

## CHAPTER FOUR



# The Hard Job of Getting Down and Helping People

The NAACP's decades-long legal assault against Jim Crow came to fruition in May 1954 when the U.S. Supreme Court announced its decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* school segregation case. The decision seemed to open new doors for civil rights activists. At the very least, those interested in wiping out racial inequality now had the sanction of the highest court in the land and the symbolic weight of the federal government behind their cause. Robert F. Williams, the leader of the Monroe, North Carolina, branch of the NAACP, said, "I was sure that this was the beginning of a new era in American democracy." Baker, too, was overjoyed by the news, but her reaction was tempered by her understanding of how the American system of government operated. As she saw them, jurists' rulings were mere words on paper. Only the masses' determination to test the ruling and force the executive branch to enforce the verdict, she believed, could give the judgment meaning and power.

That would require the kind of mass movement Baker had long anticipated, but such a movement did not exist in May 1954, and a betting person would not have wagered that one was on the horizon. As southern states and local school boards surveyed the new landscape and tried to concoct plans that complied with the decision either fully or in name only, white segregationists organized themselves and saw to it that "their" schools would desegregate as slowly as possible—if at all. In Indianola, Mississippi, where a local doctor had taken charge of the NAACP branch and launched a voter registration drive, the white town fathers formed a new organization that

they called the Citizens' Council. Members of the Citizens' Council—small business owners, bankers, and lawyers—defined racial segregation as a positive good for society and argued the point forcefully. They proudly defined themselves against the Ku Klux Klan; the Councils were to use economic means, not bullets and dynamite, to punish black dissidents. They had a simple goal: to make it as hard as possible to be a civil rights activist. While the rest of the country waited for the Supreme Court's 1955 implementation decision (*Brown II*, as it became known), the Citizens' Councils spread throughout the South. The original decision said nothing about how local districts should accomplish desegregation, but *Brown II* advised them to proceed with desegregation plans “with all deliberate speed.”

As important as their development was, the Citizens' Councils were far from alone in organizing resistance to the *Brown* decision and federal efforts to enforce it. White moderates were curiously quiet as hard-core segregationists managed to turn outright resistance to the Supreme Court into something like a mainstream activity throughout the South. As Richard Kluger has documented, in Clarendon County, South Carolina, whites used every weapon in their arsenal to ruin J. A. DeLaine, the plaintiff in one of the five suits that had been folded into the *Brown* case. They fired DeLaine, his wife, two of his sisters, and a niece from their jobs, dried up his credit, and burned down both DeLaine's house and the church he pastored. They shot into his house, and when he shot back they charged him with felonious assault with a deadly weapon. They literally ran him out of the state for trying to enroll his children in better schools. Hundreds of brave black men and women who wanted to give their children more opportunity shared DeLaine's experience.

In Mississippi, whites working under the aegis of the Citizens' Councils threatened local activists such as Gus Courts in Belzoni, Amzie Moore of the Delta town of Cleveland, Dr. Clinton Battle of Indianola, and Dr. T. R. M. Howard of Mound Bayou with financial ruin and physical harm if they didn't call off their voter registration drives and challenges to segregation. Courts, Battle, and Howard had to leave the state, but Moore—an NAACP branch leader with whom Baker had worked in the 1940s—stayed and fought. When the Yazoo City, Mississippi, branch of the NAACP found fifty-three African American parents willing to petition the local school board to admit their children into what were then all-white schools, the Citizens' Council took out a full-page ad in the local newspaper, printed broadsides, and posted them all over town. The publications listed the names and addresses of the signers, many of whom lost their jobs almost as soon as their names went public. Within days fifty-one of the fifty-three had removed their names from the petition, and more than a dozen of them eventually had to leave

the state. Similar fates befell the parents in the nearby cities of Vicksburg and Jackson who were brave enough to challenge Jim Crow in their schools. Now that white Mississippians had proven how effective these campaigns could be, organized efforts to “defend” white schools from desegregation cropped up in every state of the former Confederacy. In community after community, blacks who stuck their necks out for the cause met with economic intimidation and violence.

Baker felt a visceral need to provide whatever assistance she could while the southern activists held on by their fingernails. If the segregationists could snuff out their activism with violence and economic terrorism, she rightly feared, the nascent movement would be set back at least a generation. With two other New Yorkers, Stanley Levison and Bayard Rustin, Baker began organizing a network of northern financial supporters that quickly coalesced into an organization they called In Friendship. Together they raised money through New York churches and labor unions for the material and legal aid that parents in Yazoo City and Clarendon County and hundreds of other southern communities suddenly needed simply to survive and live with some measure of dignity. Much of the work was ad hoc; when Baker heard of a need, she donated her time (which was precious—without a full-time job at the time, she strung together freelance consulting, fund-raising, and conference organizing work to make ends meet) to go out and raise money to help alleviate it. Charles Payne describes In Friendship’s *modus operandi* as “find someone who is already working and support that person.”

Baker, Levison, and Rustin were three unlikely peas in a pod. In previous decades all three had either expressed admiration for American Communists’ organizing strategies (in Baker’s case) or joined the American Communist Party (as Levison almost surely did) or the Young Communist League (of which Rustin was briefly a member). All three had worked for racial justice.

Baker had first worked with Levison, a wealthy New York–based lawyer and real estate investor, in the unsuccessful lobbying fight against the Cold War–era McCarran-Walter Act. The legislation, which Congress ultimately passed into law over President Truman’s veto in 1952, allowed the United States to deport immigrants, even those who had become naturalized citizens, simply for having “Communist and Communist-front” affiliations. Communists and sympathizers such as Baker’s former associate W. E. B. Du Bois and the popular black entertainer Paul Robeson were among the many American citizens whose lives the U.S. government made miserable under cover of the legislation; over the ensuing years the government also used the act’s provisions to deny entry to prominent foreign leftist intellectuals. Baker’s interest in the legislative fight may well have sprung from her guilt

over her involvement in the effort to purge Communists from the NAACP. Levison had proved himself a successful fund-raiser for the American Jewish Congress, and he shared Baker's energy and intense interest in civil rights.

Baker had known and worked closely with Rustin at least since 1946, when they planned the Journey of Reconciliation. A committed Quaker pacifist, an acolyte of Gandhian nonviolent civil disobedience, a former member of the Young Communist League, and an open homosexual, Rustin was, to put it mildly, one of a kind. In the immediate postwar years he functioned, in the words of his biographer Jervis Anderson, "as a one-man civil disobedience movement." As it was with Baker, movement building was a way of life for Rustin, a lifelong vocation that took multiple forms. Like Baker, he set his sights on a southern-led mass movement in the late 1940s and early 1950s and did what he could to build a foundation for what he hoped might eventually emerge. Together they formed In Friendship with these goals in mind.

Baker called on New York City's major religious leaders, union officials, and leftist activists to support In Friendship. Once again she and Rustin leaned on A. Philip Randolph, who agreed to lend his prestige to the new organization by serving as chairman. Over the course of a little less than two years the group raised tens of thousands of dollars to aid the people In Friendship accurately defined as "race terror victims," southern activists facing economic retaliation. Here the new group followed the lead of the NAACP, which in 1955 deposited more than a quarter-million dollars at the black-owned Tri-State Bank in Memphis to back loans to southern activists who had been targeted by the Citizens' Councils. But the amount of money it would have taken to assist every single black activist the Councils were in a position to ruin would have cost many times that. At best, these efforts were drops in a bucket. No outside effort, no matter how coordinated, could have raised enough money to meet the need.

The best In Friendship could hope to do was to provide just enough of a bandage to limit the bleeding, make a few lives marginally better in the South, and build bridges among southern activists and between southerners and their northern allies until better opportunities presented themselves. To that end, Baker, working under the auspices of In Friendship, also provided technical assistance to southern civil rights campaigns, organized conferences that brought together activists from throughout the region, and embarked on public relations campaigns that publicized conditions in the South to the rest of the country. She served as a civil rights free agent whenever "called upon by the outstanding leaders of the civil rights struggle to perform specific tasks that need to be done, but which seem not to fall within the operational scope of other organizations," as she put it in a report for In Friendship. For

Baker, who was in the movement for the long haul, that was enough for the moment. But she still pined for a honest-to-goodness mass movement.

The indigenous southern movement Baker had hoped for all her adult life announced itself in December 1955. Rosa Parks, the secretary of the Montgomery, Alabama, branch of the NAACP who had connected with Baker a decade earlier, touched off what seemed to some observers a spontaneous display of frustration with Jim Crow when she refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus and was arrested for violating the city's segregated seating laws. Baker knew better.

