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to take King case

Says Pierotti prejudiced himself

By DWIGHT LEWIS
Staff Writer

The U.S. Justice Department was asked yesterday by one of the nation's top civil rights leaders to look into new claims that James Earl Ray did not shoot the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Rev. Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said he faxed a letter yesterday to U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno asking her to appoint a special prosecutor to handle the case.

The request comes as Shelby County District Attorney General John Pierotti says he will investigate the new claims, but remains convinced they are a "total fabrication."

"It's good to hear that the district attorney general in Memphis has decided to investigate the new claims," Lowery said in a telephone interview from his Atlanta office. "But since he has already concluded that this is a hoax, he has prejudiced himself and I don't

think he will conduct an objective and intensive investigation."

Lowery said if a special prosecutor is appointed to the case, Pierotti would probably have to step aside.

"Hell, no," Pierotti said in response to Lowery's comments. "I am not going to step aside."

"If a crime is committed against state law in this county, it is my sworn duty to investigate it. I would be abdicating my job if I stepped aside."

Retired businessman Loyd Jowers, 67, told a national television audience Thursday night that he agreed to find a man to assassinate the civil rights leader for money and friendship.

In an interview with Sam Donaldson broadcast on the *Primetime Live* program, Jowers said he found a killer as a favor for a friend, now-deceased Memphis produce dealer Frank Liberto.

Jowers, who owned Jim's Grill in

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Memphis when King was assassinated April 4, 1968, said Ray did not kill King.

Ray pleaded guilty March 10, 1969, to King's murder, but recanted three days later, saying a man named Raoul had asked him to buy a rifle in a gun deal.

Ray, who was on the run after escaping from a Missouri prison, had rented a room above Jim's Grill on the day King was killed. He may not have known he was part of the conspiracy, Jowers said.

Jowers' attorney, Lewis Garrison, said on the television show the real triggerman is believed to be still living and that "we are working currently to locate him."

Jowers and four others have asked for immunity to testify before a Memphis grand jury about the plot.

One of those five, Willie Akins, 63, told *The Tennessean* Wednesday night that Jowers has told him several times over the past 15 years that Jowers hired and paid the triggerman.

"It's really intriguing that after all these 25 years these people have remained silent as witnesses," Lowery said. "I can see Jowers doing that, but not the others."

Lowery said he had heard that some white businessmen in St.

Louis, Memphis and New Orleans had financed the assassination.

"We had also heard that the shot that killed Dr. King had not come from the second floor of the rooming house where Ray was supposed to have been. And the name 'Liberto' had surfaced before, not only during the congressional investigation into the slaying but also on the streets."

Lowery added: "Anybody with any sense would realize that James Earl Ray didn't have the intellectual know-how or the financial resources to implement this by himself."

After the *Observer* of London said in a Sunday story that a group of five people had come forward to make sworn and videotaped statements to their lawyer that back up Ray's claim that he did not shoot King, Pierotti termed the claims a "hoax and a sham."

He also said he would not call a grand jury to look into the conspiracy claims.

"I was more convinced after seeing the television show ... that I was right. It is a hoax. It's a total fabrication from the start."

However, Pierotti said he will now investigate the claims because they are interesting.

"We are getting ready to look into them and I will not talk to the media until we get finished. If we



John Pierotti, Shelby County district attorney general, tells reporters that he will investigate new claims of a conspiracy in the murder of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., but that he doesn't put much credence in them. AP

find something, we will let you know."

With a case that's 25 years old, Pierotti said he expects it will be real tough to come up with some good information:

"But we're going to dig and see what we can find. We want to make sure we're on track and it's not another rabbit hunt."

Pierotti was referring to other claims made in the past that there was evidence to prove Ray did not shoot King.

"As curious as everybody is about this, I don't want anyone saying I am trying to hide something by not investigating the new claims."



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THE REV. JOSEPH LOWERY

Southern Christian Leadership Conference

While he said he will not step aside from investigating the case, Pierotti said he would welcome the Justice Department's aid.

"That's fine with me. The attorney general has more resources than I do, and I would welcome

her help."

Meanwhile, John Russell, a spokesman for the Justice Department, said yesterday afternoon that he had not seen the request asking the department to become involved in the case. ■