

Ralph Abernathy

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Ralph David Abernathy, Sr. (March 11, 1926 – April 17, 1990) was a leader of the African-American Civil Rights Movement, a minister, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s closest friend. In 1955, he collaborated with King to create the Montgomery Improvement Association, which would lead to the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott against segregation on buses in the south. In 1957, Abernathy co-founded, and was an executive board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Following the assassination of King, Abernathy became president of the SCLC. As president of the SCLC, he led the Poor People's Campaign March on Washington, D.C. in 1968. Abernathy also served as an advisory committee member of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). He later returned to the ministry, and in 1989 - the year before his death — Abernathy wrote a controversial autobiography about his and King's involvement in the civil rights movement. The title of his publication is "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography" and is still available.

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Ralph Abernathy



Abernathy in June 1968

Born	Ralph David Abernathy March 11, 1926 Linden, Alabama, USA
Died	April 17, 1990 (aged 64) Atlanta, Georgia, USA
Cause of death	Natural causes
Occupation	Clergyman, activist
Organization	Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
Political party	Democratic
Movement	African-American Civil Rights Movement, Peace movement
Religion	Baptist
Spouse(s)	Juanita Jones Abernathy
Children	Kwame Luthuli, Ralph David Jr. (deceased), Ralph David III, Donzaleigh, Juandalynn

Early life and education

Abernathy, one of William and Louivery Abernathy's 11 children, was born on March 11, 1926 on their family 500-acre (200 ha) farm in Linden, Alabama.^{[1][2][3][4]} Abernathy's father, was the first African-

American to vote in Marengo County, Alabama, and the first to serve on a grand jury there.^[5] Abernathy attended Linden Academy, a Baptist school founded by the First Mt. Pleasant District Association. At Linden Academy, Abernathy led his first demonstration, to protest the inferior science lab; the school improved the science lab as a result of his persistent actions.^[5]

During World War II, he enlisted in the United States Army, and rose to the rank of Platoon Sergeant before earning an honorable discharge as a result of his bout of rheumatic fever in Europe.^{[1][6]} Afterwards, he enrolled at Alabama State University using the benefits from the G.I. Bill, which he earned with his service.^[7] As a sophomore he was elected president of the student council, and led a successful hunger strike to raise the quality of the food served on the campus.^[7] While still a college student, Abernathy announced his call to the ministry, which he had envisioned since he was a small boy growing up in a devout Baptist family. He was ordained a Baptist minister in 1948, and preached his first sermon on Mother's Day, in honor of his recently deceased mother. In 1950 he graduated with a bachelor's degree in Mathematics.^[3] During that summer Abernathy hosted a radio show and became the first black man on radio in Montgomery, Alabama.^[7] In the fall, he then went on to further his education at Atlanta University.^[7] And, in 1951, Abernathy earned his Master of Science degree in sociology with High Honors.^[3] His master's thesis, "The Natural History of A Social Movement: The Montgomery Improvement Association", was published by Carlson Publishing in David Garrow's book *The Walking City – The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956*.

He began his professional career in 1951, when he was appointed as the Dean of Men at Alabama State University.^[8] Later that year, he became the Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church, the largest black church in Montgomery, where he served for ten years.^{[3][8][9]} He married Juanita Odessa Jones of Uniontown, Alabama, on August 31, 1952.^{[10][11]} Together they had five children: Ralph David Abernathy Jr., Juandalynn Ralpheda, Donzaleigh Avis, Ralph David III, and Kwame Luthuli Abernathy.^{[11][12]} Their first child, Ralph Abernathy Jr., died suddenly on August 18, 1953 - less than 2 days after his birth on August 16.^[12]

In 1954, Abernathy met Martin Luther King Jr., who — at the time — was just becoming a pastor himself at a nearby church.^[10] Abernathy mentored King and the two men eventually became close friends.^[10]

Civil rights activism

Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955

After the arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955, for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, Abernathy (then a member of the Montgomery NAACP) collaborated with King to create the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), which organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott.^{[1][3][13][14]} Along with fellow English professor Jo Ann Robinson, they called for and distributed flyers asking the black citizens of Montgomery to stay off the buses.^[15] The boycott attracted national attention, and a federal court case that ended on December 17, 1956, when the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Browder v. Gayle*, upheld an earlier District Court decision that the bus segregation was unconstitutional.^[16] The 381 day transit boycott, challenging the "Jim Crow" segregation laws, had been successful.^[17] And on December 20, 1956 the boycott came to an end.^[18]

