verage by fostering social disruption. What resulted was the "collective power of masses." This power was highly visible. Widespread media coverage disseminated information about the drama across the country and the world. King, the charismatic figure, played a key role in bringing national and international attention to the movement, which generated pressure against the opposition.

The Montgomery movement introduced the nonviolent approach for social change to the black masses. Until this bus boycott, most blacks were unfamiliar with the techniques and principles of nonviolent direct action. The Montgomery movement served as a training ground where nonviolent direct action was systematically introduced and developed among the masses and the local leadership of the boycott.

A block of time was specifically set aside at the weekly mass meetings to train blacks in how to use nonviolence as a tool of social change. That was how, in Montgomery, the "Nonviolent Workshop" was introduced to the civil rights movement. The workshops were often conducted by the Reverend Glenn Smiley and Bayard Rustin, both experts on nonviolent protest, having received extensive training through their long affiliations with pacifist organizations. During the workshops protesters participated in "socio-dramas" in which they were taught to respond creatively and nonviolently to the tense racial climate exacerbated by the boycott. At the workshops literature on nonviolent protest was distributed to the masses so that they could study the techniques at home.

The religious doctrines of the black church provided the ideological framework through which the doctrine of nonviolence was disseminated to black Montgomeryites. For years blacks had been taught that Christian love conquered hate and that the individual should love everyone, including oppressors. King, Abernathy, and Smiley were familiar with the convergences between Christian theology and the philosophy of nonviolence, which they utilized when teaching nonviolence to the masses. In Montgomery blacks were systematically taught to engage in nonviolent protest aimed at bringing about social change. The organizational procedures developed in Montgomery were observed by black leaders (e.g. Steele and Shuttlesworth) across the country, who came to Montgomery to learn the details of the mass movement approach. They would use the same format in their own nonviolent movements.

Finally, Montgomery had a great impact on the black masses because it was successful. The collective power of the masses was generated from the instant that the entire black community boycotted Montgomery buses. Indeed, once the mass bus boycott was under way, the Mayor, the city commissioners, and officials of the bus company were forced to meet continuously with protest leaders to discuss grievances and demands. These meetings contrasted sharply with earlier sessions between black leaders and white authorities. The boycott made it clear that black demands could not be easily ignored, because the entire black community was mobilized in support of its leadership. Thus, from the very beginning Montgomery blacks were able to experience and define themselves as efficacious agents of social change.

Victory came to the Montgomery movement after an entire year of protest. On November 13, 1956, the United States Supreme Court ruled that Alabama's state and local laws requiring segregation on the buses were unconstitutional. Even though it was a Supreme Court ruling that made it possible to end the boycott, the black community of the United States knew that the disciplined and organized mass movement in Montgomery had created the pressure that contributed to the favorable court ruling. The victory was clear proof not only to Montgomery blacks but to blacks across the nation, protest organizations, opposition forces, and the general American population that power is created when masses act collectively. Before a movement starts, politically unconnected individuals of the dominated group are unaware of how to alter their position in the society. Once a movement is successful, the dominated come to know that there is power in organized collective action.

TALLAHASSEE

Tallahassee provided proof that the "collective power of masses" was indeed an authentic form of power. Tallahassee's mass bus boycott began just five months after the Montgomery movement started. In many respects Tallahassee stood in sharp contrast to Montgomery. First of all, it was a small city. According to the 1950 Census, it had 27,237 people residing within its standard metropolitan area. Of these, only 9,373 were nonwhite. The Reverend C. K. Steele referred to Tallahassee as a little, iron-tight town where "everybody knew everybody and white people had their friends, and the people they used to hold the community in check." Speaking of a bus boycott, Steele stated, "I had no dream that it could happen in Tallahassee." The appearance of a movement in a small city would alert Southerners to the increasing power and pervasiveness of mass protest. Social disruption occurred in Tallahassee during May 1956. On a spring day two women students from Florida A. and M. College refused to give up their bus seats to whites. Organizational forces in the black community immediately began organizing a movement when the two students were arrested for their action. Steele was asked how much Montgomery had inspired the Tallahassee boycott. "Well, we had one, you must remember, in Baton Rouge," he answered. "I heard of it. I knew Rev. Jemison, had known
his daddy. I knew about that." This testimony places the origin of the modern civil rights movement in Baton Rouge. Steele acknowledged that Montgomery was also central, that he and others frequently visited that movement and learned its format for meetings, its procedures, and the nature of its demands.

