



Hundreds march in Fresno to remember Martin Luther King

By Vanessa Colón / The Fresno Bee
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Hundreds of people marched in downtown Fresno on Monday to remember civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and to continue his legacy 40 years after his death.

Many marchers said King's struggle for equality, racial harmony and peace in the world continues.

"There's a need for greater change and the continuing of his message and a concern for all humanity," said Robert Mitchell, who lives in west Fresno.

About 750 people walked from St. John's Cathedral at Mariposa and R streets to Fresno City Hall and then to the Saroyan Theatre.

This year marked the 22nd anniversary of the federal holiday observing King's birthday. But for Fresno, it was the 23rd annual commemoration of King, the Nobel Peace Prize winner famous for his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C.

King is most remembered for his use of civil disobedience and nonviolent tactics to end segregation and combat racial discrimination. He was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

"There is still injustices in our society. We must commit ourselves to the same goals and principles," said Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, outside Fresno City Hall.

Some marchers said discrimination hasn't ended and the country appears to be going backward. Hate crimes nationwide rose by 8% to 7,722 incidents in 2006, compared with 7,163 incidents in 2005, according to the latest statistics available from the FBI.

"A lot of racial issues are being tolerated and not addressed. ... Leaders speak out against it, but they don't deal with it," said 52-year-old Valarie Binion of Fresno. She cited what happened last year in Jena, La.: Civil rights groups said black students were prosecuted more harshly than white students involved in a racial dispute at school.

Monday's keynote speaker, Roger Palomino, executive director of the Fresno County Equal Opportunities Commission, said the nation has seen tremendous changes since the days of segregation in the 1950s, but racism still exists.

Palomino also said more needs to be done to help minority teens develop an appreciation of their cultural backgrounds to help them succeed in school. Too many, he said, end up in jail instead -- and are worse off when they come out.

"We have to look at those issues of racism. We don't know what we are doing to them when we lock them up," Palomino said.

Some marchers said the nation today faces issues similar to what King faced in the 1960s -- concentrations of poverty among ethnic minorities and an unpopular war, this time in Iraq. Before his death, King spoke against the war in Vietnam and for eradicating poverty.

"War takes away from our resources ... The longer we stay there [in Iraq], the deeper the grave we will dig for ourselves," said Sudarshan Kapoor, a member of the Fresno Martin Luther King Unity Committee.

Pastor Leonard Adams of St. Mark United Methodist Church in southwest Fresno emphasized voting as the way to keep the dream alive.

"That's where the change will occur," Adams said.

After the march, people watched dance and singing performances at the Saroyan and an awards presentation. The award winners were former Clovis Police Chief Jim Zulim; The kNOW youth magazine; John Shegerian, co-founder of Addicted.com and president of Electronic Recyclers International; and Brenda Carlee, president of Family Council, Dewitt Sub-Acute Care at Community Regional Medical Center in Fresno.

Organizers collected about 150 cans of food since last week. The cans will be donated to the Salvation Army in Clovis and a church in southwest Fresno. At the event, a few people sold \$10 T-shirts to help the African American Historical and Cultural Museum and \$10 DVD orders of the celebration to help Fresno High School's film studies program.