As a result of the boycott on January 10, 1957, Abernathy's home was bombed — his family was unharmed.^{[19][20][21]} Abernathy's own First Baptist Church, Mt. Olive Church, Bell Street Church, and the home of Reverend Robert Graetz were also bombed on that evening, while King, Abernathy, and 58 other black leaders from the south were meeting at the Southern Negro Leaders Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration, in Atlanta.^{[3][21][22][23]}

African-American Civil Rights Movement

On January 11, 1957, after a two-day long meeting, the Southern Leaders Conference on Transportation and Non-violent Integration, was founded.^[24] On February 14, 1957, the Conference convened again in New Orleans, LA. During that meeting, they changed the group's name to the Southern Leadership Conference and appointed the following executive board: King, President; Charles Kenzie Steele, Vice-president; Abernathy, Financial Secretary-Treasurer; T. J. Jemison, Secretary; I. M. Augustine, General Counsel.^{[22][25]} On August 8, 1957 the Southern Leadership Conference held its first convention, in Montgomery, Alabama.^[26] At that time, they changed the Conference's name for the final time to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and decided upon starting up voter registration drives for blacks across the south.^{[26][27]}

On May 20, 1961, the Freedom Riders stopped in Montgomery, Alabama, while on their way from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans, Louisiana to protest the still segregated buses across the south.^[28] Many of the Freedom Riders were beaten once they arrived at the Montgomery bus station, by a white mob, causing several of the riders to be hospitalized.^[28] The following night Abernathy and King setup an event in support of the Freedom Riders, where King would make an address, at Abernathy's church.^[29] More than 1,500 people came to the event that night.^{[30][31]} The church was soon surrounded by a mob of white segregationists who laid siege on the church.^{[32][33]} King, from inside the church, called the United States Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and pleaded for help from the federal government.^[31] There was a group of United States Marshals sent there to protect the event, but they were too few in numbers to protect the church from the angry mob — who had begun throwing rocks and bricks through the windows of the church.^[34] Reinforcements with riot experience, from the Marshall service, were sent in to help defend the perimeter.^[34] By the next morning, the Governor of Alabama - after being called by Kennedy — sent in the Alabama National Guard, and the mob was finally dispersed.^[31] After the success of the Freedom Riders in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Huntsville in 1961, King insisted that Abernathy assume the Pastorate of the West Hunter Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, and Abernathy did so — moving his family from Montgomery, Alabama, in 1962.^[3]

The King/Abernathy partnership spearheaded successful nonviolent movements in Montgomery, Albany, Georgia, Birmingham, Mississippi, Washington D.C., Selma, Alabama, St. Augustine, Chicago, and Memphis. King and Abernathy journeyed together, often sharing the same hotel rooms, and leisure times with their wives, children, family, and friends. And they were both jailed 17 times together, for their involvement in the movement.^[20] Their work helped to secure the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the abolition of Jim Crow Segregation Laws in the southern United States.

Abernathy suffered bombings, beatings by southern policemen and State Troopers, 44 arrests, and daily death threats against his life and those of his wife and children. His family land and automobile were confiscated (his family had to re-purchase his automobile at public auction). Some of his colleagues and some volunteers in the civil rights movement who worked with him were murdered.

Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

On April 3, 1968 at the Mason Temple, Abernathy introduced Dr. King before he made his last public address; King said at the beginning of his now famous *"I've Been to the Mountaintop"* speech:

“ As I listened to Ralph Abernathy and his eloquent and generous introduction and then thought about myself, I wondered who he was talking about. It's always good to have your closest friend and associate to say something good ”

about you, and Ralph Abernathy is the best friend that I have in the world. —

Martin Luther King Jr.^[35]

The following day, April 4, 1968, Abernathy was with King in the room (Room 306) they shared at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. At 6:01 p.m. while Abernathy was inside the room getting cologne, King was shot while standing outside on the balcony. Once the shot was fired Abernathy ran out to the balcony and cradled King in his arms as he died.^{[6][36][37][38]} Abernathy accompanied King to St. Joseph's Hospital within fifteen minutes of the shooting. The doctors performed an emergency surgery, but he never regained consciousness. King was pronounced dead at 7:05 p.m. at age 39.

Leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Until King's assassination, Abernathy had served as SCLC's first Financial Secretary/Treasurer and Vice President At-Large. After King's passing, Abernathy assumed the presidency of the SCLC.^{[3][20]} Abernathy led a march to support striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. In May 1968, Abernathy led the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C. The nation's poor Blacks, Latinos, Whites, and Native Americans came together from the Mississippi Delta, the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Indian Reservations of the Northwest, the farmlands of the Southwest, and the inner cities of the North under the leadership of Abernathy to reside on the Mall of the Washington Memorial in Resurrection City. Hoping to bring attention to the struggles of the nation's poor, they constructed huts in the nation's capital, precipitating a showdown with the police. On June 19, Ralph spoke at the Lincoln Memorial in front of tens of thousands of black and white citizens. The Poor People's Campaign reflected Abernathy's deep conviction that "the key to the salvation and redemption of this nation lay in its moral and humane response to the needs of its most oppressed and poverty-stricken citizens". His aim in the spring of 1968 was to raise the nation's consciousness on hunger and poverty, which he achieved. The Poor People's Campaign led to systematic changes in US Federal Policies and Legislation creating a national Food Stamp Program, a free meal program for low income children, assistance programs for the elderly, CEDAR and other work programs, day care and health care programs for low income people across America. June 24, 1968, the Washington, D.C., Police forced the poor to disband and demolished Resurrection City. Dr. Abernathy was jailed for nearly three weeks for refusing to comply with orders to evacuate.

On the eve of the Apollo 11 launch, July 15, 1969, Abernathy arrived at Cape Canaveral with several hundred members of the poor people to protest spending of government space exploration, while many Americans remained poor. He was met by Thomas O. Paine, the Administrator of NASA, whom he told that in the face of such suffering, space flight represented an inhuman priority and funds should be spent instead to "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend the sick, and house the homeless". Paine told Abernathy that the advances in space exploration were child's play compared to the tremendously difficult human problems of society, and told him that "if we could solve the problems of poverty by not pushing the button to launch men to the moon tomorrow, then we would not push that button". On the day of the launch, Abernathy led a small group of protesters to the restricted guest viewing area of the space center and chanted, "We are not astronauts, but we are people."

Abernathy took part in a labor struggle in Charleston, South Carolina, on behalf of the hospital workers of 1199B, which led to a living wage increase and improved working conditions for thousands of hospital workers.

Abernathy successfully negotiated a peace settlement at the Wounded Knee uprising between the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Leaders of the American Indian Movement, Russell Means and Dennis Banks.

Abernathy remained president of the SCLC for nine years following Dr. King's death in 1968 until his resignation in 1977, when he became President Emeritus.^[3]

Politics and later life

Abernathy addressed the United Nations in 1971 on World Peace.^[1] He was also a member of the Board of Directors of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change.

In 1977, he ran unsuccessfully for Georgia's 5th Congressional District seat, losing to Congressman Wyche Fowler. He founded the nonprofit organization Foundation for Economic Enterprises Development (FEED), which offered managerial and technical training, creating jobs, income, business and trade opportunities for underemployed and unemployed workers of all races and ethnicities. Through a grant from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, he built the Ralph David Abernathy Towers, a high-rise housing complex for senior citizens and the handicapped.

In 1979, Abernathy traveled around the country supporting Senator Edward M. Kennedy's candidacy for the Presidency of the United States. However, he shocked critics a few weeks before the 1980 November election, when he endorsed the front-runner, Ronald Reagan, over the struggling presidential campaign of Jimmy Carter.^[39] With an inevitable Republican victory, Abernathy said that he felt that he had to endorse Reagan, so that African Americans might gain some respect in that political party. After the disappointing performance of the Reagan Administration on civil rights and other areas, Abernathy withdrew his endorsement of Reagan in 1984, remaining a Democrat until his death.