The African Americans of Montgomery, more than any black community in any other city, were *organized*, and Parks's refusal to give up her seat was not out of character. In addition to the NAACP leadership training sessions she attended in 1946, Parks had more recently participated in a two-week workshop at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. Founded in 1932 as a training ground for labor organizers, Highlander was one of the few places in the South where blacks and whites could come together to discuss the problems that faced them as workers and as citizens in a racially integrated setting. In the 1950s Highlander developed into the premier training site in the South for desegregation activists. Ella Baker had found kindred spirits at Highlander, participated in dozens of its programs through the years, and maintained long professional and personal relationships with Myles Horton, Highlander's cofounder, and Septima Clark, its education director. Virginia Foster Durr, a white Montgomerian with a long history of work with interracial organizations in the South and with a friendly relationship with Rosa Parks, recommended Parks for a workshop titled "Racial Desegregation: Implementing the Supreme Court Decision." According to Baker biographer Joanne Grant, Baker led classes at the Highlander workshop and reconnected there with Parks, but the evidence for this claim is scant.

By her own admission, Parks was at first unsure what to make of the people at Highlander, all of whom addressed one another as "brother" and "sister," and who square-danced or played volleyball when they weren't engaged in hours-long discussions about the race problem. (They also sang a lot: among the many other things they did, Highlander people repurposed and popularized the organized labor song "We Shall Overcome" for the civil rights movement.) Parks recalled, "That was the first time in my life I had lived in an atmosphere of complete equality with members of the other race." For the first time in her life Parks saw, heard, and felt evidence that "this could be a unified society." At Highlander, she said, "We forgot about what color anybody was. . . . I experienced people of different races and backgrounds

meeting together in workshops and living together in peace and harmony. I felt that I could express myself honestly, without any repercussions or antagonistic attitudes from other people.”

Parks scribbled twenty-two pages of handwritten notes on yellow legal pads at Highlander; she took the educational seminars seriously, and she took the questions that were raised there to heart. But more than anything, Parks left Highlander with the sense that blacks and whites really could live together as equals. She now had a deep belief based on her experience in the Tennessee mountains that integration was a positive good for society, and she went home with a determination to do her part to end Jim Crow. Horton, Clark, and others at Highlander had helped her develop a vocabulary to describe the problems she saw in her community and an action plan for bringing down segregation. She returned to Montgomery resolved to do whatever she could—either as a member of her NAACP branch or as an individual—to kill Jim Crow.

Black Montgomerians had already identified segregated seating and disrespectful treatment on the city’s buses as the one indignity they most wanted to end. A delegation of local black women told city officials as much in a February 1954 meeting, and the leader of the NAACP branch, E. D. Nixon, began looking for ways to test the constitutionality of the local ordinances that wrote Jim Crow into law. According to these statutes blacks were to sit in rows from the back forward and whites in rows from the front back; no black could sit in a row with a white, so the middle rows were available to black paying customers (who made up three-fourths of the city’s ridership) only if they were unused by whites. To make matters worse, several bus drivers, all of whom were white in 1954, took special pleasure in mistreating their black passengers in any way possible. “Some bus drivers were meaner than others,” Parks said. “Not all of them were hateful, but segregation itself is vicious, and to my mind there was no way you could make segregation decent or nice or acceptable.”

Days after the U.S. Supreme Court announced its *Brown* decision in May, Parks’s colleague Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, an English professor at Alabama State College, Montgomery’s historically black institution, and head of the Women’s Political Council, a counterpart to the all-white local chapter of the League of Women Voters, demanded that the city desegregate the buses or face a boycott from its black ridership. Robinson later admitted that the threat of a boycott did not at the time have widespread support from the city’s black leaders, but she believed the issue could spur the entire community into unified action. Every bit of this organizing had gone on independent of leadership from national organizations. Lo-

cal people had identified the problem and begun to define solutions to it entirely by themselves.

Parks, E. D. Nixon, and Jo Ann Robinson nearly had the test case they had been searching for in March 1955 when Montgomery police arrested Claudette Colvin, a high school junior and member of Parks's NAACP Youth Council, for refusing to give up her seat in a middle row to a white rider. Colvin said that Parks's advice—"Always do what is right"—rang in her ears as the police led her away in handcuffs. A judge dropped the charge of violating the city's segregation laws so that the NAACP branch could not pursue the matter in federal courts, and the black community failed to rally around Colvin, a brash-talking, unmarried young woman who was, as it turned out, several months pregnant. "If the white press got ahold of that information, they would have a field day," Parks accurately concluded. In October, eighteen-year-old Mary Louise Smith was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger, but again local leadership failed to rally behind her. Smith's father was a well-known alcoholic.

Montgomery's budding antisegregation movement needed "a plaintiff who was more upstanding before we went ahead and invested any more time, effort, and money," Parks said. She became that plaintiff in December 1955. On the first day of the month she finished a workday at the downtown Montgomery Fair Department Store where she worked as a seamstress, did some Christmas shopping, and boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus. It had been a typical workday for Parks, which is to say that she worked more than one job. She spent her morning coffee break trying to arrange a space for an upcoming NAACP branch workshop and getting branch correspondence in the mail, and she met Fred Gray, Claudette Colvin's attorney, for lunch to plan strategy for her case. That afternoon Parks took a seat in a middle row of the thirty-six-seat bus and settled in for the ride home to the Cleveland Courts apartment building. At the bus's third stop several whites boarded, and the driver, James F. Blake, told Parks, two women, and a man sharing her row, "Move y'all, I want those two seats." Blake, a tobacco-chewing, pistol-packing racist from central casting who was known in Montgomery's black community as a "vicious bigot," had a history with Parks. He had physically mistreated her on a bus in 1943, and she had vowed never again to pay the fare on a bus he was driving; she also joined the NAACP shortly after the incident. She had apparently kept her pledge to avoid his buses until December 1, 1955, when she boarded the bus—"my bus," he insisted on calling it—with her mind on other matters.

"Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats," Blake repeated, and the three other African American patrons complied.

Parks sat. Blake made his way back and asked Parks, “Are you going to stand up?” Parks looked him in the eye, flatly said, “No,” and told the bus driver he would have to call the police. He did just that. Officers F. B. Day and D. W. Mixon removed Parks from the bus without incident, took her to city hall to swear out and sign a warrant for her arrest, and then transported her to the city jail.

Baker considered the events in Montgomery, not the announcement of the *Brown* decision, as the exciting opening of a new chapter in the history of the American civil rights movement, not because Mrs. Parks had acted bravely in staring down Jim Crow and refusing to cooperate with it any longer, but because so many local African Americans joined her side. From the beginning—really, even before Parks’s arrest, it was a mass movement. Parks, Nixon, Robinson, and handful of others had black Montgomery organized so tightly by the time of Parks’s arrest that they were able to use the event as a springboard to mass, nonviolent, direct action. Parks had not intended to become the plaintiff in a test case, but when Blake demanded her seat—the seat for which she had paid full fare, same as the white passengers—she concluded on the spot, “There had to be a stopping place, and this seemed to have been the place for me to stop being pushed around and to find out what human rights I had, if any.”

News of Parks’s incarceration moved quickly through the Montgomery grapevine; no one was as surprised by the arrest of the well-respected, respectful Parks as E. D. Nixon. When his wife told him, “You won’t believe it. The police got Rosa,” Nixon was temporarily and uncharacteristically dumbstruck. “Holy mother of God” was all he could think to say that night, but he later allowed, “My God, look what segregation [has] put in my hands[:] The perfect plaintiff.”

Parks was arrested late on Thursday afternoon. Late that night she and Nixon planned their next steps—they agreed to turn her arrest into a test case, taking it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court if necessary, despite the economic and social hardships becoming such a publicized plaintiff would impose on Rosa and Raymond Parks. Nixon briefed attorney Fred Gray, who in turn contacted Jo Ann Robinson late the next evening. Robinson suggested they call for a boycott of the city’s buses to begin the following Monday. She wrote herself a note: “The Women’s Political Council will not wait for Mrs. Parks to consent to call for a boycott of city buses. On Friday, December 2, 1955, the women of Montgomery will call for a boycott to take place on Monday, December 5.”

Boycotts are easy to declare, of course, but nearly impossible to pull off effectively. Robinson knew that as well as anyone, so she went to work. After

midnight she assembled a small work crew—two women students and a business professor who had access to his department’s mimeograph machine—at the Alabama State campus. Speaking for the three hundred members of the Women’s Political Council, Robinson composed a short manifesto. It read:

Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down.

It is the second time since the Claudette Colbert case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This has to be stopped.

Negroes have rights, too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother.

This woman’s case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don’t ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday.

You can afford to stay out of school for one day if you have no other way to go except by bus.

You can also afford to stay out of town for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children and grown-ups, don’t ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off of all buses Monday.

