

# ELLA BAKER

## ON LEADERSHIP IN THE MOVEMENT

I have always felt that it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means that the media made him, and the media can undo him. There is also a danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.

Strong people don't need strong leaders. My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they have against violence or injustice...People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves.

I have always thought what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing the leadership of others.



*Ella J. Baker (1903-1986), social justice activist who was instrumental in the founding the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Baker began her affiliation with the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1940. After working as a field secretary, Baker served as director of branches from 1943 to 1946. Her efforts to expand the reach of the NAACP throughout the South helped create the grassroots network that provided a base for the Civil Rights Movement in the following decades. She moved to Atlanta, Georgia in 1957 to organize Martin Luther King Jr.'s newly formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and to run the Crusade for Citizenship, a voter registration campaign. Baker stayed at SCLC for two years, but she never accepted its policy of favoring strong central leadership over local, grassroots politics. When a group of students in Greensboro, North Carolina, touched off a sit-in campaign, Baker left SCLC. Determined to assist the fledgling student movement, Baker invited sit-in leaders to attend a conference in April 1960 at Shaw University. From that conference, the SNCC was born. Unlike older civil rights groups, SNCC was a decentralized organization that stressed direct-action tactics and encouraged women, the young, and the poor to take leadership positions. [Source: <http://www.ncsu.edu/chass/mds/ellabio.html>]*