Redefining the Movement: SNCC and the 'Beloved Community', 1960-1964

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A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario

December, 2003

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 0-612-89837-7
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 0-612-89837-7

Abstract

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which became the largest student led and run organization within the civil rights movement, developed as a result of young people's desire to direct their own activities and develop their own strategies. This resulted in the creation of the 'beloved community', a community which valued equality, trust, and truth. An examination of the dynamic which was created by the adoption of this community structure highlights how these principles were adopted at all levels of the organization from the construction of leadership to communication. In addition, this form of analysis positions the experience of SNCC activists in the foreground.

Acknowledgements

Learning about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee has been fascinating, invigorating and challenging. Without the energy, spirit and dedication of the individuals that made up this community, this thesis would not have been possible. Thank you to all these individuals for their commitment to truth, equality and justice.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Susan Whitney, for steering me in the direction of youth history. Her encouragement, advice and support were instrumental to the completion of this project. Without her, I would have been lost.

Many thanks to Dr. David Dean, Dr. Jennifer Evans and Dr. Deborah Gorham for providing excellent models of teaching from which I could learn. I have gained so much from witnessing your dedication and enthusiasm.

I would also like to thank my colleagues Stacey Barker, Ryan Eyford, Kristina Guiguet, Robbyn Gulka and Ryan Shackleton for providing guidance, encouragement, laughter and most of all friendship.

To my dear friends Jessica Clark, Justin Kerr, Arianne Richeson and Lesa Smith without your understanding and continued support I would have been lost.

I would especially like to thank Rob Cameron for believing in me, challenging me to think outside the box and providing continuous and unwavering support.

Most importantly, many thanks to my parents Brian Futterer and Charleen Glover for encouraging me to pursue my dreams and for providing me with continuous emotional and spiritual support. To my brother Cole and my sister Lindsay for keeping me grounded, making me smile and reminding me of the important things in life.

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ABBREVIATIONS LIST

ACLU – American Civil Liberties Union

COFO – Council of Confederated Organizations

CORE – Congress of Racial Equality

FOR – Fellowship of Reconciliation

MFDP – Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

NSA – National Students Association

SCLC – Southern Christian Leadership Conference

SDS – Student for a Democratic Society

SNCC – Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

INTRODUCTION

On May 17, 1954 the United States Supreme Court's landmark ruling *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* declared that the "separate but equal"[1] doctrine did not in fact provide African-American children with the same educational facilities and opportunities as white children and that segregation damaged the self-esteem of black children. The following year, while on vacation in Mississippi, fourteen-year-old African-American Emmett Till was murdered by two white men alleging that the boy had whistled at a white woman. The white woman was the wife of one of the two attackers. These two incidents, both related to school-aged youth, greatly affected the generation growing up in the 1950s. As activist Joyce Ladner recalls, "an indelible imprint was stamped in my consciousness when young Emmett Till was murdered."[2] Many young people were jolted by these events which caused them to re-evaluate the society in which they lived. As activist John Lewis remembered years later, "I couldn't accept the way things were ... I could not live

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[1] This doctrine is from the *Plessey* v. *Ferguson,* 163 US 537 case which stated that "equality of treatment is accorded when the races are provided substantially equal facilities, even though these facilities be separate." [*Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, Ed. Clayborne Carson et al. (New York: Blackside, 1991), p. 69.]

[2] Joyce Ladner, "No Subject",4 February 2003, SNCC Email Listserv, (May 15, 2003)

... taking the world as it was presented....[3]" The segregated and violent landscape of the South began to shift and blur after these events, providing the perfect opportunity for a new generation to emerge and fight for the creation of a community built upon truth, equality and freedom.

Between the late 1950s and the early 1970s, large numbers of African-American youth, accompanied by a smaller group of white youth, participated in a variety of civil rights campaigns, including nation-wide lunch counter sit-ins, localized protests against segregationist policies, and voter registration drives. These young people, drawn primarily from college, university and high school campuses in the South, were propelled into the 1960s civil rights movement for many of the same reasons as their adult counterparts. Like adults, they wanted to witness the end of segregation, to achieve democracy for all American citizens regardless of race, to remove social perceptions of African-Americans as lesser and unworthy beings, and to eradicate negative definitions of blackness.

But the students' direction, organizational style and demeanour differed significantly from that which had characterized their predecessors. Rather than becoming involved in legal battles as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had done for much of the 1940s and 1950s or focussing solely on the needs of urban communities like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), students believed that changes needed to occur

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[3] John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 47.

at a much faster pace than those changes accomplished by previous generations. As an activist from Lane College pointed out in October1960, "[t]he students who instigate and participate in these demonstrations are dissatisfied not only with existing conditions, but with the snail-like pace at which they are being ameliorated."[4] Many young people also felt that a movement needed to reflect the opinions and voices of all its members, and rely on group decision making to make effective changes. As activist Zoya Zeman wrote, "[i]f we compromise on basic values (justice, human value, truth, etc.), then we hurt everyone. This idea is at the root of the philosophy of nonviolence...."[5]

At the same time, many parents, especially those living above the poverty line who had stronger ties to middle-class values, could not understand their children's challenge of the society they were accustomed to. As activist John Lewis points out in his autobiography *Walking with the Wind*,

> there was little room for change in the world my parents knew, and what change there was was usually for the worse. It's hard not to understand at all the mixture of fear and concern they both felt as they watched me walk out into the world as a young man and join a movement aimed, in essence, at turning the world they knew upside down.[6]

For other parents in southern communities, there was more concern that activists

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[4] "An Appeal for Dignity", *Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. IV (November 1960), p. 2.

[5] Letter from Zoya Zeman to Erwin D. Zeman; July 7, 1964 Transcript, reprinted in digital archive (University of Southern Mississippi Library, 2001), <http://anna.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/zeman/zz035.html> (1 April, 2003)

[6] Lewis, p. 9.

would sweep into town, stir up trouble, and leave the community to pick up the pieces and deal with the consequences. Greenwood activist Endesha Mae Holland's mother felt that way.

> "Don't wann hear dem,' she said, covering both ears with her hands. 'Ain't got no time t' fool 'round wit' dat mess. Git our freedom! You best lissen t' me, gal. Don'cha git in wit' dem fools. All dey gwine do is git a lotta folkses kilt. Den dey gwine go back home up nawth."[7]

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which became the largest student led and run organization within the civil rights movement, developed as a result of young people's desire to direct their own activities and develop their own strategies. Formed after the Greensboro sit-ins in February 1960, SNCC focussed initially on maintaining communication between college and university campuses and coordinating activities. Although the 'Statement of Purpose'[8] for the group was prepared in May of the same year, it was not until the fall that more concrete actions and goals were established. Even though coordination was the primary function of the group during that spring, new issues moved to the forefront by the October conference held in Atlanta. At this point, discussions surrounding the future of the movement, the need to communicate leadership expectations within the group, and the potential use of nonviolence as the solution to problems

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[7] Endesha Mae Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta: A Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 211.

[8] Further explanation and analysis of the "statement of purpose" is provided within Chapter 3 as it relates to the organizational and leadership structure of SNCC.

confronting the nation became crucial to the movement.[9]

Committed to achieving true democracy in the US, the students set out to actualize these principles for the African-American community, and consequently for themselves. Yet the movement was to become more than protests and boycotts in the coming years. By the spring of 1961, the group became divided over whether or not to continue pursuing direct-action tactics or to expand voter registration within the South. In the end, it was decided to pursue both, after hours of heated debate and an almost catastrophic decision to split the organization; to accomplish this, many members of SNCC headed to the Deep South, immersing themselves in the harshest realities of racial segregation. In doing this, the group brought a coordinated movement to communities that had previously been ignored or deemed too dangerous to organize by other civil rights groups. During 1962 and 1963, SNCC activists continued to expand their organization, helping to coordinate movements and develop leadership in such areas as Albany, Leflore County, Mississippi and Selma. By 1964, the focus for the organization became 'Freedom Summer', a co-ordinated effort to force the federal government to provide support and protection for southern black citizens, and to increase the number of black voters through registration campaigns. This summer campaign, which solicited the support of northern white volunteers, also involved the development of freedom schools and support for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). SNCC's ability to bring students from varying backgrounds, regions, classes,

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[9] *Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (August 1960), p.1

religious affiliations, and races together into a strongly knit group reflected both the organization's important role within the civil rights movement and its broad-based appeal.

Central to SNCC's particular brand of youth civil rights activism between 1960 and 1964 was the concept of the 'beloved community'. The term was originally coined by Josiah Royce, a philosopher-theologian and member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.[10] It was not popularized and imbued with deeper meaning, however, until Dr. Martin Luther King used the idea after the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. In a speech at a victory rally following the announcement of a favourable United States Supreme Court decision desegregating the seats on Montgomery's buses, King said "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community."[11] For King, the 'beloved community' was a space in which "racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice would be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In which love and trust would triumph over fear and hatred."[12] For him it was a "realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and

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[10] The Fellowship of Reconciliation is an organization, founded at the beginning of the 20th century, committed to encouraging peaceful interactions between people and countries. For a more detailed discussion of FOR's relationship to the civil rights movement see Chapter 2.

[11] "The Beloved Community of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.", *The King Center,* n.d., <http://www.thekingcenter.org/bc.html> (1 September 2002).

[12] "The Beloved Community of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."

trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence."[13] In King's view, according to scholars who have analysed his writings on the subject, the image of the 'beloved community' represented "a flexible but potent depiction of what the American dream could become if black and white America sought to enact it in both their public and private sectors."[14]

As they worked to deconstruct the existing system of racial segregation, members of SNCC developed and implemented an alternative community to take its place: the 'beloved community'. SNCC's understanding of the 'beloved community' built on King's, and similarly encompassed the principles of nonviolence, equality, trust and love. Unlike King, however, SNCC emphasized action and put these ideas into practice. Rather than simply preaching about the possibilities of a changed society, SNCC worked to create a community committed to equality and positioned to redefine the boundaries of race, class, and gender. Joseph Ellin explained his impression of SNCC's 'beloved community' in a letter home to his parents, "... they're all living through a kind of experiment in community life and purposeful action that's going to make a profound difference ...."[15] The

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[13] "The Beloved Community of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."

[14] Carolyn Thomas-Callosa and John Louis Lucaites, "Introduction", *Martin Luther King Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse* (Tuscaloosa, 1993), p. 8.

[15] Nancy and Joseph Ellin, Hattiesburg, to Mom and Dad, (Joseph's parents), 3 July 1964, Ellin Freedom Summer Collection, Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, The University of Southern Mississippi Libraries, http://anna.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/ellin/ellin006.htm

distinct organization set up by SNCC activists tested the formal boundaries and meanings of community by eliminating geographical regions as the primary determinant for belonging. Rather, SNCC's beloved community was based upon principles and ideas of racial equality that broke down barriers rather than reinforcing them. Altering the existing boundaries of a community meant, however, that SNCC had to reinvent the reasons for belonging to the group and the very meaning of the group itself. For instance, the important thing was to build a community in which the ideas and structure of the group were determined by its membership. This reflected not only the students' desire for self-direction but also the important role of consensus-building within the organization.

Since the movement required most individuals to devote themselves entirely to the cause, the community these students created affected them in a number of ways. It acted as an intellectual forum for self-discovery and provided a place for young people to challenge and redefine concepts and constructions of identity based on gender, race and class. By deconstructing the many negative and limiting social definitions placed on the students, the 'beloved community' helped many individuals within SNCC to develop a greater sense and awareness of self. The development of such an awareness is evidenced by the large number of autobiographies that have been produced by former SNCC activists detailing the impact the movement had on their lives. This personal impact can also be seen by the significant role that the student newspaper played within the organization by keeping activists informed of events and movement activities, and by providing

them with a written forum for the exploration of ideas. As a student argued in the October 1960 edition of the *Student Voice*,

> To retain personhood will be the hardest battle of all ... in a world where a mass movement is necessary to save the South and America. ... The most immediate threat to personhood is organization ... organizations are totally vulnerable to institutionalization ... The movement is more than a social force, a nameless entity. It is people sitting, people standing, people waiting, people giving, people hoping. It can be a vision of the self ...[16]

In other organizations, which did not have a support network or distinctive culture like SNCC and which encouraged the homogenization of membership activities, the role of the individual was not as valued as it was within SNCC. The 'beloved community' thus functioned on a number of levels. It allowed young people to define their own system of values, to explore religious ideas outside the church structure, and to design leadership roles, modes of communication, and relationships accordingly. Finally, it became a place of refuge from the outside world, especially since objecting to the status quo and the existing culture of racial intolerance often meant rejecting one's preordained position within society.

Despite the importance of the 'beloved community', historical works rarely examine its importance to SNCC. When examining SNCC, historians have tended to focus either on a specific geographical area of the organization's activity, a particular activist, or on the politicization of the organizational structure. Although these approaches provide important information and conclusions about this youth-

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[16] "Across the Editors Desk," *Student Voice,* Vol. I, No. 3 (October 1960), p. 1.

led movement, they have left the significance of the 'beloved community' unexplored.

The major historical study of SNCC, Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, focuses primarily on the political aspects of the group and emphasizes the increasing radicalization of the movement. The central theme of Carson's work on SNCC, therefore, is the evolution of the organization's radicalism.[17] Carson argues that the students were able to revive "dormant traditions of racial militancy" through their work in southern communities.[18] Carson categorizes the development of this radicalism as falling into three phases. The first stage, he argues, was group formation. He states that the students looked to former organizations and other protest movements in order to form a "rationale for activism."[19] The move from desegregation to voter rights, Carson argues, caused the organization to shift away from nonviolence to a secular and humanistic radicalism influenced by Marx, Malcolm X and the experiences of the activists in the south.[20] This period ended after Freedom Summer and the defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The second stage in SNCC's development, according to Carson, began in late 1964 and involved an internal analysis of the

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[17] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, 3rd Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 2.

[18] *Ibid*, p. 2.

[19] *Ibid*, p. 2.

[20] *Ibid*, p. 3.

organization's goals and strategies. The students questioned whether they could continue "to expand the black struggle while remaining tied to the rhetoric of interracialism and nonviolent direct action."[21] There was also growing concern over the role of whites in the organization and whether or not the students could continue to rely on the support of white liberals and federal intervention.[22] In an attempt to resolve these and other issues, SNCC members called for an increase in black consciousness and for black power. In doing so, the organization had a great amount of difficulty determining a set of values and ideas that could unify activists and black people. This marked the beginning of the third stage of SNCC's radicalization as detailed by Carson.

In Struggle presents a detailed account of SNCC's activities from 1960 until 1971 and is constructed around the three aforementioned time periods. By organizing his book in this way, Carson is able to highlight many of the important campaigns directed by SNCC during these different periods and discuss the roles of many of the central activists within the organization. As the major work on SNCC, Carson brings to light important events, individuals and struggles often forgotten and overlooked within traditional civil rights movement histories. By structuring his arguments around these three phases, however, Carson focuses too heavily on the political agenda of the group and envisions this as the radical component of the organization. Although the group's political decisions and

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[21] *Ibid*, p. 3.

[22] *Ibid*, p. 3.

interactions were significant and contributed to the impact the organization was able to make, the book does not demonstrate why SNCC operated in the manner that it did or how it was able to maintain a cohesive community.

Rather than expanding upon the ideas and values that were central to the operations and structure of SNCC, Carson simply makes mention of the fact that SNCC was a very dynamic community. He states that they had a "... strong sense of collective purpose"[23] and retained "...qualities of informality, openness, and impetuousness that ... made the group unique."[24] Although clearly outlining key characteristics of the 'beloved community', Carson does not discuss SNCC's relationship to it and how it helped to shape the organization's emergence or the significant role the community played in activists' lives. Within the entire text, in fact, there are only three references made to the 'beloved community'. Firstly, he introduces the Nashville student group and James Lawson, and connects them to the ideals of the 'beloved community'.[25] The subject is raised a second time when he quotes John Lewis on the changing racial consciousness of the Southern Black community.[26] The third mention comes during his discussion of the Waveland Retreat and the tensions which developed over the role and participation of whites in SNCC. Carson quotes white activist Mike Miller as saying, "... if we are building

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[23] *Ibid*, p. 287

[24] *Ibid*, p. 66.

[25] *Ibid*, p. 21, 23-24.

[26] *Ibid*, p. 101.

in our own movement that beloved community, then race cannot be used to automatically disqualify the argument of a white field secretary..."[27] None of these examples provides further information or attempts to explain the value of these ideas on and within the organization.

Clayborne Carson's work is supplemented by Emily Stoper's *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization*. Stoper similarly attempts to understand the development of SNCC and the reasons for the organization's change to black power after 1965. In the introduction, Stoper states that she will answer the reasons for SNCC's change from a "religiously oriented group with moderate, integrationist goals to a cadre of political organizers dedicated to Black Power."[28] Rather than exploring the dynamics of the organization prior to 1965, Stoper concentrates on detailing the political and leadership structure of the organization. Her analysis does not provide any insights into the role of the 'beloved community' within the SNCC structure or examine the significance that religion played within the early dynamics of the organization. What is useful in this book and to the study of the 'beloved community', however, is the collection of interviews with SNCC activists from 1966-1967. Not only do these interviews provide important information and commentaries about the SNCC organization, but they emphasize the significant role

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[27] *Ibid*, p. 145.

[28] Emily Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), p. 3.

that individuals played in creating and defining the meaning of community.

If Carson's and Stoper's are the only historical work to focus on SNCC, discussion of SNCC occurs elsewhere in the historical literature in the civil rights movement.[29] Two of the most significant historical works on the civil rights movement which deal with SNCC are Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* published in 1995 and Debra Schultz's *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* published in 2001. Although neither work is specifically centred around the activities of SNCC activists, both writers acknowledge the significant role that the organization and its members played in the modern civil rights movement.

Payne's text examines the evolution of Mississippi activism from the early twentieth century until the mid 1970s. He focuses on the experiences and contributions of ordinary people rather than well-known movement leaders and examines how these individuals were able to form and develop an effective and meaningful movement. Payne's analysis incorporates the experiences of many SNCC activists because much of SNCC's work was done in Mississippi. By framing his work around local activities in Mississippi, the central role of community

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[29] Tarah James, "Sisters in Struggle: The Development of Black Feminism in SNCC" (Ph.D. diss., Sarah Lawrence College, 2000), p. 1-67. Within this analysis, James uses the Womanist theory to uncover the double restraints of gender and race on the experiences of African American Women in SNCC. Although the 'beloved community' is listed as a chapter title, her analysis is minimal. She states simply that gender within the 'beloved community' encouraged sexist tensions.

mobilization is highlighted. In doing so, Payne hints at the significance of community and community building for SNCC. He details many important aspects of community organizing like maintaining strong connections between activists and locals and understanding the importance of developing indigenous leadership. He also provides important personal anecdotes and comments from those involved in the Mississippi struggle, and this supplements available historical sources. Nevertheless, Payne does not directly comment on how SNCC's community was unique and meaningful.

Debra Shultz's examination of the civil rights movement comes from a very different perspective. Rather than focussing her analysis on a particular geographical area like Payne, Shultz's study looks primarily at northern Jewish women who travelled south to participate in the civil rights movement. While exploring Jewish cultural traditions of resistance, she also examines the motivations, background and experiences which enabled these young women to join the movement. Schultz's historical account is significant to the discussion of SNCC and the 'beloved community' because most of the Jewish women who joined the civil rights movement were active in SNCC. The SNCC community presented many ideas and principles that aligned with the women's goals and provided a supportive network in which to examine their own values and morals. These women were also able to evaluate their own understanding of being Jewish in both

a religious and secular way.[30] As activist Miriam Glickman recalls, many blacks within local communities referred to Jewish women as "brights"[31] or as a sympathetic third race rather than white.[32] From this standpoint, then, Schultz is able to discuss the important impact of the SNCC community on redefining racial and gendered identity.

If standard historical works do not always reflect the importance of the 'beloved community', there are a number of other kinds of sources that do.[33] Activist autobiographies are excellent sources for understanding the ways in which the 'beloved community' affected the experiences and development of these individuals. These autobiographies include John Lewis' *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, Mary King's *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement*, Endesha Ida Mae Holland's *From the Mississippi Delta: A Memoir*, Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and a compilation of personal stories entitled *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement*. In contrast to the mainstream civil rights movement, where most

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[30] Debra Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 106-107.

[31] A term Glickman describes to mean light-skinned since they were often seen as black.

[32] Schultz, p. 107.

[33] Howard Zinn (*The New Abolitionists*) and Sally Belfrage (*Freedom Summer*), for example, both produced scholarly work during the mid 1960s in response to their involvement with SNCC and other civil rights organizations. Although both texts provide interesting facts and some first hand experiences, they fall outside the boundaries of historical scholarship.

autobiographies have been written by visible leaders, many of the autobiographical writings produced have been by lesser known participants within SNCC. This suggests the important role that this period of activism represented in the young activists' lives and underscores the importance that every individual had within the SNCC organization. Within each autobiography, the authors discuss the significant role that SNCC had in shaping their understanding of the movement and themselves. Since the SNCC ideologies and value system helped to challenge the hegemonic construction of gender and race, activists responded to these changes within their writing. They wrote about how they felt less limited by race and gender within the supportive community.

Margo Perkins, in her analysis of female activism and the writing of autobiography, argues that activists use autobiographies as a way of connecting with other activists, creating a link between the personal and political, in the effort to create change and in order to create an alternative history which challenges the hegemonic way of knowing.[34] Since SNCC's activism required members to constantly integrate the personal and political autobiography becomes a continuation of the commitment and support experienced within the movement. Historian Joan Scott contributes to this argument in noting that the advent of writing and documentation from those who have been omitted or overlooked in accounts of the past has created a crisis for orthodox history "by multiplying not only stories,

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[34] Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), p. xii.

but subjects, and by insisting that histories are written from fundamentally different – indeed irreconcilable – perspectives or standpoints, no one of which is complete or completely 'true'."[35] These histories provide evidence of a "world of alternative values and practices whose existence gives the lie to hegemonic constructions of social worlds."[36] Without the use of autobiography in examining the impact of the 'beloved community', historians remain unable to examine the unique community structure that SNCC developed.

Because SNCC was an organization that attempted to break down the boundaries of race and gender, exploring the way in which women have been treated by civil rights historiography is significant. In fact, women's exclusion from early accounts of the civil rights movement has recently spawned a huge volume of literature on the subject.[37] This literature has included such discussions as the political and leadership roles women have played within the civil rights movement,

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[35] Joan Scott, "Experience",*Feminists Theorize the Political*. Ed. Judith and Joan W. Scott Butler (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 24.

