Creecy, 57, was elected SCLC president in January after Bernice King, daughter of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., declined the position. Before that, Creecy had served as the interim president of the civil rights organization founded by Martin King and other civil rights leaders in 1957.

The Rev. Howard Creecy Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, died early Thursday morning, a spokesman for the SCLC confirmed.

Creecy, pastor of Olivet Church in Fayette County , died of a heart attack at around 12:30 a.m. in Atlanta, Damien Conners of the Atlanta SCLC office told the AJC.

Creecy, 57, was elected SCLC president in January after Bernice King, daughter of the Rev. Martin Luther King

Jr., declined the position. Before that, Creecy had served as the interim president of the civil rights organization founded by Martin King and other civil rights leaders in 1957.

When he took the helm on Jan. 30, Creecy acknowledged that the SCLC had suffered internal divisions in recent years. His mission, he said, was to help define the direction of the group in the 21st century.

For 26 years Creecy was senior pastor at St. Peter's Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta before joining his father at Olivet Church in 2002. He became pastor at Olivet when the elder Creecy died in 2008.

The Rev. Gregory Sutton, pastor of Atlanta's Jackson Memorial Baptist Church, described himself and Creecy as "best friends" who had known one another since their teenage years.

"We started out in the ministry together," Sutton said. "I was looking for a young friend, my equal, and we met and we've been friends since, and that was back in 1971."

He said that Creecy had hoped to "put SCLC back on the map. He was trying his best to revitalize and to put it back to where it needed to be."

Infighting had engulfed the civil rights organization for the past few years when two competing factions both claimed to be the official board. One group tried to remove the other from positions of power because then-Chairman Raleigh Trammell and then-Treasurer Spiver Gordon were suspected of mishandling $569,000 of SCLC funds, first reported by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

The FBI and the Fulton County District Attorney's Office opened investigations into the matter, and it is still pending. A grand jury in Ohio indicted Trammell in connection with his spending of that chapter's money.

A Fulton County judge ruled last summer that Trammell and his supporters were not the official board.

That ruling seemingly paved the way for Bernice King, who had been elected president in October 2009, to assume the presidency. But in January, King said she would not take the position, citing conflicts with the board. “After numerous attempts to connect with the official board leaders on how to move forward under my leadership, unfortunately, our visions did not align,” King said.

Creecy was then elected to lead the organization.

The SCLC, Sutton said, “took a big loss in terms of all the legal stuff that they went through and Howard was trying to bring it back financially. He was trying to pool preachers and pastors across the country.”

“We knew that we were in a new season, and it involved new and different kinds of issues and we just wanted to serve the community,” said Sutton, who said he had been asked by Creecy to serve on the SCLC board of directors.

“Some had said that the SCLC had become sort of obsolete, but we felt like we just needed to deal with the new issues in this day and that it was not obsolete,” Sutton said. “Howard felt like it was a challenge and he committed himself wholeheartedly.”