Robinson and her crew typed up the call for boycott, then printed and delivered an estimated 52,500 leaflets between midnight and 4:00 a.m. on Saturday, December 3. Black Montgomery awoke that morning to find the leaflets had been delivered to virtually every school, business, church, and home in the community. The people of the community would have to decide whether to honor the boycott, and anything short of unanimity would doom it to failure.

While Robinson planned and publicized the boycott, Nixon mobilized Montgomery’s black preachers. As an organizing medium, the black church had no peer. No other institution—no black newspaper, social club, or any other entity—could match Montgomery’s black churches’ “grapevine,” or communications infrastructure, and no one—not Robinson or even Nixon—spoke with more power and authority on issues that affected the black community than the preachers. In Montgomery, as elsewhere throughout the South, the churches were the community’s most important institution, and they were also the most autonomous—which in theory made them the least vulnerable to white counterattack. There was no guarantee that the preachers would support the boycott, but if Nixon could convince them to throw their influence behind the effort it stood a good chance of success.

Nixon first called his own pastor, Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, whose First Baptist Church was the oldest and most imposing black Baptist church in town. Abernathy responded positively and promised to use his post as secretary of the town's Baptist Ministers Alliance to bring others on board. He suggested that Nixon follow up by enlisting Rev. H. H. Hubbard, the president of the Alliance, and a newcomer to Montgomery, the twenty-six-year-old pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., in the effort. Nixon invited King on board, but the preacher replied, "Brother Nixon, let me think about it and call you back." That disappointed Nixon, but a pep talk from Abernathy subsequently brought King onto the team; he agreed to host a meeting of roughly fifty black leaders to discuss the boycott at Dexter Avenue that Friday evening. The assembled clergymen had to be convinced to support the boycott—which was still conceived as a one-day, one-off affair—but they did agree, and they did promote it in their Sunday sermons.

Community organizers such as Ella Baker and Jo Ann Robinson inevitably find that life gets in the way of political action. In the context of the mid-1950s South it was not difficult to find examples of the truism at work. An employer angrily questioned his employee about his signature on a petition requesting the desegregation of local schools, so the employee removed it. The local banker recommended that a homeowner give a second thought to the voter registration card he filled out yesterday—it would be a shame if the bank had to call in his home loan—so the homeowner rescinded it and told the civil rights workers to go away the next time they came by to encourage him to register. How could a domestic worker who supported the ideals of a bus boycott but could not afford to risk being late to work—her family depended on this job, and keeping her children fed was more important than anything else—do anything but shuffle onto the back of a bus? Robinson's idea for a bus boycott could not possibly work. That domestic worker in Montgomery earned an average wage of just \$523 a year, so it wasn't like she could just buy a car to get to work. She and thousands like her simply depended on the bus system too greatly for a critical mass of them to give it up even for a day.

And yet the one-day boycott called for December 5 did work, to an almost magical degree. Nearly every single African American in Montgomery refused to ride the bus that morning, which meant that nearly everyone had to walk, in some cases for miles, or hastily arrange a carpool to get to work. "Here you have a situation historically unthought of and unpredicted," Baker later said, "where thousands of individuals, just black ordinary people, subjected themselves to inconveniences that were certainly beyond the

thinking of most folk. . . . [O]ld women and maids who ran the risk of losing their little income would walk [to work], if they got there, rather than ride the buses.” That was remarkable enough in the context of black Montgomarians’ resistance to Jim Crow, but Baker peered deep into the boycott and saw something even more significant. “Now this meant that you had a momentum that had not been seen even in the work of the N.A.A.C.P. And it was something that suggested a higher potential for wide-spread action through the South,” she said. King attributed the boycott’s success to “the zeitgeist,” but Baker, Parks, Robinson, and the other women of Montgomery knew better. It “was not a prairie fire, or a rising tide, or a gear that tumbled in the cosmos,” according to historian Danielle McGuire. It was “a women’s movement for dignity . . . the end of a drive chain that ran back into decades of black women’s activism” in Montgomery.

The number of regular people from every economic and social class, from grade school dropouts to PhDs, who rallied around the issue of racial segregation on the Montgomery buses was unprecedented. First they gathered at city hall, where Parks had to make her way through a crowd estimated at five hundred people to appear before a municipal judge to answer the charge of having violated Montgomery’s segregation laws. The trial’s outcome was foregone. Attorney Fred Gray had already decided not to mount a defense so that he could argue against the constitutionality of segregation on appeal. Five minutes after gaveling the court to session, Judge John B. Scott found Parks guilty and fined her \$10 plus \$4 in court fees. The crowd outside the building was incensed by the verdict, but instead of stoking the rage, Nixon and Abernathy encouraged the people to go home and cool off, then attend a previously planned mass meeting to be held that evening at Holt Street Baptist Church.

Nixon, Abernathy, and Rev. Edgar N. French then met over lunch to plan out an agenda for the mass meeting and for the boycott more broadly. They adopted what in retrospect looks like a ridiculously moderate set of demands, asking only that the bus company instruct all drivers to treat African Americans with respect, hire African American drivers for routes on which black riders were the majority, and institute a separate-but-truly-equal system of seating on the buses. They approved the name Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) for the new group that would be necessary to manage the boycott they hoped the community would agree to continue. At a second meeting that afternoon Nixon attempted to sell the plan to a larger group of black pastors, businessmen, and community leaders. When some of the clergymen raised legitimate concerns about the retaliation they could expect to face if they supported the boycott, Nixon lost his cool and accused them of

being “scared little boys.” He thundered, “If we’re going to be men, now’s the time to be men.” The gendered language he chose was interesting, because he had failed to invite the women who were responsible for the boycott in the first place. “The men took it over,” Robinson said.

One of the pastors—King—spoke up on behalf of the others. “Brother Nixon, I’m not a coward. I don’t want anybody to call me a coward,” he said. Up to that moment nearly everyone had assumed that Nixon, or perhaps Abernathy, the pastor of the church Nixon attended, would assume leadership of the MIA. But Nixon and Abernathy had worked in Montgomery long enough to make enemies, and a sizable faction of those present at the meeting wanted someone else to serve as their spokesman. They jumped at the chance and nominated King, who was then elected by acclamation.

At first glance, King was a curious choice to act as the MIA’s spokesman. Parks had met him for the first time that summer, soon after he arrived in Montgomery, when he delivered an address on the importance of the *Brown* decision at an NAACP branch meeting. “He looked like he might have been a student in college instead of a minister at a very prestigious church,” Parks later said. Only twenty-five years old at the time, King had arrived in Montgomery with impressive credentials. The son and grandson of Baptist preachers who tended to well-to-do flocks on Atlanta’s Auburn Avenue, King had graduated from Atlanta’s Morehouse College and Crozer Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He had also completed his coursework for a PhD in theology at Boston University and would receive his degree the following year.

When the other members of the MIA tapped him to serve as spokesman for the group, King had never so much as marched in a civil rights protest. But he had given a great deal of thought to how African Americans might use their churches as a force for social change, he had read at least superficially about Mohandas Gandhi’s nonviolent campaigns against British imperialism, and he had established a reputation as a gifted public speaker. Perhaps he really was a better choice for the spokesman’s role than he initially appeared.

King erased any doubts that night at the Holt Street Baptist Church mass meeting, when he delivered one of the greatest speeches in the entire history of American protest rhetoric. A thousand people filled the pews and aisles inside the church, and thousands more listened in via a hastily constructed public address system in the church basement and outside on the sidewalk. “We are here this evening for serious business,” he assured the crowd. “We are here in a general sense because first and foremost, we are American citizens, and we are determined to acquire our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning. We are here also because of our deep-seated belief that democracy



*Ella Baker, circa 1942. (Visual Materials from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division LC-USZ62-110575).*

# **NOW!**

## **MORE THAN EVER**

### **YOUR FREEDOM DEPENDS ON YOU**

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"We must guard against divisions among ourselves  
... . We must be particularly vigilant against  
racial discrimination in any of its ugly forms"

—President Roosevelt in his address to the Congress  
on the State of the Nation, January 6, 1942.