As to the difference between Tallahassee and Montgomery, Steele states:

> It was Montgomery with the Ph.D.s as its leaders, and many of the Professors at Alabama State were involved. They had every kind of facility with which to operate, in a big manner, in a big way. They had attracted the attention of the whole world even people who were coming out from India, from everywhere.

Whereas the Montgomery movement received important financial assistance from outside sources, the Tallahassee movement did not. In that regard the Tallahassee movement, like the one in Baton Rouge, was far more typical than the Montgomery movement. The civil rights movement did not emerge from the efforts of outside elites or ambitious participants who simply wanted to advance in the social structure. Rather, the overwhelming majority of the numerous local movements during that period were organized and financed by indigenous blacks.

A brief examination of the mobilization and organizational base of the Tallahassee mass bus boycott will uncover the logic of that movement. On May 27, 1956, two female students from Florida A. and M. College were arrested after refusing to move from seats in the "white section" of a local bus.36 The student body at the all-black college took the first mass action. On May 28 the students met and unanimously voted to stay off the buses for the remainder of the semester. The following day students monitored the buses passing through the campus and persuaded black passengers not to ride on them. The students had been successful in initiating the boycott, and within a short time word of the students' action had spread to the larger black community. The school semester would end in two weeks, however, and what would happen to the boycott after the students left was unclear. Black church leaders solved the problem by acting immediately.

On May 29 Reverend Steele—minister, community leader, and president of the local NAACP—along with Dr. James Hudson, president of the Inter-Denominational Alliance (a clergy organization comprising black ministers of all denominations) and former chaplain at the college, immediately arranged a meeting of community leaders to discuss the arrests. Again, it was established leadership closely tied to the mass-based church that spearheaded the movement after the students had acted. At that meeting a committee was formed to approach the city manager to ascertain whether members of the white power structure would desegregate the buses.

Anticipating a negative response, these church leaders, using their vast organizational contacts, called a mass meeting at the Bethel AME Church, which was strategically located in the center of the black community. The committee reported to the meeting that the city manager and the manager of the bus company maintained that bus desegregation was impossible. A motion passed that night to call an immediate boycott of the buses. At that moment Tallahassee's organization of organizations, the ICC, was formally organized. Ministers were elected to serve as president (C. K. Steele), vice president (K. S. Dupont), and secretary (M. C. Williams) of the new organization. Indeed, the ICC was modeled after the UDL and the MIA, having various committees and an organized church work force to accomplish its tasks.

Again, the Southwide attack against the NAACP played a role in the formation of the new protest organizations in Tallahassee. Reverend Steele, as president of the local NAACP, was asked why the boycott was not organized through that organization. He replied: "We would have fought this thing under the NAACP. But there were people who said they've outlawed it in Montgomery, the NAACP. They're going to outlaw it here, and it was for that reason that we formed another organization in Tallahassee, other than fighting it under NAACP."37 Historical events prevent us from knowing whether a mass direct action movement could have been organized through the NAACP in Tallahassee. What is clear, however, is that the attack against the NAACP caused the local black leadership and black institutions of Tallahassee to become the agents of social change in the community.

In Tallahassee, an effective transportation system was organized by the Transportation Committee, chaired by Reverend Speed. Steele recalled:

> That committee's job was to see to it that people got to and from wherever they wanted to go. They proceeded to set up the following system; that anybody who would drive were to go to various of our own filling stations authorized to give them two dollars' worth of gas, and when they ran out they could come back for more. We designated various places in town where people could assemble to be picked up to go to work or what have you.

