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Ralph Abernathy



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Ralph David Abernathy Sr.

(March 11, 1926 – April 17, 1990) was an American civil rights activist and Christian minister. As a leader of the [Civil Rights Movement](#), he was a close friend and mentor of [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) He collaborated with King to create the [Montgomery Improvement Association](#) which led to the [Montgomery Bus Boycott](#). He also co-founded and was an executive board member of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#) (SCLC). He became president of the SCLC following the [assassination of King](#) in 1968, where he led the [Poor People's Campaign](#) in [Washington, D.C.](#) among other marches and demonstrations for disenfranchised Americans. He also served as an advisory committee member of the [Congress on Racial Equality](#) (CORE).

In 1971, Abernathy addressed the [United Nations](#) about world peace. He also assisted in brokering a deal between the FBI and Indian protestors during the [Wounded Knee incident](#) of 1973. He retired from his position as President of the SCLC in 1977 and became president emeritus. That year he unsuccessfully ran for the [U.S. House of Representatives](#) for the 5th district of [Georgia](#). He later founded the Foundation for

Ralph Abernathy



Abernathy in June 1968

2nd President of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#)

In office

1968–1977

Preceded by [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

Succeeded by [Joseph Lowery](#)

Personal details

Born Ralph David Abernathy
March 11, 1926
[Linden, Alabama, U.S.](#)

Died April 17, 1990 (aged 64)
[Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.](#)

Political party [Democratic](#)

Spouse(s) [Juanita Jones Abernathy](#)

Children 5, including [Ralph David III](#) and [Donzaleigh](#)

Occupation [Clergyman](#), [activist](#)

Known for [Civil rights movement](#)
[Peace movement](#)
Closest friend and mentor of [Dr. Martin Luther King](#)

Military service

Allegiance  [United States](#)

Branch/service  [United States Army](#)

Rank [Platoon Sergeant](#)

Battles/wars [World War II](#)

Economic Enterprises Development, and he testified before the [U.S. Congress](#) in support of extending of the [Voting Rights Act](#) in 1982.

In 1989, Abernathy wrote *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography*, a controversial autobiography about his and King's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. He was ridiculed for the revelations in the book about Martin Luther King's alleged [infidelity](#). Abernathy eventually became less active in politics and returned to his work as a minister. He died of heart disease on April 17, 1990. His tombstone is engraved with the words "I tried".^[1]

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Early life, family, and education [\[edit \]](#)

Abernathy, 10th of William and Louivery Abernathy's 12 children, was born on March 11, 1926, on their family 500-acre (200 ha) farm in [Linden, Alabama](#).^{[2][3][4][5]} Abernathy's father was the first African-American to vote in [Marengo County, Alabama](#), and the first to serve on a grand jury there.^[6] Abernathy attended Linden Academy (a Baptist school founded by the First Mt. Pleasant District Association). At Linden Academy, Abernathy led his first demonstrations to improve the livelihoods of his fellow students.^[6]

During World War II, he enlisted in the [United States Army](#), and rose to the rank of Platoon Sergeant before being discharged.^{[2][7]} Afterwards, he enrolled at [Alabama State University](#) using the benefits from the [G.I. Bill](#), which he earned with his service.^[8] 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.^[8] 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.^[4] During that summer Abernathy hosted a

radio show and became the first black man on radio in [Montgomery, Alabama](#).^[8] In the fall, he then went on to further his education at Atlanta University, earning his Master of Arts degree in sociology with High Honors in 1951.^{[8][4]}

He began his professional career in 1951, when he was appointed as the Dean of Men at Alabama State University.^[9] 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.^{[4][9][10]}

He married Juanita Odessa Jones of [Uniontown, Alabama](#), on August 31, 1952.^{[11][12]} Together they had five children: Ralph David Abernathy Jr., Juandalynn Ralpheda, Donzaleigh Avis, [Ralph David Abernathy III](#), and Kwame Luthuli Abernathy.^{[12][13]} Their first child, Ralph Abernathy Jr., died suddenly on August 18, 1953, less than 2 days after his birth on August 16, while their other children lived on to adulthood.^[13]

In 1954, Abernathy met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who — at the time — was just becoming a pastor himself at a nearby church.^[11] Abernathy mentored King and the two men eventually became close friends.^[11]

Civil rights activism [edit]

Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955 [edit]

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](#).^{[2][4][14][15]} 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.^[16] 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.^[17] The 381-day transit boycott, challenging the "[Jim Crow](#)" [segregation laws](#), had been successful.^[18] And on December 20, 1956, the boycott came to an end.^[19]

