

NATIONAL NEWS



The Rev. Henry Lyons cries in a Largo, Fla., courtroom as he listens to some testimonials on his behalf during his sentencing last Wednesday. Lyons was sentenced to five and a half years in prison for swindling more than \$4 million while president of one of the nation's largest and most influential black denominations. The 57-year-old minister was also ordered to repay almost \$2.5 million.

Tearful Lyons is sentenced to five years

Judge tells minister 'it's time to pay the piper'

By PAT LEISNER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LARGO, Fla. — Defense attorneys returned to the Rev. Henry Lyons' church to tell his congregation their pastor would preach no more from the pulpit where he's delivered fiery sermons for the past 28 years.

Lyons, past president of the National Baptist Convention USA, was led from a Pinellas County courtroom by bailiffs Wednesday to begin serving a 5 1/2 year prison sentence for racketeering and grand theft in convention business dealings.

His lawyers went to Bethel Metropolitan Baptist Church to bring word the beloved minister was behind bars despite pleas for leniency from Lyons and supporters, said attorney Denis deVlaming. The defense also failed to win a 90-day delay before Lyons was taken into custody.

Defense lawyer Grady Irvin, a longtime friend of Lyons and member of his congregation, said a plan was in place so the church would not be without a shepherd until Lyons finishes his prison time and returns.

"I've asked God every single night and day to forgive me," a tearful Lyons told Circuit Judge Susan Schaeffer before sentence was imposed.

"And I ask the court and I ask America and I ask black people to forgive me because I believe that it will haunt me the rest of my life," he said, crying.

"I ask for mercy," Lyons said, then broke into sobs and ended his statement.

Schaeffer also ordered Lyons to pay nearly \$2.5 million restitution.

"A jury has said you're a racketeer and they said you're a thief," she said. "It's time to pay the piper, Dr. Lyons."

Lyons faced up to eight years in prison under sentencing guidelines.

Lyons was convicted Feb. 27 of racketeering for stealing more than \$4 million from companies seeking to market life insurance policies, credit cards and cemetery plots to convention members.

He also was convicted of grand theft for stealing almost \$250,000 from the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, money intended to rebuild churches that were burned down in the South.

Lyons concentrated on the theft count in his courtroom apology.

"It stinks in God's nostrils and I know it stinks in the law's nostrils and it stinks to me," Lyons told the judge.

In asking for a longer prison term, Pinellas State Attorney Bernie McCabe accused the minister of apologizing in order to influence the judge's sentence.

"The words he speaks are the words he thinks will serve him best at the moment," McCabe said.

The judge received about 115 letters from friends and supporters begging for leniency. Five supporters and Lyons' wife and lawyers spoke about his generosity and good deeds.

"I love my husband very much. We have been through some rough times together," Lyons' wife, Deborah, told the judge.

Carol McCarty, a church member, told the judge the minister helped her conquer a crack cocaine addiction that threatened to send her to prison. Now, she said she has her real estate license, a nice car and a home where she raises her children.

Lyons' troubles began in 1997 when his wife set fire to a \$700,000 waterfront home he owned with Bernice Edwards of Milwaukee. The fire led to closer scrutiny of Lyons' lavish spending.

Lyons served as president of the National Baptist Convention from 1994 until he tearfully resigned that post on March 16, a few weeks after he was convicted.

The next day, he avoided a second trial by pleading guilty in federal court to evading taxes, engaging in fraudulent activities and lying to officials — charges that also grew out of convention business dealings.

Edwards went on trial with Lyons but was acquitted. However, she pleaded guilty in federal court to tax evasion and is awaiting sentencing Sept. 13.

Lyons' sentencing in federal court is set for June 18. His lawyers said that under sentencing guidelines, he will probably serve a little more than 7 years at the most.

Low-key rally marks MLK's death

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — One year after 4,000 marchers stretched six blocks to mark the 30th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King Jr., a scant 15 showed up Sunday to remember the slain civil rights leader.

The 31st anniversary rally, sponsored by the Memphis chapter of the NAACP youth council, featured chants, songs and speeches. The group stood under the balcony of The Lorraine Motel, where King was assassinated in 1968.

"Society can be reborn again if we can stop violence and stop the hate," said 15-year-old Aren Cowan, the council's vice president, in one speech. She noted this was the first year the anniversary has fallen on an Easter Sunday.

The motel is now the site of the National Civil Rights Museum, where many visitors were unaware of the day's significance as they wandered upon the afternoon rally.

"We didn't know anything about it," said Ruth Johnson of Huntsville, Ala. "We were just here."

