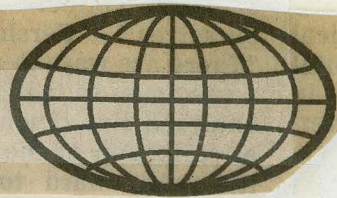


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Pastor says city leaders 'missed an opportunity'

By AMY STEVENS
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KINGSPORT — A local pastor has expressed disappointment that city leaders did not attend a community unity celebration on Martin Luther King Jr. Day earlier this week.

Elder Ronnie Collins of Spirit and Truth Full Gospel Baptist Church attended Tuesday's Board of Mayor and Aldermen meeting and challenged the BMA to stop talking unity and start doing something about it.

"We're going to talk unity," Collins said. "We're going to talk race relations. You can't do that sitting in here. ...

"You've got to get out there in the community."

The Tennessee and Virginia Fellowship Against Racism, which sponsored Monday's unity celebration, mailed letters of invitation to every BMA member (with the exception of new Alderman Larry Munsey), the city manager and the assistant city manager, Collins said. In addition, he said, the organization requested the city send a letter to be read at the event if no officials could attend.

Gov. Don Sundquist submitted a letter that was read at the celebration.

After Tuesday's BMA meeting, Collins said the city could have at least sent a letter.

"They talk unity," he said. "And then when the time comes, they don't do anything.

"The least they could have done was send a letter, a note. They missed an opportunity."

Mayor Ruth Montgomery said she did not receive an invitation to the unity event, but other aldermen indicated they



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— Elder Ronnie Collins,
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man Nathan Vaughn said he was unable to attend due to a family commitment.

Both Aldermen Lon Boyd and Roy Harmon were out of town Monday and Tuesday.

Vice Mayor Ken Maness said he was unable to leave work Monday afternoon. Assistant City Manager William Haston said job obligations also kept city employees from attending.

Haston said the city did not receive a written request for a letter to be read at the event.

Two city representatives who did attend the celebration were school board members Verna Ruth Abbott and Susan Pond.

Maness said it was unfortunate the BMA was not represented.

"I wish we had been there," Maness said. "I wish I'd been there. But it shouldn't be seen as any lack of support for their effort or anything at all negative.

"It's just that I was work-