WE WHOBELIEVE IN FREEDOM CANNOT REST UNTIL IT COMES

The Continual Activism of Charles Sherrod in Southwest Georgia

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"Southwest Georgia, the development of southwest Georgia,
is akin to the development of my innermost self.
For somewhere along the way, I've put my blood,
and I've put my soul into this work and development."[1]

Charles Sherrod, 1968.

[1] *One More River to Cross,* Glen Pearcy Productions, 1969/2012, transcript.

We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest Until It Comes: The Continual Activism of Charles Sherrod in Southwest Georgia

1. Introduction

1.1. Fighting Till This Day

"We've come a long way, but we've got a long way to go." With these words, Charles Melvin Sherrod opened his 2010 lecture at the Virginia University School of Law. Fifty years before, he had been one of the student leaders who entered the American Civil Rights Movement through the sit-ins and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Early on, he came to believe that getting across a "concept of freedom" was a fundamental step in black people's quest for social change. I first learned about Charles Sherrod during an American History research seminar at Leiden University. As director of SNCC's Southwest Georgia Project, Sherrod stood out because of his strong religious faith, his identification with nonviolence as a way of life, and his dedication to an integrated movement. Whereas SNCC in the second half of the 1960s abandoned the ideal of nonviolent direct action and integration, and replaced it with the ideology of Black Power, Sherrod remained faithful to the organization's founding principles and continued his work in southwest Georgia in the same spirit that dominated the early days of the movement.[2]

Due to their similar positions as SNCC project directors, movement scholars have often compared Charles Sherrod's work in southwest Georgia to Robert Moses' activities in

[2] Charles Sherrod, "50 Years After the Sit-ins: Reflecting on the Role of Protest in Social Movement and Law Reform," University of Virginia School of Law, January 28-30, 2010, transcript. .SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, Atlanta, Georgia, December 27 – 31, 1963, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6312_sncc_excom_min.pdf, 21. He ended his lecture at Virginia Union by saying: "We who believe in Freedom, cannot rest until it comes," a quote from 'Ella's Song,' written by Bernice Johnson Reagon and sang by Sweet Honey and the Rock as a tribute to Ella Baker

Mississippi. In *In Struggle* (1981) Clayborne Carson described these projects as the "two most important testing grounds for SNCC's community organizing approaches." Stephen Tuck, author of *Beyond Atlanta* (2001) noted how Sherrod's Southwest Georgia Project "stands alongside Mississippi as one of the two classic set-piece confrontations between a major civil rights organization and massive resistance in the rural black belt." In *Many Minds, One Heart* (2007) Wesley Hogan referred to Sherrod and Moses as "two of the most determinate and brilliant of SNCC's later visionaries." Hogan: "What Sherrod did for Georgia, Moses did for Mississippi." Both were "engaging in something… profound – the recruitment of a new, active citizenry drawn from the rank and file of black America."[3]

Whereas the development of protest in Mississippi occupies a prominent place in movement historiography, the movement in southwest Georgia, to quote Tuck, "has largely escaped the scrutiny of historians." Apart from a short period between December 1961 and the summer of 1962, known as the Albany movement, protest in southwest Georgia has not been subjected to in-depth study. This can partly be explained by the fact that "the Georgia project never escalated to the scale of Mississippi," and "became increasingly marginalized both from the SNCC head office and national attention." As a result, Moses' leadership has been thoroughly analyzed, while attention for Sherrod's role remains fragmentary. In *Climbing Jacobs Ladder* (1967) Pat Watters and Reese Cleghorn noted how Sherrod, "never attained the national attribution that such a figure as Robert Moses did." Commenting on the lack of attention for Sherrod, Carson said in 2010: "He was as central to the struggle for voting rights as Moses was; the difference is, the movement's turning point wasn't Southwest Georgia, it was Mississippi. History is strange that way." Hogan expressed regrets about experienced organizers and grassroots leaders such as Sherrod being "still largely, if not wholly, absent from the debate." His absence is especially regrettable, according to Carson, because, while for many activist of the 1960s their experience of the movement was short-lived – they "went on and did something else" – some, like Sherrod, "didn't leave the movement. They stayed, and they're still fighting to this day."[4]

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[3] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981)74; Stephen G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia 1940 – 1980*(Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 160; Wesley Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America*(Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 39, 79, 89, 212.

[4] Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta,* 160-161; Pat Watters and Reese Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacobs Ladder: The Arrival of Negroes in Southern Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), 155; Clayborne Carson, quoted in Joan Walsh, "The Civil Rights Heroism of Charles Sherrod," *Salon,* July 23, 2010,

The continued relevance of movement veterans such as Charles Sherrod, combined with the limited amount of in-depth research, make him a natural subject for further study. Throughout this thesis, the focus will be on three general themes that feature prominently in the historiographical debate. First, by reconstructing the chronology of protest in southwest Georgia between the 1950s and the present, I will try to see to what extent its history fits general theoretical frameworks concerning periodization and the chronology of the American Civil Rights Movement. Second, by looking more closely at Charles Sherrod's role in building and sustaining the local movement, I hope to shed more light on the concept of leadership as a source of social change. Finally, I want to see to what extent armed self-defense, as opposed to non-violent resistance, determined the nature of the local struggle. To provide the necessary theoretical framework for my research, I will first briefly summarize how the concept of periodization, leadership, and armed self-defense feature in the historiographical debate since the 1960s. Then I will give a brief overview of the way Sherrod has been described in leading studies of SNCC and the movement in southwest Georgia, and to see how this reflects on the central themes of periodization, leadership and armed self-defense.

1.2. Theoretical Framework – The Historiographical Debate

Historical interpretations of the Civil Rights Movement can be roughly divided into two categories. A first generation of scholars, writing during 1960s and 1970s, generally focused on the South, and depicted the 'classical' phase of the movement as "spontaneous and discontinuous with previous struggles." These scholars identified the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling of 1954, and the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 as the beginning of a distinct phase. The legal victories of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 symbolized the movement's greatest accomplishments. Afterwards it all began to unravel, to end "with the tragic assassination of Martin Luther King" in 1968. While the rise of black militancy during the second half of the 1960s expanded the scope of the movement to the North, as far as 'classical' scholars were concerned, the Black Power era merely served

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http://www.salon.com/2010/07/23/charles_sherrod_civil_rights_hero; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 254;Clayborne Carson, quoted at New Communities Inc., http://www.newcommunitiesinc.com/new-communities-inc-founders.html.

"as a 'tragic epilogue' to the grand narrative" of the southern struggle. The years after 1965 were depicted as an era of declension, dominated by violence, and lacking the "the moral clarity of the earlier movement."[5]

'Classical' scholars generally depicted the 'master narrative' as a "decade of collective action," sustained by "a powerful moral vision of nonviolent direct action and the goal of an interracial democracy." Images of "respectability and courage" and "coercive nonviolence" of black protesters, pitted against the "guns, nightsticks and fists" used by southern white segregationists served as a powerful appeal to national public opinion and the federal government. But when it came to identifying the movements driving forces, mass activism was merely portrayed, "as a new instrument in the arsenal of national civil rights organizations." Instead, the charismatic leadership of national civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., and the action of federal government officials, were considered decisive elements in the process of securing national civil rights legislation.[6]

In the late 1970s, and the 1980s 'revisionism' drastically altered the analyses of the driving forces of the modern Civil Rights Movement. While the central role of King and national civil rights organizations could not be denied, scholars now championed "an *indigenous* perspective" focusing on "women and men who initiated protests in small towns and cities across the South, and who acted according to their own needs rather than those of central organizations." Clayborne Carson, for example, emphasized the need to "determine the extent to which civil rights leaders reflected the aspirations of participants of black struggles," and advocated more research into "the shifting relationship between leadership and mass struggles." Instead of a sole focus on 'civil rights,' scholars now argued that black activism involved "varied and constantly changing strategies, tactics, and styles of leadership," and that the "locally based social movement," of the 1950s and 1960s disrupted "hundreds of southern communities… by sustained protest… that lasted, in some case, for

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[5] Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *The Journal of African American History,* Vol. 92, no. 2 (March 2007): 265-288, 266; Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Between Memory and History: Autobiographies of the Civil Rights Movement and the Writing of the Civil Rights History," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 74, No. 2, (May, 2008): 325-364, 330.

[6] Nasstrom, "Between Memory and History," 330; Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 2 (April 1991): 456-471, 456. Clayborne Carson, "Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America,* ed. Charles W. Eagles, (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 19-32, 23. Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 266.

years." Despite "serious differences regarding approaches" these scholars still "shared an understanding of the movement's chronology," and they generally considered the period between 1954/55 – 1965/68 as the modern "Civil Rights Era."[7]

A next "wave" of scholars argued that in order to "identify and explain the long-term structural factors underlying the movement's origins, development, and outcomes," one had to look beyond the movements 'classical' phase. The image of a 'spontaneous and discontinues' movement was challenged by the image of what Jacqueline Dowd Hall called the "Long Movement," which went back as far as the 1930s, and lasted far into the 1970s. In doing so, Hall rejected the image of sharp ideological decline in the second half of the 1960s, and argued instead for continuity between what happened before, during and after the 'classical' phase. Many of these same scholars were also interested in "undermining the trope of southern particularity," and argued that "the differences between southern *de jure* and northern *de facto* racial oppression were exaggerated," and that activism of the 1960s was "as much a product of black activists' engagement with racist New Deal liberalism in the North as with southern Jim Crow."[8]

The broader conceptions of a "black freedom movement" allowed scholars to get "beyond a dichotomy between civil rights and Black Power, both ideologically and chronologically." Some scholars emphasized "the coexistence of liberal, black nationalist, and radical ideologies and practices; as well as nonviolence and armed self-defense, during the movement's "heroic" civil rights period." In *The Spirit and the Shotgun* (2007), Simon Wendt, for example, argued that armed self-defense formed "a significant auxiliary to nonviolent protest in the southern civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s." In *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed* (2016) SNCC veteran Charles Cobb, in turn, noted how the apparent clash between "violent and nonviolent ideas and approaches to civil rights struggle was oversimplified," and ignored "the more complex tension between the priorities of local black communities and the priorities of national civil rights organizations." The emphasis on the deep roots of armed self-defense contradicted the alleged centrality of nonviolence in

[7] Clayborne Carson, "Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America,* ed. Charles W. Eagles, (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 19-32, 21, 23; Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 265, 267, 268; Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now," 557.

[8] Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 265, 267, 268, 274, 281; Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," 1235.

the early 1960s.[9]

Some aspects of the revisionist movement history have in turn been subjected to criticism. Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, argued that 'Long-Movement' scholars tended to "bend the stick too far in the opposite direction," aggregating the different phases of movement activism "into one undifferentiated mass of characteristics." Instead, they suggested the concept of "the Civil Rights and Black Power movements as waves in a broader more complex river of resistance and affirmation." In their opinion these scholars focused too much on "conservative versions of the declension narrative," while ignoring more progressive and liberal conceptions of either 'civil rights' or 'black power.' They also pointed out that the "social and political terrain encountered by Black Power activists was very different from that confronted by civil rights workers, in large part due to that movement's *qualified* success." Instead of either 'declension,' or 'continuity,' "these advances cleared the ground for Black Power projects to focus on building alternative institutions, rather than gaining access to existing institutions, and electing African American officials, rather than merely acquiring the vote."[10]

Nevertheless, 'revisionist historiography' opened the door to a multitude of alternative versions of movement history. Although 'revisionism' is in many ways a rejection of the previous 'classical' interpretation of movement history, and has now come to dominate the contemporary historical discourse, it does not mean that proponents of the 'master narrative' have lost all authority. As Steven Lawson wrote in 1991, "only by emphasizing the element of struggle – between national institutions and local activist, moderates and

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[9] Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 269, 274, 276-277; Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 1; Charles E. Cobb Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*(Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), xvii, 111; See also: Umoja, Akinyele O., "The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement," Journal of Black Studies, Vol. 29, no. 4 (March, 1999): 558-578.

[10] Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 270, 273, 275, 276, 278. Cha Jua and Lang argued that the Civil Rights Movement was not only about "desegregation, civil disobedience, and electoral politics." And Black Power was more than a rejection of non-violence," and covered "a range of activities centering on autonomic empowerment efforts." According to them Black Power, "derived its central meanings from a divers tradition of black nationalist thought and practice." It encompassed an heterogeneous set of goals, "reflecting a range of activities centering on automatic empowerment efforts," including community control of schools and police, private capitalist enterprises, alternative religious iconographies, land-based reparations campaigns, electoral politics, and self-determination and dignity. With the "movement's *qualified* successes, Cha-Jua and Lang referred to the "U.S; Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v; Board of Education* decision, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the 1968 Fair Housing Act, and the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty programs," which all significantly altered the legal, social, and political landscapes" of black people.

radicals, whites and blacks, women and men, predecessors and contemporaries – can we fashion a more complete synthesis of the Civil Rights Movement." Therefor both historiographical perspectives can be useful in this attempt to shed some more light on the history of southwest Georgia and determine to what extent individual activists such as s Charles Sherrod influenced the course of the struggle on a local level.[11]

1.3. Theoretical Framework – The Place of Charles Sherrod and the Development of Protest in Southwest Georgia in Movement Historiography

Because SNCC initially chose to work in the rural communities of the Deep South, far away from the spotlights of the national media, and because its ideal of participatory democracy precluded the emergence of a single leader, much of its work in the vanguard of the Civil Rights Movement did not generate the same level of national attention as the campaigns by Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The first studies that did focus on SNCC and Charles Sherrod's contribution to development of protest in southwest Georgia, were written by liberal white authors Howard Zinn, Pat Watters and Reese Cleghorn, who wrote with admiration and sympathy about their work in the area.[12]

They generally identified SNCC as an important "catalyst" for the development of protest in southwest Georgia and emphasized the students' role in encouraging local leadership. Referring to the SNCC field staff working in southwest Georgia as "The Outsider as Insider," Zinn wrote in 1964: "SNCC… were *educating* in the ultimate meaning of that word, bringing about from deep inside the Negro people of that area the muffled cries, the dreams so long kept to themselves." Zinn's description of Charles Sherrod as "a Pied Piper of Freedom" stressed his leading role. Both Watters and Cleghorn also placed him at the center of the local struggle. In *Down to Now* (1971) Watters suggested, however, that SNCC's efforts to facilitate independent local leadership paid off. By the 1970s local people "no longer need or

[11] Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now," 457.

[12] Laura Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders? Robert Parris Moses, SNCC, and Leadership in the Production of Social Change during the American Civil Rights Movement, 1960 – 1965" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2013), 16. The dissertation written by Laura Visser-Maessen, which examines the impact of leadership in the production of social change from the perspective of Robert Parris Moses and SNCC, provided some important guidelines for approaching the subject of Charles Sherrod and the movement in Southwest Georgia. Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*(Chicago: Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); Howard Zinn, *The Southern Mystique*, Pat Watters, *Down to Now: Reflections on the Southern Civil Rights Movement*(New York: Pantheon Books, 1971); Watters and Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacobs Ladder*.

depend on Southwide organizations like SNCC or charismatic leadership like Dr. King." In relation to the subject of armed self-defense Watters praised the ability of SNCC, as well as local leadership, "to transcend the dominant culture's reliance on violence" and their success in controlling "the tension between cultural conditioning and the discipline of non-violence" in southwest Georgia.[13]

The 'revisionist' perspective of the Civil Rights Movement partly undermined the image of SNCC as a 'catalyst' for social change. Studies of Mississippi, such as *Local People* (1994) by John Dittmer, and *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (1995) by Charles Payne, "demonstrated that civil rights activism existed before, during, and after SNCC's presence." However, as Laura Visser-Maessen has more recently argued in 'A *Lot* of Leaders' (2013), while SNCC could build on previous efforts of local leadership, their contribution to southern movements *was* a turning point, because it was due to the presence of full-time organizers that previously "untapped sources of movement strength" were drawn into the movement. And by doing so, SNCC succeeded in generating a "beguiling sense of movement, both of progress and inclusion," in a way that earlier activists could not.[14]

The growing interest in the indigenous roots of the southern movement also influenced the way scholars evaluated SNCC's role in southwest Georgia. In an article about the development of protest in the city of Albany, Michael Chalfen emphasized the "chronological depth" of activism prior to 1961, noting that the area "saw some of the early political organization that is increasingly being recognized as important leaven from which the Montgomery-to-Selma movement rose." In his study of Georgia, Stephen Tuck argued that "a statewide network of local protests" existed well before the 1960s, and how "black activists were influential long before the so-called King years of civil rights protest." But unlike Mississippi, "where the activities of the 1940s developed through the 1950s into the mass movement" of the early 1960s, protest in Georgia witnessed a sharp decline during the second half of the 1940s as a result of a supremacist backlash triggered by earlier signs of racial progress. By the time "the next generation of direct action protesters" arrived, with

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[13] Zinn, *The Southern Mystique*, 156; Zinn, *SNCC*, 123, 144, 145; Watters, *Down to Now*, 187-188, 407; Watters and Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacobs Ladder*, 304.

[14] John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Campaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Charles M. Payne, *I've got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 18, 105-106, 292.

the exception of a few "individual threats of continuity," these networks were largely forgotten. Instead of the "first act of a two-act play," the story of black protest in Georgia before the 1960s could be better characterized as "the first of two one-act plays." In that sense, the "sheer scale of black protest, and the entrance of direct action protest techniques," following the arrival of SNCC in October 1961, symbolized a new phase of organized protest in the area.[15]

Both Chalfen and Tuck saw "continuity of protest" in Albany and the surrounding counties beyond its 'classical' phase, but they differed in their interpretation of its driving forces. While Chalfen highlighted the role of indigenous leaders such as Rev. Samuel B. Wells and other Albany Movement leaders, Tuck saw evidence of continuity in the activism of local people like Carolyn Daniels, as well as Charles Sherrod's rejection of the ideology of Black Power, and his long-time efforts "to build black community institutions and local leadership networks" in the area. Leading studies about the organizational history of SNCC, by scholars like Clayborne Carson and Wesley Hogan, generally disregard the efforts of local leaders prior to the arrival of SNCC in the area. And by the mid-1960s, the Southwest Georgia Project had become increasingly marginalized from national headquarters, and lost its significance as far as the history of SNCC was concerned. However, they both suggest that Sherrod's activism *was* influenced by the rise of Black Power. Carson noted how he "voiced the new mood of militancy" of SNCC after 1964 and Hogan described how Sherrod, after years of working in the Deep South, also struggled with feelings of hatred towards white people.[16]

When it comes to evaluating the leadership of Charles Sherrod as a source of social change, the emphasis lies on his time as a member of SNCC. Scholars like Carson and Hogan identify him as part of the first generation of black students, whose activism was shaped and guided by the 'Judeo-Christian' founding principles of SNCC, and influenced by the ideas of

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[15] Michael Chalfen, "'The Way Out May Lead In': The Albany Movement Beyond Martin Luther King, Jr.," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (Fall, 1995): 560-598, 561, 563-564; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 2, 73,244. In his study about the history of movement activity in Louisiana, Adam Fairclough referred to the chronology of activities as "the first act of a two-act play." Chalfen mentions people such as C.W. King, Millard F. Adams and Joseph P. Cheevers who established a local chapter of the NAACP in Albany in the 1920s and the foundation of a Voters League in 1947 by members of the Criterion Club, as well as the Youth Chapter of the NAACP in 1958. In relation to southwest Georgia, Tuck uses the example of D.U. Pullum, in Terrell County and C.W. King in Albany to illustrate the existence of local activists, prior to the 'classical' phase of the movement. He also emphasized the important role of the local NAACP chapters in Georgia, including Albany.

[16] Chalfen, "The Way Out May Lead In," 561, 564-565, 567, 596. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta,* 190-191, 196-197; Carson, *In Struggle*, 127; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 204-205.

James Lawson, and Martin Luther King Jr. Like Robert Moses, Sherrod is also portrayed as an organizer whose style was exemplary for SNCC's community organizing strategy, aimed at facilitating local leadership and strengthening the movement ar the grassroots. At the same time, as an individual leader Sherrod has been depicted as someone with a strong personal vision, whose emphasis on religion, nonviolence and interracialism defined the nature of the Southwest Georgia Project. Carson, for example, noted how he imprinted "his own personality and attitudes on the activities in Albany." And according to Tuck, he "stamped his personal authority on the project." Laura Visser-Maessen, in turn, argued that, unlike Moses, Sherrod "personified a tendency within SNCC to impose views on locals and staff."[17]

Concerning the subject of armed self-defense, Akinyele Umoja pointed out in a 1999 article that by the mid-1960s many members of the field staff, working in the Deep South, embraced "armed self-defense as a legitimate method in the pursuit of human rights." Charles Cobb noted that the southern black culture SNCC encountered in the rural areas "had long accepted armed self-defense as legitimate," and, while "local black people could be uncertain about when and how to best employ it, the idea itself was not subject to debate." Yet scholars generally emphasized the nonviolent character of the local movement in southwest Georgia, and there is no real evidence to suggest that the local field staff incorporated armed self-defense into its organizing strategy, or that local people actively used guns in movement-related actions.[18]

1.4. Research Questions

The brief overview of 'classical' and 'revisionist' interpretations of the history of the Civil Rights Movement demonstrates that, when put next to studies about the development of protest in one particular area, or the role of one particular movement activist, the general theoretical framework does not always fit the complex reality of protest on a local level. It does however help to raise new questions, which in turn can lead to a deeper understanding of the general conditions that generate social change.