Within a couple of days no blacks in Tallahassee rode the buses. The new transportation system enabled them to continue working and moving about the city.

The financial base of this movement was also rooted in the black church. In Reverend Speed's words:
The bulk of the money came from the black people in the community, from church to church. The various churches would take up a collection, and they would bring it over if they weren't at the mass meeting at that particular time. They would bring that money from those churches to the mass meeting. Every church at that particular time where we were holding the meetings were the largest churches we had here. They would be overrun.

Thus, the money for the movement was collected through the church community.

An effective boycott in Tallahassee required the total mobilization of the black community. As in Montgomery, long-term mass mobilization was attained through the churches and especially the grassroots mass meetings. Reverend Steele recalls that “we held two mass meetings a week,” but since “no church in town could accommodate the people we finally had to have two a night on either side of town. About three of us would visit at each one of those meetings and talk.” Moreover, to ensure solidarity the mass meetings rotated from church to church. Pointing out the utility of rotating the mass meetings, Reverend Speed informs that “when we would go to those various churches at various times in the community, we would pull all the people from the North side to the South, and all the people from the South to the North all the time.” This method allowed community people to exchange ideas and resources. The method of rotating the mass meetings between churches had been adopted earlier in Montgomery. The mass movement in Tallahassee, then, was not spontaneous; it grew out of the deliberate efforts of organizers, who mobilized the community through preexisting organizations coordinated by the ICC.

The Tallahassee movement provided a training ground for the further development of the nonviolent strategy. As was shown earlier, local movements were connected rather than isolated. These connections become evident when one investigates how the philosophy and tactics of nonviolence spread throughout the South. Nonviolence was first introduced to the black masses in Montgomery. Indeed, as a disciplined form of mass struggle it was systematically taught to blacks by experts at each mass meeting of the MIA. These experts formed a “nonviolent team,” including Reverend Abernathy and the Reverend Glenn Smiley of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Part of their mission was to visit other “trouble spots” in the South and teach nonviolence. At the outset of the Tallahassee movement the nonviolent team was dispatched there to teach the new method. For many local movements the possibility of violence was strong, because they faced opposition forces accustomed to its use or making threats of its use. Yet blacks for the most part remained nonviolent. How was this accomplished in Tallahassee, where the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens' Council, and other racist groups made it known that they were prepared for violence?

Reverend Speed was asked whether the Tallahassee leadership had problems keeping the masses nonviolent. He replied:

Not a lot, because we had some experts in nonviolent training here at all times. One person in particular was Dr. Glenn Smiley. Glenn was the active chairman for the committee of the nonviolent group that talked to all of the various assemblies. When he didn't do it himself, somebody out of his committee would be there to talk with them... The various leaders in the churches and other persons would in turn talk to their memberships. Consequently, it had a tendency to always keep a kind of a shadow of direction over the people.

Speaking about one of the tense moments in Tallahassee, Reverend Steele explained: “Something was going to happen, because it had come to a breaking point. They may have had a riot, a race riot. I don’t know what would have happened in Tallahassee had we not had the background of this philosophy of love and nonviolence actually demonstrated in Montgomery.” Blacks did not struggle nonviolently because they were peaceful by nature. Rather, nonviolence became a disciplined form of mass struggle because it was systematically developed through the organized structures of the movement.

As for results, the mass boycott put the buses out of business in the black community of Tallahassee. Considering that it was concurrent with the boycott in Montgomery, in which the issues were being deliberated by the Supreme Court, the Tallahassee leaders decided to continue the boycott until that ruling was made. When the Supreme Court ruled against bus segregation in Montgomery, blacks in Tallahassee resumed riding buses, with segregated seating. Even after the ruling, however, blacks often encountered difficulties when they attempted to use the front seats. Periodically the boycott was re instituted until bus desegregation was achieved for good, two years after the start of the boycott.

