Witnessing and Testifying
Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights

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Fortress Press
Minneapolis
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2. Septima Poinsette Clark (right) with Rosa Parks at the Highlander Center (date unknown). Photo courtesy Highlander Center. Used by permission.

3. Fannie Lou Hamer (front row, left) and Ella Baker (front row, right), along with other Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegates, sing at a rally on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City, New Jersey (August 10, 1964). Photo copyright © 1976 George Ballis/Take Stock (San Rafael, California). Used by permission.


late 1964, she said to a group of civil rights advocates, “the only group that can make you free is yourself, because we must free ourselves from all of the things that keep us back.” As a consequence of this perspective, Baker says she put “a greater degree of real concentration on organizing people. I keep bringing this up. I’m sorry, but it’s part of me. I just don’t see anything to be substituted for having people understand their position and understand their potential power and how to use it. This can only be done, as I see it, through the long route, almost, of actually organizing people in small groups and parlaying those into larger groups."

Drawing on her religious roots, Baker used Christian scripture to admonish listeners to fight “for the freedom of the human spirit for freedom.” “Let me quote one of my favorite thoughts in scripture,” Baker told her audience. “And it has to do with the whole struggle I think: ‘For now we are nearer than when we first believed but let us cast aside the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light.’” In what immediately followed, Baker equated “works of darkness” with long-term “tacit” agreement with practices that contributed to Black oppression; she called for not only freedom of African Americans but also “a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind.”

Baker’s use of human freedom seems to signify her understanding of human dignity. For Baker, the meaning of human dignity relates both to her belief in the right of individuals to express themselves freely and the basic right of people to realize as fully as possible the capacities with which they have been endowed by their Creator. This includes people having the opportunity to work out for themselves the meaning of realizing their capacities. Ella Baker also felt that freedom of expression and freedom to actualize potentiality were constituted through full recognition and participation in the benefits and burdens of human community. While much of her work focused on African Americans, Baker’s understanding of human dignity and egalitarianism always derived from her theological understanding about all humans. She said her work for freedom was for “a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind.” Explaining this, Baker said, “as far as I’m concerned, I was never working for an organization[,] I have always tried to work for a cause. And the cause to me is bigger than any organization, bigger than any group of people, and it is the cause of humanity. This is the cause that brings us together.

The drive of the human spirit.” Baker insisted on this principle through her lifetime of work to empower individuals, ranging from addressing issues of hunger and education to helping organize local communities and other groups for political participation. While these ideas were rooted in Baker’s childhood community experiences of egalitarianism and care, they were expanded and became more fully developed through socialist ideas and through experiences she encountered as a young adult in New York.

Ella Baker worked for more than fifty years as a human rights activist. From her earliest days of organizing cooperatives to combat hunger and educating people about food quality, she expressed consistently a twofold perspective about human dignity and egalitarianism: first, that every human being deserves respect, and, second, that every person and community has within it whatever it needs to address its own social problems. Originating in racial uplift practices of her childhood, Baker carried forward these values in her own practices of racial uplift and social responsibility, and passed on these norms to others, who passed them on their work. She focused on organizing local people to empower them to take charge of their own lives.

Septima Poinsette Clark: Education for Citizenship

Septima Clark, like Baker, was also concerned with empowering local people; Clark’s focus was education for enfranchisement and citizenship. Through exercise of the franchise Clark saw opportunities for persons to participate in political processes that could improve their lives.

The religious self-understanding of Septima Poinsette Clark was deeply tied to her identity as a Christian and a church woman. Clark grew up in Old Bethel Methodist (later United Methodist) Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where her mother held membership, where she was baptized as a baby, where she was confirmed around age thirteen, where she chaired the youth group, and where, during all the years she resided in Charleston, she also held continuous membership. When Clark lived away from Charleston, she took up active membership in the local churches nearby. Clark once said of
herself, "I've been working in the church all my life." In addition to her local church participation, which she took very seriously, Clark was an active member with the United Council of Church Women and participated with other church women in various civic groups in what may be described as the legacy of the social gospel movement among religious women. In this regard, she was like many nineteenth-century Black religious women social activists who related religious piety to racial uplift and social responsibility practices. Clark's participation in the Civil Rights Movement was, for her, an extension of the Christian civic activism in which she was already involved. She became predisposed to this through religious influences in her early life. Clark began her practice of religious activism before 1920 at her first teaching assignment by fulfilling what she likely understood as Christian duty to serve community members who came to her for assistance in becoming literate. By the 1950s her adult literacy work evolved into the Citizenship Education Program, a method of teaching literacy for voter registration that was replicated across the South and became significant to massive Black voter registration.