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## **Hear Miss Ella J. Baker**

**National Representative of the N. A. A. C. P.**

**Sunday, March 1st - 4 P. M.**

**McCABE M. E. CHURCH**

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**CITY-WIDE MEMBERSHIP CAMPAIGN**

**February 22nd - March 6th**

**Campaign Headquarters:**

**Bethel Baptist Church, 10th St. and 3rd Ave. South**

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# **JOIN NOW!**

## **THIS IS YOUR FIGHT, TOO!**

*ST. PETERSBURG BRANCH, N. A. A. C. P.*



*Ella Baker hosts the first NAACP "Give Light and the People Will Find a Way" regional leadership training conference in New York City, 1944. Baker is standing, far right; along with, l to r: Attorney Theodore Spaulding of Philadelphia; Alfred Baker Lewis of Greenwich, Connecticut; Walter White; Judge Charles E. Toney of New York; and Arthur B. Spingarn, president of the NAACP board of directors. (Visual materials from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division LC-DIG-ds-01443.)*



*Baker attends the May 1962 Student Leadership Conference in Chapel Hill, N.C. (front row, far left). Other attendees include Carl Braden (second row, hands clasped around knees), Anne Braden (second row, in black dress), and Tom Hayden (right of window in dark jacket). Carl and Anne Braden Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.*



*Baker addresses the MFDP State Convention, Jackson, Mississippi, 1964. (Take Stock)*



*Baker addresses a crowd in Atlantic City on behalf of the MFDP. (Take Stock)*



*Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegates and supporters singing at a rally on the Atlantic City Boardwalk outside of the Democratic National Convention, 1964. Fannie Lou Hamer holds the microphone, Baker is at far right, and SNCC's Eleanor Holmes Norton stands between them. (Take Stock)*



*Ella Baker speaking at an unidentified political gathering, circa 1970. (Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.)*

transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government on earth.” Speaking in the tones and vocabularies of both the black church and the American civic tradition, King laid out the MIA’s goals and inspired his listeners to continue the bus boycott, together. “This speech had evoked more response than any speech or sermon I ever delivered,” King later wrote. “My heart was full. . . . The unity of purpose and *esprit de corps* of these people had been indescribably moving.” The members of the MIA voted to continue the boycott. They were high on the boycott’s one-day success, and few among them would have imagined that their protest would have to last 381 days, but it did.

This was a game-changer. Almost immediately Baker, Levison, and Rustin pivoted to transform In Friendship into a support group for the MIA. Night after night, the three of them “talked into the wee hours of the morning,” Baker said, “in terms of, how do you develop a course that can enlarge upon the gains or the impact of the Montgomery bus boycott?” Levison and Rustin thrilled at the possibilities they saw in the well-spoken, charismatic spokesman of the movement, whom they hoped they might be able to mold into an American Gandhi. In contrast, Baker swooned at the numbers: five hundred African Americans at Mrs. Parks’s trial, thousands at the mass meeting, nearly 100 percent compliance with the boycott. This was a mass movement! Black Montgomerians had identified a problem and developed their own indigenous, democratic institution to combat it. And it looked as if they had a strong chance of success.

In Friendship’s first large fund-raising rally, a Madison Square Garden extravaganza, resulted in a direct \$2,000 contribution to the MIA. The group later raised another \$4,000 to send Rev. King to Africa and India so that he could attend the ceremonies surrounding Ghana’s independence from the British empire and to study Gandhi’s philosophy and methods in the hope that he might be able to apply them in Alabama.

As the bus boycott unfolded, the trio looked for ways not only to support the MIA but also to extend its methods to other southern communities. Baker said, “We began to talk about the need for developing in the South a mass force that would . . . become a counterbalance, let’s call it, to the NAACP.” Whatever form a new organization growing out of the Montgomery experience took, it would have to grow organically from the grass roots—a movement of, by, and for southern blacks. Ironically, Alabama officials made this easier by banning the NAACP from operating in the state in 1956. From that point on, there was no chance for the Association to co-opt the local energy of the Montgomery movement even if it had been inclined to try. Baker, Rustin, and Levison moved aggressively to fill the void.

“[H]ere you had a social phenomenon that had not taken place in the history of those of us who were around at that time,” Baker said, “where hundreds of people and even thousands of people, ordinary people, had taken a position that put them in a very uncomfortable [position]—at least made life less comfortable for them—when they decided to walk rather than to ride the buses.” By any definition, she said, this was “a mass action that anybody who looked at the social scene would have to appreciate and wonder. Those of us who believed that . . . only through mass action are we going to eliminate certain things, would have to think in terms of how does this get carried on.” Carrying it on became her life’s work.

However, Baker also saw a familiar (and distressing) pattern taking shape in the bus boycott. She had spent a lifetime in the church, where “in terms of things taking place”—actual work getting done—“[a]ll of the churches depended . . . on women, not men. Men didn’t do the things that had to be done[,] and you had a large number of women who were involved in the bus boycott.” That organizational model seemed to be replicating itself in the MIA. While the news media (and Rustin and Levinson, among many others) focused on the MIA’s charismatic spokesman, Baker thrilled at the unanimity of black Montgomerians across economic classes. She marveled at the working-class women, who after putting in eight or more hours of domestic labor day after day energized the MIA’s nighttime mass meetings and encouraged one another to carry on. “They were the people who kept the spirit going[,] [along with] the young people,” Baker said. “I knew that the young people were the hope of any movement. It was just a normal thing to me.” In contrast, she added, “The average Baptist minister didn’t really know organization.”

Nonetheless, Robinson and the organizers of the MIA kept the boycott going and kept black Montgomery almost completely unified. (The recognized “leaders” of the movement were all men, but women staffed the organization and managed its most complex aspect, the logistics of a volunteer carpool that replaced the buses.) They found the Chicago-based owners of the city bus line willing to negotiate, but local elected officials remained recalcitrant. The city fathers drew a line in the sand and refused to compromise on any aspect of Jim Crow segregation. Using an antiunion state law that forbade economic boycotts, local officials arrested eighty-nine members of the MIA. Someone bombed King’s home. The Ku Klux Klan marched through Montgomery. Still, every day tens of thousands of black residents refused to ride the buses, at great personal sacrifice, and the MIA’s mass meetings continued to attract thousands of enthusiastic supporters. In 1956 federal courts agreed with the protesters and decided that segregated seating systems inherently

violated African Americans' constitutional rights. The city finally agreed to abide by the decisions, and on December 21, 1956, black citizens rode at the front of Montgomery buses for the first time.

There are few if any examples in American history in which communities of nearly fifty thousand people who share nothing but proximity and skin color can agree on *anything*, much less something that requires them to sacrifice so heavily, and maintain unanimity for any length of time. But that many black Montgomeries banded together in the bus boycott and maintained their unanimity for twelve months. It was a truly remarkable accomplishment. The spokesman and moral compass of the boycott, King had become at the age of twenty-seven arguably the preeminent proponent of racial justice and nonviolent protest, not just in the United States but throughout the world.

A mass movement—conceived, peopled, led, and nurtured almost entirely by native southerners—succeeded in bringing down at least a vestige of Jim Crow. King and the MIA struck gold, in part because they used nonviolence as both a tactic and a philosophy. It must be noted that Baker, along with the vast majority of African Americans and, for that matter, Americans of all races, did not share the philosophy of nonviolence. Comparing herself to Bayard Rustin many years later, Baker candidly admitted, “[Rustin] had a history of dedication to the concept of non-violence. I have no such history; I have no such commitment. Not historically or even now can I claim that, because that’s not my way of functioning.” She did come to appreciate its strategic usefulness, but Baker was slow to recognize how useful nonviolence was in building a movement culture in Montgomery. Rustin believed that the nonviolent movement in Montgomery gave MIA supporters “the feeling that they could be bigger and stronger and more courageous and more loving than they thought they could be.” Moreover, as historian Adam Fairclough writes, “Nonviolence not only promoted unity and discipline among the blacks but also inhibited the employment of violence by the whites” of Montgomery.

Carrying on the work of the MIA, spreading the mass action gospel to other southern communities while there was still momentum to build on, became Baker’s sole focus. “You needed a force in the South that was comparable to the N.A.A.C.P. in some respects,” Baker said. The Association, she continued, “primarily dealt with legal action. Although it had a program of branch action it had not organized mass action that lent itself to demonstrations. So, if you think in terms of something in the South for mass action you’d start with the group that had been involved in something.” That left the Montgomery movement, but even it had a critical flaw in Baker’s mind:

MIA drew its strength from the masses, but black ministers had dominated it. As moving as their speeches were, she had little confidence that ministers could run an effective anti-Jim Crow organization. Baker believed that the nascent mass movement had to somehow take advantage of the black churches' networking capabilities without replicating the churches' organizational model of one charismatic leader and many members of the congregation. It was critical that movement supporters act quickly, she counseled. "After the Montgomery bus boycott success it became very obvious that there was need to move. You had the big boycott and then nothing," she said.

Baker dealt in the world of the possible, so instead of waiting for the perfect prospect to present itself she worked with the opportunities that existed. She, Rustin, and Levison encouraged King and the ministers throughout the South who identified with the MIA's brand of struggle to form a new civil rights group. The idea for a new organization was born, Baker said, out of the idea that "it would be good to have an organizational base in the South comparable, to some extent, to the NAACP. Because the NAACP was not activist in that direction. And these people who had come out of the bus boycott or its leadership ought to be involved in something worth more than just relying on the past." The Montgomery bus boycott showed that mass direct-action campaigns could work in the South. "There had been cooperative or interrelated action" in the South, Baker said, "but you still didn't have a viable base for political social action in the South out of the black community." A new organization would have to fill that void.