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[17] Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 38, 72, 201, 229; Carson, *In Struggle*, 57, 74; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 3, 162; Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 134. Carson and Hogan also acknowledge how Sherrod's personal vision shaped the southwest Georgia project and how his emphasis on nonviolence and interracialism at times reflected his own ideas rather than those of SNCC, or people at the grassroots (See for example: Carson, *In Struggle*, 75-76; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 149, 152).

[18] Umoja, "The Ballot and the Bullet," 559; Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 168.

In relation to the concept of periodization, the available scholarly resources, 'classical' and 'revisionist' alike, all seem to recognize the arrival of SNCC in southwest Georgia as an important catalyst. Rather than debating whether the presence of 'outside' organizers did, or did not play a central role during the 'classical' phase of the southern movement, Laura Visser-Maessen suggests that it is more relevant to ask "*how* and *to what extent"* facilitation occurred. Only this way, would it become clear to what degree the arrival of SNCC's symbolized "a break with prior activism," and if there were "continuities with what had gone before." One central objective of this research will be to examine what happened after SNCC and Charles Sherrod entered southwest Georgia in October 1961 to determine how and to what extent they facilitated local leadership, and how their arrival altered the nature of protest on a local level.[19]

Another question related to the concept of periodization, is to what extent movement activity in southwest Georgia was affected by the rise of Black Power. The eventual demise of SNCC's activities in the area seems to suggest some form of declension. On the other hand, Stephen Tuck uses Sherrod's long-term commitment to the area, and the strong religious, nonviolent and interracial roots of his activism, to argue for continuity of protest, rather than change. However, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang have drawn attention to the difficulty of maintaining an 'either/or' discourse when it comes to analyzing the transition between the 'classical' phase of the movement and the Black Power era. By using a broader definition of the concept of Black Power that goes beyond the rejection of nonviolence and integration and includes a strive for black political and economic empowerment, this thesis will also examine how and to what extent the nature of local activism, changed or continued after the end of the 'classical' phase.[20]

The emphasis on both Sherrod's supportive and directive role in the development of protest in southwest Georgia, suggests a more complex relationship between 'outside,' and 'local' leadership, and further undermines the value of the 'either/or' dichotomy. Rather than trying to determine whether social change in the area was the result of 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' forces, the second central objective of this thesis will be to see *how* and to what extent Sherrod and SNCC succeeded in mobilizing the local community. Furthermore, during

[19] Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 20.

[20] Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 274.

his long-term involvement with the local movement Sherrod himself eventually ceased to be an 'outside' organizer, and became a part of the local community. An additional aspect in relation to leadership as a source of social change, will be to look more closely at what defined Sherrod's leadership and how this role in the local movement evolved over a longer period of time.

The third central objective of this research is to see if closer scrutiny of the development of protest in southwest Georgia will produce more evidence of armed self-defense ever being an essential part of the local struggle, either amongst SNCC workers or within the local community. And to what extent the nature of Sherrod's activism played a role in steering the local black community away from the use of violence.

1.5. Sources

In 2001 Steven Tuck called the Southwest Georgia Project "an ideal case study" due to the substantial amount of detailed field reports. Through the Roosevelt Study Center in Middelburg, the Netherlands, I have been able to access the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959 – 1972, which contain many of the field reports, as well as other relevant primary resources relating to SNCC and the Southwest Georgia Project. Additional primary resources, including the digital archive of the New York Times, have been obtained through the internet. First-hand accounts of movement participants can be found in memoirs by former SNCC members such as James Forman, and John Lewis, as well as in collective publications such as *Deep in our Hearts* (2002), *Hands on the Freedom Plow* (2012), and Cheryl Greenberg's *A Circle of Trust* (1998).Charles Sherrod has never published his memoirs, but in 2012 his wife Shirley Sherrod wrote *The Courage of Hope* (2012) which also covers their joined activism in southwest Georgia beyond the 'classical' phase of the local movement. Together with the available interviews and lectures he gave during the course of his lifelong activism, they serve as representation of Sherrod's side of the story.[21]

[21] Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 161. The publications of SNCC workers used within the context of this thesis are: James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries: A Personal Account by James Forman*(New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972); Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1973);
John Lewis, with Michael D'Orso, *Walking the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*(San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998). Collections of movement memoirs: Constance Curry, Joan C. Browning, Dorothy Dawson

Secondary resources, which have been briefly discussed in the introduction, include other academic studies, articles and dissertations that shed light on certain facets of Sherrod's activism, and the general history of the Civil Rights Movement in southwest Georgia.

Burlage, Penny Patch, Theresa Del Pozzo, Sue Thrasher, Elaine DeLott Baker, Emmie Schrader Adams, and Casey Hayden, *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement*(Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002); Faith S. Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Smith Young and Dorothy M. Zellner, eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC*(New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998). Shirley Sherrod with Catherine Whitney, *The Courage of Hope: How I Stood Up to the Politics of Fear* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2012).

2. Seeking Room to Become

2.1. Background, Upbringing and Education

Charles Melvin Sherrod was born in 1937 in Surry County, a rural area of southwest Virginia. He spend most of his childhood in the slums of Petersburg, the second largest city in the state, after Richmond. The circumstances of his childhood show some similarity with black family life in the Deep South in the decades after the abolition of slavery, as described by sociologist Franklin E. Frazier in *The Negro Family in the U.S.* (1939). In the absence of a father, with his mother being only fourteen when she gave birth to him, and with five more brothers and sisters around, he grew up in a "maternal family situation "where the oldest woman in the house, being his maternal grandmother "Big Ma," was "regarded as the head in the family."[22]

Looking back on his childhood, and the roots of his nonviolent activism, Sherrod recalled how, when he was a little boy, his grandmother told him stories "of white people and what they'd do." One of these stories was how, at the turn of the century, his grandfather was forced to flee from Waverly, in Surrey County "for nothing other than having spoken up" against the lynching of a black man. "Stories like that were part of my consciousness. That was what was passed down." His grandmother was a very light skinned woman, and like some of Sherrod's other relatives she could pass for white. Taylor Branch described how, in his teens, Sherrod had once shocked his family by announcing that he wanted to locate some of his white relatives and introduce himself to them. The family depended on welfare assistance, and as the eldest son, Sherrod started to work at an early age to help provide for his family; he continued to work throughout his education. The experience of growing up in poverty made him "sensitive to the psychological importance of militancy for blacks." Later, while working in the rural counties of the Deep South, his background helped him to identify with the plight of the poor.[23]

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[22] Franklin E. Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), 126, 150; Sherrod with Whitney, *The Courage of Hope,* 31.

[23] Charles Sherrod, quoted in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 67, 307; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954 – 63* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1988), 525; Carson, *In Struggle,* 57, 142. For his close identification with the plight of poor people, see: Charles Sherrod, "From Sherrod," http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6411_sncc_sherrod-r.pdf.

As for many black people in the South, religion and the church were central to Sherrod's life. His grandmother, who was a devote Baptist, taught him that "as a Christian, if he acted humbly and in step with the teachings of Jesus, he need not fear any man." At an early age he started preaching to other children at Mount Olivet Baptist Church in Petersburg. He also attended Gillfield Baptist Church where Wyatt Tee Walker was a pastor between 1953 and 1959. Walker remembered him as an "earnest" and "dedicated" young man. Later Sherrod found himself in a direct confrontation with Walker over strategy, and they developed different vision on how to use leadership as a source of social change. But during the years he attended Gillfield, Sherrod found in Walker an example of a man whose "activism was a natural outgrowth of his call to ministry and his belief in Jesus the Christ," and whose life as an activist had "always been directed at the uplifting and defense of human beings who [were] oppressed, downtrodden, and disenfranchised." In 1954 Sherrod made his first contribution to the Civil Rights Movement when he participated in a 'kneel-in' in a white church in Petersburg, following the 1954 Supreme Court decision. Bernice Johnson Reagon recalled that Sherrod participated in demonstrations led by Walker in the same city.[24]

Sherrod's "religious upbringing, deep faith, and theological studies guided and sustained his activism." Shirley Sherrod described how, ever since he was a little boy, he developed a strong sense of ethics and religious conscience. And unlike "the passive faith of his ancestors," his own faith gave him "a sense of responsibility to act." In *From Reconciliation to Revolution* (2016) David Cline noted how, even before he joined SNCC, he was already committed to the ideal of the beloved community, which "envisioned the embodied expression of Christian faith as an integrated society based on brotherhood and build on love and justice;" the same ideal that "anchored the thinking of James Lawson and some of

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[24] Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 67; "This Far By Faith", http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/witnesses/charles_sherrod.html; Wyatt Tee Walker, interview by Blackside, Inc. on October 11, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection; Charles Sherrod, interview by Blackside, Inc., December 20, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection; Wilfred A. Moore, "Wyatt Tee Walker: Theologian, Civil Rights Activist, and Former Chief of Staff to Martin Luther King, Jr." (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2009), 5; Moore, "Wyatt Tee Walker," 1; NEWS, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, January 11, 1962, File #0003, Reel 14, Subgroup A, Series VII, Communications Department, SNCC Papers; Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Uncovered and Without Shelter, I Joined this Movement," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow,* eds. Holsaert et al., 119-127, 122.

the other religious SNCC founders." In *The Human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement* (2006) Robert Luckett argued that Sherrod was drawn "toward the nonviolent, liberal Christian theory of the Civil Rights Movement that advocated equality and salvation for all people regardless of race and class."[25]

In 1954, with the financial support of Wyatt Tee Walker, Sherrod moved to Richmond to study at the Virginia Union University, were he received a Bachelor degree in 1958, followed by a Bachelor of Divinity in June 1961. Virginia Union University was a small, private black institution of higher education located several miles from the city center, which was founded at the end of the Civil War as an initiative of the American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS). When slavery was abolished in 1865, northern religious organizations such as the ABHMS, took it upon themselves to form new educational institutions to build a black leadership elite, described in 1896 as the "Talented Tenth" by the organization's executive secretary Henry Morehouse. These black leaders were destined to serve as a "racial class buffer zone between unprivileged blacks and white society."[26]

During the time Sherrod attended Union, Dr. Samuel Dewitt Proctor was president of the university. During the Montgomery bus boycott Proctor had been invited by Martin Luther King Jr. to give a series of sermons on religion and social change, earning him a national reputation as an advocate of social justice and critic of segregation. His positive stance towards the movement, in combination with the universities independence of state funding, made the climate for activism at Virginia Union relatively positive. When the sit-ins reached Richmond, Proctor made it clear that they were "not some class project sponsored by the school," but unlike many of his colleagues, he did not take any disciplinary actions to prevent the students from participating. He even spoke out in favor of the demonstrations: "This is one fragment of the total protest. I suppose we can expect one form of protest or another

[25] David P. Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution: The Student Interracial Ministry, Liberal Christianity, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 93; Sherrod and Whitney , *The Courage of Hope*, 31, 72; Robert E. Luckett Jr., "Charles Sherrod and Martin Luther King Jr.: Mass Action and Nonviolence in Albany," in *The Human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement*, ed., Susan M. Glisson (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006) 181-196, 182.

[26] Walker, interview by Blackside, Inc.; Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth. Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 16-17; Raymond Pierre Hylton, *Virginia Union University*. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2014, 9.

perpetually until racism is gone."[27]

During his time in Richmond Sherrod's racial consciousness developed to such an extent that he started to envision himself as a civil rights activist. Shirley Sherrod recalled that when he arrived at the seminary "the scales were lifted from his eyes." While growing up he had no real interaction with white people. Now he started attending meetings of the local Human Relations Council, which at that time consisted mostly of white liberals. According to Kirk A. Moll it was during these meetings that Sherrod for the first time "began to break with his stereotypical notions of white and black abilities." He discovered that he "could think and speak at a level equal to these white people." Until then he had also been "a perfect patriot," believing that "the government could do no wrong." Now his understanding began to grow, and he started reading books and newspapers, trying to gain more insight into a range of subjects, including U.S. history, economics, and Africa. It made him question many of the things he had previously been taught. He also learned about the activism of people like Martin Luther King Jr. and James Lawson.[28]

Inspired by the Greensboro sit-ins, Sherrod and some other Virginia Union students discussed "the possibility of doing the same thing in Richmond." He later wrote about their motivations for joining the movement: "Our impatience with the token efforts of responsible adult leaders was manifested in the spontaneous protest demonstrations which, after February 1, spread rapidly across the entire South and into the North as sympathetic students sought to display their own dissatisfaction with race relations in the United States." They began mobilizing students and organizing trainings in nonviolent direct action. As seminary students they sought support in the black community, "working through area ministers and addressing congregations." On Saturday, February 20, they led over two-hundred Virginia Union students to stage their first sit-in. In its wake, protests spread to other areas in Virginia. An attempt by other students to desegregate a movie theater in

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[27] Black Past Org,http://www.blackpast.org/aah/proctor-samuel-dewitt-1921-1997; Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 57; Peter Wallenstein, *Blue Laws and Black Codes. Conflict, Courts, and Change in Twentieth-Century Virginia.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004, 118.

[28] NEWS, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, January 11, 1962, File #0003, Reel 14, Subgroup A, Series VII, Communications Department, SNCC Papers; Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 31; Sherrod, "William G. Anderson Slavery to Freedom Lecture Series," Michigan State University, February 14, 2008, transcript; Kirk A. Moll, "Theological Education in Action. Adult Learning About Race in the Student Interracial Ministry of Union Theological Seminary, 1960 – 1968"(PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2011), 220.

Sherrod's hometown involved his younger brother Roland R. Sherrod.[29]

The sit-ins signified a new phase of the civil rights struggle which, until then, had been mostly fought in federal courtrooms. By bringing the movement inside dime stores and restaurants, the southern students forced America to "consider the *moral* implications of segregation as well as the legal ones." For Sherrod his first real experience as a civil rights activist gave him "a new sense of freedom and racial pride." He recognized an opportunity "to go ahead in a new way." Sherrod: "We are not puppets of the white man. We want a different world where we can speak, where we can communicate."[30]

2.2. The Youth Leadership Meeting

Sherrod's prominent role in the Virginia sit-ins earned him an invitation to the "Youth Leadership Meeting" in Raleigh, North Carolina in April, 1960. The meeting was an initiative of Ella Baker of SCLC and was supported by Martin Luther King, Jr., SCLC's president. The purpose of the meeting was to give the southern students an opportunity to evaluate the "great potential for social change," created through the sit-ins. It was also an attempt to establish contacts between southern activist and sympathetic northern colleges. For Sherrod, it was a first introduction to other student leaders from all over the county, and it further exposed him to the ideas of established movement leaders such as Ella Baker, James Lawson and Martin Luther King Jr.[31]

The most lasting impact on the evolution and ideology of the student movement came from Ella Baker. Being in her late-fifties by the time of the sit-ins, she had a long history as an activist, and had been "on the cutting edge" of the Civil Rights Movement since the early 1940s when she first started working for the NAACP. Charles Payne pointed out how Baker, "having been raised with an abiding sense of community," had developed a "concept about the need for people to have a sense of their own value and *their* strengths." She believed in "individual growth and individual empowerment," and felt that once people were able to

[29] Report by Sherrod, no date, Introduction; Wallenstein, *Blue Laws and Black Codes,* 115-116, 138.

[30] Powledge, *Free At Last*?,227; Sherrod, quoted in Carson in, *In Struggle,* 57.

[31] NEWS, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, January 11, 1962; Invitation for the "Youth Leadership Meeting," http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6004_sncc_call.pdf.

"understand where their interest really was and the relationship to their own capacity do something about it," they no longer needed strong individual leaders. She also believed that "as an organizer you start where the people are." In *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (1992), Richard King noted that "by attacking the dependence upon charismatic leadership so engrained within the Southern black religious community and linking action with self-awareness and self-interest," Baker encouraged a style of leadership different from the 'top-down' organizing tradition of the NAACP and SCLC .[32]

When the sit-ins emerged in the early 1960s, Baker was impressed with the student's "inclination toward group-centered leadership, rather than toward a leader-centered group pattern of organization." To make sure that "this massive outpouring of activist energies" would have a chance to develop into a long-term, independent force for social change, she did everything in her power to prevent existing civil rights organizations from taking control of the student movement. Her conceptions about leadership and community organizing played a central role in shaping SNCC's strategy; inspired a next generation of activists such as Charles Sherrod and Robert Moses. Joanne Grant later recalled: "She taught the SNCC students the importance of nurturing local leaders, the value of organizing local groups who would make their own decisions… [and] instilled in them the idea that they were not organized to exist in perpetuity as an organization, that others would come along to continue the struggle, and that the struggle is continuous."[33]

It was Martin Luther King Jr. who introduced the students to the ideal of nonviolence as a way of life, the importance of reconciliation, and "the creation of the beloved community" as the movement's ultimate goal. James Lawson shared King's faith in the power of nonviolent direct action, the religious foundations of nonviolence, and the moral and spiritual nature of the struggle. In fact, Lawson possessed a deeper understanding of the

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[32] Ella Baker, quoted in Payne, *I've got the Light of Freedom,* 81; Charles Payne, "Ella Baker and Models for Social Change", *Signs*. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* Vol. 14, No. 4 (Summer, 1989): 885-899, 884, 885, 890; Ella Baker, quoted in Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 144. Before Ella Baker started working for the NAACP she had was national director of the Young Negroes' Cooperative League, and she worked with a variety of labor organizations. She worked as a fundraiser for the Urban National League. Prior to her involvement with SCLC she helped organize In Friendship, together with Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison. (Payne, "Ella Baker and Models for Social Change," 887 – 889).

[33] Ella Baker, "Bigger than a Hamburger," *The Southern Patriot*, May 1960. This article summarized the address she gave during SNCC's founding conference at Shaw University, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/sncc2.htm; Payne, *I've got the Light of Freedom,* 79; Joanne Grant, "Peek around the Mountain," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow,* eds. Holsaert, et al., 303-311,309.

philosophical and historical foundations of nonviolence, and was less disturbed by the idea of the use of nonviolence as a tactic rather than a way of life. The advocacy of the religious and nonviolent nature of the struggle by King and Lawson, together with the charismatic appeal of the Nashville students trained by Lawson, determined the tenor of the first Youth Leadership Meeting. SNCC's "Statement of Purpose," issued the following month, confirmed the "philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of their purpose." But even during the early days of the student movement, many of the student leaders, lacking the religious faith and intensive nonviolent training of the Nashville students, found it hard to grasp the concept and even harder to put into action.[34]

Sherrod was amongst the students who, prior to the Raleigh meeting, had had no real "philosophical concept of what nonviolence might mean as a way of life." In an interview with Charles Cobb in 2012, he recalled that "I'd only heard about it because I read about [Martin Luther King] in newspapers." But seeing all these young people like himself, "standing up and making speeches," saying the same thing he would say if he had been asked to make a speech, he "just fell in love with the group." For Sherrod the prospect of becoming part of a beloved community "grounded in nonviolence and the southern black church," was very appealing. He could easily identify with the idea of the movement being part of Gods plan to eradicate social evil. And he "recognized a part of himself that had always been committed to nonviolence" because he was a Christian, regarding nonviolence as essentially nothing more than "Christ in action." Years later he wrote: "The Church, the real Church, has always been made up of people who refuse to accept things as they are." Although the faith-based ideology of nonviolence was questioned from the beginning and became less central to SNCC's ideology in the following years, the Raleigh conference introduced Sherrod to a new way to serve God, by fighting segregation.[35]

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[34] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Statement to the Press at the Beginning of the Youth Leadership Conference", April 15, 1960, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/statement-press-beginning-youth-leadership-conference; Lewis, *King*, 116; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 35-36; Carson, *In Struggle,* 22-25; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America,* 63-64; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Founding Statement, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/sncc1.htm. See also: Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 53; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 38.

[35] Charles Sherrod, quoted in Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff Will Get You Killed,* 159-160; Casey Hayden, "In the Attics of my Mind, in *Hands on the Freedom Plow,* eds. Holsaert, et al., 381-388,385; Sherrod, Keynote Address, "50 Years after the Sit-ins;" Sherrod, "William G. Anderson Slavery to Freedom Lecture Series;" Charles

3. Affirming Equality and Brotherhood of All Men

3.1. Rock Hill

While many sit-in participants returned to their colleges and universities after the summer, Sherrod was one of the students who "began to consider their involvement in civil rights as the central work of their lives, not just a summer job." As graduation approached he turned down a teaching job, and by the time of the October SNCC conference in Atlanta he had become one of the organization's driving forces, next to Marion Barry, Jane Stembridge, Julian Bond, Diane Nash, and Charles Jones. Since the Raleigh conference, the student leaders had become "increasingly confident of their ability to formulate the future course of the movement." In February 1961 SNCC made "its boldest organizational decision up to that date" when Sherrod, Nash, Jones, and Ruby Doris Smith volunteered to support the students' in Rock Hill, North Carolina by joining them in jail. It "made them the stuff of instant legend among SNCC sympathizers." For Sherrod, "as for many students later in the decade and for many radicals and revolutionaries of other times, imprisonment was a crucial learning experience." Wesley Hogan noted how, "[h]aving lived through the possibility of imminent death," Sherrod came out of the jail transformed, "his philosophy firmly rooted in his survival of that experience."[36]

His time in the Rock Hill prison forced Sherrod to put his ideas about nonviolent direct action to the test. The experience gave him the courage to face the difficult struggle that lay ahead, and strengthened him in his conviction that he had found his true purpose in life. Sherrod: "What it meant was that nothing but death could stop me from the mission that I had of developing our people." After his release, he was elected as SNCC's first field

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Sherrod, "The Revolutionaries and the Church," August 1967, quoted in Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 117.