**Clark's Moral Formation:**

**Social and Religious Influences in Her Early Life**

Septima Poinsette was born May 3, 1898, in Charleston, South Carolina, to Peter Porcher Poinsette and Victoria Warren Anderson Poinsette. Septima, named for her maternal aunt, was the second of eight children. Like Ella Baker's grandfather, Septima's father had been a slave. Peter Poinsette's mother, who also was a slave, came to Charleston "from the Bahamas and he thought he may have been born there rather than on the Poinsette plantation." Reared on the farm of Joel Poinsette, Peter took that name after becoming emancipated. While he lived on the Poinsette plantation, Peter's main responsibility was to take his slave master's children to and from school. Septima said her father was comfortable with the job, and, moreover, did not oppose the system of slavery. "Well, my father never found any fault with him [his white slave master] whatsoever," Clark said. She continued, "In fact, he didn't find any fault with any white people at that time; he was just that way." During the Civil War, Clark said, Peter "took water to the soldiers who were fighting to keep him a slave, to fight against the people in the harbor who were coming to free him. He really felt that it was perfectly all right." In addition to this, her father carried "wood to stoke the cannons to shoot the balls at those ships."

Septima's knowledge of her father's disposition during the antebellum era likely derived from what he told her and her siblings when they were children. In a 1976 interview, Clark said Denmark Vesey, organizer and leader of the failed slave revolt in Charleston, would not have been a friend of his [her father's], because he didn't have that kind of a feeling... . [Vesey] could see what was happening. But [Vesey] had had some experience away from plantations, you know, and I guess that helped him. My father had such a... Well, I guess they had Christianized him... . He was one of the house servants—they used to say "house [nigger]"—and they felt themselves so much better than those who worked in the field. He didn't work in the field. So when slavery was over he found a job working in a ship.

Although Clark characterized her own citizenship work as Christian, she also distinguished "Christianizing" (the slaveholder practice of inoculating passivity and docility) from living what might be called a conscious Christianity. While she expressed reserved criticism of her father's perspective as a slave, Clark said that she valued "his genuine love of people," demonstrated as a father and community member, and that she learned from his instruction. "There were three things I learned from my father," she explained:

One was that he wanted you to always be truthful. Next, he wanted you not to exalt yourself, but to... investigate how you could improve yourself towards [others]. Then, too, he talked about having Christ in your life. ... I feel that sitting around that pot-bellied stove he really gave us three very good things to look forward to—being truthful, strengthening people's weaknesses, and seeing that there is something fine and noble in everybody.

She came to understand her father both as a class-conscious house servant who felt himself better than fellow slaves and as a gentle, nonviolent person whose disposition influenced her ability to advocate the nonviolent philosophy of the Civil Rights Era.

When Peter Poinsette came out of slavery, he became a cook on ships sailing from New York to Florida, where he met and married
Victoria Anderson. Although Septima valued the patience and temperament she learned from her father, in many ways she was more deeply influenced by her mother.

Victoria Warren Anderson was born in 1872 in Charleston of what "she proudly termed free issue. She had some education from books; my father had none," Clark said. After marrying Peter Poinsette, she lived with him in Charleston, where he became a caterer while she took in laundry at home. Unlike the humble conciliatory personality of her father, Clark said Victoria Poinsette was careful to present herself as a dignified person who opposed slavery. "My mother was something else. She was fiercely proud," Clark said. "She boasted that she was never a slave." In addition, Mrs. Poinsette triumphed in having received some measure of education. "She was haughty, very much so," Clark continued. "She'd grown up in Haiti, and seemingly, in learning to read and write, she'd also learned something about the government." Taken together, Victoria Poinsette's education and being born of "free issue" influenced her perspective and behavior in relationship to slavery, domestic work, and race relations. She abhorred slavery, "terribly so, and she just actually hated the name of it, [and] always claimed that she never was a servant, and she wasn't going to be one." Although Victoria Poinsette took laundry and ironing work into her home, Clark said, "she used to boast about 'I never gave a white woman a cup of coffee.'" The distinction may appear to be splitting hairs, since Mrs. Poinsette took in washing from whites; however, in spite of the meager pay and necessity of the work, taking washing into her home as opposed to going into white people's homes as a housekeeper afforded Mrs. Poinsette some level of autonomy, and clearly contributed to a sense of self-worth and dignity that she sought to maintain. She opposed things that she considered undignified or that "she felt would make her a servant." For example, Clark recalled,

