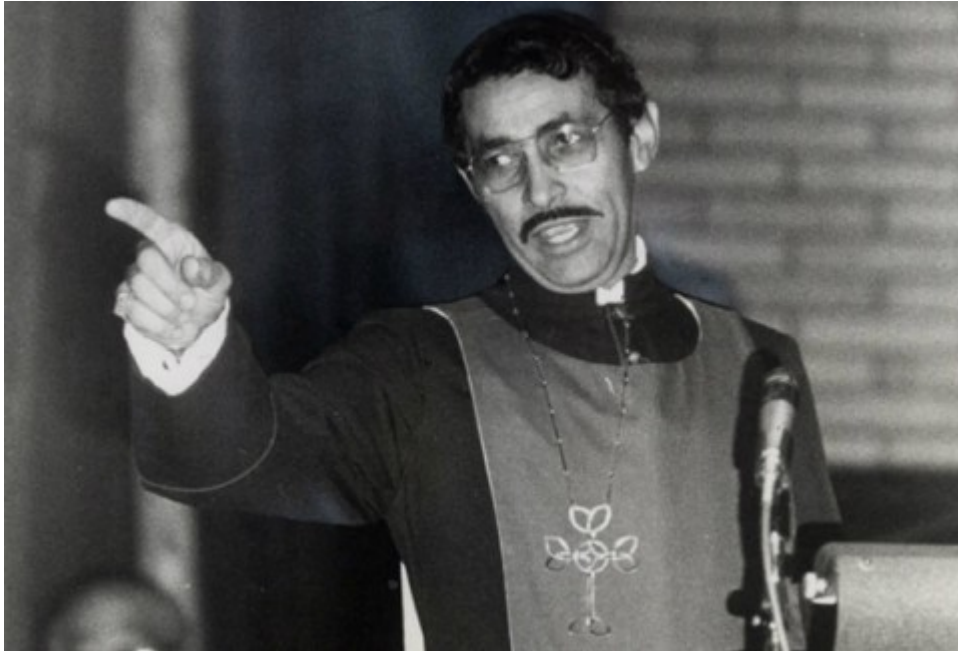


Wyatt Tee Walker, MLK confidant and civil rights leader, dies

## **Walker was "a legend in his own right," said the current president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which Walker also led.**

by [Denise Lavoie](#), with added information in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue



Wyatt Tee Walker in the 1970s at Canaan Baptist Church in New York City. File photo by Walter Mayo, courtesy of Dr. Melody McCloud, [wyattteewalker.com](http://wyattteewalker.com).

Wyatt Tee Walker, a prominent New York City pastor and leader in the civil rights movement who helped Martin Luther King Jr. assemble his famous ["Letter From Birmingham Jail,"](#) has died.

He was either 88 or 89, since family records showed different years of birth, said his daughter, Patrice Walker Powell. He had been in declining health the past few years after a stroke.

Walker was a key player in the civil rights movement, brought in by Martin Luther King Jr. to be the executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference three years after the civil rights organization was founded.

Walker was “a legend in his own right,” said Charles Steele, current SCLC president. “He was such a great orator. . . . He was known for motivating and uplifting people.”

Before joining the SCLC, Walker was already a top civil rights leader in Virginia, where he had led a Pilgrimage of Prayer in Richmond against school segregation on New Year’s Day 1959.

In 1961, during the Freedom Rider campaign to integrate interstate buses, Walker was one of seven black leaders and four white clergymen arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for trying to eat at a bus station restaurant. And in 1963, he had a key role in the SCLC’s campaign against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama.

“Wyatt Walker, youthful, lean and bespectacled, brought his energetic and untiring spirit to our meetings, whose members already knew and admired his dedicated work as a behind-the-scenes organizer of the campaign,” King wrote in his book *Why We Can't Wait*.

When King and others were jailed in Birmingham for parading without a permit, Walker helped assemble King's famous answer to his moderate critics, "Letter From Birmingham Jail." King had written the essay on scraps of paper and in the margins of newspapers. Walker and a secretary then put it together.

“That episode was a testament both to King’s brilliance to be able to write such a letter while sitting in confinement, and Walker’s courage and creativity in making sure King’s thoughts were shared with the world,” [wrote Marvin A. McMickle, president of Colgate Crozer Divinity School, in a tribute.](#)

Leaving the SCLC post in 1964, Walker was pastor of Harlem’s Canaan Baptist Church from 1968 until his retirement. He was installed there by King just ten days before King was assassinated April 4, 1968.

In an interview with the Associated Press in 2004, Walker recounted his response to King’s assassination.

“I felt that Dr. King’s image and importance had become so large that nobody would dare try to do him harm,” he said. “I grieved for about six months. But one day I was walking down 125th Street and it was as if I heard [King’s] voice saying: ‘Whatcha got your head down for? At least I was with you for a while.’ So I got over my grief and I continued to do for my church base those things which I had learned through

him.”

Those efforts included promoting affordable housing and becoming a leader in the U.S. movement against South African apartheid. In 1994, Nelson Mandela kicked off his first U.S. visit as South African president by thanking Canaan Baptist Church.

*A version of this article, which was edited on February 12, appears in the print edition under the title “People: Wyatt Tee Walker.”*