According to Baker (King would surely have told a different story), she herself brought up the idea of capitalizing on the boycott's momentum to "build something larger," and she took that idea to King. Why had he allowed the energy and momentum of the MIA to dissipate? "I irritated [King] with the question," Baker recalled. "His rationale was that after a big demonstration, there was a natural letdown and a need for people to sort of catch their breath. I didn't quite agree. . . . I don't think the leadership in Montgomery was prepared to capitalize [on what] . . . had come out of the Montgomery situation."

In any case, two months after the bus boycott concluded successfully with Montgomery having desegregated its buses, King and roughly sixty supporters met in Atlanta in January 1957 and decided to form what they called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). They included the word *Christian* in the new organization's name not only because it accurately reflected the group's membership but because, they hoped, it would deflect accusations that the group was influenced by godless Communists. To avoid

open competition with the NAACP, they decided against selling individual memberships. The SCLC would organize primarily through church networks (which is not to say through congregations, from the bottom up), as a confederation of local movements and activist clusters.

Beyond that loose definition, what kind of organization the SCLC would become remained very much up in the air. Baker believed that the fix was in from the beginning. Because the founders were nearly all black ministers, the SCLC would follow a top-down church model. When he arrived at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1954, King wrote, "The pastor's authority is not merely humanly conferred, but divinely sanctioned. . . . Leadership never ascends from the pew to the pulpit, but it invariably descends from the pulpit to the pew." As pastor he expected "to be respected and accepted as the central figure around which the policies and programs of the church revolve." SCLC would work the same way.

"Those of us who preferred an organization that was democratic and where the decision making was left with the people would think in one vein [that included] the organizing of active . . . chapters or units of people," Baker said. The "majority of the people who were called together [to create the SCLC] were ministers and the decision as to who was called together emanated, no doubt, from the background out of which . . . Martin came." She thought that he might lack "understanding . . . of the virtue of utilizing the mass surge that had developed there in Montgomery." Because ministers dominated the early stages of the SCLC, Baker recalled, "The nature of the organization became to a large extent a ministerial thing."

The Kings invited preachers who had already demonstrated an interest in civic engagement to the initial meetings of the SCLC, but "you have to reckon with the fact that most of the people involved had never had any experience in developing mass action," Baker insisted. "They functioned largely in the church vein; if you had a meeting and you preached to the people the people would go out and do what you said to do and come back. So it wasn't a question of opening it up. It was largely ministers and just about all ministers."

Baker's activism drew on another model of church-based activism, the work of the women's missionary societies that women like her mother had perfected early in the twentieth century. According to historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Anna Ross Baker's generation of African American churchwomen "encouraged an aggressive womanhood that felt personal responsibility to labor no less than men . . . their evangelical zeal fervently rejected a fragile, passive womanhood of the type preoccupied with fashion, novels, and self-indulgence." It manifested itself in community organizing

campaigns of various stripes. Rejecting that organizational model, the SCLC settled into a more hierarchical and male-dominated church model.

Baker perceived that the ministers of the original iteration of the SCLC banded together with one another because they were comfortable in one another's presence. In the process they shut out the secular organizers—Baker, mainly—who wanted to generate mass action based on the Montgomery model: “You see, basically your ministers are not people who go in for decisions on the part of people. I don't know whether you realize it or not,” she said. “And they had been looked upon as saviors.” Baker didn't look upon *anyone* as a savior, and as an ultraegalitarian she approached a conversation with the belief that anyone's ideas could be challenged and perhaps improved upon. When that happened in the context of SCLC strategy sessions, “here they are faced with a suggestion that goes against the grain and with which they are not prepared to deal. So they come together” in defense of one another. They circled the wagons.

Baker's reservations about a minister-dominated organization were evident from the outset, but the SCLC offered the best hope for a southern-led mass movement, so she stayed involved. Besides, she said on more than one occasion, “I was never working for an organization. I have always tried to work for a cause. And that cause to me is bigger than any organization, bigger than any group of people, and it is the cause of humanity.”

Good preachers are not necessarily good administrators. Although the SCLC's founders issued some impressive rhetoric in the earliest days of the organization, they had a tough time getting it up and running and actually doing anything. The SCLC clearly needed someone who could step in and do the tough work of setting up an office, setting an agenda, and keeping the organization on task. The SCLC especially needed someone to organize its planned Crusade for Citizenship, a one-day mass action the preachers planned to take place on February 12, 1958, Abraham Lincoln's birthday, in twenty different southern cities to demonstrate blacks' desire to vote and to insert the issue into national political conversations.

That person was Baker, who reluctantly hired on as the SCLC's first and only staff member in January 1958. Without consulting her, Rustin and Levison had first convinced King to hire her in much the same way that Walter White had promoted Baker at the NAACP. King, who seems to have considered the term *professional woman* an oxymoron, doubted a female could be effective in the role Levison and Rustin suggested. They promised King that they would raise the funds for Baker's salary in New York, so that she would cost SCLC nothing, and King agreed to the arrangement. Baker found the episode “a bit presumptuous” but swallowed her pride—again—for the good of the

cause and agreed to go along. “[M]y ego isn’t very pronounced,” she insisted, but she also acknowledged that “not to ask me what to do but to designate me to do something without even consulting me” was disrespectful. Baker went to Atlanta intending to help SCLC set up an office and put the infrastructure in place for the Crusade, then return to New York. Yet even that seemingly well-defined, short-term task was a daunting and wide-open one; what was supposed to be a six-week-long trip turned into a multiyear southern sojourn.

The preachers of the SCLC had done just as Baker had predicted they would: They had talked a great deal about the Crusade for Citizenship, had announced it was coming, but had otherwise done nothing to actually plan a program or build the network that would be necessary to pull it off. SCLC planned a \$200,000 budget for the Crusade but raised only about \$50,000. “There had to be somebody to pull together the program and to make contact with these cities and the like,” Baker said. But “when I came in, there was no office,” so she worked out of her room in the Savoy Hotel on Auburn Avenue. “For the first couple of days . . . I had to function out of a telephone booth and . . . keep my notes in the pocketbook.”

Baker found that she could not even count on the considerable resources of nearby Ebenezer Baptist Church, the home church of Rev. Martin Luther King Sr., to organize the Crusade. “I had to accommodate myself to whatever time the manager of that office felt that the mimeograph machine and other facilities could be available, usually after office hours,” if at all, Baker remembered. She finally procured office space for SCLC near Ebenezer on Auburn Avenue.

The SCLC board of directors gave Baker few if any detailed instructions for the Crusade. “In fact, they spelled out nothing because there was nobody to spell out anything,” she said. Having at least opened the office, Baker did what she had previously done when an organization disappointed her: She beat the bushes and built up a network of supporters through phone calls, letters, and face-to-face relationships in the field. Drawing on her contacts from the NAACP days and the local networks of SCLC members, she traveled the South, lining up speakers for February 12. This was no small order, because many of the most influential African Americans did not want to risk cooperating with an effort that could be seen as competition to the NAACP. She made hundreds of phone calls to arrange local meeting logistics, held mass meetings to drum up popular support for the Crusade, and convinced local journalists that the Crusade would be newsworthy enough to merit their attention. “I talked with New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Shreveport, Mobile, Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Nashville, Chattanooga, Knoxville, and Durham,” she reported to King one day in February.

Baker dove into the work because she believed deeply in the specific cause as a means to the end of empowerment. “The voter registration [effort in general] was not just for the sake of getting people to register but to get them politicized to the extent that they would recognize that they could only fight the system if they had some political power,” she later said. (Then again, she added, “It also helped to show the limitations of political power simply by the vote.”) Due almost entirely to Baker’s efforts, black activists in twenty cities in fourteen states held Crusade for Citizenship rallies on February 12 and generated considerable press coverage. Though the Crusade failed in its stated goal of doubling the number of registered black voters in the South and is little remembered today even by civil rights historians, it was much more successful than anyone in 1958 had a right to expect it would be. But just as Baker had feared, the Crusade was a one-time-only phenomenon in nearly all the communities it reached. She had not had enough time to develop indigenous leaders or to build sustainable networks in those cities, so her efforts sparked just enough energy to mobilize communities for a day, like the proverbial flash in the pan.

The Crusade at least gave the SCLC a focus—voter registration—and although the one-day event accomplished little in the way of mass mobilization or long-term results, it suggested a direction that the organization might head in if it wanted to achieve those larger aims. It barely made a dent in voter registration numbers, but Baker considered the event the beginning of a process, not an end in itself. The SCLC had announced that following the Crusade it would launch a ten-state voter registration drive. If the SCLC had followed through on those intentions historians today might be more impressed with the Crusade for Citizenship’s accomplishments, but the organization opted not to hire the huge field staff the effort would have required. In fact, the SCLC hired no one else besides its one-woman whirlwind, and it only kept Baker on in a part-time role after February.

