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Interview with

ELLA BAKER

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Durham, North Carolina

conducted by Eugene Walker

transcribed by Frances Tamburro

for the Southern Oral History Program

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Eugene Wal<sup>K</sup>ter: I want to acknowledge first of all that in most of the literature I've read, they've spoken rather highly of you. Some of them have gone so far as to dedicate works to you: Howard Zinn and his SNCC: The New Abolitionists <sup>Holt</sup> and Pope and his work on the Mississippi Freedom Summer. These men felt that you were one of the main cogs in this wheel that these subsequent movements followed. So I'm honored to talk with you this morning, and I'd like for you to share with me some of your experiences and accounts of the role you played in SCLC and your interpretations of roles other individuals played in the organization that you might feel are necessary to give me more insight as to the dynamics involved in the programs that SCLC ultimately initiated. My first question to you, as I was saying earlier, is, can you point out to me other factors aside from the Montgomery movement and the 1954 Supreme Court decision which may have contributed to the founding of SCLC when it was founded in '57?

Ella Baker: Well, I think what you have is a question of continuity of struggle. You said that people had referred to me largely in terms of maybe being a factor. That I think sprang from the fact that several years before that, in the forties, late thirties and in the forties in particular, I was working with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and a primary function of mine was to go into the areas--maybe some of the areas that had not been visited in a long while. For instance, I used to leave New York sometime in February and go into Florida. I'd start at St. Pete(rsburg) and Tampa and that was because the Association didn't have an active branch in [continued on page 2].

Miami at the time. So we'd work around Tampa and up the east or the west coast, Palm Beach, West Palm Beach and on and on and up, Pampano and small places and hit Jacksonville; from Jacksonville to Tallahassee; from Tallahassee to Pensacola; Pensacola into Mobile; Mobile through Alabama; from Alabama into Georgia; Georgia up till you came into Virginia. So that had been my itinerary for several years. Then in the process it was not to be unthought of that I had touched a number of people who had not been visited for a long time by Association personnel. That may account for whatever historical impact I may have had.

In addition to that, the '54 decision was frequently interpreted by people as being the end of the struggle because the N.A.A.C.P. struggle had been one of legal action to a large extent. The 1954 decision culminated an effort on the part of the lawyers of the Association to raise the question of the constitutionality of racial segregation. This was the case on which that got verbalization. So that becomes an historical monument and to some people it almost was interpreted as being the end of the struggle. But as we have seen from the history of racial segregation and discrimination, we've had court action that has been nullified from time immemorial. You must go back to the Reconstruction period and I'm not going into that, but you

go back there. Much of what was supposedly gained in the forties and fifties legally, had been supposedly secured to us right after the Reconstruction period. And you know those laws were nullified. So, S.C.L.C.; why? It was . . . . (interruption)

E. W.: You were about to speak to the "why" of S.C.L.C..

Baker: I think the basic "why" of S.C.L.C. has to do with what has taken place in the '54 decision and the unthought of Montgomery bus boycott. But before you can evaluate the bus boycott, you have to understand how it came about. And it didn't come out of a vacuum.

There were two people in Montgomery who had functioned with the N.A.A.C.P. over the years and they were Mrs. Rosa Parks and E.D. Nixon. Where did E. D. Nixon get his fire? He got his fire and his sense of social action from being a member of the Brotherhood of Sleepingcar Porters and the struggle that it had waged through the years. So when the Montgomery bus boycott ended successfully here you had a social phenomenon that had not taken place in the history of those of us who were around at that time, where hundreds of people and even thousands of people, ordinary people, had taken a position that put them in a very uncomfortable--at least made life less comfortable for them--when they decided to walk rather than to ride the buses.



And this was a mass action and a mass action that anybody who looked at the social scene would have to appreciate and wonder. Those of us who believed that mass and only through mass action are we going to eliminate certain things, would have to think in terms of how does this get carried on. So, whatever the reasons, or however the historical accidents of history or whatever else that precipitated Martin as the president--that's quite a story I'm not going into because you didn't come here for that-- but whatever those factors were, he was there as the spokesman for the boycott. -And out of the boycott he became a world-wide known individual articulating the strivings and the hopes and so forth of the people who were involved in the boycott.

E. W. : At this time, you were working with the N.A.A.C.P.?

Baker: No, at '54?

E. W. : No, in '57.

Baker: No, no, no. See, I left the N.A.A.C.P. nationally in '46, and I worked with a local branch. I think I was the president somewhere in the fifties. In 1957, at the time that S.C.L.C. was formally organized--I think that's when it was formally organized--I was doing a program of trying to educate or trying to stimulate action on the part of black and Puerto Rican parents in respect to the school situation. See, New York City had taken , had set up a

commission on de facto segregation, I believe. I'm not sure, but they were supposed to be eliminating de facto segregation in the school system in New York. So, for the summer of '57 we had weekly meetings with parents in the different boroughs for getting them to deal with the question of their schools, what was happening to their children. That's where Kenneth Clark came into the picture in the whole area of . . . .

E. W. :

You mentioned

the fact that E. D. Nixon probably got a lot of his fire from his earlier affiliation with the Sleepingcar Porter's and Mrs. Rosa Parks had been N.A.A.C.P. member for a long time. But I also read an account where Mrs. Parks had attended earlier, the Highlander Folk School. This was a place in Monteagle, Tennessee, as you know, where young people would go aspiring to be leaders in the community to get different kinds of training as to how they could best go about doing it. And it was right after that, that Mrs. Parks decided that she wasn't going to give up her seat. So it's a question over here as to where her primary motivation came from as to the reason that she didn't give up her seat. Have you heard that story before about the field influence?

Baker: Sure. Well, in the first place, the first time Mrs.

Parks left Montgomery to go anywhere, she says it was to come to Atlanta to a regional leadership training conference that I happened to have organized. When I was precipitated into the directorship of branches of the N.A.A.C.P., one of the first things that I projected was the idea of the need for the training of the people who were carrying on branch activities. And when I said training, largely in terms of preparing them, giving them the information and broadening the scope of their understanding of what was involved. One of the reasons was that I had seen that to a large extent most of the branches were feeling that their duty was to provide some memberships and some money to the national organization. They had attitudes that were not particularly helpful in terms of change. For instance, say Atlanta or somewhere else. I'm not identifying Atlanta per se as such, but they would be against the idea of going to battle for the town drunk who happened to have been maybe brutalized when being arrested because, who was he? And in some places like Buffalo, New York, for instance, most of the black children were coming out of the high schools with just certificates attesting to the fact that they had been in attendance. But I frequently would have people ask me as I came up from the deep South, up to Virginia and North Carolina,

how are things down South? Which meant that to them that's where the problem was and they had not identified the problem in their own area.

E. W.: This was in the fifties?

Baker: The fifties. The late forties, up to '46, was when I was travelling.

E. W.: Now you said when you were working, you did some work in Florida, came up through Mobile and Tampa and all up through that. When was that?

Baker: That was in the forties.

E. W.: The forties.

Baker: With the N.A.A.C.P. when I was serving as an assistant field secretary.

E. W.: How was it that you moved into a position in the S.C.L.C.? What was the process involved there?

E. W.: The process there was that after the '54 decision, after the Montgomery boycott or simultaneous almost with it, the '54 decision precipitated certain kinds of repressive action against people who attempted to enroll their children in school. Two places in particular come to mind. One was Clarendon County, South Carolina and I think there was Yazoo, Mississippi where the black parents attempted to enroll, and certain repressive actions were taken against them. People who were tenant farmers for thirty or forty

years no longer had anywhere to farm. Those who had a little business, they were boycotted; there were boycotts against them in terms of the delivery of goods and services. So, some of us here in New York including two or three ministers--one in particular, one black minister who is now dead that was Jim Robinson, the Reverend James H. Robinson, who was in the Presbyterian Church, Church of the Master, and he had been associated with the N.A.A.C.P. as a youth secretary--and Rabbi Weiss, I believe it was (anyway I have the list here); we organized. They were people who had prestige but some of the rest of us like Bayard, George Lawrence, Stanley Levenson of the American Jewish Congress,

and some of the labor people, organized what was called "In Friendship." Its purpose was largely to provide some material and legal assistance as much as possible to such people as were being evicted from their tenant farms and households and other situations in Clarendon County and Yazoo and in other places. So out of that came the concept of an enlarged effort. You see, by that time you were running into . . . '54 was the decision. People were having their difficulties, say in '55, '56. Then came in that period the Montgomery boycott. And the boycott then moved on the scene as having involved a

large number of people. So the question arises, where do you go from here? Also the question arose in respect to mass action--does the N.A.A.C.P. lend itself to mass action or will it initiate mass action or will it continue its program of legalism?

E. W.: Pardon me, but this is at the successful end of the Birmingham boycott?

Baker: Montgomery boycott.

E. W.: Montgomery boycott.

Baker: Yes, it had come at that period. So the question in some of our minds is that there was something there that should be continued, that you needed a force in the South that was comparable to the N.A.A.C.P. in some respects. Why? Because the N.A.A.C.P. in the minds of those of us who were concerned at that stage, 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. So there was Montgomery and in connection with Montgomery there were large numbers of black ministers, or a number of black ministers throughout the area who had identified with that struggle. For instance, C. K. Steele in Tallahassee,



Florida and Abraham something or other in New Orleans . . .

E. W.: Yes, Jameson was in New Orleans.

Baker: Jameson had had a boycott of his own in Baton Rouge, you see. So what you do then, is stimulate thought of an organization in the South that can spread.

E. W.: At this point you may be able to help me clear up another question too. There's a question as to where the initial call for this conference came from. Reading a book like Louis, Miller, they suggest that the call came from C. K. Steele. Well, I went down and interviewed Rev. Steele and he assured me that the call didn't come from him. He responded to the call. He said some Jewish-talking, or some funny talking man called him-- he's always thought it was Bayard Rustin --and asked him if he would go along with the conference in late '56, late December, '56. And he said, yeah, it was just his kind of a thing. He had just finished his Tallahassee thing and they were at the city council. So, I'm trying to pin down, if there's any way possible.

Baker: I don't know whether you can pin it down because I think Bayard may verify the fact that there were three of us who talked into the wee hours of the morning in terms of, how do you develop a course that can enlarge upon the gains or the impact of the Montgomery bus boycott.

E. W.: Did the three represent you, Bayard and Levenson?

Baker: Yes, Bayard and Levenson; largely at Stanley's house. He was the man with some money, and Bayard and I would go over there. He's not living where he use to. Why me? Because I knew the South--comparatively, in terms of their knowledge of it. They had not had as wide knowledge as I had. Plus the fact that I had been associated with the N.A.A.C.P.. So, we talked into the wee hours and the concep of trying to develop out of the Montgomery bus boycott leadership a force. And when they approached/<sup>no doubt</sup> Martin and whoever else, their response was largely in terms of ministers. That's why you get the ministerial thing. You couldn't think in terms of a leadership around the bus boycott without also thinking of C. K. Steele's efforts and Jameson's efforts.

E. W.: McCullough of South Carolina.

Baker: Well, McCullough came a little bit after that. Then you go into the whole question, which was the pattern in the South, who were the leaders? The ministers-- which may or may not be justifiable, but that's how it started. Then, let's say that the call came from Martin.

