

Fiery, fearless civil rights icon Fred Shuttlesworth dies at 89

by [Greg Garrison](#)

October 6, 2011

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama (RNS) The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, the driving force behind the Birmingham integration efforts that energized the national civil rights movement, died Wednesday (Oct. 5) at age 89.

Shuttlesworth said he never feared death, and repeatedly put himself on the line during his struggle against Jim Crow segregation in the 1950s and early 1960s.

He was brutally beaten by a mob, sprayed with city fire hoses, and arrested by police 35 times. He was blown out of his bed by a bomb set by the Ku Klux Klan, which also bombed his church.

"He was a testament to the strength of the human spirit," President Obama said in a statement, recalling the day in 2007 when he pushed Shuttlesworth's wheelchair across the famed Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Ala.

"And today we stand on his shoulders, and the shoulders of all those who marched and sat and lifted their voices to help perfect our union."

Shuttlesworth founded the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights in 1956, when he began violating Birmingham's bus segregation law. He risked his life again and again to pave the way for a minority's civil rights.

"That Fred Shuttlesworth did not become a martyr was not for lack of trying," said his biographer, Andrew Manis, author of "A Fire You Can't Put Out." "There was not a person in the civil rights movement who put himself in the position of being killed more often than Fred Shuttlesworth."

Shuttlesworth was pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Collegeville, Ala., from 1953 to 1961, a period when he had persistent battles with Birmingham's segregationist police commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor.

The defining moment for Shuttlesworth came during the 1956 Christmas night bombing that shattered the church and crumbled the parsonage next door. He walked out of the rubble almost unscathed, yet he recalled that the mattress he was sleeping on was blown to bits. "We didn't find any pieces as large as my fists," he said.

He believed it was a sign from God.

"Shuttlesworth was convinced that God saved him to lead the fight," Manis said. It seemed to give him new energy and even more courage in his efforts to desegregate Birmingham's buses and schools.

The day after the bombing, he and his supporters were back in the front seats of city buses, defying segregation laws.

Shuttlesworth did not have the smooth appeal of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and his demeanor often rubbed people the wrong way. Unlike King, Shuttlesworth was truly a country preacher, rough around the edges, Manis said.

"For the most part he was theologically self-taught; he was conservative, almost a fundamentalist," Manis said. "He was obsessed and had this fiery approach to whatever he was doing."

Shuttlesworth's absolute commitment to his churches and to the civil rights struggle was at times hard on his family. His 1970 divorce from his longtime wife, Ruby, resulted in conflicts with his children.

His boldness in confronting city leaders and breaking laws he felt were unjust made him controversial, even to many in the black middle class. His relationship with King was delicate as well.

"They were not close friends; they were, in a sense, business associates," Manis said. "(King) appreciated what Shuttlesworth was doing."

But their differing backgrounds and approaches meant they would never be close friends. "That kept King at arm's length from Shuttlesworth," Manis said. "The movement took all kinds of people. They both understood their roles."

Shuttlesworth began pestering King as early as 1959 to focus national demonstrations on Birmingham, writing letters impatient and irritated in tone.

"Shuttlesworth helped the rest of the movement understand the way Birmingham was symbolically the strongest bastion of segregation in the South, with Bull Connor himself being the symbol of segregation," Manis said. "That was clear to Shuttlesworth early on."

It may have been clear to King, too, but it wasn't until the disappointment of King's efforts in Albany, Ga., that he felt the timing was right for Birmingham in 1963.

"Fred was the inspiration," said civil rights leader Jesse Jackson. "Fred was, in many ways, the soul of that campaign. He embraced me as a young minister. I feel indebted to him. I feel a keen sense of loss."

Shuttlesworth left Bethel Baptist in 1961 and moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where infighting split his congregation at Revelation Baptist Church. He then helped found Greater New Light Baptist Church in 1966 with supporters, and preached his last sermon there in 2006.

After moving back to Birmingham in 2008, he often reflected on the many confrontations in his life. "Confrontation is not bad," he said. "Goodness is supposed to confront evil."

Shuttlesworth is survived by his wife and four children.