[36] Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 126; Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 31; Zinn, *SNCC,* 38; SNCC Meeting Minutes, February 3-5, 1961, Atlanta, Georgia, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6102_sncc_minutes.pdf; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954 – 63* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1988), 392; Carson, *In Struggle,* 32-33; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 52. Edward B. King, Jr., then the Administrative Secretary of SNCC wrote to Sherrod, after the October conference: "We, your Coordinating Committee, commend you for the dedication which has prompted your action on behalf of the rights of men, the spirit of non-violence which has motivated your actions, your courage and daring in challenging prevailing social customs, and your vision of a free society which makes possible the Student Movement" (Letter from Edward B. King, Jr. to Charles Sherrod, October 19, 1960, File #005, Reel 11, Subgroup A, Series V, SNCC Conferences 1960-1964, SNCC Papers).

secretary. In this capacity he was to "establish contact with protest groups;" he was given the "authority to speak for SNCC and issue press releases."[37]

3.2. The Freedom Rides

The Freedom Rides presented SNCC with the an opportunity to "revive the flagging spirit of student militancy." For Sherrod the rides were yet another important step in his development as a civil rights activist. The bus rides had initially been an initiative of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to test a 1946 court ruling declaring racial segregation on interstate public transportation unconstitutional. In 1961 they launched a second attempt, and Sherrod, just released from the Rock Hill jail, attended a meeting in the Virginia Union chapel, the night of the riders' passage through Richmond. When interviewed by New York writer Charlotte Devree, Sherrod spoke with a "cold fury," – insisting that "[s]ome of us have to be willing to die." When CORE decided to abort the attempt, following some very violent confrontations in South Carolina and Alabama, SNCC became actively involved with the rides, and Sherrod was asked to represent the students on the Freedom Riders Coordinating Committee (FRCC). On June 5, he conducted his own 'freedom ride,' sitting in the white section of the bus when traveling from Richmond to Jackson, Mississippi.[38]

The violence used against the riders, and the refusal of local authorities to offer protection, received much national and international press coverage. Supporters from all over the country travelled to Jackson, causing a "first large infusion of young Northerners, whites among them, into the Southern movement." Their arrival made the city the rallying point of the movement for the following months. The experience taught SNCC that the arrival of freedom riders "empowered and energized local black movements," and could

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[37] Charles Sherrod, interview by Joseph Mosnier, June 4, 2011, June 4, 2011, Civil Rights History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2010039_crhp0022/; SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, April 21-23, 1961, Charlotte, North Carolina, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6104_sncc_min.pdf; SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, June 9-11, 1961, Louisville , Kentucky, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6106_sncc_min.pdf; SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, July 14-16, 1961, Baltimore, Maryland, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6107_sncc_minutes.pdf. See also Carson, *In Struggle*, 32-33; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 392-393.

[38] Chrystal L. Johnson, "The CORE Way: The Congress pf Racial Equality and the Civil Rights Movement, 1942 – 1968" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2011), 55-56; Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders. 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98, 114; The Progress-Index, Petersburg-Colonial Heights, Va., Tuesday, June 6, 1961, https://www.newspapers.com/clip/7403291/charles_sherrod_661961_freedom/.

thus be used to "penetrate the previously impenetrable walls of segregationist complacency." It was also the first time that SNCC as an organization "worked in significant numbers with anyone but themselves." Sherrod later recalled how they got "the idea of mobilizing the whole community from the way people responded in Jackson." During SNCC's July meeting in Baltimore, Sherrod testified about the considerable support they received from the young people in the community, and urged "to finance an effort to involve Jackson citizens in the Freedom Rides." The most significant lesson of the rides, was that "without a carefully planned, concentrated, sustained, attack, the movement would not come in force to the rural Deep South for many years."[39]

3.3. Direct Action vs. Voting Rights

Following their involvement in the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, SNCC gradually moved away from direct action towards political activism. As Bayard Rustin described in 1965, in the wake of the sit-ins there was a growing awareness of the limited value of "winning access to public accommodations for those who lack money to use them." In order to face the multitude of problems that black people faced, what "began as a protest movement" now needed "to translate itself into a political movement." Ella Baker anticipated that the sit-ins provided an opportunity to actualize what she felt established civil rights organizations such as NAACP and SCLC should have done years before: "[G]o into some of the rural counties where Blacks were not voting at all," and stimulate black political empowerment from the grassroots. The increased influence of black voters "in the state-wide political machinery" could then "lead to the change desired in the South." By establishing a connection between grassroots organizers and the students, she hoped to guide the latter "away from the lunch counters and their campuses" and engage them in the more essential struggle at "the front lines of the southern battlefields against racism."[40]

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[39] Watters and Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, 45; Arsenault, *Freedom Riders,*396, 402-403; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 57; James H. Laue, *Direct Action and Desegregation, 1960-1962: Toward a Theory of the Rationalization of Protest* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 113; SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, July 14-16, 1961.

[40] Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (February, 1965); Payne, "Ella Baker and Models for Social Change," 890; SNCC Prospectus for Voter Education Project, April 6, 1962, File #0363, Reel 10; Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers, 1; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 176, 252.

Robert Moses, a former student of Hamilton College, New York, who came to Atlanta in the wake of the sit-ins, "[s]eeking a form of activism that suited his personality, skills, and beliefs," played a crucial role in SNCC's shift from direct action to voter registration. Encouraged by Baker, he embarked on a journey through the Black Belt to establish the necessary contacts with grassroots leaders. Through his meeting with Amzie Moore, a long-time NAACP activist from Cleveland, Mississippi, the idea for SNCC's first voter registration campaign in the Deep South was born. Coinciding with these 'bottom-up' initiatives, the Federal Government had also been trying to exert their influence from the 'top down' by trying to direct the student movement away from the confrontational and provocative use of direct action tactics. By offering funding and protection, they tried to steer them towards political action. Tim Jenkins, a northern student from Howard University, and vice president of the National Student Association (NSA), was asked to sell the idea to the students.[41]

Charles Sherrod, Charles Jones, and Charles McDew, called the "three Charlies" by Jenkins, were amongst the first to support the idea of SNCC engaging in voter registration. Sherrod's endorsement of political activism did not spring from a willingness to sacrifice SNCC's founding principles, or abandon direct action protest. Nor was it the result of "crass political calculations," as some of the Nashville students suggested. During a meeting with the Attorney General when the subject of becoming involved with voter registration was discussed, Sherrod was so incensed about what he considered to be "a bribe to lure him away from righteous work," that he said to Robert Kennedy: "It is not your responsibility before God or under the law to tell us how to honor our constitutional rights. It is your job to protect us when we do." His endorsement simply reflected his growing awareness of the complexity of race relations beyond desegregating public facilities, and the need for SNCC to "broaden its concerns." He was also one of the first students to see, as Ella Baker recalled, "that you couldn't possibly engage in… community organizing in the deep black belt areas without eventually running into the problems with the law and if you went in to do political education, you'd still run into problems with the law and you'd still have to have mass action." During the open confrontation between those in favor of nonviolent direct action,

[41] Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 35,51, 57, 72-73; Carson, *In Struggle*, 40; Zinn, *SNCC,* 59. For more information about the beginning of SNCC's campaign in Mississippi, see also: Ella Baker, Interview by Anne Romaine, February, 1967, http://www.crmvet.org/nars/6702_baker.pdf; Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 65-66, 68; Payne, *I've got the Light of Freedom,* 105-106.

and those in favor of voter registration, which threatened to split SNCC, Sherrod supported the latter.[42]

3.4. The Pike County Movement

In the meantime, not wanting to wait for the outcome of the internal struggle within SNCC, Moses had started working on voter registration in Mississippi. The students' first attempt at political activism in the rural South demonstrated what Ella Baker had known all along, and what Sherrod had realized early on. In the Black Belt counties, voter registration was by no means the "relatively noncontroversial way to further the cause of desegregation" the federal government had hoped for, nor the tactical, calculated struggle, nonviolent direct action proponents had feared. When Moses was arrested, SNCC workers, both those in favor of direct action and voter registration, rushed to Mississippi to support the local movement. Sherrod was amongst the first students to arrive in McComb. Although born and raised in the South, he had yet to adapt to the harsh reality of race relations in the rural South. Charles McDew recalled how, on their way up there, they stopped at a gas station where "Sherrod foolishly went to the bathroom," only to be consequently escorted out at gunpoint. Upon his arrival, Sherrod immediately began to organize direct action workshops for local high school students, who "wanted to engage in something more visible" than voter registration, thus demonstrating his rather pragmatic attitude, and his willingness to adapt his ideology to local circumstances.[43]

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[42] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 479; Andrew B. Lewis, *The Shadow of Youth: The Remarkable Journey of the Civil Rights Generation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 108-109; ; Charles Sherrod, quoted in Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 480; Carson, *In Struggle*, 40; Baker, interview by Romaine. Early in the summer Sherrod travelled to Mississippi to meet with Amzie Moore, and discuss the possibility of launching a voter registration campaign in the Deep South by using volunteers. According to Carson, Moses was also present at the meeting (Carson, *In Struggle*, 40). Bernard Lafayette, Jr. commented on Sherrod's position in the whole voter registration versus direct action discussion, saying: "I think that Charles Sherrod probably epitomized that debate because he was one of the people who was part of the direct action wing and who believed that nonviolence is a way of life, but when we had the opportunity to get some financial support to do voter registration, we jumped right at it" (Bernard Lafayette, Jr., in *A Circle of Trust*, Greenberg, ed., 87-88).

[43] Fred Powledge, *Free at Last?,* 370; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 226; Charles McDew in *A Circle of Trust,* Greenberg, ed., 68.

4. Breaking Away the Box

4.1. Moving into New Territory

Robert Moses' voter registration plans in Mississippi "had nothing to do with grand schemes or philosophy," but were "simply a response to Amzie Moore's analysis of what would work best" in the area. There is no clear evidence to suggest that Sherrod had established close contacts with local leaders, similar to the relationship between Moses and Moore, prior to SNCC's decision to move into southwest Georgia. However, a detailed report about the "research destination," mentioned the willingness of local black leaders to support any initiatives concerning voter registration. D.U. Pullum, an independent landowner and head of the local NAACP chapter in Terrell County since the 1940s, "almost begged on bended knees for students to come… to get people registered to vote." Students at Terrell County High School also "felt that the people… would support demonstrations and voter registration." While they did note that SNCC should not count on "the elders where pioneering was needed," they were confident that, "once a following developed, protests would mushroom."[44]

In Albany, "the only metropolitan area of any prominence" in southwest Georgia, there had been tentative, but so far unsuccessful attempts by members of the black establishment to negotiate with the City Commission "to initiate the desegregation of certain city facilities," and to enhance living conditions in black neighborhoods. The Ministerial Alliance had asked for the formation of a bi-racial committee to discuss Albany's race relations. And there had been "sporadic incidents" around the Albany State College in February and March. It was against this background of "local unrest, frustration, and developing action," that black leadership welcomed Sherrod's proposal "to bring the movement into Albany." College and high school students also relished the idea "to participate in demonstrations," and go along

[44] Branch, *Parting the Waters*,486; "20 Years Later and Still Marching: The Albany – S.W. Georgia Movement 20the Anniversary Celebration," August 5th through August 8, 1981, https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/holsaertfaith/#aspace_ref136_ytf, 1; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 37; Terrell County and Albany Report, no date, File #0366, Reel 10, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers, 4-6.

"with the philosophy of nonviolence."[45]

Based on these initial contacts, the general conclusion of the exploratory visit was that "most of the people, whether student, teacher, professional or common folk in Terrell or Albany," were willing to take further action, despite "deep feelings of inadequacy to meet the opposition." And the overall impression was that SNCC merely needed to assure black people that they could "operate on the same level as the whites," before they could move to the next county "with the confidence that the 'new Negro' was off again." Thus strengthened in his conviction that conditions in southwest Georgia were favorable for launching a voter registration campaign, Sherrod returned to Atlanta.[46]

4.2. The Egypt of Southwest Georgia [47]

After mass arrests and violent outbursts caused a temporary halt to the movement in McComb, Sherrod, accompanied by Cordell Reagon, left for southwest Georgia in mid-October. Charles Jones joined them some weeks later. Like Sherrod, Reagon and Jones had entered the movement through the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, and they were equally "influenced by the religious ideas that pervaded the early student protest movement." Well aware that nonviolence "as a way of life," was a long way off for most people in the Deep South, Sherrod was nonetheless confident that the ideology could serve as "an invincible instrument of war." Echoing Ella Baker's ideas about community organizing, Charles Jones recalled how they had "this notion that the people were their own power and… didn't need individual leaders." And Instead of a 'top-down' leadership structure, they aimed at create "a collective leadership process." Both Sherrod and Jones also emphasized the importance of establishing "clear identity with the local community," to the point that they were no longer outsiders.[48]

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[45] Report by Sherrod, no date 1; Howard Zinn, "Albany: Special Report, Southern Regional Council," January 28, 1962, File #0340, Reel 9, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers, 8-9;Sherrod, interview by Joseph Mosnier; Report on Terrell County and Albany, no date, File #0116, Reel 19, 7.

[46] Terrell County and Albany Report, no date, File #0116, Reel 19, 7-8.

[47] W.E.B. Du Bois describes how Dougerty County, of which Albany is the capital, was known as the "Egypt of the Confederacy," W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1994, 75. In a report, written by Sherrod in 1961, he referred to Albany as "the Egypt of southwest Georgia," File #0031, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers.

[48] SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, October 8 – 10, 1961, Atlanta, Georgia, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6110_sncc_staff_min.pdf; Carson, *In Struggle,* 57; SNCC Regional Meeting

"Non-violence," a manual on community organizing, written by Sherrod in the spring of 1963, revealed a slightly different take on the position of the SNCC field staff. He noted how, as 'outside' organizers, they had to be forever "under the judgement of the community" in which they lived, and had to execute any plan, only "after careful consideration of the people." At the same time he advised the staff not to let their respect for local people cloud their personal judgement, or "let the project go to the dogs," because they felt they had to be "democratic to the last letter." He also warned them not to abandon their own "philosophy or strategy" in a desire to meet the needs of the local community. This view on community organizing revealed an ambiguity in Sherrod's attitude towards local people, which is somewhat contrary to the image of SNCC being merely 'facilitators.' And it confirmed the notion that in reality the relationship between 'outside' organizers and local leadership was somewhat more complex.[49]

The deeply engrained social patterns that governed southern race relations, also question the 'revisionist' notion that at a grassroots level protest developed without the support of national civil rights organizations. Upon their arrival Sherrod and Reagon discovered how "an enormous gulf of fear" stood between the black community and their political freedom, and how many people were "boxed in," waiting for radical leadership. Sherrod: "We know that they can do it themselves but they can see no further than the sides of their dimly-lit box." He felt that, in order challenge the racial status quo through political activism it was first necessary to "break the grip of fear and lethargy by some means," and bring "hope to people who had none before." Due to the de-centralized organizational structure of SNCC, Sherrod and Reagon felt free to adapt their plans to local circumstances. They decided to relocate to Albany which, because of its strategic location at the center of rural counties such as Terrell, Lee, and Baker County, could serve as "the beachhead for Democracy." By "showing in Albany… that people were not afraid," they hoped that "whatever happened in race relations… would spill over into the surrounding counties."[50]

Minutes, Atlanta, Georgia, March 24, 1962, File #0001, Reel 3, Subgroup A, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers, 2; Charles Jones, quoted in Powledge, *Free At Last?*345. See also: Sherrod, interview by Blackside, Inc.; Sherrod, "Non-violence," 5.

[49] Charles M. Sherrod, "Non-violence," no date, Social Action Vertical File – SNCC, 1930-2002, http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll2/id/69299/rec/202.

[50] Powledge, *Free at Last?,* 342; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 248; Sherrod, "Non-violence," Introduction; Sherrod quoted by Anne Braden, *Southern Patriot,* October Issue, 1962, File #0339, Reel 9, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 45; Report by Sherrod, no

Looking back in 2008, Sherrod recalled how the first thing a community organizer needed to do, was listen. "So many times we bring our own agenda into a community," but success depended on the organizer's ability to initially "put aside" his own agenda until local people are ready to act. Sherrod: "You get them committed to what they want to do, then they give what you want to do a chance." Thus, in Albany, Sherrod and Reagon's first objective was to familiarize themselves with "the nature of the atmosphere inside the box." By first gaining insight into the "mode of livelihood," and "scale of values" that governed people's lives, as well as their most pressing desires and needs, they could get them to move towards these goals. Sherrod compared their role, with that of a 'social scientist.' Armed with "a common 'bag'" made up of the knowledge of their past two years of preparation, they moved into the community, trying to share their experience with black people of "all ages and religious and economic groupings." By talking to the local community, and explaining to them who they were and what they wanted to do, they hoped to convince people of their own vital role in generating social change, and to motivate them "to feel their responsibility for the task." Eventually, they also wanted to find a way to move the white community, "because the long history of mutual fear, and falsehoods had "de-humanized both."[51]

In southwest Georgia SNCC aimed at drawing previously "untapped sources of movement strength." Sherrod and Reagon started building a movement by turning to "people who were just natural for [them] to talk to." By visiting local campuses, and hanging out at playgrounds – acting "like neighborhood boys" – they tried to identify "natural leadership" amongst local youths. Like in other areas of the South, a lot of the young people were "searching for a meaning in life," and were eager to join the movement. The SNCC field secretaries started canalizing this energy by organizing daily workshops, in which they elaborated on the concept of nonviolence, trying to educate the students on how the sit-ins and Freedom Rides could not be understood "without knowing how nonviolent resistance came straight from the Bible." With the students' help, they began canvassing black neighborhoods.[52]

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date,1; James Forman, "These Are The Questions," 1964, Social Action Vertical File – SNCC, 1930-2002, http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll2/id/12166/show/12087/rec/3, 2; Powledge, *Free At Last?*, 347-348.

[51] Sherrod, "William G. Anderson Slavery to Freedom Lecture Series;" Terrell County and Albany Report no date, File #0116, Reel 19; Sherrod, "Non-violence," 1, 2, 3, 5; Report by Sherrod, no date, 2-3, 7; SNCC Prospectus for Voter Education Project, 7; Powledge, *Free At Last*?, 348.

[52] Sherrod, interview by Blackside, Inc.; Cordell Reagon, quoted in Carson, *In Struggle,* 57; Powledge, *Free At Last?*, 347; Sherrod, "Non-violence," 6; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 525; "Revolution in Albany," January 8,

Having arrived in southwest Georgia with nothing but their "bodies and minds," and with few resources available to them, establishing clear identity with the local community was not only an organizing principle, but also a necessity. In Albany they could count on the support of some of the more liberal members of the black establishment, such as Clennon Washington King, and Eliza and Emanuel Jackson, to provide them with housing and office space. Young professionals like Slater and Chevene Bowers King also lend their support. Sherrod later recalled how local people, because of the youth and poverty of the SNCC field staff, often felt responsible for them and came to see them as their children. Sherrod and Reagon's close contacts in the local community enabled them to "find out" people who had previously not been part of any form of movement activism. Just like leadership could be found amongst the local youth, an "old lady on the block" who people came to talk to or ask for help or advice, could, once drawn into the movement, turn into a "natural leader." Although those people did not consider themselves to be leaders, and were "of no title and with no organizational support," they could be of great value for the development of protest on a grassroots level.[53]

The black church in the Deep South represented much of the hierarchical, conservative kind of leadership that SNCC railed against. Nonetheless, according to Sherrod, no one working in the southern states, could "expect to 'beat the box' if he assumes – both verbally and practically in his work – that one does not need the church as it exists." It was part of "accepting the people…where they are." Sherrod did however distinguish "between the church as an institution and the church as a community." And the strength of the southern movement came, not "from the spirit of the First Mount Olive Church, or from the spirit of the First Presbyterian church," but "from the spirit of *the* church." The church presented him with an opportunity to mobilize and unite people beyond the boundaries of race and class. David Cline pointed out how "the familiar culture of the black church" became an important

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1962, File #0030, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers, 1. Sherrod later recalled how during the early days, they often had to search the students before demonstrations, always finding at least "five or six switchblades" (Sherrod, "William G. Anderson Slavery to Freedom Lecture Series"). See also: Report From Deep South by Cordell Reagon, File #0319, Reel 9, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers; Albany Nonviolent Movement Meeting Minutes, , November 15, 1961, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/611115_albany_agenda.pdf.

