



Fred Shuttlesworth

Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth

Civil Rights Pioneer

by Victoria McAfee

“The best thing we can do is be a servant of God. It does good to stand up and serve others.”

One of Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth's first sermons as a Baptist minister focused on two questions that Paul (then Saul) asked God: “Who are you?” and “What would you have me do?” The latter question guided Rev. Shuttlesworth for the rest of his life as a socially conscious minister first in Alabama, then in Ohio.

Fred Lee Shuttlesworth was born in Montgomery County, Alabama, on March 18, 1922. His family moved to Birmingham when he was a toddler, and he served as a truck driver during World War II. After leaving the service, he experienced what he believed to be a call to the ministry. He enrolled in Cedar Grove Bible College in Mobile, and eventually he graduated from Alabama State College in 1952. Ordained in 1948, he took over the pastorate of Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1953. A year later he met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., right before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery.

Rev. Shuttlesworth began his work with the civil rights movement by supporting the NAACP voter registration and also the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. The following year, when the NAACP was banned from Alabama, he founded his own organization, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). The organization's first fight was integrating the Birmingham Police Department. After witnessing the success of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Shuttlesworth also attempted to desegregate the Birmingham Transit Company with blacks riding the buses. Once he announced his plans, on Christmas night, 1956, segregationists planted 16 sticks of dynamite outside his bedroom in the church parsonage. In the blast, Shuttlesworth landed in the basement while his bedroom was blown apart, but he and visiting Deacon Charles Robinson were unharmed. A policeman told him, “Reverend, if I were you I'd get out of town fast.” Shuttlesworth replied, “If God could keep me through this, then I'm here for the duration.” The next day he led the bus protest. That he persevered, he said, “gave people the feeling that I wouldn't run, I didn't run, and that God had to be there.”

In 1957, Shuttlesworth made front-page news when a white mob beat him with chains and brass knuckles and stabbed his wife as they attempted to enroll two of their children in an all-white high school. Incredibly, Shuttlesworth managed to drive his family to the hospital while telling his children to always forgive your enemies.

Also in 1957, Eugene T. “Bull” Connor, an avid segregationist, was elected Birmingham commissioner of public safety. Connor used the fire and police departments to

discourage ACMHR meetings, but those tactics failed. Connor is also believed to have been behind two more attempted bombings of Shuttlesworth's church.

Shuttlesworth joined with Dr. King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy to help found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He told Dr. King, “I assure you if you come to Birmingham, this movement can not only gain prestige, but really shake the country.” At first, the mass sit-ins he and King organized brought little public attention, but in 1963 Shuttlesworth was behind the decision to allow students and even young people to participate in demonstrations and sit-ins. Some 2,000 students joined this “children's crusade,” as it became known, and more than 600 of them were arrested. The Birmingham police turned police dogs and fire hoses on the demonstrators. Images of the demonstrations on national television caught the attention of the country, and President Kennedy declared the struggle for civil rights a moral issue for the nation.

Some people said Shuttlesworth was too aggressive, too confrontational, even a hindrance to the movement. But Dr. King called Shuttlesworth “one of the nation's most courageous freedom fighters” and they continued to work together, organizing the voting rights march to Selma in 1965 and integration initiatives across the South.

Though Shuttlesworth regularly visited the movement in Alabama, he felt the Lord leading him to move in 1961 to Cincinnati for the sake of his family, and he pastored there for almost 50 years. He led protests against discrimination in Ohio as well, and in 1989 he established the Shuttlesworth Housing Foundation, which helps low-income Cincinnatians purchase their first home. In 2001, he received the Presidential Citizens Medal from President Clinton.

Shuttlesworth kept his connection to Birmingham. He worked with Richard Arlington, the city's first black mayor, to establish the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and Museum, and the Birmingham Airport Authority voted to honor Shuttlesworth by renaming the city's airport as the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport. In 2007, during a commemoration of the voting rights march to Selma, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama pushed Shuttlesworth in a wheelchair across the Edmund Pettus Bridge to honor his service and commitment.

Shuttlesworth came back to Birmingham after he retired from his church in Cincinnati. He suffered a stroke and returned to Alabama in 2008 for rehabilitation. He died on October 5, 2011, in Birmingham.

When a group of grade school students asked him later in his life what he did in the civil rights movement, he said, “I went to jail 30 or 40 times, not for fighting or stealing or drugs.... I went to jail for a good thing, trying to make a difference.”



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