Kim Peters, a teacher from Fredericksburg, Va., said King is among the famous black Americans her classes discuss during Black History Month.

"I wanted to see this. ... We had no idea that anything like this was going on," she said.

The low-key rally was a stark



Associated Press photo by The Commercial Appeal, Kent Phillips

Annie Boyd holds a sign to mark the 31st anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during a march in Memphis, Tenn., Monday. The march was sponsored by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Local 1733, which staged the sanitation strike in April 1968 for which Dr. King came to town at the time of his assassination on April 4. "I Am A Man" was the slogan used by the striking sanitation workers in 1968. The anniversary march was held Monday to avoid conflict with Easter observances.

contrast to the 30th anniversary, when thousands of marchers, led by the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Memphis Mayor W.W. Herenton, sang "We Shall Overcome" and other standards from the civil rights movement and carried pictures of King and signs saying, "Remember the Man and the Message."

Elsewhere in Memphis, several multiracial community worship services Sunday remembered King's life and death while celebrating Easter.

"It was 2,000 years ago that Jesus of Nazareth died on Calvary. And this place we call Memphis is a kind of Calvary because a man of God died at The Lorraine Motel 31 years ago today," said Rev. Bill Adkins, pastor of the Greater Imani Church and Christian Center in a morning service at the Mid-South Coliseum.

King was slain in Memphis

while helping organize a strike by city sanitation workers. He was standing on the balcony of The Lorraine when he was felled by a single rifle slug.

James Earl Ray, a prison escapee from Missouri, pleaded guilty to killing King and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. He later recanted. Sunday's anniversary was the first since Ray died last April of liver disease at age 70.

Cops make more arrests during Reunion

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — More people were arrested during Black College Reunion weekend last year than other Daytona Beach events such as Bike Week and spring break, a computer-assisted review of police records found.

Police averaged 550 traffic tickets and 70 arrests a day, mostly for minor offenses, during the three days of beachside revelry by black college students, according to the analysis by The Orlando Sentinel.

Critics claimed that police were targeting black visitors for petty offenses. The newspaper's review showed that four out of five people arrested or given tickets that weekend were black.

But police were even tougher on students during spring break in its heyday nearly a decade ago. When police began cracking down on spring breakers in 1990, officers made 1,400 arrests for alcohol and drug offenses and disorderly conduct in 11 days, or nearly 130 arrests a day.

Daytona Beach police said the Black College Reunion, which starts Friday, is different from spring break or Bike Week in that it's concentrated in a small area along the beach.

Residents have complained for years about traffic snarls along Atlantic Avenue during Black College Reunion, which competes with Atlanta's Freaknik as the place for black college students to spend their spring vacations.

"This is a predominantly black group of visitors, but I don't see any underlying racial tension with our officers nor have I gotten such complaints from the visitors," said Cmdr. Willie Anderson, Daytona Beach police's top-ranking black officer.

Police said some of the most troublesome visitors are "day trippers" who don't stay in hotels and tend not to be college students.

The Sentinel review showed that last year more than seven out of every 10 people arrested or cited during Black College Reunion were Florida residents and nearly half of that group came from central Florida.

Most of those who had a run-in with police were issued a single ticket for offenses such as seat-belt violations, obstructing traffic, loud stereos and disorderly conduct. About one third of the offenses were dropped by prosecutors or by the courts.

During Black College Reunion, thousands of people

drive up and down the beachfront in Daytona Beach cruising for members of the opposite sex and staging impromptu parties in the middle of the street. Last year's reunion weekend erupted in violence when an Orlando man was killed and four police officers wounded during a shootout.

As a result of the problems, the city this year is limiting the number of visitors who will be able to cross over bridges leading to the beach, a move seen by some as racist since police haven't done the same for spring break or Bike Week visitors. Black College Reunion visitors will be forced to park their cars

and take a shuttle to the beach.

The NAACP and several black college students on Monday asked a federal judge to stop Daytona Beach's plans to restrict car access to city beaches this coming weekend.

The traffic plan denies the rights of equal protection and assembly to the 100,000 black students expected for three days of beachside revelry, the civil rights group said in an emergency filing in federal court.

The plan, which would be implemented if there is heavy congestion, allows only residents, hotel guests and those conducting

business on the beach side of town to have access to the beach. All others would have to park their cars and take a shuttle to the beach.

No similar traffic plans were enforced for the 500,000 visitors who attend Bike Week or the 150,000 visitors at spring break, said Crystal Lewis, a black student at Daytona Beach Community College. Those events are mainly attended by white visitors, she said.

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