The wider significance of the Tallahassee victory was in demonstrating that the black masses could be organized for protest in small Southern cities. It was becoming clear that the power of social disruption would be not a transitory oddity but an enduring social reality. By January 7, 1957, the Southern Regional Council (SRC) in a press release “disclosed that 21 Southern cities had ended compulsory segregation on local buses without difficulty.” The SRC went on to state: “In every case the desegregation took place without court action—usually by a change of policy on the part of the transit company involved. The
change caused no incidents of violence or organized protest.\textsuperscript{66} In these cities, then, the potential for mass action was sufficient to cause elements of the white power structures to capitulate. The Tallahassee struggle signaled to the unfolding civil rights movement that Montgomery was no accident and that massive social disruption was an effective weapon that could be used across the entire South. Indeed, many more bus protests would be conducted, especially in the deep South. Tallahassee played a significant part in establishing the lines along which many of these battles would be fought.

**BIRMINGHAM**

By Southern standards Birmingham was a large city. Its population exceeded 300,000, and the black population alone was nearly 150,000. The tripartite system of racial domination was firmly entrenched and buttressed by violence. Indeed, Birmingham became known as "Bombingham" because of the bombs that frequently exploded in the black community. By 1956 the NAACP had built a strong organization in Alabama, with fifty-eight branches and a membership of more than 14,000.\textsuperscript{64} Moreover, Birmingham was the site of the NAACP's Southeastern headquarters, which coordinated the association's activities in seven Southern states. Following the 1954 Supreme Court school decision, the NAACP was vigorously pursuing desegregation of the public schools. On June 1, 1956, the white power structures in Alabama struck a vital blow to this effort by outlawing the NAACP throughout the state.

The outlawing of the NAACP in Alabama triggered the direct action movement in Birmingham. New protest machinery was developed to replace the NAACP. The Birmingham movement's contribution to the unfolding civil rights struggle was thus in demonstrating that direct action movements could be organized to confront issues other than bus segregation. The Montgomery and Tallahassee movements were organized around acts of defiance (women riders ejected from buses and arrested), which required immediate mobilization of the black community for an effective fight against this specific pattern of domination. Although the outlawing of the NAACP presented the black community with a difficult situation, it was by no means immediately clear what the appropriate response should be or whether any response was necessary.

Reverend Shuttlesworth, minister of Birmingham's Bethel Baptist Church and former membership chairman of the outlawed NAACP, decided it was time to organize a direct action movement in Birmingham. Indeed, it was clear that masses of blacks could be mobilized for social change, for at that very moment blacks were boycotting buses in Montgomery and Tallahassee. Shuttlesworth had observed these movements closely and had visited Montgomery the night its movement was organized. With support from several ministers and community people, Shuttlesworth called a mass meeting to discuss an alternative to the NAACP.

At that meeting the ACMHR was organized. Like the UDL, the MIA, and the ICC, this was a church-related organization with the top leadership positions held by ministers. Also like those organizations, the ACMHR held rotating mass meetings at various churches every Monday night. Shuttlesworth recalls that "when things were really hot, we would hold mass meetings every night."\textsuperscript{65} The Mass meetings were packed with community folk who came out to fight against domination and participate in the fervent religious culture that undergirded the movement.

Once again, the Birmingham movement was financed largely by the indigenous community. A Southern Conference Educational Fund publication issued about 1959 reported that "since June, 1956, a total of $50,000 has been raised and spent by the ACMHR, most of it on court litigation. Most of this has been contributed by the Negroes of Birmingham, many of whom make scarcely enough to live on."\textsuperscript{66} Writing about ACMHR finances somewhat later, Shuttlesworth explained:

I doubt very much if we have gotten over $8,000 from outside of Birmingham in the three years in which the Movement has been organized. Our major weekly source of income is derived through weekly contributions at mass meetings. In addition, we receive some donations, and some income from honorariums I receive for various speaking engagements throughout the country and contributions which are made at these meetings to be given to ACMHR (for all of which we are exceedingly grateful).\textsuperscript{67}

When interviewed for this study, Shuttlesworth further clarified the financial structure of the ACMHR: "Our money came from mass meetings. We collected it at the different churches. That was the chief basis of our funding. We didn't get a lot of money from outside. At the first meeting of the ACMHR, we raised $400. We could usually raise $200–300 a night."\textsuperscript{68} In short, it was the Birmingham black community that financed efforts aimed at its own liberation.