[53] Sherrod, "Non-violence," 4, 5, 6; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 173-174; Carson, *In Struggle*, 75; Sherrod, interview by Blackside, Inc.; Watters and Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder,* 106. For more information about the way members of the black establishment in Albany supported SNCC upon their arrival, see for example Branch, *Parting the Waters,* 524-526; Powledge, *Free at Last?*, 345-346; Watters, *Down to Now*, 155.

part of nourishing and sustaining the movement in Albany, as Sherrod and other movement leaders got in the habit of translating "the proposed action into religious terms." Sherrod's religious faith and training helped him to establish contacts with local church leaders. In Mississippi, Robert Moses called the lack of cooperation from ministers, "the biggest single problem facing the local movement." Sherrod, however, managed early on to win the trust of some of the local ministers. "Allowing their churches to be used as staging areas for mass resistance" was, according to him, "the ministers 'gift to the movement.'"[54]

Sherrod and Reagon were both gifted singers. Building on the familiar church tradition of signing gospel songs and slavery spirituals, they introduced altered versions of these songs to the black community, where they became "a weapon in the battle for freedom." Sherrod later recalled how singing gave them the extra strength to: "march against the horses, march against the dogs, march against anything that they brought against us. "Songs like "We Shall Overcome," which originated as a church hymn, and had been introduced to the student movement by Guy Carawan, found their way into the local movement. In an article about the function of freedom songs in the movement, Kerran Sanger described how they helped "to invite and to inspire one another to engage in additional rhetorical undertakings such as sit-ins, freedom rides, marches and imprisonment." In his article "Non-violence," Sherrod put the teaching of freedom songs first on the list of things every organizer should do when moving into a new community.[55]

Their strong sense of commitment and willingness to suffer helped Sherrod and Reagon to earn the respect of a substantial part of the local black community in Albany. However, when it came to winning the confidence of the more conservative members of the black establishment, it took "some very creative leadership" from SNCC's part to overcome their suspicion and hostility. The local NAACP felt their presence undermined its role in the local movement and resented the influence Sherrod and Reagon had on members of the NAACP

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[54] Sherrod, "Non-violence;" 1-2; 6; Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 94, 103;Sherrod,"William G. Anderson Slavery to Freedom Lecture Series;" Field Report by Sherrod, January 28, 1962; Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 146; Sherrod, quoted in Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 94.

[55] Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 94-95; Sherrod, "Non-Violence,"2-3; 6; Deanna F. Weber, "The SNCC Freedom Singers: Ambassadors for Justice," in *We Shall Overcome: Essays on a Great American Song*, ed. Victor V. Bobetsky (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2015), 27-42, 30; Kerran L. Sanger, "Function of Freedom Singing in the Civil Rights Movement: The Activists' Implicit Rhetorical Theory," *Howard Journal of Communications,* Vol. 8, No. 2(February, 2009): 179-195. See also: Carson, *In Struggle*, 63, 64; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 532; Watters, *Down to Now,* 21; Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Uncovered and Without Shelter, I Joined this Movement," in Hands on the Freedom Plow, eds. Holsaert et al., 122-123; Watters, *Down to Now*, 55-60.

Youth Chapter. Others, like the administrators of Albany State College, who Sherrod described as people "who refuse to think further than a new car, a bulging refrigerator, and an insatiable lust for more than enough of everything we call leisure," resented the influence SNCC had on the students, "and made systematic attempts" to stop them.[56]

In hindsight, Sherrod felt that conflicts between the different levels of leadership actually *helped* to set things in motion in Albany: "Children against their elders, teachers against those who employ them, other professionals against professionals." There was simply "no single way" to build and maintain a movement; it was a process of trial and error, trying to find out what was most effective, under the given circumstances. In an attempt to set things in motion, SNCC tried to provoke black as well as white community leaders into action by "stomping" around. As it turned out, the testing of the Interstate Commerce Commission's (ICC) ruling to desegregate all waiting room facilities provoked a sufficiently strong reaction to stir the local community into action.[57]

4.3. The Albany Movement

The militant activism of the students who, according to the *Southern Patriot,* "responded to the image of freedom projected by the SNCC and its work," signaled the beginning of the 'classical phase' of the Albany movement. The introduction of nonviolent direct action tactics and the central role of local youths were a direct result of the arrival of SNCC. It serves as evidence of the distinct nature of the Albany movement after 1961, when compared to previous forms of protest in the area, and undermines the sense of continuity as advocated by 'long-movement' proponents. Seeing the students marching, past the assembled police force and, into the train station symbolized, according to Sherrod, "the expression of years of resentment… for the whole damnable system." With this action, the students challenged the racial status quo in a way the adults "would not have ever done." It triggered a strong reaction from white city officials and conservative members of the black

[56] Zinn, "Albany," 10, 22; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 526; Report by Sherrod, no date, 3, 5. For more information about the relation with the local NAACP, see also: Lewis, *King*, 144; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 86-87.

[57] Jones, quoted in Powledge, *Free At Last?*, 346; Sherrod, interview by Blackside, Inc.

establishment. And it contributed to a heightened sense of indignation among parents.[58]

A group of community leaders, mostly members of the black establishment, sat together with Sherrod and Reagon on November 17 in an attempt "to gather into a cohesive organization the loose and lengthening strands of discontent." At the same time, Slater King noted how the meeting was also an attempt to end any "confusion about roles," and "to eliminate friction" between local members of the NAACP and SNCC. All organizations involved, with the exception of the local NAACP chapter, came to an agreement that they were willing to lose "their identity as a separate group" to cooperate under the name of "The Albany Movement." William G. Anderson, a local doctor, was appointed 'official' head of the organization, and "a system of checks and balances was set up which kept the control of the movement in the hands of the group."[59]

The arrival, and consequent arrest of an interracial group of freedom riders in Albany on December 10 – another initiative of SNCC under the direction of James Forman – contributed to the growing sense of anticipation. Inspired by the maxim, a "jail is just another house," Sherrod convinced his "ace group" of high school students to "fill up the jails." By the time Martin Luther King Jr. and SCLC arrived on December 15, the local movement had already "gained the momentum." The early examples of open defiance of the racial system had convinced other members of the black community to overcome their own fear; attendance at mass meetings and demonstrations had been high prior to King's arrival. However, his presence, and consequent arrest, made the Albany movement a "topic of national and international concern." It attracted the attention of the media, alerted state and federal officials, and earned the city its place in the 'master narrative,' as "the largest

[58] Braden, *Southern Patriot*, October Issue 1962; Report by Sherrod, no date, 9-10; "Revolution in Albany," 1; William G. Anderson, "William G. Anderson Slavery to Freedom Lecture Series," Michigan State University, February 14, 2008, transcript; Untitled Report, no date, 1962, http://www.crmvet.org/lets/62_sncc_albany.pdf;. For more details about the support of the adult community, see also: Zinn, "Albany," 11; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 531; Powledge, *Free At Last?,* 347.

[59] Lewis, *King*, 144;Untitled Report, 1962, 1; Zinn, "Albany," 10; Slater King, quoted by Claude Sitton in "Negro Group Split on Georgia Protest," *New York Times*, December 18, 1961;Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 529-530; Report by Sherrod, no date, 10, 11. The Albany Movement included members of the Baptist Ministerial Alliance, the Interdenominational Alliance, the Criterion Club, the Lincoln Heights Improvement Organization, the Federated Women Club of Albany, the NAACP and its coordinate groups – the Youth Council – Albany Voters League, and SNCC. See also: "Constitution and By-Laws of the Albany Movement," October 1961, File #0033, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers.

series of demonstrations and protests since the Montgomery bus boycott."[60]

Contemporary reports strengthen the image of SNCC's as a catalyst for social change in the area. *The Southern Patriot* noted how protest in Albany developed "because a few completely dedicated crusaders on the staff of SNCC decided to spark a nonviolent revolution in southwest Georgia." Another report praised their work on voter registration, and its potential as an "effective vehicle of change." And, while the Albany Movement was generally rendered a failure because of the inability of local and national leadership to secure any tangible gains, the local SNCC field staff had more reasons to be pleased. Their initial objective of creating in Albany a base "from which they could take hope and confidence into the surrounding rural areas," had been established. And, as Taylor Branch noted, they had been incorporated into an indigenous "leadership organization much broader than anything ever created in McComb."[61]

SNCC's own evaluation of the early days of the Albany movement revealed the tension between its supportive role, and its growing awareness that it constituted the vanguard of the southern struggle. Charles Jones initially downplayed their contribution to the Albany movement during a staff meeting in March, 1962, stating that "SNCC people did not have the major role" in the establishment and "shaping" of the Albany Movement. However, another SNCC report written around the same time, noted how the "Albany movement was organized primarily through the urging and pressure of SNCC." The Albany Movement's adoption of nonviolence, as its "basis of action," serves as further evidence of the significant influence SNCC had on local leadership, during the formative days of the local organization.[62]

A staff meeting in March 1962 revealed how, behind the scenes, the ambiguity between SNCC and the more conservative members of the Albany Movement continued. It also further exposed the organizers' ambition beyond facilitating local leadership. Some local leaders felt that, as "outside organizers," SNCC exercised too much control over the local movement, and they accused them of trying to take over leadership "by strait-jacketing

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[60] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 533, 335; "The New Barbarians," no date, [Charles Sherrod], https://repository.duke.edu/dc/holsaertfaith/fhpst03002, 3; Sherrod, interview by Blackside, Inc., Lewis, *King*, 149; Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 7.

[61] Braden, *Southern Patriot*, October 1962,3; "Revolution in Albany," 1; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 530.

[62] Carson*, In Struggle*, 62; SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, March 6, 1962, File #0001, Reel 3, Subgroup A, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers, 2; Untitled Report, no date, 1962, http://www.crmvet.org/lets/62_sncc_albany.pdf, 1; Report by Sherrod, no date, 13.

Anderson." Jones, in turn, questioned Anderson's capacity as a leader, and suggested that he should be "led by the Strategy Commission." He summarized the situation by stating that "the Albany Movement had created a monster for whom there is a struggle for control." Only by giving the monster "brains and a nervous system" would it be able to "function properly." It was Ella Baker who reminded the SNCC staff, that in order to prevent situations like this in the future, the "strategy in each local community should be to shift as much of the responsibility as soon as possible to local handling, looking at the day when the movement would be on its own in a local community and SNCC staff would leave." While Jones agreed, he admitted that in practice it was not always easy to maintain these organizing principles "when the pressures are upon you."[63]

The prospect of a more long-term involvement with the struggle in southwest Georgia challenged SNCC to redefine its role once some form of black leadership had been established. When it came to determining their future role in Albany, the field staff made it clear that their continued presence in the area was needed "to keep pushing." Not only did they feel it necessary to stay in the city in order to reach out into the neighboring rural counties where black leadership was still scarce, but they also felt that in the city itself, much more work needed to be done in the area of political activism. For this purpose they were willing to work with local leadership and SCLC on voter registration, while NAACP insisted on organizing their own drive. SNCC also wanted to support the Albany Movement and young high school students in their attempts "to gain equal job opportunities" through boycotts, and protest actions. And they were involved with the organization of the city's first "read-in" to desegregate the city library.[64]

[63] SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, March 6, 1962, 1-2.

[64] Voter Registration Project Report by John O'Neal, no date; SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, March 6, 1962, 3; Untitled Report, no date, 1962, http://www.crmvet.org/lets/62_sncc_albany.pdf, 1,2; Southwest Georgia Project Report by Sherrod, December 1963, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/swga_report_63.pdf, 3-4.

5. Ezekiel's Wheel Within a Wheel

5.1. From Albany into the Rural Counties

Between January 1962, until mid-1964 when he took, "a movement sabbatical," in order to pursue a master's degree in sacred theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Charles Sherrod continued working in southwest Georgia. After the groundbreaking work in Albany, and with the Albany Movement now in charge of the local movement, the time had come to return to the initial plan of working on voter registration in the rural counties. Based on the approach used by Robert Moses and Amzie Moore in Mississippi, they planned to bring in fulltime volunteers to work besides local people, in order to support them in setting up their own registration networks, and help them "with whatever resources – skills, manpower, education – were lacking." The emphasis was on political activism, but to Sherrod, in essence their work in the southern movement came down to "a psychological battle for the minds of the enslaved." In October 1962 he wrote: "Our criterion for success is not how many people we register, but how many people we can get to begin initiating decisions solely on the basis of their personal opinion."[65]

So far, Sherrod and Reagon's theory "concerning the influence of direct action in Albany on participation in 'the movement'" in the surrounding counties, had proved correct. The mass movement in Albany had conveyed onto people a sense of progress and perspective, and several counties showed signs of increased grassroots activism amongst students as well as adults. Following the earlier invitation from D.U. Pullum, they were now asked by James Mays, a local landowner and civil rights militant, to come to Lee County to work on voter registration. Confident that other counties would soon follow, Sherrod announced that they would also move into Sumter, and "be in Baker in February, come Hell or high water." He took it upon himself to "spearhead the SNCC vote drive in Terrell County," and planned to set up a school, similar to the voter registration workshop in McComb, where prospective voters were educated about their constitutional rights, and how to use them in their

[65] Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 98; Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 109; Charles Sherrod, quoted in Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 3; Terrell County Evaluation, Feb 1963, File #0276, Reel 8, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers. See also: SNCC Prospectus for Voter Education Project, Report, April 6, 1962, 3, 7; Untitled document, no date, File #0366, Reel 10, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers.

advantage.[66]

In the rural counties the process of finding leadership, and mobilizing the community towards political activism was time consuming, and more patience was needed to establish "a community organization competent to maintain and continue itself and to be its own active and creative unit." In these isolated areas, community support was even more vital to SNCC's success, than it had been in Albany. To convince local people to support them, the staff tried to create a "deeper understanding" of what they were trying to do, and point out the shared responsibility and common goals of locals and civil rights workers in what should essentially be a "joined and unified action." Underlying their appeal for local support, was the expectation that, since the SNCC organizers came there "facing dangers," local people owed them at least a minimum of support "in terms of a place to sleep and food to eat and participation." There was also a religious element to the plea for help, urging people "to act as Christians must."[67]

Their poverty proved once again to be "an asset," because it gave "the silent supporter a vital issue with which to deal." His first impression of Terrell County confirmed Sherrod's urge to involve the local church in the movement: "One very important point I can observe – we must make our initial thrust in any similar community one of deep religious basis." He realized that, like in Albany, they would not "get immediate support from the ministers (as a body)" but there "will always be a few." Some economically independent members of the rural black communities, like D.U. Pullum, or the Mays family openly supported the civil rights workers. Additional support came from 'natural leaders' like "Mama Dolly" Raines, of Lee County and Mrs. Carolyn Daniels of Terrell County. Sherrod wrote: "There is always a 'mama.' She is usually a militant woman in the community, outspoken, understanding, and willing to catch hell, having already caught her share." Field staff often stayed at their houses, while working in the area, and Sherrod recalled how "Mama Dolly" would

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[66] Field Report by Charles Sherrod, no date, 1962, File #0003, Reel 13, Subgroup A, Series VII, Communications Department, SNCC Papers, 2-3; Charles Jones to James Forman, January 18, 1962, File #0218, Reel 7, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers; Field Report by Charles Sherrod, January 28, 1962 http://www.crmvet.org/lets/6201_dawson-rpt1.pdf; NEWS, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, January 11, 1962.

[67] Voter Registration Project Report by John O'Neal, no date; News Release, Terrell County – Sasser, July 26, 1962, File #0003, Reel 14, Subgroup A, Series VII, Communications Department, SNCC Papers; Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Project Report, July 1962, File #0215, Reel 7, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers; *The Student Voice*, October 1962, Vol. 3, No 3, 2.

sometimes sit at his bedroom window with a "big ol' gun," guarding him. [68]

Having grown up in an urban environment, Sherrod "didn't know nothin' about no shotgun." But he recalled, how in the rural South, "you couldn't look into a room without seeing a gun either on the mantelpiece, above the mantelpiece or in the corner somewhere." In spite of their own insistence on nonviolence, Sherrod instructed the staff "to withhold judgement on the local people who did have guns, because *everybody*… had guns." Moreover, they "didn't come to change their local culture." Living under the constant threat of violence, the presence of guns sometimes even helped to create a feeling of safety. Peggy Trotter Dammond Preacely remembered how the idea made them feel "somewhat protected," and how this feeling was "ironic and ambiguous at the same time."[69]

5.2. Creative Mechanisms'

With SNCC now dividing its attention between their merely supportive role in Albany and their leading role in the countryside, Sherrod felt that some form of inter-county unity was needed to lift the general pace of progress in the whole area. Unlike Mississippi, where the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) united representatives of national and local civil rights organizations into a state-wide network, and where individual projects "were initiated and sustained independently of Moses' presence," Sherrod's interpretation of organizational unity was more centralized. He envisioned the Southwest Georgia Project "as a wheel," work in Albany as the "hub," and the outlying counties as the "spokes." "Together hub, and spokes drove the wheel." Sometimes he also described it as "Ezekiel's wheel within the wheel," referring to the prophet's vision as described in the Old Testament. Instead of appointing different local directors, the field staff in Terrell, Lee, and Dougherty County received directions from Albany, and fell under the responsibility of one project director.[70]

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[68] Dawson Field Report by Sherrod, January 28, 1962. Local women brought the field staff food, and they received offers to come to dinner. Sherrod: "Females continually call and ask for us… They will do anything we say, (well, almost anything)," 1; Carolyn Daniels, "We Just Kept Going," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow,* eds. Holsaert et al., 152-155, 153; Charles Sherrod, "On Crackers, Cucumbers and Collards," September 20, 1962, in Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 275-277, 276;

[69] Charles Sherrod, interview by Charles E. Cobb Jr., October 30, 2012, as quoted in Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 168-169, 180; Peggy Trotter Dammond Preacely, quoted in Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed,* 169.

[70] Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 111, 113, 119; Southwest Georgia Project Report by Sherrod, December, 16, 1963; Holsaert, "Resistance U," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow,* eds. Holsaert et al., 186;

More than merely a desire to lead from the top, Sherrod believed that a reciprocal relationship between the city and the rural counties could be another way of helping people to overcome their fear. By turning up with a busload of people from Albany at rural meetings "where fears of reprisal" meant that normally only a few people dared to attend, they turned "a small group" into "a big group." Sherrod: "The importance of this 'outside' attendance can hardly be overstressed as a morale builder." He believed in "the practical usefulness of the sharing of experience," and argued that the "sense of fellowship, the heartening influence of the prayers, the songs, the scripture readings, the tales of hardship bravery born, all these must stay with us." The joined meetings also helped "to widen the identification of 'community.'" For years, the white power system had exercised "rigid control" over mobility between the different counties by creating a sense of fear that discouraged people from Albany to go to Terrell County, or people from Sumter to go to Leesburg or Dawson. These feelings of fear now had to be replaced by a "sense of the new community" aimed at uniting black people throughout southwest Georgia.[71]

Unlike Robert Moses, who's early experiences with community organizing in McComb had convinced him that voter registration was the best option to implement change in the rural South, Sherrod came to believe that direct action and registration drives in Albany could be "tactically complementary, to rural registration drives." The latter could serve "as the most dramatic 'neon light' imaginable to highlight the kinds of conditions the vote seeks to change" and could "add stimulus to the urban people to turn out in indignation." The underlying idea was to charge Albany leadership "with the responsibility of aiding in the struggle in the counties, its fight being 'one.'"[72]

Another "creative mechanism" that distinguished the Southwest Georgia Project from other SNCC projects, was Sherrod's insistence on using white staff members and volunteers to work in the black community to "show that integration could work." In comparison, Robert Moses initially chose to focus on "trying to build a strong Black movement in

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[71] "Negro Voter Drive gets Gift of a Bus," *New York Times*, October 20, 1962; Sherrod, quoted in Powledge, *Free At Last?*, 348; Sherrod, quoted in Watters and Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacobs Ladder,* 172, 189-190. See also: Southwest Georgia Project Report by Sherrod, December 1963, 1. See also: Dawson Field Report by Sherrod, no date, 1962.

[72] Holsaert, "Resistance U," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow,* eds. Holsaert et al., 186; Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 111; SNCC Prospectus for the Voter Education Project, 3; Charles Sherrod to Wiley Branton, October 5, 1962.

Mississippi," before first bringing in white volunteers in 1963 for the "Freedom Vote" campaign, in order to gain "national significance." For Sherrod the symbolic value of an interracial movement was of vital importance since he first moved into southwest Georgia. He wanted "to strike at the very root of segregation… the idea that white is superior." In accordance with SNCC's general organizing strategy "to set examples rather than to lead from the top," he believed that people had to see "white and black working together side by side, the white man no less than his black brother, but as human beings together." Eventually people would get used to "seeing black and white together as they have become used to the separation of the groups." Underlying the moral appeal, there was also a more practical side to his decision to use white volunteers. Based on the observation that "when the white folks get in trouble, we get out of trouble," he used this strategy as a mechanism to generate more attention for the southern movement, and bring in the necessary financial support and media exposure.[73]

It was the first time white civil rights workers became involved with community organizing on a grassroots level in the Deep South, and the idea reflected neither the position of SNCC, nor local people but was based solely on Sherrod's personal vision of social change. The decision to "integrate a project as a matter of policy," knowing that the presence of black and white workers would provoke strong reactions from the white and black community alike, serves as an illustration of his strong dedication to realizing the ideal of an integrated society. His emphasis on integration also illustrates how, in spite of his dedication to implementing change from the bottom up, he sometimes used his position as a leader to influence the process of social change, well aware that the people he was trying to help, as well as the people who were working with him, were not yet ready to appreciate or understand the significance of such a measure.[74]

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[73] Donald Harris, interview by Emily Stoper, 1966,http://www.crmvet.org/nars/harrisd.htm; Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 165; Powledge, *Free at Last?*, 347; Robert Moses quoted in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 151; Sherrod, quoted in Larry Rubin, "A White on Whites," Fall 1962, Albany, Larry Rubin Papers, http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll2/id/10331/show/10321/rec/54, 2; Chalfen, "The Way Out May Lead In," 579; Watters and Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacobs Ladder*, 156; Sherrod quoted in Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 131. See also: Carson, *In Struggle*, 77.

