

# Alton NAACP hosts 37th annual celebration of Dr. King

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**ALTON** - Several community leaders joined with members of the public Sunday afternoon at **Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church** to celebrate the life and message of the late **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

**The Alton Branch of the NAACP** sponsors the event. This year's theme was "**Stand Up and Be Counted - The Best is Yet to Come.**" The event commemorated the spiritual and personal messages of Dr. King through worship, speaking and song. **Featured speaker Reverend Reginald A. Burrell** spoke on the theme during the ceremony.

"I'm going to speak about moving the mountain in front of you, instead of letting someone do it for you," he said. "The largest hurdle is not doubting yourself. To do that, give yourself a different narrative. We ourselves are the narrators of our stories. We can do what we want to."

Burrell said he is still in the process of climbing that mountain and is still learning how to be the man other people believe him to be. He was invited to speak at the event by the Alton NAACP.

"They saw something in me, which I didn't see in myself," he said. "I'm still learning and figuring out what that is."

Dr. King's message would expand if he were alive to deliver it today, Burrell said. Burrell said divisions throughout the U.S. and the world still exist, but have expanded beyond the lines of colors.

"Division still exists, and it's not just a color thing," Burrell said. "It's a culture thing. Every place, every job, every environment and every school has a culture. People are being categorized, instead of finding common denominators."



Second Vice President of the Alton Branch of the NAACP Joe Williams said King's message applies today as well. He said the nation has always been divided, but does not have to be. He said the nation could lose its divisions if every person accepted they were God's people. He described the people of the United States as "blessed," and said this year's theme applies if everyone were to stand up and be counted.

"We all have to stand up and be counted, and if we do, the best is yet to come," he said.

Williams said Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church Pastor John Buford would be a recipient of this year's Martin Luther King Award, which honors local pastors who embodied the spirit of King, who himself was a Baptist minister.

"King was a Baptist minister who taught from the pulpit as well as from the streets," Williams said. "Buford has done a lot of himself for the community, that is why we gave it to him. He's a teacher."

Buford said King's message inspired him to be able to accomplish anything. During his time as an electrician, Buford said he was thankful for the inspiration King gave him and other black people, so they could go into the world and get jobs such as his, which provided for their families and were once unattainable.

Illinois State NAACP President Teresa Haley was also in attendance on Sunday. She said she came from Springfield as part of an effort to support all 32 branches of the NAACP in Illinois. She said the celebration of Dr. King was a celebration of democracy.

"As we celebrate Dr. King's birthday today, we have to remember that democracy comes with a price," she said. "That price is service to the community, community action and giving back."

If Dr. King were alive today, Haley said he would remind the world of his dream and that we must continue to fight together towards the common goal of unity. She said division in this country is higher than it has been in recent memory. She described that division as a "wake up call," saying it was time for unity to shine through.

Several elected officials were at the ceremony, including Madison County Board Chairperson Kurt Prenzler and Alton Mayor Brant Walker. Prenzler said he has read several biographies of Dr. King, and said he was very impressed not only by King, but by those who stood with him.

"They practiced for their rallies and marches," Prenzler said. "They took what they were doing very seriously. Ultimately, all they did worked out for the best."

Walker said Dr. King's message would be a hard one to improve.

"It's a wonderful day to remember a great man and mentor who stood up for what he believed in," Walker said. "It would be the same message today he started with then. It's hard to change the perfect message."

Madison County Auditor Rick Faccin was considered by friend Bobby Collins to be the embodiment of King's message to public servants.

"Rick is the best Madison County has to offer," Collins said. "I've known him for years. He's a straight-up man. He is what Dr. King's talked about."

Faccin said he was honored and privilege to attend the event this year. He said he has been coming to it since he took office. He said as an Altonian he was proud of the ceremony and its turnout every year.

Alton Police Chief Jason "Jake" Simmons said the event was a great way to build bridges across the community, saying he was glad to be a part of it.

