

Siblings divided over future of King Center

By David Stokes

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Heirs of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. continue to disagree with one another on the proposed sale of the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change. Last month, the center's board of directors began discussions about possibly selling the memorial to the National Park Service, primarily to have it do the costly upkeep.

The center has been troubled with finances for basic maintenance, and faced closure of the facility by the city and state earlier last year when health regulations and codes were being unmet. The center's doors have been open to the public for 25 years, and is estimated to need tens of millions annually for adequate, proper maintenance.

King's four children are divided into two camps over whether it is beneficial or proper to sell the center that promotes King's teachings. Two stand together against their other two siblings. Other relatives and long-time supporters of King and his continued message have

voiced differing opinions, as well.

The King Center for Nonviolent Social Change — site of his tomb — was founded in 1968 by Coretta Scott King soon after her husband's death. In 1981, the center moved from her basement to its current address next to the Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church where King preached from 1960 to 1968.

Yolanda King, 50, is the eldest of the children and is in agreement with her brother Dexter King, the board chairman, and a majority of directors for the sale of the northeast Atlanta landmark.

But Martin Luther King III and his sister Rev. Bernice A. King object to any sale and are threatening legal action against Dexter.

When asked about Mrs. King's thoughts of a proposed sale, "our mother has said to us she has not envisioned (the Center) being sold to the government in her lifetime," King III said. "Because she developed the programmatic structure, it is very much a part of her legacy." (The 78-year-old matriarch continues to

progress from a stroke suffered last August that has created speech impediments.)

Recent changes in the board membership and directorship add to the controversy.

King III, who claims the center's board was "hijacked" last summer when younger brother Dexter "selected — not elected" to replace King III with Isaac Farris, a cousin who is the son of Christine King Farris, eldest sibling of King Jr. Farris, age 39, became the new chief by a majority of board votes, according to a recent press release.

Furthermore, according to King III, remedy from the courts may be probable if an amicable agreement or "negotiation" is not soon reached.

Dexter Scott King, who turns 45 later this month and is a resident of southern California, was the center's chairman of the board since 1995, succeeding longtime chairman Jesse Hill Jr., retired president and C.E.O. of Atlanta Life Insurance Co. After some immediate growing pains and acrimony with a

few directors serving since the center's 1969 inception, his influence from the west coast has now been apparently solidified. Six months ago, Dexter King "appointed" directors in sync with the desire to sell the Auburn Avenue site, King III said in an interview following a news conference.

The board of directors is comprised of "lifelong" members and relatives (King III, Mrs. King, Mrs. Farris, Edythe S. Bagley, Mrs. King's sister; and Vernon King), one "who's like family," Andrew Young, the former United Nations ambassador and Atlanta mayor who served as King's executive director at the SCLC; and Phillip Jones, president of Intellectual Properties Management, Inc., the business concern which controls interests for the family via the King Estate, among others in business and human rights. Also, the secretary of the board, Rev. Bernice A. King, was subsequently relieved of her duties. The Emory University graduate who will be 43 in March, however, remains a director.

Young, along with Dexter and Yolanda, and King's sister, Christine King Farris — all lifetime board members — are united in favor of the sale to the government.

Young said "discussions [about a government purchase] have been ongoing for a while. The family (collectively) will realize they will do better" with the National Park Service, overseen by the Department of Interior, having oversight of the Center for basic upkeep purposes.

"The property has been deeded to the government, but the family and the board will retain control of its programs and mission," the 73-year-old Young said.

King III said, "This is a very difficult time for me... with a problem that is as personal as it is monumental," speaking before local and national media in front of his father's crypt. "Bernice [King] and I stand to differ with those who would sell our father's legacy and barter our mother's vision, whether it's for 30 pieces of silver or \$30 million."

"Frankly, over the past 10 years, the board of directors

of which Bernice and I are a part has been remiss in providing sufficient oversight regarding important governance, operational and program issues," King III admitted. "I take responsibility for [our] own failure."

His resolve is unwavering for the center to remain under family control, nonetheless. "This is really not about a family or brothers' squabble," King III said. "This is about the center remaining and keeping its independent voice for the Black community. The Center is sacred ground...that has always sought government funding, but we must continue to challenge (federal government policies). War and destitution is not Kingian nonviolence."

"The Black community needs to also voice a view. We don't want to sell the Center, we want to save it. The federal government must withdraw from negotiations for the Center's facilities" until ambiguity in legal status of new directors is resolved and affirmed.

David Stokes writes for the Atlanta Inquirer.

It's one thing to dream, it's another to inspire others to make that dream come true.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a man who was generous enough to invest his vision, his words, his courage and his commitment so that all people would have the right and equal opportunity to live their dreams. At Washington Mutual, we're honored to celebrate his life and legacy.



Washington Mutual

MORE HUMAN INTEREST™

wamu.com

License granted by Intellectual Properties Management, Atlanta, Georgia, as exclusive licensor of the King Estate.

FDIC Insured 