As a result of the boycott on January 10, 1957, Abernathy's home was bombed — his family was unharmed.^{[20][21][22]} Abernathy's own First Baptist Church, Mt. Olive Church, Bell Street Church, and the home of [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.^{[4][22][23][24]}

Civil Rights Movement [edit]

On January 11, 1957, after a two-day long meeting, the Southern Leaders Conference on Transportation and Non-violent Integration, was founded.^[25] On February 14, 1957, the Conference convened again in New Orleans. 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.^{[23][26]} On August 8, 1957, the Southern Leadership Conference held its first convention, in Montgomery, Alabama.^[27] 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 black people across the south.^{[27][28]}

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.^[29] 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.^[29] The following night Abernathy and King set up an event in support of the Freedom Riders, where King would make an address, at Abernathy's church.^[30] More than 1,500 people came to the event that night.^{[31][32]} The church was soon surrounded by a mob of white segregationists who laid siege on the church.^{[33][34]} King, from inside the church, called the [Attorney General Robert Kennedy](#), and pleaded for help from the federal government.^[32] There was a group of [United States Marshals](#) sent there to protect the event, but they were too few in number to protect the church from the angry mob, who had begun throwing rocks and bricks through the windows of the church.^[35] Reinforcements with riot experience, from the Marshals service, were sent in to help defend the perimeter.^[35] 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.^[32] 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.^[4]

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.^[21]

During Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination [[edit](#)]

Further information: [Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

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

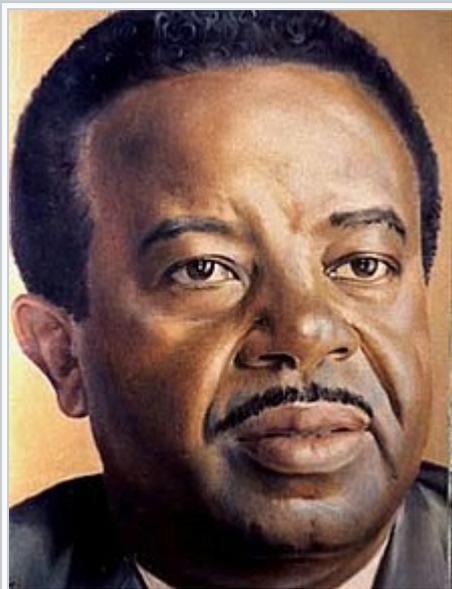
As I listened to Ralph Abernathy and his eloquent and generous introduction and then thought about myself, I wondered who he was talking about. It's always good to have your closest friend

Ralph David Abernathy and his wife Mrs. Juanita Abernathy follow with Dr. and Mrs. Martin Luther King as the Abernathy children march on the front line, leading the [Selma to Montgomery March](#) in 1965.

and associate to say something good about you, and Ralph Abernathy is the best friend that I have in the world.^[36]

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 lay unconscious.^{[7][37][38]} Abernathy accompanied King to [St. Joseph's Hospital](#) within fifteen minutes of the shooting.^[39] The doctors performed an emergency surgery, but he never regained consciousness.^[40] King was pronounced dead at 7:05 p.m. at age 39.^[41]

Leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [edit]



Ralph David Abernathy, as painted by the artist [Robert Templeton](#), Oil, 1974

Until King's assassination, Abernathy had served as [Southern Christian Leadership Conference's](#) first Financial Secretary/Treasurer and Vice President At-Large.^[42] After King's death, Abernathy assumed the presidency of the SCLC.^{[4][21]} One of his first roles was to take up the role of leading a march to support striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee which King and Abernathy had planned before King's assassination.^[43] In May 1968, Abernathy led the [Poor People's Campaign](#) in Washington, D.C.^[44]

Protest at NASA [edit]

On the eve of the [Apollo 11](#) launch, July 15, 1969, Abernathy arrived at [Cape Canaveral](#) with several hundred members of the poor people campaign to protest spending of government space exploration, while many Americans remained poor.^[45] 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".^[46] Paine told Abernathy that the advances in space exploration were "child's play" compared to the "tremendously difficult human problems" of society Abernathy was discussing.^[46] Later in 1969, Abernathy also took part in a labor struggle in [Charleston, South Carolina](#), on behalf of the hospital workers of the local union 1199B, which led to a living wage increase and improved working conditions for thousands of hospital workers.^[47]

Wounded Knee [edit]