E. W.: Yes, well that's the way it was basically reported.

Baker: Yes. Historically he gets credit for it, but

the truth let it be known, no one individual really conceive of an idea like that without somewhere, somehow some other input.

E. W.: Right. Now I can see a great deal of precipitating happenings leading to the founding of S.C.L.C.. The next question in my mind is, after this was realized there was a need for an instrument to try and spread this movement that was in Montgomery with the hope of bringing about greater social change, what was the notion of the kind of organization you would have? I know you said you had a great deal of ministers, but would it be one with just a president and a lot of lieutenants, a president and an executive secretary with a great deal of power, or was it a democratic organization in conception, or a strong dictatorial organization? What was the thinking about the nature of the organization at this time?

Baker: Well, the thinking about the nature of the organization would vary with the people who were doing the thinking. 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 and the organizing of active, let's call it, chapters or units of people. But when you reckon with the fact that a majority of the people who were called together were ministers and the decision as

to who was called together emanated no doubt both from the background out of which (let's call it) Martin came and maybe lack of understanding (I'm willing to say ) of the virtue of utilizing the mass surge that had developed there in Montgomery. Just look at Montgomery. What has happened since Montgomery?

E. W.: But there's another problem here . . . .

Baker: So I think the nature of the organization became to a large extent a ministerial thing. Out of the one hundred plus (I forgot how many) that were present at the initial meeting where the formal organizing of the organization took place, I think Whitney Young and a guy from Mississippi . . . who I worked with for a number of years, I can't think of his name . . .

E. W.: Dr. Henry?

Baker: No, no, no . . . Anthon Moore in Cleaveland, Mississippi, were among the maybe two or three non-ministers present. I was the only woman. I think maybe there was another person who came and sat in . . .

E. W.: Do you think the reason for that was because most of the ministers at that time had the power to . . .

Baker: Well, not only . . .

E. W.: . . . the power to bring people together?

Baker: No, not only the power. When you haven't

been accustomed to mass action, and they weren't . . . 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. And they had been looked upon as saviors. So what happened is, 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.

E. W.: There's one other question of particular importance to me, namely, the question involving Dr. King's first two years as president of the S.C.L.C.. At the same time, he was still president of the M.I.A.. I'm wondering if that ever caused any friction?

Baker: Friction, where?

E. W.: On the part of the people in Montgomery-- M.I.A. people who were trying to get funds and the S.C.L.C. people who were trying to get funds. It seems to me that Dr. King would have been the main instrument for both organizations for bringing funds in to operate. Was there any problem in that regard?

Baker: I think your best person for focusing on that problem, if there were one, would be such as Nixon because he was the treasurer, and he resigned, and he resigned for certain reasons. But it wasn't so much the problem of (let's call it) the dual function of King. Unfortunately,

you're looking in retrospect but at the initial stages you have to reckon with the fact that most of the people involved had never had any experience in developing mass action. They functioned largely in the church vein; that if you had a meeting and you preached to the people and 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.

E. W.: Well, Rev. Tilly was the first executive director of S.C.L.C..

Baker: That's right.

E. W.: One of the persons contending for executive director, according to the sources I've looked at, was Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. It was a <sup>constant</sup> thing of his. In each one of the few minutes I saw--I haven't been able to see all of them--he would tell them, don't forget we've got to get an executive director. You know, you always try to look for little nuances of things that will give you some kind of a hint. I got the impression there that he was hoping that they would hurry up and get somebody to take some of the pressure and heat off of his son. What's your thinking in that regard?

Baker: Well, it could well be because I don't think at the stage even of the Montgomery bus boycott Martin



Luther King, Sr. was ready for the role that Martin was catapulted into--and I use the term advisedly. I don't think Martin Luther King, Sr. nor Jr. had thought in terms of Jr.'s being in Montgomery in terms of developing a mass action program. You see, they were still ministers. He was probably thinking in terms of an executive director to take some of the pressure, as he conceived of it, off of Martin. Plus the fact that S.C.L.C. as such was formally organized over a year before it had any office or any executive at all. How do you explain that?

E. W.: How do you explain that in the middle of 1959 they reduced the executive staff to one, namely you?

Baker: I was in the office. I set up the office of S.C.L.C.. That's a story I'll tell some other time. I'll not go into detail now. I went there primarily to do their first program which was to have twenty-odd meetings in different cities simultaneously on the same night which was February twelfth.

E. W.: Citizenship Committee.

Baker: Yes, for the vote. I had anticipated being there for about six weeks. Gave myself four weeks to get the thing going and two weeks to clean it up. But they had no one. How did they get Rev. Tilly? They wanted a minister.

I knew that. They couldn't have tolerated a woman.

E. W.: Let me review something with you. I had occasion to look at the criteria for selection that was suggested by Dr. King and a couple of people to the selection committee?

Baker: When was the criteria suggested though?

E. W.: Well, in '58.

Baker: Well, that's a difference.

E. W.: It was '58, prior to the time. And Dr. King emphasized that they shouldn't just confine their consideration just to ministers. I thought it was kind of strange that he made that point but I think it was made advisedly in that he wanted to encourage bringing in people with a few more administrative skills than he believed ministers had. Anyway, they wound up getting Dr. Tilly. As soon as Dr. Tilly resigned, you stepped in and became executive director and from sources I've seen I also see where you conceived this idea of the Citizenship Crusade and you spelled out in detail some of things you felt should be done. Did you encounter any difficulty in trying to get this problem over, or was S.C.L.C. glad to get it over?

Baker: In the first place, Rev. Tilly became the executive largely because I knew Tilly. I knew they wanted a minister. Bayard was scheduled to go down even at the

time I went instead of me-- I hadn't thought of it; I hadn't participated--to set up the office. After setting up the office and after the program of February the twelfth had taken place, there came pressures from the ministers who were involved for an office and organization--a person whom you might talk to if you ever get around to it is a minister in Nashville, Smith.

E. W.: Kelly Smith?

Baker: Kelly Miller Smith, yes, a very perceptive young man at the time. When they hadn't found anybody or at least they hadn't decided on any . . . they thought in terms of Dr. Pitts, a young man now dead who became president of Birmingham College. Pitts was a teacher in Georgia and I had know him in my N.A.A.C.P. days. I went to him and talked with him; he asked me to talk with him. They had made some slight overtures to him and then he decided that he couldn't do that. They had waited, gone around; nothing was happening. What was happening was nothing except what I was doing in the office. So I suggested that they had to have a minister. I had heard that Tilly had been responsible for a voter registration drive in Baltimore which may or may not be quite accurate because that was no doubt masterminded by the president of the Baltimore branch of the N.A.A.C.P.-- Mrs. Jackson and her

daughter Juanita who was the wife of Clarence Mitchell who was with the N.A.A.C.P. Washington bureau. Anyhow, they never got around to calling anybody so Stanley and I met Tilly here in New York. Tilly said he would be interested and then he went down to see them. He became the executive director but he maintained his church connections in Baltimore which meant he was in and out. Whatever was being done in terms of continuity had to be done by whoever was there, namely me.

E. W.: These first three years of S.C.L.C. operation, '57 to '60, you were, if not an intimate participant, right there where you could see most of what was going on. My question to you is just what was the roll of the executive director of the S.C.L.C. in contrast to the roll of president of S.C.L.C., Dr. King?

Baker: Different from the roll of director of such organizations as N.A.A.C.P. , C.C.R.E. and so forth. The executive director was more or less nominally under direction . The personality that had to be played up was Dr. King. The other organizations (if you know this), the executive director was the spokesman. But they couldn't tolerate having an old lady, even a lady, and an old lady at that. It was too much for the masculine and ministerial ego to have permitted that. (laughing) There you are.

E. W.: You show great insight in this period. I've been looking over . You may call it hindsight but it seems to me that you knew what was going on. You made some recommendations to S.C.L.C. over some long range things you felt they should do. Two things you felt they should do in particular, namely: trying to create a program where they could get more women involved in the program and try to come up with some program to try and get more of the youth involved in the movement. This was before the Greensboro thing. I regard this as being of a great deal of insight. What was it you had seen which made you realize at that point in time that women and youth would eventually be playing vital rolls or they should be included at that point in time in trying to bring about whatever social change was taking place?

Baker: I guess my own experience but basically in terms of the church. All of the churches depended in terms of things taking place 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. They were the people who kept the spirit going and the young people. I knew that the young people were the hope of any movement. It was just a normal thing to me. The average Baptist minister didn't really know organization.

This I know most people would be highly critical of, as they were. What happened was, a minister would come in to a church and he would follow the pattern that had been there all along. You have a Sunday school, a ladies' auxiliary . . .

E. W.: They weren't creative at all.

Baker: All he did was to change the person who was in charge. It wasn't creative.

E. W.: Was there anything that happened in the latter '59, '60, which triggered the S.C.L.C. to start moving having used that stage '57 to '60 for organizing?

Baker: What triggered it was the formation--triggered it more than anything else to get into a broad program of action--of the existence of S.N.C.C.. The sit-ins became S.N.C.C. and S.N.C.C. was an action group, an activist group. Have you read The Making of a Black Revolutionary by James Foreman?

E. W.: Yes. Everybody gives you credit for bringing about two almost profound compromises in terms of S.N.C.C.

and S.N.C.C.'s relationship to S.C.L.C.. The first one--and I'd like for you to help --took place in that second organizational meeting. No, the first one led to the actual calling of the meeting. You believed, you expressed that in the papers I've seen, that in order



to keep the spirits going among these young people, keeping them from being discouraged and resorting to violence, we've got to get them some kind of co-ordination and direction going right here, an organization. So you talked the S.C.L.C. into underwriting this Raleigh Conference at your former school. And that's where you first got together, where you brought all these students together from North and South and some leaders. The young people, from what I could gather, were a little skeptical about Dr. King at that time but they were somewhat high on Rev. Lawson. But they went along with adding non-violence to their platform because of the influence of people like you and Rev. Lawson in addition to the charisma of Dr. King. The second one where you brought about a compromise was in Montego at the Highlander Folk School. This one I think was a little bit more significant in that it almost led to the breaking up of S.N.C.C.. You had a group there that wanted to be engaged in militant action, confrontation ahead. You had another group that was being enticed to engage in the poor force and voter registration. So you suggested that they go both ways. And the young people bought that.

Baker: What they really were fighting over was a question of dominance. Those who came out of the non-

violent resistance struggle, like Diane Nash and some who came out of Nashville, were more deeply indoctrinated in the real philosophy and practice of non-violence than many others. Those who were advocating voter registration had been influenced to a large extent by their meetings with such personalities as Bobby Kennedy. Bobby Kennedy had tried to almost buy them in terms of saying concentrate on getting black people registered. Of course he had in mind the next election which would have brought his brother back in. So at the Highlander meeting there were those who contended very heavily for their points of view to the point that they looked like they were splitting. I had been accused by a couple of the grown-ups there of not letting them more or less split because those who were very dedicated to the concept of non-violence did not see that voter-registration would precipitate a conflict, a confrontation with violence, had to, because of the kinds of areas to which they were going. The young people decided--after months and months, weeks and weeks, all night and so forth--recognized that going to southwest Georgia, going down into deep Alabama and Mississippi meant you were going to be faced with violence. So if they compromised, it was largely in terms of the fact that the strength of the movement lay in being together not in division.