[74] Carson, *In Struggle*, 144. Sherrod on the negative impact of the presence of white civil rights workers on black staff members, including himself: "I can get my head bloodied down there in Dalton, Georgia, Terrible Terrell County… I can get shot up in unbearable Baker; and in unmitigated Mitchell I can get my ass kicked black and blue, and nobody would care a damn what would happen to me." But "[a] white face and a white tail, let her tail get whipped on, and it's all over AP and UPI and FBI! We're in the news!" Sherrod also recalled how it was not easy for black staff members who had "worked and sacrificed, labored and exerted influence" for

5.3. The New Barbarians [75]

The expansion of SNCC's organizing efforts into the rural areas of southwest Georgia, as well as the arrival of additional volunteers and field staff, most of them from the North and many of them white, changed Sherrod's leadership role. He now spend less time in the field, and supervised the entire project from Albany. In order not to lose touch with what happened in the field he tried to "[l]ive and work in each county for short stretches of time." He was also traveling the country to raise funds and to recruit more students. When interracial groups of field staff started working in Terrell and Lee County by the summer of 1962 Sherrod also played a crucial role in "providing advice to personnel living permanently in the counties."[76]

Many of the new recruits, lacking the experience of the 'original' SNCC members, did not naturally possess the ability to provide the "kind of leadership that neither insults or displaces local leadership, but rather strengthens and develops it." To them, Sherrod activism served as an example of the patience and respect towards local people that was needed to stimulate change from the grassroots. Faith Holsaert, recalled how "Sherrod's vision, including his rules," helped to structure their work. One report referred to him as "a genius" because of his ability to involve local people with the movement on a practical level, while at the same time enabling them "to be aware of what is happening to themselves as human beings." Another report described how he carefully drew out to local people "the importance of nonviolence in disarming the opposition and forcing their conscience to disturb them," and helping them to understand that the "opposition are human beings too."[77]

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years, to accept that a recently arrived white staff member could "say something to the black people, and they'll do it, and it's taken you two years to get them to a meeting." (Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 149, 152).

[75] "The New Barbarians." In this essay, Sherrod described the white northern volunteers as "new barbarians," who refused to "eat in Rome of Greece at the best tables, but instead chose to "share the hog of the oppressed."

[76] SNCC Survey: Current Field Work, Spring 1963, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6305_sncc_cong-fieldwork.pdf; Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals by Charles Sherrod, December 1963, File #0341, Reel 9, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers,16. For examples of Sherrod's fundraising and recruitment activities, see: Robert Mans, quoted in, Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 54; Lee County Voter Registration Project Report by Conwell, July 16-21, 1962; Lee County Voter Registration Project Report by Kathleen Conwell, August 1962, File #0215, Reel 7, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

[77] Voter Registration Project Report by O'Neal, no date; Holsaert, "Resistance U," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow,* eds. Holsaert et al., 186; Lee County Voter Registration Project Report by Kathleen Conwell, August 17-

Another story described how Sherrod was once talking to a black man, who kept repeating to him: "People treat me like a dog… Do I look like a dog? Do I look like a dog?" He listened "for several hours… eyes intently focused on the man." Afterwards word spread through the community that SNCC really cared. Some of Sherrod's own reports reveal, how behind the image of a patient, respectful organizer, there was also a more sharp and witty side to his character. Sherrod: "[W]e were walking long country miles in Lee and Terrell counties, hearing 'I'm scared' over and over and over and wanting to yell 'hell lady, I'm scared too, so what!'" [78]

His awareness of the "symbolic importance" of the actions of the staff, was further demonstrated by his recognition of the "need to resist white authority publicly." On several occasions he demonstrated his commitment to the local struggle and his willingness to suffer by openly defying white authorities and segregationists. His leading role during a voter registration meeting in Mount Olive Church in Sasser, Terrell County on July 25, 1962 serves as a very powerful example of what Wesley Hogan called Sherrod's "uncanny talent... for taking routine situations generated by the caste system and standing them on their head." Under the watchful eye of several reporters Sherrod defied a group of white men who entered the meeting, confronting them with the moral righteousness of the protest movement, asking them: "If God be for us, who will be against us?" Claude Sitton's article about the event exposed the "mockery of the voting rights protections in the civil rights acts." That same sense of commitment, and unwillingness to give up, was once again demonstrated when some of the churches were later burned to the ground. Sherrod stated that SNCC "won't be moved," and meetings continued in a tent. [79]

With the arrival of white students, many of them unaware of the delicate rules of conduct

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26, 1962; Lee County Voter Registration Report by July 1962, File #0001, Reel 13, Subgroup A, Series VII, Communications Department Public Relations, SNCC Papers.

[78] Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 132; Sherrod, "Crackers, Cucumbers and Collards,' in Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 276.

[79] Carson, In Struggle, 75; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 74; Watters and Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacobs Ladder*, 164-168; Claude Sitton, "Sherriff Harasses Negroes At Voting Rally in Georgia," *New York Times*, July 26, 1962; Sherrod, "Crackers, Cucumbers and Collards,' in Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 276; Branch, *Parting the Watters*, 620; "4th Negro Church Burned in Georgia," *New York Times*, Sept 18, 1962. That night, at the invitation of Sherrod, several newsmen, including Pat Watters and Claude Sitton were present during the meeting. Afterwards, Taylor Branch called Sitton's article describing the event as "perhaps the most remarkable news dispatch of the entire civil rights generation." (Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 166). Mount Olivet was one of the churches in Terrell County that were burned down in August 1962.

that governed the relationship between black and white people in the South, came a heightened sense of responsibility for Sherrod. Trying to minimize the potential threat of violence resulting from the presence of interracial teams, as well as dealing with "the profound effect of the racial composition of the staff… upon the staff itself," was a time consuming side-effect of his emphasis on interracialism. He closely supervised the staff and prohibited drinking, mixed relationships or other forms of 'immoral' behavior. Members of the field staff were, according to one report, "expected to behave like religious novitiates." And everyone, whether they were religious or not, was expected to attend church. In a letter to Wiley Branton, Elizabeth Wyckoff questioned the defining role of religion in the Southwest Georgia Project. While she acknowledged "the all-encompassing importance of the Christian church," she wonder whether the "religious emphasis in this political project may not, even in rural Georgia, keep away some young, questioning rebellious minds." To Sherrod however, this emphasis on religion sprang from a desire to respect "the avowed mores of the community," as well as his own belief in the central role of religion in the southern movement.[80]

5.4. A Benign Dictator?

Howard Zinn noted in 1965 how by the mid-1960s all southern SNCC state projects were ran according to a same pattern of "participatory democracy," which encompassed three different levels of leadership. Most decisions were made on an "intermediate" level by people on the spot, like Sherrod, and Moses, in conjunction with the field staff. Then, "local people were brought in," and then "national headquarters." In practice, the level of authority exercised on the "intermediate level," depended on the individual character of the project director. Laura Visser-Maessen pointed out how Moses' leadership style benefitted from the pattern of "participatory democracy." In relation to Sherrod's leadership, Dennis Roberts, a law students who worked in Albany as an assistant of C.B. King in 1963 and 1966, noted how both Charles Sherrod and Donald Harris, who headed SNCC's activities in

[80] Field Report by Ralph Allen, no date, File #0059, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers, 7; SNCC Press Release, Albany Office by Barbara Schwartzbaum, July 17, [1963], File #0102, Reel 19, Subgroup A, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers; Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Project Report by Elizabeth Wyckoff to Wiley Branton, East Albany Jan 8 1963, File #0388, Reel 10, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers. See also: Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 74.

Americus, were "strong leaders," but ran their projects differently. According to Roberts, Sherrod was "a Christ figure who people believed in and wanted to die for – they looked to him for every decision and felt that they couldn't function in his absence." Harris, in turn, "inspired a kind of confidence in the people." But he also tended to have "a final word on who did what, when (if there was a conflict)." However, at times "when a project ran smoothly because people were excited about what was happening, it was almost as if there was no decision making apparatus – or it wasn't visible as people did what was necessary and what was necessary was right."[81]

Other people working with Sherrod, experienced more difficulty in accepting his leadership, and rebelled against his authority. One report mentioned how "all decisions concerning the project policy" were made by Sherrod, and how he essentially pursued "only those actions that he himself oversaw." Individual staff members complained that they had no saying in when and where they should work, and meetings were said to last as long as it took "for Sherrod to persuade the others to think his way." Another report mentioned how most decisions of the staff were first subjected to his "favorable acquiescence," giving people little sense of achievement. Other, or sometimes even the same reports, nuanced the image of Sherrod as an authoritarian leader. Ralph Allen described him as "a benign and personal dictator," whose ability to "move the project" was simply beyond the limits of his "warmth and concern." Allen also noted that Sherrod was "never one to play the role of organized administrator methodically delegating duties to his inferiors." Roberts mentioned "how his moral program" sometimes got oppressive, only to add that "what he is doing is beautiful so you can ignore it."[82]

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[81] Howard Zinn, quoted in Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 133; Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 133; Dennis Roberts to Phil, February 6, 1965, www.crmvet.org/lets/swga/dr_650206.pdf, 1.

[82] Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 97; Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 134; Field Report III by Ralph Allen, no date, 1963, File #0059, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers, 1-2; Daily Journal by Dennis Roberts, June 28 – August 25, 1963, http://www.crmvet.org/nars/dr_63_journal.pdf, 39. When Sherrod decided in April 1963 to change the composition of the field staff working in Lee, Terrell and Dougherty County, this led one of the staff members, Carver Neblett to exclaim: "Today Charles Sherrod, our beloved Project Chairman, put his stupid revolving idea into effect." Another report by Ralph Allen stated that "at the work of our leader, Rev. Sherrod, we trapsed into Albany to place our necks upon the slaughtering block of Chief Pritchett" (Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Project Report by Carver Neblett, April 16, File #0276, Reel 8, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Field Report Albany by Ralph Allen, May 13 – May 27, 1963, File #0059, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers). An example of the way Sherrod, and the SNCC field staff sometimes opposed local initiatives was when James Mays wanted to organize another school boycott in Lee County, "to show the white community the level of organization in the black community." The local staff and Sherrod refused to lend their support, arguing that under the circumstances legal action was preferred above any form of direct action, "because of the protection

Sherrod was well aware of the tension between his commitment to encouraging indigenous leadership while at the same time wanting to realize certain goals, which required more planning and a long term strategy. In one report he reflected "on his torment at having to enforce discipline," and how he was torn between his "attempt to respect the human dignity of people with whom you work on the one hand, and the attempt to get work done effectively against overwhelming odds on the other." But over time he increasingly sided with the local community, at the cost of his relation with SNCC headquarters, blaming the latter for discounting "the contributions he and the people of Southwest Georgia had made to the Civil Rights Movement."[83]

When combined with his reputation as a respectful and patient community organizer, the image of Sherrod as an authoritarian leader seems too limited. The need to exercise a certain level of control was a necessity that came with his increased responsibilities as a project director, and was reinforced by his inability to effectively delegate certain tasks once the project increased in scale. Unlike "Moses consistent commitment to voter registration as an overriding priority," Sherrod's goal of establishing "Freedom of the Mind" was a concept that was not easily understood by either local people, or members of the field staff. And it was hard to translate into a "solid method of organizing" that could be applied throughout southwest Georgia, by either local leadership or staff, and required his close supervision. His, at times rather strict and directive manner of conduct also seems to stem from a sense of frustration, caused by the inability of local leadership as well as members of SNCC to understand what he was trying to do, rather than disrespect for their individual opinions, or needs. [84]

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offered more readily to the people on the latter issue." (Lee County Voter Registration Project Report by Conwell, August 1962).

[83] VEP report written by Sherrod, quoted in Watters and Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacobs Ladder*, 155;Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 97.

[84] Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 109; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, December 27 – 31, 1963, 21; Selma, Alabama Workshop Report, December 13-16, 1963. Sherrod's loyalty to the local people of southwest Georgia was demonstrated when national headquarters made only limited funds available for local people from Albany to attend the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. Sherrod expressed his regrets that, while the march was meant to "articulate the needs of the poor and the unemployed… the most needy in the city will be the least represented" (Letter from Charles Sherrod, August 18, 1963, File #0102, Reel 19, Subgroup A, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers). For more details about the increasing difficulties between Sherrod and SNCC headquarters, see Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 190; Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 97-98.

5.5. Moving On

One, rather drastic, example of Sherrod's tendency to impose his vison on local people as well as staff members, took place in May 1963. In the hope that a successful campaign in Albany would help to revitalize the movement in the rural areas, he made the strategic decision to temporarily withdraw all "troops" from the rural areas. Instead he wanted all of the field staff to participate in the "Big Push," a direct action campaign in Albany, aimed at making it once and for all, an "open city." As a result, all voter registration projects were "temporarily abandoned," and the financial support of the Voter Education Project (VEP) was sacrificed. While the intention was to return to the rural areas after the summer, for the time being, "this left the people of these... counties to fall back upon their own local leadership," at a moment that the SNCC staff was still closely involved with organizing and carrying out voter registration activities.[85]

The consequent failure of the "Big Push" served as another illustration of the tentative relationship between SNCC and local leadership. Sherrod questioned the commitment of the black community as well as local leadership, accusing the former of "lethargy" and the latter of inadequacy to capitalize on the heightened sense of frustration and indignation in the community. Local leaders, in turn, questioned the efficiency of SNCC's strategy "of going to jail to crush segregation." In hindsight, Sherrod admitted that the rather chaotic and uncoordinated nature of the summer program, and the failure from SNCC's part to see things through, had at times caused confusion amongst local leadership and the black community "as to what SNCC was doing in Albany." Peter de Lissovoy suggested that the tension between SNCC and the Albany Movement, and their inability, at times, to formulate a communal strategy, reinvigorated amongst the people of Albany a longing for "certain far-off and charismatic figures like President Kennedy and [Martin Luther] King." And after the summer of 1963 the Albany Movement did re-establish their ties with SCLC.[86]

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[85] Report on Albany by Peter de Lissovoy, July 19 – September 29 1963, File #0107, Reel 6, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers, 6; Field Report Albany by Allen, May 13 – May 27, 1963, 2;Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals by Sherrod, 8, 10; Field Report II by Ralph Allen, no date, [1963] File #0059, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers.

[86] Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Project Report by Prathia Hall, Feb 23 - March 8, 1963, File #0155, Reel 6, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers; Field Report Albany by Allen, May 13 – May 27, 1963; Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals by Sherrod, 14; Report on Albany by Peter de Lissovoy, July 18 – September 29 1963, 5-6; Eliza Jackson to James Forman, October 11, 1963, File #0033, Reel

The sense of chaos and lack of clear directions allowed social unrests to come close to a boiling point during the summer of 1963. Ever since the beginning of the Albany movement, the local Chief of Police, Laurie Pritchett, had been very successful in selling his "meet violence with non-violence" strategy to the press, and putting the "burden for disorder" on black demonstrators. In the summer of 1962, following incidents of police violence during arrests, the black community "retaliated in some instances by throwing bricks and bottles." The inability of local leader and SNCC to control the rising feelings of frustration and anger was demonstrated when more violent confrontation's occurred that same year. An open confrontation between a crowd of two thousand angry youths, most of them teenagers, and the police formed a sad climax of the feelings of mounting tension. The incident made national headlines, and while Slater King expressed how "he couldn't help but be constantly amazed by the lack of real violence" that had transpired so far, Pritchett triumphantly asked the press if they had seen "them nonviolent rocks." [87]

During the summer of 1963 Pritchett suddenly switched tactics when he launched "his campaign of deliberate brutality." As a result, a majority of the SNCC field staff and key members of the Albany Movement were arrested. In the absence of clear leadership "the latent violence of the Negro community" came closer to an outbreak, and made it more difficult to "channel their deep-seated emotions toward productive nonviolence." Dennis Roberts noted how "the dissatisfied and disenfranchised" were close to taking "their guns, their dynamite, their gasoline bombs, and go out into the streets." And the sense of apathy that seemed to have come over people, when more demonstrations were called for, was, according to a report by Phil Davis, really "a pause supercharged with the threat of violence

37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers. The idea of King coming to Albany "to lead the children to Egypt" had caught on since Wyatt Tee Walker had "held out Dr. King like a carrot over the head of the mule," during an executive board meeting of the Albany Movement in May 1963. In the summer of 1964 SCLC, under the leadership of Hosea Williams, launched the Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) program which worked with a hundred Northern volunteers in fifteen counties in Georgia. (Field Report by Allen, May 13 – May 27, 1963, 1, 4; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 258, 263-264).

[87] Hedrick Smith, "Moderate Voices Muted in Albany, Ga.," *New York Times*, August 5, 1962; Hedrick Smith, "Georgians Balk Albany movement for Civil Rights," *New York Times*, Aug 18, 1962; News Release, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, June 20, 1962, File #0003, Reel 13, Subgroup A, Series VII, Communications Department, SNCC Papers; Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Project Report, July 1962, File #0215; Reel 7, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers; Claude Sitton, Front page 1 – No Title, *New York Times*, July 25, 1962. For more details on violent incidents, see Claude Sitton, "Albany Ga: Police Break Up Protest by 2000 Negroes," *New York Times,* July 24, 1962.

at every moment."[88]

Open support for armed self-defense increased. Local people were putting SNCC down for talking nonviolence after the shooting of a black boy by the police, leading Donald Harris to question what right SNCC had "to stop these people from doing what they want to do." In Americus people discussed the theme of self-defense, due to a lack of "police protection to all involved," and some local SNCC recruits, like James Daniels, were known to carry guns. The influence of black nationalism also became noticeable in southwest Georgia with some staff members openly supporting the "Muslim position," as advocated by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. And there was a growing feeling that non-violence had been "pushed to the brink," and that black people would soon take what was rightfully theirs, whether "painlessly" or through the use of violence.[89]

5.6. Time For Re-Evaluation

The first years of working in southwest Georgia, convinced the SNCC field staff that, no matter how much work was done on a grassroots level, as long as the federal government was unwilling to support these efforts from the top down, implementing social change on a fundamental level, would prove difficult. It also led to a growing awareness of the need for "a radical shift of the means of economic power," in addition to political empowerment. And it raised questions about the efficiency of SNCC's organizational structure and organizing principles, and exposed "a tension between organizing around political vs. organizing around religious or philosophical goals." Looking back, Sherrod wrote in 1963: "I feel that we who are writing some type of history with our feet are really losing the point with our hands and minds. We have not interpreted with depth. In fact, we have done little or no interpretation

[88] Report on Albany Georgia by Peter Titelman, no date, 1963, File #0030, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; Daily Journal by Roberts, 7, 39; Excerpts from letters by Phil Davis, July 1963, File #0032, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers.

[89] SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, June 9-11, 1964, Atlanta, Georgia, Howard Zinn Papers – Mississippi Summer Project, 1964, http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll2/id/11833/show/11795/rec/89, 12-13, 15; WATS Report, July 7, 1964, File #0169, Reel 57, Subgroup C, Series I, Administrative Files, SNCC Papers; Field Report by Phil Davis, January – January 7, 1964, 2, File #0020, Reel 17, Subgroup A, Series VII, Communications Department, SNCC Papers; Weekly Report from John O'Neal to Charles Sherrod, February 23 – March 6 1963, File #0289, Reel 8, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers, 1. See also: Claude Sitton, "Georgia Defeat Angers Negroes," *New York Times,* July 5, 1963.

of what we are about."[90]

In spite of the recent setbacks, the fundaments of Sherrod's ideology remained firmly in place. In his eyes, mental change in attitude, more than realizing specific political and economic programs, had to be the central focus of the movement. To him, success was more about "how a man sees himself in relation to other men," than about "the directive of a law or some kind of injunction." Once a man was "mentally freed," he would be able to decide for himself what his needs and whishes were, and how to meet them. Education could help to ensure a long-lasting change of attitude that would enable black people to enjoy the luxury of desegregated facilities, and to use their vote "intelligently." Feelings of disillusion that plagued many of the field staff were, according to Sherrod, caused by their sole focus on program "as a criterion of success." The field staff, in turn, increasingly questioned the practical attainability of Sherrod's liberation theory, noting that "one action does not make a man free." Many movement participants of the early days of the Albany movement, were now no longer involved with any kind of activism.[91]

'Finding' independent local leadership, and building lasting community institutions also proved more time consuming than SNCC had anticipated. By the end of 1963 they had developed a close working relationship with members of the Albany Movement, like Reverend Samuel B. Wells, Slater, and C.B King, and Eliza Jackson, to an extent that they "could greatly influence and assist what they do." But they represented "a small group of people trying to do a lot of work," and most of them had already been involved with some form of civil rights activism previous to the arrival of SNCC. Bernice Reagon, who described herself as "a product of SNCC's work," noted that, since 1961, there had been "little attempt at creative use of local people." Local youth leaders like Eddie Brown, James Daniel and Randy Battle had been successfully draw into the movement. But, as James Forman pointed

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[90] Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals by Sherrod, 2; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, December 27 – 31, 1963, 8, 21; Sherrod, quoted in Watters and Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacobs Ladder*, 50.

