

Civil rights legend Fred Shuttlesworth dies

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [November 1, 2011](#) issue

Fred Shuttlesworth, the last of the "Big Three" of the civil rights movement along with Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King Jr., died October 5 in Birmingham, Alabama. He was 89.

To the general public Shuttlesworth was the least well known of the three cofounders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957, but few advanced its agenda of nonviolent resistance at greater risk. By his own count Shuttlesworth was bombed twice, beaten into unconsciousness and jailed more than 35 times.

"Fred Shuttlesworth did not become a martyr, and it was not for lack of trying," biographer Andrew Manis said in the *Birmingham News*.

Manis, a professor at Macon State College, first met Shuttlesworth when his uncle was owner of the construction company that built the Greater New Light Baptist Church's new sanctuary in 1978. At the time a master of divinity student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Manis arranged to have Shuttlesworth speak at the predominantly white seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Manis, who later earned his doctorate at Southern, interviewed Shuttlesworth many times and wrote the acclaimed biography *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth*.

Born March 18, 1922, in Montgomery County, Alabama, Shuttlesworth moved to Birmingham at age three, where he lived with his mother and stepfather. He studied for the ministry at Selma University and by 1949 was preaching at Selma's First Baptist Church for \$10 a week.

In 1953 he took over as pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham. He became an activist in the city, calling for the hiring of African-American police officers and joining voter registration efforts of the NAACP.

He became known as the chief nemesis of Bull Connor, Birmingham's racist police chief, whose use of police dogs and fire hoses on the Freedom Riders in 1962 helped build public support for the civil rights movement and inspired other similar campaigns.

Shuttlesworth compared himself to Daniel in the lion's den and said the only reason he could think of that he survived the civil rights struggle while others like King and Medgar Evers were assassinated was God's protection.

President Obama, who once pushed Shuttlesworth's wheelchair across the Edmund Pettus Bridge near Selma, Alabama, to commemorate a march for voter rights in 1965, voiced sadness at news of his death.

"As one of the founders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Reverend Shuttlesworth dedicated his life to advancing the cause of justice for all Americans," Obama said. "He was a testament to the strength of the human spirit. And today we stand on his shoulders, and the shoulders of all those who marched and sat and lifted their voices to help perfect our union." —ABP