That was the basis. Mine was not a choice of non-violence versus the other. Mine was in terms of the knowledge of history that I at least had and the recognition that where their strength would ultimately lie would be in involving people in mass, but together, not one fighting for non-violence.

E. W.: During that time what was N.A.A.C.P. and C.C.R.E.'s reaction to the S.C.L.C.?

Baker: Outwardly it was friendly, let's put it that way. Maybe subterraneously there were concerns about the extent to which S.C.L.C. might pre-empt their roll in certain places, but you didn't have any outward conflict.

E. W.: The organization pulled an awful lot of people from the N.A.A.C.P..

Baker: No, I don't think so.

E. W.: That was because you didn't accept individual membership.

Baker: That was one of the basics.

E. W.: That was one of the basic rules of S.C.L.C. in all of the time--placate organizations like N.A.A.C.P..

Baker: That was a basic projection from the beginning when those of us who thought in terms of organizing an S.C.L.C. or some force in the South--was to avoid individual memberships which would not place you in competition

with the N.A.A.C.P..

E. W.: Miss Baker, your idea of Crusade for Citizenship did create somewhat of a furor. I'm mindful of the fact that you tried to get an advisory committee together for this thing and you sent names out to all of the big people just so they would lend their name to it; you weren't asking them to really give money but just to lend their name to it. You sent to the Rappaports; you even sent to Roy Wilkins and Mr. Wilkins subsequently declined but he recommended somebody from his group. Mr.            said explicitly that he didn't want to be involved with this citizenship project because he was already on the board of the N.A.A.C.P. and they were engaged in similar action and he didn't want the N.A.A.C.P. to feel that he was encouraging another organization that was doing basically the same thing that they were doing. And beyond that there were reports in the New York Amsterdam News and one or two other papers that Wilkins was a little peeved at this kind of thing. They didn't state specifically what he said but they got the implication that he was peeved. Obviously Dr. King felt the same way because on a memo that he wrote to the executive board that he was going to try once more to try and get co-operation between his organization and the N.A.A.C.P.. Can you shed any light on that situation for

me or did you detect any kind of antagonism or friction or tension between the two groups at that time?

Baker: I think what you're faced with is a normal situation in the period, in the context of the period. Here was an organization, the N.A.A.C.P., which in 1950 was at least forty-one years old. I think it came into being in 1909. They had carried on certain kinds of programs. And here was an individual who had not had any real connection, hadn't grown up in the struggle. Martin had not, historically, been any part of the struggle. He was the son of a well-to-do minister and he was in search of a higher status in terms of education. I don't think there's any record of his being involved in any movement of any kind prior to that. So what do you have? Somebody could say, there's an upstart. And I guess these are the human factors. I'm sure there were strains. For instance, Roy would have to be sort of convinced, let's say to put it politely, to participate in such as the March on Washington, the famous march, and prior to that there were the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage and there were a couple of marches involving students in terms of the question of school segregation. The mass action type thing like that, the N.A.A.C.P. at that stage had not been involved with. Naturally there was this sense of priority of right (let's call it). Who was the bridge between that? That was Philip Randolph.

You look at the record. Never did they have a conference in terms of working out without Phil Randolph. Phil had the respect of both. Phil had articulated the concept of mass action and had attempted the thing that got called off.

E. W.: The March on Washington.

Baker: The March on Washington in the '40's. And Mrs. Roosevelt and Mayor LaGuardia--you know our good angels of the liberal angels--talked him out of it. But N.A.A.C.P. could not afford, Roy could not afford to absolutely turn thumbs down over the situation because they could have been left out in the cold, number one. Number two--their deep respect for Phil Randolph.

E. W.: He was certainly a monument in that whole scenario . . .

Baker: Certainly he was, yes.

E. W.: . . . because when you look at it he initiated the idea to go and talk to the president and he wanted to have a call-up meeting but he wanted a forum. Roy turned thumbs down on that idea; they didn't go along with him on that. Martin Luther was wholeheartedly in favor of it--having other leaders aside from themselves coming in to talk with the president. The Urban League and N.A.A.C.P. didn't think that would be the wisest



thing at that time.

Baker: You see, they couldn't trust C.O.R.E. (both laughing) in their minds. What you have there is the division between those who have some respect for mass action and pressure and those who believe that your best results came from negotiations from the knowledgeable people. The negotiations from the knowledgeable and the legal action were the N.A.A.C.P. and the Urban League.

E. W.: There are four other names that were frequent in this whole episode and I'd like to mention them to you and get you to give whatever response you can to them. I'll mention them and give you my impression of what they were doing. You had Stanley Levenson from the time of his involvement in writing the books Strive Toward Freedom clean on up until

Beyond the Year of '62. The man was King's constant advisor; he just revered the man. He just regarded King as being some super special and he didn't charge him a penny for all of the legal work he did. Not a penny. He told him that he did not want him to pay him anything. He was doing this because he wanted to participate in the movement and this was one way that he could try and look out for him. And every important decision that I think he made, he either consulted with Levenson or he got some

advice from Levenson.

Baker: Where did you find this?

E. W.: In the papers in Boston, Boston University.

Baker: King's papers?

E. W.: King's papers.

Baker: I see.

E. W.: He put all of them down there. King's papers. That man wrote him on everything--on his book, on his taxes, on his dealing with Fred Gray down in Alabama when Gray wanted to rip him off for so much money for representing him, on meeting out of Chicago. The whole emphasis of this man was giving King advice and King seemed to have regarded his advice highly. What was your impression of Stanley Levenson, number one?

Another individual was Bayard Rustin. Rustin gave him a great deal of advice and there's something that's puzzling me in David Louis' book. You mentioned about the middle of 1959 (interruption) King backed out at the last minute on his participation in the Southern Conference on Education, in part because he feared he might be called a communist being sympathetic to communism. But at the same time, he was getting ready to make a recommendation to the board that they hire Bayard Rustin as his special assistant. There was already rumors out that

Ruskin might be associated with or might have socialist or communist leanings. So I can't reconcile how on one hand he would just completely disassociate himself with

S.C.E., and on the other hand he was going to wholeheartedly endorse Ruskin when he pointed out in his recommendation that he was mindful of the fact that this might be misinterpreted--people might attribute our going in different direction. But he felt Ruskin was so valuable to him that he had to take that chance.

And one other person that I want you to speak to is Smiley, Glen Smiley. Now Mr. William Noah, who worked with F.C.R. along with Smiley, wrote King around the middle of 1959. This was when all of this was coming to a head. He suggested to him that there was some friction between

Smiley and Ruskin and that both of them were trying to get his attention. And King replied to him by saying, yeah, he had been observing it for a number of months but he was at a loss to know exactly what to do about it. But there's no question about Smiley's commitment to non-violent principles and the fact that he was willing to give his all to S.C.L.C. and the cause of non-violence.

These individuals, in addition to yourself, keep coming up.

Baker: He was giving all not to the S.C.L.C. but that

was for the Montgomery boycott. Smiley.

E. W.: Was he permanent in S.C.L.C.?

Baker: Not that I know of.

E. W.: Okay, very good.

Baker: No. So what is your major question?

E. W.: My major question is: How did you perceive, being close to the whole movement, the roll of these gentlemen? Was it similar to the one I portrayed or do you see it differently?

Baker: No . . . . Stanley, number one, comes out of the American-Jewish Congress. He had some prior knowledge of the value of social action because the Congress was not just an organization of top-heavy individuals alone. The Jewish people did a lot of demonstrating. And he was party to the initial discussions thinking, how do you keep alive what had come out of what has been demonstrated in the Montgomery bus boycott. You're raising the question of his dedication. He didn't have to charge because he had income; he had business. He was knowledgeable about fundraising. Whatever his personal motivations for doing it, you would have to find out from him. The fact that he was involved before in social action . . . . You see, I met Stanley when I was president of the local

branch of the N.A.A.C.P.. He called upon me for trying to get some action out of the N.A.A.C.P. against the McCarrin-<sup>a</sup>

Immigration Act. Many times there are other groups, especially in the New York area, that are much farther advanced, further advanced in terms of dealing with social issues that affect the whole population than the N.A.A.C.P. which was concentrating primarily on race. So Stanley and I met. When the boycott came about he knew that Ruskin came out of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, way back, and at that time was with the and League. He 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. So here you are. We needed somebody who had the entree to non-violence. And there was another question, how do you pay for these things? That explains, I hope.

E. W.: It rather does. It goes a long way in explaining it because Levenson was a contact in the circles around New York and other places on the east coast whereby he could get money. And money was a vital ingredient for this whole thing. He also knew people who were specialists in certain areas, especially when it came to the income tax thing. He could recommend certain people.

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Baker: Yes, he was a real estate man, lawyer.

E. W.: Yes. Is he still in New York?

Baker: As far as I know. I haven't seem him; yes he's still in New York. Stanley's still here. I don't know exactly where he's living. It just happened that when I thought I had a heart condition I happened to be recommended to the same doctor as his.

SIDE II TAPE II

inaudible



[This is an interview with Miss Ella Baker conducted by Eugene Walker on September 4, 1974. The place is Durham, North Carolina.]

Eugene Walker: We'll be taking about some of Miss Baker's experiences and perceptions of the S.C.L.C.. Miss Baker, I'd like to begin the questions this morning by asking you if you could discern to me the role you played in setting up the office of S.C.L.C. in Atlanta, Georgia.

Ella Baker: Well, the office of the S.C.L.C. was set up I think at the end of 1958, the beginning of 1959. I was asked to come down in order to facilitate a program that they anticipated having on the twelfth of February, which was to have twelve, at least several--they wanted at least twenty different southern cities to have meetings simultaneously on the twelfth of February. And in order to do that, there had to be somebody to pull together the program and to make contact with these cities and the like. So, when I came in, there was no office. For the first couple of days, whatever functioning there was I had to function out of a telephone booth and my pocketbook--keep my notes in the pocketbook. Through the help largely of the Reverend Williams, Samuel Williams who was professor of philosophy at Morehouse at the time, we did get an office set up. Without him I don't know how I would have

found an office that quickly.

E.W.: The S.C.L.C. didn't move its headquarters to Atlanta until late(?).

Baker: No, a year after.

E.W.: But in the meantime you operated out of wherever you could find some space in Atlanta to try and coordinate this simultaneous meeting you had planned for these cities in the South.

Baker: Well, yes, you see as I had said when I came there there was no space. Nobody had made any provisions for space, hadn't even thought about it--apparently had not. I had assumed that certainly we might have been able to function with some degree of sustained effort out of the church office of Ebenezer Baptist Church since the Rev. Dr. King, Sr. was the father of the Re. Dr. King, Jr., but this was not provided for in the full sense. Well, I had to accomodate myself to whatever time the manager of that office felt that the mimeograph machine and other facilities could be available usually after office hours. And so, as I indicated, Re. Samuel Williams, we talked and we pointed out of course that it was obvious you couldn't function effectively that way. So he succeeded in getting space in the original office--I've forgotten the name, the address now of S.C.L.C. on Auburn Avenue.

E.W.: Was Rev. Williams acting in the capacity of con-

cerned official of S.C.L.C. in trying to help you find space or was he acting just as concerned citizen in trying to get you as decent a place as you could to co-ordinate your program?