[91] Selma, Alabama Workshop Report by Phil Davis, December 13-16, File #0108, Reel 6, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, December 27 – 31, 1963, 21; Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals by Sherrod, 1, 2;
Terrell County Evaluation, February 1963, File #0276, Reel 8, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers. Ralph Allen described, how by the summer of 1963 a large part of the black community was not very close to SNCC or to the movement: "[T]hey may have marched at some time in the last two years, attended mass meetings, come around the office as one would go to the zoo to watch the animals. In a lump, these are the folks who haven't yet really figured out what's hapnin' and so have not yet completely identified with the movement" (Field Report by Ralph Allen, no date, 4-5).

out, so far SNCC had failed to produce "leaders out of the student movement who can take local leadership." Further attempts "to encourage participation from the community in the decision making and activities," of the movement in Albany had been neglected. And, while in some rural counties, such as Lee County, local leadership was now working "pretty much on its own," further attempts "to involve any substantial number of new people in active roles," had been unsuccessful.[92]

Some people felt that SNCC's continued presence hindered the development of local leadership. Dave Bell wrote in September 1963: "We have gotten into a situation where the people are too dependent on us and will not develop leadership." Bob Cover added that the staff "had been negligent in using local people," and had failed to give "leadership to the people." For example, in Americus, Sumter County, where SNCC staff had been working since early 1963, the strong leadership of Donald Harris, "allowed the potential leadership… to remain dormant," and the presence of the field staff served "as crutches for the local leaders." As a result, when Harris was arrested, they were "running around like chickens with their heads cut off wondering what to do next." Many staff members, black as well as white, felt that the presence of too many white volunteers also undermined local initiative. Some white staff members working in the rural areas, noted that their 'whiteness' stood in the way of developing local leadership, and believed that black staff members would be "far more capable of gaining the confidence of a potential leader."[93]

Personally, Sherrod felt that the slow progress of establishing independent local leadership could partly be explained by the fact that staff had been always coming and going, and "things never settled long enough for a comprehensive plan to be worked out."

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[92] Selma, Alabama Workshop Report, December 13-16; Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals by Sherrod, 14, 17, 21; Field Report by Allen, no date, 1963, 10; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, Atlanta, December 27 – 31, 1963, 20-21. For more details about SNCC's activities in C.M.E see for example: Voter Education Project Report by Peter de Lissovoy, July 18, 1963, File #0107, Reel 6, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files, SNCC Papers.

[93] Evaluation of Sumter County Movement by David E. Bell and Robert Mants, September 24, 1963, File #0020, Reel 17, Subgroup A, Series VII, Communications Department, SNCC Papers; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, December 27 – 31, 1963, 20; Field Report by Allen, no date, 1963, 5,6; Southwest Georgia Project: Report on Rural Counties by Wendy Mann and Bob Cover, October 7, 1963, File #0223, Reel 7, Subgroup A, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers, 3. Ralph Allen felt that many members of the black community, at least in Albany, had difficulty identifying with whites: "They have seen nothing open to them going out from the whites, and have seen nothing of themselves to relate to. Thus, their attitude towards the struggle is easily turned to one of letting the snccs do their silly things, and standing back to watch the whole scene with a sort of detached melancholy and perhaps a snicker" (Field Report by Allen, no date).

Furthermore, “anyone with ability” left to go elsewhere, making it difficult for SNCC to “pick up local staff.” He suggested that they had to find new ways to harmonize their initial sense of urgency, “with the realism of long-range projects.” Instead of moving into new counties, to avoid further dependency of local people, he insisted on bringing in more personnel to intensify their work in Albany, Sumter, Lee and Terrell County. He now envisioned a more long-term involvement and expressed concern about who would eventually replace SNCC. He also raised questions about the wisdom of restricting the length of time they should work in one specific area.[94]

After the summer of 1963 the “all or nothing, complete open city type of thinking” was gradually replaced by “a sort of chipping away approach,” similar to Moses idea, that “to accomplish something very real, you [had] to do something very limited… by biting off a small piece of the problem.” Sherrod acknowledge that ‘freedom’ was not always a necessary first requisite for further action, but could also come “as a consequence of action programs that developed first.” And he became more susceptible to the idea of offering local people concrete gains in order to draw them into the movement, as well as to the need “for local issues around which to rally support.” [95]

After the rather disorganized and chaotic nature of the summer program, Sherrod felt a need to first reestablish the relationship with local leadership and the black community. In order to re-attune the activism of the SNCC field staff to local needs and wishes, he proposed that they “should instigate an evaluation of the present situation in Albany by the active movement people.” Through this dialogue he hoped to find out what was happening, and formulate a new plan of action that local people would “accept and fight for. ”Reaching out to “the various levels” of black community, asked for more flexibly and “a wide diversity of program, approaches, [and]actions,” and required a commitment by the remaining staff “to see the responsibility and seriousness of their actions.”[96]

In relation to black political empowerment, Sherrod realized that “an emotional focal point,” would increase the effectiveness of voter registration in the city.” Slater King ran for

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[94] SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, December 27 – 31, 1963, 20-21; Selma, Alabama Workshop Report by Phil Davis, December 13-16, 1963.

[95] Field Report by Allen, no date, 1963, 11; Robert Moses, quoted in Visser-Maessen, “A *Lot* of Leaders?,” 133;SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, December 27 – 31, 1963, 4, 21.

[96]Southwest Georgia Project Report, by Sherrod, December 27, 1963, 14; Selma, Alabama Workshop Report, December 13-16, 1963; Field Report by Davis, January – January 7, 1964, 1.

mayor in October 1963, and SNCC and the Albany Movement planned to lay "the groundwork for a political machine for the next city election." A conscious effort was made "to develop power groups of counties which form state senatorial districts," in order to build up black political influence from the counties, to a State and Federal level. In April 1964 C.B. King qualified to run for the Democratic Congressional nomination for the 2nd Congressional district. It was the first time since Reconstruction that a black man ran for Congress, and although chances of success were nil, SNCC and the Albany Movement believed that such a campaign could help to educate people about the political system, "and create among them a sense of community that goes beyond village lines."[97]

As a response to meet the most pressing needs of the local black community, SNCC also decided to move beyond civil rights, to include other social and economic issues. Reducing the economic control of the white man, and enhancing the economic position of black people became a topic of major interest. There was a growing awareness that only "a re-construction of the economic basis of…livelihood" could help to "free the people for action." In Albany they planned to develop "groups of people around specific interests" such as the segregated hospital, housing projects, school desegregation, adult education classes and Federal Food Programs. There were also plans to do some "union-type organizing" amongst maids. In the rural counties, the possibility of cooperatives needed further exploring, and they wanted to educate small farmers about the possibilities of government programs, and enhance black representation on various local county boards responsible for agricultural planning. Implementing these fundamental changes, and long term goals demanded time and specific knowledge and further altered SNCC's role in stimulating social change in the Deep South.[98]

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[97] Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals by Sherrod, 1, 15; "Negro is Defeated in Albany, GA., Vote, *New York Times*, October 16, 1963; Cline, *From Reconstruction to Revolution*, 107; SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, June 9-11, 1964, 6;Homer Bigart, "Vote Drive Gains in Rural Georgia," *New York Times*, July 11, 1964; Harris, interview by Emily, 1966. The 2nd Congressional District included Dougherty, Baker, Randolph, Terrell and Worth County. See also: SNCC News Release, Atlanta, no date, File #0003, Reel 14, Subgroup A, Series VII, Communications Department Public, SNCC Papers.

[98] SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, June 9-11, 1964, 4; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, December 27 – 31, 1963, 4, 19; Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals by Sherrod, 2, 19.

6. Grasshoppers Fighting the Sleeping Giant

6.1. The Wisdom of the Pinched Toe and the Empty Belly

By the time the Albany Movement and SNCC started working on C.B. King's congressional campaign, Charles Sherrod had assigned his position as project director of the Southwest Georgia Project to Donald Harris, a Rutgers graduate from New York who had been working in the Americus since August 1962. Harris later recalled how Sherrod's departure changed the interracial character of the movement, because the majority of the white people drifted out, and the local SNCC leadership "just didn't take any others in." Before he went to New York to attend Union Theological Seminary, Sherrod spent part of the summer supporting the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), an instrument of "grassroots empowerment" aimed at challenging the seating of the regular delegates at the Democratic National Convention (DNC). He assisted Ella Baker with contacting delegates "to get their states to pass resolutions supporting the MFDP." He was also present in Atlantic City during the convention, and, like the rest of the SNCC staff, supported MFDP's rejection of the final compromise, regarding it as an empty gesture rather than a meaningful concession.[99]

MFDP's rejection reflected a new mood within SNCC. Writing after the convention, Sherrod noted that the time had come for black America to demand a real "share in the power," if not "in reconciliation," then through "rioting and blood." He argued that the refusal of the Democratic Party to meet the demands of the MFDP delegation exposed the deep roots of racism beyond the South. Sherrod: "We are a country of racists with a racist heritage, a racist economy, a racist language, a racist religion, a racist philosophy of living, and we need a naked confrontation with ourselves." Referring to the crucial role of black people from the grassroots of the Deep South, he concluded that "it is only now that a voice is being heard in our land. It is the voice of the poor; it is the tongue of the underprivileged;

[99] Harris, interview by Stoper; Biographical info on Donald Harris, File #0140, Reel 56, Subgroup C, Series I, Administrative Files, SNCC Papers; WATS Report, July 28, 1964, Freedom Information Service, WATS Reports, July 1964, http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll2/id/47177/rec/5. Carson, *In Struggle*, 127. According to Donald Harris, the departure of whites "had no great effect" on SNCC's work in southwest Georgia, except reducing the risk of violence, and the level of tension that came with their presence. He did believe however, that the departure of whites in southwest Georgia might have lost them "some of the technical and skilled kind of things," like in Mississippi where students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) set up a radio station. (Harris, interview by Stoper).

it is from the lips of the desperate. This is a voice of utter frankness."[100]

During the Waveland retreat in Mississippi, in November 1964, Sherrod was amongst those members of the field staff who had come "to see themselves as local leaders rather than as outside organizers." In a position paper, written for the occasion, he argued that "the new society of Democracy" that SNCC was trying to realize should be based on knowledge of the people at the grassroots, whose understanding of their own predicament he described as "the wisdom of the pinched toe and the empty belly." When James Forman launched his appeal for a more centralized organizational structure during the same retreat, Sherrod, together with Robert Moses, insisted that their activism should be governed by the very people they were trying to organize. He urged his fellow organizers to always be sure that the "concern, and aspirations" of the people were in accordance with what they, as an organization, wanted to do. As Wesley Hogan pointed out, Sherrod insisted that "rank-and file southerners be included in any community decision-making" associated with the organization. If only SNCC, a joined effort of "the sons of farmers and maids, janitors and preachers, teachers and doctors," would succeed in formulating a program that allowed them to "stay loyal to its people, it could do what was necessary."[101]

Despite the growing resentment about the role of white volunteers in the southern movement, and the recent criticism that their presence undermined the position of people at the grassroots, Sherrod's faith in the necessity of interracialism remained strong. In his Waveland paper he warned that there was "no place for race hatred" among them, and reminded those present not to forget that as human beings they all shared the same need for recognition, fulfillment, and status. Like Bayard Rustin, who warned in 1966, that "a multiracial world demanded multiracial solutions," Sherrod was aware that, since "communities did not exist within total racial isolation from one another," Black Power could only go so far: "Whatever the solution to the problem of race in our country, it's got to be a

[100] Carson, *In Struggle*, 127; Charles Sherrod, "Mississippi at Atlantic City," *Grains of Salt*, (Union Theological Seminary, October 12, 1964).

[101] Carson, *In Struggle*, 143; Charles Sherrod, "From Sherrod," http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6411_sncc_sherrod-r.pdf, 1-2; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 200-201.

black and white solution." And if the solution was to be a black and white one, then, "going towards the solution," should equally be a shared effort.[102]

6.2. Union Theological Seminary

In the fall of 1964 Sherrod started his master of theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, the oldest independent seminary in the United States. It was founded in 1836 by members of the Presbyterian Church, but was open to students of all denominations, and had the reputation of being "one of the primary places in the protestant theological world for the training of activist ministers who would explore the intersection of the Christian gospel and social issues." Reinhold Niebuhr, described by Charles Marsh, as "the most influential Protestant theologian in mid-century America," whose work Martin Luther King Jr. regularly cited, taught at Union from 1928 until 1960. During the time Sherrod was at Union Niebuhr still conducted a seminar on social ethics. David Cline noted how for many southern ministers like James Lawson, their education at a northern institution "merged their southern identity with the liberal, more modern theology more typical of the North." This allowed them to combine elements of the Social Gospel Movement, the Old Testament, the neo-orthodoxy of Niebuhr, and the evangelism of the black church, to formulate their own methods and agenda.[103]

Union, together with the Gammon United Methodist Theological Seminary in Atlanta, also provided most of the volunteers for the Student Interracial Ministry (SIM). Like SNCC this student organization was founded in the wake of the Raleigh Conference in 1960, and so far its main purpose had been to organize "pulpit exchanges between black and white clergy and churches." In SIM Sherrod found "a group of eager, optimistic, intellectual, seminarians who still harbored a commitment to the ideals he espoused." The SIM members in turn, found in him "an experienced civil rights veteran who still retained his commitment to the beloved community." It was therefor only natural that Sherrod used the opportunity of studying at Union "to create a major recruiting network" of white field staff for the

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[102] "From Sherrod," 3; Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 146; Sherrod, quoted in Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 144-145.

[103] Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 3, 44; Moll, "Theological Education in Action," 8-9; Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 26; Ronald H. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Memoir to the Twentieth Century* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 110, 233; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 895.

Southwest Georgia Project. One SIM participant, John Chappell, even suggested that Sherrod's decision to attend Union, and to get involved with SIM, was partly motivated by his aspiration "to raise funds and recruit new volunteers." Sherrod's proposal presented white seminarians with an opportunity to move beyond the relatively slow progress of their integrated church mission, and to participate in the vanguard of the southern movement.[104]

Well aware of the growing resistance against further involvement of white volunteers in the southern movement, Sherrod envisioned that they "would act in such humility and concert with both the local people and the handful of SNCC volunteers still working among them that SIM would leave few footprints in southwest Georgia." And whereas previously there had been room for individual white staff members to take initiatives, or have a leading role, he now made it very clear that, within the context of the movement, all power needed to be with its black participants. Sherrod: "[W]e blacks need to be in charge, we need to have the last word on what's going to reflect on us or what's going to move us or what's going to hurt us in some way or what's going to help us in some way. We need to have the last word." The white volunteers received very strict instructions to "never lead or give orders," but "to listen, to question, and to help the people help themselves." Unlike some of the previous white volunteers, members of SIM in turn, were more aware of their subordinate role and the symbolic and strategic value of their involvement in the southern struggle. Kirk Moll noted for example, how they "left it in the hand of the SNCC leaders and Charles Sherrod to decide, in any given situation, whether it was useful or not to have white workers involved."[105]

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[104] Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 271; Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 98-99;Moll, "Theological Education in Action," 171, 208.

[105] Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 101; Sherrod, quoted in Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 101, 105; Moll, "Theological Education in Action," 164-165, 208, 210-211. Joe Howell recalled that by 1966, SNCC did not want white staff "messing around" in Baker County, and how their support was restricted to working on a Head Start Program. Joe Pfister recalled how they had to learn not to be too outspoken, and "to take a backseat." They were pared with a black staff member and had to follow their lead (Howell, *Civil Rights Journey*, 97; Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution,* 149.

6.3. Toward Black Power?[106]

During the time Sherrod was at Union, the Civil Rights Movement realized two of its major triumphs when seen from a 'top-down,' national perspective, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. After more than three years of "breaking ground" in the Deep South, using direct action and voter registration, the changing circumstances demanded a different approach from the SNCC field staff, including specific knowledge about the use of Poverty Programs, and ways to transform the new civil rights legislation into tangible gains. At the same time there was a general feeling that, regardless of recent legislation, black people were still "going to have to fight for everything they get." This led to a growing sense of black militancy within the organization. Instead of trying to gain access to the existing political structure, new SNCC projects such as the one in Lowndes County, Alabama, explored the possibility of building independent political institutions. In Atlanta, members of the newly formed Atlanta Project began to promote "black separatism with singular fervor." And in June 1966 Willie Ricks introduced "Black Power" to SNCC's discourse, a slogan that was consequently picked up by Stokely Carmichael and others, and further emphasized the organizations black nationalistic stance.[107]

The fundaments of Sherrod's vision of social change remained largely unaffected by the new sense of black militancy within SNCC, as was evident from his attempt to bring in more white, religiously motivated volunteers into southwest Georgia. However, the limited success of the "King for Congress" campaign, and the growing awareness of the deep roots of racial inequality beyond equal access to public facilities or political representation, did affect the morale of the field staff. With the majority of the white, as well as the idealistically motivated activists gone, many of the remaining black staff members were more susceptible to black nationalism. Both Roy Shields, a graduate of Franconia College, New Hampshire, and Isaac Jenkins, a former student of Miles College, Alabama, who served as Southwest Georgia Project directors after Donald Harris, were "extremely suspicious of whites, [and]

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[106] In September 1966, during a SIM meeting in Chicago, Sherrod proposed a fourfold overall direction: "Toward Black Power; Toward the death of religion and the life of the church; Toward social change and change in personal values; Toward Living" (Sherrod, quoted in Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 142).

[107] SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, April 12-14, 1965, Holly Springs, Mississippi, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6504_sncc_excom_min.pdf, 2; Carson, *In Struggle*, 165, 191, 208-209.

intellectuals." And SIM member Joseph Howell, noted in his dairy how by 1966, many black SNCC workers felt "extremely bitter and cynical about the church."[108]

Whereas black staff members had previously merely questioned the effectiveness of using white volunteers to work in the black community, they now openly opposed the idea. In 1965 only five white SIM volunteers worked with SNCC during the summer. And SNCC's Central Committee unanimously rejected Sherrod's proposal to bring in more white volunteers in the future. Due to what Shirley Sherrod described as a growing "undercurrent of Black Power" there was also a "great deal of tension" between black staff members and the group of over twenty white SIM volunteers that came to southwest Georgia in the summer of 1966. Howell, described that when seminarians arrived in Albany for an orientation session, Grady Little greeted them by saying: "[I]t looks like the roosters outnumbered the panthers. Panthers are hungry. Panthers *eat* roosters."[109]

However, there was still much confusion about what Black Power actually meant; the staff spent long hours discussing the subject and its implementations for the southern movement. David Cline noted how the "idea of black people seeking power – political, economic, and cultural" was in itself nothing new. It "undergirded approaches that ran the gamut of ideology, from the self-esteem and advancement championed by Booker T. Washington to complete black separatism." And the black SNCC field staff, including Sherrod, "for the most part embraced Black Power as emblematic of the need for black political and economic strength." Individually, they often "imbued the phrase with personal meanings and adapted it to fit a particular cultural space." Some of them had become so disillusioned that they not only turned against whites, but also felt that any sort of compromise was wrong. They were "distrustful of everything from Martin Luther King and SCLC to federal poverty funds to Headstart programs."[110]

Sherrod did not share their aim for separation, but at the same time felt that is was too

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[108] Overall Report, Southwest Georgia by Roy Shields, February 1965, File #0059, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; Roberts to Phil, February 6, 1965; Joseph Howell, *Civil Rights Journey: The Story of a White Southerner Coming of Age During the Civil Rights Revolution* (Bloomington: Author House, 2011), 94-95.

[109] Motion, Recommendations, Mandates of SNCC Central Committee, May 14 - May 17 1966, File #0001, Reel 3, Subgroup A, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 74-75. A snarling black panther was chosen as the symbol for the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. A white rooster was the symbol of Alabama's regular Democratic Party (Carson, *In Struggle*, 165-166, Lewis and D' Orso, Walking with the Wind, 368).