In order to take any kind of advantage of the little momentum the Crusade had generated, Baker would have to remain in the South a little longer. “I had anticipated being there for about six weeks,” she said. “I gave myself four weeks to get the thing going and two weeks to clean it up. But they had no one.” So she stayed in the South. Baker hit the road again, devoting the bulk of her time in 1958 and most of 1959 to two local movements affiliated with the SCLC that could take advantage of her expertise, the MIA and the United Christian Movement (UCM) of Shreveport, Louisiana.

Montgomery, as we have seen, was already organized. Baker helped the community document instances of discrimination against aspiring black voters through sworn affidavits, then organized them into a formal complaint

for the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. The commission held the first public meeting in its short history in Montgomery, in December 1958. Baker also aided the UCM, which had previously organized a highly effective boycott of Shreveport's public trolley system, in a similar effort to document voter discrimination. That resulted in another formal complaint to the Civil Rights Commission, but the state of Louisiana and an unfriendly federal judge were able to postpone the commission's public hearings until 1960. (In the interim, the state actually removed ten thousand African American names from the voting rolls.) The publicity these campaigns and the resulting commission hearings generated were valuable, and the attention they brought to the issue of voter discrimination was necessary. But they did not match the goals SCLC had laid out for the Crusade. In any case, for Baker the campaigns were more like means to an end—and that end, again, was the activation of local black communities for long-term struggle.

As late as the spring of 1958 the SCLC still had not hired a full-time executive director. Baker believed that in some ways Bayard Rustin would have been the man (and she recognized that, due to the SCLC's dynamics, it almost had to be a man) for the job; she certainly respected Rustin's energy and his ideas about direct-action campaigns and community organizing, though she did not share his philosophical commitment to nonviolence. "But I knew Bayard's lifestyle did not fit Atlanta at that stage, because there was nowhere that he could function in his manner without exposure," she said, in another major understatement referencing Rustin's openly gay lifestyle. Besides, she added, "Bayard [wasn't] basically one to take on the nitty-gritty," the prosaic office work that had to get done behind the scenes to keep the organization moving.

Having seen the SCLC's board of directors in action, and knowing well her own set of personal strengths and drawbacks, Baker understood that she would be a bad fit in the position. "I had no ambition to be . . . executive director," she later told an interviewer. "If I had had any, I knew it was not to be. And why do I say that? Two reasons. One, I was a female . . . and non-minister. The other, I guess, [was] . . . the kind of personality differences that existed between me and the Rev. Dr. King. I was not a person to be enamored of anyone," she reiterated. "My philosophy was not one of non-violence per se and I knew enough about organization (at least I thought I knew enough about organization) to be critical about some of the lack of procedures that obtained in SCLC." She therefore had to tiptoe around the SCLC's issues and its personalities. "Within the inner councils, whenever there was discussion, I did not try to force myself upon them, recognizing the sensitivities that existed. Now, I did not hesitate to voice my opinion

and sometimes [in] the voicing of that opinion it was obvious that it was not a very comforting sort of presence that I presented,” she admitted. Baker’s description of the dynamics within SCLC and her appraisal of her own ambitions may have included a dose of self-serving justification after the fact, but in the main they illustrate her knowledge of self and comfort in her own skin.

Baker’s accounts of her time at the SCLC could conceivably come across as so many sour grapes. But other women who rose to contemporary prominence in the organization described its culture in remarkably similar terms. Septima Clark, the remarkable South Carolina school teacher who created literacy and citizenship curricula at Highlander for black southerners who wanted to vote, and who later became the SCLC’s education director, said, “Those men didn’t have any faith in women, none whatsoever. They just thought that women were sex symbols and had no contributions to make.” She recalled an occasion when she had asked King to do more to organize in the communities that invited him in to lead protests instead of just mobilizing them. “I sent a letter to Dr. King asking him not to lead all the marches himself, but instead to develop leaders who could lead their own marches. Dr. King read that letter before the [otherwise all-male] staff. It just tickled them; they just laughed.”

Dorothy Cotton, who succeeded Clark as education director, recalled, “I did have a decision-making role, but I’m also very conscious of the male chauvinism that existed. . . . [Black preachers] are some of the most chauvinistic of all.” But the women also described the sexism they faced in the most matter-of-fact terms possible. The preachers they worked with may have been sexists, but at the time so was every other segment of American society. Baker was so used to sexist behavior that she came to expect it even while she worked around it. Her real beef with the organization was its dependence on King’s charismatic leadership at the expense of mass organizing, not rampant male chauvinism.

In any case, after Baker kicked off the Crusade the SCLC as an organization seemed to be stuck in neutral. It needed a program. “What was happening was nothing except what I was doing in the office,” she said. King was already being pulled in so many directions that he could not consistently offer the sort of leadership the organization sorely needed from its chairman. Still the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, he was in constant demand from other southern congregations. When he was not lobbying the White House and Congress for civil rights legislation, he was working with a ghostwriter on his book about the bus boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom*. Clearly he could not devote the time to SCLC that the organization needed.

The board of directors appointed an executive committee to hire an executive director. According to Baker, they “wanted a minister. I knew that. They couldn’t have tolerated a woman.” So she suggested Rev. John Tilley, a Baltimore pastor, for the post. Baker had met the much older Tilley at Shaw, where he studied theology while she was an undergraduate, and she was aware that he had worked closely with the Baltimore NAACP branch, one of the largest and most active in the country, and organized successful voter registration campaigns. Those credentials seemed to square nicely with the activist direction Baker hoped the SCLC was headed.

Again according to Baker, the executive committee “never got around to calling anybody, so Stanley [Levison] and I met Tilley here in New York. Tilley said he would be interested and then he went down to see them. He became the executive director [in May 1958] but he maintained his church connections in Baltimore, which meant he was in and out.” Tilley apparently never mentioned to Baker at the initial meeting that he planned to keep his pastorship if he got the job with SCLC; if he had she would have demanded in no uncertain terms that he choose one or the other. But the committee offered Tilley the job without forcing him to choose. It is baffling that anyone in the higher reaches of the SCLC thought Tilley could succeed as the director of a serious, hard-charging civil rights organization headquartered in Atlanta while continuing his work as a full-time pastor in Baltimore, but the results were predictable: the SCLC wasn’t hard charging at all during the year under Tilley’s direction.

If they hadn’t before, the SCLC’s internal politics, lack of discipline, and organizational dysfunction by now made the NAACP’s look like child’s play to Baker. According to Adam Fairclough, the author of the first major organizational history of the SCLC, Baker “found the haphazard informality of the Southern black church exasperating,” and the SCLC built its organizational structure and work culture on exactly that model. During the Tilley period, “Whatever was being done in terms of continuity had to be done by whoever was there, namely me,” Baker said. Then again, until 1960 *everyone* of consequence in the SCLC, including Baker and King, worked part time. Baker split her time between Atlanta and New York, where she still kept an apartment, even though there was now less to draw her back home to Harlem. Jackie had graduated from high school and matured into an independent young adult by this point, and Baker’s marriage ended quietly in divorce in 1958. She and Roberts had gone their separate ways almost since the beginning of their “arrangement,” so the separation was not surprising. King resigned his position at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery only at the beginning of 1960, at which time he joined his

father as pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and devoted more of his time to SCLC.

King made another momentous decision for SCLC in 1959. Upon his return from India, where he had met with associates of Gandhi and studied the philosophy and methods of nonviolent resistance, King learned that Tilley had made no progress whatsoever on extending the Crusade for Citizenship. King concluded that the project “has not had a dynamic program commensurate with the amount of money that it is spending,” so he did something that was, according to historian Taylor Branch, “alien to his character and almost unique in his entire career”: He demanded Tilley’s resignation, leaving the SCLC again without an executive director. King wanted Baker to serve in the role—they hardly ever saw eye-to-eye on the most important issues facing the SCLC, but she knew the organization better than anyone else and at least she could be counted on to do *something*. But when he took the prospect to the board of directors, the ministers agreed to it only on the condition that Baker be given the title of *acting* executive director. They felt the organization needed another man, another preacher, at the helm, and they wanted to continue looking for one, but they allowed King to hire Baker in the interim role.

Baker agreed to take on the job she knew ill suited her, and she did so without illusions. The role in SCLC was “different from the role of director of such organizations as the NAACP, CORE, and so forth,” she later said. “The executive director was more or less nominally under direction. The personality that had to be played up was Dr. King. [In] the other organizations . . . the executive director was the spokesman. But they couldn’t tolerate having an old lady [in charge of the SCLC] . . . It was too much for the masculine and ministerial ego to have permitted that.” After the fact, she claimed, “I had known . . . that there would be never be any role for me in a leadership capacity with SCLC. Why? First, I’m a woman. Also, I’m not a minister. . . . The basic attitude of men and especially ministers, as to . . . the role of women in their church setups is that of taking orders, not providing leadership.”