Baker: Well, he was part of the S.C.L.C. and I think we'd have to credit him with both factors. He was an official and he was knowledgeable enough to be, to realize that you couldn't function without some space.

E.W.: Very good. Then, S.C.L.C. as an organization, didn't seem to regard this as a serious problem--the fact that you didn't have office space in Atlanta? Otherwise they would have made some concessions, wouldn't they?

Baker: Well, I would think so. You see, S.C.L.C. had not, I suppose, grown to the point of understanding themselves or understanding organization sufficiently to be aware of the loss of momentum that could come from just coming in and trying to create out of air, you see.

E.W.: Do you have any knowledge at all about who may have recommended you for that position?

Baker: Well, I think I know who recommended me--I don't think it was a recommendation. At that point, I was drafted. I was drafted without my own consent.

E. W.: Explain that to me please.

Baker: I think I had indicated to you some time earlier that there had been a series of conversations and

dialogues with and between myself and Stanley Levenson and Bayard Rustin. That was even prior to the, let's call it, the formation of the S.C.L.C.. And at the initial meeting at which the S.C.L.C. was organized, in '57 I believe it is, of course I was down in Atlanta with Bayard and preparing materials for that meeting.

E. W.: You might be interested to know that I have a number of these work papers that were prepared. I don't know who prepared them but I do know that work papers were prepared at the first meeting in January and the one in February in New Orleans.

Baker: Well, the work papers in the first meeting in January were prepared, the content, largely by Bayard and the format I did because I like to set things out in a form that you can see easily, you see. So I was sent there by this method. The three of us were to meet and Bayard and Stanley had gone out to the airport to talk with Martin as he passed through New York going where, I don't know. They came back and told me that I had been drafted to go to Atlanta to set up the program for the Crusade for Citizenship for these twenty-odd meetings. Prior to that it had been assumed that Bayard would go down, but he was not available, let's say. I was very provoked because I had never in my life.

E. W.: . . . given your consent not as a contributor.

Baker: No, I had not planned to go. To be drafted in the sense of having it be said that I would go when I hadn't been consulted . . . my ego isn't very pronounced. But I suppose in that aspect of it, my ego is easily touched; not to ask me what to do but to designate me to do something without even consulting me, but I went.

E. W.: Well, let me ask you this. This is the first major civil rights undertaking in the history of this country whereby a woman has been granted a seemingly, ostensibly significant policy-making kind of position. Now, were you taken by that? Was that gratifying to you?

Baker: (laughing) Oh no, no, no, no. Because I knew I didn't have any significant role in the minds of those who constituted the organization. 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 and somebody else, but incidental since there was no designation of authority. I wasn't a person of authority.

E. W.: So, when you first moved into S.C.L.C., your actual work designation was never really specified. You were just called here to assist them in a project that they

didn't know too much about--namely, the co-ordination of voters project throughout the South, a spontaneous one at that? Is that correct?

Baker: Yes. Getting together the meetings and preparing material for it. In fact, they spelled out nothing because there was nobody to spell out anything.

E. W.: They were searching for projects?

Baker: Well, they had in mind . . . the idea was conceived of as having dramatic, let's call it far-reaching, impact. Of having twenty meetings, or twenty-two meetings, simultaneously on February the twelfth--which I think is the official date of Douglas<sup>s</sup>' birthday, Frederick Douglas<sup>s</sup>' birthday.

E. W.: And some white president, what's his name--Lincoln.

Baker: Lincoln, no. Yes, his is near that period. I think there's a difference of a day in the dates of the two births. But as I remember it, in my thinking, my obeisance was paid to the fact that it was near Mr. Douglas' birthday.

E. W. I have read where others gave credit to the fact that it was the white president's.

Baker: (laughing) Well, let it be. And my coming, as I said, was to see that this be done. Now how it was to



be done, who was to do this, that or the other--there was nothing spelled out. I guess I must believe that both Stanley and Bayard knew that I knew something about organization--I had functioned both as a field person and as a national office staff member of the N.A.A.C.P.. I had had other kinds of, call it, professional positions. So, they figured that with the input that would come down, you see, from them and others we'd have something going.

E. W.: Right, right, I can understand that.

Baker: So, certainly by no stretch of the imagination can it be considered a conscious effort on the part of the officialdom of S.C.L.C. to provide input from a female, as such. If anything, it would be to the contrary.

E. W.: Okay. Now, how long was it that you were working on your project before they hired an executive secretary . . .

Baker: . . . an executive director.

E. W.: An executive director, yes.

Baker: You see, this project which I had given in my thinking, let's call it two months, I had said it would take me a certain number of weeks to set it up. I think I went there the earlier part of January, and this was to come off on February the twelfth. I planned to stay six weeks--the month to do it and two weeks to clean it up.

But it didn't work out that way. Then they began talking about having an executive director and naturally they wanted a minister.

E. W.: Who brought up this idea about an executive director, do you recall?

Baker: Oh, I don't know that I can recall anybody in particular. I think it came out of what might be considered what was over ther an executive group, the board, the executive committee. I don't think they had even constituted too clearly, prior to the February twelfth meeting, the delineations of different groupings within it. They had an executive committee, and then they began to see. . . . There were pressures. There were pressures for a format and a mechanism to implement whatever they had been talking about doing, providing an organization.

E. W.: Who was the

Baker: I think the ministers, many of the ministers, who had been initially a part of the formation of S.C.L.C.. You see, the meetings prior to this--you referred to the initial meeting in January and then there was a meeting in New Orleans . . .

E. W.: . . . in February . . .

Baker: . . . which I gather was largely a matter of let's call it a board meeting and big mass meeting--but the con-

tinuance of a program and even the spelling out of a well-defined program and devising the machinery for seeing it through, had not taken place. And there were some people who, I'm sure, would be very much disturbed by this. And some had had certain kinds of experiences. In my way of thinking, I would immediately think of a person like . . .

E. W.: Reverence Bill Smith of Nashville?

Baker: Smith of Nashville. I would also think of --what's the man that was, not in New Orleans, but . . .

E. W.: Simpkins?

Baker: Simpkins, yes.

E. W.: Jameson?

Baker: I like Jameson especially. See, they would be pressing for something concrete. Some others no doubt. I imagine Reed. I'm not sure whether Reed was in that early; Reed of Norfolk. I don't think he was.

E. W.: What about

Baker: Well, I imagine he would be concerned but he didn't want to maybe violate his relationships with Martin. There was a certain defferential consideration that they had, maybe sometimes too defferential in terms of trying to force something through.

E. W.: I want to ask you about that later on because

I do think it is crucial that I try and get these kinds of relationships they had. That will be one of the real points. Now I want to move on to the election of the executive director who was Dr. Rev. John Tilly out of Baltimore . But he was eventually

chosen as the executive director. Can you explain to me that process? Who selected him? Who recommended him?

Baker: Well, I'll answer the last question first. I recommended him, largely because of two things. One, they had talked in terms of "finding" an executive director. I knew, number one, that they were biased towards a minister. I felt that it ought to also be somebody who had certain kinds of experience. And prior to reaching Dr. Tilly, I had interviewed (or at least talked with) a person in Atlanta who they had . . . whose name had come up occasionally was also a minister . . .

E. W.: Dr. Pitts?

Baker: Yes, Dr. Pitts. And I knew Dr. Pitts from my early N.A.A.C.P. days. There had been overtures made to him. I don't know; I think he called me. At least we talked to each other and he suggested I come by and talk with him. I think he wanted to ask some questions. I know he wanted to.

E. W.: Did you encourage him to take the position?

Baker: No, I didn't. I neither encouraged nor discouraged because I felt he had a sufficient amount of knowledge and background and experience to be able to evaluate whether he should or should not. He did not have a great enthusiasm for making that shift. And I think he had reasons for it because I don't think he would have felt quite as free. He didn't feel that there was an atmosphere (now I shouldn't put this in) but there would be an atmosphere of freedom of operation. He didn't feel that there was a clarity of organizational procedure that would suit him at that point.

E. W.: That seems to be a pretty accurate observation at that time.

Baker: Yes. So then the next move--I guess there may have been others they may have approached, I don't recall--but I suggested Tilly because I knew Dr. John Tilly. He was a theological senior student at school at Shaw when I was a student there. I knew him as a person and I had read of the credentials that were attributed to him in terms of having conducted a very successful voter registration drive in Baltimore. So, I suggested him and it took a little while before anyone saw him. In fact, nobody saw him until I further suggested to Stanley that we talk to him. And so Stanley underwrote the . . .

E. W.: Let me get this now. You first suggested to some members of S.C.L.C.?

Baker: Yes, I forget the name.

E. W.: And there was slow response.

Baker: Yes.

E. W.: And, subsequent to that, you talked to Stanley?

Baker: Yes. It may have been almost simultaneous to let Stanley know about that thing.

E. W.: Yes.

Baker: But there's still the question of where the initial move officially should come, from which it should come. And so, this information let's say is turned over to Dr. King.

E. W.: Okay.

Baker: And no motion.

E. W.: Okay.

Baker: And we further suggested, let's have a conference with Mr. Tilly to feel him out. So he came to New York and we met at an ice cream parlor (laughing) thereon 125th. Street and St. Nicholas Avenue. I think it used to be called , I don't know what it's called now. But we met there and of course there was no problem with Tilly and me because we knew each other from way back. So he seemed to be interested. Then that was followed up.



Eventually it was followed up. He was invited to come to Atlanta, I think, to meet with an executive committee. Eventually he was designated as the executive director. That's how it took place.

E. W.: Okay. And the initiative came from this meeting that you and Mr. Levenson had with him in New York.

Baker: Yes. In New York.

E. W.: Do you know how long Rev. Tilly served as executive secretary?

Baker: I can't recall the exact date, but it seems to me it was less than a year. He was not full-time. He had made provisions to continue his pastorate of a given church in Baltimore. So he would commute, at times for several weeks. Seems to me that the initial meeting he attended was the one we had in Mississippi.

E. W.: Clarksdale.

Baker: Clarksdale, Mississippi.

E. W.: That was labelled as the greatest meeting yet.

Baker: I think I did that labelling, I'm afraid.

(laughing)

E. W.: Now the question is was that propaganda or was that . . . ?

Baker: No. I don't know how it was labelled. Where did you get the label?

E. W. I found it in some of my notes. Now, we were talking about Rev. Tilly, his being appointed executive director. You were trying to recall the first meeting he attended. Was this at that Clarksdale meeting?

Baker: Yes. It was there. It was at Clarksdale.

E. W.: What kind of a speaker was Rev. Tilly? Was he as dynamic a speaker as, say, a person like Rev. King or Walker? What kind of a delivery did he have?

Baker: He had very good delivery. It was not as forcefull in terms of what might be called dramatics as Martin's voice. Wasn't as resonant but he had a clear voice and good thinking. He had very good thoughts. Of course, he had been speaking a long time.

E. W.: Can you recall any frustrations he might have experienced which caused him not to stay on at S.C.L.C. for more than a year? Do you have any idea as to the reasons why he left S.C.L.C.--that's the point I'm trying to make.