[36] Scott, p. 24

[37] Some of the key works are: *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (1990) edited by Vicki L. Crawford and Jacqueline Anne Rouse, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (2001) edited by Bettye and V.P. Franklin Collier-Thomas Sara Evans' *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement & the New Left* (1979), Belinda Robnett's *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (1997) and Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984). Important biographies on women in the civil rights movement include Cynthia Griggs Fleming's *Soon We Will Not Cry* (1998) on Ruby Doris Smith and Joanne Grant's *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (1998).

the importance of community organizing, and the development of a feminist consciousness. These texts have also highlighted individual women's contributions to the civil rights movement.

Within discussions of SNCC, female participation and activism has been given a significant amount of attention. Paula Giddings' work *When and Where I Enter* published in 1984 is an excellent example of this trend. This work traces the ways in which black women have continuously been involved in the struggle against racial and patriarchal oppression by beginning with an exploration of the anti-lynching campaigns and ending with an examination of the Second Wave women's movement. Although not centered around the civil rights movement, her discussion of this time period looks at the importance of SNCC to black women's activism. Since it provided amazing opportunities for black women to lead and challenge stereotypes, SNCC was a logical choice for Giddings to use in her analysis. In addition, Giddings reinforces the importance of examining struggle over time and movement continuity and this was a key feature of the 'beloved community'.

Examining the experiences of women in the civil rights movement is also important because it helps to bring the female voice to the foreground of movement accounts. Vicki L. Crawford's and Jacqueline Anne Rouse's *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* and Betty Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin's *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* are both examples of how women's stories have become central to the way that historians are currently examining the civil

rights movement. This framework allows for a more complete and dynamic understanding of the civil rights movement and helps in legitimizing the experiences of women. This analysis has also helped to challenge the normative concepts of leadership, activism and participation, and has forced historians to broaden the ways they conceptualize the movement. Because much of SNCC's work involved the breaking down of racial and gendered boundaries, many of the personal histories that have contributed to this expanded concept of the civil rights movement have been from former SNCC participants.

The historiography of this committed group of young activists does not come in a neat and tidy package like that of other civil rights historiographies. Without a traditionally defined leader and organizational structure, retelling the history of SNCC becomes difficult and more complex. With varying agendas, projects at multiple local and national levels, and a non-hierarchically structured community, historians are forced to examine SNCC from many angles and perspectives. Using the 'beloved community' as a lens with which to examine SNCC between 1960 and 1964 allows for an exploration of the complex dynamics within the organization. Without this lens, it is impossible to understand the uniqueness and intricate nature of SNCC.

After Freedom Summer '64 and the Waveland Retreat[38] that fall, however,

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[38] The Waveland Retreat was a meeting organized by James Forman for November, 1964 in Waveland, Mississippi. The purpose of the meeting, as detailed in a SNCC memo sent to 160 staff members, was to confront a broad range of questions such as "where ... how ... why do we organize? Who should

SNCC's foundation and direction changed and this altered the role of the 'beloved community' within the organizational framework. A desire to seek autonomous power for African-Americans within the United States combined with a growing awareness of black nationalism to highlight the divisions between black and white members of SNCC. The disappointing results of nonviolent techniques in changing segregationist policies, laws and beliefs similarly compelled activists to search out new methods of achieving their goals. Although a tight-knit community was still important to SNCC, the 'beloved community' no longer reflected the same ideals and values as it once had, and was no longer a central feature of SNCC activism. But even after its collapse, former SNCC activists still highlight the 'beloved community's' importance to their personal growth and continued commitment to activism. Activist Diane Nash, for instance, defined the 'beloved community', at a conference in 1988, as

> ... a community that gave to its citizens all that it could give and allowed its member to then give back to the community all that they could. Our goal was to reconcile, to heal and to rehabilitate, to solve problems rather than to simply gain power over the opposition ... in order to create a community where there was more love and more humaneness, it was necessary to use humaneness and love to try to get to that point[39].

Years after the demise of SNCC, many activists have made continued attempts to

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be on the Executive Committee? ... Where is the civil rights movement now and what does that mean?" (Carson, p. 140) Activists were asked to prepare position papers for the meeting in order to get to the heart of problems and concerns.

[39] Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 18-19.

regain this sense of community through such things as email list-serves and reunions. As writer Mike Miller wrote in an article entitled "Renewing the Beloved Community",

> ... all of us identify that time as one of the most significant in our lives. Most of us never again experienced the intensity and depth of feeling that bound us together as a "beloved community"--both the way we sought to be with one another and the community we sought to build in the society as a whole[40].

This master's thesis examines how the concept of the 'beloved community' functioned within SNCC as a philosophical and religious framework, an organizational structure, and a means of creating a bond amongst a group of young people who had diverse experiences and came from different classes, races and geographic locations. The thesis has already situated this study within the context of the historical literature on SNCC and the civil rights movement. Chapter One follows this discussion by demonstrating that SNCC understood the deep historical roots of the struggle within the black community and provided the students with the necessary platform to help create and develop their own sense of community within the larger movement. It contains a detailed account of the development of nonviolence as it relates to the United States and a documentation of the ways in which much of the struggle during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries assisted in the emergence of SNCC. This chapter similarly investigates the important role that women played within abolitionist and nonviolent movements to

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[40] Mike Miller, "Renewing the Beloved Community", *Civil Rights Movement Veterans*, September 2000, <www.crmvet.org> (1 April, 2003)

set the stage for the significant role women would play in SNCC. Following this analysis, Chapter Two is an examination of the organizational structure of SNCC and the way in which leadership was conceived in accordance with the principles of the 'beloved community'. Also included in this chapter is an explanation of the ways in which the classification of leaders and leadership has been constructed according to race and gender, and an argument that the expansion of the meanings of these terms allows for a more complete understanding of SNCC. Chapter Three presents a synthesis of the different forms of communication used by SNCC to vocalize their beliefs and activities to each other and to the nation. Newspapers, the national media, communication teams and singing were all used not only as a means of eliciting support for the movement and fulfilling the students' goal of sharing the truth about the South, but also as a way of maintaining unity within the group. The final chapter, which relies primarily on autobiographical works, examines the ways in which the 'beloved community' affected individuals' experiences. This community enabled and encouraged men and women to look inside themselves, to reflect on their changing views of race, gender and class, and to determine what effect these changes would have on them personally. The community also created a safe environment for many women, especially white women from the South, to examine prescriptive gender roles.

An appreciation of the central role of the 'beloved community' within SNCC will enable scholars to broaden their understanding of the movement. It encourages a perspective of SNCC that considers more than the organization's

political and social goals, and it takes into account the personal experiences of those involved. Although former activists have made constant reference in their autobiographies and in interviews to the importance of this community structure, this has not been reflected in academic writings. Thinking about the 'beloved community' as a lens which highlights the unique characteristics and elements of the organization is necessary to fully understand SNCC's impact on the civil rights movement. The leadership and organizational structure, for instance, can be understood as overtly reflecting the values of the community. The way in which the organization cultivated its message and ensured that truth and honesty remained at the forefront of movement activities similarly becomes apparent through this form of analysis. Finally, this lens provides the framework with enables the voices of individuals who have been forgotten, ignored and written into the margins to become the focus rather than the backdrop. As a result of this thesis, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee can be seen not simply as a complex political organization involved in local and national campaigns against segregationist policies and blacks' exclusion from the political process but rather as a group of young, hopeful, moralistic and determined activists joined together by a common desire to create a community based on truth, equality, love and nonviolence. This community would also provide the support and encouragement needed for the development of individuals and the movement as a whole.

CHAPTER ONE

Historical Antecedents

> American radicals have never been able to reach each other across the decades very well. Each radical movement has risen and fallen in an historical moment gone before it has begun to be understood. Its leaders, its troops, its perception of issues, its solutions appear either sentimentally valorous, or else archaic, to its successors. But any movement for a different social order in American will not be the work of one generation alone. We have to mend discontinuities in the radical impulse if we can, head off generational misunderstandings, stand before others neither as false heroes nor as fallen idols. For this reason, it seems useful to try to begin to tell our story.[1]

The modern civil rights movement is often unjustly confined within the parameters of the 1960s. This is done both by historians who situate this decade as the beginning of the movement rather than a moment within a historical struggle against racial intolerance and by those who view this simply as a single struggle comprised of large events like the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision or the Montgomery bus boycott. This narrowly defined time frame limits the ability of historians to discuss the significant roles played by earlier generations of activists as well as the importance of established regional and national

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[1] Arlyn Diamond, "Choosing Sides, Choosing Lives: Women's Autobiographies of the Civil Rights Movement", *American Women's Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory,* Ed. Margo Culley (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), p. 228. This passage is from Eleanor Langer's Memoir.

organizations. These individuals and organizations were key in developing successful modes of direct action which activists drew upon throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Aldon Morris points out in the *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* that retaining the continuity between historical moments of activism is extremely important. It not only broadens the conception of leadership by highlighting the numerous ways that individuals have led within the movement but also helps to emphasize the importance of human agency.[2] In ignoring this continuity the less dramatic moments of the movement, like network building and community organizing, become undervalued.

This continuity is particularly significant when exploring the activism of students and student organizations during this period. The development of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the key youth organization in the civil rights movement, cannot be examined in a historical vacuum that denies the significance of earlier moments of struggle. Expanding the context for a study of the emergence of SNCC provides historians with the opportunity to understand the factors, individuals and organizations that enabled the 'beloved community' to develop and thrive from 1960 until 1965. This was particularly important since SNCC was an organization of young people. As SNCC activist Prathia Hall Wynn pointed out, there was an extensive learning curve and long educational process required for the students to succeed in their campaigns. "In the beginning we were

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[2] Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 415-417.

students...we had a lot to learn, and I think our attitude was that of learners. We went to learn from the people who had already been there ...."[3] To effectively understand the origins of SNCC, therefore, the nineteenth-century abolition movement, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference all need to be examined, for these organizations provided important examples which SNCC could build into its campaigns. In addition, by examining the ways in which SNCC was directly influenced by earlier generations of activists such as James Lawson, Ella Baker, Constance Curry and Amzie Moore, historians gain a more comprehensive understanding of the structure, image and experiences of SNCC and its members. These individuals provided necessary information, support and guidance for the young activists and their organization.

This expanded vision similarly requires a multi-disciplinary approach when examining the development of SNCC and its impact on the rest of the civil rights movement. The concepts and theories used in sociological studies of generational interactions are useful because they highlight the significant role played by earlier groups and individuals. Sociological theorists, relying on studies of both the parents of activists and the students themselves, argue that the social, political and religious tendencies of parents cannot be separated from the young activist's

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[3] Cited in Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 144.

understandings of him/herself.[4] This analysis is especially relevant to the development of SNCC's 'beloved community' when examining the religious backgrounds of its members. Nearly all SNCC activists between 1960 and 1964, for instance, were the children of ministers and/or had attended a theological institution with encouragement from their parents. Ignoring the significance of these activists' religious development undermines the important role religious ideas played in the organization of SNCC's 'beloved community'. By taking these activists' personal backgrounds into account, historians begin to understand how the students forged the tools, ideas, and systems that would carry them forward in creating their new version of society.

The connection between these two generations of activists has not always been acknowledged. Some scholars writing in the 1960s and 1970s have argued that the sit-ins were the result of an independent black student movement which was radically detached from previous civil rights activities and organizations.[5] Although SNCC did offer many ideas that differed from those of previously established groups, they were aware and conscious of those activists and organizations in existence before them. Using mobilization theory, as opposed to

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[4] Darren E. Sherkat and T. Jean Blocker, "The Political Development of Sixties Activists: Identifying the Influence of Class, Gender and Socialization on Protest Participation", *Social Forces*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (March 1994), p. 822-823.

[5] Aldon Morris, "Black Southern Sit-In Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 46, No. 6 (December 1981), p. 745

traditional collective behaviour theories[6], Aldon Morris points out that traditional theories obliterate the institutional and organizational framework from which the sit-ins emerged.[7] These networks were, in fact, instrumental to the development of SNCC. Building on the work of other theorists, Morris further argues that pre-existing social structures and organizations were crucial to the spread of collective activism.[8] His research demonstrates that there were 15 sit-ins between 1957 and 1960, thereby emphasizing the fact that the sit-ins which swept across the nation in 1960 were not simply reactive or isolated. The pre-1960 sit-ins were heavily reliant on the church for financial support and leadership, and had strong connections to youth chapters of the NAACP. These sit-ins were unable, however, to gain mass support because the NAACP had historically only been able to inspire 2% of the population to become members[9]. Morris argues that the contacts and political centres that were formed prior to the February 1960 Greensboro sit-ins were instrumental to the success of the 1960s sit-in movement.[10] Not only is it important to comprehend how organizations and individuals were involved in the explosion of youth-led civil rights activism during the 1960s, but it is necessary to look at the ways in which nonviolent philosophies and the idea of the 'beloved

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[6] This theory emphasizes the irrationality of participants.

[7] Morris, p. 745.

[8] *Ibid,* p. 746

[9] *Ibid*, p. 751.

[10] *Ibid*, p. 754-755.

community' has been developed within the United States.

Nonviolent resistance and philosophy was not a new concept or form of activism when students adopted this technique at the beginning of the 1960s. It had been used in a number of countries around the globe from the 19th century onward. The term nonviolence refers to the attempt to resolve a conflict through "direct action undertaken at risk but without recourse to [the] destructive force"[11]. Evolving from concepts of non-resistance and pacifism, nonviolence is a modern construct with deeper meanings than the absence of violence within conflict. As a term with a variety of intended meanings, it can be best understood when broken down into multiple parts ranging from non-resistance to nonviolent revolution.[12]

When discussing the origins and development of the modern civil rights movement, the most important distinctions in nonviolent typologies are active reconciliation, moral resistance, *Satyagraha* and nonviolent revolution. Active reconciliation is based on principles in which the individual seeks personal improvement and reconciliation alongside outward attempts to convince their

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[11] Charles Chatfield, "Nonviolent Movements in the United States", *Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective,* Ed. Stephen Zune et al. (Massachusetts: Black well Publishers Inc., 1999), p. 283.

[12] The typology outlined by Gene Sharp argues that there are nine levels of nonviolent action. These are non-resistance, active reconciliation, moral resistance, selective nonviolence, passive resistance, peaceful resistance, nonviolent direct action, Satyagraha and nonviolent revolution. This is a fluid structure which does not limit a particular event or organization from utilizing elements from multiple classifications. Sharp's (1969 revised version) divisions of nonviolent participation was used by Bo Wirmack's (1974) examination of Nonviolence in the Civil Rights Movement.

opponent, without coercion, of their position.[13] Since many supporters of this type of nonviolent action prefer a "quietest" approach, they opposed direct action, agitation and strategy.[14] Moral resistance places the emphasis on his/her moral responsibility and seeks gradual social reforms through education, legislation, and the actions of government officials.[15] *Satyagraha* is derived directly from Mohandas K. Gandhi and can be translated approximately as "the adherence or reliance on the truth."[16] Gandhi argued that peaceful resistance, which is classified by Gene Sharp as the previous level of nonviolence, would achieve only limited goals and reflected 'nonviolence of the weak'.[17] True *Satyagraha* required a strong inner conviction which would enable movements to achieve greater accomplishments and more extensive social change.[18] Without a systemized philosophy, Gandhi dealt with problems as they arose, relying on the ethical principles of truth, *ahimsa*[19], and

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[13] Gene Sharp, "The Meanings of Nonviolence: A Typology (Revised)", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 1959), p. 42. Gene Sharp has been a major contributor to the study of nonviolent struggle, having produced numerous volumes of work including *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (3 Volumes) and *Social Power and Political Freedom, Gandhi as a Potential Strategist.* Currently a Senior Scholar at the Albert Einstein Institution in Boston, Sharp also held research appointments at Harvard University's Centre for International Affairs for nearly thirty years.

[14] *Ibid*, p. 48.

[15] *Ibid,* p. 49.

[16] *Ibid*, p. 57.

[17] *Ibid*, p. 55-56.

[18] *Ibid*, p. 55-56.

[19] Ahimsa means non-injury to living beings in thought, word and deed

equality. The final stage of nonviolent activity to be defined is nonviolent revolution. This approach relies on action and thought rather than on a fixed ideology.[20] It emphasizes the need for both individuals and society to change in order for major social problems to be solved.[21] One of the most significant differences between non-resistance and nonviolence, as argued by Mennonite Guy Hershberger, is the belief that the Bible forbids participation in warfare, violence and all forms of coercion.[22] It is significant, however, to recognize that these different concepts and modes of thinking have influenced each other and can have different meanings depending on social circumstances.

Appearing in the Old and New Testament and the writings of Buddha, the concept of non-resistance to evil has a long history among religious activists within the United States and throughout the world. Non-resistance, as it is described in the Scriptures, is a term developed out of the biblical passage from Matthew 5:39, "But I say unto you, *that ye resist not evil*, but whosoever smites thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."[23] Quakers, for instance, used "suffering and patience under persecution as an instrument for converting and influencing

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[20] Sharp, p. 59.

[21] *Ibid*, p. 59.

[22] *Ibid*, p. 42.

[23] Harold S. Martin, "The Christian and Nonresistance", n.d., <http://www.brfwitness.org/Articles/1968v3n1.htm> (June 1, 2003). Martin argues that nonresistance is really a result of the doctrine of grace. He notes that God displays grace towards sinners, enemies, etc... and, therefore, humans should reflect this and display love towards enemies and grace to those who attempt to persecute others.

neighbours"[24] and were instrumental in transferring beliefs from America throughout Europe and vice versa. Within Quaker churches, often referred to as 'peace churches', the application of principles such as the equal worth of all persons regardless of gender or race and the rejection of war and killing was implemented.[25] According to the typology designed by Sharp, the Quakers and many pacifists fall under the category of active reconciliation, which implies that change must first be reflected in one's own life before attempting to accomplish a "positive alteration in the attitude and policy of the group or person responsible for some undesirable situation."[26]

It was not until the abolitionist movement of the early 19th century that the concept of resistance to evil was transformed from a "personal, religiously inspired expression of moral conviction into a consciously developed tactic."[27] Theodore Dwight Weld and the Grimke sisters, Angelina and Sarah, were among those abolitionists working within the Anti-Slavery Society, established by Arthur Tappan in 1831, to bring about social change. After attending the Oneida Institute and

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[24] Lerner, p. 60. In the late 18th century, Quaker John Woolman tried to reason with slaveholders arguing that slavery represented the evils of society. He felt that "conduct [was] more convincing than language" which was the reason he refused to participate in the system of slavery. Mary Dyer, also a Quaker, argued that the persecution of heretics was unjust. She voiced her disapproval with no success, so put her own life on the line as a nonviolent protest against the persecutions.

[25] Chatfield, p. 284.

[26] Sharp, p. 47.

[27] Lerner, p. 63.

meeting Charles Stuart, Weld was encouraged to join the abolitionist cause and was a strong supporter of nonviolent techniques in achieving social reform. In a newspaper article printed in 1836 he noted, "let the mob have the credit for all the noise and disorder, while the friends of human rights retain their position with the calmness of reason...."[28] In addition, Weld determined that a mob would not attack a man whose hands were folded and standing still. This demonstration piqued the curiosity of bystanders and members of the mob thereby providing a platform for Weld to use in order to inform others of his views against slavery.[29]

As a minority group within nineteenth-century American culture, the abolitionists utilized the moral strength of religious non-resistance principles and the persuasive power of nonviolence to create an effective strategy in the fight against slavery. William Lloyd Garrison, a young white abolitionist, stated at the New England Abolitionist Convention on May 26, 1858 that when the "anti-slavery movement was launched it was baptized in the spirit of peace .... I do not believe that the weapons of liberty ever have been or ever could be the weapons of despotism."[30] Garrison's remark was used to further persuade his audience and to highlight the dichotomy between violence and liberty. In addition, Garrison's own credo was "I will not equivocate–I will not excuse–I will not retreat a single inch–

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[28] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[30] Sharp, *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 1959), p. 50.

AND I WILL BE HEARD."[31] This demonstrates his personal commitment to abolishing slavery, and his awareness of nonviolence as a viable tactic. The abolitionists relied almost completely on being able to achieve their goals by personal and individual example, and also by persuading others to refuse participation in the system of slavery. Emphasis was not placed on examining the economic and social infrastructure which allowed slavery to exist. The abolitionist movement of the 19th century, in this sense, can be seen as falling into the category of moral resistance.

Another important element of the anti-slavery movement was the opportunity it provided for white and black women to enter the public sphere. The Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, initially formed in 1832 by free black women, and the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, a mixed race group founded in 1833, are two examples of organizations which developed. These organizations, and others like them, emerged partly out of the fact that many male abolitionists, like Lewis Tappan, felt that a woman's place, especially if that woman were black, was not to speak in public. This belief was reinforced by the exclusion of female participation in any male-dominated anti-slavery society until 1840.[32] Even though women had been rejected from these mainstream organizations, the abolitionist movement proved to be an excellent opportunity for white and black women to gain increased

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[31] Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), p. 105.

[32] *Ibid*, p. 109.

access and power within the political sphere.

Within the abolitionist movement women were not only debating the role and purpose of slavery. This movement and these organizations provided women with a forum to explore concepts of identity, myths surrounding black womanhood[33] and the notion of equality between the sexes. Maria W. Stewart, a black abolitionist, published a short article in 1831 entitled *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build* and in it she discussed issues of black autonomy. She argued that black women needed to refute the image that blacks were "ignorant, lazy, and degenerate" perpetuated by the south by taking part in politics, education and business.[34] Challenging the restrictions placed on blacks by slavery lead abolitionists to similarly question other restricting elements within Southern culture. It was also during this period of debate over slavery that the dual burden of race and sex became more apparent to African-American women. As Mary Church Terrell noted, "What would they [white women] do ... if they had two heavy loads to carry through an unfriendly world, ..."[35] In arguing for equal access to voting rights, black women were, therefore, not only

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[33] This dichotomy, as pointed out by Deborah Gray White(1985), justifies and excuses the sexual exploitation of women through the image of Jezebel while the character of Mammy endorses black women's domestic service in Southern households.

[34] Hine et al., p. 107

[35] Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, "Advancement of the Race through African-American Women's Organizations in the South, 1895-1925", *The Journal of Negro Education,* Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1982), p. 221.

attempting to break down the hierarchy of race but also that of gender.