By this point Baker had concluded that the SCLC as a whole was all but irredeemable, but she also knew from experience that there was no such thing as a perfect civil rights organization. Despite their faults, King and the SCLC still offered her the best possibility of activating southern communities. The SCLC’s mission was to create a network of local movements (à la the MIA) that could then be supported (critics would have said “directed”) by a central authority (which critics derided as a cult of personality around Martin Luther King Jr.) as they built regional direct-action campaigns

against Jim Crow. Baker believed that the “cult of personality” criticism had weight, and she pushed back against the culture she saw developing within the organization. But she continued to put her faith in the masses, and until something better came along, SCLC offered the best opportunity to foment a mass southern movement. The men in charge of SCLC had squandered the opportunity they had been handed in Montgomery, but perhaps Baker could help them do better if they somehow caught lightning in a bottle again.

That hope did not last long. If Baker’s efforts had gone unappreciated on her first time around the block with SCLC, the board members picked up where they had left off when she signed back on, first by insisting on adding “acting” to her title and second by paying Baker less than they had paid Tillery—less, in fact, than they paid her to launch the Crusade for Citizenship. One suspects that this would have been more of an issue were Baker not already so accustomed to such treatment that she was beyond caring about it. Rather than complain about the obvious inequity, she set off on the herculean tasks of creating programs for SCLC and developing a better working environment for its staff (which, as late as 1960, included only herself and two clerical workers). She arranged the SCLC newsletter and planned the organization’s conventions and board meetings and wrote up reports to King and various SCLC committees. “I knew I didn’t have any significant role in the minds of those who constituted the organization,” she said. “I’m sure that basically the assumption is, or was, and perhaps the assumption still prevails in the minds of those who remember my being there, that I was just there to carry out the orders of Dr. King[.]” If she had any of her own ideas about how to run a civil rights organization, the board of directors expected Baker to keep them to herself and follow King’s lead.

Nonetheless, Baker did not pull punches as she tried to cajole the SCLC into action. “I was difficult. I wasn’t an easy pushover,” she admitted. In an October 1959 memorandum she chided everyone in the organization for having failed to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the Crusade for Citizenship: “The word CRUSADE connotes for me a vigorous movement, with high purpose and involving masses of people.” SCLC clearly had not created that kind of a movement, in her judgment. The organization, she said, ought to be identifying and supporting indigenous leaders, especially in the Deep South, harnessing the power of women, creating programs to fight functional illiteracy among southern blacks, making more of a push for voter registration, and developing more direct-action campaigns.

King and the board thought that the organization needed to do more to garner headlines through forceful, direct-action assaults on the segregated order. Baker agreed, though she was infinitely more interested in action for

the sake of movement building than for the sake of news generation. To that end, Baker encouraged the board to hire Rev. James Lawson, a Methodist minister who had studied deeply in the Christian pacifist and Gandhian direct action traditions and who had begun training a cadre of college students to demonstrate against segregation in Nashville, Tennessee. Baker wanted Lawson to train nonviolent protest “action teams” throughout the South on behalf of SCLC.

Baker believed at her core that for the organization to become more relevant it would have to engage in more long-term community organizing and institution building. To that end she pushed SCLC to partner with the Highlander Folk School to create literacy and citizenship education courses that would ideally kill several birds with one stone. Literacy education was a goal in its own right: obviously, literate African Americans would live healthier, more secure lives. Better-educated blacks were also harder for southern officials to keep off the voting rolls, which made literacy a civil rights issue. Although King and the board agreed with the principle, they did little to translate their thoughts into action until 1961, when Highlander began to founder in the face of white resistance. Baker had resigned from SCLC by then, but before she left she finally convinced the board that northern philanthropic foundations were more likely to donate money for education and voter registration than for direct-action campaigns. SCLC hired Septima Clark to replicate the programs she had pioneered at Highlander as SCLC’s education director.

Clark and a new arrival to SCLC, Rev. Andrew Young, built the new Citizenship Education Program (CEP) into SCLC’s most important institution. According to Taylor Branch, Clark “specialized in teaching illiterate adults to read[,] and barely literate ones to become teachers” and leaders in their own right. “The basic purpose of the Citizenship Schools is discovering community leaders,” she said. At Dorchester, a former school on the Georgia coast that had been donated by the National Council of Churches, she trained thousands of black southerners to pass literacy requirements so that they could register to vote. In the process she identified, encouraged, and trained dozens of new local civil rights leaders. Bringing Clark from Highlander to SCLC may have been Baker’s greatest contribution to the organization.

As acting executive director Baker continued her travels through the Deep South, offering what assistance she could to the local movements she considered most promising. She spent an inordinate amount of time in Shreveport, where she wanted to see the work she had helped begin with the Crusade for Citizenship through to completion, and in Birmingham, where

she formed an especially close bond with Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and his wife, Ruby. Rev. Shuttlesworth led the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) and was a founding member of SCLC, which he pushed from the inside to attack Jim Crow more aggressively. The civil rights movement's leadership in Alabama and across the South was "much less dynamic and imaginative than it ought to be," he complained to King in 1959. "When the flowery speeches have been made, we still have the hard job of getting down and helping people. . . . We [the SCLC] must move now, or else [be] hard put in the not too distant future, to justify our existence." This was music to Baker's ears, and it helps to explain why she devoted so much of her time to helping the Shuttlesworths organize Birmingham.

Tellingly, the Shuttlesworths invited Baker, and not another preacher, to give the keynote speech to the ACMHR's third anniversary celebration in June 1959. Baker biographer Barbara Ransby considered the address, which Baker titled "Nothing Too Dear to Pay for Freedom," "one of the most militant speeches of her career." A comprehensive statement of Baker's political beliefs, it did not lack for rhetorical firepower, and it illustrated her willingness to buck the SCLC's official positions, beginning with the organization's commitment to philosophical nonviolence. "What is the basic right of the individual to defend himself?" she asked—rhetorically, perhaps, but she was after all in the city that would come to be known as "Bombingham," where hard-core white segregationists used unprecedented amounts of violence against black activists. Self-defense was very much on the minds of Baker's listeners, that night and every night. "Guideposts to first-class citizenship call for the utilization of all resources at the group's command," Baker said, which, Ransby points out, sounds a lot like Malcolm X's "by any means necessary."

But Baker made it clear that although she might disagree with some of SCLC's philosophical underpinnings, she stood foursquare with the preachers on the subject of forceful assertion of their rights. The real enemy in the African American community, she warned, was "the accommodating type of Negro leader who says what he thinks local southern officials want to hear." African Americans, she said, faced an array of problems and needed to fight on several fronts. "The leader, self-styled or otherwise designated, who is quick to limit the Negro's drive for civil rights to some one phase, such as voter registration, and who pointedly avoids mention of desegregation of schools, buses, housing, public facilities, etc., is as dangerous as those white persons who lump together the NAACP and the White Citizens Councils as 'two extremes.' Both are misrepresenting the facts and therefore befuddling the issues," she boomed. Baker concluded the speech with a reminder that,

despite how far the cause had come in the past decade, much remained to be done. Legal victories such as *Brown* would be implemented at full force “only if people make use of every right won, and continue a determined battle against segregation wherever and whenever it exists.”

She continued that work at SCLC. As Baker worked to professionalize SCLC’s operations, she also asked for institutional soul searching. Her SCLC memoranda include such observations as “Have we been so busy doing the things that *had* to be done that we failed to do what *should* be done?” and “Have we really come to grips with what it takes to do the job for which SCLC was organized; and are we willing to pay the price?” Was SCLC even necessary, Baker asked, if it wasn’t engaged in long-term community organizing? The organization struggled to find its footing in the late 1950s. By 1959 Baker had begun to doubt that the group, at least under its present leadership, would ever develop a program for change, but she continued to support SCLC’s efforts to gain national prominence. In January 1960, with Carl Braden of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), she organized a “Voluntary Civil Rights Commission” to hold public hearings in Washington. SCLC, SCEF, and others had tried in vain to get the U.S. Civil Rights Commission to investigate their claims that African Americans faced systematic discrimination and harassment when they tried to register to vote. The Voluntary Commission was meant to shame the real commission into action.

The following month Fred Shuttlesworth happened to be preaching at a revival in High Point, North Carolina, when students from North Carolina A&T College in the nearby city of Greensboro sat down at the seats of a Woolworth’s lunch counter designated for whites only and refused to leave until they were served. Shuttlesworth drove over to Greensboro to see the so-called sit-ins himself, then phoned Baker excitedly to provide an eyewitness report. “You must tell Martin that we must get with this,” he said. Shuttlesworth predicted that the sit-ins would “shake up the world”—and he was right. College students in cities throughout the South used the Greensboro tactic, and a new movement spread like wildfire. Baker thought what the students were doing was “more productive than anything that had happened in [her] life.” That spring she worked on a plan to bring the students together at a regional conference to discuss their common concerns and to explore new directions for their movement.

