

Church service unites King, Ray friends in doubts about slaying

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Friends of James Earl Ray and of Martin Luther King Jr. gathered in a predominantly black church yesterday for a memorial service for the civil-rights leader's confessed killer.

Speaker after speaker said they still believe King's killing was the result of a conspiracy in which Ray played a small part, if any at all, and that their quest for the truth did not end with his death.

"In spite of the various ways he misled his life, James Earl Ray was not the assassin of Martin Luther King," said the Rev. James Lawson, himself a civil-rights leader who was with King when he was killed and later became Ray's minister.

He asked those in attendance to pray for the King family "as they pursue this matter."

About 100 people were at the Metropolitan Interdenominational Church, which agreed to hold the service after two other mostly black churches in Nashville declined.

Ray confessed to killing King in Memphis on April 4,

1968, and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. But he quickly recanted and spent the rest of his life trying to gain a trial. He died April 23 of liver failure at the age of 70.

The King family supported Ray's quest for a trial. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, and their son, Dexter, have said they believe Ray was innocent and a scapegoat for conspirators.

At the service, King's nephew, Isaac Farris Jr., read a statement from Mrs. King to Ray's family: "We share with your family regret at the tragic failure of the justice system to give him his day in court."

Farris said Mrs. King and Dexter King did not attend the service because they were trying to meet with President Clinton about their request for a new federal investigation into the assassination.

White House spokesman Barry Toiv said Mrs. King did not meet with Clinton yesterday. He said no decision has been made on whether to grant her request for a meeting.



Associated Press

Isaac Farris Jr., right, embraces William Pepper, attorney for the late James Earl Ray, at a memorial service for Ray. Farris is the nephew of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

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