The need to utilize nonviolent methods, however, was not universally accepted by abolitionists, especially those advocates from the southern states. Support for the 'Just War position'[36] by some abolitionists, although often seen as an ethical norm for Western civilizations, undermined the effectiveness of nonviolent tactics.[37] This position allowed for the definition of legitimate and non-legitimate support of violence, creating a loss in the effective nature of nonviolent techniques and principles. As another example of the inconsistency in application, activists in Kentucky never witnessed the same level of sophistication about abolitionist nonviolence as did the northeast.[38] In the end, the fear of an uprising from black slaves and Antebellum southern culture, which viewed violent acts in defence of one's honour and rights in a more positive light than the north, were essential factors in the differing vantage points of abolitionists.[39] The transition from non-resistance to nonviolence was exceptionally important in the evolution of activism as it signified not only the change from a purely religiously centred idea and construct but also demonstrated the close connection between the African-

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[36] The 'Just War' position argued that violence could and should be used in the event of a war. Essentially it was used to justify the use of violence while still supporting abolition.

[37] Chatfield, p. 284.

[38] Stanley Harrold, "Violence and Nonviolence in Kentucky Abolitionism", *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. LVII, No. 1 (February 1991), p. 8.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

American struggle for rights and freedom, encouraged by the abolitionist movement, and nonviolent philosophy and resistance.

Among generations of African-American slaves, a culture of nonviolent resistance had "evolved, embedded in language, song, and forms of humour."[40] This culture was developed not only by slaves determined to retain a level of control by resisting the power structure in small but forceful ways but also through strong leadership by men and women within existing organizations, churches and communities. This culture was embraced and perpetuated by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and has been reflected in many civil rights texts. In Bo Wirmark's analysis of nonviolence and the civil rights movement he argues, however, that the Montgomery Bus Boycott was the primary instance in which African-Americans embraced nonviolent tactics.[41] In denying the lengthy history of nonviolence in black communities, Wirmark contributes to the traditional histories which have limited and isolated African-American activism . By denying the continuous nature of black activist struggles, their authority and power are undermined.

It is also significant that much of the nonviolent resistance that occurred throughout the history of the United States has been carried out by women.

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[40] Chatfield, p. 284.

[41] Bo Wirmark, "Nonviolent Methods and the American Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965", *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1974), p. 117.

According to historian Gerda Lerner, the idea and practice of nonviolence as a tool of resistance was developed equally by American women and men. However, most historical accounts do not recognize this fact, and Lerner argues that when women nonviolent resisters have been mentioned they "are usually described as followers of male leadership."[42] In Gene Sharp's list of 200 detailed instances of the use of nonviolence, women are scarcely visible.[43] Rather than including women's resistance within the existing discourse on nonviolence, they have ended up on the periphery. It is important, therefore, to reintroduce to civil rights movement texts the historical context in which women's nonviolent participation has occurred as a way of validating these previous experiences and emphasizing the continuity between generations.

Since nonviolent tactics subtly challenge existing systems of oppression, they provide women with the opportunity to organize and claim positions of leadership in ways that might not have been afforded them otherwise. In addition, nonviolent protest often operates outside the boundaries of mainstream political and social culture, and thus is seen as less threatening. For this reason women are

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[42] Lerner, p. 59.

[43] Pam McAllister, "You Can't Kill the Spirit: Women and Nonviolent Action", *Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective*. Ed. Stephen Zune et al. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), p. 22-23. McAllister also makes mention of other researchers and theorists which disregard the contributions of women like *Blessed Are the Peacemakers* (1971) edited by Allen and Linda Kirschner, in which only Joan Baez is the only woman mentioned. Staughton Lyndon's work *Nonviolence in America* includes 46 of 535 pages on women.

able to legitimately gain opportunities and access through this form of activism. The act of accounting for women's use of nonviolent philosophies and techniques, therefore, serves not only to ensure the accessibility and survival of these stories but becomes in itself an act of nonviolent resistance. Pam McAllister adds to this argument by stating that the use of nonviolence facilitates the complex reality of all struggles and recognizes and appreciates both the diversity of experience and the common ground among the participants.[44] Violent tactics, in opposition, rely on "polarization and dualistic thinking and require us to divide ourselves into the good and the bad."[45] In eliminating violent tactics, the role of the victim, and consequently that of the oppressor are removed allowing for a further exploration of the definitions of race, class, and gender by the participants.[46] Nonviolence therefore becomes both a tool of protest and a tool of analysis.

The organizations that emerged in the 20th century recognized the usefulness of nonviolent principles and were driven by the desire to ameliorate the situation for southern blacks. The NAACP, for instance, was organized in 1909 as a response to increased concern over racial tension and discrimination. It relied on legal and judicial means to achieve greater equality, but was not able to make many inroads in rural communities where violence and racial segregation were used to

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[44] *Ibid*, p. 18.

[45] *Ibid*, p. 18.

[46] Casey Hayden, "Fields of Blue", *Deep In Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 342. Quoting notes from 1988 Trinity College Conference.

block legal changes. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), founded in 1957, tried another approach. According to those who founded the SCLC, taking advantage of local leadership was the only way that major changes could be achieved within rural communities. Although the most prominent figure of the SCLC was Martin Luther King, Jr., it was in fact three radicals, Stanley Levinson, Bayard Rustin and Ella Baker, who saw the Montgomery Bus Boycott as the perfect "springboard for a new organization."[47] According to these three, this new organization needed to come from the South, in order to be effective be directed by southern blacks, and appear to have developed spontaneously.[48] Recognizing the Congress On Racial Equality's[49] (CORE) inability to gain a mass following, the SCLC was designed by Baker, Levinson and Rustin as an umbrella organization that would facilitate the joining of local groups and would provide advice and assistance to other organizations.[50]

The organization was realized predominantly by southern black ministers, many of whom were members of the NAACP and some of whom were affiliated with

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[47] Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), p. 30.

[48] Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, p. 32-33.

[49] CORE was founded in 1942 by an interracial group of students from Chicago. It was originally known as the Committee of Racial Equality and had strong ties to the Fellowship of Reconciliation, as many of these students were members there as well. Anonymous, "The History of Core", n.d. <http://www.core-online.org/history/history.htm> (October 1, 2003)

[50] Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America,* p. 33.

the bus boycotts, and this occurred after a conference was called by Martin Luther King, Jr. on New Year's Day, 1957. The original name of the group was the "Southern Leadership Conference on Transportation and Nonviolence". It was not until the following meeting on February 14th that Christian was added and Transportation and Nonviolence dropped. As one of the ministers argued, "...by calling itself 'Christian', the organization might be less vulnerable to charges of radicalism and communism – charges which the NAACP continually attracted."[51]

As the SCLC wanted to appeal to the masses, ministers played a dominant role within the organizational structure. Since African-American churches were owned and controlled by blacks themselves, preachers had more economic independence and, therefore, greater independence of speech action within their communities.[52] In addition, the black church had traditionally represented a gathering place in which information and guidance could be provided. In attempting to utilize their freedom of speech and access to the community, the SCLC launched the "Crusade for Citizenship" in February 1958 in an attempt to increase the number of southern black voters.[53] However, this proved unsuccessful in linking the

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[51] Adam Fairclough, "The Preachers and the People: The Origins and Early Years of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1959", *Journal of Southern History,* Vol. 52, No. 3 (August 1986), p. 424.

[52] Fairclough, "The Preachers and the People", p. 405.

[53] Jacqueline A. Rouse, "'We Seek to Know ... in Order to Speak the Truth': Nurturing the Seeds of Discontent – Septima P. Clark and Participatory Leadership", *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, Ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 111.

organization's leaders to the broader population and overcoming the high rate of illiteracy which prevented many blacks from passing the voting literacy tests.[54] Septima Clark, through her experience with the Highlander Folk School, helped to establish Citizenship Schools in many southern communities, after 1959, by getting directly involved with the community.[55] Clark was able to communicate to the local residents that they were powerful and had the potential to alter their own lives.

By the beginning of the sit-ins, younger activists had come to regard the leadership within the church system and, by association, the SCLC as ineffectual and disconnected from the actual concerns of the African-American community. Carolyn Callosa-Thomas and John Lucaites argue in their analysis of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his role in promoting politics and religion that,

> [t]he black church represented a relatively conservative political activism. Its interests were privatized resulting in the creation of a relatively silent black community operating within the boundaries set for it by the politically dominant white society.[56]

Although connection to spirituality and religion were still important to the young activists, they felt that the pulpit was not the only place where African-Americans could voice their opinions and create effective strategies for change. Ella Baker and Septima Clark agreed with the youngsters' view since they had not been given

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[54] Rouse, p. 111.

[55] *Ibid*, p. 111-112.

[56] Carolyn Callosa-Thomas and John Luis Lucaites, "Introduction", *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse,* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), p. 7.

access to the formal leadership positions within the SCLC.

The SCLC was not the only organization that relied on and associated themselves with Christian principles and doctrine as a way of battling racial and human inequalities. Although not directly involved with the battle for civil rights, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) is significant to the emergence of SNCC because it provided an opportunity for adults and youth with strong religious principles and convictions to organize. Based on moral ideas and religious beliefs, rather than just political or social goals, FOR supplied many activists with tools that enabled them to repeat its format. The organization was formed in 1914 after a group of more than 150 Christians, fearing that war was near, organized a meeting in Germany in an attempt to head off hostilities.[57] War became a reality during the meeting, causing all attendees to flee for their home countries. Four months after the initial meeting, holding firm to the notion that Christian love could transcend all boundaries,[58] the group was officially begun at Trinity College and Henry Hodgkin, a British Quaker, was nominated as the first chairperson.

> Members of the Fellowship bore gallant witness to the insanity of war and the belief that truth is stronger than falsehood, that love overcomes hate, and that nonviolence is more enduring than violence. For them, religious faith broke down the barriers of nation

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[57] Richard Deats, "The Rebel Passion: Eighty Five-Years of the Fellowship of Reconciliation", The Fellowship of Reconciliation: For a World of Peace, Justice and Nonviolence, 2001, <http://www.forusa.org/nonviolence/0900_63Deats.html> (May 15, 2003).

[58] Deats, "The Rebel Passion: Eighty Five-Years of the Fellowship of Reconciliation".

and race, class and tradition.[59]

This organization gained momentum in the United States when Hodgkin visited New York in 1915; as a result the American FOR was created and Gilbert A. Beaver was chosen chairperson. Listed in an early organization leaflet from New York, the FOR Statement of Purpose exemplifies the significance of nonviolence to its membership.

> Although members do not bind themselves to any exact form of words, they refuse to participate in any war or to sanction military preparations; they work to abolish war and to foster goodwill among nations, races and classes; they strive to build a social order which will suffer no individual or group to be exploited for the profit or pleasure of another, and which will ensure to all the means for realizing the best possibilities of life; ... and to maintain the spirit of self-giving love while engaged in the struggle to achieve these purposes.[60]

The American FOR did not, however, confine its efforts to issues related to military armament and wars as expressed within this statement of purpose. Rather, FOR was interested in stopping any system of exploitation which affected a group's or individual's abilities "for realizing the best possibilities in life".[61] By the 1940s, FOR was determined to help "eradicate the evils of racism" and to help build the

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[59] Deats, "The Rebel Passion: Eighty Five-Years of the Fellowship of Reconciliation".

[60] Sharp, *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 1959), 50.

[61] Deats, "The Rebel Passion: Eighty Five-Years of the Fellowship of Reconciliation".

'beloved community'.[62] FOR became directly involved with CORE in the first interracial sit-in in 1943.[63] By associating itself with this fight, FOR illustrated the dynamic relationship between war and the violent system of oppression, evident in southern culture, which limited the opportunities for African-Americans. Highlighting the internal racial struggles within the United States during a period of intense scrutiny over international instances of racial intolerance marked a significant turning point in the support for change within the African-American community.

This is not to say, however, that FOR was a completely open-minded and forgiving organization for which to work. Bayard Rustin, who became a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation during the 1930s and helped James Farmer in 1942 set up CORE, an offshoot of FOR, eventually became disillusioned with FOR after members claimed that Rustin's support of the Montgomery Bus Boycott attracted damaging and unsolicited media attention.[64] This was compounded by the fact that elements of Rustin's personal life, such as the fact that he had once belonged to the Young Communist League and was gay, had become public

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[62] FOR borrowed the term 'beloved community' from Martin Luther King, Jr.. Glenn Smiley, member of FOR, worked alongside King during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

[63] Deats, "The Rebel Passion: Eighty Five-Years of the Fellowship of Reconciliation".

[64] Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America,* p. 23-24.

knowledge.[65]

The most important and significant role that FOR played in the emergence of the modern civil rights movement, and most notably SNCC, was employing Reverend James Lawson as southern secretary based out of Nashville in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Before joining FOR in Nashville, Lawson spent time studying Gandhian philosophies and techniques in India, five years after Gandhi's death. Lawson considered Gandhi to be one of his spiritual and intellectual mentors.[66] Returning to the United States in 1956, Lawson enrolled at Oberlin College to pursue a degree in theology.[67] Having participated in sit-ins[68] and studied and experimented with nonviolence for close to ten years, Lawson's unique skills and background were of significant use to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC. Instead of going to work for the SCLC in Atlanta however, he decided that his experiences would be put to better use working within a southern community like Nashville.

Nashville's history of culturally rather than legally based segregation, the

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[65] *Ibid*, p. 24.

[66] James Lawson, "Interview with Reverend James Lawson", A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict, 2000, <http://www.pbs.org/weta/forcemorepowerful/nashville/interview.html> (December 1, 2002)

[67] Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America,* p. 59.

[68] Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America,* p. 59. At the age of twenty-two Lawson filed for conscientious observer status rather than register for the Korean War draft. He spent fourteen months in jail for his refusal to serve.

city's reputation as moderate and progressive in contrast to the "deep south", and the existence of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council made it an excellent site for developing a permanent nonviolent movement.[69] Nashville, and more specifically Fisk University, attracted many prominent movement speakers like Fred Shuttlesworth, W.E.B. Du Bois and Thurgood Marshall. Residents were thus kept abreast of victories in the fight against segregation. But James Lawson was hesitant about belonging to and participating in a movement which reflected the slower paced "peace" movements he had witnessed as a student during the thirties and forties; therefore, he turned again to Gandhi's *Satyagraha*, which promoted a "militant aggressiveness about looking at life and going forward and going towards it".[70] Lawson taught Gandhi's principles, initiated discussions between members of all religious affiliations – which he argued were linked through a common view of justice -- and attempted to demonstrate the historical connection[71] between all actions of nonviolence in his workshops held at Clark Memorial United Methodist church. These workshops were attended by numerous students from Fisk University, including Marion Barry, Paul LaPrad and Diane Nash, as well as the American Baptist Theological School, including Bernard Lafayette, James Bevel and John Lewis. Activist John Lewis pointed out in his autobiography that it was "mind-blowing" to find out that the tension between right and wrong that he had

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[69] Lawson, "Interview with Reverend James Lawson"

[70] Lawson, "Interview with Reverend James Lawson"

[71] John Lewis, *Walking in the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 79.

experienced since his childhood had an historical context.[72] That people had been experiencing the same sorts of injustices, asking the same sorts of questions, and reacting in a nonviolent manner to these types of situations for generations was comforting and encouraging to Lewis.[73] These workshops by Lawson also began to discuss the system of oppression and the symbiotic relationship between the oppressor and the victim.

While James Lawson was holding workshops for students in Nashville, Ella Baker, then of the SCLC, was spearheading the organization of a conference to coordinate student activities countrywide. Ella Baker's experience as an activist began after her graduation from Shaw University in 1927 and her subsequent migration to New York City. Although her childhood and family had provided her with a solid foundation for being a proud, self-sufficient black person, Baker was very interested in helping others achieve this same level of self-confidence and awareness.[74] During the 1930s, Baker was involved with the Worker Education Project of the Works Progress Administration, a program run and staffed primarily by women.[75] Her involvement with this organization furthered her belief in the need

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[72] *Ibid*, p. 79.

[73] *Ibid*, p. 79.

[74] Payne, p. 80-81.

[75] Barbara Ransby, "Behind-the-Scenes View of a Behind-the-Scenes Organizer: The Roots of Ella Baker's Political Passions", *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement,* Ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 46.

for equality of opportunity for all individuals. As a way of offsetting the stress of the Depression and exploring alternatives to capitalist social relations, Baker began running workshops and classes in Harlem which advocated buying co-ops and consumer clubs.[76] Working within a network of strong women and helping to create social change helped Baker in defining herself as an activist and an intellectual.[77]

Ella Baker's activism, however, was not only limited to helping the adult population. From 1934 to 1936, for instance, Baker helped to develop the Young People's Forum at the Harlem Library where those aged sixteen to twenty-six could participate in discussions and workshops on social, political and economic issues of the day.[78] "Miss Baker successfully formed an active organization, which she brought into touch with other youth groups in the neighbourhood and city"[79] was how the Harlem librarian described her actions and the significance of the role she played in supporting networks of young people. Baker recognized the need to encourage the energy and determination of young people and to educate them about the ways to change society. For Baker, this youthful spirit and dedication needed to be fostered and channelled towards improving the situation for African-Americans.

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[76] *Ibid,* p. 47.

[77] *Ibid,* p. 47.

[78] Payne, p. 84.

[79] *Ibid,* p. 84.

It was not until 1941 that Ella Baker became involved with the official struggle for African-American rights by joining the NAACP first as a field secretary and then as National Director of Branches. During this period she also developed connections and friendships with, in her words, "people who were in the Communist Party, and all the rest of the Left forces"[80] including Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levinson. Although appreciative of the access to political and philosophical ideologies, and to strong female activists provided through her work with the NAACP, Baker felt that the NAACP had allowed itself to become fixated on a middle-class agenda, ignoring the kinds of economic and political issues that were of importance to the poor and working-classes, and had not taken advantage of the discontent building within black communities since the Second World War.[81] By providing seminars on leadership and encouraging programs at the local level, supporting the participation of all persons, and operating as a democratic organization, Baker felt that the NAACP would be living up to its capabilities and responsibilities to itself and the Black community.[82] In addition, Baker's travels with the NAACP helped her to develop important contacts within the South that would be invaluable to the next generation of activists.[83] The organizational characteristics that Ella Baker argued for were, in her opinion, necessary elements

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[80] Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America,* p. 33.

[81] *Payne,* p. 87.

[82] *Ibid,* p. 87-91

[83] Robnett, p. 142

to a successful movement and they were features that she would bring up again within the SCLC and SNCC.

Since she provided inspiration for the SCLC prior to its inception, it is only logical that Ella Baker would become the organization's acting executive director after leaving the NAACP. For most of 1958 and 1959, Baker worked almost single-handedly to try and relieve the financial strain the SCLC was experiencing and to develop a strong system for voter-registration. Becoming increasing disenchanted with the leadership and structure of the SCLC, Ella Baker continued to speak her mind and suggest ways of increasing the successes of the SCLC, much like she had done within the NAACP. Her opinions and intellect, however, held seemingly less power within the SCLC. Ella Baker was forced to confront the realities of being a woman in a male dominated organization.

> "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 [the women] and the young people. ...I had known ... that there would never be any role for me in a leadership capacity with SCLC. Why? First I'm a woman. Also, I'm not a minister ... the role of women in their church setups is that of taking orders, not providing leadership."[84]

Ella Baker stayed within the SCLC long enough to visualize and implement the conference for the students in 1960.

Amzie Moore's contribution to the advancement of rights and freedom for

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[84] Payne, p. 92.

African-Americans similarly began during his youth when he became involved with an organization of Black Republicans and then when he registered to vote during the mid-1930's.[85] It was not until Moore returned from the Second World War, however, that his awareness of the culturally embedded system of racial discrimination within American society was heightened. Alongside many other African American war veterans, these men returned to the United States with increased confidence and self-esteem, and little desire to "passively readapt to the South's humiliating caste system."[86] Moore spent much of the 1940s and 1950s helping to maintain the civil rights struggle through his involvement with the NAACP and efforts to encourage local people to join the struggle, even under the violent and intimidating conditions.[87] Moore, in fact, was seen by some as the father of the civil rights movement because of his continued support and dedication.[88] As a strong believer in voter registration, Moore encouraged the next generation of activists, and in particular Bob Moses of SNCC, to send volunteers into Mississippi to continue the struggle for racial equality.

Although Moore's involvement in the civil rights struggle was hands-on, many activists remained influential by their involvement in established institutions.

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[85] *Ibid*, p. 30.

[86] Fairclough, "The Preachers and the People", p. 406.

[87] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening*, Third Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 26.

[88] Payne, p. 63.

Constance Curry's involvement in the struggle for racial equality did not emerge, like others, from personal attacks in the segregated south. The difficulties and struggles in Ireland, she argued, were planted within her from a young age as an Irish descendant, and undoubtedly led her to question the American system of democracy.[89] Her experience as a white southern women similarly exposed her to the existence of sharp inequalities. Curry became involved with the National Students Association (NSA) during the late 1950s, choosing education as a forum in which to initiate change. The statement in the preamble to the NSA constitution -- "to all people, because of their inherent dignity as individuals, equal rights and possibilities for primary, secondary, and higher education, regardless of sex, race, religion, political belief or economic circumstances"[90] – complemented Curry's view of how society should operate. This belief led her to collaborate with SNCC and support the design of the 'beloved community'. Also working with the NSA was Ray Farabee who felt that the 1950's generation was quite different from their parents' and, with exposure to new ideas and concepts, could be encouraged to participate in the struggle for social change.[91] Farabee recognized that students were capable of accomplishing changes when efforts were combined.

The 1950s and 1960s were not, however, the first time that students joined

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[89] Constance Curry, "Wild Geese to the Past", *Deep In Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 4.

[90] *Ibid*, p. 8.

[91] *Ibid*, p. 12.

to form their own movements and organizations. Although adult directed organizations like the Intercollegiate Socialist Society made headway in establishing campaigns on campuses in the early 1900s, it was not until the 1930s that the first American mass student movement emerged.[92] This movement, led primarily by socialists, communists and pacifists, emerged out of a political analysis of the economic situation in the United States and the rise of fascism.[93] Students tended to be more acutely aware of democratic issues because their college and university experiences were preparing them to be the next generation to participate actively in society.[94] As such, student movements across the country also supported the reformation of university life, which included advocating for an end to discrimination against African-Americans.[95] The demands of the Fisk University black student revolt of the 1920s, which called for a less paternalistic and white dominated university administration, continued to resonate among black students and many white students during the 1930s when two university law schools were integrated. As such, there were a number of young people who were proud of their connection to the youth chapters of the NAACP although very little activity seems

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[92] Robert Cohen, "Student Activism in the United States, 1905-1960", *Student Political Activism: An International Reference Handbook*, ed. Philip G. Altbach (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989) 427-432.

