

Historic civil rights church to be considered for national recognition

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(RNS) The West Hunter Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, where Ralph Abernathy Sr. and Martin Luther King Jr. met, prayed, and organized the civil rights movement, could be on its way to formal national recognition after a vote by the U.S. House of Representatives on Monday (September 15).

The vote approves a Department of Interior study to determine whether it can be named a National Park Service site.

“I am very pleased,” said Ralph David Abernathy III, who runs a foundation that intends to raise about \$6 million to turn the site of the now vacant stone building into a park and historic center. “This was the spiritual workplace of the civil rights movement.”

Abernathy, whose father and King were close friends and co-founders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, hopes for Senate passage of the West Hunter Street Baptist Church Study Act before the end of the year.

“The history of the Civil Rights Movement is a lesson in democratic ideals,” said Rep. Hank Johnson (D., Georgia), who proposed the legislation with Rep. Austin Scott (R., Georgia). “We deeply believe that it is our duty to preserve these landmarks and to share their significance with future generations.”

Abernathy, one of four living children of the civil rights leader, testified before members of Congress in July about the bipartisan bill, which is co-sponsored by 77 House members.

The historic church was the site of training sessions for Freedom Summer and other voter education projects. It has been vacant ever since the elder Abernathy led the church to a new megachurch location. Ralph Abernathy Sr. died in 1990.

The foundation has proposed that the park at the site would include a 21-foot bronze statue of six pioneers of the civil rights movement: Rosa Parks; King; Coretta Scott King; Abernathy Sr.; his wife, Juanita Abernathy; and John Lewis.