By then Baker was a lame duck on the way out of SCLC. She had helped the executive board find and convince Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker of Petersburg, Virginia, to take over as executive director. He accepted the position in early 1960 and planned to begin work in August. Never one to place loyalty

to an organization over principle, Baker now had even less inclination to corral the students on behalf of SCLC.

Baker's tenure at the SCLC was unsatisfying on multiple levels—"more frustrating than fruitful," in Ransby's words—but it also brought her back into the game. Baker spent her tenure at SCLC demanding that the organization do more to create an active program, and in 1960 the students proved she had been right to do so. The sit-ins expressed the students' frustration with what they perceived as the NAACP's and SCLC's cautiousness as much as they expressed the students' unwillingness to cooperate with Jim Crow. To the organization's credit, SCLC did begin to heed Baker's advice by developing voter registration campaigns and engaging in increasingly militant direct-action efforts, if only after she left. Baker's insistence that SCLC needed to do more institution building led directly to the creation of its most important long-term project, the CEP.

She did not leave SCLC embittered. A cynic might say that Baker had such low expectations for SCLC all along that the organization could not have disappointed her. There is a grain of truth in the suggestion, but no more. SCLC might not have lived up to the potential she saw in it while Baker was associated with it, but the organization did mature and grow during the period. Moreover, Fred and Ruby Shuttlesworth, Ralph David Abernathy, Wyatt Tee Walker, and many others Baker had met through SCLC remained lifelong friends. When Baker died in 1986, Abernathy offered the opening prayer and Walker read scripture at her funeral service in Harlem.

Baker's relationship with King was complex, but students of the movement should not read more into Baker's statement, "I did not just subscribe to a theory just because it came out of the mouth of the leader," than is necessary. Baker respected King and liked him personally. With countless others, she thrilled at his ability to move crowds and to communicate the goals of the civil rights movement, especially to Americans outside of the South who might not otherwise have stopped to think about why the movement was even necessary. She might not have thought that the ability to deliver a moving speech was the most important trait a civil rights activist could develop, but Baker respected King's intellect greatly and believed that the work he did was critical. She just didn't think he should be worshipped for it, and told him so.

Baker told a story that illustrated their differing approaches to movement building, in more ways than one. In 1958 the MIA put on an Institute on Nonviolence for its third anniversary celebration. It provided a good opportunity to look back to the bus boycott for lessons the SCLC could use

moving forward, but the institute's organizers took a different tack, dedicating the largest block of time to "A Testimonial to Dr. King's Leadership." The program featured six formal speeches from fellow preachers who did nothing but praise King. There was no mention of Jo Ann Robinson, E. D. Nixon, or Rosa Parks, much less the thousands of foot soldiers who made the MIA viable in the first place, and local people noticed. Nixon told a friend, "When people give all recognition to one because of his academic training and forge[t] other[s] who do not have that kind of training but are making a worthwhile contribution," it stung, and it made people like him less likely to devote their time and talents to the SCLC or any other civil rights organization in the future.

Baker considered the conference program emblematic not only of the budding movement's misguided hero worship but also of what she believed was a deeper problem: the stunning ability of African American ministers, and the institution of the black church as a whole, to waste breath and resources on insignificant, surface-deep issues when there was real, fundamental work to be done. Why not devote that time in the program to voter registration training? Baker asked King point-blank why he would permit his friends to organize an entire conference around his personality. "Well, I don't want to. The people want to do this," King answered guiltily in Baker's telling of the story. He did not want to disappoint them, so he allowed it to go on.

That wasn't good enough for Baker, obviously, but she blamed the people who all but worshipped King as much as she blamed the minister who, she believed, proved all too willing to accept and play the role of savior whether or not he sought it. The dynamic was unhealthy and old-fashioned, she thought. One observer of a Montgomery mass meeting reported that women in the pews had responded to King by gushing, "He's next to Jesus himself!" and "He's my darling!" Baker wanted the SCLC to teach those women how to become leaders for their own communities, but instead the organization encouraged them to swoon over King. Baker had enough respect for King that she offered this criticism to his face. And if Baker believed that King's ego too often got in the way of organizing a real program for change, then she recognized him as an imperfect, three-dimensional human being with feet of clay in a way that his worshippers did not.

Both King and Baker had been raised in the church, and much of the conflict between them developed from what they had done after having had that formative experience. Baker developed her own political philosophy in working-class New York and sharpened it through thousands of hours' worth of respectful argument with people across the political spectrum. She relished a good discussion on the issues of the day, if not an argument—in part

because it helped her hone her own beliefs and practices, but also because she approached each conversation with genuine interest in her interlocutor and the understanding that she might be able to learn something from him or her. In contrast, King had arrived in Montgomery with stellar academic credentials and the expectation that he would do the talking and his congregation would do the listening.

Baker was still a Christian and a churchgoer (even though she had relocated to Atlanta, she remained a member of Friendship Baptist Church in Harlem), but by now she had developed an intense anticlerical streak. She believed that King had risen so far and so fast in Montgomery that his inner circle—in Baker’s words, “a complete embankment of ministers who feel they’ve been called by God for leadership . . . and who had not had the discipline of thinking and real dialogue, especially dialogue that differed with them”—insulated him from criticism. “I was dealing with ministers whose only sense of relationship to women in organization was that of the church,” she said. “And the role of women in the southern church—and maybe all of the churches but certainly the southern churches—was that of doing the things that the minister said he wanted to have done. It was not one in which they were credited with having creativity and initiative and capacity to carry out things—to create programs and to carry them out. Certainly that was not my concept of functioning.”

Baker also admitted frankly that her personality played a role in the conflict. “I was not the kind of person that made special effort to be ingratiating. I didn’t try to insult but I did not hesitate to be positive about the things with which I agreed or disagreed,” she said. “I might be quiet but if there was discussion and I was supposed to be able to participate, I participated at the level of my thinking.” American feminists now claim Baker as a patron saint of the modern women’s movement because she refused to conform to society’s expectations of how she should behave. “I wasn’t a fashionplate,” she said. “I make no bones about not being a fashionplate.”

In any case, their two opposing “concepts of functioning” made it all but impossible for Baker and King to work effectively together. “I think I could make a generalization that Martin suffered from self-protectiveness that frequently goes with one who has been accorded high place in the public image,” Baker suggested. “I don’t care how much reading you do, if you haven’t had the interchange of dialogue and confrontation with others you can be frightened by someone who comes [in] and is in a position to confront you.”

There is, of course, another side to this story. King is not often described, even by other critics, as having been easily frightened, and his closest confidantes portray a man who constantly self-criticized, sought others’ opinions

on how he could work more efficiently and effectively, and agonized over the effects of his actions. Levison, for instance, described King as “an intensely guilt-ridden man. . . . If he had been less humble, he could have lived with this great acclaim, but as it was, he always thought of ways in which he could somehow live up to it.” Rustin remembered King as someone who was “always struggling to make sure that he was trying to do the right thing in the right way.” King’s unquestioned skills as a communicator would also seem to indicate that he was more skilled at “dialogue and confrontation” than Baker gave him credit for. In any case, King chafed at Baker’s criticism, and how could he not have? But the record proves that he respected her as well. Why else would he have encouraged the executive committee to hire Baker as executive director in 1958? In any case, as the chairman of an organization he had a right to expect the executive director and staff of that organization to execute his decisions, and Baker proved unwilling to do that, at least without debate.

The Montgomery bus boycott had given Baker hope that a new day was dawning in the South. The mass movement could conceivably have spread immediately throughout the region and led to massive change, but SCLC failed to deliver on that promise for a simple reason: Social movements need constant feeding and care to succeed, and the ministers of the SCLC either did not know how to organize or did not have the patience necessary to parent a grassroots movement. As historian Tomiko Brown-Nagin has written about organizing in another context, “Movements require structure and organization, unifying themes, concrete goals, effective symbols, tools for engagement with the public, and methods to influence policymakers.” SCLC had not mastered all of these variables of successful movement building yet, but as an organization it was beginning to improve by 1960, and it would make even greater strides in the years to come.

The ministers would have to make those strides without Baker. Given a choice, she always put her faith in young people—and now she had a choice to make. “I knew that the young people were the hope of any movement. It was just a normal thing to me,” she said. She had already decided to leave SCLC, which had only recently seemed like the best alternative to the NAACP, a possible incubator for the mass southern movement she had dreamed of nurturing. In 1960 she found young people, college students, with whom she was willing to place those dreams. The students would not disappoint her.