[93] Cohen 432-433.

[94] Andrew Barlow, "The Student Movement of the 1960s and the Politics of Race" *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, Vol. 19 No. 3 (1990), p. 2.

[95] Cohen 437.

to have emerged directly from these students.[96] This support and awareness developed into the 1950s, when the Supreme Court handed downs its historic *Brown vs Board of Education* ruling.

For African-American students at southern colleges, however, the 1950s also represented a moment in which political mobilization and radicalism was heightened.[97] Less affected by the purging of the left going on in many institutions of higher education, black students remained in more supportive and facilitating environments where they were seen simultaneously as community activists and students.[98] Emerging in the sixties as movement leaders, therefore, was a logical extension of their activities.

In isolation, these concepts, individuals and organizations represent singular instances of action against the status quo. Taken together, however, they demonstrate the continuity of struggle within the African-American community and provide the necessary foundation for the emergence and development of SNCC. FOR and the SCLC provided examples of organizational structures for SNCC to

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[96] John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York, 1998), p. 52. It is evident from the writings of black southerners, like Moody and Lewis, that the Brown decision had an impact on their lives. It shook up the system of segregation highlighting that blacks did desire better and that separate was not equal. Although this decision did not directly affect these two, by being invited to formerly all white schools, but did force them to question their own identity within the black community and black/white hierarchy.

[97] Barlow, p. 5-6.

[98] *Ibid*, p. 6.

analyse and build upon. Both organizations were also strong advocates of using nonviolent techniques. On a practical level, both the SCLC and the NSA provided important financial support by allowing SNCC to operate out of the SCLC offices in Atlanta, donating paper, envelopes and other office supplies, and having the *Student Voice* newspaper printed out of the NSA office.

For SNCC, being able to relate to and understand the actions of their forefathers was necessary in creating new positive definitions of blackness. As Charles Kiel has argued,

> ...more Negroes must identify themselves. They must struggle with their past and accept it – all of it; they must honor their heroes and prophets, past and present; they must define with greater care who they are now and what they want their children to become.[99]

Ella Baker, for instance, was not only instrumental in organizing the first conference which helped SNCC get off the ground but also became a strong role model for both men and women in the movement. Her inner strength and commitment to the movement were honoured. Ella Baker's refusal to have her personal life brought into political discussions, for instance, demonstrated to other female activists that their positions within SNCC were not dictated by their intimate relationships with men.[100] Similarly, James Lawson's influence and experience were key elements in the development of the student movement in Nashville.

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[99] Kerran L. Sanger, *"When The Spirit Says Sing!" The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement*" (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), p. 4.

[100] Ransby, p. 50.

Many of the leaders of this movement, like Diane Nash and John Lewis, became powerful activists within SNCC. Amzie Moore and Constance Curry, although involved less directly in SNCC, provided important connections to local community activists and to key organizations. Constance Curry, through her work with the NSA, also attracted other white southern women, like Casey Hayden and Dorothy Dawson, to join SNCC's activities.[101] What remains most important in understanding the background of SNCC's development is that the role of the individuals that contributed to and shaped the movement are highlighted, especially since many of them have remain unrecognized by other movement histories.

By demonstrating how nonviolence has been associated with multiple organizations and movements throughout the history of the United States, SNCC's adoption of these methods and principles in this moment becomes more apparent. In addition, the number of key individuals who had previous experience in civil rights activism and then became involved with SNCC is significant. Jo Freeman argues that "the older activists in Mississippi created co-optable networks which younger generations found new uses for."[102] Many of the ideas, philosophies and techniques characteristic of the 'beloved community' that were of principal importance to this organization were formed and developed with help from activists such as Baker and Lawson. Those activists involved in the early years of SNCC

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[101] Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement & the New Left* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 54-55.

[102] Payne, p. 64.

recognize their indebtedness to the earlier generation of activists because they were able to engage with them and learn from them. As activist Dorie Ladner recalls, "we were 15, 16, 17 years old and they were taking up time with us to try and teach us ... I feel very good about those early people, ... who took this interest and helped to develop insight and gave me this guidance."[103] Rather than relying on traditions in which young people were chosen as leaders by those higher-up, the youthful activists sought out the older generation as a way of taking control of their activities and providing new alternatives for the movement. Although the techniques were different, key elements of the movement had been replicated by the younger activists. "...while the intensity and widely publicized character of the protests may have represented a departure from the past, the spirit of determined resistance did not."[104] The knowledge gained by the students on their college campuses and the experiences acquired through protests made the connections between their activities and those of their predecessors real and comprehensible. These connections helped replace negative images and stereotypes of African-Americans and white southerners with hope and possibility - images that they hoped to replicate within their own communities.

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[103] *Ibid,* p. 64.

[104] Sanger, p. 113.

CHAPTER TWO

Making It Work: Organizational Structure and Leadership in the 'Beloved Community'

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee emerged at the beginning of the 1960s in response to the explosion of student-led protests and sit-ins throughout the southern United States. It was the impulsive sit-in of a lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina ignited by four black college students which prompted several other college campuses to initiate similar protests against segregated restaurants. Rather than developing from an "ideological rationale for protest" and without a clear set of principles to guide them, the initial sit-ins were the result of suppressed resentments against segregationist practices and policies, and a desire to create change.[1] Long-term planning and the determination to develop an alternative society were overshadowed by the immediacy of gaining equal access to daily facilities such as lunch counters and restaurants.

The reactionary nature of sit-ins within the first few months of the decade encouraged previously established groups and organizations to re-examine the ways in which challenges to the segregated and racist social order had been

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[1] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 9.

carried out. Young people and students were at the forefront of action which called for quicker and visible changes based on direct action rather than long and drawn out court proceedings. As Roy Wilkins of the NAACP noted in a speech delivered in Cleveland that April, "[t]he message of this movement is plain and short. Negro youth is finished with racial segregation, not only as a philosophy but as a practice."[2]

Not only were these students determined to put an end to racial segregation but they were also intent on realizing their desire to see changes in accessibility to education and voting rights. These young people believed that if a social, political and cultural system like segregation were dismantled, an alternative culture and society based on the belief in nonviolent struggle and including key qualities like freedom, equality, love and justice would thrive and grow. As activist Charles Sherrod exclaimed in the spring of 1961, "we want a different world where we can speak, where we can communicate."[3] SNCC's new community culture also functioned as a cohesive bond uniting students and local activists from varying backgrounds, races, gender and classes together. This chapter will examine the ways in which SNCC echoed the concepts and philosophies of the 'beloved community' in their organizational structure and model of leadership.

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[2] Eric Morton, "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: A Brief History of A Grass-Roots Organization", *Ijele: Art eJournal of the African World,* Vol. 2, No.1 (2001), p. 2.

[3] Carson, p. 57.

For the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee creating the 'beloved community' involved a negotiation between the existing American culture full of inequalities and the potential America, as envisioned by the group, which offered freedoms and rights to all citizens regardless of race, class or sex.[4] Participants in the 'beloved community' understood that it was the moral responsibility of men and women "to respond and struggle nonviolently against the forces that stand between a society and the harmony that it naturally seeks."[5] Opposing the system of racial segregation, by refusing to remain in the position of victim or oppressor, meant that students were also objecting to the hierarchical system which gave power and privilege to a select few. Members of SNCC believed that in order to develop an organization which reflected their goal of a society which enabled all persons to participate equally, the movement's structure needed to be inclusive and egalitarian. As a result, group-centred leadership and a decentralized decision-making structure emerged within SNCC. This decision was related to Ella Baker's repeated disillusionment with traditional leadership structures and helped the students create an environment which encouraged everyone to participate regardless of race, class or gender.[6] James Lawson firmly believed that the use of

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[4] Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites, "Introduction", *MLK Jr. and Sermonic Power of Public Discourse* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), p. 8-9.

[5] John Lewis, *Walking in the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 78.

[6] Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 101.

nonviolence provided the ideal base for SNCC's egalitarian structure.

> ...that's one of the things that we, in the non-violent world always teach; namely, that in the non-violent movement everyone can be a participant. Children can participate, women can participate, men can participate. Young people, old people. That is a kind of equality that what is so important is the vitality of your character, your courage and your concern for the change that you want. That's what equalizes everybody, so that it's not a question of the survival of the fittest or those who are physically in the best condition are the only ones who can do the work. Everyone can do the work.[7]

In this statement, Lawson articulates how the use of nonviolence within the organization provided an equalizing platform for its members. There was room for everyone to participate.

This new kind of organization similarly required the establishment of a set of core values with which to create a social identification recognizable by those on the inside and visible to those on the outside of the movement. Love, equality, freedom and justice, the key values identified by the group, were epitomized in the structure of SNCC – and this affected all elements of activity from the way in which leadership roles were defined to the organizing structure itself. For members of SNCC this meant that the organization they had created reflected their desire for a secure and stable setting which reflected their goals and values.

> Many of its members report that before 1964, they often experienced a sense of harmony and certainty that is rarely felt ... Their lives were

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[7] James Lawson, "Interview with Reverend James Lawson", A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict, 2000, <http://www.pbs.org/weta/forcemorepowerful/nashville/interview.html> (December 1, 2002)

> not fragmented. Instead of filling a series of largely unrelated roles (parent, employee, citizen), they filled only one role: SNCC worker. Instead of balancing in their heads a multiplicity of values, all of them tentative, they had one certain, absolute set of beliefs. The group provided a world order which is far more complete and stable than any that individuals could assemble for themselves.[8]

Recognizing the need to base moral and value structures on established systems, SNCC looked both to philosophers and believers in the power of nonviolent doctrine, such as Gandhi and Thoreau, and to the tradition of activists who had believed in the possibility of change through nonviolence.

SNCC's founding conference was held from April 16-18,1960 in Raleigh, North Carolina and was organized primarily by Ella Baker, a long-time activist, with support from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The goal of the conference was to facilitate the creation of a structure which epitomized the students' beliefs and goals and, most importantly, would encourage the explosion of student-led activities and protest throughout the country. The purpose of the conference and, by default, the committee itself was to "coordinate activities, analyse the status of the movement and map plans for the future."[9] Yet SNCC exerted little control over the sit-in's and protests which dominated the beginning of the decade. "In relation to local protest", a copy of the Student Voice reads, "SNCC's role is suggestive rather than directive; in relation to those groups that are

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[8] Emily Stoper, "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization", *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (September 1977), p. 30.

[9] "What is SNCC?", *Student Voice*, Vol. 1. No.1 (June 1960), p. 2.

interested in the movement, SNCC is to serve primarily in an informational capacity."[10]

The initial structure of the organization, stressing the importance of remaining active and organized at the state level, was, therefore, simple and made up of only three full-time positions and a volunteer delegation representing each college or state. The positions, elected chairman, committee secretary and office secretary, were initially held by Marion S. Barry, Jr., from Tennessee but attending Fisk University, Henry James Thomas, from the District of Columbia and attending Howard University, and Jane Stembridge, a student at Union Theological Seminary. These positions were elected and based on a system of rotation in order to prevent one individual from dominating and usurping power, and to ease possible tensions between different student groups by varying the group dynamics.[11] Right from the beginning, SNCC was determined to break with the traditional organizational mould in creating an organization which enabled individuals to excel and work together effectively.

Reverend James Lawson, who was invited by Ella Baker to be the keynote speaker at the Raleigh conference, articulated the desire of the students to create a "new face" for the civil rights movement. Lawson believed in the need for individuals, especially blacks, to question the political and economic foundations

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[10] "November Meeting of SNCC", *Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (December 1960), p. 1.

[11] Robnett, p. 100.

which had enabled the survival of segregation in the United States.[12] He encouraged the students to question their own role within the movement and to consider how this role would be developed and nurtured. In doing so, students began to reflect on and determine the values they wished to adopt within their organization and, consequently, their new community. The declaration of their independence as a group from other civil rights organizations was the first step. The issue of student sovereignty would, consequently, be one of the first debates to surface within the organization and would directly affect the way in which the students conceived of their relationship with other civil rights organizations.

Ella Baker, who had foreseen the desire by the SCLC and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP) to make the student movement an arm of their own organizations, encouraged the students to seek autonomy and to determine their own method of thinking.[13] Students wanted to organize "on the basis of equality", in keeping with the values of the 'beloved community', and were unwilling to tolerate any form of "manipulation or domination" that might come from joining the existing organizations.[14] In his opening statements, Reverend Lawson criticized the NAACP for emphasizing "fund-raising and court action rather than developing our greatest resource, a people no longer

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[12] Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, (Athens: University of Gerogia Press, 1987) 64.

[13] Aprele Elliott, "Ella Baker: Free Agent in the Civil Rights Movement", *Journal of Black Studies,* Vol.2, No. 5 (May 1991), p. 600.

[14] Carson, p. 24.

the victims of racial evil who can act in a disciplined manner to implement the constitution."[15] This struck a chord with the student delegates not only because of their resentment towards the apparent inactivity of moderate civil rights leaders but also because Lawson had managed to outline their desire for a transformed community. Nonviolence, then, was the way in which to create this new society because "... your means of doing so, must be consistent with the society you want to create."[16]

Regardless of the lack of coordination between the students, there was a common understanding that nonviolence was the necessary way to protest against the continued practices of racial segregation. Since most students were not able to participate in the political system through either the act of voting or holding public office, nonviolence and direct action enabled young people to affect public consciousness and the social and political culture by rejecting the system of racial segregation and violence that characterized the south. This was especially important for black and white young women who had even less access to the political system than their male counterparts. The 70, 000 students that participated in the spring of 1960 in civil disobedience against racial segregation[17]

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[15] James Lawson. "From a Lunch-Counter Stool", Ed Meier et al, *Black Protest in the 20th Century (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965),* p. 310.

[16] Lewis, p. 78.

[17] Barbara Ransby, "Foreword", *Deep In Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. xiii.

represent a perfect example of the commitment expressed by these young activists to ensuring the success and survival of their cause through nonviolence. In addition, the use of nonviolent tactics levelled the playing field since size, gender, race, and class were not the qualities which determined participation.

The students were also able to pull knowledge, commitment and guidance from the legacy of nonviolent actions and protests embedded in the culture of the United States and more specifically in the culture of the African-American community. The nonviolent protests which had been initiated in Greensboro, and mimicked by multiple other college campuses, as well as the well-organized protests from the Nashville Student Movement, set the tone for how the student organization wished to operate. Historian Clayborne Carson notes that when a delegate suggested that decisions be reached first about the committee's goals and then the philosophy, Lawson corrected him and argued that only by discussing the importance of nonviolence would SNCC achieve the end result.[18] Although the precise understandings of nonviolence and the decision to adopt nonviolence as a tactic or as a way of life were never fully agreed upon,[19] SNCC members felt that fighting violence with violence would not solve the problem of segregation or the notion that African-Americans were inherently destructive and unworthy. As Peggy

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[18] Carson, p. 23.

[19] Hollis Watkins, "Oral History with Mr. Hollis Watkins," interview by John Rachal, *University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Program*, October 23rd, 29th, 30th, 1996 (Three Interviews), <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/watkins.htm>

Alexander and Diane Nash proposed in their paper *Nonviolence speaks to the movement* written at the beginning of SNCC's development, "the structure of the movement should emerge from the philosophy."[20]

For many white Jewish northerners involved with SNCC during the early years, the transition to nonviolent tactics was not without challenges. The existing progressive Jewish culture, which valued active Jewish rebellion against one's oppressors, was in direct conflict with the philosophy adopted by SNCC.[21] Carol Ruth Silver, a Jewish SNCC worker, recalls her frustration and anger at the abuse fellow activist Ruby Doris Smith had received at the hands of the jailers in Parchman penitentiary.[22] In a speech made weeks after their release from prison Silver spoke about her experiences in jail. She recounted that, rather than being outraged at the experience, Ruby Doris Smith had "turned this physical defeat into a victory of love over violence and oppression."[23] This required Silver, and other Jewish activists, to align her heritage with what was expected of her as a civil rights activist.

Nonviolence was seen, therefore, as a constant and important topic for

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[20] Diane Nash and Peggy Alexander, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972,* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: ProQuest Information and Learning Co., 1994), microfilm, A=I=1.

[21] Debra Shultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 42.

[22] *Ibid*, p. 42. The incident Silver refers to occurred during the Freedom Rides in June 1961.

[23] *Ibid*, p. 42.

discussion, and this was true from the first meeting. Discussion group # 3, headed by two students whose names are undecipherable, articulated the ways in which nonviolent protest had many levels, from discussing the issue or problem and eventually getting to protest.[24] These discussions, along with Lawson and King's encouragement, and the historical influence and significance of previous nonviolent movements, encouraged the students to centralize nonviolence within their organization as reflected within their founding statement. It is obvious from the numerous scratched out words and sentences visible on the original document that this statement of purpose was not agreed upon without serious discussion and debate.[25] This demonstrated not only the group's determination to utilize consensus based decision making but also the possibility for many people to vocalize their opinions.

The founding statement of SNCC which was created at its second meeting in Atlanta, Georgia on May 13-14th, highlights the organization's commitment to nonviolence. It reads, in part

> We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the pre-supposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love.[26]

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[24] *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972*, microfilm, A=I=1.

[25] *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972*, microfilm, A=I=1.

[26] "Philosophy", *Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (June 1960), p. 2.

Obviously influenced by Christian doctrine, the statement of purpose also reflected the influence of Gandhi and anti-colonialism on the direction of the movement, and the significant role of religion and spirituality within the group. Although the organization sought to change the way in which laws and communities envisioned segregation and racial intolerance, their aim was not to move beyond democracy but to make its rights equally accessible to all. They aimed to extend voting rights and raise awareness about the fact that these rights had been so long denied to African-American communities within the South. For example, the group affirmed their belief in the validity and usefulness of the existing judicial system in the statement "seeks a social order of justice".

Further on in their statement of purpose, SNCC argued that nonviolent actions would "nurture the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities." This articulation of the disparity between the theory of justice and equality, and its practical applications in society was a key element in SNCC's 'beloved community'. For these students, there was no difference between believing in a concept and putting that concept into practice.[27] The sit-ins, voter registration drives and Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party Challenge were a perfect example of this determination and commitment.

The organization's importance and guiding role began to surface only as the impact and potential of the early protests waned. Marion Barry spent much of the

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[27] Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 24-25.

summer of 1960 interacting with other organizations, such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and establishing important financial and political connections.[28] At the Democratic Convention's Platform Committee meeting in 1960, Barry described the goals of the student movement as "seeking a community in which man can realize the full meaning of self, [and] which demands open relationships with others."[29] In articulating the students' goals, Barry was suggesting that the SNCC community would not only foster the full potential of all members regardless of race, gender and class but would also encourage equality and truth within relationships. Since the organization was at this point still small in numbers, its official leaders concentrated primarily on responding to day to day problems, requests for information about protest activities and financial aid for students expelled for their activities.

As students increasingly forced local white leaders to give in to their demands, SNCC realized the necessity of setting out guiding ideas and principles which reflected the community's understanding of the movement. Increasing SNCC's presence as an organization was the way to attain these goals.[30] As students returned to school in the fall of 1960, fewer localized protests were

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[28] *Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (June 1960), p. 3

[29] Julian Bond, "SNCC: What We Did", *Monthly Review*, Vol. 52, No. 5 (October 2000), p. 17.

[30] Carson, p. 18.

initiated. This dip in participation was similarly reflected at the second official SNCC meeting. The October conference in Atlanta, unlike that in Raleigh, attracted only a core group of students who had remained involved after the decline in student protests, and, therefore, reflected those who saw the struggle against racial intolerance as the central feature of their lives. The centrality of SNCC's values and goals would be reflected in the organizational structure. This conference in many ways, cemented the staying power of SNCC and its membership as students took a more prominent role in planning and directing the conference demonstrating an increase in self-confidence as well as belief in the organization itself.[31]

While continuing to focus on and support local initiatives and directions, few changes were made to the original organizational structure of SNCC. The organization continued to promote the values within the 'beloved community' by encouraging the development of everyone's leadership potential and fostering the group's commitment to equality. One significant change that the SNCC staff did decide to adopt was the Jail vs Bail strategy. This decision set activists on a level playing field with one another in the sense that physical, intellectual, social and racial characteristics did not determine an individual's ability to participate.[32] This

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[31] *Ibid*, p. 28.

[32] For members of SNCC going to jail was about choosing to be on the front line and objecting to a system which was unfair and unjust. It was about putting the values and concerns of the community before personal comfort and security. Getting arrested was not based on specific traits related to race or gender. All of the activists were, in some form, therefore rejecting gendered and racial stereotypes. Black men within the movement, for instance, were not complacent or obedient of the rules of the white police officers and dismissed

shift in strategy also reflected the "increasingly militant orientation of many proponents of nonviolent direct action."[33] Some student protestors had already adopted this strategy, including activists in Florida who conducted a mass march on March 12th, 1960 and chose to serve their sentences rather than pay fines.[34] This decision remained consistent with SNCC's belief in using nonviolent tactics to object to any system or institution which perpetuated injustice and forced whites into the role of the oppressor and blacks into the role of the victim. In coordinating their refusal to cooperate, SNCC demonstrated their determination to affect and alter national political and legal systems.

The refusal to pay bail fines also had important financial benefits for the activists. As Bayard Rustin pointed out "imprisonment is an expense to the state; it must feed and take care of you. Bails and fines are an expense to the movement."[35] With limited funds available to them, it became increasingly necessary, from a financial standpoint, for the students to refuse bail. Forcing the state to pay for their imprisonment, which resulted in overloaded jails and court rooms, increased the impact of the students' goals and the seriousness of their actions. SNCC's executive secretary Ed King stated in an appeal to those who

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their inherent authority.

[33] Carson, p. 28.

[34] "State Reports", *Student Voice*, Vol.1, No. 2 (August 1960), p. 4.

[35] Bayard Rustin, "Jail Vs. Bail", *Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (August 1960), p. 7.

shared the convictions of the students to join them "... in jail. Only by this type of action can we show that the nonviolent movement against segregation is not a local issue for just the individual, but rather a united movement of all those who believe in equality."[36] Both these systems, which had traditionally persecuted Blacks, were now being forced to deal with the unrest in their communties.

