Charlotte man recalls his days with Martin Luther King Jr.

For the Rev. Jesse Douglas, the approach of Monday’s holiday honoring what would have been Martin Luther King Jr.’s 86th birthday recalls bittersweet memories.

While Americans spend Monday marking the accomplishments of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Rev. Jesse Douglas Sr. will be reflecting on a time – turbulent, but also triumphant – when the two preachers, then young and on fire for justice, worked and marched together.

For Douglas, who moved to the Charlotte area a year and a half ago to be near daughter Adrienne, the approach of the holiday honoring what would have been King’s 86th birthday recalls memories that still endure. “Dr. King,” as Douglas always called him, was a friend, a fellow man of the cloth and a leader of those, like Douglas, who were on the front lines of the civil rights movement in the segregated South of the 1960s.

For three key years, 1963-66, Douglas was president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, where he helped plan and pull off King’s historic Selma-to-Montgomery march for voting rights. And for more than 30 years, Douglas was on the national board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the civil rights group King formed in the late 1950s.

King, Douglas remembers, was down-to-earth, calm but compassionate, loved to stop and talk with children, and wouldn’t let ever-present threats diminish his sense of humor.

He was also a man whose heart beat for the poor, and Douglas is convinced King would have raised up the issue of economic inequality – still unfinished business today – if he had not been murdered in Memphis in 1968.

Plus, Douglas adds with a smile, King was a lover of gospel music and would summon “Jesse,” a singing preacher, to stand up during church rallies and perform his favorite spiritual – “I Told Jesus It Would Be All Right If He Changed My Name.”

Douglas is now 84 and lives with his wife, Blanche, at a nursing and rehabilitation center in Mint Hill. He’s had his physical challenges in recent years, including spinal surgery and a hip replacement. But his mind is still sharp as he recalls the years alongside King in an Alabama whose cities – Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma – were historic battlegrounds.

“There was a lot of hatred going on among the white constituency there,” Douglas told the Observer in an interview last week. “They just did not want to recognize black people as equals.”

His own complexion is so light that some Alabamans mistook Douglas for a white person – including one in Albany, Ala., he remembers, who spat on him for being “a white sympathizer” of black causes.
Douglas never commanded as big a spotlight as those around King who went on to become famous in their own right, including John Lewis, now a congressman, and former United Nations ambassador Andrew Young.

But they recall him with fondness, and say King relied on Douglas to get things done and rally the troops with his singing.

“Dr. King had a great deal of faith in him. He would say, ‘Jesse was taking care of this’ and ‘Jesse was taking care of that,’ ” Lewis told the Observer last week. “And he could lead a song, creating a real sense of solidarity.”

Getting bad news

In 1965, it was Douglas, then a pastor and president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, who would occasionally pick up King and wife, Coretta, at the capital city’s airport. Douglas didn’t drive, but he would then accompany them – in a limo borrowed from a local funeral home – to Brown’s Chapel in Selma for strategy sessions, rallies and worship services. Their planning culminated in a 54-mile march for voting rights that – as dramatized in the new movie, “Selma” – ended with King’s oration to a rally of 25,000 before the Alabama Capitol in Montgomery.

Fifty years later, Douglas still remembers how excited – and weary – he was at the rally. In the days before, he’d led a tense night-time prayer vigil at the Capitol for 40 clergy “from up North, with Alabama state troopers holding billy clubs over our heads.” He had also arranged transportation for visiting celebrities and others, staged a Montgomery protest of police brutality, and walked the last 17 miles of the march that started in Selma.

Watching the Montgomery rally from downtown’s Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King’s launching pad in the 1950s, Douglas says his reaction was simply: “Here at last! Here at last!”

But the euphoria ended that night, when Douglas got a call about 10 o’clock from a federal officer who had worked with him to protect the marchers.

“He told me, ‘Rev. Douglas, I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news for you,’ ” Douglas remembers. “He said, ‘Everything went fine today, but we had an incident on Highway 80. Mrs. Viola Liuzzo was killed by a group of rebels who saw her get in the car with this black man.’ ”

Liuzzo, a white homemaker and mother of five from Detroit, had answered King’s call for people to come to Alabama to support the march.

“She decided she couldn’t sit still any longer,” Douglas says. “She volunteered for our transportation committee, brought her own car and refused to accept gas money.”
After the march, as she was driving back from shuttling marchers to the airport, a group of Klansmen followed her car and shot her. She was 39.

Inspired to action

Douglas was born in New Orleans in 1930. Then-Gov. Huey Long ruled Louisiana, racial segregation was law, and the Great Depression was ravaging the country, especially the South.

Douglas’ mother worked as a maid. And she often took her son with her when cleaning and tending to the children of white families.

Like his mother, Douglas stood out as a light-skinned African-American. Other black kids would tease him about his blue eyes and blonde hair, calling him “old white boy” and “old albino.”

