

Ralph David Abernathy

1926–1990



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Ralph David Abernathy was a civil rights leader and Baptist minister. He was chief aide to Martin Luther King Jr. and helped organize the Montgomery bus boycott. He also served as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference after King's death.



As you read the biography below, think about how Abernathy worked with Martin Luther King Jr. What role did he play as King's chief aide?



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During the 1970s the focus of the civil rights movement shifted. African Americans had won many of the rights they fought for in the 1960s. Segregation was illegal, and African Americans had the right to vote. Now Martin Luther King Jr. and others viewed poverty as the most important social issue for African Americans. When King was assassinated, his chief aide, Ralph David Abernathy, set out to finish King's work.

Ralph David Abernathy was born in Linden, Alabama, in 1926. He was ordained as a Baptist minister in 1948. Two years later he received a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Alabama State University. He earned a master's degree in sociology in 1951 from Atlanta University.

Abernathy became a pastor of the First Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1951. A few years later he met Martin Luther King Jr., who was also a preacher in Montgomery. In 1955 the two men teamed up to organize a bus boycott in Montgomery. This event signaled the beginning of a new phase of the civil rights movement in the United States.

In 1957 King and Abernathy founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The goal of the organization was to challenge segregation throughout the South with nonviolent protests. Those who supported segregation, however, often responded to the SCLC's protests with violence. The homes and churches of both King and Abernathy were bombed.

Abernathy always stood by King's side. He shared jail cells with him and provided religious counsel and friendship. In 1968 when King was shot, Abernathy rode with him in the ambulance, remaining by his side until his death.

The Civil Rights Movement

Biography

Abernathy then succeeded King as president of the SCLC and continued King's work, taking part in many campaigns and marches. He became one of the leaders of the Poor People's Campaign, a movement to call attention to the economic inequalities in American society with nonviolent actions. In May 1968 a march was held in Washington, D.C., but results of this campaign were limited.

Abernathy also helped hospital workers win a strike and marched on behalf of three black Alabama school teachers who had been fired. In 1973, as public interest in the civil rights movement and financial contributions to the SCLC were waning, Abernathy announced his resignation, criticizing blacks who had benefited from the organization but would not support it. He agreed to stay until 1977 when he made an unsuccessful run for Congress.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Make Inferences** What role did Abernathy play in the civil rights movement after King's death?

2. **Predict** What might have happened to the civil rights movement if King hadn't been assassinated? What other issues might he and Abernathy have tackled together?

ACTIVITY

Poverty continues to be a major problem in the United States and around the world. Create a poster to advertise a rally focused on addressing the needs of the poor. What would your poster need to say or show to inspire people to come to the rally to learn more?