The organization also decided that any SNCC-initiated activity must have the support of at least two-thirds of the delegates. This reflected not only the importance of consensus building within the SNCC community but the value of the individual opinion within the organization. Not only did consensus building ensure that one individual did not dominate the organization but it also provided opportunities for less vocal and "minority"[37] participants to speak out. A Mississippi Freedom Summer volunteer commented on the impact this had when he commented in a letter, "...the savvy of the organization is a marvel. ... Its members ... have the strange ability to discuss, plan, scheme, openly and honestly disagree, and then come to a definite decision which all follow ...."[38]

Although the delegation was initially made up primarily of black educated

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[36] As quoted in Carson, p. 32. Originally printed in Fred Sheheen, "South's Negro to Focus on 'Jail-ins" at Rock Hill," *Charlotte Observer*, February 7, 1961.

[37] In this instance, the term "minority" is being used to describe black women and white men and women who represented less than 50% of the organizational staff.

[38] *Letters from Mississippi* , Ed. Elizabeth Sutherland (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 14.

men, by 1961-62 the opportunities for women, whites and those without a formal education expanded. This enabled these individuals to occupy more formal positions and to participate within the changing administrative structure. Sociologist Belinda Robnett points out that although many official positions were dominated by men, women within SNCC had increased visibility and held more power than women in other civil rights organizations.[39] Ella Baker and Septima Clark's experience within the SCLC, for instance, demonstrated that although women's participation was accepted in these organizations, their role within the organizational structure was often limited and restricted. Women were not given access to positions of authority and power. Within SNCC, however, the minimalization of hierarchy,[40] emphasis on field work and cultivation of leadership provided women with greater access to organizational power than those associations with more centralized organizational structures.

Yet, although the structure of SNCC was decentralized and therefore more accessible to women, positions within the organization were still gendered.[41] There were some restrictions on the titled positions women could hold, but female activists still contributed and lead in significant and essential ways. In fact, Robnett argues that many women avoided titled positions because these roles were seen as

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[39] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, p. 100-101.

[40] According to Carol Mueller's description of Ella Baker's philosophy. Robnett, p. 101.

[41] *Ibid*, p. 108.

directly connected to office and clerical work. Many women preferred field work.[42] One female activist stated that what was "most important was not what men thought of them [and their leadership potential] but what they thought of themselves."[43] Activist Faye Bellamy pointed out that the characteristics for participation within SNCC were not based on racial or gendered factors and, therefore, women had equal rights to become involved. "...[women] were workers, they were responsible people, they were not afraid to get involved in a showdown, struggle about a discussion to make a point or to have their point heard."[44]

Nonetheless, this assessment does not take into account the fact that many northern and southern white women used their clerical skills as a way to gain access to the SNCC organization. Dottie Zellner, fo example, was hired by James Forman not only because of her commitment to the movement but as a result of being a fast typist.[45] This was not an isolated occurrence, since many young Jewish women of this generation, like Zellner, had been encouraged by parents to acquire a marketable skill, like typing.[46] Clerical work, although less glamorous than field work and constructed around more traditional ideas of gender, provided many white

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[42] *Ibid,* p. 109-110.

[43] *Ibid*, p. 39.

[44] *Ibid*, p. 39.

[45] Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Everybody Says Freedom: A History of the Civil Rights Movement in Songs and Pictures* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989), p. 88.

[46] Schultz, p. 33.

women with the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to the movement and to illustrate the effectiveness of an integrated and open community.

Influenced by the numerous letters of request sent by young people to attend SNCC's conferences and received by Office Secretary Jane Stembridge[47], James Forman decided to expand the organizational structure and develop a more diversified staff and volunteer committee. Since funding could only be given to official delegates, any student wanting to attend these conferences had to finance the trip alone which made attendance for less privileged individuals and groups more difficult. During the third SNCC conference, held in April of 1962, the criteria for membership was changed to include delegates from each protest group rather than from each state. By expanding the organization to include not only full-time paid field secretaries, but also a very strong and supportive network of local and national volunteers, the structure of SNCC began to shift.

In addition, James Forman redefined the organization by establishing the Executive Committee. This committee was composed of eight SNCC members: the chairman and executive secretary, whose positions had existed since the early stages of the organization, two advisors and three at-large students members, who were to carry out the policies of the organization in between conferences. Although changing the overall structure to resemble a more hierarchical organization risked alienating members and participants, such a move proved to be

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[47] *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972,* microfilm, A=III=2 to A=IV=1

the only way to gain the strength and momentum to proceed in the South. As Forman wrote in 1963,

> ... we had achieved more than a certain sense of organizational security. The meeting was permeated by an intense comradeship, born out of sacrifice and suffering and a commitment to the future, and out of knowledge that we were indeed challenging the political structure of the country, and out of a feeling that our basic strength rested in the energy, love and warmth of the group. The band of sisters and brothers, in a circle of trust, felt complete at last.[48]

James Forman underlines in this statement that the strength of the SNCC organizational structure was in the strong ties that had developed between the activists. Providing more individuals with the opportunity to participate and organize also meant increasing the potential strength of the organization.

During the spring and summer of 1964, SNCC would experience the largest influx of volunteers into the newly organized structure. This would put the changes within SNCC to the test. As the brochure which advertised the events of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project and encouraged the participation of northern students stated, "A Domestic Freedom Corps will be working in Mississippi this summer. Its only weapons will be youth and courage."[49] Many members felt that in order to bring about significant changes for Mississippi blacks, SNCC had to incite a confrontation which would alter the existing power structures; increasing voter registration drives and the implementation of freedom schools were all

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[48]James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), p. 307.

[49] *Ibid*, p. 369.

necessary actions in this summer project. SNCC not only needed a greater number of volunteers to carry out their activities but they needed a stronger base and network of support.

Robert Moses, a principal activist and director in Mississippi, stated in an interview in 1964 that "...these students bring the rest of the country with them. They're from good schools and their parents are influential. [With them involved] the interest of the country is awakened..."[50] James Forman, added that in recognizing the culture and structure that SNCC was up against in the South, Freedom Summer represented the opportunity to "consciously recruit a counter power-elite."[51] By adding an increased number of students to the community structure, many activists felt that the movement's goals could be achieved faster. Activist and Mississippi resident Fannie Lou Hamer, having witnessed the northern white volunteers work hard during the summer of 1963[52], was eager to see more volunteers arrive to

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[50] Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 40.

[51] *Ibid*, p. 40.

[52] Carson, p. 96-99. After having obtained the registration of only 5% of the black voting aged population in Mississippi, Robert Moses decided that new tactics needed to be used. During the Jackson, Mississippi demonstration over the assassination of NAACP leader Medgar Evers in June 1963, Moses met Allard Lowenstein, a white activist from North Carolina. Lowenstein suggested to Moses that black citizens cast "freedom votes" in protest of their disenfranchisement. This lead to the "One Man, One Vote" campaign adopted by SNCC workers in the fall of 1963. Lowenstein recruited over one hundred northern volunteers through his contacts at Yale and Standford Universities. These volunteers helped to get over 80, 000 blacks to vote in their symbolic election held that November. The summer of '64 voter registration drive was a larger extension of the work done during the summer and fall of 1963.

continue to help make changes in the deep South.[53]

There were, however, also many concerns which came with the increased number of volunteers. The financial burden which accompanied the expansion of the organization meant that the free way of operating and highly personal nature of the group was declining.[54] This meant that the SNCC structure could no longer manage a community which supported and catered to each activist's own sense of purpose. Rather than providing assistance for every conceivable project which directly or indirectly supported the ultimate goals of the movement, SNCC had to become increasingly conscious of where its resources were being spent. For smaller projects and less successful undertakings this meant a decline in organizational support.[55] Up until 1964, most of the SNCC field workers in the South were on their own, "working for subsistence wages and priding themselves on their independence."[56] In addition, the added number of staff members and projects meant that the accountability of movement activities increased which reflected the large and complex entity SNCC had become.

Many members of SNCC were also concerned about the outcome and effect of the Freedom Summer project.[57] Some community members worried that the

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[53] Lewis, p. 251-252.

[54] King, p. 520.

[55] Carson, p. 98-100.

[56] Lewis, p. 248.

[57] Carson, p. 98-99.

project would perpetuate the "image of racial dependence" and that the black community would be seen to be in need of white activists to make achievements.[58] Freedom Summer was seen as contradictory to the principle within 'beloved community' of nourishing self-reliance and independence among members and the black communities.[59] Others felt that their years of experience within SNCC and working in the South would be disregarded in favour of the northern volunteers' media appeal.[60] Others still questioned the motivations of the northern volunteers,[61] or wondered if the organization hadn't simply become "fashionable and chic."[62] Activist Charles Sherrod questioned the sustainability of other SNCC projects once the students returned at the end of the summer to their home cities.[63] Sherrod made his concerns clear at the Executive Committee Meeting on December 30th, 1963 when he stated, "...are we willing to risk disintegration of our total operation in such a confrontation?"[64] The SNCC leadership, after weighing the potential for success against the consequences of their actions but, determined to

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[58] Lewis, p. 249.

[59] *Ibid*, p. 249.

[60] *Ibid*, p. 249.

[61] *Ibid*, p. 252-253. The screening process for the Summer Project was extensive. All candidates were asked of their motives for coming to Mississippi to ensure that the caliber of activists would be upheld and that the movement would continue to be taken seriously.

[62] King, p. 520-521.

[63] Carson, p. 99.

[64] *Ibid*, p. 99.

successfully achieve voting rights for all citizens regardless of race, pushed forward with the project. It was a powerful way of demonstrating to the rural communities in the South that there was mass support for them and that they were not alone. The potential to expand the reach and impact of SNCC's ideas and principles was something that could not be ignored by the organization's leadership.

SNCC forces us to rethink traditional approaches to leadership. Leaders have been described as "those who hold titled positions, have power over members, make decisions on behalf of the organization, and are perceived [as such] by the public and the state...."[65] Movement leadership has been similarly defined, most notably by Morris, as deriving from indigenous resources, rather than outside elites.[66] According to Morris, then, the Black church became the "institutional base of the movement from which leaders, participants, financial support, and a means of dispensing protest information emanated."[67] As an organization which was not directly affected or controlled by the white population, it is only logical that many leaders would emerge from within the church setting. In defining leadership as such, however, men become automatically defined as leaders since they were the ministers and in control of the institution while women could only be conceptualized in opposition, as followers and onlookers. In

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[65] Belinda Robnett, "African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership and Micromobilization", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 101, No. 6 (May 1996), p. 1664-1665.

[66] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, p. 17.

[67] *Ibid*, p. 17.

addition, leaders have often been equated with charismatic qualities, like those of Martin Luther King, Jr., and as people who have found support within the public limelight. The definition of charisma similarly reflected this traditional "belief in educated men and/or male leaders as formal leaders."[68] Many activists continued to support this definition, even though it was socially constructed rather than reflective of true leadership qualities. By expanding the definition and characteristics of leadership, scholars are able to develop a better understanding of the structure in SNCC and also the different ways that activists displayed leadership qualities.

From the beginning, SNCC set out to challenge traditional definitions of leadership, and this set the organization apart from others in the civil rights movement. By creating an organization that was based upon a decentralized structure, leadership within SNCC was similarly conceived of from an egalitarian perspective. It was constructed to deter one individual or an elite few from usurping all of the power. SNCC specifically set out a different style of leadership than experienced in other movement organizations because the traditional format did not suit the movement's goals or the spirit of their activities. Expanding the definition of leadership was one way SNCC was able to develop a more cohesive community and maximize the energies of all its members.

Belinda Robnett, a sociologist who has done extensive research on

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[68] *Ibid,* p. 39.

leadership in the civil rights movement, suggests that by adding bridge leadership to the existing formula a more comprehensive picture is produced. She argues that although formal leadership can be important to some organizations, it does not guarantee solidarity or group cohesion. In fact, she contends that grassroots leaders help to encourage individuals that may not be pre-disposed to join the movement.[69] According to Robnett, in drawing on the works of Evans and Boyte, bridge leaders are individuals who make decisions similar to those of formal leaders but from within an unclaimed space outside of the formal leadership structure.[70] Bridge leaders, in addition, rely on one-on-one and community-based interaction to initiate mass mobilization. This new definition, as Robnett has set out, recognizes the multi-layered nature of leadership within SNCC.

Robnett points out that this role has traditionally been occupied by women as they rarely have access to formal leadership. Women often held their positions of power based on their activism within the community rather than officially titled roles.[71] Because of the uniqueness of SNCC's leadership model and organizational structure, however, the bridging model can be used generally to describe the way in which leadership was conceived of and adopted by SNCC. While constantly reaching across the boundaries of race and class, the activities which SNCC organized, directed and lead occurred at the community level. This reinforces the

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[69] *Ibid*, p. 7.

[70]Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, p. 21.

[71] *Ibid*, p. 19.

key element of bridge leadership which was to connect the movement and southern communities together in a cohesive manner. In doing so, the activists were able to bridge the public role of SNCC with the private lives of the members of the southern communities.

Recognizing the significant role that Ella Baker played in encouraging the students to adopt a non hierarchical system of leadership, Baker insisted that leadership should be envisioned as a form of teaching in which the emphasis was placed on finding the leadership potential within others.[72] Activist Faye Bellamy recalls that although existing gender norms affected the construction of leadership within the movement the most important thing was how members felt about their own participation. "We felt that we were all leaders, and that's what kept some of the balance ...."[73] In this sense, the concept of leadership was expanded to include everyone by recognizing that each individual has the capability to lead if encouraged. In fact, members of SNCC, as Bellamy points out, "...were very open to the fact that people were capable [as leaders]" and until proven otherwise, "...they would assume first that you are capable...."[74] SNCC member Bernice Johnson Reagon provides similar support for the leadership structure in SNCC. "I'm saying that we were in a movement, and the structure of that organization was

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[72] Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 93.

[73] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?,* p. 39.

[74] *Ibid*, p. 38.

such that you were the only person who could limit what you did."[75]

Baker also felt that the key to a successful organization was to create and sustain indigenous black leadership. Since many volunteers found it difficult to fully gain the trust of local people in the South, indigenous leaders could bridge the gaps between the student activists and their local communities.[76] This would also ensure that the seeds of continuity were firmly planted within the community and the movement as a whole, and that future activists would understand the history of struggle which had existed before them. In doing so, more experienced activists would be able to share their knowledge and skills with others by making connections and providing leadership on a one-on-one basis. This leadership structure reflected the origins of SNCC as it was independently run protests and sit-ins that had encouraged the organization's inception in the first place.

Although conceived of as being based on equality, leadership and participation within SNCC did not operate without being affected by gender and race. Although SNCC's community culture was breaking down barriers, it was impossible for activists to completely disregard the gender norms that they had previously experienced. Activist Bernice Johnson Reagon in summarizing her impressions of the gendered nature of participation in SNCC stated that "... we were

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[75] *Ibid*, p. 40.

[76] *Ibid*, p. 144-145.

all, men and women, products of our time."[77] Former member of SNCC Faye Bellamy agreed with Reagon's assessment by adding that "... the males seemed to be the 'leaders,' and I think some of that is a throwback [to] the very sexism we grew up with in our universe and in our personal environment."[78] Reagon further stated that although ideas about the limiting nature of race and gender existed within the civil rights movement, activists within SNCC were continuing to break down many barriers that had previously existed. "... we'd been socialized to go as for as you can go, but don't do X, Y, Z if you're Black. And SNCC was saying 'We're breaking this thing up. We're breaking it down. We're challenging this structure.'"[79] In doing so, SNCC was required to develop alternative definitions and roles that encompassed their changing value system.

This was especially true for white activists. Recognizing that their roles should be supportive of the existing black leadership meant that white activists had to be very aware of their contributions and position within the organization. SNCC worker Elaine DeLott Baker recalls that,

> ...working as a white woman in the midst of the freedom struggle was a tremendous privilege, but it was also a source of enormous tension for me. I completely identified with the SNCC principles of local leadership, respect for the common man, consensus, and participatory democracy, but I was always aware of

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[77] *Ibid*, p. 37.

[78] *Ibid*, p. 38-39.

[79] *Ibid*, p. 37.

my status as a newcomer in a very deep and lengthy struggle.[80]

Some white activists were able to utilize their socially privileged position to the advantage of the movement. SNCC photographer Danny Lyon, for instance, was able to obtain photographs of imprisoned black activists because he did not seem to pose a threat to the white infrastructure.[81] Maintaining the necessary balance, however, proved to be difficult for many white activists. During her jail time after the Freedom Rides in 1961, SNCC member Carol Ruth Silver wrote in her diary of the complications that arose when Pauline Knight, a fellow activist, began making decisions for the group without consultation.

> We had all felt very strongly that the spokesman for the [hunger] strike and the leadership from it should come from one of the Negro girls rather than from one of us in this cell, but we also felt that as individuals equally with them involved in a democratic movement, we had at least the right to be treated equally.[82]

Balancing the need to make decisions with the principles of the SNCC community was a challenging one.

In the beginning, SNCC activists felt that in order for their movement to be taken seriously by the "White establishment" and for effective changes to occur,

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[80] Elaine DeLott Baker, "They Sent Us This White Girl", *Deep In Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 269

[81] Seeger, p. 96-97.

[82] Schultz, p. 39.

that black men had to be seen as strong leaders.[83] Their legitimacy was dependent on interacting with the gendered and classed structure already in existence. The press, for instance, turned to the men of SNCC for interviews because they were the people seen as important by the dominant culture. Most female activists, especially black southerners, did not feel that perpetuating ideas of strong black leadership took away from their power or authority within the movement and organization.[84]

However, by 1964 there were some women who felt that their positions within the SNCC community needed to be examined and discussed. At the Waveland Retreat held in November 1964 intended to discuss the future of SNCC, an anonymous position paper about women was submitted.[85] This position paper titled "Position Paper: Women in the Movement" argued that there were discrepancies between the principles and ideals which represented the heart of the organization and the way these principles and ideals were applied to women. It presented detailed examples of circumstances in which women had been relegated

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[83] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, p 42-43.

[84] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?,* p. 44. Some women, after having experienced the women's movement, now reflect on their experiences differently stating that their were not fully aware of the secondary position that women often took. Although they might now consider some of their experiences sexist, it is important to note that at the time most women did not feel oppressed by their gender.

[85] It was later determined that Mary King and Casey Hayden were the authors of the position paper. For a full account of the Women's position paper see Appendix A

to clerical positions or other roles seen as "women's work". Arguments were also made by the paper's authors which compared the assumption of male superiority to that of white superiority in an attempt to demonstrate that gender and race are inextricable connected and cannot be separated. The real question being asked by their paper was whether or not there would be room for individuals, and in this case women, to act out on their beliefs.[86] This was an extremely relevant question for all activists because the actualization of beliefs and values had been central to the survival of the 'beloved community'.

It becomes clear by examining the organizational structure and leadership of SNCC that the 'beloved community' represented more than ideas and principles to its members. From the beginning, the qualities and characteristics most important to the organization like nonviolence and equality were written into and became part of the movement's structure. Challenging social boundaries and breaking down barriers was integral to the way in which SNCC perceived itself, and constructed its operations. Regardless of the fact that inconsistencies existed within the structure of SNCC's community and that the organization was not always successful in universally applying its principles, the 'beloved community' was present within the SNCC organizational structure and helped to shape the decisions and actions of the group's activists.

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[86] King, p. 448-449.

CHAPTER THREE

The Voices of SNCC

After hearing about the Greensboro sit-ins from a colleague at Brandeis University, Barbara Jacobs Haber attended the initial conference which saw the emergence of SNCC. Haber described the convention as "an absolutely mind-blowing experience, being surrounded by people my own age, including Black students, and talking, talking, talking and singing, singing, singing."[1] Haber's description highlights one of the key characteristics of SNCC: communication was integral to the organization's structure and this was most apparent in the consensus decision making which enabled all members to articulate their opinions. Communicating, however, involved much more than holding meetings and making decisions. It represented a way for SNCC to set itself up as a community of activists who shared ideas, future goals, beliefs and fears. In order for SNCC to embrace all of the differences in verbal communications, experience, and culture within its organization, a common 'language' and image needed to be established and perpetuated.

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[1] Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 31-32.

As a relatively unknown group in the early 1960s, SNCC needed to vocalize its direction and priorities in order to separate itself from other civil rights organizations. The theory that each "social group speaks in its own 'social dialect' – possesses its own language – expressing shared values, perspectives, ideology and norms"[2] is one that has been supported by Mikhail Bakhtin.[3] In order to create a movement based on the values of the 'beloved community', like equality and truth, these ideas needed to be articulated and discussed both inside and outside the group setting. The SNCC sentiment, as expressed by activist Casey Hayden, was that "the purpose of life was in living as you think. There were no other ultimates except doing that and communicating in that way."[4] As a decentralized and consensus-building organization, internal discussions were strategically built into the organization. Living in close proximity to one another, working long hours in confined spaces, discussing ideas, problems and concerns at length helped to create and maintain internal communication lines within SNCC.

Although communication amongst the activists was significant to the

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[2] Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition", *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 146.

[3] Henderson uses Bakhtin's theory in which social groups are designated according to class, religion, generation, region and profession, and reinterprets the model from the standpoint of race and gender. Both of these elements were absent from Bakhtin's original system of social and linguistic stratification. Henderson, p. 162.

[4] Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), p. 448.

continuation of struggle, creating public awareness of the efforts and activities that the group had been involved with, as well as SNCC's values, were also important. In order to do this effectively, SNCC members needed to present themselves in a way that reflected the values and ideas of the community and that the image of SNCC seen by the public had to reflect the values of the organization. As sociologist William Gamson points out, "collective identity...is manifested through the language and symbols by which it is publicly expressed – in styles of dress, language, demeanour and discourse."[5] Since one of SNCC's fundamental goals was to transform and better society through increasing awareness of the inequalities plaguing African-American communities, the realization of the 'beloved community' could not occur if the dominant culture were not affected. This required a national communications strategy. As Mary King argues in her autobiography, "without national exposure and mobilized public opinion, there was no point to the struggle. The sacrifice would be lost in oblivion."[6] SNCC, therefore, recognized that any significant social change in the United States required a "mastery of communications and effective use of the news media..."[7] In a society where the written word is privileged and honoured over that of oral testimony,[8] demonstrating

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[5] William A. Gamson, "Commitment and Social Agency within Movements", *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (March, 1991), p. 41.

[6] King, p. 213-214.

[7] *Ibid*, p. 247.

[8] Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), p. 27.

the group's ability to communicate effectively was important in legitimizing SNCC's goals and activities. SNCC focussed its communications efforts around the organization of a sub-committee on communications, the development of a SNCC newspaper called the *Student Voice*, and the singing of freedom songs. How SNCC used communication to further its goals and beliefs will provide the focus of this chapter.