In response, Douglas says, “I learned to fight real good.”

But in 1954, he answered a call to the ministry. Douglas moved to Atlanta to attend seminary. And by the early 1960s, inspired by college students and their sit-ins in neighboring North Carolina, he had become part of the civil rights movement. His first campaign: Joining with other Georgia students to try to desegregate cafeterias and lunch counters in Atlanta.

The fighting boy was by this time a nonviolent resister. His weapons were marches, sit-ins and litigation.

“No one could participate in the movement unless they were committed to nonviolence,” he says. “We agreed to make our bodies a living sacrifice.”

By 1962, Douglas had moved to Montgomery to become pastor of a church – and continued as a civil rights pioneer.

“He was always very active,” Lewis said. And during those years when the nation’s eyes were on Alabama, Lewis added, Douglas was “always reliable, always dependable.”

Though based in Atlanta, King was frequently in Alabama during the early-to-mid 1960s, as SCLC leaders mobilized protests and even went to jail with rank-and-file protesters.

Douglas says that’s him singing at the beginning and the end of an LP record the SCLC released featuring King reading his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

That’s also Douglas, locked arm-in-arm with King and Lewis, in one of the most famous photographs taken during the time of the Selma-to-Montgomery march. To Douglas’ amusement, newspapers around the country ran a caption that called him “unidentified white man.”
When the photo was taken, the civil rights leaders were marching to protest a Montgomery County sheriff who had, Douglas says, permitted deputies on horseback “to run down (black) students from Alabama State College.”

In the nation’s capital, that photo now hangs on a wall in Lewis’ congressional office, and on the side of a building on the Washington Mall, where the National Museum of African American History and Culture is scheduled to open in 2016.

As a black who could pass for white, Douglas says he sometimes attended whites-only events to eavesdrop and report back to the civil rights groups. And once, he remembers, he was able to answer a white woman’s taunt that “You can march all you want, it won’t make you white” with an invitation to inspect his skin. “Lady,” he said, “look at me. I’m whiter than you.”

Unlike many of his fellow activists, Douglas says, “I never got beat up because I think whites just thought I was one of them, just being sympathetic to the movement.”

But he remembers being sickened by all the white-on-black cruelty. Like, on “Bloody Sunday,” when Alabama state troopers beat Lewis and other protesters on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma – a scene that horrified a national audience watching it on the TV networks.

“I couldn’t understand how human beings could treat other human beings like that,” he says, “without any sympathy, without any concern.”

Douglas says he was with King when an American Nazi punched the civil rights leader in the face – a version of which is recreated in the movie, “Selma.” Douglas says King instructed his aides not to retaliate, saying that “he’s the victim of a sick society. Don’t harm him.”

Such a response, Douglas says, marked King as a man doing God’s work.

“I noticed in my lifetime that God has a way of selecting persons for certain jobs, and preparing them for that,” he says. “I believe Martin Luther King was one of those persons. He gave his life for his people and for the fulfillment of God’s word.”

In 1966, Douglas moved to Birmingham to pastor another church.

And that’s where he was two years later, in April 1968, when he heard that King had been assassinated. He still remembers exactly where he was when he got the news: downtown Birmingham, on his way to a restaurant.

When asked about King’s death last week, Douglas seemed to crumble a bit in his wheelchair. His eyes became teary, his voice breaking.

“It was like someone had taken a dagger,” he says, forming one with his hand, “and stuck it through my heart.”
A legacy of change

For decades after that, Douglas served at a succession of CME (Christian Methodist Episcopal) churches, in Kansas City, Mo., Detroit, Chicago, Champagne, Ill., and Flint, Mich. He retired in 2004.

He also stayed active in civil rights over the years, and became a regular speaker at Martin Luther King Jr. Day events.

Had King lived, Douglas said last week, he would have shifted his emphasis. With segregation outlawed, voting rights won and access to restaurants, hotels and other public places assured, King was already speaking up in 1968 about economic injustice.

Too many poor people – black, white and Hispanic – were unemployed or underpaid. “He said, ‘If you don’t have the money, how can you enjoy the privileges we fought so hard to get?’”

King and the SCLC were planning a Poor People’s Campaign. And in the wake of his assassination, it was carried out, with a 3,000-person tent city on the Washington Mall. In one photo from the event, Douglas is shown singing to delighted protesters.

And even with Barack Obama in the White House, Douglas also thinks King would not be satisfied with the current scene, especially “new tactics” – more subtle than in King’s day – “to deprive minorities and the poor of their rights.”

And yet, Douglas says, he’s proud to have helped King change America, “making it better for those who came after us.”

He can see the fruits of their struggle in the college degrees and top jobs that now go to African-Americans.

Says Douglas, again with a smile: “At least my kids and my grandkids are able to say this about me: ‘He didn’t sit by and watch things happen. He helped make things happen.’

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