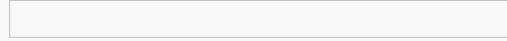


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## MLK memorial 'holy ground' for many

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The Washington Post



The Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial is shown in Washington, D.C., on Saturday, July 16, 2011. The official unveiling of the latest memorial on the National Mall is scheduled for Sunday, August 28. (Nikki Kahn - THE WASHINGTON POST) For Sister Donna Barfield, getting a sneak peak at the soon-to-open Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial was, she said, one of the most emotional experiences of her life.

She was moved by the statue, the curving granite walls engraved with his words taken from various speeches and writings.

“It was phenomenal,” said Barfield who was among nearly 100 African American priests, nuns, seminarians, and deacons who got to tour the memorial in late July when they visited Washington for their annual National Black Catholic Joint Conference.

“If I have the opportunity, I would love to go back to the opening,” she said. Barfield said she appreciated being able to “absorb the whole spiritual aspects of it” without crowds.

Crowds are what Washington officials are bracing for as the Aug. 28 dedication of the MLK’s memorial draws near. King, a religious and civil rights leader, frequently drew on his spiritual tradition to inspire the movement

Destination DC , the city’s official tourism and marketing office, is reporting an increase in calls and other inquiries about the events surrounding the dedication. The office has refocused its marketing efforts to promote King memorial-related hotel packages, including tickets to the official viewing areas at the dedication ceremony. Due to demand since the close of a public lottery for tickets, six of the 16 hotels started offering one-night packages. The office also has reached out to a variety of groups, including faith-based organizations, and targeted niche and national publications, television and radio networks to promote the memorial. In July, the office’s president and chief executive Elliott Ferguson spoke on the Tom Joyner Morning Show, which reaches more than 8 million listeners daily, many of whom are African American.

Washington is a beacon for visitors from around the world, particularly in the summer. Its connection to King is already strong: The Mall served as the backdrop for one of his most famous speeches; he rested at one of its landmark hotels, the Willard Hotel; and he has been among revered theologians and ministers to preach at Howard University’s Rankin Chapel .

The dedication of the memorial is scheduled to take place on the 48th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom when King delivered his historic “I Have a Dream” speech. The effort to build the memorial took more than 25 years.

Standing on the grounds of the memorial, gazing at the Stone of Hope and imagining that for years to come, legions will learn and also become inspired by the slain minister and humanitarian were very overwhelming, said Redemptorist Father Maurice Nutt.

Hundreds attend the first public viewing of the Martin Luther King Junior Memorial in Washington, D.C. on August 22, 2011. (Marvin Joseph - WASHINGTON POST)

“It felt like I was on holy ground,” said Nutt of Chicago. “You feel as you walk through the Mountain of Despair and see the image of Dr. King on the Stone of Hope, his image coming out of the stone depicts steadfast determination.”

The priest is a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., which King joined in the 1950s and Nutt joined in 2006. Members of the black Greek-letter organization spearheaded the effort to raise money to construct the monument between the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials.

Nutt said he plans to return and march with fellow Alphas to the site the day of its dedication.

“Given the situation we are in today, with racial unrest, political differences, and economic recessions, this is a very significant time for the memorial to be dedicated,” he said. “We need hope. I believe that it’s very pertinent that the memorial is being dedicated right at this very moment.”

The Rev. Al Sharpton, founder and president of the National Action Network, is organizing a rally and march to the memorial site a day before the official dedication. Busloads of supporters from across the country are scheduled to participate. He said the need to fight for jobs, freedom and equality persists.

“Dr. King died dealing with economic inequality in this country, which we are still dealing with to this day,” said Sharpton, who is slated to speak during the dedication. “Where we will be for his memorial is where he wanted to build Resurrection City as part of the Poor People’s Campaign.” The campaign was the last major movement King organized before his assassination.

Sharpton said King played a major influence on his life.

“I grew up as a boy preacher,” he said. By 12, Sharpton found himself drawn more toward social justice ministry outside the sanctuary than working strictly for one congregation as a pastor. When King died, Sharpton was serving as youth director of the New York branch of Operation Breadbasket, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference initiative aimed at providing economic opportunity and equality.

Sharpton noted that the march will be the first national gathering of progressives, faith-based groups, labor leaders and others since the battle over raising the debt-ceiling, the ongoing debate over proposed changes to medicare and social security and the passage of the health-care bill. It is being called the Emancipator to the Liberator rally and march for jobs and justice, and it will begin at the Lincoln Memorial and end at the King memorial.

“It will be a rallying cry for people in the street against what is happening, against those who tried to declare war on poor people and the disadvantaged and the middle class,” he said, adding that one of the co-chairs is a leader of AFSCME, the group whose striking sanitation workers King spoke in support of in Memphis the night before he died.

Ronald Rice, a Newark city councilman and an Alpha, said he couldn’t miss witnessing history and plans to drive down Washington, D.C. later this week.

“I am just proud to be alive and to be able to see the first African American president dedicate this monument to the man who foretold his election in America,” Rice said. “This is a celebration of what is best about this nation and a call to service in our own communities.

“This day is almost as big as the inauguration of President Obama, but only if we all leave the dedication committed to doing more in our communities when we get back home. Our urban communities need mentoring, jobs and real education reform, healthcare and a renewed covenant by us to save us,” he said.