From the movement's beginnings, SNCC activists recognized the significance of maintaining strong levels of communication, not only about their continued activities but about successes and changing perceptions within the organization. As there was not yet a system of communication in the early months of 1960 which would have enabled college campuses across the nation to effectively discuss goals, make plans or coordinate their activities, students were required to rely on word of mouth, student governments and the media to sustain the momentum of their activities. The dependence of these students on such an inconsistent system of communication would have halted the movement prematurely. As Ella Baker noted, "...they were motivated by what the North Carolina four had started, ... [but] you couldn't build a sustaining force just based on spontaneity."[9] SNCC developed precisely as a forum for students to share information and to communicate with one another about their tactics, successes and failures; as such, expression and the exchange of ideas became a central feature

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[9] Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 98.

of the organization.

Since the act of protest is in itself a form of vocalizing an opinion, concern or disagreement, it was only logical for SNCC to decide at its first meeting that one of the three departments to be established within the organization would be the Communications Department. Operating primarily out of the Atlanta office, the function of this department was to publish a newsletter "to be distributed within the movement and to supporting groups. It should contain, among other articles, news reports sent in from areas all across the South."[10] The Committee on Communications was also responsible for publishing public relations pamphlets, releasing press statements on the movement, and creating and maintaining a series of flash news as a means of alerting the nation to emergencies and serious developments.[11]

At the beginning, when the sit-ins dominated the agenda of SNCC activists, the Communications Department's primary function was to relay information through the organization about the activities of each local protest group. The purpose of the committee remained consistent with the group's immediate goal of coordinating the activities of students nationwide. It also encouraged and supported indigenous leadership and team building key elements in the 'beloved community'. The

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[10] "Present Status of SNCC", *Student Voice,* Vol. 1, No. 1,(June 1960), p. 3.

[11] "Present Status of SNCC", *Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (June 1960), p. 3.

communications department relied on each protest group to supply SNCC with all relevant updates, activities and successes of the movement. As indicated by an early posting from Jane Stembridge in the student newspaper, this was not always an easy task:

> ... numerous irate readers are probably wondering how we could be so incompetent as to fail to mention the accomplishments of many an active group in the movement. We are not incompetent; we are just uninformed. So if you want your state reported properly, send us information.[12]

The state reports published in early versions of the *Student Voice* were primarily from areas with an immediate history of activism like Montgomery and Little Rock.[13] For the protestors who had organized in spontaneous manner and without a more formalized operation, it is understandable that their priorities were not on preparing reports for submission to SNCC headquarters but on the immediate task of making changes happen.

As SNCC's focus became less about documenting isolated protests and more about developing a sustainable and cohesive movement, the communications department's focus also shifted. Although preparing state reports remained important to the department's agenda into 1965, it was no longer their central function. With Julian Bond as its director until 1965, the department recognized that in order to demonstrate to the nation that the system of segregation was indeed

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[12] "Contributors", *Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (August 1960), p. 7.

[13] "State Reports", *Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (August 1960), p. 4.

a serious problem, one that affected whites as well as blacks and the north as much as the south, public information needed to be distributed on a larger scale. SNCC could not rely on the southern press to disseminate accurate information and reports about their activities as many newspapers did not view the actions and grievances of the black community as newsworthy.[14] As Paul Good, an ABC reporter from the early 1960s, explained, the networks adopted "a policy of crisis reporting, moving on a story as it boiled up, quickly dropping it the moment its supposed public interest had died and racing off to a newer crisis."[15] This simple framework was especially destructive for SNCC because continuity and process were key components of their activities and disregarding these elements meant losing the uniqueness of SNCC as an organization. Moreover, it did nothing for expanding the reach of the principles of the 'beloved community'. Reporting on morality and truth was much less marketable than dog attacks, mobs and bomb threats.

The fact that the media often went looking for one spokesman or leader to interview also made reporting on SNCC difficult. The news media often then resorted to creating one figurehead by "repetitively quoting one individual as a source"[16] and rejecting the decentralized leadership structure of SNCC. For those

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[14] King, p. 214.

[15] Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 392-393.

[16] King, p. 430.

members of the press who did attempt to openly cover the activities of SNCC, the situation often meant that they were also putting their lives on the line because many locals felt betrayed by their activities. "... the mob ran after the reporters, started busting cameras and knocking them to the ground. Clearly they were trying to smash the camera lenses, to blind the eyes of the press."[17]

The media's focus on more visible, and often more violent, events negated all the community work and challenges to social and institutional racism accomplished by members of SNCC. Although some protests and sit-ins were covered by the media in the beginning, activists were generally constructed as "outsiders" or anomalies in order to diminish the significance of their situations and actions. Labelling the students as radicals, communists and rabble-rousers was intended to diminish their capacity for change. Constance Curry, director of the "Southern Project" for the US National Student Association, issued a press release following the June 1960 meeting stating that charges of communism within the student movement by Mr. Truman were false and without countering.[18] With continuous publicity like this, the movement would have be unable to gain the necessary momentum, financial support, and attract further volunteers and activists.

So SNCC, once again determined to push the limits, took advantage of

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[17] Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Everybody Says Freedom: A History of the Civil Rights Movement in Songs and Pictures* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 54.

[18] *Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (June 1960), p. 3.

modern tools like the telephone and typewriter, and deliberately set out to use the "power of electronic and print media ... to change national opinion"[19] and to break the racial cover of secrecy. SNCC attempted to this in a number of ways. Firstly, SNCC felt that it was important to create a system which recorded movement activists' day-to-day experiences. This would ensure an accurate account of movement activities to be transformed afterwards into press releases and, simultaneously, to maintain their own form of historical record. After providing help to SNCC staff in the Atlanta office for nearly a year without pay and getting fired from the Southern Regional Council (SRC)[20], James Forman hired Dottie Miller Zellner in 1961 to type up the affidavits of field secretaries returning to Atlanta after working in the South.[21] Listening to the unbelievable and graphic stories of the field workers was traumatic for Zellner but it helped in solidifying the importance of her role in chronicling the activists' efforts.[22] This work "documented the scope of illegal attempts to deny African Americans the right to vote and helped legitimize SNCC's organizing efforts."[23]

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[19] King, p. 233.

[20] Schultz, p. 33. Dottie Miller Zellner believes that she was fired from the SRC because the FBI had arrived at the offices discussing her leftist background (implying connections to communism). The SRC claimed that it had nothing to do with this fact but Zellner does not believe them.

[21] Seeger, p. 88.

[22] Schultz, p. 34.

[23] *Ibid*, p. 34.

As the movement expanded, there was less opportunity for students to travel back and forth between the local offices and, therefore, a protocol for dispersing information needed to be created. Getting the necessary information in a concise format was essential. In a circular for activists about the process of news gathering, Mary King presented specific instructions for all staff to follow: "...this means names, ages, dates, locations, background, and organizational affiliation ... underline important data ... all interpretative statements ... should be attributed to someone."[24] Not only did this ensure that all necessary information was being gathered but it placed students in charge and provided them with skills they might not otherwise have had access to. With Dottie Miller Zellner officially in the position of secretary and assistant director of the communications department until 1963, she and Julian Bond spent long hours putting together press releases, newsletters and urgent telegrams from this information.[25] Zellner stated that their work was shared and separated evenly. "We would divide up and I would call some people and he would call other people. We'd write the press release, we'd crank it out..."[26] This statement highlights the emphasis SNCC placed on equality and working together to help make the organization a success. Rather than relying on traditional gendered ideas of work, the office stayed afloat through group efforts.

Providing and securing information about activities and movement workers

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[24] King, p. 214.

[25] Shultz, p. 35.

[26] *Ibid*, p. 35.

was also a key component of the workings of the Communications Department. As the movement gathered momentum, the number of jailings, assaults, car and church bombings, and shootings against SNCC staff and supporters increased dramatically. This not only added to the already stressful work environment of the activists but made the implementation of an effective monitoring system necessary. With a continuously expanding organization, keeping tabs on the whereabouts of all of its workers would have been impossible without such a system. During the initial years, for instance, whenever there was the threat of arrests or violence as the outcome of direct-action, an observer would be appointed to "move parallel to but apart from the demonstrating group."[27] This observer would be able to contact the SNCC office, Justice Department, or the press if arrests and violence took place and provide accurate information and details about the events and individuals involved. During the Freedom Ride from Atlanta to Albany in December 1961, for example, Casey Hayden, a white southern women, joined the eight other riders to act as the observer in case resistance was met.[28] Her role, although under-played by the media and subsequent movement histories, was invaluable in ensuring the safety of the other SNCC activists. Rather than casting Hayden aside because of her race and gender, SNCC utilized the social perceptions of a white southern woman as genteel and non-threatening to its advantage. SNCC also created less

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[27] Joan Browning, "Trends in Feminism and Historiography--Invisible Revolutionaries: White Women in Civil Rights Historiography", *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Fall 1996), p.189.

[28] Browning, p. 189.

elaborate systems to ensure the safety of its members.

Putting a reporter at a jail or making a telephone inquiry from a newspaper were necessary steps to let the local sheriff understand that he was being watched.[29] Some local police departments by 1962 and 1963 had become more conscious of their role in relationship to nonviolent protests. Moving the violent retaliatory acts behind closed doors, where the press and bystanders were not able to witness them, made the surveillance of all activists' whereabouts more vital. As well, without an observer present at mass protests or demonstrations, it was important that SNCC workers take the opportunity themselves to pose as reporters, especially from large northern newspapers, or to contact the communications department in the case of emergency. This occasionally helped to lessen the violence received by those arrested. A volunteer in Jackson working on the local communications committee stated in a letter, "... we in communications have the responsibility of running the telephone system and handling the press, knowing where everyone in the state is. We are the security system."[30]

Security handbooks were also published in order to ensure that all volunteers and paid activists understood the risks involved in their actions. Regulations covering travel, such as keeping doors locked and removing all unnecessary objects from the vehicle, as well as rules for living in freedom homes,

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[29] King, p. 215.

[30] *Letters From Mississippi*, Ed. Elizabeth Sutherland (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1965), p. 200.

such as keeping the shades constantly drawn, were included in the handbooks.[31] The detailed security handbook also informed activists about ways to deal with the press. Not only should the credentials of all members of the media be checked to maintain secure lines of communication, but SNCC activists should never "argue with the press. Do not exaggerate. [and] Give the facts only."[32] The handbook ensured that activists were behaving in a manner that reflected the ideals and principles of the group.

The media also, as previously mentioned, helped to provide some security for many of the activists. They often provided photographic evidence or first hand accounts of the incidents of violence occurring in southern communities. As Dorothy Cotton remarked, in discussing the events in Birmingham, 1963, "...if it hadn't been for television nobody would have ever believed they turned the dogs on us and turned the fire hoses on our children."[33] The presence of the national media during such acts of violence created a recorded and undeniable truth requiring the country to bear witness to the injustices that southern blacks were facing.

By 1963, the communications system became drastically improved with the

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[31] *SNCC Security Handbook*, n.d., reprinted in digital archive (University of Southern Mississippi Library, 2001), p.1. <http://anna.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/zeman/zz004.html> (April 1, 2003).

[32] *SNCC Security Handbook*, p. 2.

[33] Seeger, p. 115.

installation of three Wide Area Telephone Service (WATS) lines.[34] The WATS line provided SNCC with a continuous lifeline of communication among field secretaries, local offices, states offices and the headquarters. In addition, it became a more consistent system for record keeping and security, especially as the number of volunteers increased in 1964. A white Freedom Summer Volunteer recorded her impression of the WATS system in her diary.

> When I left the office tonight I signed out on the WATS line. (You put your name, when you're leaving, from where, to where, mode of trans., route, expected time of arrival.) Then, when you get to your destination you report in to the communications person and he telephones on the WATS wires back to your starting point. This way they keep track of who's where and if someone's missing.[35]

Maintaining security for those individuals who were already members of SNCC was incredibly important in supporting the integrity and trust of the community. As the Federal Government and Justice Departments rarely responded to the continued letters, telegrams and phone calls of the communications department, making the public responsible for preventing the discriminatory acts in southern communities

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[34] *Ibid,* p. 216. The WATS lines were special trunk line which allowed SNCC to call all over the country for a set rate. Decreasing the cost of telephone calls was a high priority for the organization since they worked on a limited budget. Mary King and Julian Bond, with this in mind, set up a list of dummy surnames in order to refuse incoming collect calls from field workers which would come at the expense of the organization. A collect call from John Chestnut, for instance, meant that Atlanta should call Ruleville, Mississippi. They took advantage of this system of code until the WATS line operators figured it out.

[35] Jinny Glass, *Mississippi Diary,* (August 10, 1964), Digital Reproduction, The Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, University of Southern Mississippi Libraries, p. 1.

became increasingly important.

The communications department also recognized the need to create and solidify a strong network of contacts within the national news media in order to ensure consistent placement of movement-related news. In order to create this network, the communications department had to ensure that the press releases passed on to journalists or newspapers were reliable, accurate and most importantly believable.[36] To do this effectively, the organization had to ensure a sense of continuity within its publications and announcements. Dorothy Miller Zellner, for example, passed on her list of live- and print-media contacts to Mary King, after leaving the communications departments in 1963, in an attempt to strengthen and develop further ties within the media.[37] With the field staff trained to deliver precise and informative reports, which reinforced the value of truth within the SNCC community, the communications department remained supported by its members' actions. This coordinated effort also helped to demonstrate the organization's credibility. In addition, the political influence and continuous barrage of letters and telegrams provided by the Friends of SNCC groups in support of protests and political efforts added to the organization's authenticity. According to Mary King it would have taken only one overstatement or error to destroy this perception.[38]

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[36] King, p. 233.

[37] *Ibid*, p. 221-222.

[38] *Ibid*, p. 234.

SNCC's attempts to manage the media did not always prove successful, however. The Freedom Summer of 1964 proved to be a detrimental experiment in SNCC's utilization of the media. The summer was envisioned as an opportunity to use an augmented base of white volunteers in the deep south as a means of attracting increased media attention towards the realities faced by black southerners. It was hoped that by bringing an increased awareness to the South, all Americans would begin to understand that "...his [Mississippi Blacks] freedom and yours are one ..."[39] Many of the volunteers, however, recognized that their presence in Mississippi, rather than the oppression of the state's black citizens, was what was attracting the attention of the media. As one white volunteer noted, "... the big story out of Mississippi this summer ought not to be about my participation in the movement, or even my death. The big story ought to be Life in Mississippi."[40] As helpful as many of the northern volunteers proved to be in setting up Freedom Schools and encouraging black citizens to vote, their presence underscored the political reality SNCC's 'beloved community' was attempting to dismantle. Mary King argued that, "[not only the White House but reporters and television crews – and therefore the nation - emphasized, in ways that SNCC's own egalitarian ethos was powerless to contradict, a simply but stunningly clear message: White people were still of more consequence than blacks, and white lives were still more

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[39] Eric Burns, *And Gently He Shall Lead: Robert Parris Moses and Civil Rights In Mississippi* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 155.

[40] Sutherland, p. 18.

important than blacks."[41]

As important as sustaining a consistent and accurate image of SNCC in the media was, maintaining a strong and united community through open communication and discussions was also imperative to SNCC's survival. For an organization that was spread across the United States and consisted of both paid field activists and volunteers, however, maintaining contact, especially given the intense scrutiny exhibited within southern communities, was a difficult task. In the early years of the movement, the *Student Voice*, the newspaper printed by SNCC, helped to build community and morale among the activists and supporters nationwide. Since distance between participants was a movement reality, the students' newspaper helped to create feelings of commonality, comfort and acceptance. The state reports which dominated the pages of the *Student Voice* until the end of 1960 reassured students that their actions were not isolated ones and that their successes were celebrated by others.

In the February 1961 edition of the *Student Voice*, a letter was published from Clarence Graham, a Rock Hill student jailed after participating in a local sit-in. In this letter, Graham attempted to convince his parents that they should understand his decision to participate in the movement and that rather than being angry, they should be proud.[42] He argued that going to jail was "not like going ...

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[41] King, p. 523.

[42] Clarence Graham, "Letter from Rock Hill Student", *The Student Voice*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (February 1961), p. 1.

for a crime like stealing, killing, etc... but we're going for the betterment of all colored people."[43] For students considering joining SNCC who were worried about the consequences or their parents reactions, this letter would have provided support, a feeling of understanding and perhaps camaraderie. These elements were key to strengthening the 'beloved community'. Activist Faith Holsaert wrote, in an unpublished article, that "*The Student Voice* strengthened my identity as part of the Movement. I often knew about events before I read the *Voice*, but it gave me details and texture, knowledge which shared with all SNCCs."[44]

The *Student Voice* also provided activists with a publication that was geared towards reporting the daily events within the movement that were rarely covered by any other form of media. It became the reliable source on the activities in the movement as it was printed on a regular schedule. By 1963 and 1964, rather than being published on a monthly or bimonthly basis like early on, the *Student Voice* was being mailed out weekly. The reliability of information created by the newspaper made the fast-paced and sometimes unpredictable activities more bearable for many students. In a letter from L.D. Reddick published in the August, 1960 edition of the *Student Voice*, Reddick explains how important this form of publication was to participants:

> At last the students have their own publication. I am sure that others have found as I have that the daily press cannot be relied on for a

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[43] *Ibid*, p. 1

[44] Schultz, p. 34.

> true account of "The Movement". At best, the reporting is spotty, piece-meal, and ever-so-often inaccurate. At worst, the distortion is deliberate. In some places, there is a blackout of any and all statements by student leaders. But now the "Troublemakers" will be able to tell their own story. We shall expect it to be authentic, comprehensive, revealing, penetrating ....[45]

Not only did this newspaper provide accurate information about activities and increased violence to the students but it also presented intimate details about the movement community.

Providing more than news and updates within the newspaper made this medium of communication a more personal and reflective one for members of SNCC. Recommended books and articles about the movement and related topics, which were intended to nourish the minds of students still in college or those who had dropped out to work with the movement full-time, were often features of the *Student Voice*. Tom Kahn's pamphlet "Unfinished Revolution" for instance, was featured in the February 1961 issue, along with an excellent review.[46] The opportunity for students to discuss literature and philosophy fostered and broadened the intellectual outlook of many participants who had abandoned their formal educations to join the movement. Personal growth and development were important elements in maintaining a strong and connected community.

An interracial marriage of two SNCC workers in 1963 also made the student

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[45] L.D. Reddick, "Letters", *Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (August 1960), p. 3.

[46] "Unfinished Revolution", *Student Voice*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (February 1961), p. 1.

newspaper. Quoting the State Attorney General describing the relationship as a "deliberate, direct disservice to the white and colored people of our state,"[47] this article demonstrated to other activists that although segregationist policies continued to invade their personal lives, they could be fought and that SNCC's actions were creating a more open community structure. The newspaper also provided students with the opportunity to celebrate their successes with one another and to document events that were not necessarily considered newsworthy by the media. The opening of a new Freedom library, a successful food and clothing drive, and an increased number of registered African-American voters represented important victories within the movement that needed to be shared.[48] The personal and emotional connections that the *Student Voice* was able to forge were invaluable in maintaining strong ties among the SNCC participants.

Most significantly, the *Student Voice* created a medium for communicating the philosophy, achievements, and desires of SNCC across the racial, religious, age, gender and class lines dividing its members. It provided a common understanding of events and communicated the direction of the movement in a

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[47] "SNCC Wedding Stirs Arkansas Officials, *Student Voice*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (November 18, 1963), p. 1-2.

[48] King, p. 246. In late 1963, Mary King received a letter from Jane Stembridge, who was working in the Greenwood office, which stated "this afternoon, about thirty kids came in to get some library books and it was a very loud and happy time. I was glad to be here when they came and to hear what they had to say. That is the most important event ..." Although a very important event, especially against the odds that the group was facing in the segregated south, it was not a story that would make it into the news.

comprehensible language and form, thus ensuring that different accents and expressions or use of language did not interfere with the message. In addition, it was used by students to bridge the gap between the beliefs, motivations and actions of themselves and their community, as well as those of their parents. Since their newspaper contained accurate accounts of their activities, many members of SNCC used the *Student Voice* as a demonstration of the validity of their actions. A volunteer in Mississippi explained the desire to share information in a letter home stating, "...I feel such a need for you and really crave to somehow have you experiencing what is important to me. So look, please, at the enclosed material."[49] Finally, it enabled young people to actively participate in the creation and documentation of their own history and movement experiences. In doing so, the students were given a sense of validation.

To find an alternate mode of communication that was consistent with the ideals of the group, and which did not rely solely on traditional forms of public address, members of SNCC also turned to singing; this helped demonstrate their purpose, confidence and unity within the movement. With a group as diverse as SNCC, finding a form of communication that strengthened the organization rather than accentuated their differences was important. Singing became the perfect language for SNCC as it did not assume that participants had a particular level of education or former experience, and it proved to be the perfect way to form bonds

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[49] Sutherland, p. 14.

of trust, understanding and dedication. As activist Hollis Watkins pointed out,

> "... singing music is an integral part of southern black people's lives. So, it's deeply embedded into the culture. So the reason this was so important is because this is something that black people could relate to. This is something that black people could identify with. And by using the music it gave you a natural entree into the hearts, souls, and minds of black people in presenting and offering something that was not foreign to them."[50]

The use of music to express ideas transcended cultural, religious and economic boundaries.

The act of singing also provided activists with a way of integrating the abstractness of nonviolence into their daily lives.[51] Singing was used in protests and marches as it provided the activists with something to do in response to the violent acts. As Julius Lester remarked about students returning from a protest in Nashville, "While the mob threw rocks and bottles at them, they sang 'We Shall Overcome'. ... The song was simply their only recourse at a time when nothing else would've helped."[52] Freedom songs were also important in helping students who had been arrested and jailed turn to nonviolence. Cordell Reagon, who was sent to Parchmen penitentiary with several other activists after his arrest in 1961,

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[50] Hollis Watkins, "Oral History with Mr. Hollis Watkins," interview by John Rachal, *University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Program*, October 23rd, 29th, 30th, 1996 (Three Interviews), <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/watkins.htm>

[51] Kerran L. Sanger, *"When the Spirit Says Sing!": The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), p. 152.

[52] *Ibid,* p. 152.

remarked on the significance singing played to their survival. He explained that "the rednecks did everything the could. ... they would bash our heads against the wall, ... and we would just keep singing and praying."[53] Since other forms of direct action were denied to the students while in jail, singing provided them with the opportunity to continue to voice their refusal to give up and to not be rendered impotent by their opponents.

