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Abernathy-Ray Bjt 400

MEMPHIS, Tenn. AP — A top aide to slain civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has paid a jail cell visit to James Earl Ray, King's accused killer, and says he will aid in Ray's defense. The move was backed by the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, King's successor as head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

"Brother Ray has asked me to defend him and I intend to do it," the Rev. James Bevel told a meeting of about 50 ministers Thursday night after his jail visit. Bevel said last week he was convinced Ray was innocent in the slaying of King here last April 4.

In Atlanta, Abernathy said he viewed Bevel's action as a way of moving "nonviolence into a new dimension in American life." The SCLC head added, "Rev. Bevel is speaking to the real issue—namely that it is not who killed Dr. King, but what killed him."

Bevel visited with Ray in the top-security cell on the third floor of the Shelby County Jail, accompanied by Ray's attorney, Percy Foreman of Houston, Tex.

Sheriff William N. Morris Jr. said Bevel and Foreman were with Ray for one hour. Later Bevel discussed the case in general terms with the ministers who had been attending the general board meeting here of the National Council of Churches.

Bevel said he was convinced of Ray's innocence before he met with him "and I am now even more convinced that Ray was about as capable of killing King as I am of flying to the moon."

In answer to a question, the bearded, balding Bevel said he had been accepted by Ray to assist in the case and that Foreman would remain as chief counsel. Bevel, 32, is not a member of the bar but says he is a lawyer "by circumstances."

Foreman was not available for comment on what part Bevel would play in the case.

Asked about the arrangements for his visit with Ray, Bevel said, "I sent his (Ray's) attorney a telegram, he honed me and we went to see him tonight."

Abernathy, in his comments, said that "America's OPPRESSED AND VICTIMIZED" SHOULD COME "to the aid and defense" of Ray.

He said, "If a conspiracy exists, and I believe it does, it must be fully exposed. Going beyond conspiracy, Americans must understand the broader guilt of a society which has been killing off its best young leader."

"One man should not be made the scapegoat for this monstrous crime. The American public must have all the information about the guilt for this murder," concluded Abernathy.

At the meeting here, Bevel declared, "We are going to defend Ray. But we're not going to find out who's guilty. You'll say 'Who did it?' You go find out—you're a cop. I'm a prophet."

During the session Bevel lashed out at nearly everyone connected with the Ray trial, the ministers and Negroes and whites in general.

"America is going to have a good lynching party—the judges and the preachers," he said. "Black folks are so intent on revenge that they are going to sleep through a lynching of a deranged man. White folks are going to stand by."

When newsmen asked what evidence he had, Bevel refused specifics. "Why would you assume that I am a fool; that I would disclose it?" he asked.

Ray is scheduled to go on trial March 7.

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