The grievances, demands, and activities of the ACMHR clearly reveal the character of this new organization. Its first act was to request the hiring of black policemen to patrol black communities. When the white power structure denied that request, the ACMHR filed a lawsuit
against Birmingham's Personnel Board to open all civil service examinations to blacks. The Personnel Board responded by removing the "white only" restriction from all jobs and allowing blacks to take the examination, but none were hired. As in Tallahassee, the leaders of the ACMHR decided to ride the Birmingham buses on a desegregated basis immediately after the Supreme Court ruling was handed down in the Montgomery case. Two hundred fifty members of the organization announced that they would ride the buses on December 26, 1956. Violence, Birmingham style, reared its ugly head on Christmas night, 1956. While the city's marquee proclaimed peace unto mankind, Shuttlesworth's home was bombed and the bed in which he slept was shattered. Somehow Shuttlesworth emerged from the wreckage unharmed. A voice louder than any of the other vociferous individuals that had gathered around the bombed house exclaimed, "God saved the Reverend to lead the movement." One of the mottoes of the ACMHR was that you had to keep pushing, testing, and learning. On December 26, 1956, the group of 250 rode the Birmingham bus in mass violation of the local law. Twenty-one were arrested, and the ACMHR immediately filed suit in federal court.

Six months later Shuttlesworth, his wife, and several others attempted to desegregate the Birmingham railroad station. They were forced to flee when they were met by a white mob intent on killing them. Three months later Reverend Shuttlesworth, his wife, and another minister attempted to enroll their children in an all-white school. A mob beat Reverend Shuttlesworth with chains while Mrs. Shuttlesworth was stabbed in the hip, and one of their children sustained a foot injury. In response, the ACMHR filed suit against the board of education. That same month another bomb was tossed into Shuttlesworth's church. By this time, however, the ACMHR had established a security system whereby guards patrolled its president's church and home. A guard threw the bomb out of the sanctuary, but it exploded on impact, damaging part of the church. Three months later members of the ACMHR again attempted to ride a segregated bus. They, along with Shuttlesworth, who was not one of the riders this time, were thrown into jail for violating segregation ordinances. The night of the trial "an orderly crowd of 5,000 Negroes gathered on the Courthouse lawn in non-violent protest against the arrest." All the defendants were convicted but released on bond. The ACMHR responded by filing another injunctive action against the city and the bus company.

Thus, the ACMHR attacked the tripartite system of domination along several fronts: the right to have black police patrol black communities; discrimination in hiring; bus and train segregation; disfranchisement at the polls; segregation of public schools; and segregation at swimming pools, libraries, and retail stores. In Shuttlesworth's words, "I was trying to tear the system down. Out to kill segregation before it killed us." The ongoing mobilization of a large segment of Birmingham's black community through the churches was the backbone of ACMHR's efforts. It was such mobilization that made it possible for five thousand people to protest in an orderly manner on the lawn of the courthouse at an agreed time. The presence of the nonviolent team, which had gathered experience in Montgomery and Tallahassee, was the principal factor that prevented blacks from engaging in violence, an ever present threat in this tense racial atmosphere. Indigenous resources enabled the ACMHR to file lawsuits frequently and confront the white power structure continuously. Shuttlesworth recalls that "the people had so little but did so much to carry on the cause." To be sure, the Birmingham movement was propelled by an organization of organizations and was church-based, but personality factors were central in developing this multipurpose mass movement.