Baker: I don't think he spelled out --certainly to me and I'm not even sure he speeled out to the board--any specific, let's call it, gripes about S.C.L.C. per se. But I think the rationale that was provided was that he found it necessary to give more time to his church work. He didn't find it quite viable to continue to have to commute to

Atlanta and be both from home and from church over periods of time,

E. W.: During the time of Rev. Tilly's tenure he was given the title of executive director. After Rev. Tilly departed, you became acting executive director. Number one, how did you feel about his leaving and what did you think of the position of acting executive director?

Baker: What did I think about? How did I feel?

E. W.: How did you feel about it?

Baker: I had no ambition to be (let's call it) executive director. 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. The other, I guess, a combination of female and non-minister, plus the kind of personality differences that existed between me and the Rev. Dr. King. I was not a person to be enamoured of anyone. 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 S.C.L.C.. 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 it was the voicing of that opinion it was obvious that it was not

a very comforting sort of presence that I presented.

E. W.: Was any of these sensitivities regarding a female being in a power position in the organization ever explicitly expressed or was it just a feeling, a presumption that you had in this regard.

Baker: Well, when you say explicitly expressed I think the nearest to it would be the fact that: number one, when brought down, although I had full responsibilities for doing whatever was being done I was never offered a position, an official position, by way of title. And when there was the bringing in of an executive director, I think there was a willingness on the part of the officialdom to permit me to stay on without even title. So I think it may have been some of my friends who raised the question with me and so I maybe raised the question to at least I should keep some record as to where I'd been. There were a number of occasions on which I differed very sharply when a discussion came up and I never was one to just agree on the basis of the position of the other fellow. When I say position, the international and national prominence of the individual had nothing to do, in my opinion, with the opinion that was expressed with the opinion that I did not concur. The prominence of the individual was not a

bar to my saying it didn't concur.

E. W.: And you are almost certain that your name never figured prominently in the search for an executive director?

Baker: Well, I know that. After the first meetings and I think it was maybe after the Clarksdale meeting--I'm not too sure, I think it was Clarksdale--and there were some subsequent meetings, I had a special meeting with ministers in Mississippi and nobody was there but me, nobody from the organization. I think I did bring one of the persons from Nashville . . . I can't recall who came. There was a Methodist bishop--I'm not sure that he was a bishop, but I believe he was (I ought to check the record)--who voiced openly, he was so enthusiastic you know of my "demonstration of capacity to get something out of nothing". Because I had to create materials. I not only created but had to break it down so they could use it. Occasionally I had opportunities to raise questions in council. So some people he recommended openly, immediately, that I become the executive, you see.

E. W.: How was that handled?

Baker: How was it dealt with?

E. W.: That's right.

Baker: (laughing) I don't recall any verbalization

at the time. They probably were to the effect that: well, at this stage, you know, it's not ready or something to that effect. But nobody ever took it seriously, I mean the officialdom didn't take it seriously. In fact, if anything it was an irritant. As far as I was concerned, I knew it couldn't be. So I had no aspirations and I had no illusions as to the possibilities of it being. You see, I was not a young person--that's number one. I was old enough to be the mother of the leadership of the organization. And I was dealing with ministers whose only sense of relationship to women in organization was that of the church. And the roll 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.

E. W.: This is the dilemma that I see in this whole episode and I'd like to hear your reaction to what I'm about to suggest. As I can see it, they had a fantastic respect on the one hand for your ability but an equal amount of fear for your potential of independence on the other hand because they never did make you an official, a bonafide



type of official of the organization. Yet, they gave you bonafide top responsibilities--namely, the establishment of this program that they wanted to have such profound impact on the country at the time. This is the kind of ambivalence that is difficult to digest. It's hard to understand that.

~~Q~~ E. W.: Well, I don't think it's too difficult to digest if you look at it from the perspective that here was a young leadership that came out of a background that had little or no prior experience of working with an effectively trained black (certainly it didn't have to be black or white) an effectively trained and experienced organizational promoter who had had the kind of experience that I had had. And who was not loathe to raise questions. I did not just subscribe to a theory just because it came out of the mouth of the leader. So, it was too difficult; it was much too difficult. I was too old . . .

E. W.: . . . to be intimidated by the presence of . . .

Baker: Well, not only that. From their perspective I was too old to create any interest on a man-female, man-woman, basis. I wasn't a fashionplate; I make no bones about not being a fashionplate. (interruption)

E. W.: We were talking about their respect for their abilities on the one hand and a fear of your independence

on another. This is the way I perceive it. In addition to that, maybe they didn't regard you as you suggested as a kind of a female animal that fit into their scheme of things.

Baker: Yes.

E. W.: You didn't have that kind of relationship with them.

Baker: No, and I wasn't a showplate. The average attitude toward the southern Baptist ministers at that stage, and maybe still, was as far as their own women were concerned were that they were nice to talk to about such things as how well they cooked, how beautiful they looked, and how well they carried out a program that the minister had delegated them to carry out but not a person with independence and creative ideas of his own, but on whom they had to rely. They could not tolerate, and I can understand that they couldn't, and especially from a person like me because 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. I might be quiet but if there was discussion and I was suppose to be able to participate, I participated at the level of my thinking.

E. W.: Very good. This brings us to another aspect

of S.C.L.C. and that is the decision-making aspect. You have mentioned the fact that you did participate in the discussions. Can you recall how decisions were finally made in these kinds of gatherings, discussion groups?

Baker: Well, I think it would vary from time to time.

E. W.: Can you recall any outstanding personalities here--the ones who seemed to dominate the discussions or the ones who seemed to persuade others to their point of view. This is what I'm talking about--the whole decision-making process and the identification of those individuals who seemed to have had the greatest influence.

Baker: I'm not sure that I can specify with any degree of accuracy other than to indicate that persons who had been, let's say, number one, closely related to the Montgomery movement--had a certain, brought with them certain credentials as a result of that. A person like

who had on his own initiated a program in Birmingham at the point at which the N.A.A.C.P. activities were banned and persons who had some "standing" in their own communities. Like the reverend--I've forgotten his name--from New Orleans.

E. W.: Jameson?

Baker: No, Jameson was Baton Rouge. The one who had a very big church in New Orleans. You see, all of

these factors that usually influence one minister in terms of his relationship to another minister especially in the Baptist hierarchy--such things as the fact that he was big in Baptist circles, had a big congregation, and that sort of thing--these operated also in terms of how well people were listened to. But in the final analysis there was a deferential consideration on the part of the men themselves both in terms of their not being present, let's call it, at the center of the locale where the organization supposedly had its office and a deferential consideration towards Martin because of his roll internationally and nationally--the image that had been created. So what you had was a open and blank discussion, I think, and an effort to at least voice their opinions. But in the final analysis, the decision for implementing this was left to a large extent to the president. So I don't know whether this touches upon the point you . . .

E. W.: Certainly. It touches upon the point but I can understand the difficulty involved in specifying certain individuals. The categories you mentioned are certainly useful--mainly that based on the Baptist hierarchy, the minister with the largest congregation, and with standing in his community certainly had a definite influence on the outcome of certain things. But in the final analysis it was left up to Martin as to what would be done. Let me

ask you this, can you recall any individuals who refused, other than yourself, who refused to defer in most instances to the wishes of Martin? Were there any coalitions formed within the body politics, like a decision-making body of the S.C.L.C.?

Baker: No, I think at that stage, let's see, this was the prevailing atmosphere: one of, we have something great; we have a great person and we must try to make use of this and not be divisive. I think this was a consideration on the part of the people who were there. Plus the fact, the lack of prior experience on the part of many ministers with dealing with organizations of this type. This was different from a church organization and it was out in "competition" with other national organizations and it was a movement. So neither their time nor general inclination motivated them to give undivided attention to this organization. And they were willing to--as is not uncommon in organization--leave it up to somebody else. Now this however, was one of the reasons that a so-called executive committee was formed. And that committee was supposedly the committee in which great decisions were made and where the differences would be fought out.

E. W.: Do you remember who had the power to appoint the executive committee? Was it chosen in the general assem-

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ex-official roll of Mr. Levenson perceived by the members of the organization? This is something I mentioned to you earlier and I'd like to get it on tape. Did they really know about him?

Baker: I don't think that there was wide knowledge of Mr. Levenson per se as an "official" or unofficial constant advisor and consultant to Dr. King. I think it was more of a personal relationship, it might have been regarded by others. They didn't know about it.

E. W.: So rather than use the term official--like I've been doing--or constant advisor, you think the best designation to refer to Mr. Levenson and his contribution would be a constant friend of Martin Luther King's?

E. W.: I think you would certainly have to make the combination of friend and advisor because he was not designated as an official advisor by the organization. He was not openly known. I won't suggest that it was a covert action, but it was not considered necessary for all the constituency even of the executive committee to know of all the individuals with whom the president "consulted." And since out of the Montgomery situation there had developed a national and international bases for Dr. King's relationships, it was presumed and accepted that if he found it advised, advantageous or necessary to consult with or to

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Baker: . . . and the advisory relationship. If anyone wished to be venal you could almost say this could be interpreted as having some implications beyond that.

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E. W.: That's what I was trying to think about, just what all of this meant. Just what effect did this have on the direction of the organization? You know, the different kind of advice that Dr. King was getting and different kind of advice that he shunned. There were certain people that I don't believe he would listen to too much and he might have been one of those people. I'm just trying to get the direction. I think you can tell a lot about an organization if you can find out where the greatest input is coming from.

Baker: Well, I think one of the yardsticks that might be used is the fact that I don't think that persons without --I'll put it his way, I'll put it positive: persons who were in a position to provide both financial aid and public relations assistance to the furtherance of the organization or the furtherance of the career of the president would be certainly high on the list of acceptable advisors. Stanley was in position; I think he ran the money-making campaigns in New York. He comes out of the Jewish tradition. He was part of the American Jewish Congress, I believe; as you know, that's a highly organized money-raising organization. They have a format. He was able to provide that

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E. W.: We were talking about the character of it. You're describing the spontaneity of it and the exceptional capacity that the people had to sacrifice.

Baker: Yes, for what they considered to be a point of liberation. This was supposedly designed to escalate that throughout the South. If you recall the first organization meeting in Atlanta . . . was tied up with

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E. W.: And I'm trying to really examine it. I thought I'd clear my mind, as you can see, but these are the kinds of things that I am trying to look at.

Baker: No, I don't think there was an ideology that certainly was comparable to the Marxist-Leninist concept of a changed society. The nearest to an ideology would be, let's call it, the Christian philosophy and that tied in with the philosophy of Ghandian non-violence, non-violent mass action. That was the nearest to it. But this is itself becomes an elusive sort of a thing when, let's call it, the impact of the need to grow enters in and maybe the influence from individual leadership as to what shall we do next. And the "what shall we do next" frequently comes from sources other than the organization--like the identification with the anti-war movement. This did not develop out of the organization. It's out of discussion within the organization. It no doubt came as a suggestion to the president and the invitation to the president to come and speak at anti-war rallies. And I know something about somebody saying, "There is a time now for Martin to speak on anti-war. Do you think that this is the time for it?" And somebody would say, "Yes, it is." Somebody would talk to him; somebody that he felt duty-bound, let's call it, to listen to.