Another fundamental component of singing for members of SNCC was the spiritual connection it provided. Although a secular organization, the importance of the Christian tradition in SNCC was apparent with the use of terms like 'redemption' and 'reconciliation' in describing the movement's goals. Because SNCC was set apart from the traditional church structure, movement activists looked for an alternative way to demonstrate and act out their spirituality. The revival of hymns and other church music provided an important spiritual foundation for members of SNCC and the community they were developing. Members of SNCC viewed singing as an expression of the spirit and the souls of the singer. Jailed in Parchman Penitentiary, James Bevel encouraged other jailed students to continue to sing freedom songs after the guards threatened to take away their mattresses. He argued, "what they're [the guards] trying to do is take your soul away. It's not the mattress, it's your soul."[54] Singing also proved to be an excellent strategy in reaching out to communities in the South. Hollis Watkins stated that "if

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[53] Seeger, p. 64

[54] Sanger, p. 36.

you are black and from the South, ... there is a special element that is part of you. When you organize here, you are working and organizing among religious people."[55] With emotional lyrics and songs, the students could not avoid reconnecting with their heritage.

The use of song was also an important way for students to connect with the history of the African-American community. Some activists argued that traditional songs should not be used because they were representative of terrible and strenuous times for African-Americans. Other activists were convinced that using these songs would demonstrate to the rest of the United States that they were proud of their heritage.[56] Acutely aware of the long history of struggle within the African-American community, SNCC looked to songs that had traditionally been used by slaves to unite a community and resist the negative definitions of blackness placed upon them by their white oppressors and used then for their own purposes. Activists felt that singing would fulfill their needs as it had for their ancestors. As Cordell Reagon argued, "without these songs, you know we wouldn't be anywhere. We'd still be down on Mister Charley's plantation, chopping cotton for 30 cents a day."[57] Using songs from earlier black resistance was a symbolic affirmation by the students of their link to previous generations of struggle.

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[55] *Ibid*, p. 36.

[56] *Ibid*, p. 27.

[57] *Ibid*, p. 29.

Even before creating the organization, in fact, students at the Raleigh conference vocalized their common vision through song. Remembering the Raleigh conference, Jane Stembridge remarked that the "most inspiring moment was the first time I heard *We Shall Overcome.*"[58] Originally a gospel hymn titled *I'll Overcome*, the song gained further popularity, distinctive of the church setting, during the 1945 Charleston tobacco strike. Zilphia Horton, music director at the Highlander Folk school in Tennessee, learned the song from the women on strike and in turn taught it to other participants in the movement. For her, however, the song was meant to be "slow with an irregular pulse and beat,"[59] thus maintaining the strong historical roots of the song while altering it enough to make it significant for the current situation. *We Shall Overcome* became a sort of anthem for SNCC. "People just heard that song and knew it was theirs – it expressed exactly what they felt."[60]

The lyrics of the song spoke specifically to the goals and beliefs of SNCC. In order to alter both whites' perception of blacks and institutionalized racism, activists understood that they needed to learn not to let fear stop them and this was underscored by the line "we are not afraid".[61] In a letter home to her brother, Freedom Summer volunteer Heather wrote about how her sense of fear was altered

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[58] Seeger, p. 36.

[59] *Ibid*, p. 8.

[60] *Ibid*, p. 39.

[61] Sanger, p. 154.

through the act of singing.

> ... the type of fear that they mean ..., when we, sing "we are not afraid" is the type that immobilizes .... The songs help to dissipate the fear. ... when they are sung in unison, or sung silently by oneself, they take on new meaning beyond words or rhythm ... It has to do with the miracle that youth has organized to fight hatred and ignorance.[62]

We Shall Overcome also spoke to members of SNCC about how they were not isolated or powerless, as demonstrated by the lyrics "we are not alone". Singing "we'll walk hand in hand, black and white together" enabled members of SNCC to voice their commitment to and belief in an interracial community, and further emphasized the need and importance of unity and mass involvement.[63]

One of the most interesting features of this song for the group was its versatility. It remained a song which could have different meanings at different moments, as there were no specifically named enemies or references to particular events as was the case with many other songs created during the movement. Activist Bernard Lafayette highlighted the multivalence of the song when he explained,

> Sometimes you're singing about the problems all over the world – "We shall overcome"; sometimes you're singing about the problems in the local community – "We shall overcome." But in that bus station [during the 1961 Freedom Ride into Montgomery] it was a prayer – a song of hope that we would survive and that even if we in that group

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[62] Sutherland, p. 151.

[63] Sanger, p. 155.

did not survive, then we as a people would overcome.[64]

This song was also perceived as an unwavering oath of mutual support amongst the members of SNCC.[65] In an environment fraught with fear and the possibility of violence and retaliation, singing provided the activists with the chance to release and confront their emotions. Group singing offered activists a sort of therapy in which they "sang out all [their] fatigue and fear"[66] in order to carry on the next day.

As the civil rights movement developed, songs became even more important and further embedded in the culture and meaning of SNCC. A song written by Guy Carawan entitled "Ballad of the Student Sit-ins" outlined the goals and values of SNCC and provided activists with the opportunity to communicate their intentions publicly and as a group.[67] Other songs were created or reinvented during moments of extreme duress and intensity. Bob Zellner, for instance, while jailed with Chuck McDew in East Baton Rouge Parish prison in Louisiana in December 1962, began making up new verses to songs after going through all the freedom songs that they knew.[68] The song titled *Been down in the South*[69] spoke about the struggles that

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[64] Seeger, p. 55.

[65] King, p. 97.

[66] Sally Belfrage, *Freedom Summer* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), p. 52-53, 55.

[67] For lyrics to "Ballad of the Student Sit-ins" see Appendix B.

[68] Seeger, p. 138-140.

[69] This song was based on a song Bob Zellner remembered learning at a Methodist church camp in Alabama called *Been Down in the Sea.* The tune is

SNCC members had been involved with and how their work would continue regardless of how many activists were jailed. The lines "Segregation is chilly and cold, Chills my body but not my soul" and "The only thing we did right was the day we started to fight" encouraged movement activists to persevere and to believe that freedom was near. The singer, in this sense, took on the role of the storyteller and related the experiences of other activists within the movement through lyrics and melodies rather than written or spoken words. "The moral came through the music ... words could never rival its [the songs] effectiveness..."[70] By communicating in this manner, the storyteller was able to fulfill the desire of the participants to belong to a coherent and interactive community, and to create a positive portrayal of the activists themselves. The rewriting of lyrics in freedom songs was another way for SNCC to write its own history the way they felt it should be written. Singing provided all activists, and potential participants, with the opportunity to participate regardless of experience.

Singing in the civil rights movement meant creating an environment in which everyone was given the opportunity to assert and voice their commitment. Unlike a choir or other professional vocal organization, participation in the singing of freedom songs was about uniting as a group, vocalizing the goals of the movement, and capturing all the differences of the participants in the wholeness of a song. For

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similar to the song *Them Bones Gonna Rise Again.*

[70] Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 91.

activist Mary King the act of singing provided an important reinforcement of her commitment to the movement and reminded her of the tight knit group to which she belonged.

> "I had sung alto in my church choir, and my mother and I harmonized when we sang at home, but in the black community my voice seemed thin and usually lacked the timbre of the voices around me. Nonetheless, swept up and carried away, I would sing with all my strength, and with my mind, my emotions, my body, my whole being brought together, shivering with the joy of total expressiveness and lost in the momentary unity of belief, feeling, and music."[71]

This type of singing "implied a risk-taking, an opening of the self, and a trust in others that activists felt were necessary for the movement to succeed."[72] The trust, determination and security that emerged from the singing of freedom songs were also elements developed within the 'beloved community'. In addition, the structure of the freedom songs corresponded to the structure of SNCC as an organization. Call and response style singing was spontaneous, with no set leader or solo singer providing all individuals with the chance to perform and participate equally.[73] The communication between the group was built and sustained by individuals working separately and together, shifting their roles accordingly.

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[71] King, p. 95.

[72] Sanger, p. 35.

[73] Sanger, p. 40. Call and response singing involves a singer calling out a line which the rest of the group responds to. The response is either a repetition of the original line or a specified chorus line. The individual who called the first line then drops back to join the group and another person steps forward to repeat the process.

The articulation of the group's intentions was not only a crucial step to carrying out the aims of SNCC but also allowed an individual to perceive his or her role in the movement as significant.[74] The freedom songs not only used 'we' to describe the actions of the movement but also 'I'. The song *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round*, for example, reminded activists that although they were acting in cooperation and coordination with others, individual participation and dedication were the keys to the movement's success. For the northern volunteers who participated in Freedom Summer activities and whose experiences were far removed from the realities of southern Blacks, music represented an important tool in reinforcing the purpose of the movement and their involvement, and in creating group unity. In 1964, many students wrote letters home which emphasized the strength and support that they had experienced from the singing of freedom songs. On June 27th a new SNCC activist wrote:

> "Slowly the voices in the room joined in. We stood with our arms around each other and we sang for each other. ... The group sang in one voice, each individual singing not for himself but for the group ... And I knew better than ever before why I was going to Mississippi and what I am fighting for.[75]"

Activists like Cordell Reagon, understood that the music in itself was not a tool that would create institutional change, but they believed that singing unleashed an inner strength and determination in individuals that would make a difference and keep

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[74] *Ibid*, p. 155

[75] Elizabeth Sutherland, p. 32.

them motivated in the face of violence.

> "The music doesn't change governments. Some bureaucrat or some politician isn't going to be changed by some music he hears. But we can change people – individual people. The people can change governments."[76]

By the end of 1964, however, the communication within SNCC had begun to disintegrate as the direction and purpose of the organization itself was brought into question. After the end of Freedom Summer in 1964 and the defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), SNCC was forced to reconsider its aims and purpose, and determine the direction the group should be heading. Many tensions that had existed within SNCC from the beginning came to a head, such as the participation of whites in the movement and the use of nonviolence as a universally applicable technique. These strains undermined the trust and communication within the organization.[77] As activist Donald Harris stated in an interview in 1967, "[t]here wasn't the communication ... there wasn't that sort of a bond, a binding comradery between the individuals as much as there had been in the early days."[78]

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[76] Seeger, p. 85.

[77] Penny Patch, "Sweet Tea at Shoney's", *Deep In Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 161.

[78] Donald Harris, interview by Emily Stoper for dissertation in 1966-67, reprinted in *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: the Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization,* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), p. 156.

The student newspaper reflected a similar unravelling of communication within the organization. After March 25th, 1965, the next published copy of the newspaper to appear was in June and it came with a new title: *Voice*. The change in title was an indication that the organization was in the midst of an overhaul. The final copy of the newspaper, published in December of that same year, contained an article pleading for help from movement supporters. "In future, *The Voice* plans to explore more programs and ideas in depth – depending on financial resources for paper, ink, and so on. This part is up to you."[79] Rather than encouraging members to support the organization through financial donations as had been done in the early years of the *Student Voice*, this announcement was more regimented and less personal. Freedom songs too lost their role in creating a sense of purpose and organization for the group.

There is no question that communication was pivotal in building and sustaining the ideals of SNCC's beloved community up until 1965. It was central to the creation of SNCC's perception of itself and the image being projected to the nation. Activist Mary King highlighted the importance of the communications department and cooperation of the national media when she noted that "one of the lasting lessons of the civil rights movement is that attitudes of Americans can change and individuals can mobilize on a national basis if they have accurate information about injustice."[80] SNCC's desire to reveal the truth about the

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[79] "Help", *the Voice*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (December 20, 1965), p. 4.

[80] King, p. 248.

circumstances confronting Black communities in the south was achieved, in part, through effective communication within SNCC and to the nation at large. Strong communication ultimately succeeded in creating a sense of what it meant to be a part of SNCC and the type of community that these youngsters were attempting to construct.

CHAPTER FOUR

Experiencing the 'Beloved Community'

In the unique, moralistic, determined and bold community that members of SNCC created, there was little distinction between where the movement began and where an individual's personal life left off. A complete and total dedication to the movement was encouraged and often seen as necessary in order to effectively create change. Activist Mary King, when describing the movement, stated that it "was ... encompassing. The goals were so close, yet they were so far. They grabbed me up, sucked me in and took over ... "[1] Essentially, there was no time away from being an activist or from being a member of the SNCC community. King also pointed out that the "political, emotional, and spiritual lives [of the activists] were inseparably bound to the movement."[2]

Freedom houses, for instance, were established and organized within local communities so that student activists could remain in close proximity to one another to remove the possibility of isolation. SNCC offices too became a late night refuge

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[1] Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking Press, 2000), p. 102.

[2] Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), p. 404.

for many members when work and planning needed to be completed. Students also spent countless hours together eating in groups at local restaurants while determining their action for the following days and weeks. Friendships and romances similarly developed out of the close proximity that the students kept. Unlike other movement organizations whose structures were restrictive and confining, the SNCC community was interactive and thus promoted the continuous involvement of activists in the development of the organization and themselves. These circumstances, combined with the structural and communicative elements of the organization, encouraged SNCC to become a tight knit community of activists.

This dynamic within SNCC, therefore, provided activists with the opportunity to shape more than just social and political institutions and regulations. For SNCC activists, the 'beloved community' represented a space in which to grow and develop from a child into an adult and to test the limitations of their educations. The organization similarly provided the opportunity for members to discover more about themselves and to shape their personal identities. SNCC also provided a forum for activists to negotiate gender roles and to develop a feminist consciousness. By examining the impact of the SNCC community on its members, the significant role that the 'beloved community' played in helping to form personal identity and consciousness becomes clear.

The numerous autobiographies which have been published by former SNCC activists within the last two decades attest to the fact that this movement was more

than a political experience for individuals. These activists use life writing not only to add to the existing literature on the civil rights movement but in some instances to reshape the history and to give voice to missing details and experiences.[3] In addition, each of these autobiographies makes explicit references to the significant role that the SNCC community played in shaping and influencing their experiences within the civil rights movement and their personal development. This highlights the important role that personal expression and vocalization played within the SNCC organization.

The autobiographies published by former SNCC members include Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* published in 1965, Mary King's *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* published in 1987, Endesha Ida Mae Holland's *From the Mississippi Delta: A Memoir* published in 1997, and John Lewis' *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir to the Movement* published in 1998. In addition, a collective effort by nine white women, several of whom were involved with SNCC, was published in 2000, *Deep In Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement.* These autobiographies provide excellent insight into the ways in which the values and principles of the beloved community affected and influenced the personal development of SNCC activists.

With such a youthful collection of activists in SNCC many students were, in fact, growing up and becoming adults within the organizational community. Activist

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[3] Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), p. xi - xviii.

Bernice Reagon explained, "... we were growing up. I think that is what you need to understand. We were growing up as adults."[4] Some SNCC activists, especially those who joined the organization from within the deep South, were high school students and, therefore, had little experience outside of their communities and less exposure to new ideas. For these young people who would not have had a great deal of experience with social institutions other than their family, church and school[5], SNCC provided the opportunity to develop under an alternative set of rules, ideas and constructs. In addition, joining the SNCC organization often meant that an activist had to cast him/herself off from his/her community, family and friends, and dedicate him/herself to the movement. Activist Tom Hayden remarked while discussing the role of the SNCC community that, "...from that they [the activists] got purpose, a new family, a substitute community; they grew up together from that experience."[6] For other activists, conversely, the 'beloved community' represented an extension of their childhood experiences. While discussing her closely knit family structure and community, activist Joan Browning remarks that this

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[4] Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 37.

[5] David Westby, *The Clouded Vision: The Student Movement in the United States in the 1960s* (London: Associated University Presses, 1976), p. 31.

[6] Cheryl Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 32.

was her first experience within a 'beloved community'.[7] Needing to develop her own individuality and self-image, Browning looked elsewhere for a similar situation. After participating in SNCC, Browning stated "... I was searching for restoration of my membership in a loving family and community, membership that comforted me in my early life ... For me, the Freedom Movement, was the 'beloved community'."[8]

One of the interesting elements of this organization was that it encouraged the practical application of education. Rather than simply learning about ideas, individuals and theories, the SNCC community set out to allow young people to test out their thoughts and to explore the possibilities of change first hand. The establishment of the *Student Voice* newspaper, for instance, encouraged SNCC activists to explore and share ideas with one another. It also gave many the opportunities to further develop their writing and thinking skills. A Freedom Summer volunteer working in Hattiesburg wrote home on the subject of education and stated that, "... it takes coming down here to grasp all this, no matter how many books we've read."[9] Another Freedom Summer volunteer was concerned with being overly critical of locals and worried that they would never meet her expectations. She wrote home stating that, "... people everywhere have more in common than I

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[7] Joan Browning, "Shiloh Witness", *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women In the Freedom Movement* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 40.

[8] Browning, "Shiloh Witness", p. 39.

[9] Elizabeth Sutherland, ed. *Letters from Mississippi* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), p. 55.

once thought: humanity is so much more basic than education or intellectual achievement."[10] Although many SNCC activists had university educations, it was not until their experiences in the field and within southern communities that their learning and understanding really began.

By encouraging honesty and truth, the SNCC community similarly helped to unveil the differences between the white and black education systems. Endesha Ida Mae Holland remarked that she believed, up until her interaction with the SNCC organization, that black and white students were receiving the same education and that their post-education successes were based solely on their whiteness.[11] It was not until her interaction with SNCC activists that Holland began to understand the differences between these education systems and to appreciate the privilege and access that education allowed.[12] Anne Moody makes similar remarks about her childhood perception of white and black education. Although aware that white and black children attended separate schools, she had not understood why.[13] It was not

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[10] *Ibid*, p. 46.

[11] Endesha Ida Mae Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 66.

[12] *Ibid*, p. 51. Holland remarks that up until her contact with SNCC workers she had not appreciated the privilege allotted individuals that could read and write. Although her mother had always been proud of her daughter's education, Holland had felt bored with school. Seeing people of her own generation who had not been allowed an education, as well as those from previous generations, was an eye opening experience.

[13] Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), p. 38.

until confronted with the material differences between white and black children that Moody began to see this privilege. As Moody wrote in her autobiography, "[n]ow that I was thinking about it, their schools, homes, and streets were better than mine. They had a large red brick school with nice sidewalks connecting the building."[14] This realization followed Moody through her college education. While attending Tougaloo College in Mississippi as a junior, Moody became intimidated by the number of white teachers leading her classes. She wrote in her autobiography, "I began to get scared all over again. I had never had a white teacher before."[15] The teachers treated Moody equally, challenging her perception of whites in Mississippi. These experiences led her to continue challenging stereotypes and to join civil rights organizations like SNCC.

Activists were also challenged to think about the meaning and attributes of formal education. Early SNCC activist Jane Stembridge wrote a great deal in her personal notes about the meaning of knowledge in society and within the context of the civil rights movement. Contemplating the role of rural SNCC activist Fannie Lou Hamer, Stembridge notes that, "Mrs. Hamer is more educated than I am. That is – she knows more."[16] But what Fannie Lou Hamer knew had little to do with formal education; rather, Mrs. Hamer had a greater understanding than Stembridge

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[14] *Ibid*, p. 38-39.

[15] *Ibid*, p. 245.

[16] Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984), p. 301.

of herself and her social setting.

This process provided activists with the opportunity to re-examine themselves and to determine their own definition of self. Although it is arguable that all individuals that participated in the civil rights movement were affected by what they did and saw, this experience was unique for SNCC activists because of the circumstances under which it occurred. Having the opportunity to participate in the construction of their own community increased the self-confidence of many activists. Endesha Mae Holland, for instance, noted in her autobiography that working with SNCC activists stirred a great sense of pride within her. The movement helped her to understand her own potential rather than letting herself be defined by other people. "For the first time in my life I knew who I was. I no longer needed Eva Mae Brown's clothes to feel like I was somebody. I no longer needed Ike's love to make me feel whole. I was Somebody in her own right, and that was good enough."[17]

Former SNCC activist Charles Jones experienced similar encouragement and felt that the organization facilitated his development as an individual. He stated in an interview in 1967 that,

> ... my experience with SNCC has presented me with a much larger dimension of my own self, has developed within me a much greater sensitivity to people and myself and given me a very profound sense of strength, integrity, love and determination.[18]

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[17] Holland, p. 253.

[18] Charles Jones, interview by Emily Stoper, in *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization*, Emily Stoper (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), p. 205.

Mary King similarly pointed out the importance that involvement in SNCC activities and in the development of the SNCC organization played for an individuals self image. She stated,

> ... if you are spending your time thinking about how to expand the decision making process by enlarging the vote, by community organization, by generally lifting or opening people's awareness to their own power in themselves, it inevitably strengthens your own conceptions, your own ability.[19]

Robert Moses similarly believed that involving oneself in activities like voter-registration and voter-education schools helped to encourage a sense of awareness and self-assertion in the SNCC activists.[20] This participation also helped in rejecting the white supremacist definition of black people as powerless and passive which helped to further the self-confidence of blacks in SNCC.[21]

The community also provided the opportunity for the spiritual remaking and rejuvenation of its members.[22] As a group of individuals with religious backgrounds, many SNCC members used the community as an opportunity to examine their understanding of church structure and religious principles. Activist Dorothy

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[19] As quoted in Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement & the New Left* (New York: Random House,1979), p. 56.

[20] Eric Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead: Robert Parris Moses and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 41.

[21] *Ibid*, p. 41.

[22] For further exploration of he role of freedom songs to SNCC see chapter four.

Burlage, for example, struggled with the contradictions in society about segregation and the messages she received in church about love and brotherhood, justice and righteousness.[23] The SNCC community relieved many of these tensions by attempting to organize and live around these principles. Music also provided activists with the opportunity to connect with each other spiritually. As such an integral component of the civil rights movement, Bernice Johnson Reagon argues that the "freedom songs [had] the power to symbolically remake the people who sang."[24] The power and commitment which developed out of the activist's identification with the music enabled SNCC activists "to remake themselves into people who were living refutations of the white myths regarding blacks."[25] Singing about freedom and the capabilities of the black community allowed SNCC activists to embody these ideas. Reagon similarly argues that providing the supportive and communal space for activists to voice their ideas and opinions encouraged a strengthening of self identification. Reagon experienced this first hand.

> The voice I have now I got for the first time I sang in a movement meeting, after I got out of jail. I did the song, "Over My Head I see Freedom in the Air," but I had never heard that voice before. I had never seen that me before. And once I became that me, I have never

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[23] Dorothy Dawson Burlage, "Truths of the Heart", *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women In the Freedom Movement* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 94.

[24] Kerran L Sanger, *"When The Spirit Says Sing!"* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1995), p. 9.