The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, president of the ACMHR, personified the spirit of the new direct action era even more than King or Steele. For Shuttlesworth and his supporters were involved in the tedious business of organizing a movement without benefit of a dramatic precipitating event like the ones in Montgomery and Tallahassee. The first grievances of the ACMHR make this clear. The absence of black police was certainly a grievance to which blacks could respond, but it was not a pressing grievance like bus segregation. Most blacks were so oppressed that the idea of having black policemen had never occurred to them. The prospect of hiring black policemen had not been widely discussed in Birmingham's black community, although an interracial committee had pursued the issue since 1952 with no success. Thus Shuttlesworth shocked most of his fellows when he made the request for black policemen. Many considered him a crazy fool or even an opportunist for voicing such a demand. Furthermore, the black community could not boycott the police force the way they could bus companies. The ACMHR therefore applied the legal strategy in attacking this particular grievance in late 1956. In fact, the ACMHR effectively combined the legal approach pioneered by the NAACP and direct action tactics. It was the direct action approach that distinguished the ACMHR from previous struggles in Birmingham.

Because Shuttlesworth was organizing a movement without the benefit of a precipitating outrage, such as the arrest of Rosa Parks, he was forced to make direct action popular by his personal acts and courage. Dr. King and Reverend Steele's were not placed in this predicament; their leadership evolved from dramatic situations conducive to mobilizing direct action movements. But history and the social forces of the day could not have produced a leader more ideal for the Birmingham role than Shuttlesworth. On the other side of the fence, history and the so-
cial forces of the day provided an ideal white commissioner, who, in his every act, personified and embodied the fighting spirit of the white segregationist. This “redneck” Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene “Bull” Connor, locked horns with Shuttlesworth in a classic battle that continued for almost a decade. It must be said that from the beginning history was partial to the “Bull,” for at his disposal were a large police force, vicious attack dogs, electric cattle prods, the White Citizens’ Council, the Ku Klux Klan, and the established institutions of Southern white society. At Shuttlesworth’s feet lay the arduous tasks of mobilizing the black community through the ACMHR and staging confrontations with the white power structure.

Yet Shuttlesworth, standing in the center of his group and propelled by their institutions and desires, somehow lived up to what his group later viewed as the historical demands of the movement. He became a public and charismatic figure by continuously defying the white power structure. In connection with his role, Shuttlesworth has stated: “I always believed that the minister is God’s first line soldier. . . . I always believe that a preacher ought to be able to speak out and say what thus say the Lord and then he ought to be acting out thus said the Lord. . . . I should say I’m a battlefield type general like Patton, I guess.”74 To build a movement, the people out front had to show no fear. Shuttlesworth was the epitome of courage. In his own words: “I tried to get killed in Birmingham. I literally believe that he that lose his life shall find it. He who lose it for my sake (meaning God) shall find it. I literally believe that. And I believe that if I lose my life, it was the struggle of living.”75

Shuttlesworth was known throughout movement circles as having no fear. The Reverend Glenn Smiley, who on occasions worked with Shuttlesworth, remarked:

Once he told me, after he had been chain whipped by going into a white group that chased him and whipped him with a chain, that “it doesn’t make any difference. I’m afraid of neither man nor devil.” And I said, “Fred, don’t ever ask me to go with you on a project because if you’re not afraid on occasions, and there’s plenty to be afraid of here, I don’t want to be around you.” . . . Now Martin [King] and these other guys just wouldn’t allow their fears to govern their actions. Now this is courage. This is bravery. Not Shuttlesworth. I think Shuttlesworth, his bravery is in defiance of possible consequences. But that’s the way he is. He is a strong-willed, strong character person, and directed.76

This was the kind of personality around which a direct action movement was built in Birmingham. Shuttlesworth’s colleague in Tallahassee, the Reverend C. K. Steele, seemed to have summed it up:

See, nothing was happening in Birmingham, but they had outlawed the NAACP in Birmingham, and so Fred said, “We’ve got to do something.” And all of the bigwigs said, “Now Fred’s going crazy, he’s trying to whip him up some, you know.” But Fred persisted. Because he persisted, he finally got it off the ground. I expect that the Birmingham movement remained strong longer than almost any movement in the South that I know of.77

Birmingham demonstrated that movements could be deliberately organized to accomplish long-term goals. Birmingham created a model for many subsequent consciously constructed movements, not the least of which was Birmingham in 1963.