E. W.: Okay. So the character then--and I'm just trying to theorize here and just give off kinds of responses and I want your reaction to them. The character here then, as I said, would be more and more of an action kind of a movement than one which would lend itself to a long-term plan or an ideology based on bringing about permanent social changes in the system, as such. And this action oriented movement lent itself more spontaneity than it did to the development of a structure which would require a kind of rigid format down through the years. So, this I think more than anything else would reflect the ultimate character that was inherent in what S.C.L.C. was doing. Or would you differ with that?

Baker: No, I wouldn't differ. I think you're quite correct there because the personnell who provided the leadership for S.C.L.C. had never come to grips with a philosophical concept other than the general concept of non-violent mass action. I don't think there was much--I'll be gracious and say--either time or other bases for in-depth thinking about how far non-violent mass action can go and to what extent can you really involve people. You see, you may talk about it but when you respond--as the organization did--to situations--their major efforts were in response to situations--and when you exhaust yourself in situations like

in Florida or situations in Albany . . .

E. W.: Like St. Aug?

Baker: St. Aug. and Albany--what do you have? And you see all of this is being done within the time period of two or three years. Let's call it the overthrow of the Czar. It was not a two year thing. And maybe the general format, not only the format but the pattern of communication and training and action, the development of an anti-czarist movement was much more stimulated, I suppose, by the rather harsh physical conditions. And here you have black people living in "conditions" that were great affluence, the president becoming an international figure. These harsh conditions were not . . .

E. W.: . . . were never really touched.

Baker: Never really, yes.

## SIDE I TAPE III

E. W.: Miss Baker, we'd like to move away from S.C.L.C. per se right now and look at the roll<sup>e</sup> that you played in bringing about a compromise between certain factions of S.N.C.C., namely the non-violence group and the voters registration group. I would like to ask you some specific questions about how you were able to bring this compromise about. The first question I would like to ask you is: Can you recall some of the specific individuals you talked to in either one of the factions, and the nature of your conversations with them? I'm trying to get specific information as to how this compromise came about.

Baker: To sight who was for non-violence and who were for voter registration, proponents of these two points, might have some bearing. The people who had come out of Nashville were more strongly oriented to the philosophy of non-violence than any other because of Lawson.

E. W.: Rev. Lawson.

Baker: Rev. Lawson. He had gone to India as a young missionary, I believe, during the days of Ghandi and he believed in it. So you had Diane Nash, Marion Barry--who is now running for mayor, I believe, of Washington.

E. W.: Marion Barry?

Baker: I think he's one of the candidates for mayor--and John Lewis and maybe a couple of other people from Nashville. On the other hand you had persons who had had some conferences with Robert Kennedy which would include Charlie Jones of Charlotte and Chuck . . .

E. W.: Excuse me, was Charlie Jones a white or black?

Baker: No, he was black.

E. W.: Did you ever hear of a Charlie Jones in Chapel Hill?

Baker: In Chapel Hill? I know him; a minister?

E. W.: Right.

Baker: Yes, I know him. No, no relation at least not

on the surface. And Chuch McDue and I believe Timothy Jenkins was at that meeting--I'm not too sure. They were the people who had had the conference and I think that they were influenced to some extent. So what were the issues?

The issue was whether to maintain it , have it just as a non-violent movement. The voter registration group wanted a voter registration program. So the basic difference was whether you could have a mass non-violent movement in voter registration. Whether or not you would have the confrontation that the non-violent advocates were accustomed to and were looking for. I certainly felt that number one, historically we had had much too much of dividing forces on the basis of . . . concepts that did not necessarily serve purposes in the long run. I also perhaps felt and maybe realized beyond the realization of the young, that you could not possibly conduct a voter registration program in certain areas without confrontation. That I think was persuasive argument. At that stage the black belt counters of Georgia were in the control of the state of Georgia, as far as that proportion . . .

E. W.:

Baker: No, I was thinking of southwest Georgia and other areas around Albany. In terms of the Georgia Assembly, they were much stronger than the population would



warrant.

E. W.: The county unit system?

Baker: Yes, the county unit system. That's what I was trying to think of. The county unit system gave them much more strength than their population warranted. So that kind of information was information that young people may not have had--that 's number one. Number two: the persuasive argument, I think, was that once you mounted a voter registration campaign involving mass registration you would have the resistance that you were looking for and you could utilize, if you felt it necessary, the non-violent approach. But the most far-reaching concept was that too much of division had taken place in struggle and this was not necessary at this stage. I felt that the young people were in better position to show that they could function and deal with these differing points of view without having to split up . Because one of the decisions that had already been proposed--I didn't propose it--was that you have two camps. I was happy to have seen the two chief proponents of these two camps finally work out their differences--Charlie Jones and Diane Nash. Now I think one of the reasons why I was listened to was because I had served their interest from the beginning. After the initial meeting in Raleigh, there were no people

around who had the (let's use the vaguely broad term) know-how to even bring together the report --the combination of know-how and facilities to bring together the report, to write up certain things. They had seen me do this. Shortly after that, there was a delegation that had gone to the Democratic and Republican conventions. How was the material to get written? The young white woman, Jane who became the first executive secretary, she and I spend all of fourth of July. She was a typist.

E.W.: They're impressive documents , I have a copy of them.

Eaker: Well, you see I had certain input that nobody else had. I had gone through the N.A.A.C.P. period. In fact I've lived a long time and I had related to things. So they had seen that I was not ripping them off. Up to that point they had been able to rely on me to do what they could not do or were in the position to do at the moment, in terms of the nitty-gritty work that had to be done. So they were willing to listen.

E. W.: How did they actually antagonize--I'm talking about S.N.C.C. now--S.C.L.C. and the N.A.A.C.P.? I'm mindful of the memo that went from Roy Wilkins' office to Wyatt T. Walker while he was executive secretary of S.C.L.C..

He was complaining about the press release that had been issued by S.N.C.C. and Wilkins reminded Walker that S.N.C.C. nor any other organization could speak for the N.A.A.C.P. in these kinds of things. Walker sent him a letter saying that he agreed with him whole-heartedly; you can't control these young people, boy. They're just doing things all haphazardly, you know. So this was one instance to me as to where S.N.C.C. irritated the N.A.A.C.P. and the S.C.L.C. and this may have been one minute, very small factor. So I'm asking you if you can recall any instances whereby S.N.C.C. was actually irritating, threatening (which is I think too strong a word) S.C.L.C. or the N.A.A.C.P.?

Baker: I think the basic reason for the reactions of N.A.A.C.P. and S.C.L.C. to S.N.C.C. is the fact that they elected to be independent and they exercised the independence that only young people or unattached people, those who are not caught in a framework of thought, can exercise. They were open to ideas that would not have been certainly cherished, or in some instances certainly, tolerated by either the N.A.A.C.P. or S.C.L.C.. As a chief example, the moving into Mississippi. When they decided, they called it "Move On Mississippi" and they called it "MOM". I think a delegation went to talk to Thurgood Marshall, who was then the chief counsel of the N.A.A.C.P. regarding

this and to seek legal help. And Thurgood was not responsive. In the first place because the young people had expressed the opinion and the determination that they were going to accept help from wherever they could get it. . Which meant that people like Crocket in Troy and other members of what is called the National Lawyers Guild--many white lawyers--which is leftist oriented, would be objectionable to the N.A.A.C.P. because they didn't want to introduce this conflict of ideologies, of pro-communist ideology, and leave themselves open to the charge on the part of the authorities that the communists were taking over. So the young people had taken the position, (I'm not sure of the sequence of whether this memo . . . I'm not sure when this memo but it had to be after when Wyatt came in) that they accept help wherever they could get it. One aspect of the help, for instance, that was being sought in Mississippi was the utilization of untried or unpopular methods of dealing legally with the question that arose out of the conflict of struggle in Mississippi. Persons like those who were not within the old framework,

framework, were much more open to trying these new things. (We can later deal with some of the specifics; I can refresh myself sometime and somewhere and find some documentation for you.) But this I think was the basis. Behind that I think, to be very honest, was the feeling

that here was this group of upstarts that nobody could control and that they ought to be part of either my organization or your organization. I think we have dealt somewhat in our conversation with the fact that at the initial meeting there was this very strong effort on the part of representations from at least a couple of organizations to have the young people as part of them. Of course, it was almost a foregone conclusion on the part of S.C.L.C. that because the meeting . . .

E. W.: . . . had been called by you

Baker: . . . had been called by me . . .

E. W.: (. . . you would deliver.

Baker: (laughing) Well, I guess they had. I hadn't thought of it in that way, but there was a foregone conclusion that) since S.C.L.C. sponsored the meeting, that they would be a part. I remember in Raleigh at the time Wyatt was particularly interested in this because he was coming in as executive director and he wanted a strong arm. The unfortunate part was that there was an assumption on the part of the ministers, part of the S.C.L.C. personell who was there, that they could laterally dictate (I use the term advisedly) to representatives from their area and control their voting. It was at that point I walked out of the meeting. There was this "meeting" of

the chief executives--these were adults, not a young person was present--at which they were voicing such opinions as, "I can speak to so-and-so," and "I can talk to Dorton from Virginia," and "I can control one from Montgomery," Bernard Lee.

E. W.: Yes, we're talking about how to use them.

Baker: Yes, and this was completely intolerable to me.

E. W.: But they eventually experienced a rude awakening in trying to deal with these young people. The young people just weren't listening to them.

Baker: Well, that was their first experience recognizing that the young people were going to make their own decisions. At that time, they found that they just weren't able to control the voting.

E. W.: At this meeting in Raleigh, Dr. King and Rev. Lawson were two people who gave keynote addresses. They both were really outstanding. From reading about accounts of that meeting one gets the impressions that the students were much more impressed with the speech by Rev. Lawson than they were with the speech by Dr. King.

Baker: They had to be.

E. W.: Was Lawson that more knowledgeable and persuasive in his presentations than Dr. King? How do you



account for that fact that he made a much more profound impression on the youth than Dr. King?

Eaker: I think Dr. King in a measure (from there and even in some other instances from my way of thinking) was a victim of his own background; namely, that of being a preacher who had relied to a large extent on the impact of eloquence. Lawson had not only the eloquence enough to be heard but he had the persuasiveness of argument. He also had the credentials, as far as the young were concerned, of having been a part of that student effort in Nashville. The Nashville group at their initial meeting in Raleigh, was regarded as the group because they came with a great deal of indoctrination. They had indoctrination but they also had provided action and they had suffered. So they had their credentials there and these credentials were recognized by the young. As far as Dr. King was concerned, (I don't remember his speech) his speech could not possibly have had the same relevance that Lawson's did because he had not been engaged in what the students had been doing with the same degree of membership (let's call it). He was still outside.

E. W.: This is a little derivative but it's not too far out of line with what we're talking about. This brings to mind a man by the name of Vincent Hardy<sup>ing</sup>.



Baker: Yes, I love Vincent.

E. W.: The reason that I'm bringing up his name right now is that I've been informed somewhere in my interviewing that Dr. King somewhat feared, or was a little bit reluctant to deal with, in a very open and comprehensive way personalities such as Vincent Harding and Rev. James Lawson. Did you get an impression like that? Did you ever get the impression that King regarded these men as somewhat of a threat to his position with their knowledge and power of persuasiveness?

