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The heart of a servant leader

Lewis Shepherd

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Lead photo: Dr. Lewis Shepherd (far right), vice president for community & intercultural engagement at Ouachita, visits with guests in the Green-Blevins Rotunda at McClellan Hall. Photo by Sarah Dean

For immediate release

The heart of a servant leader

By Dr. Lewis Shepherd

January 15, 2024

For more information, contact Ouachita's Office of Communications & Marketing at comm-mark@obu.edu or (870) 245-5206.

On Monday, January 15, people across America and in many places of the world will pause to pay tribute to the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

It is often when we reflect on the life of Martin King that we pay particular homage to his intellectual accomplishments. Yes, they are quite impressive when one considers he entered college at the age of 15 and completed a bachelor's degree by 19, a master's by 21, and a Ph.D. at 26, but Martin King was more than mere diplomas and academic regalia.

King did not leave a legacy because of his social status, his eloquent speaking ability, his stellar ministerial career or his authorship of five books. He did not leave a legacy because he was named Time

magazine's Man of the Year in 1963 or because he won the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 35. His legacy can be attributed to his heart as a servant leader.

Dr. King took to heart his ministry, his message and his Messiah. He took it to heart to such a great extent and at immeasurable expense that he died trying to empower those who were disenfranchised. He died trying to be the voice for those who could not and would not speak up. He died encouraging America to live out and become "the land of the free and the home of the brave." He took it to heart so much so that at his autopsy, Dr. Jerry Francisco, the Shelby County medical examiner, revealed the heart of the 39-year-old Dr. King was aged to that of a 60-year-old.

Dr. King embodied the ideals of the servant leader; he never asked others to do what he was unwilling to do. Whenever there was a march, he led from the front of the line. Whenever there was a boycott, he was the first to be arrested – being arrested more than 20 times during his ministry. From 1957 to 1968, King traveled more than 6 million miles and spoke more than 2,500 times, appearing wherever there was injustice, protest and action. King understood the role of the servant leader and that the needs of others come before the needs of the leader. He understood that the wishes of others must come before the wishes of the leader. He was a servant leader.

In the midst of national and international turmoil, and after 56 years, the words of Dr. King are still both daunting and haunting: "Either we will live together as brothers, or perish together as fools."



Dr. Lewis Shepherd is vice president for community & intercultural engagement at Ouachita.