CENTRALITY OF MOVEMENT CENTERS

The three movements discussed in this chapter, along with the one in Baton Rouge, gave rise to the first “local movement centers” of the civil rights movement movement. The early centers stimulated the organization of similar centers in numerous cities of the South during the late 1950s.

The existence of movement centers in the black communities of Montgomery, Tallahassee, and Birmingham in the late 1950s was the new reality that distinguished them from the period preceding the mass movements. Studies of protest activities in these communities conducted in the late 1950s provide evidence that they had developed movement centers. For example, in a study of the Tallahassee black community during the late 1950s, Lewis Killian and Charles Smith found that the leaders of the 1956 bus boycott replaced the conservative pre-boycott leaders. They point out that in the late 1950s:

... these “new” leaders have sought to keep the Negro community of Tallahassee militant and dynamic by continuing weekly meetings of the ICC, the organization formed to promote the bus boycott, conducting institutes on nonviolence, taking preliminary steps toward school integration, working to get more Negroes registered and voting, and making many local and nonlocal public appearances in connection with the uplift of Negroes.78

Thus a genuine movement center developed out of the 1956 boycott movement. In another study the same authors conclude that “it was not until the formation of the Negro Inter-Civic Council that any organization embarked on a program of action either for or against any form of segregation in Tallahassee.”79
Similarly, Jacquelyne Clarke, in her pioneering study of the MIA and the ACMHR during the late 1950s, argued that "they represent the strongest and most publicized forces working for civil rights within their own communities, where they appear to have appealed more to the masses of Negroes than any other organization with a similar purpose [e.g. the NAACP]." Moreover, consistent with the argument of the present study, Clarke argued that these "Negro civil rights leaders and the masses of Negroes have developed increasing organizational strength and unity to achieve full citizenship rights" and that these organizations were the "most significant of the contemporary civil rights 'grass roots' organizations of American Negroes anywhere since 1954." Clarke provides evidence that the movement centers in Montgomery and Birmingham were church-based because more than 98 percent of their members were also church members. Further, it is clear from Clarke's study that the people who were active in these centers had come to embrace new tactics in addition to the NAACP's legal approach, as more than 80 percent of them preferred nonviolent techniques, including "mass meetings, boycotts or protests and other nonviolent techniques, and legal means." It is important to point out here that as late as 1959 these centers still had significant linkages. Writing of the weekly mass meetings in Birmingham at that time, Clarke notes that "mass meeting attendance averages anywhere between 500 and 600 persons, increasing in time of crisis." Clarke estimated the attendance at a mass meeting in Montgomery in April 1959 at 350.

Data from these early studies and the present one clearly demonstrate that the centers discussed in this chapter did in fact exist and meet the basic criteria for the definition of movement centers discussed earlier. In my view scholars of the civil rights movement have consistently reached erroneous conclusions about the origins of the civil rights movement because they have dismissed these centers as weak and incapable of generating mass collective action. Piven and Cloward, in their important study of poor people's movements, go even farther by arguing that the early confrontations of the modern civil rights movement were spontaneous and successful because these activists did not engage in the counterproductive process of organization-building. In their view, the process of organization-building is the very activity that smothers movements and robs them of their underlying force of mass defiance and spontaneity. The concept "movement center" suggests that an alternative view best fits the data regarding the civil rights movement: Movement centers provided the organizational framework out of which the modern civil rights movement emerged, and it was organization-building that produced these centers.

