

Civil rights activist John Lewis dies at 80

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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(AP Photo/Mark Humphrey)

John Lewis, the longtime civil rights activist, congressman, and ordained Baptist minister who preached about getting in “good trouble,” died July 17 at the age of 80.

A founding member and former chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Lewis was among the demonstrators beaten by police after walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. At 23 years old, he was the youngest speaker at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which he helped to organize, stepping to the microphone shortly before Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

Lewis, who represented Georgia’s Fifth District, which comprises most of Atlanta, had announced in December 2019 that he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

From childhood, when Lewis preached to chickens on his family farm, to his twilight years, when he urged the attendees of the 2020 National Prayer Breakfast to “be a blessing to our fellow human beings,” faith was the fuel of Lewis’s life.

“As a people of faith, as a people of hope, we need the blessing of God Almighty,” he prayed as he uttered a benediction for the breakfast via videotape in February, with a photo of the US Capitol as a backdrop.

“It does not matter what language you speak or the color of your skin, it does not matter whether you worship one God, many gods or no gods. We are one people, one family.”

In recent years, Lewis continued to preach his message about the need to enhance voting rights.

In a 2013 ruling, the Supreme Court invalidated a key provision of the Voting Rights Act, ending rules that would spur a mandatory Justice Department review of new voting regulations in states with a history of voting discrimination. The high court’s action was considered by opponents to be a “gutting” of the landmark legislation that Lewis had taken blows to put in place.

He spent the ensuing years urging members of Congress and clergy to work for revisions that would restore the provision that had been struck down.

Asked in 2016 if he ever regretted not sticking with ministry in its traditional sense, Lewis told RNS he did not at all.

“I think my pulpit today is a much larger pulpit,” he said. “If I had stayed in a traditional church, I would have been limited to four walls and probably in some place in Alabama or in Nashville, Tennessee. I preach every day. Every day, I’m preaching a sermon, telling people to get off their butts and do something.” —Religion News Service