

Joseph E. Lowery, civil rights leader, dies at 98

by [Errin Haines](#) in the [April 22, 2020](#) issue



(AP Photo/David Goldman)

Joseph E. Lowery, a veteran civil rights leader who helped Martin Luther King Jr. found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, died on March 28. He was 98.

A charismatic and fiery preacher, Lowery led the SCLC for two decades—restoring the organization’s financial stability and pressuring businesses not to trade with South Africa’s apartheid-era regime—before retiring in 1997.

In 2009, President Barack Obama awarded Lowery the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor. In a statement on March 29, Obama said Lowery “changed the face of America.”

“He carried the baton longer and surer than almost anybody. It falls to the rest of us now to pick it up and never stop moving forward until we finish what he

started—that journey to justice,” he said.

Lowery’s involvement in civil rights grew naturally out of his Christian faith. He often preached that racial discrimination in housing, employment, and health care was at odds with fundamental Christian values such as human worth and the brotherhood of man.

“I’ve never felt your ministry should be totally devoted to making a heavenly home. I thought it should also be devoted to making your home here heavenly,” he once said.

Lowery was pastor of the Warren Street Methodist Church in Mobile, Alabama, in the 1950s when he met King, who then lived in Montgomery, Alabama. Lowery’s meetings with King, Ralph David Abernathy, and other civil rights activists led to the SCLC’s formation in 1957. The group became a leading force in the civil rights struggle of the 1960s.

Lowery became SCLC president in 1977 following the resignation of Abernathy, who had taken the job after King was assassinated in 1968. Lowery took over an SCLC that was deeply in debt and losing members rapidly. He helped the organization survive and guided it on a new course that embraced more mainstream social and economic policies.

Coretta Scott King once said Lowery “has led more marches and been in the trenches more than anyone since Martin.”

Like King, Lowery juggled his civil rights work with ministry. He pastored United Methodist churches in Atlanta for decades and continued preaching long after retiring. —Associated Press