If movement centers were important to the emergence of the civil rights movement, then the question arises as to why contemporary scholars have largely dismissed them. The most feasible explanation seems to be related to the nature of movement centers themselves. Movement centers and the collective action they generate rarely develop in a benign environment. Rather, they must contend with a number of problems, including repression, fear among members of the subordinate group, difficulties associated with devising effective strategies and tactics, and meager financial resources. Thus movement centers will experience both "hot" and "cold" periods. In the early studies of protest activities in the cities discussed here, researchers have pointed to the real problems these centers faced. Later studies have tended to dismiss these centers because they focused on the problems they faced rather than on their wider significance, organizational strength, and capabilities.

There is another important reason why scholars have dismissed these centers. It is often a wise strategy on the part of activists in movement centers to give the impression that their organization-building activities are helter-skelter and spontaneous. Publicity about an effective, coordinated movement center can draw the opposition's attention to the center and invite repressive actions against it. Besides, spontaneous mass activities are less open to charges of conspiracy by the authorities. Smith and Killian found evidence backing this argument in the case of the Tallahassee movement center during the mass bus boycott. They point out that in September 1956 "the City Court subpoenaed all the records of the ICC, demanding transportation schedules, minutes of meetings, membership lists, finances, etc." As pointed out earlier, authorities in Alabama and elsewhere had effectively used this tactic in their attack against the highly structured NAACP. The ICC responded differently; it produced no records of any consequence. Smith and Killian point out:

During the summer months [of 1956] the ICC discontinued reading financial reports, etc., in public for two reasons: one, both white reporters and other unidentified white persons were permitted at the open mass meetings; and two, the ICC felt it was getting an unfair press. . . . The minutes were kept in such a way as not to endanger personalities in the bus protest.

Therefore it is of strategic importance for activists in movement centers to project a spontaneous image, enabling authorities to label them as ungrounded, impulsive, and nonrepresentative. Social scientists whose accounts emphasize disorganization and spontaneity miss the mark by mistaking an image, projected to and taken up by repressive authorities, for the reality.

Finally, implicit in the work of a number of civil rights movements
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scholars, including Piven and Cloward and Anthony Oberschall, is the assumption that subordinate groups are usually without organizational resources and skills.93 This assumption discourages researchers from closely scrutinizing the important roles that organization-building and skilled activists play in producing collective action. Such assumptions leave the central role of movement centers largely undiscovered.

This chapter has analyzed the early mass movements of the civil rights movement and the movement centers that developed to direct them. The central argument, to be developed further in later chapters, is that these centers existed during the late 1950s and provided the organizational framework that enabled significant collective action to “explode” in the early 1960s. But in order for collective action to spread throughout the South, movement centers had to be developed in numerous locales, and their activities had to be loosely coordinated. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was formed to accomplish precisely these goals. The next chapter will explore that Southern black indigenous organization.

4

THE SCLC: THE DECENTRALIZED POLITICAL ARM OF THE BLACK CHURCH

Thus when judging the SCLC, one must place above all else its most magnificent accomplishment: the creation of a disciplined mass movement of Southern blacks. . . . There has been nothing in the annals of American social struggle to equal this phenomenon, and there probably never will be again.

—Bayard Rustin

To this point the first important struggles of the modern civil rights movement have come under study. The present chapter will consider how the dynamics of those struggles were developed in multiple communities, creating a nexus of local movement centers capable of sustaining a Southwide movement. The contention here is that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was the force that developed the infrastructure of the civil rights movement and that it functioned as the decentralized arm of the black church.

Scholars of social movements have been concerned with the important issue of how movements become forces in a society. Some theorists suggest that movements gather their strength by breaking from existing social structures, while others take the opposing view that movements draw their strength from preexisting organizations and social networks. In the case of the civil rights struggle, the preexisting black church provided the early movement with the social resources that made it a dynamic force, in particular leadership, institutionalized charisma, finances, an organized following, and an ideological framework through which passive attitudes were transformed into a collective consciousness supportive of collective action.
THE ORIGINS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Black Communities Organizing for Change

Aldon D. Morris
To the spirit of
W. E. B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Jr.,
and freedom fighters throughout the world

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