Abernathy served as a representative on the National Council for the Aged, the World Commission on Hunger, a Life Member of the National NAACP, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the American Sociological Society, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, the Atlanta Baptist Ministers Union and on more than forty other organizations. An advocate of the Constitution's First Amendment for Religious Freedom, Abernathy served as Vice President along with Dr. Robert Grant and co-founded the American Freedom Coalition in 1980.

Abernathy testified—along with his executive associate, James Peterson of Berkeley, California—before the Congressional Hearings calling for the Extension of the Voting Rights Act, which has and continues to serve as the only legal method to ensure equal and fair voting practices in the Southern States, guaranteeing that everyone born in the United States of America is entitled to full citizenship and the right to vote, regardless of race.

In the fall of 1989, Harper Collins published Abernathy's autobiography, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down*.^[3] It was his final accounting of his close partnership with King and their work in the Civil Rights Movement.^[40] In it he revealed King's marital infidelity, stating that King had sexual relations with two women on the night of April 3, 1968 (after his *"I've Been to the Mountaintop"* speech earlier that day).^[40] The book's revelations became the source of much controversy, as did Abernathy.^{[40][41]} Jesse Jackson and other civil rights activists made a statement in October 1989—after the book's release—that the book was "slander" and that "brain surgery" must have altered Abernathy's perception.^{[40][41]}

In the 1990s, the Unification Church hired Dr. Abernathy as a spokesperson to protest the news media's use of the term "Moonies", which they compared with the word "nigger".^[42] Abernathy also served as vice president of the Unification Church-affiliated group American Freedom Coalition,^{[43][44]} and served on two Unification Church boards of directors.^[45]

Honors and awards

During his lifetime, Abernathy was honored with more than 300 awards and citations, including five honorary doctorate degrees. He received a Doctor of Divinity from Morehouse College, a Doctor of Divinity from Kalamazoo College in Michigan, a Doctor of Laws from Allen University of South Carolina, a Doctor

of Laws from Long Island University in New York, and a Doctor of Laws at Alabama State University. He received the Peace Medallion of the German Democratic Republic from the German Democratic Republic. He was "Man of the Year" for the Atlanta Urban League, "Unheralded Hero of Human Rights" by the Young Men's Christian Association.

Death

Abernathy died at Emory Crawford Long Memorial Hospital on the morning of April 17, 1990, from two blood clots that traveled to his heart and lungs, five weeks after his 64th birthday.^[20] After his death the 41st President of the United States, issued the following statement:

“ Barbara and I join with all Americans to mourn the passing of the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, a great leader in the struggle for civil rights for all Americans and a tireless campaigner for justice. — President George H. W. Bush ^[20] ”

He is entombed in the Lincoln Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia.^[46] At Abernathy's behest, his tomb has the simple inscription: *"I TRIED"*.^{[41][46]}

Tributes

- Ralph D. Abernathy Hall at Alabama State Hall is dedicated to him, with a bust of his head in the foyer area.
- Interstate 20 Ralph David Abernathy Freeway, Abernathy Road and Ralph David Abernathy Boulevard of Atlanta were named in his honor.

In popular culture

- Abernathy was played by Colman Domingo in the 2014 film *Selma*.

See also

- African-American Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968)
- List of civil rights leaders
- Timeline of the American Civil Rights Movement

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Ralph David Abernathy Boulevard in southwest Atlanta

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External links

- Appearances (<http://www.c-span.org/person/?ralphabernathy>) on C-SPAN
 - *Booknotes* interview with Abernathy on *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, October 29, 1989. (<http://www.booknotes.org/Watch/9718-1/Rev+Ralph+David+Abernathy.aspx>)
- Ralph Abernathy article, Encyclopedia of Alabama (<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-1110>)
- Ralph Abernathy (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=8533>) at *Find a Grave*
- Ralph Abernathy Biography, The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany (http://www.aacvr-germany.org/AACVR.ORG/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=103&Itemid=71)
- The Jack Rabin Collection on Alabama Civil Rights and Southern Activists includes video, pictures and materials of Dr. Abernathy during Selma to Montgomery March (<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/digital/rabin.html>)
- Ralph Abernathy (<http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/tocn-mla000676-ralph-abernathy>) on the WGBH series *The Ten O'Clock News* (<http://openvault.wgbh.org/collections/tocn-the-ten-o-clock-news>).



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