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After meeting in prison, Dexter King says good-bye to James Earl Ray. He spoke yesterday with the man convicted of killing his father.

Dr. King's son meets Ray, and then says he's innocent

By Eric Harrison
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ATLANTA — It was, as Dexter King kept saying, an "awkward" moment. What does a son say to the man convicted of killing his father?

Twenty-nine years after the death of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights leader's son met yesterday with a dying James Earl Ray.

The two men shook hands. They discussed Ray's health. They touched a bit on the long-ago excesses of former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover.

And then King, looking Ray in the eye, slid ever so gently toward the heart of the matter. He asked the question he'd traveled from Atlanta

to a Nashville prison hospital to ask: "Did you kill my father?"

"No, no," a frail Ray said. "I didn't."

Ray said more, some of it rambling, some not comprehensible. "Sometimes these questions are difficult to answer, and you have to make a personal evaluation, and . . . maybe come to a conclusion," he said.

"Well," King replied, "as awkward as this may seem, I want you to know that I believe you, and my family believes you; and we are going to do everything in our power to try and make sure that justice will prevail."

Ray confessed in 1969 to killing
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Dr. King the previous year and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. He recanted three days later, claiming that his lawyer had coerced him. The judge died while considering his request for a trial. Ray has been trying to get a trial ever since.

William Pepper, Ray's current attorney and a former associate of Dr. King, said Ray was a pawn of government forces who manipulated him and conspired with organized crime to murder Dr. King.

A Tennessee appeals court is considering whether to grant a request to allow experts hired by Pepper to test the rifle and remnants of the fatal bullet with a sophisticated electron microscope. Earlier tests, all conducted by government experts, were inconclusive.

While yesterday's meeting was the first between Ray and a member of Dr. King's family, a number of the civil rights leader's associates have long championed Ray's innocence.

Pepper and Ralph Abernathy, who succeeded Dr. King as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, first met with Ray in 1978. After subsequent investigatory work, Pepper said he became convinced of Ray's innocence.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson wrote the foreword to a book Ray wrote proclaiming his innocence. And the Rev. James Lawson of Los Angeles — who coordinated the Memphis, Tenn., garbage workers strike that brought Dr. King to Memphis in 1968, where he was killed — is a staunch supporter who performed Ray's in-prison wedding ceremony.

During Dexter King's 20-minute conversation with Ray in front of television cameras, he seemed to fully embrace Ray's innocence. "In a strange sort of way," he said at one point, "we're both victims."

King, 36, also spoke of the "strange ironies" that now have united Dr. King's friends and family with Ray in a search to uncover the whole story of what happened in Memphis on April 4, 1968, when a rifle bullet ripped into his father's face. Quoting his father, King said: "We are all caught up in a mutual garment of destiny."

Ray, wearing a faded blue prison uniform and trembling slightly, entered the room in a wheelchair, but moved to a chair opposite King for their conversation.

King called the meeting a "spiritual experience."

CNN cameras were on hand to rec-

ord the beginning of their talk. Then the room was cleared, and the two spoke privately.

Acknowledging that it is "the eleventh hour," with Ray expected to die within a year from cirrhosis of the liver, King promised to work with Ray's attorney "in any way I can to try and bring forth the necessary forum to help exonerate you and continue the struggle."

If a trial ever is granted, Pepper said he would present evidence to prove that Ray did not kill Dr. King. But local prosecutors in Memphis oppose reopening the case. Even if a trial were held, they say, the judge likely would not allow evidence that Pepper claims to have that implicates others in the murder.

Material collected by the House Select Committee on Assassinations during an inquiry into the murder in 1978 have been sealed until 2028. The congressional investigators concluded that Ray killed Dr. King, but that he might have had help, perhaps from white supremacists or his brother.