[110] Cline, From *Reconciliation to Revolution*, 140, 144-145; Howell, *Civil Rights Journey*, 98.

late for the white man "to get away with affirmations of Christian love towards his poor black brother." Instead, the time had come "to prove these affirmations by relinquishing some… power and wealth." In order to convince the more militant members of the local staff to allow white volunteers to continue working in the black community, Sherrod managed to come to an agreement with the SNCC staff. While the SNCC people would work exclusively "with Black Power" in Clay, Calhoun and Mitchell County, the SIM volunteers were allowed to work in Albany, Cordele and Baker County, with the specific instruction that they were not to take "a visible lead in direct civil rights organizing." [111]

Another aspect of the rising feeling of black militancy was growing support within SNCC for the right of black people to defend themselves. During a staff meeting in April 1965, Roy Shields, indicated that he neither encouraged nor discouraged the possession of weapons, but felt that people had "a right to defend themselves." When in July 1965 a black boy shot a white boy, a local SCLC field secretary emphasized that the white power structure, and not the black youths, "were responsible." Lawrence Mamiya, one of the SIM volunteers working in southwest Georgia in 1966, described several incidents where guns were used in movement-related activism in Crisp County. In June 1966 some SNCC staff members and local leaders carried guns during a confrontation between local high school students and a white mob during an attempt to desegregate a swimming pool. Ramona Lockett, a local girl working for SNCC, used a gun she always carried to scare away some white men who threatened to shoot a white volunteer.[112]

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[111] Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 106; Howell, *Civil Rights Journey*, 94-95, 126. Sherrod's insistence on interracialism was partly vindicated, because many of the federal antipoverty programs that became available to black people in the wake of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, depended on the level of integration of these projects. With no local white support, especially in the rural counties, SIM volunteers were thus allowed to work on education and Head Start programs, mainly because of the financial benefits that came with their involvement. A rather cunning side to Sherrod's role as a community organizer was demonstrated during a meeting in Baker County when he tried to convince local families to provide housing for white volunteers. Sherrod: "I had agreed not to send in whites, but when I was asked about Head Start needing to be integrated, I thought it would be good to have these whites… only for that reason did I go against SNCC. I thought the people here wanted these whites in order to get the federal Head Start funding" (Joseph Howell, *Civil Rights Journey*, 98).

[112] SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, April 12-14, 1965, 9-10. Members of the Lowndes County SNCC project came to Roy Shields' defense, pointing out that, when traveling the roads at night, or in defense of their homes, SNCC workers should be allowed to carry guns. When asked by Carmichael who was carrying arms during the meeting, it turned out that "nearly all of the black organizers working in the Deep South were armed." (Carson, *In Struggle*, 164). WATS Report, #137, July 29, 1965, File #0169, Reel 57, Subgroup C, Series I, Administrative Files, SNCC Papers; Gene Roberts, "White Youth is Shot Near Georgia Rally," *New York Times,* July 29, 1965; Gene Roberts, "2 Negroes Accused of Murder in Death of Georgia White Man," *New York Times,* July 30, 1965, 23; Gene Roberts, "U.S. Judge Frees Four in Americus," *New York Times*, July 30, 1965; Lawrence

The question of armed self-defense came more pressing as mass demonstrations, law suits, and voter registration "produced no significant changes," and local white officials failed to protect black people exercising their constitutional rights. John Perdew noted how this "may well explain why civil rights struggles in Americus and Baker County…, have in 1965 come as close to open warfare as they have." Stephen Tuck described how in Americus, in the wake of the murder of the white boy, "the degeneration of protest into violence" undercut the authority of SNCC. In Crisp County, following the incident at the swimming pool, racial tension came to a climax during a "gun battle" between local whites and a group of black men, armed with "their old hunting rifles and 22-caliber pistols." Local youths, in turn, left a mass meeting conducted by SNCC and SCLC after Sherrod and local leadership mentioned nonviolence, leading Isaac Simpkins to conclude that "Cordele is not a city where you can really practice non-violence." Members of the local black community also "began to talk about arming themselves against the whites," and certain preparations were made "to protect the people" in the neighborhood.[113]

Southwest Georgia never witnessed the level of organized armed self-defense that was practiced by the Deacons of Defense in Louisiana, or under the leadership of Robert Williams in Monroe, North Carolina. But despite the general emphasis by movement scholars on the nonviolent, religious and interracial character of the movement in southwest Georgia, the growing sense of black militancy and the use of weapons by members of the SNCC staff, as manifested during the aftermath of the 'classical phase' of the Civil Rights Movement, did not come out of nothing. The threat of violence had been simmering under the surface since the early days of the Albany movement, and as early as 1963 there were local SNCC recruits who carried weapons. Although Sherrod's leadership partly defined the nature of the Southwest Georgia Project, and helped to attract like-minded activists to the area, not all staff members shared his vision, or were as strongly committed to interracialism and nonviolence as he was. And as Clayborne Carson noted, some staff members developed

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Mamiya, "SNCC, SIM, and the Southwest Georgia Project," http://www.crmvet.org/nars/mamiya.htm; Field Report on Cordele by Isaac Simpkins, no date [June 26, 1966], File #0107, Reel 19, Subgroup A, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers.

[113] SNCC Research, Americus and Baker County, John Perdew, August 1, 1965, File #0103, Reel 19, Subgroup A, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers, 1; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 185; Mamiya, "SNCC, SIM, and the Southwest Georgia Project"; Project Report on Cordele by John Battiste, July 8, 1966, File #0107, Reel 19, Subgroup A, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers, 4; Field Report on Cordele by Simpkins, no date.

"their racial consciousness" as a result of their participation in the southern struggle," rather than from existing nationalist or separatist ideologies." Even Sherrod later admitted to the difficulty of remaining nonviolent under the circumstances. Looking back on the early days of the movement, he said in 1971: "Hell, we didn't even let ourselves cuss when we were so non-violent. All I ever got out of that was stomach trouble."[114]

6.4. There to Stay

SNCC's work in the southwest Georgia since October 1961, combined with the highly visible campaigns in other parts of the South, as well as the legislative victories of 1964 and 1965, had led to a noticeable increase of grassroots activism in the area. In 1969 Sherrod noted how, perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the movement was "that it brought to the forefront a new group of leaders who, unlike the old, were committed to a democratic, non-authoritarian type of relationship with their constituents." Sherrod: "In many communities those responsible and responsive leaders now sit at the head of embryonic grass roots organizations." At the same time, the experience of more than five years of movement activism in the area, demonstrated that the facilitation of local leadership structures and organizations was a far more time consuming, long-term process than SNCC had initially anticipated. Despite their "considerable experience and skill, so far" the success and effectiveness of local leadership in mobilizing their communities was limited.[115]

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[114] Carson, *In Struggle*, 299; Sherrod quoted in Watters, *Down to Now*, 315. Examples of people who worked in southwest Georgia between 1962 and 1965, who later became outspoken supporters of Black Power: Willie Ricks, who joined the southern struggle as a high school student in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and described himself as "a black nationalist," and who later became a representative of the All African Peoples Revolutionary Party, was part of the SNCC staff in Georgia between the end of 1963 until early 1965. Carver Neblett, a student from Illinois who became Black Panther Party's field marshal for the western states, worked in southwest Georgia in 1962-1963. Bob Mants, who worked in the area in 1963 and 1964, later worked in the Lowndes County, Alabama, where the Black Panther Party was founded. He later became a farmer in Lowndes County, Alabama, "where he was attempting to reverse the pattern of black abandonment of southern agricultural lands" (Carson, *In Struggle*, 162-164, 208-209, 283, 306; Zinn, *SNCC*, 140).

[115] Charles Sherrod, "The Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education," June 1969, https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/holsaertfaith/#fhpsi03016, 3-4. After 1965, activism in Worth or Thomas County, "developed independently of SNCC's project." In Clay County, local black people "had been organized and trying to attain political power… since the Clay County Improvement Association in 1960." In Terrell County, were SNCC ceased working in 1964, local leadership had been working on school integration, and school teachers were running a Head Start program. The success of Committee of Political Action (COPA), made up of farmers and small storekeepers from twenty counties in the 2nd Congressional district demonstrated that there was "a more militant leadership in many of the counties" than SNCC had initially anticipated. In Albany, the Dougherty County Resource and Development League, an offshoot of the Albany Movement, was planning a community center and nursery school. Also in Albany, antipoverty and Headstart programs, described by Joseph Howell as "the fruits of the movement," were successfully run by people like

According to Sherrod, the reasons for their limited success were threefold. First, they were hindered by a severe shortage of financial resources, which were needed to build and maintain an effective organization, as well as "a lack of knowledge about how to mobilize them." Second, they were "lacking in a wide variety of information, knowledge and technical skills," to meet people's immediate needs, and guarantee "victories so necessary for the construction of organizations." Finally, there was a "serious lack of trained leaders and organizers to carry out the strenuous work of organization building." Sherrod: "Despite the great sacrifices which the present leaders have made, many of them are limited by age and energy, as well as by the necessity to devote most of their time and energy to earning their own livelihoods." And younger people with leadership potential were often "lost to the ghettoes of the North, because of the lack of opportunities… to acquire meaningful training and a steady source of income."[116]

By 1966, the remaining SNCC field staff no longer seemed able "to maintain enough discipline to carry its philosophy through." Joseph Howell noted how they were "way off base," and often handled meetings "in dictatorial fashion." And they were so "wrapped up" in their own vision of social change that they lost touch with the needs and whished of the local communities, at a time when most local people were tired of demonstrations, protests and rallies and were simply looking for ways to "raise a good family [and] make a good living." After visiting the Southwest Georgia Project in 1967, Stanley Wise remarked how the remaining staff lacked a clear sense of direction, and how Isaac Simpkins did not commend enough respect "to be an effective leader." And he felt that, at times, they seemed to be as confused as local people were, "over the concept of independent political organizing."[117]

C.B. King's wife Carol King, and Eliza Jackson (Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 188; Lawrence J. Hanks, *The Struggle for Black Political Empowerment in Three Georgia Counties* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 119; Southwest Georgia SNCC Field Report, November 22, 1965, File #0059, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; WATS Report, January 14, 1965, File #0169, Reel 57, Subgroup C, Series I, Administrative Files, SNCC Papers; WATS Report #36, April 12, 1965, File #0007, Reel 16, Subgroup A, Series VII, Communications Department, SNCC Papers; Howell, *Civil Rights Journey*, 103, 115).

[116] Charles Sherrod, "The Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education," 4. Samuel Wells, one of the driving forces of the local movement during the first half of the 1960s had, according to Joseph Howell "ran out of steam… and by 1966 was pretty much dead." In his absence the movement in Albany "had gradually slowed to pretty much of a standstill." In Baker County, Joseph Howell observed how local people lacked "the SNCC mentality of political organization" and how it was "extremely difficult" to effectively organize a voter registration campaign without the 'outside' help of Sherrod or SNCC (Howell, Civil Rights Journey, 100, 110, 126).

[117] Howell, *Civil Rights Journey*, 110, 145-147; Southwest Georgia Field Report by Stanley Wise, no date, File #0059, Reel 37, Subgroup A, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers, 3.

Sherrod had so far managed to bridge the widening gap between his own ideology and the growing radicalism of the local SNCC staff, but after national headquarters decided to exclude all remaining whites from the organization, he felt that "he had no choice but to step down." Referring to the organizations' rejection of what he considered to be one of its founding principles, he now officially resigned, stating: "I didn't leave SNCC, SNCC left me." Looking back on the decision in 2012, Shirley Sherrod wrote: "We always believed that the movement was inside us, buried so deep in our marrow that it could not be eradicated. Leaving SNCC was merely a transition not an end." After the mid-1960s Sherrod increasingly aligned himself with locals. His marriage with Shirley Miller, whom he met while working in Baker County in 1965 after the local community was stirred into action by the murder of her father, Hosie Miller, further strengthened his own roots in the area.[118]

The rise of Black Power thus signaled the end of SNCC's activities in southwest Georgia, but far from fitting the 'declension narrative,' the growing sense of black militancy, and the legal victories of the mid-1960s merely altered the nature of the local movement. Sherrod himself made a clear distinction between the 'classical phase,' which he described as "the movement phase of social change," during which "massive organizing energies… successfully aroused in large numbers of people the awareness that their plight was neither God-given nor irreversible," and a consequent "organizational phase." He noted how, during the latter, removing "the barriers of opportunity" gave way to "achieving the fact of equality." Now the emphasis shifted "away from security of civil rights towards insuring social and economic progress." Throughout the first phase, 'outside' organizers like SNCC had often been a driving force behind the development of protest in the South. With their shifting focus towards the North, "the organizing energies departed with the people who brought them." Their departure, before the "transition point between movement and stable organization" had been reached, left black people "only partly prepared for the difficulties of the organizational phase" that lay ahead.[119]

Well aware that the struggle was far from over, Sherrod prepared to "dig in for the long

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[118] Carson, *In Struggle*, 239-241; Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 75, 77; Mamiya, "SNCC, SIM, and the Southwest Georgia Project." Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 97, 106. See also, Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*,62-63.

[119] Sherrod, "The Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education," 1, 7; Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 113-114; Charles Sherrod, "Without Dr. King." April 15, http://www.crmvet.org/nars/mamiya.htm.

haul." The fundamental principles of his activism still firmly in place, he became more pragmatic in his approach towards obtaining racial equality, noting that building "around program instead of… ideologies," provided people "with more significant and lasting skills." More importantly, whereas ideologies were rather abstract, a successful program offered "visible proof of the constructiveness and resourcefulness of the poor in generating from their own resources a real enterprise for social and economic improvement in the community." The murder of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, led Sherrod to voice his own fear of declension, noting that he "saw the hope of a single method to achieve Freedom doomed." At the same time he conceived it as yet another "possibility of a more meaningful alliance between black and white fighters for freedom." For perhaps the reality of King's death could prompt "the tears to wash away the blinders from the eyes of many who saw only the dream when the nightmare was everywhere present."[120]

In relation to southwest Georgia, Sherrod felt that King's death signaled "the rebirth of the non-violent action." At the same time he felt that those who still believed and worked for the realization of the "beloved community," needed to re-evaluate their "goals and a long range commitment to them." Sherrod: "[T]he style of operation required for breaking down the virtually immovable obstacles, is not necessarily the one suited for building permanent structures capable of carrying out long-term change." In that sense, King's death also meant "the acceptance of other possibilities for other people." Sherrod: "Perhaps the kind of movement that Dr. King looked for will blossom from the seeds of his death, with violence, the threat of violence, and non-violence." Most importantly, in the absence of a strong, national leader like King "to express their mood," the time had come for black people to learn to "speak, and work, walk and love and hate" for themselves.[121]

[120] Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 113; Sherrod, "The Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education," 7; Charles Sherrod, "Without Dr. King."

[121] Sherrod, "Without Dr. King,"; Sherrod, "The Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education," 3.

7. Beyond the Dream

7.1. Navigating the Winds of Change[122]

In 1969 America had become "an increasingly complex society, woven into an interlocking net of huge governmental, administrative, and economic institutions and organizations." Unlike the North, where the frustrations about *de facto* segregation and racism erupted into overt violence during the second half of the 1960s, in the South racial tension continued on a less visible level, making it more difficult to deal with the complexities of structural racism. Shirley Sherrod noted how the early Civil Rights Movement "had been built around reversing measurable intolerable conditions that anyone with eyes to see could observe." Once segregation "was no longer an official and lawful daily reality," there was "no master strategy for rooting out the deeply ingrained racism that still lived in the hearts and minds of many people and was buried in the system itself."[123]

While SNCC, as an organization, had largely abandoned grassroots organizing in the rural South by the end of the 1960s, Charles and Shirley Sherrod, together with "like-minded colleagues from SNCC," white SIM volunteers, and local people, remained committed to the organization's original ideal of stimulating change from the 'bottom-up.' Whereas voter registration had been central to SNCC's early organizing efforts in the rural South, the experience of the last few years had exposed the deep social and economic roots of racial inequality. Combined with the complexities of American society at large, by the mid-1960s it had become clear that overcoming the debilitating circumstances of racial inequality demanded a more long-term approach. In order to provide the "knowledge, skills, and styles of operation necessary to success within these complex structures," Sherrod and his colleagues established a nonprofit, self-sustaining organization called the Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education.[124]

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[122] http://www.newcommunitiesinc.com/.

[123] Sherrod, "The Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education," 1; Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 119.

[124] Sherrod, "The Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education," 1, 2; Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 77. The Southwest Georgia Voter Education Project continued to work in different counties, mostly within a fifty-mile radius of Albany, including Baker, Clay, Lee, Terrell, Sumter, Worth, Dougherty, Grady, Crisp, with less intensive involvement in another four counties, including Grady, Mitchell, Stewart, Calhoun and Early.

There was a growing awareness that extreme poverty was central to the continual unequal status of many black people, and the new project used a more broad based strategy, aimed at helping black people gain control over a variety of factors affecting their lives, including "material, economic, political, educational, and cultural" needs. The project's ultimate goal remained "to identify, support and train local leadership and staff" in order to create a "trained body of leaders and community workers" and encourage them to pass on their knowledge, and "transfer training and skills to other counties." Sherrod: "If local leaders are to lead, they must be able to meet at least some of the immediate needs of their followers." Part of the training process was directed at the ability "to provide local groups and leadership with the skills, knowhow and information necessary for independent self-help program development," and to learn how to build "organizational structures through which the poor may initiate social change."[125]

Next to the development of local leadership, Sherrod believed that the "enforced dependency of the poor" could be overcome, "only by broadening the effective decision making power they [had] over areas critically affecting their lives as well as improving their income." However, years of organizing in the field had taught him that the economic dependency of small farmers, sharecroppers, and plantations-workers, stood between them and their freedom. Developments such as "mechanization and severe acreage allotment reductions" further weakened their position and forced "thousands of families out of farm work." Federal aid programs were all controlled by white farmers, and so far the Southwest Georgia Project had realized more "sufferable defeats than sustained victories from their steadfast organizing efforts to elect [b]lack farmers onto the influential and racially oppressive Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation committees." Furthermore, Sherrod noted how "the structures that helped farmers stay farmers weren't geared to help *small* farmers to stay farmers, or hold on to their land, or reclaim land." So far, his own inability and powerlessness to provide any guarantees in that area left him frustrated: "And there I was – with my commitment, but no power; my love, but no bread. And with all my tenacity

[125] Sherrod, "The Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education," 2-3, 4, 5, 6. The nature of trainings depended on "the developing needs of the local project area, but general themes for the workshops were: "local fund raising techniques; bookkeeping; organization management; municipal and county government; bargaining and negotiating techniques and group pressure politics.

and strength of mind, I couldn't employ nobody."[126]

At the end of the 1960s the Southwest Georgia Project "adopted a more radical land-based resistance strategy." Local organizers became convinced "of the need for an independent base for survival," outside of the existing white power structures. To Sherrod, black people's "need for land" was obvious. One way of enhancing black landownership, and self-sustaining economic activity, was through farming collectives or co-operatives. In 1963 SNCC had explored the possibility of establishing a local co-operative centered around a pecan plant formerly run by Koinonia Farm, but the plans had failed due to a lack of "proper foundation in research and community mobilization." But the idea did not lose its appeal. When, in 1964, Slater King met Robert Swann, a pioneer of the collective farming movement, this meeting inspired local leadership to further explore the idea of realizing a co-operative in southwest Georgia, based on "community land trust movements" in India and Israel.[127]

In 1968 a delegation from southwest Georgia, including Slater and C.B. King, and Charles Sherrod, as well as white supporters like Robert Swann, and Fay Bennett, director of the National Sharecroppers Fund (NSF), went to Israel to study the working of the kibbutzim.

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[126] Dãnia C. Davy, Savonala Horne, Tracy Lloyd McCurty, and Edward Pennick, "Resistance," in Justine M. Williams and Eric Holtz-Giménez, eds., *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and Commons in the United States* (Jackson: Food First Books, 2017), Chapter 2; Charles Sherrod, interview by John Emmeus Davis, 1981, http://www.cltroots.org/interviews/charles-sherrod-interview. In "Of the Black Belt" W.E.B. Du Bois described the history of the agriculture and land ownership patterns in Dougherty County and southwest Georgia, noting how, at the turn of the century "systematic modern land-grabbing and money-getting" by white landowners, supported by the state police power and discriminatory financial institutions, kept most black people in total dependency (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 69-82, 81). Agencies such as the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), the Federal Land Bank and the Agricultural Stabilization Conservation Service (ASCS) were all controlled by white farmers and local governments, and they continued to discriminate against black farmers. For more details of discrimination, see: Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 93-94.

[127] Davy et al., "Resistance," in *Land Justice,* Williams and Giménez, eds. Chapter 2;Sherrod, interview by Davis; "Celebrating the Southwest Georgia Movement: Reviewing Our Past to Chart Our Future," October 2000, https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/holsaertfaith/#aspace_ref136_ytf, 6;Charles Sherrod, New Communities Inc., http://www.newcommunitiesinc.com/, transcript; Sherrod, Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals by Sherrod, 23-24; Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 83; Robert Swann, *Peace, Civil Rights, and the Search for Community: An Autobiography,* 2001, http://www.centerforneweconomics.org/publications/peace-civil-rights-and-search-community-autobiography, Chapter 19. For more details about Koinonia Farm, and their interaction with SNCC in southwest Georgia, see: Tracy Elaine K'Meyer, *The Story of Koinonia Farm: Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*(Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997). The Community Land Trust movement was based on the Gramdan, or "village-gift movement," in India, where villages were given land, which they farmed collectively. A group of village elders acted as trustees. In Israel, a land reform movement which dated back to the late 1800s when the Jewish National Fund purchased land, which they leased to Jewish settlers to build kibbutzim (cooperatives) and moshavim (settlements).

