

James Cronin - A Brief History of the SCLC

The catalyst for the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956. SCLC differed from organisations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in that it operated as an umbrella organisation of affiliates. Rather than seek individual members, it coordinated with the activities of local organisations like the Nashville Christian Leadership Council.

SCLC's first major campaign, the Crusade for Citizenship, began in late 1957, sparked by the civil rights bill pending in Congress. The campaign's objective was to register thousands of disenfranchised voters in time for the 1958 and 1960 elections, with an emphasis on educating prospective voters. Funded by small donations from churches and large sums from private donors, the crusade continued through the early 1960s. SCLC also joined local movements to coordinate mass protest campaigns and voter registration drives all over the South, most notably in Albany, Georgia, Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, and St. Augustine, Florida. King insisted that civil rights participants be guided by Christian principles. For example, volunteers in the Birmingham campaign were required to sign a 'Commitment Card' that read in part:

I HEREBY PLEDGE MYSELF--MY PERSON AND MY BODY--TO
THE NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT. THEREFORE I WILL KEEP
THE FOLLOWING TEN COMMANDMENTS:

1. MEDITATE daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. REMEMBER always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation-not victory.
3. WALK and TALK in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. PRAY daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.
5. SACRIFICE personal wishes in order that all men might be free.
6. OBSERVE with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. SEEK to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. REFRAIN from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.
9. STRIVE to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. FOLLOW the directions of the movement and of the captain on a demonstration.

The organisation also played a major role in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where King delivered his 'I Have a Dream' speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on 28 August 1963. The visibility that SCLC brought to the civil rights struggle laid the groundwork for passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Adam Fairclough argues that the SCLC built a bridge from the black proletariat to the white liberal elite and then, finally, to the halls of Congress and the White House.

By the latter half of the decade, tensions were growing between SCLC and more militant protest groups such as SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality. Amid calls for 'Black Power', King and SCLC were often criticised for being too moderate and overly dependent on the support of white liberals. The assassination of King on 4 April 1968 crippled SCLC's momentum which had often been overshadowed by its leader's prominence.

Headquartered in Atlanta, SCLC is now a nationwide organisation with chapters and affiliates located throughout the United States. It continues its commitment to nonviolent action to achieve social, economic, and political justice and is focused on issues such as racial profiling, police brutality, hate crimes, and discrimination.

Notes

1. A scan of an original 'Commitment card' is reproduced on the inside back cover.
2. The text of the SCLC 'Commitment Card' is reproduced from: Wolfson, Adam, 'The Martin Luther King We Remember', *Public Interest* Summer, no. 152 (Summer 2003): 39-64. See pages 48-49.
3. For a history of the SCLC see Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

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