Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles Biography

The Reverend Samuel "Billy" Kyles was born in Shelby, Mississippi, on September 26, 1934. A longtime leader in the civil rights movement, Kyles has been pastor of the Monumental Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, since 1959.

After Memphis sanitation workers went on strike in February, 1968 due to low wages and inhumane working conditions, Kyles helped to form and lead the effort to gain community support for the striking workers. Part of that effort involved persuading the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Memphis in support of the strike. Their success resulted in Dr. King coming to Memphis and leading a major march that ended uncharacteristically in violence. It was later learned that the violence was caused by paid provocateurs. Before this fact was known, however, Dr. King's disappointment with the violent ending of the march soon gave way to his determination that another peaceful march would be held. He returned to Memphis, where Kyles and several ministers and civic leaders, who had been putting together nightly rallies and raising money for the strike, organized a major rally in preparation for another big march. The rally was held at Mason Temple, the unofficial headquarters for the protest activity, on April 3, 1968.

It was on that evening, marked by active thunderstorms, that an enthusiastic, packed crowd heard Dr. King give what has come to be known as the "Mountaintop" speech. In it, he gave an unusual glimpse into his personal fears and challenges, as well as his prophetic insights into his own fate. The next day Kyles and his family planned to host Dr. King and his entourage at their home for a home-cooked meal. Dr. King was assassinated as they prepared to go to the Kyles' home. The last hour of Dr. King's life he spent with Kyles and Rev. Ralph Abernathy in his room at the Lorraine Motel. Rev. Abernathy has since passed on, leaving Kyles as the only living person that actually spent the last hour of Dr. King's life with him.

Kyles has maintained his involvement with civil rights work since the 1960s. He is a member of several civic and professional organizations. Kyles is a founding member of the National Board of People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), the executive director of Rainbow-PUSH-Memphis and the executive producer of Rainbow-PUSH WLOK Radio. Kyles also worked on Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns and was a delegate to the First African National Congress. He was appointed by President Bill Clinton to serve on the Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad.

Kyles has appeared in several television documentaries about the life and assassination of King and has toured the country extensively, speaking on King and his message. Kyles has received many honors and awards, including the Tennessee Living Legend Award in 1992.