

MLK memorial dedication is dream fulfilled for black churches

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) In a ceremony that blended worship and a call to action, tens of thousands gathered Sunday (Oct. 16) for the official dedication of a national memorial to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"In this place, he will stand for all time, among monuments to those who fathered this nation and those who defended it; a black preacher with no official rank or title who somehow gave voice to our deepest dreams and our most lasting ideals," President Obama said.

Obama spoke in the shadow of the 30-foot sculpture of King's likeness called the "Stone of Hope," which emerges from a "Mountain of Despair," both images taken from King's iconic 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech.

The throngs of people were smaller than the crowds anticipated for the memorial's original dedication date on Aug. 28, the 48th anniversary of the March on Washington and King's most famous speech.

Weeks after Hurricane Irene disrupted the original dedication festivities, those who made it to the rescheduled ceremony said the delay had not dampened their respect for King's legacy as a religious and civil rights leader.

"Dr. King was a 20th-century prophet and so that's really significant to see that we've got a prophet on the National Mall where presidents usually are," said the Rev. Seretta C. McKnight of Hempstead, N.Y., who traveled with members of her youth leadership organization. "He gave his life, so that is the least that can be done to commemorate."

Held during the traditional Sunday morning worship time, the ceremony featured choirs, gospel artists Mary Mary, and Aretha Franklin singing one of King's favorite hymns, "Precious Lord." But it also had political overtones as some speakers lent support to Obama's re-election; the crowd occasionally broke into chants of "four more years!" for the nation's first African-American president.

King family members, civil rights veterans and celebrities said King's message should not remain solely like the monument, set in stone, but rather be continually put into practice.

His daughter, the Rev. Bernice King, suggested that God may have desired for attention to be focused away from the anniversary of King's "I Have a Dream" speech to more recent calls for economic justice for the poor.

"Perhaps the postponement was a divine interruption to remind us of the King that moved us beyond the dream of racial justice to the action and work of economic justice," she said.

The memorial was supported by a wide array of houses of worship, particularly black churches, that contributed large and small sums to make it a reality on the edge of the Tidal Basin. Harry Johnson, president of the memorial's foundation, said more than 200 churches contributed \$1.8 million to the \$120 million memorial, for which \$117 million has been raised.

And though not as many as originally planned, church members drove, bused and flew to Washington for Sunday's dedication.

More than 100 members of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King once served as co-pastor, made the trip. Its pastor, the Rev. Raphael Warnock, said the black church, in particular, sees in King not only a national leader but also one of their own.

"Martin Luther King Jr. is, without a doubt, the black church's most beloved son and celebrated saint," said Warnock, who gave the benediction and whose choir sang at the ceremony.

While Warnock, 42, was born a year after King's 1968 assassination, others came because they had a personal connection with King.

The Rev. Fred Taylor, associate pastor of Atlanta's Trinity Baptist Church, once passed out leaflets for the bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala., that King help lead.

"I sort of grew and matured as a movement child and I spent my professional working life as a part of the movement," said Taylor, 68, who retired in 2007 from the Atlanta-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which King co-founded.

"My going to this memorial's celebration is a part of my witness as a preacher of the gospel."

Some whose plans to attend the original dedication were dashed nevertheless played a significant role in helping the memorial get built. Obama's former Chicago church, Trinity United Church of Christ, collected one of the largest sums, \$114,142, from its members and other Chicago churches.

"I think it is appropriate for the church, especially the African-American church, to support and lift up the legacy of one of the greatest individuals produced out of the institution," said the Rev. Otis Moss III, Trinity UCC's senior pastor, whose parents were married by King and were active in the SCLC.

King's membership in the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity prompted Johnson, a former national president of the fraternity, to lean on pastor friends who were fraternity brothers. As a result, several churches in Texas donated \$100,000 each.

The Rev. Joe Ratliff, a fraternity member and a Morehouse College alumnus like King, is a pastor of one of those churches, Brentwood Baptist Church in Houston.

"I had no excuse," said Ratliff, who gave the invocation and, as the sole clergyman on the board of the memorial's foundation, encouraged the congregation-based fundraising. "I had to push."