

King's legacy honored in Bridgeport

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Deon Kipping & New Covenant perform during the 28 Annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Program at Mt. Aery Baptist Church in Bridgeport. (CT Post / Phil Noel)

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BRIDGEPORT — With voices raised in tribute and praise, and steps both resolute and reverent, homage was paid to the life and legacy of civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in the city Monday.

At Mount Aery Baptist Church in the morning, a large crowd heard speakers address the theme, "Keeping the Faith, While Focusing on Our Future." Their words underscored King's dream of social equality through nonviolent change as a powerful lesson for today's young people.

At noon, about 50 marchers, many bearing placards with quotes from King's speeches, endured the day's chilly drizzle as they trod down Stratford Avenue to St. Paul's Missionary Baptist Church on Logan Street. More than 200 people packed the church to hear preachers urge them to keep King's dream alive.

Florence Marshall, a 21-year-old city resident, was one of about 1,200 people on hand for the service at Mount Aery, the 28th annual program sponsored by Bridgeport's Black Pride to mark King's birthday.

Although she is too young to remember King, who was assassinated in 1968, she feels she lives his legacy in her own way.

"I'm a college student. I'm studying to become a school principal, an administrator," said Marshall, who attends Western Connecticut State University in Danbury.

"If it were not for Martin Luther King, I would probably not be able to do that, being a person of color," she said.

Speakers proclaimed the enduring message of King, who tirelessly advocated that people of different colors live peacefully together with equal rights and justice.

King was cited not only as an American civil rights pioneer, but as a modern day prophet and visionary.

Achieving King's dream will take work, like any goal, the speakers agreed.

"This is not a day off. This is a day on," said the Rev. Anthony L. Bennett, pastor at Mount Aery, in opening remarks.

King worked hard to achieve the vision he had for humanity, being true to Gospel principles, said Carol Birks, assistant principal at Harding High School.

"He knew that faith without works is dead," Birks said.

King remained committed to his mission, which he believed was from God, despite great personal danger and constant threats, said Brother Kenneth Muhammad, a member of the Nation of Islam and a Harding teacher.

"It is the meaning of being crucified," Muhammad said.

The great legacy King gave humanity, that a person's character, not skin color, is their true measure, unfortunately seems to have been lost in the morass of today's popular culture, glamorizing money, guns, and treating women badly, said the Rev. Kenneth Mooles Jr., the event's keynote speaker.

He talked about how he turned on the Black Entertainment Television network and saw one music video after another, featuring a "gangsta" mentality.

"You look at the hip-hopper, 50 Cent. He doesn't even think enough of himself to be worth a dollar," Mooles said of the black recording star.

At least black entrepreneurs own the TV network, he said. But "where are the black grocery stores?" he said. "Where are the black gas stations?"

Music was performed by Deon Kipping and New Covenant.

Mayor John M. Fabrizi, who attended the event, read a proclamation designating Monday as Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the city, echoing the federal holiday observed in King's memory.

Fabrizi, appearing later at St. Paul's, pledged to focus more on recruiting minority contractors for city projects.

"Regardless of our race or creed, when we all work together on some mission we can get it done," he said.

The mayor was one of a series of speakers, most of them pastors, who spoke of King's dream of justice and equality in terms of problems today.