Inspired by "the structure and dedication of the farmers," and the "democratic principles" that were used to run the land-lease covenants, they set out to create something similar in America. In 1969, New Communities Inc. acquired a piece of land of almost six-thousand acres in Lee County, making it "the largest piece of land owned by blacks in the country anywhere in a single tract." When Slater King died in a car accident in 1969, Sherrod took his place as president of the founding board of New Communities Inc. As far as Sherrod was concerned, the co-operative was part of "a broader movement for a better life" for black people, governed by the same "political commitment" and "deep philosophical underpinning" that had defined his activism since the early days of the movement. And, while there was a controversy between those who felt that strong leadership, in the form of a "traditional farm manager," was needed, and those in favor of a more participatory approach, in 1981 Sherrod noted that so far, "our creative approach has won out."[128]

Against the advice of experts, who told them to "lease the land and let someone else take the risk," they decided to manage the co-operative themselves, because, according to Sherrod, "if we let someone else do our farming, we would never learn." Growing up on a farm, Shirley Sherrod had the necessary farming experience and expertise. To Sherrod running a farm was an entirely new experience: "When we started I didn't even know the difference between grass and hay." The members of the collective, with the help of experts, "decided the kind of educational, health, industrial, housing, recreational and agricultural systems they would have." The day-to-day running of the organization depended heavily on the skills of local people and "home-grown technology." Sherrod once again attracted

[128] Swann, *Peace*, *Civil Rights, and the Search for Community,* Chapter 19;Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 84; Sherrod, Keynote Address, "50 Years after the Sit-ins." The trip to Israel was funded by the National Sharecroppers Fund (NSF), and the Jewish National Fund. New Communities Inc. was able to buy the property through a combination of different financers, including a loan from NSF, long-term financing from Prudential, an agricultural investments and loans company, as well as loans from black church groups, and private sponsors. Anticipating the growing interest in government circles in America "to provide loan guarantees to permit the development of new towns," the general idea was, that over time New Communities would evolve into "a self-sustaining agricultural community that would have all of the infrastructure associated with a small town." This vision was reminiscent of "triumphant Reconstruction and post-reconstruction Black town developments like Promised Land, South Carolina (1870); Nicodemus, Kansas (1877); and Mound Bayou, Mississippi (1887)." With a "planning grant" from the federal Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO) a site plan was created for the entire development, including three villages, and sites for factories, schools and other community facilities. Local as well as state officials used their influence to prevent substantial funding from the OEO (Swann, *Peace*, *Civil Rights, and the Search for Community,* Chapter 19 and 20; Chapter 20; Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 87-88; Howell, *Civil Rights Journey*, 168; Charles and Shirley Sherrod, interviews by Edward Pennick, June 17, 2016, quoted in Davy et al., "Resistance," in *Land Justice,* Williams and Giménez, eds. Chapter 2).

"idealistic college students" from northern college to work voluntarily on the farm, but, as SIM volunteer Ed Feaver recalled, many of them turned out to be unprepared for "the harsh realities of 'stoop labor.'"[129]

However, the realization of such a large scale, ambitious project was only possible with financial support from national organizations such as the National Sharecroppers Fund. And when the area experienced a series of severe droughts in the late 1970, and early 1980s, New Communities fell victim to the discriminatory practices of the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) and the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). By stalling their application for an emergency loan, these federal agencies caused them to go into foreclosure in 1985. The end of the co-operative was very painful for everyone involved. Looking back in 1991, Sherrod recalled: "For a long time the loss… hurt me so much I couldn't even talk about it."[130]

7.2. We Who Believe in Freedom

The Southwest Georgia Project continued its efforts to promote social change through black political representation. In 1962, Sherrod had predicted that "[i]n six years, there will be a black man sitting in congress from southwest Georgia." This estimate turned out to be a little too optimistic, since many black people continued to be "numb and fearful from decades of effective repression to leap into overt political action." But after 1965, attempts at black political empowerment slowly started to pay off. All over southwest Georgia, black candidates successfully ran for a variety of positions. In Albany, after Robert Montgomery and Mary Young, Charles Sherrod became the city's third black City Commissioner in 1976, where he served for six consecutive two-year terms, until 1990. In 1996 he ran, unsuccessfully, for the Georgia State Senate, his last attempt at political office. By 2008, in seven counties in the area, black city and county commissioners outnumbered whites, and in 2004 Willie Adams became the first black mayor of Albany, followed in 2012 by Dorothy

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[129] Charles Sherrod, quoted in Tom Dent, *Southern Journey: A Return to the Civil Rights Movement* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1997), 234; Sherrod, interview by Davis; Allen G. Breed, "Black Farmer's Lawsuit Revives a Dream," *Washington Post*, December 6, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/12/06/black-farmers-lawsuit-revives-a-dream/f286668f-67de-400f-a10b-051ba9bf47a7/?utm_term=.325026c638be.

[130] Sherrod, interview by Davis; "Celebrating the Southwest Georgia Movement," 6; Sherrod, quoted in Dent, Southern Journey, 334.

Hubbard.[131]

Despite these signs of progress, change was "slow to develop." Under the surface racism continued, "governed by a combination of adherence to tradition, fear by blacks, racism by whites, and the facts of economics." In 1985 Sherrod noted: "Those people who shot at us and blew up churches and all that 20 years ago, they haven't gone anywhere… The attitudes are still there." Their behavior has only changed "because we have a little power," and because people don't want to "do anything they can't get away with." Referring to the progress in Albany in since the 1960s, Sherrod commented in 1990: "This town is just as racist as it has ever been," and everything we received here "has been fought for, not given."[132]

Living conditions had improved, as had "upward mobility in terms of hiring and promoting" black people in city departments. However, as Sherrod made sure to point out, these "were the result of pressure and protest, not goodwill." Good jobs were scarce, unemployment high, and drugs commonplace among black youth. Integrated schools did not always lead to educational progress of black students, and made it more "difficult to teach black history and a positive sense of black culture." In the rural counties small farms continued to be threatened with foreclosure due to discriminatory practices of local rural development offices, while, at the same time, the Reagan administration closed USDA's civil rights office, "with the tacit understanding that discriminatory practices were a thing of the past."[133]

Like many other activists who entered the movement in the 1960s, the persistence of racism, discrimination, and inequality motivated Charles and Shirley Sherrod to continue the fight for 'freedom.' Sherrod combined his time on the City Commission with his work in a government social service program. He served as an Adjunct Professor at Union Theological Seminary in the 1970s. Later he worked as a chaplain in the Georgia State Prison in Homerville, lifting up "people who felt the most hopeless." His appointment to the History,

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[131] "Celebrating the Southwest Georgia Movement," 6; "The New Barbarians," 4; Tom Wicker, "In the Nation: The Fence is Down," *New York Times*, June 2, 1970; "20 Years Later and Still Marching." Dent, *Southern Journey*, 243; Sherrod, "William G. Anderson Slavery to Freedom Lecture Series."

[132] E. R. Shipp, "Across the Rural South, Segregation as Usual," *New York Times*, April 27, 1985; Dent, *Southern Journey*, 216.

[133] Dent, *Southern Journey*, 217, 218-219; Sherrod, "William G. Anderson Slavery to Freedom Lecture Series;" Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 94, 119, 120-121.

Political Science and Public Administration Department at Albany State University in 2008 gave Sherrod an opportunity to pass on to the students some of the "skills" he learned "over sixty-nine years" in the movement. In passing the torch to the next generation, he urged them: "to stay faithful, to reclaim our neighborhoods, leverage our money, and finally [to] use our political strength."[134]

Through her work with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, Shirley Sherrod became an expert in "helping farmers keep their land" in a climate of "corporate farm power." She also became involved with preparing a class action suit, bundling the claims of 400 black farmers, including New Communities, who experienced "land loss and discrimination against them at the USDA" between 1981 and 1996. The lawsuit, which was filed in 1997, became known as *Pigford v. Glickman*, and eventually resulted in a "consent decree," leading to the largest civil rights settlement to date. In 2009, after years of trying to fight continued discriminatory practices by government officials, Shirley Sherrod also got an opportunity to change the system from within when she was appointed as Georgia's first black director of rural development, by the Obama administration.[135]

Ironically, during the "one hundred years of USDA's history of discrimination" not a single white person had been dismissed from the agency for discriminatory actions. Yet hardly one year after her appointment, Shirley Sherrod was asked to step down, following false accusations of reverse racism by Andrew Breitbart, a Tea Party activist and blogger. The Obama administration's insistence on her immediate resignation, before checking the facts,

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[134] Dent, *Southern Journey*, 212;"Celebrating the Southwest Georgia Movement," 12; Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 123; Santrice Curry and Ashley R. Harris, "Civil Rights Organizer Joins School that Considered Him a Trouble Maker," January 4, 2007, http://cooljustice.blogspot.be/2007/01/civil-rights-organizer-joins-school.html; Sherrod, "50 Years After the Sit-ins." Other activists who entered the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s, like John Lewis, Marion Barry and Julian Bond also pursued a career in politics, with Lewis becoming a member of Congress, Barry becoming Mayor of Washington D.C., and Bond elected to the Georgia Senate. James Forman became head of the Unemployment and Poverty Action Council, a social action organization in Washington D.C. Robert Moses initially withdrew himself from the movement feeling that people had become too dependent on his leadership. Later he returned to Harvard to finish his philosophy doctorate. And he founder of the Algebra Project, "an alternative, bottom-up egalitarian educational program for underprivileged children" (Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 222, 237, 240, 253, 254; Carson, *In Struggle*, 305-306; Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 271, 286).

[135] Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 95-96, 121-123, 132, 133. A second suit law, which became known as *Pigford II*, was filed in 2008, to enable a group of over sixty-thousand black farmers, "who had filed late claims, or who had not had the information or means to file claims at all," to add their complaints (Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 126).

demonstrated that under America's first black president there was in fact "zero tolerance for anything that would bring race to the forefront." And, as Shirley Sherrod noted, it revealed how the "supposedly race-transcendent president" was in fact "*terrified* of race." It also served as an illustration of the fragile state of race relations. To Charles Sherrod, the incident revealed how essentially "the nature of the beast is still the same as it was in 1961." Sherrod: "[T]his monster, this racist society, can change its moods, can change its forms, can maneuver, can throw a rock and hide its hand, can throw a rock and show its hand." But as long as "it has the power to do so, it does so." At the same time, being always "able to find a blessing in the worst situation," he also noted that the attack on his wife, "opened up an avalanche of discussion on a tabooed subject – race."[136]

Summing up the heart of the struggle in the aftermath of his wife's resignation Sherrod noted: "[W]e are a confused bunch because of racism in our society in the way we've been brought up. So we are messed up. All of us are messed up." Looking back on his own life, and on all the hardship he suffered at the hands of white people, he said: "All of this is inside of me. I can't just put it aside but I can decide who I want to be. Despite all the hurt that I have, I'm not going to hurt another brother." And in spite of all the disappointments and setbacks he witnessed throughout his long time in the movement, he still believed that the only way to move on was to "move forward, away from past injuries," but always with an acknowledgement of what happened in the past. Deeply founded in their Christian faith, both Charles and Shirley Sherrod continued to believe that: "The lesson of the civil rights movement is that we have an obligation to seek harmony, even though no one ever said it would be easy."[137]

Ten years after the initial settlement, in 2009 New Communities was granted a total of $ 12 million. Both Charles and Shirley Sherrod received an additional $150.000 "for mental anguish," because, according to the chief arbitrator of *Pigford*, the USDAs attitude towards them, "smacked of nothing more than a feudal baron demanding additional crops from his

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[136] Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 4, 19-20, 21, 23, 108; Charles Sherrod, interview by Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Editor-in-Chief, Washington, July 26, 2010, https://newpittsburghcourieronline.com/2010/07/30/sherrods-tell-black-press-where-america-must-go-from-here/. The white man and woman, mentioned by Sherrod are Eloise and Roger Spooner, a white couple Shirley Sherrod allegedly refused to help safe their farm. In the wake of the allegation by Breitbart, they came to her defense, stating that it was in fact, because of her help that they had been able to safe their farm.

[137] Sherrod, interview by Hazel Trice Edney.

serfs." It took another two years for the judgement to be finalized, but in 2011 New Communities Inc. was able to buy Cypress Pond, a former slave plantation, located outside Albany. Shirley Sherrod noted how it felt like "there was a certain moral justice to acquiring a former slave plantation to promote economic opportunity for farmers and dialogue amongst the races." She envisioned it to be a place where they could both "farm the land and also nurture the minds of people."[138]

Through their years of working in the rural South, both Charles and Shirley Sherrod came to believe that eventually, "[p]overty, more than race," was the tie that bound people together, and the emphasis on black empowerment was replaced by a more general effort to meet the needs of the poor. New Communities revived its work on community empowerment "though agribusiness, education, socials awareness, and wealth building." The Southwest Georgia Project now tried to "educate, engage and empower through grassroots organizing and advocacy." And while the organization's staff and directors were black, the organization no longer specifically emphasized the need for *black* empowerment, focusing instead on the advancement of "human rights and social justice in southwest Georgia and beyond." The newly founded Charles Sherrod Community Development Corporation did continue to address the issue of "black land loss." By encouraging small farmers of all races, it also strove "to improve racial reconciliation… and reduce prejudice and discrimination in the South." However, as Sherrod noted in 2008, while the given political climate made it difficult to openly address the continued significance of race, a disproportionate amount of poor people in America were black, and addressing poverty, was in fact a synonym for helping black people.[139]

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[138] Chief arbitrator for *Pigford*, Michael Lewis, quoted in Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 132; Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 170; New Communities Inc. ,http://www.newcommunitiesinc.com/.

[139] Sherrod and Whitney, *The Courage of Hope*, 108; New Communities Inc., http://www.newcommunitiesinc.com/; Southwest Georgia Project, http://www.swgaproject.com/organization-history.html; Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 225; Charles Sherrod Community Development Corporation, http://www.newcommunitiesinc.com/charles-sherrod-cdc.html; Sherrod, "William G. Anderson Slavery to Freedom Lecture Series." During the lecture Sherrod illustrated the connection between poverty and race, by noting that, every time Barrack Obama was talking "poor, poor, poor, poor," he was in fact "talking black, black, black, and some white." Currently the Southwest Georgia Project aimed at realizing three goals: The development of "a more community oriented food system;" providing training and education for farmers, and building "sustainable communities by advancing a human rights/social justice agenda through community organizing and issue framing." For some of the accomplishments of the project towards "empowering communities," and "racial healing," see: "The Arc of

8. Conclusion

This study of the continual activism of Charles Sherrod in southwest Georgia since the 1960s demonstrates the complexity of trying to fit the individual story of one person, and the development of protest in one particular geographical area, into the general historiographical framework. It also exposes the limits of using an "either/or dichotomy," inherent in the debate between 'classical' and 'revisionist' scholars. As Laura Visser-Maessen concludes, such a division makes "debates on the movement needlessly complex" and often confuses rather than clarifies matters.[140]

To a certain extent, SNCC's decision to move into southwest Georgia to work on voter registration fits into the larger scheme of federal government officials to steer the students' energies away from direct action towards political activism. And they did, although with limited success, appeal to the Justice Department for aid and protection. However, instead of directing the local movement from the 'top-down,' by working towards the realization of national civil rights legislation, in accordance with the 'master narrative,' SNCC's organizing strategy, sprang from a desire to facilitate change from the 'bottom-up,' and to inspire leadership amongst 'ordinary' people at the grassroots. Hence, Sherrod and Reagon's efforts to acquaint themselves with the local community, and their attempts to identify 'organic' leaders, beyond existing leadership structures. SNCC's decentralized leadership structure, and the emphasis on realizing 'common goals' rather than a nationally defined program, allowed the field staff to cater to the needs of local black communities, and adapt their strategy to local circumstances, as was demonstrated by their decision to first engage in nonviolent direct action instead of voter registration, soon after their arrival.

At the same time, SNCC's groundbreaking work in the rural areas of Mississippi and southwest Georgia challenges 'revisionist' theories about the autonomous nature of the southern struggle, as well as the sense of continuity with previous forms of protest, as presented by 'long movement' scholars. Their arrival accelerated the pace of protest and drastically altered the nature of the local struggle. Instead of merely backing local leaders

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Justice Bends Toward Cypress Pond," https://www.wkkf.org/what-we-do/featured-work/the-arc-of-justice-bends-toward-cypress-pond.

[140] Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 274; Visser-Maessen, "A *Lot* of Leaders?," 289.

and students in their efforts to challenge segregation, they used their own experiences in the sit-ins and Freedom Rides, and their perspective on social change, to lift movement activism to a higher level. Their introduction of nonviolent direct action, their conscious efforts to create a sense of inclusion by drawing students and 'ordinary' people into the movement, and their attempts to create a sense of unity between the city of Albany and the surrounding rural counties, all symbolized a clear break with previous attempts to challenge segregation. It helped to create a feeling of momentum and encouraged a wider sense of perspective. The introduction of full-time 'outside' organizers to support the local movement was also new to the area, and it was the first time that northern white students came to work on voter registration in rural black communities in the Deep South. Their independent status and lack of strong local ties allowed them to use a more confrontational approach, and enabled them to engage in the slow process of community organizing and education, as well as voter registration, in a way that traditional black leadership could not.

The history of SNCC's contribution to the movement in southwest Georgia equally undermines the distinction between 'classical' and 'revisionist' conceptions of 'top-down' or 'bottom-up,' leadership as a source of social change. SNCC's modes operandi of living and working with the people they were trying to organize, and their dependency on locals to support them, allowed them to establish clear identity with the black community. Instead of leading from the 'top-down,' their open defiance of the white power structure, combined with Sherrod's strong religiously based ideology, gave them great moral power. Their strong sense of commitment and dedication served as a demonstration of courage and helped other people to overcome their own fear. On another level, the success of strengthening people at the grassroots depended heavily on the amount of outside support they were able to generate on a national level. The slow and intensive process of working on voter registration was only possible due to the joined efforts of local and 'outside' organizers, as well as the financial support of northern white liberals. And regardless of the amount of courage and suffering demonstrated by local people, it took the images of white volunteers getting beaten and jailed to raise more funds and to get the federal government to act. Over time the moral appeal of the movement and the power of leading by example lost much of their effect, due to the slow progress of social change. And passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act diminished the national dimension of the southern struggle. With the departure of SNCC by 1967, the Southwest Georgia Project once again became a 'local'

struggle, with Charles Sherrod as "a sort of transplanted local."[141]

Sherrod's own experience of personal growth during the early days of the student movement convinced him that confronting your fears, and freeing yourself of the negative impact of years of suppression, was a necessary first step towards social change. His own experience with poverty caused him to closely identify with the plight of the rural poor, and made him aware of the difficulty of overcoming the negative side effects of poverty and racism without outside help. Using his faith as a source of strength, his leadership served as a demonstration of the possibility of withstanding violent abuse and harassment with dignity. And by introducing white volunteers to the rural South he tried to break the persistent image of white superiority. His clear vision and ideology at times caused him to violate SNCC's ideal of participatory democracy, and led him to sometimes use a directive, rather than a supportive leadership style. But his strong commitment, and his dedication to the struggle in southwest Georgia also strengthened his local ties and allowed him to continue his work in the rural South at a time when many other SNCC members became disillusioned and turned their back on the movement, or even on American society at large.

When it comes to measuring the impact of Black Power on the chronology of protest in southwest Georgia, the history of SNCC's leading role during the early days of the Albany movement, followed by the disintegration of its organizational activities in the area, seems to validate the 'declension narrative.' During the first years of the Southwest Georgia Project, the extensive nonviolent trainings, and the advocacy of nonviolence by movement leaders like Sherrod, for some time helped to keep feelings of anger and frustration in the black community in check. Yet, as early as 1963 the persuasive power of nonviolence, and the support for the kind of religiously motivated activism that characterized the early days of SNCC, was waning. And there are more incidents of armed self-defense. But overall, the occasional outbreaks of violence, and incidents of armed self-defense, seemed to be the result of growing frustrations after years of heightened tension, rather than proof of continuity between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power era. While waves of racial violence swept northern cities after the mid-1960s, there is no evidence to suggest that in southwest Georgia armed self-defense continued, or increased exponentially.

Rather than 'declension' or 'continuity,' when compared to previous forms of activism,

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[141] Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution*, 106.

the nature of movement activism in southwest Georgia gradually changed. By the end of 1963, voter registration efforts were directed at building political strength through electoral politics. And as a result of the growing awareness of economic dependency and poverty as major obstacles for black upward mobility, social and economic progress became more central to the struggle. After the mid-1960s, with the major legal obstacles out of the way, local initiatives such as New Communities Inc., and the Southwest Georgia Project, increasingly aimed at meeting the basic needs of local people.

By the mid-1960s Sherrod had become more outspoken in his criticism of the racist nature of white society, and the white power structure's refusal to willingly share power with black citizens. His emphasis on black empowerment and equality, rather than integration, serves as evidence of his own growing sense of militancy. While the ideological foundations of Sherrod's vision of social change remained the same, his vision on *how* to realize the ultimate goal of mental freedom underwent significant changes. This became evident in his distinction between what he called "the movement phase" and the "organizational phase" of the local struggle, as well as his endorsement of a more programmic rather than ideological approach towards implementing social change. He realized that most people were motivated by a simple desire to improve their basic living conditions. Looking back in 1967 he noted: "In the end, it seemed to be a matter of work with individuals, and this, inevitably, seemed to promise more than ward-heeling politics had ever achieved. It was a work barely begun, and in its entirety beyond the resources of the movement."[142]

[142] Sherrod, "The Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education," 1; Watters and Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacobs Ladder*, 304.

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