

Civil rights advocate C.T. Vivian dies at 95

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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(RNS photo by Adelle M. Banks)

C.T. Vivian, a minister and advocate for civil rights who worked with Martin Luther King Jr., died July 17 in Atlanta.

Cordy Tindell Vivian was 95. He died of natural causes, business partner and friend Don Rivers told the Associated Press.

Vivian's social justice work preceded King's, as the Missouri native nonviolently and successfully protested segregated lunch counters in Peoria, Illinois, in 1947. He later became part of King's executive staff at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta. He served as president of the SCLC into his late eighties.

Over the course of his life, Vivian held numerous roles—pastor, editor for a Baptist Sunday school publisher, and dean of Shaw University Divinity School in Raleigh, North Carolina.

He gained global attention in 1965, when he confronted Sheriff Jim Clark on the steps of the Selma, Alabama, courthouse as civil rights activists attempted to register to vote. As Vivian stood almost nose to nose with the sheriff, Clark turned his back on him.

“You can turn your back on me but you cannot turn your back upon the idea of justice,” Vivian told Clark. “You can turn your back now and you can keep the club in your hand but you cannot beat down justice. And we will register to vote because as citizens of these United States we have the right to do it.”

Within minutes, Clark punched the minister in the face, knocking him down the steps and leaving his face bloody.

In 2013, almost 50 years after the Selma confrontation, Vivian received a Presidential Medal of Freedom. He was still hard at work. He was the board chair of a minority-owned bank with eight branches in Georgia, and he was the director of the Urban Theological Institute at Atlanta’s Interdenominational Theological Center, a consortium of African American seminaries. He was also fostering career development and innovative leadership for at-risk youth and college students through his C. T. Vivian Leadership Institute.

At the time of his presidential honor, Vivian viewed the award as a recognition of his life’s work.

“It’s like the laying on of hands,” he told RNS, “when the nation says that you have served well.”

The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change tweeted about Vivian’s “sacrificial” life. “A powerfully well-lived life that lifted humanity,” it said. “We will miss you. Thank you, sir.” —Religion News Service