

Ella Baker

Rejecting King's charismatic leadership, Ella Baker advised student activists organizing the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee \(SNCC\)](#) to promote “group-centered leadership” rather than the “leader-centered” style she associated with King’s [Southern Christian Leadership Conference \(SCLC\)](#) (Baker, Interview by John Britton, 19 June 1968). It was this grassroots leadership that Baker credited for the success and longevity of the movement: “You see, I think that, to be very honest, the movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement. This is not a discredit to him. This is, to me, as it should be” (Baker, Interview, 19 June 1968).

Born in Norfolk, Virginia, on 13 December 1903, Baker was raised on the same land her grandparents had worked as slaves. Baker’s childhood was marked early on by the activist spirit of her mother, a member of the local missionary association, who called on women to act as agents of social change in their communities.

After graduating from Shaw University in 1927, Baker moved to New York, where she served as national director of the Young Negroes Cooperative League. In 1938, Baker joined the staff of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People \(NAACP\)](#) as an assistant field secretary and later as director of branches. Unable to redirect the organization's focus toward grassroots organizing, Baker resigned from her position in 1946. She joined the NAACP again in 1952 as president of the New York City branch. In 1956, Baker, along with [Stanley Levison](#) and [Bayard Rustin](#), co-founded [In Friendship](#) to provide aid to local movements in the South.

In January 1958, Baker moved to Atlanta to organize SCLC's Crusade for Citizenship, a campaign to help enforce voting rights for black citizens. She ran SCLC's Atlanta headquarters: after executive director [John Tilley](#) resigned in April 1959, she filled in until a permanent director was hired the following year.

In addition to her criticism of SCLC’s organizing philosophy, Baker also experienced conflicts with her male colleagues. [Andrew Young](#) described Baker as a “determined woman” and went on to say: “The Baptist church had no tradition of women in independent leadership roles, and the result was dissatisfaction all around” (Young, 137).

Following the February 1960 [sit-ins](#) in Greensboro, North Carolina, Baker and King called a conference of student activists at Shaw University. The result of the April meeting was a student-led organization known as the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee \(SNCC\)](#). Already serving in an advisory capacity to the growing student movement, Baker left SCLC in August 1960.

In addition to continuing her involvement as an advisor to SNCC, Baker served as a consultant to the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF) throughout the mid-1960s and helped organize the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party \(MFDP\)](#). She returned to New York in the late 1960s and remained active in the civil rights struggle until her death in 1986.

Sources

Baker, Interview By John Britton, 19 June 1968, RBOH-DHU.

Grant, *Ella Baker*, 1998.

Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 2003.

King to John Lee Tilley, 3 April 1959, in [Papers 5:179](#).

Reddick, “Notes on Southern Christian Leadership Conference Administrative Committee Meeting,” April 1959, in [Papers 5:171-179](#).

Young, *An Easy Burden*, 1996.

http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_baker_ella_josephine_1903_1986/