In 1973, Abernathy helped negotiate 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.^{[48][49][50]}

Abernathy remained president of the SCLC for nine years following King's death in 1968.^[4] After King's death the organization lost the popularity it had under his leadership.^[51] By the time Abernathy left the organization the SCLC had become indebted, and critics stated that it wasn't as imaginative as the SCLC led by Dr. King.^[52] In 1977 Abernathy resigned from his leadership role at the SCLC, and was bestowed the title President Emeritus.^[4]

Political career and later activism [[edit](#)]

Abernathy addressed the [United Nations](#) in 1971 on World Peace.^[2] He was also a member of the Board of Directors of the [Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change](#).^[53] In 1977, he ran unsuccessfully for Georgia's 5th Congressional District seat, losing to Congressman [Wyche Fowler](#).^[54] 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 for underprivileged blacks.^[55]

In 1979, Abernathy endorsed Senator [Edward M. Kennedy](#)'s candidacy for the Presidency of the United States.^[56] 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](#).^[57] Abernathy stated of his endorsement: "The Republican Party has too long ignored us and the Democratic Party has taken us for granted and so since all of my colleagues and the latter in various places across the country were supporting the Democratic Party, I felt that I should support Ronald Reagan."^[58] After the disappointing performance of the Reagan Administration on civil rights and other areas, Abernathy withdrew his endorsement of Reagan in 1984.^[59]

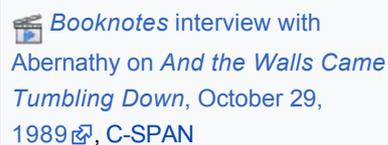
In 1982, Abernathy testified—along with his executive associate, James Peterson of Berkeley, California—before the Congressional Hearings calling for the Extension of the Voting Rights Act.^[60]

And the Walls Came Tumbling Down [[edit](#)]

In late 1989, [Harper Collins](#) published Abernathy's autobiography, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*.^[4] It was his

final published accounting of his close partnership with King and their work in the Civil Rights Movement.^[61] 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).^[61] The book's revelations became the source of much controversy, as did Abernathy.^{[61][1]} [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.^{[61][1]}

External video

 [Booknotes interview with Abernathy on *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, October 29, 1989](#), C-SPAN

Unification Church [edit]

In the 1990s, the [Unification Church](#) hired Abernathy as a [spokesperson](#) to protest the news media's use of the term "Moonies", which they compared with the word "[nigger](#)".^[62] Abernathy also served as vice president of the Unification Church-affiliated group [American Freedom Coalition](#),^{[63][64]} and served on two Unification Church [boards of directors](#).^[65]

Death [edit]

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.^[21] After his death, [George H. W. Bush](#), then-[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.^[21]

He is entombed in the Lincoln Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia. At Abernathy's behest, his tomb has the simple inscription: "I TRIED."^[1]

Tributes [edit]

During his lifetime, Abernathy was honored with more than 300 awards and citations, including five honorary doctorate degrees.^{[66][67]} 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](#).^[67]



Ralph David Abernathy Home on the campus of [Alabama State University](#) in [Montgomery](#)

- . Ralph D. Abernathy Hall at Alabama State Hall is dedicated to him, with a bust of his head in the foyer area.^[68]
- . [Interstate 20](#) Ralph David Abernathy Freeway,^[69] Abernathy Road,^[70] and Ralph David Abernathy Boulevard of Atlanta were named in his honor.^[71]

In popular culture [edit]

- . Abernathy is played by Ernie Lee Banks in the 1978 miniseries *King*.^[72]
- . Abernathy is played by [Colman Domingo](#) in the 2014 film *Selma*, a film about the [Selma to Montgomery marches](#), Martin Luther King Jr., and SCLC.^[73]
- . Abernathy is played by [Dohn Norwood](#) in the 2016 film *All the Way*.^[74]

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See also [edit]

- [List of civil rights leaders](#)
- [Timeline of the civil rights movement](#)

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- Appearances on C-SPAN
- Ralph Abernathy article, Encyclopedia of Alabama
- Ralph Abernathy at Find a Grave
- Ralph Abernathy Biography, The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany
- The Jack Rabin Collection on Alabama Civil Rights and Southern Activists includes video, pictures and materials of Dr. Abernathy during the Selma to Montgomery March
- Ralph Abernathy on the WGBH series *The Ten O'Clock News*.
- FBI file on Ralph Abernathy
- Ralph Abernathy on *Night Call* program in 1968



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