

During his last year in seminary, Martin Luther King Jr. came under the influence of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a classmate of his father's at Morehouse College. Niebuhr became a mentor to Martin, challenging his liberal views of theology. Niebuhr was probably the single most important influence in Martin's intellectual and spiritual development. After being accepted at several colleges for his doctoral study including Yale and Edinburgh in Scotland, King enrolled at Boston University.

During the work on this doctorate, Martin Luther King Jr. met Coretta Scott, an aspiring singer and musician at the New England Conservatory school in Boston. They were married in June 1953 and had four children, Yolanda, Martin Luther King III, Dexter Scott, and Bernice. In 1954, while still working on his dissertation, King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama. He completed his Ph.D. and was awarded his degree in 1955. King was only 25 years old.

### Montgomery School Boycott

On March 2, 1955, a 15-year-old girl refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery city bus in violation of local law. Claudette Colvin was arrested and taken to jail. At first, the local chapter of the NAACP felt they had an excellent test case to challenge Montgomery's segregated bus policy. But, then, it was revealed that she was pregnant and civil rights leaders feared this would scandalize the deeply religious black community and make Colvin (and, thus the group's efforts) less credible in the eyes of sympathetic whites.

On December 1, 1955, they got another chance to make their case. That evening, 42-year-old Rosa Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus to go home from an exhausting day at work. She sat in the first row of the "colored" section in the middle of the bus. As the bus traveled its route, all the seats in the white section filled up, then several more white passengers boarded the bus. The bus driver noted that there were several white men standing and demanded that Parks and several other African Americans give up their seats. Three other African American passengers reluctantly gave up their places, but Parks remained seated. The driver asked her again to give up her seat, and again she refused. Parks was arrested and booked for violating the Montgomery City Code. At her trial a week later, in a 30-minute hearing, Parks was found guilty and fined \$10 and assessed \$4 court fee.

On the night that Rosa Parks was arrested, E.D. Nixon, head of the local NAACP chapter met with Martin Luther King Jr. and other local civil rights leaders to plan a citywide bus boycott. King was elected to lead the boycott because he was young, well trained, with solid family connections and had professional standing. But, he was also new to the community and had few enemies, so it was felt he would have strong credibility with the black community.

In his first speech as the group's president, King declared, "We have no alternative but to protest. For many years we have shown an amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice."

Martin Luther King Jr.'s fresh and skillful rhetoric put a new energy into the civil rights struggle in Alabama. The bus boycott would be 382 days of walking to work, harassment, violence and intimidation for the Montgomery's African-American community. Both King's and E.D. Nixon's homes were attacked. But, the African-American community also took legal action against the city ordinance arguing that it was unconstitutional based on the Supreme Court's "separate is never equal" decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. After being defeated in several lower court rulings and suffering large financial losses, the city of Montgomery lifted the law mandating segregated public transportation.

### The Southern Christian Leadership Convention

Flush with victory, African-American civil rights leaders recognized the need for a national organization to help coordinate their efforts. In January 1957, Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and 60 ministers and civil rights activists founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to harness the moral authority and organizing power of black churches. They would help conduct non-violent protests to promote civil rights reform. King's participation in the organization gave him a base of operation throughout the South, as well as a national platform. The organi-

zation felt the best place to start to give African Americans a voice was to enfranchise them in the voting process. In February 1958, the SCLC sponsored more than 20 mass meetings in key southern cities to register black voters in the South. King met with religious and civil rights leaders and lectured all over the country on race-related issues.

In 1959, with the help of the American Friends Service Committee, and inspired by Gandhi's success with non-violent activism, Martin Luther King visited Gandhi's birthplace in India. The trip affected him in a deeply profound way, increasing his commitment to America's civil rights struggle. African-American civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, who had studied Gandhi's teachings, became one of King's associates and counseled him to dedicate himself to the principles of non-violence. Rustin served as King's mentor and advisor throughout his early activism and was the main organizer of the 1963 March on Washington.

But Rustin was also a controversial figure at the time, being a homosexual with alleged ties to the Communist Party, USA. Though his counsel was invaluable to King, many of his other supporters urged him to distance himself from Rustin. In February 1960, a group of African-American students began what became known as the "sit-in" movement in Greensboro, North Carolina. The students would sit at racially segregated lunch counters in the city's stores. When asked to leave or sit in the colored section, they just remained seated, subjecting themselves to verbal and sometimes physical abuse. The movement quickly gained traction in several other cities. In April 1960, the SCLC held a conference at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina with local sit-in leaders. Martin Luther King Jr. encouraged students to continue to use nonviolent methods during their protests. Out of this meeting, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee formed and for a time, worked closely with the SCLC. By August of 1960, the sit-ins had been successful in ending segregation at lunch counters in 27 southern cities.

By 1960, Martin Luther King Jr. was gaining national notoriety. He returned to Atlanta to become co-pastor with his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church, but also continued his civil rights efforts. On October 19, 1960, King and 75 students entered a local department store and requested lunch-counter service but were denied. When they refused to leave the counter area, King and 36 others were arrested. Realizing the incident would hurt the city's reputation, Atlanta's mayor negotiated a truce and charges were eventually dropped. But soon after, King was imprisoned for violating his probation on a traffic conviction. The news of his imprisonment entered the 1960 presidential campaign, when candidate John F. Kennedy made a phone call to Coretta Scott King. Kennedy expressed his concern for King's harsh treatment for the traffic ticket and political pressure was quickly set in motion. King was soon released.

### "I Have a Dream"

In the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. organized a demonstration in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. Entire families attended. City police turned dogs and fire hoses on demonstrators. Martin Luther King was jailed along with large numbers of his supporters, but the event drew nationwide attention. However, King was personally criticized by black and white clergy alike for taking risks and endangering the children who attended the demonstration. From the jail in Birmingham, King eloquently spelled out his theory of non-violence: "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community, which has constantly refused to negotiate, is forced to confront the issue."

By the end of the Birmingham campaign, Martin Luther King Jr. and his supporters were making plans for a massive demonstration on the nation's capital composed of multiple organizations, all asking for peaceful change. On August 28, 1963, the historic March on Washington drew more than 200,000 people in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial. It was here that King made his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, emphasizing his belief that some day all men could be brothers.

The rising tide of civil rights agitation produced a strong effect on public opinion. Many people in cities not experiencing racial tension began to question the nation's Jim Crow laws and the second-class treatment of African-American citizens.

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