

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Award

Presented for leadership and perseverance in applying the nonviolent philosophy and techniques of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., toward the achievement of human relations and civil rights goals.



Reverend Doctor Ralph David Abernathy

Posthumous

He was with Dr. Martin Luther Jr. every step of the way on that incredible journey, from the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955-56 to the Sanitation Workers strike in 1968. And on that fateful April 4 day in Memphis, he cradled Dr. King's bloody head as Dr. King lay mortally wounded on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

In years that followed the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Dr. King and Rev. Abernathy went to jail together 17 times in a quest to achieve justice that led from Albany, Georgia to Selma, Alabama. Their colleague and fellow civil rights warrior Hosea Williams once referred to Dr. King and Rev. Abernathy as "the greatest team," adding, "Martin wouldn't make a decision without him."

The grandson of a slave, Ralph David Abernathy was born in Marengo County, Alabama. He was the 10th of 12 children. His father, William L. Abernathy, was a farmer and a Deacon, and his mother, Louivory Valentine Bell Abernathy, was also a devout Christian. He attended high school at Linden Academy, an all-Black Baptist school which his father helped found. He enlisted in the Army during World War II and rose to the rank of Platoon Sergeant, seeing combat in Italy.

In 1945, upon his honorable discharge from the Army, Ralph Abernathy passed a high school equivalency exam, and with a financial assist from the Federal G.I. Bill enrolled in Alabama State Teacher College in Montgomery, Alabama. There he excelled. He graduated with High Honors with Bachelor's degree in Mathematics and was a student leader. In 1948 he was ordained a Baptist Minister. In 1951, he earned an M.A. in sociology from Atlanta University (later Clark Atlanta University), and in 1952, he became the Senior Pastor of the historic First Baptist Church in Montgomery. In 1955, after Rosa Parks' act of civil disobedience sparked the bus boycott, it was Rev. Abernathy who was asked to lead the boycott, but he deferred to Martin Luther King. In 1957, a year after a Federal court issued the injunction giving Blacks and Whites equal status on buses, Rev. Abernathy's church and home were bombed. He and his family were not harmed, but the church was destroyed.

In 1961, Rev. Abernathy became the pastor of the West Hunter Street Baptist Church in Atlanta. After Dr. King's death in 1968, Rev. Abernathy took over the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He led the Poor People's Campaign which brought thousands of poor—Black, White, Latino, and Native American—to Washington, D.C., and led to the creation of the Federal food stamps program.

After Rev. Abernathy died at the age of 64 in 1990, Andrew Young, the civil rights activist and former Mayor of Atlanta said: "He was a jovial, profound, loving preacher who gave his life in the service of others."