Baker: I could say that I got the impression, specifically, that he was loathe to do this. 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. He was not sufficiently secure, I think, to feel that he could exist and they could exist without feeling that they were competitive or threats. He may not have been conscious of that, I don't know. This is not uncommon. Especially this is not uncommon out of the background from which he came. He had to continue to emphasize that he had not had the kind of organizational discipline that either Lawson had had or Vincent. I think Vincent was part of the Friends, Quakers. That's dialogue, where people

talk things out a lot where they have a long series of discussions. Martin had not had these things.

E. W.: His Ph.D. in philosophy and ethics couldn't possibly prepare him for this?

Baker: No. 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 and is in a position to confront you.

E. W.: Especially if they confront you with an air of security and independence.

Baker: Yes, and if they come with their own credentials. There was an insecurity, I think. I don't know whether he was ever aware of it. It was a natural insecurity coming out of that Baptist tradition. Baptist ministers have never been strong on dialogue; it was dictum.

E. W.: Now we turn back again to S.C.L.C.. Can you recall any ministers in that organization that impress you as being individuals who sought practical ways of dealing with problems and the institutionalization of a policy making apparatus in S.C.L.C.? Was anybody putting pressure? We mentioned <sup>Shuttlesworth</sup> Chilesworth and people like Jameson out of Louisiana, but can you think of any other people who were trying to apply constant pressure to the creation of a kind of a structure, a tactical and flexible situation for dealing

with practical problems and the institutionalization of a decision making apparatus?

Baker: I would think Kelly Nola Smith would certainly be a person in that context. He was in the national situation too but he wasn't too happy, maybe, with the manner in which that structure was being developed--the mechanism for decision making was being developed. You mentioned <sup>m. J. Le</sup> Chuttlesworth. . . . I think they questioned inside but there is also this business of closing rank after the question.

E. W.: Explain that for me.

Baker: That means, we're all on the same board. If we are inside behind closed doors we can differ but when you have "the great leader" you close ranks in public. That in itself sometimes decimates the effectiveness of dialogue, especially when the leader is open to advice and receptive to advice from others who weren't even at the meeting.

E. W.: That's very good, informative and enlightening because you had explained earlier this closing rank kind of thing. It has an almost escalating effort, especially on a strong personality when behind closed doors you could pour it all out but you never can enjoin the whole forum to try and influence people to your way of thinking. This is something I'm going to try and examine and see

just how strong-willed people dealt with this kind of a situation. I think a man like Kelly Nola Smith from Nashville, a person like Fred <sup>Miller</sup> Chittlesworth had to be uncomfortable and frustrated a lot of times because these were people who wanted to express their own ideas and ways of doing things.

Baker: In all probability, but I think Kelly was perhaps feeling more secure being in Nashville and having played a roll there. He may have even reached a point of wanting to retire from a certain kind of roll, I don't know. What am I predicating that upon? The fact that I don't think that--since the students of Nashville were in the confrontation--he had been instrumental in developing any kind of program that precipitated confrontation. That's number one. A person like Fred--he had his own machinery that was continuing in Birmingham up until the time of the Birmingham "movement" that Martin identified with. He knew he was able to keep going.

E. W.: Let me ask you again about this man, Rev. Wyatt T. Walker. He assumed the executive directorship right after your acting directorship.

Baker: Whatever you call it.

E. W.: (laughing) I'm trying to give it a name. Can you enlighten me on the process involved in electing



Wyatt T. Walker? Who recommended him? After his recommendation who interviewed him? I know you and Mr. Levenson talked to Rev. Tilly and subsequently recommended him and he was eventually hired. Can you explain the process of selecting Wyatt T. Walker?

Baker: Wyatt had a movement or had been involved in a movement in Petersburg. I think at the stage that he came into contact with Martin, he came as president of Petersburg whatever it was. He had also been identified with C.C.R.E. in Virginia and had worked with N.A.A.C.P. in Virginia. His child, I believe it was his daughter, was the guinea pig in the school situation in Petersburg after the '54 decision.

E. W.: That's what happened to my son in Thomasonville.

Baker: Is that so?

E. W.: He was used as a guinea pig. I would never do that again. I would never advise someone to send their kids to one of them all-white schools. I couldn't do that in good conscience.

Baker: Not any more.

E. W.: Never. Never be a pioneer again.

Baker: Well, Wyatt had had that experience plus he had been to several of the meetings. I don't think he was

at the organizing, I'm not sure. He was at the first of the so-called non-violence conferences that was held at Spellman. Forgot about those.

E. W.: We have them all. I haven't missed any.

Baker: Yes, I did that one too. That's where I met him. I didn't know him; I knew of him. I think he'd been coming to two meetings. Who first spoke to him about becoming executive, I'm not sure but I'm the one. I think I am. He and his wife were visiting New York and a mutual good friend, the Rev. George Lawrence. I had known George in his escalation up the ladder. I invited them to come to the house. I even cooked the lamb. We had dinner and I raised the question with Wyatt of being the executive director. He may have had inclinations, aspirations before and he may have been approached by somebody, I don't know. I do know that. I'm not too sure, but I may have voiced this around in circles with Martin and the like. I don't know because I hadn't left completely then, I don't think. That's the first step that I know of. Wyatt being the personable individual he is and a contemporary age-wise and style-wise of Martin, that was not too difficult a bridge to cross and they had had very little or no success in finding a minister to be executive director. Certainly it had to be a minister. It had to

It had to be a minister.

E. W.: Tell me about the criteria for selection. Martin wrote that down; it's in his papers. The point that he was trying to make was another thing I don't know: "but we certainly must admit that we ought to consider persons who may not necessarily be ministers." The implication was that executive skills should take priority over his religious affiliation. Reddick and all these other people made similar kinds of suggestions but nobody stipulated that he can't . . . yeah, one man, Rev. Lowry, suggested that it should be a minister. Maybe his suggestion took precedence over everybody else's.

Baker: I'd be interested in the date on that.

E. W.: It was before the selection of Rev. Tilly. It was prior to your suggestion for them to consider in getting a person like Rev. Tilly.

Baker: I think maybe Martin's verbalization regarding that it did not necessarily have to be a minister could have come as a result of his consultation with persons like Stanley and Bayard and maybe my own presence there at the time, and the fact that they had made approaches to other ministers of a certain standing like Pitts and had not gotten a favorable response. And it may have been more political to have made that kind of statement.

E. W.: Right and that's another thing. And the fact is that they did select a minister.

Baker: Yes.

E. W.: And they can't get around it.

Baker: And they only have had ministers even Andy Young.

E. W.: Can you think of any laymen that played prominent rolls or were elceted to any official position? I don't have any record of it but maybe you can recall something I haven't gôt written out. Can you think of any layman that was elected to a position--other than a lawyer? I have Augustine.

Baker: Yes.

E. W.: He's the only one that I have seen who was not a minister and listed in some prominent position.

Baker: The only non-minister that I recall was on the executive board was Dr. . . .

E. W.: Simpkins?

Baker: Simpkins.

E. W.: Yes, he's an M.D. not a Ph.D..

Baker: No, he's a dentist, a D.D.S., I think. But you see, he had a good movemant.

E. W.: That's right. (laughing)

Baker: So there you are.

E. W.: This brings me to questions about other people whose names I've seen frequently in the earlier days of S.C.L.C.; for example, Dr. Reddick who was formerly at Alabama State was designated official historian of the organization. He figured prominently in a number of executive committee meetings--his name. You never see what they said because I don't have records of the minutes and I haven't been able to find them. Can you recall what you perceived his roll to be in the organization--Dr. Lawrence Rettick?

Baker: Rettick was in Montgomery, I believe, at the time of the boycott. He was teaching there. Certainly he was there at the time of "Strive<sup>d</sup> Towards Freedom" and I think to a large extent may have been the actual writer, and if not the actual ~~writer~~ then the guiding head for the development of that.

E. W.: Without a question.

Baker: Yes. There was a certain amount of rapport that had been established between him and Martin. Then Martin of course being male, a Ph.D., would have some respect for one who had these credentials. So he was part of the executive committee but I'm not sure that he had any over-riding influence at all. Then he left Montgomery, I believe.

E. W.: Yes, and went to State.

Baker: Yes, State in Maryland and then from there to Philadelphia.

E. W.: Yes, that's where he's from. I was in touch with him a while ago.

Baker: Yes. I don't know . . . you haven't had a chance to . . .

E. W.: No, he told me he would talk with me and he would try and see what he could contribute to my study. He was, and still is, the official historian. An historian to me is a person who should have all the records and things.

Baker: He has none?

E. W.: Well, that's the impression I got in talking with him.

Baker: (laughing) He hasn't written any history?

E. W.: Not sizable. He's written the thing about The Family , whatever it was, the biography of Dr. King and the Montgomery movement. Beyond that, he hasn't turned out too much about S.C.L.C..

Baker: No.

E. W.: And I'm intruding on his territory.

Baker: Well, he had capacity for input in the area you first had mentioned when you raised the question of the Bolshevik Revolution. He had the knowledge about these things. He also had some association with that.

E. W.: He's got to in the devel-



opment of an ideology to be in the history of the presidency and deliberations.

Baker: Well, perhaps he could not, you see. In the first place, when you are faced with a complete embankment of ministers who feel they've been called by God for leadership--why, that's enough--and who had not had the discipline of thinking and real dialogue, especially dialogue that differed with them.

E. W.: You had one assignment that I think kept you frustrated a great deal. This is the impression I get from looking at the in your reports. You were in charge of the book, Strive Toward Freedom, and the assignment of certain numbers of books to people throughout the country. Was that as frustrating an experience as I perceived in looking at your responses and your tallies of the number of books that you had given to various ministers, the amount of money that they had turned in; some of them trying to make the case that they didn't get X-number of books and things of that sort? Was this a really frustrating experience or did you really take it in stride?

Baker: I hope that I took it in stride but it wasn't part of what I had conceived of as my roll. (laughing) After all, I was just there to do "what had to be done."

This was the concept; this was the first thing that would come up. When the book came out, Tilly went to the National Baptist Convention and I went to Detroit to that other Baptist convention. From then on, Tilly was out. I had to get these books shipped out. Of course, I had to devise my own scheme without any time to deal with it.

E. W.: To get \_\_\_\_\_ to help you with the book.

Baker: Of course, no preparation had been made. I had forgotten about that.

E. W.: I have it here, all of it; the number of books, the amount of money you collected. You got rid of all of them except three books. All the books were accounted for except them.

Baker: Yes, and I remember doing that.

E. W.: That's right; all of that is here. This was supposed to be a source of revenue for the S.C.L.C.. Did it really bring in?

Baker: I don't think it's ever been a big source of revenue. I don't think it amounted to anything, the money-- certainly the part that came in while I was there could not be considered (in my opinion) a big source.

E. W.: A lot of time and energy and personnel was

invested in bringing this thing off as far as Dr. King and the organization itself. I don't know if it balances out in terms of gains received--the amount invested in it--or not. I was curious to ask you that.

Baker: Certainly, directly it did not--as far as I could perceive of it, expecially going to the conventions. I don't recall what the total came to be.

E. W.: It's listed there. Another perceptual kind of question: Did they ever attempt to define in any specific way the roll of the executive director and the roll of the associate director? Give you a job description like you attempted to do?

Baker: You didn't get it before hand; perhaps after we'd been pushing for certain things. In my last days, I was not only pushing for job descriptions but certain other bases of considerations.

