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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) | [Next entry](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_spock_benjamin_1903_1998) | |
| |  | | --- | | http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/resources/uploads/sclc.gif |   With the goal of redeeming ‘‘the soul of America’’ through nonviolent resistance, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was established in 1957, to coordinate the action of local protest groups throughout the South (King, ‘‘Beyond Vietnam,’’ 144). Under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., the organization drew on the power and independence of black churches to support its activities. ‘‘This conference is called,’’ King wrote, with fellow ministers [C. K. Steele](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_steele_charles_kenzie_1914_1980/) and [Fred Shuttlesworth](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_shuttlesworth_fred_1922/) in January 1957, ‘‘because we have no moral choice, before God, but to delve deeper into the struggle—and to do so with greater reliance on non-violence and with greater unity, coordination, sharing, and Christian understanding’’ (*Papers* 4:95).   The catalyst for the formation of SCLC was the [Montgomery bus boycott.](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_montgomery_bus_boycott_1955_1956/) Following the success of the boycott in 1956, [Bayard Rustin](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_rustin_bayard_1910_1987/) wrote a series of working papers to address the possibility of expanding the efforts in Montgomery to other cities throughout the South. In these papers, he asked whether an organization was needed to coordinate these activities. After much discussion with his advisors, King invited southern black ministers to the Southern Negro Leaders Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration (later to be renamed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) at [Ebenezer Baptist Church](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_ebenezer_baptist_church/) in Atlanta. The ministers who attended released a manifesto in which they called upon white southerners to ‘‘realize that the treatment of Negroes is a basic spiritual problem.… Far too many have silently stood by’’ (*Papers* 4:105). In addition, they encouraged black Americans ‘‘to seek justice and reject all injustice’’ and to dedicate themselves to the principle of [nonviolence](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nonviolent_resistance/) ‘‘no matter how great the provocation’’ (*Papers* 4:104; 105).   SCLC differed from organizations such as the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_student_nonviolent_coordinating_committee_sncc/) and the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_national_association_for_the_advancement_of_colored_people_naacp1/), in that it operated as an umbrella organization of afﬁliates. Rather than seek individual members, it coordinated with the activities of local organizations like the [Montgomery Improvement Association](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_montgomery_improvement_association/) and the Nashville Christian Leadership Council. ‘‘The life-blood of SCLC movements,’’ as described in one of its pamphlets, ‘‘is in the masses of people who are involved—members of SCLC and its local afﬁliates and chapters’’ (‘‘This is SCLC,’’ 1971). To that end, SCLC staff such as [Andrew Young](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_young_andrew_1932/) and [Dorothy Cotton](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_cotton_dorothy_foreman_1930/) trained local communities in the philosophy of Christian nonviolence by conducting leadership training programs and opening citizenship schools. Through its afﬁliation with churches and its advocacy of nonviolence, SCLC sought to frame the struggle for civil rights in moral terms.   SCLC’s ﬁrst major campaign, the Crusade for Citizenship began in late 1957, sparked by the civil rights bill then pending in Congress. The idea for the crusade was developed at SCLC’s August 1957 conference, where 115 African American leaders laid the groundwork for the crusade. 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. The crusade sought to establish voter education clinics throughout the south, raise awareness among African Americans that ‘‘their chances for improvement rest on their ability to vote,’’ and stir the nation’s conscience to change the current conditions (SCLC, 9 August 1957). 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](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_st_augustine_movement/). The organization also played a major role in the [March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_march_on_washington_for_jobs_and_freedom/), where King delivered his [‘‘I Have a Dream’’](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_i_have_a_dream_28_august_1963/) speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The visibility that SCLC brought to the civil rights struggle laid the groundwork for passage of the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_civil_rights_act_of_1964/) and the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_voting_rights_act_1965/). 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](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_congress_of_racial_equality_core/). Amid calls for [‘‘Black Power,’’](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_black_power/) King and SCLC were often criticized for being too moderate and overly dependent on the support of white liberals.   As early as 1962 SCLC began to broaden its focus to include issues of economic inequality. Seeing poverty as the root of social inequality, in 1962 SCLC began [Operation Breadbasket](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_operation_breadbasket/) in Atlanta to create new jobs in the black community. In 1966 the program spread to Chicago as part of the [Chicago Campaign](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_chicago_campaign/). A year later planning began for a [Poor People’s Campaign](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_poor_peoples_campaign/) to bring thousands of poor people to Washington, D.C., to push for federal legislation that would guarantee employment, income, and housing for economically marginalized people of all ethnicities. The [assassination](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kings_assassination_4_april_1968/) of King on 4 April 1968 crippled SCLC’s momentum and undermined the success of the Poor People’s Campaign. The organization, which had often been overshadowed by its leader’s prominence, resumed plans for the Washington demonstration as a tribute to King. Under the leadership of SCLC’s new president, [Ralph Abernathy](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_abernathy_ralph_david_1926_1990/), 3,000 people camped in Washington from 13 May to 24 June 1968.   Headquartered in Atlanta, SCLC is now a nationwide organization 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.   **SOURCES**  Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 1987. King, ‘‘Beyond Vietnam,’’ in *A Call to Conscience*, Carson and Shepard, eds., 2001. King, MIA press release, 7 January 1957, in *Papers* 4:94–95. King, ‘‘A Statement to the South and the Nation,’’ Issued by the Southern Negro Leaders Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration, 10 January–11 January 1957, in *Papers*  4:103–106.  SCLC, Press release, 9 August 1957, MLKP-MBU.  ‘‘This Is SCLC,’’ 1971, MLKJP-GAMK. |