[25] *Ibid*, p. 9.

let that me go.[26]

The number of autobiographies produced by SNCC activists is a testament to the fact that the 'beloved community' encouraged a greater self-confidence in its members. Since the use of "I" in autobiographical writings "facilitates (at least discursively) the move from passive object (of others' discourses) to active subject,"[27] the autobiographer is able to establish authority and power over his/her own experiences. This becomes increasingly significant for members of oppressed groups, like women or blacks, because they have had little opportunity to construct their own socially acknowledged identity.[28]

Participation within the 'beloved community' also afforded activists the opportunity to examine and renegotiate gender roles and their position within society. Within a non-hierarchical and consensus-building organizational structure, activists were able to see themselves as real contributors to and important players within the movement. This had a significant impact on their perceptions of themselves as activists as well as individuals. Bernice Johnson Reagon described her feelings about participating in SNCC as "an unleashing of my potential as an empowered human being."[29] Activists, like Reagon, were not

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[26] *Ibid*, p. 9.

[27] Margo Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), p. 30.

[28] *Ibid*, p. 30.

[29] Robnett, p. 37.

categorized by their age, race or gender and judged incapable of participating or making a significant contribution. She also stated that she "... only experienced being challenged and searching within myself to see if I had the courage to do what came up in my mind."[30] SNCC member Faye Bellamy supports Reagon's statement arguing that limitations could only be enforced if an individual agreed. Bellamy describes an incident during a march over the Pettus Bridge in Selma, Albama when James Forman encouraged her to turn around because it was too dangerous.

> Forman will you shut ... up? I mean you got all these white folks up here--white preachers, white rabbis, white Catholics, white this and white that--and you gonna tell me to get in the back 'cause I'm female and you want to protect me? You must be insane![31]

SNCC expanded the realm of possibilities made available to young people and it challenged them to think about the restrictions placed on individuals because of their race, class and gender.

In order to actively participate in the struggle, women in SNCC "transcended traditional feminine roles and gender expectations."[32] Although unable to completely disregard the "sexist" traditions which activist had grown up with and were surrounded by, activists renegotiated their own understanding of gender definitions. The feelings of empowerment and belonging experienced by women in SNCC encouraged the redefinition of leadership to include women. As activist

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[30] *Ibid*, p. 37.

[31] Payne, p. 33.

[32] Perkins, p. 103.

Penny Patch articulated, "[i]n truth, during my movement time I learned to cook, type and do office work. I also learned to drive a car, listen and persuade, develop strategy, organize people to register to vote and go on demonstrations, act independently if necessary, speak in public, and keep working despite fear and exhaustion."[33] Diane Nash also challenged the existing understanding of women's role by helping to redefine the meaning of motherhood within the movement. Rather than paying bail while pregnant, Nash argued that she should be sentenced and serve jail time because unless the system of segregation was dismantled, her child would be born "behind bars" anyways.

For many white women, their participation in SNCC required an awareness of the unique dynamic that they brought to the organizational structure. Early activists recognized that the role of whites within the movement should be one of support and should help to encourage black and white relationships. Dorothy Zellner argued, "I was always very conscious of the fact that this was a *Black* movement led by Black people, ... this was *the* central issue and by god I was going to get down there and be with them."[34]

In addition, white women were aware of the limitations and restrictions which their gender and race imposed. Activist Penny Patch points out that "... there was

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[33] Penny Patch, "Sweet Tea at Shoney's", *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women In the Freedom Movement* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 152.

[34] As quoted in Robnett, p. 122.

always some limitations because I was White and particularly [because] I was a White female."[35] This did not, however, take away from their experience or their feeling of stepping outside of their gendered role. Joan Browning, a participant in the Albany branch of SNCC's activism, noted in her short autobiographical essay on the presence of white women in the civil rights movement that she continuously goes searching for her name in the index of civil rights histories.[36] For Browning, finding her name within the pages of a movement text helped to validate her experiences and honour her contribution to the SNCC community. Combatting the beliefs about White women encoded in Southern culture could also mean putting other activists and the community at risk. Constance Curry describes how this dynamic worked itself out during car rides in South Carolina. "Casey and I were riding with Reggie Robinson, who was Black. He bought a chauffeur's cap and made Casey and I sit in the back seat."[37]

The differing experiences of white and black women within the civil rights movement has been given extensive attention within the existing historical literature.[38] These works have highlighted the fact that gender and race are

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[35] As quoted in Robnett, p. 123.

[36] Joan C. Browning, "Trends in Feminism and Historiography – Invisible Revolutionaries: White Women in Civil Rights Historiography", *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Fall 1996), p. 186.

[37] As quoted in Robnett, p. 127.

[38] Evans, Rosen, Rothschild, McAdam, Robnett, and Perkins are a few examples of the literature which has examined this.

inextricably linked and, therefore, produce experiences which are indicative of these differences. Sociologist Belinda Robnett argues that white women's power and leadership occurred primarily within the Atlanta office where gender norms were more closely maintained and monitored whereas black women, with greater movement within the movement, fulfilled leadership roles in the field.[39] The fact that after 1965, white women from within SNCC sought change through the Second Wave Women's Movement while black women looked to the Black Power struggle is emblematic of the differences in their experiences.

In addition to providing intellectual support and the opportunity to expand self-definitions, the 'beloved community' also provided an important and necessary system of emotional support for its members. As Mary King explained, "Within this community we had created, we satisfied our emotional needs from the group more than from the solace of separate personal relationships."[40] With the threat of violence and retaliation constant, the strong community bonds and relationships kept many activists going. A secure place for rejuvenation and emotional solace was necessary to keep activists from continually burning themselves out from their constant activism. Feeling isolated from the dominant culture similarly increased the necessity of having a strong and supportive community structure to fall back on. Activist Penny Patch, for instance, after leaving the SNCC community in 1965 felt that she did not belong in the "white" world, and this increased her already

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[39] Robnett, p. 122.

[40] King, p. 405.

heightened sense of isolation.[41] Jane Stembridge similarly articulates this sense of dislocation with the outside world. " ... Mrs. Hamer knows something else ... She knows that she is good." [42] Stembridge felt she had no such knowledge herself. "I went into society. I was there. And that is where I learned that I was bad ... Not racially inferior, not socially shameful, not guilty as a White southerner .. not unequal as women .. but Bad."[43] Stembridge, although knowledgeable about theology and philosophy, felt that her formal education had not provided her with the framework and grounding to situate herself in society. Being able to explore these ideas and step outside personal boundaries within the SNCC community proved significant to the development of SNCC activists.

In addition, Mary King points out that most SNCC relationships occurred at a faster pace than in the outside world. She states, "...there was no time for the normal evolution of relationships; bonds formed quickly and deeply."[44] The community provided an atmosphere of trust for activists which they could not easily find outside of the movement. Activist Donald Harris stated in an interview in 1967 that "... I knew every person on that staff of SNCC, knew them well. ... I knew them

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[41] Penny Patch, "Sweet Tea at Shoney's", p. 165.

[42] Giddings, p. 301

[43] *Ibid*, p. 301

[44] *Ibid*, p. 74.

well enough to have some faith and confidence ... in them in a crisis situation."[45]

In describing the community and its emotional strengths, King also points out that,

> ... we felt both isolated from and vulnerable to the outside world. What sustained us from day to day was an intense feeling of interdependency -- the sense that we had only one another to rely on -- and a spirit of comradeship. We could not trust anyone else. We had to trust each other and we did.[46]

In fact, there were some activists who, after being rejected by their families for their activism, turned to the community for support. Joan Browning, for instance, turned wholly to SNCC when her mother rejected her from her family because of her activities.[47]

The 'beloved community', therefore, provided more than an organizational infrastructure for activists to work within. It provided a secure forum for young people to explore a range of ideas and values. The community allowed the students to inegrate these principles into their everyday lives. By promoting equality within the community, for instance, activists began to see themselves as equal players who were entitled to equal opportunities. The perception of an individual's ability and leadership were also not limited to their gender or race because the students were unwilling to rely solely on traditional definitions. The active deconstruction of

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[45] Donald Harris, interview by Emily Stoper, in *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization*, Emily Stoper (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), p. 153.

[46] *Ibid*, p. 74.

[47] Joan Browning, *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women In the Freedom Movement* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 71.

boundaries enabled the students to explore their own sense of self and to determine their own boundaries rather than having constraints placed upon them by someone else. An examination of the function of the 'beloved community' enables an understanding of the organization as one that created a community of support and in which the exploration of ideas was encouraged while activists battled against political and social systems of racial intolerance. Activist Jane Stembridge articulated the significant role that the 'beloved community' had in maintaining the integrity of the organization and the strength of the participants when she noted, "[w]hen we had nothing, we had community. When our hands were empty, they were held."[48] For an organization that was constantly striving to prove itself and legitimize its actions, this strong network of support and compassion was integral to its success.

[48] Rosen, p. 102.

CONCLUSION

SNCC was formed at the beginning of 1960 in response to youth inspired sit-ins and protests which occurred independently and without coordination across the United States. This moment marked the beginning of a decade animated by student activism. Although battling many of the same problems that earlier generations of activists and organizations had faced, the students organized themselves and operated in a different manner. This was a logical progression for a generation who felt they had more entitlement than their parents.[1] Former member of SNCC Endesha Ida Mae Holland explained that for many black Mississippians of her mother's generation the possibility of change or any kind of dream of betterment was seen as uppity.[2] "And rather than be tortured by dreams, many decided not to dream at all."[3] Rather than immersing themselves in legal battles or cautiously encouraging desegregation like previous generations of activists had done, the young activists looked to direct action tactics order to be effective and to

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[1] Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 21.

[2] Endesha Ida Mae Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 50

[3] *Ibid*, p. 50.

bring about immediate change. These young people's activism emerged in many forms, including sit-ins, protest marches, mass meetings, and voter registration drives. Although these student-led activities differed from one another, the ideals, principles and goals which led to their participation were similar and parallel. Truth, equality, respect, and the use of nonviolence were principles embedded in the structure and objectives of the student movement. The young people who created the SNCC organization adamantly believed in the possibility of change. They believed that social and political institutions which limited the participation of blacks could be altered if challenged. Most importantly, members of SNCC recognized that in order for changes to occur within the United States, their own organization and community of activists had to reflect and emulate their ideal society. This lead to the establishment of the 'beloved community'.

In order for their goal of a changed society to occur, SNCC first had to understand the organizations and individuals that had encouraged the student movement to develop. Recognizing the long history of struggle within the African-American community enabled many students to understand and recognize the efforts and improvements that had previously been made within the South. It also helped to solidify their understanding of what still needed to be accomplished. Activist Amzie Moore, for instance, was able to encourage young people that further changes were possible through his commitment and continuous dedication to the

movement.[4] Exploring the work of former activists similarly encouraged a sense of pride and hope within many of the students that had formerly been ashamed or neglectful of their black southern heritage. Singer and song writer Guy Carawan explained that students who learned about the singing tradition of their ancestors, began "turning back to a part of their cultural heritage -- an embracing of something which for years they have scorned or rejected."[5] Making strong connections with the previous generation of activists was also important in maintaining the strength of the organization. If veteran activists from Mississippi, with established contacts and credibility, had taken the stance toward the student movement that national civil rights movement organizations consistently took, SNCC would have had a very difficult time establishing themselves. "Instead, they chose to legitimate the outsiders."[6]

Discussing the significant role that previous generations have played in the civil rights movement also brings to light the important and consistent role that non-violent protest and techniques have had. This style of protest technique has been used repeatedly within the Black community and represents yet another strong link between the students' experiences and those of their predecessors. Recognizing the role that nonviolence had played in the past contributed to its power and

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[4] Payne, p. 60.

[5] Kerran L. Sanger, *"When the Spirit Says Sing!": The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), p. 27.

[6] Payne, p. 62.

usability for the young activists. Nonviolence as a technique was also adopted by the organization because inherent to the structure of nonviolent techniques was the participation of all members regardless of gender, race or class. This correlated with the ideals of SNCC's community because it encouraged equality and supported the activities of all members. Nonviolent tactics were successfully used by members of SNCC prior to 1965 to challenge segregation and allowed the students to halt their participation in this system of oppression.

The principles of the 'beloved community' were also visible in the structure and leadership of the organization. Creating an organization which incorporated and reflected the goals and principles of the community was key to the students and their mentors. The way in which the structure of SNCC was formulated encouraged the participation of all members and enhanced a sense of equality amongst the activists. Rather than allowing one individual to withhold all the power and decision-making capabilities an executive committee and a group decision-making policy were adopted. Not only would this ensure a balance of power but it would also enable the voices of all members to be heard and considered. The model of leadership enacted in the organization similarly attempted to break down boundaries. Rather than adopting a traditional form of leadership, SNCC believed that all members had the potential to lead and should be encouraged to do so. Activist Ella Baker similarly believed that leaders had a secondary function and

should be defined by the movement rather than take complete control.[7] SNCC's unique structure became an organizational and leadership model for future movements, and provided hands-on training and guidance for the next generation of activists.

SNCC's success as a community of activists also came through their ability to attract, mobilize and maintain support and membership. Determined to vocalize the goals and principles of the movement activists organized a communications department to oversee and thus relate with the dominant culture. This ensured that accurate accounts of the organization's activities were distributed to mainstream American culture. In addition, the group established a student newspaper called *Student Voice* to keep all activists, especially those in more isolated areas, abreast of the organization's activities. Not only did this ensure that the SNCC community remained cohesive but it established a universal voice for the members to trust and respond to. The group was also able to maintain closeness through the established structural group decision-making. As activist Hollis Watkins explained,

> "I believe that the most valuable lesson we have to pass on is the miracle of how we used to talk with each other -- vigorously coming from many angles, but sharing a common set of values and arriving at a consensus about what we were all willing to work for ..."[8]

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[7] Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 100.

[8] Hollis Watkins, "Oral History with Mr. Hollis Watkins," interview by John Rachal, *University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Program*, October 23rd, 29th, 20th, 1996 (Three Interviews), <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/watkins.htm>

Another key element adopted by members of SNCC to retain a cohesive organization and celebrate their black heritage was the use of freedom songs. Not only did these songs encourage strength and commitment to the movement but it was a form of communication that could be used by all activists equally. Skill, gender or race did not determine an individual's ability to participate. Activist John Lewis recalls that the freedom songs "had the power to lift our spirits and draw us together, those old slow-paced spirituals and hymns ..."[9] It became a way for activists to come together and rejoice in their successes, and to share the emotional stresses of their experiences.

The number of autobiographies produced by SNCC activists since the end of the 1960s civil rights highlights the importance that personal opinion and dedication played to the organization's success. It was a period when political and social achievements were woven together by deeply unique personal and spiritual experiences. SNCC proved to be more than an organization by providing the space for members to develop trusting and nurturing relationships. Activist Mary King states in her autobiography that before becoming involved with SNCC she wanted to assure the organization that she could be trusted as an activist, a white southerner and friend.[10] In addition, these personal histories, regardless of their historical accuracy, demonstrate that experiencing the 'beloved community' had a

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[9] John Lewis, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 268.

[10] Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement,* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), p. 40

tremendous and lasting impact on the members of SNCC. The participation of numerous SNCC activists in a list serve dedicated to this organization similarly reflects the significant role that the community played for members of the civil rights movement. This list provides the opportunity for individuals to communicate with one another, to provide a forum for truthful and honest discussion, and to educate and inform future generations of their activities. As the purpose of the SNCC list states, "[t]his list is for describing and discussing what we did in the Freedom Movement, what it meant to us ... It is for rebuilding the beloved community that we were all once part of, and for continuing the tradition of mutual support that saw us through dark days."[11] Years after their participation in the civil rights movement, activists continue to try to recreate and mirror the dynamic which existed within SNCC.

Without the use of the 'beloved community' as a lense with which to examine SNCC, historians are left without a full understanding of the organization. Although their political activities are important to the study of the civil rights movement, SNCC's ability to function as a tight-knit and cohesive community is equally important. This mode of analysis enables the voices of activists, many of whom have become lost within traditional movement histories, to remain visible and become the focus. Elements of the SNCC organization, like their decentralized

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[11] Susan Glisson, "Purpose of SNCC List", *SNCC 40th Anniversary Connections,* n.d. <http://www.honors.olemiss.edu/mailman/listinfo/sncc> (February 15, 2003)

organizational structure, group decision-making policies and communication department, become less relevant without an understanding of why these students adopted these methods and structures in the first place. This kind of approach similarly helped to emphasize the continuity of struggle that has existed within the United States by arguing that a community does not have to be set up by geographical borders but can be formed on principles, ideas and desired goals. "We were living in a community so true to itself that all we wanted was to organize everyone into it, make the whole world beloved with us, make the whole world our beloved."[12] In the end, the 'beloved community' helped not only to change policies and opinions on segregation and race relations but it also helped a generation of young people grow and develop, and renegotiate the boundaries around race and gender. [13]

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[12] King, p. 8.

[13] Payne, p. 100.

APPENDIX A

Position Paper: Women in the Movement

- Staff was involved in crucial constitutional revisions at the Atlanta staff meeting in October. A large committee was appointed to present revisions to the staff. The committee was all men.
- Two organizers were working together to form a farmers league. Without asking any questions, the male organizer immediately assigned the clerical work to the female organizer although both had had equal experience in organizing campaigns.
- Although there are some women in Mississippi project who have been working as long as some of the men, the leadership group in COFO is all men.
- A woman in a field office wondered why she was held responsible for day-to-day decisions, only to find out later that she had been appointed project director but not told.
- A fall 1964 personnel and resources report on Mississippi projects lists the number of people on each project. The section on Laurel, however, lists not the number of persons, but "three girls."
- One of SNCC's main administrative officers apologizes for appointment of a woman as interim project director in a key Mississippi project area.
- A veteran of two years' work for SNCC in two states spends her day typing and doing clerical work for other people in her project.
- Any woman in SNCC, no matter what her position or experience, has been asked to take minutes in a meeting when she and other women are outnumbered by men.
- The names of several new attorneys entering a state project this past summer were posted in a central movement office. The first initial and last name of each lawyer was listed. Next to one name was written: (girl)
- Capable, responsible, and experienced women who are in leadership

positions can expect to have to defer to a man on their project for final decisionmaking.

. A session at the recent October staff meeting in Atlanta was the first large meeting in the past couple of years where a woman was asked to chair.

Undoubtedly this list will seem strange to some, petty to others, laughable to most. The list could continue as far as there are women in the movement. Except that most women don't talk about these kinds of incidents, because the whole subject is [not] discussible--strange to some, petty to others, laughable to most. The average white person finds it difficult to understand why the Negro resents being called "boy," or being thought of as "musical" and "athletic," because the average white person doesn't realize that *he assumes he is superior.* And naturally he doesn't understand the problem of paternalism. So too the average SNCC worker finds it difficult to discuss the woman problem because of the assumptions of male superiority. Assumptions of male superiority are as widespread and deep rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro. Consider why it is in SNCC that women who are competent, qualified, and experienced, are automatically assigned to the "female" kinds of jobs such as typing, desk work, telephone work, filing, library work, cooking, and the assistant kind of administrative work but rarely the "executive" kind.

The woman in SNCC is often in the same position as that token Negro hired in a corporation. The management thinks that it has done its bit. Yet, every day the Negro bears an atmosphere, attitudes and actions which are tinged with condescension and paternalism, the most telling of which are when he is not promoted as the equally or less skilled whites are. This paper is anonymous. Think about the kinds of things the author, if made known, would have to suffer because of raising this kind of discussion. Nothing so final as being fired or outright exclusion, but the kinds of things which are killing to the insides--insinuations, ridicule, over-exaggerated compensations.

This paper is presented anyway because it needs to be made know[n] that many women in the movement are not "happy and contented" with their status. It needs to be made known that much talent and experience are being wasted by this movement when women are not given jobs commensurate with their abilities. It needs to be known that just as Negroes were the crucial factor in the economy of the cotton South, so too in SNCC are women the crucial factor that keeps the movement running on a day-to-day basis. Yet they are not given equal say-so when it comes to day-to-day decisionmaking. What can be done? Probably nothing right away. Most men in this movement are probably too threatened by the possibility of serious discussion on this subject. Perhaps this is because they have recently broken away from a matriarchal framework under which they may have grown up. Then too, many women are as unaware and insensitive to this subject as men, just

as there are many Negroes who don't understand they are not free or who want to be part of white America. They don't understand that they have to give up their souls and stay in their place to be accepted. So too, many women, in order to be accepted by men, on men's terms, give themselves up to that caricature of what a woman is--unthinking, pliable, an ornament to please the man.

Maybe the only thing that can come out of this paper is discussion--amidst the laughter--but still discussion. (Those who laugh the hardest are often those who need the crutch of male supremacy the most.) And maybe some women will begin to recognize day-to-day discriminations. And maybe sometime in the future the whole of the women in this movement will become so alert as to force the rest of the movement to stop the discrimination and start the slow process of changing values and ideas so that all of us gradually come to understand that this is no more a man's world than it is a white world.

Presented at the Waveland Retreat, November, 1964

APPENDIX B

MUSIC FROM THE MUSIC

"Ballad of the Student Sit-ins"

The time was 1960, the place the USA
That February 1st became a history-making day.
From Greensboro across the land, the news spread far and wide,
As quietly and bravely, youth took a giant stride.

(Chorus) Heed the call, Americans all, side by equal side.
Sisters, sit in dignity, brothers sit in pride.
From Mobile, Alabama to Nashville, Tennessee.
From Denver, Colorado to Washington, D.C.
There rose a cry for freedom, for human liberty.

The time has come to prove our faith in all men's dignity.
We serve the cause of justice, of all humanity.
We're soldiers in the army, with Martin Luther King,
Peace and love our weapons, nonviolence is our creed

(Chorus)

This is a land we cherish, a land of liberty.

How can Americans deny all men equality?
Our constitution says we can't and Christians, you should know.
Jesus died that morning, so all mankind could know.

(Chorus)

No mobs of violence and hate shall turn us from our goal,
No Jim Crows laws nor police state shall stop my free bound soul,
Three thousand students bound in jail still lift their heads and sing,
We'll travel on to freedom, like songbirds on the wing.

(Chorus)

Written by Guy Carawan, Eve Merriam, and Norma Curtis

Originally printed in *Sing for Freedom* , Guy and Candie Carawan, eds. (Bethlehem, PA: a Sing Out Publication, 1990)

Reprinted in Julian Bond. "SNCC: What We Did." *Monthly Review*. 52.5 (October 2002) 14-28.

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