E. W.: Certainly, . I have your whole memo about this.

Baker: This was predicated upon the fact that people came without the same kind of experience and training as (let's say) the person who was there with me, and were getting more. Oh, yes; but this was personal. This I, of course, objected to. Thank goodnes the young lady who came--I think I told you , she came from . . .

E. W.: From South Atlanta?

Baker: Yes.

E. W.: She was one of Wyatt T. Walker's secretary's?

Baker: No, she may have stayed there a while after he came.

E. W.: She did. She resigned to go to Lockheed. She wrote him a letter and made her resignation.

Baker: Yes, because there was nobody else there. I think Rev. King brought in one of his former church secretaries as bookkeeper after. Then there was this great division of responsibility. There was not the necessary rapport that could have existed. I'm . . . sure Mrs. Brown--

E. W.: That was her name, Mrs. Brown--a tall, dark lady . . .

Baker:--had so much capacity. Thank goodness we were helpful in getting her to release herself from the syndrome.

E. W.: Well, she did. I give her a hand for that when she resigned. We've been talking on the periphery; now I'm going to ask you directly and you can treat it any way you see fit. Can you describe your relationship with Dr. King for me? What kind of a relationship did you have while you were working as the person in charge of the citizenship project, as one who served as associate direc-

tor and as one who served as acting director?

Baker: At the initial stages, practically no relationship. He was not relating to the situation too well (let's put it that way). They were still living in Montgomery; he would come to Atlanta and I would never see him.

E.W.: He was the president of the organization.

Baker: Yes, he was.

E. W.: Who did you relate to?

Baker: Who was helpful?

E.W.: Right. And who suggested to you what your roll should be in the organization?

Baker: No one. No one had suggested to me because the background for conceptualizing it was not there in terms of the top leadership. They had this idea of having these meetings; that's where it stopped. Then, what does it take to get those meetings? I think to a large extent Martin was depending on Bayard. The last couple of days before the meeting took place, Bayard came down. But you see he didn't need to come down then. He was supposed to be the top strategist.

E. W.: As a matter of fact, you and Bayard are designated as co-directors of the Citizenship Crusade, on the letterheads of all the papers.

Baker: Yes. That's the way it goes. From the stand-

point of my relationship with Martin, it was almost mutual color in a certain sense. I didn't go there in the beginning with any hope or any expectation of being a key figure and recognized as such. It was another one of those efforts that I felt; "alright, things have to be done. I was in a position to do them and hopefully it would be part and parcel to the contribution of running things. Maybe from Martin's standpoint . . . well, you have to tolerate what you have to tolerate; I don't know. I have heard in later years that he felt--I don't know whether he said it to someone else--I hated him or disliked him, something like that. Martin wasn't good at receiving critical questions. He was not alone; as I said, this was a pattern with ministers. After all, who was I? I was female; I was old. I didn't have any Ph. D.. An interesting angle: there was a news conference held, a little gathering of some N.A.A.C.P. officials and S.C.L.C. officials in connection with some voter registration program. Roy Wilkins and (I think) Bob Carter came down. Then, of course, there was Martin and then there was the news conference. I remember, I believe it was Ralph who said to me, he wouldn't have let himself be ignored in this situation or rolled in it. He knew I knew more about the history of voter registration and what had taken place



in the struggle than they did. I was at least as familiar with all the things that the N.A.A.C.P. had done historically. Martin didn't have that historical information at his finger and he had not been active in getting around in that current period. But it didn't bother me. Maybe it should have; I don't know.

E. W.: Herè's the thing that bothers me and I'm at a loss to understand it. There was a question about press releases. Martin and Bayard I guess suggested to each other that no press releases would go out of the office unless they first read it and approved it. They must have told you that or something like that because I got the impression from a memo you sent back to Martin that the next press release you would let him read before it was released. Did you ever have any difficulty at all with them on press releases?

Baker: I don't recall too much of a difficulty, maybe because I didn't recognize it.

E. W.: This was a little note kind of a thing.

Baker: You don't know when?

E. W.: It was late '59; it may have been early sixties.

Baker: I was on my way out then. I had indicated in December of '59 or early sixties, that I would be leaving.

I think I left in August of '60. I believe I told Wyatt.

E. W.: I was trying to detect in that little memo whether or not they were trying to put a stranglehold.

Baker: I'm sure. I don't know any press release that they had any basis for objecting to, but I had had to write letters and sign Martin's name to them. There were occasions, for instance; the mayor of Birmingham or something. He brought the situation up and send him information but nothing came. We eventually did send a letter out. When the meeting was held in Columbia, South Carolina, the letters that were signed nominally by him-- who wrote them? You see? You had to get them out.

E. W.: I was going to ask you about that. I can't recall the exact date.

Baker: If you happen to dig up that memo, I'd like to see it. (laughing)

E. W.: I'll send you a copy of it.

Baker: Yes, I'd be glad and I'll help the best I can.

E. W.: When did you let them know that you wouldn't be back? Did they give you any indication that they would be happy for you to leave or they didn't want you to stay around? Or you just decided that it was best to get on out of the thing?

Baker: There was every indication from the beginning

that my presence was not one that would be very tolerable in that situation for me in the sense of what roll can you play, effectively. You feel the breach of having nobody to instigate or to get together that initial meeting?

E. W.: Yes.

Baker: I went the six weeks; that's all I had planned. After that, ~~they~~ were still without anybody so I stayed on. Then when the sit-ins broke, I suggested that there needed to be a meeting of sit-in leaders for the purpose of communication if not co-ordination. That's how I had the April of 1960 meeting in Charlotte out of which S.N.C.C. and the viable organizations got its roots.

E. W.: I was curious to ask you about that because it disturbed me--that kind of memo.

Baker: There were lots of consultations and discussions around my roll and around me that did not come to my light, I'm confident.

E. W.: Can you recall any confrontation that you and Martin had that was a little volatile, an argument or anything of that sort? Or you were just, as you suggested, tolerating each other?

Baker: I would raise questions about things that were intolerable, not towards me as such but policy-wise. I like the question of the differential in salary for a young person who was capable, had come under difficult

circumstances and worked effectively, getting less than someone who was brought in and wasn't doing too much. That's number one. I would confront on the basis of regulations regarding how you hire people and what kind of rights they had. I would also raise questions about any issue that came up that I would voice my opinion on. So, I think the situation was a mutually tolerable situation. I recall (this just comes to mind) the newsletter <sup>Jane</sup> James Stembridge and I started. It was beautiful. You don't have any copies of that?

E. W.: I have one copy of a newsletter; one copy where you indicated all the meetings they had had, but there was no content as to what had transpired at these meetings. But I do have this and I'll try to go back and get newspaper accounts of meetings in these cities. Did they ever report on these meetings that took place? You had a non-violence conference in Durham; you had one in Shrievesport; had one in Montgomery. At the same time during the year in '57 to '58, there were about six meetings.

Baker: They were largely mass meetings.

E. W.: These were largely large, mass meetings. Did they ever report on these meetings in the newspapers?

Baker: They would hope to have the press there. This

was part of the format--big meetings.

E. W.: Would the local newspapers report on them?

Baker: I don't know . . .

E. W.: You never did check into newspaper accounts?

Baker: No. They probably had some. I didn't keep any record of it.

E. W.: I'm going to try to get to that. First I'm going to get the local newspapers of the cities that you mentioned. I have all of them listed here.

Baker: Wherever Martin went at that time, some news coverage took place.

E. W.: I have all the meetings listed, the dates and the places where they took place. I'm going to try to see these newspapers to get some temper of the times.

Baker: For instance, the initial meeting that was held in Montgomery at which the name S.C.L.C. was determined-- I was there.

Baker: That meeting took place in New Orleans, didn't it? That was the second meeting, in February of '57.

Baker: What do you have there for a meeting in Montgomery? (interruption)

Baker: . . . that's number one, because he had a respect for me. He had a respect going way back. Even as a student I was in position to elicit respect and I had respect for him. I don't recall our having too many actual conferences about what was to be done. He had a great deal of sensitivity to carrying out (let's call it) the wishes of the president. Let's put it that way.

E. W.: Very good.

Baker: That may even have been a frustration even for him although he was not a very aggressive person in the sense of wanting to dominate the scene--or at least showing the desire to want to dominate the scene.

had to have some degree of frustration because the president so often couldn't find him.

E. W.: This was a thing that gave the impression that he was the busiest man in the country. In order to get Dr. King to speak at a particular place, you'd have to contact him about a year and a half in advance unless it involved a person who had the potential for giving money or one of his favorite friends, or one of his favorite

institutions. He could always find time to go to Harvard.

: to have schedule.

Baker: Yeah, it makes a difference.

E. W.: It makes a difference. They had a schedule there. A person who wanted him to speak at Harvard or Yale



or one of these big schools could contact him about a month and a half before time. But a lady like Miss Huges who had given him all that money out in Houston, Texas . . .

Baker: Yeah, I remember her.

E. W.: . . . had to work for two years.

Baker: How much money did she finally give him?

E. W.: She gave him one time better than a thousand dollars to come out there and speak to her graduating class at that business school.

Baker: Yes.

E. W.: This lady is a fantastic lady her letters. She was writing all the time and when Rev. Thaxton attacked her, that Baptist minister--he really lambasted.

(interruption)

E. W.: At the July 22 through 24th, 1959 Institute on Non-Violent Resistance to Segregation meeting which represented, according to the memo, the first silent line effort to evaluate non-violence resistance as an instrument for social change, you suggested in your memo that Rev. Wyatt T. Walker was preparing the recommendations and findings of that meeting. Did he ever submit this to anybody?

Baker: Not to me.

(interruption)

E. W.: We were talking about the question of Harry Belafonte's involvement in the movement. You had indicated to me that he had come out of a tradition of movement somewhat to the left, too. Could you recall that for me?

Baker: Frankly, I am not truly aware of the specifics. He came on as a young man struggling in the area of entertainment at the time when in the New York area you had an atmosphere in which the so-called ultra-Left--such liberals as Mrs. Roosevelt and others--were seeking those same platforms. He was not unaware of the Leftist movement. I don't know personally of his involvement but I do know at the time of the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage, the N.A.A.C.P. had gotten him involved in the prayer pilgrimage. And they had a press conference at the N.A.A.C.P. headquarters. I was told that he was there and they banned him. Now I wasn't there but I wouldn't doubt it.

E. W.: Do you think he might have been classified as one of these Young Turks in the N.A.A.C.P.?

Baker: No. I think if anything, they must have banned him because of his prior affiliations. They may have thought of him as "Red." I think it was an anti-communist reaction on the part of the N.A.A.C.P.. Whether he was ever one or not I don't know and it doesn't matter. He would be in the liberal tradition in his philosophical thinking I would think. Since then he has been

associated with liberal movement in the entertainment world..

E. W.: That's fine. I want to get a basic consideration that's something I can step off from. I know you might not be able to speak precisely about his involvement in the left movement. I can look back probably at a book by Harold Cruz--I don't remember seeing his name mentioned in Cruz' book.

Baker: Cruz is an embittered soul too, isn't he?

E. W.: It's so evident when you look into his book. Oh, he's embittered; he's exceptionally candid in saying whatever he wants to say about anybody. He attacks everybody. . .

Baker: . . . but himself.

E. W.: Yeah, but himself

(End of Interview)