There was a group of, I guess they were eight Germans or Irish right across from me, and they had a car out in the street and they sold this bootleg, and they would come and sit on our step, you know, and when people'd come up you'd see them going in to this car, you know selling the bootleg liquor from that car. I really didn't know what they were doing at that time. My mother didn't want them to sit on her step. I guess she understood what they were doing. And she would lock the door and
then take some water and throw under the door, and they could—
n’t understand where this water was coming from. That’s the
way she did. . . . Throw it very quietly. Yes. They’d be getting up
and looking, wondering where this water was coming from.80

On another occasion, Mrs. Poinsette withstood a police officer who
was looking for the Poinsette dog, which had scratched the face of a
white neighbor’s son. Clark said, “she told him that she didn’t know
where the dog was, and she’d put the dog up in the attic. . . . And he
wanted to come in to look, and she refused to let him. She said,
‘Don’t put your feet across the sill of my door . . . if you come
through here, something’s going to happen to you.’ . . . She meant
that, too. She would fight if she had to. . . . And she had that tone she
would talk with all the time, and people understood it.”81

Among those “people” who understood Mrs. Poinsette’s tone
were her children. “My mother was the disciplinarian in that fam-
ily,” Clark said. Her mother

had a schedule for every child and for every day of the week. She
had to wash and iron to help with the income. . . . Every day we
had special chores. In the morning when I cooked the breakfast
my sister had to take care of the little ones—get them dressed for
school. When she cooked, then I had to do the dressing of the
smaller children. My brother, who was younger than I, had to
swipe down the steps and cut paper for the outside toilet. That
was his work, and then rake the yard sometimes.

Each of the older children always had a younger child as our
ward to see that that child was fed, had clean clothes, didn’t have
holes in their clothes or anything of that type. If he had, then the
older one got the whipping. That’s the way my mother did it. I
know if Lorene had a hole in her underpants, I’d get the whip-
ing. I was expected to mend the hole.82

The Poinsette children could only play on Friday afternoons. Although
neighborhood children could play ball and other games on Sunday
afternoons, Mrs. Poinsette would not allow her children to do so.

We went to Sunday Schools, one in the morning and one in the
afternoon. When we came back in the afternoon we sat on the
porch and they served us some peanuts and candy, and we could
sing around an organ that we had. My sister could play the organ,
but we never could go out in the yard and play ball, because that

was against the religion to do anything like that on Sunday. Of
course, we didn’t have radio or television then, so the only thing
you could do was sing, or go walking, and then go to bed.

Mrs. Poinsette even felt it religious to whip her children on Sun-
days. “If you did anything wrong on Sundays . . . she wouldn’t whip
you on Sunday”; however, the Sabbath did not bring absolute reprieve because “she’d whip you early Monday morning.”83

Mrs. Poinsette’s stringent perspective expressed in disciplining her
children pervaded much of her moral practice and belief. She was
active in her church, Old Bethel Methodist, and demonstrated her
strict perspective regarding religious practice, among other ways,
through her loyalty to that church. “The money she got from her
washing and ironing she used to keep up her church dues,” Clark
recalled. “She wasn’t going to let the church go lacking. If she needed
a piece of ice . . . and she had money for insurance or money for
church, she would rather drink the water hot. That’s going to be for
the church, that for the insurance. She kept it just like that.”84

In social life, as was true of many nineteenth- and early twentieth-
century religious women, Mrs. Poinsette related her religious per-
spective to morality and her sense of self-worth and dignity. This
view influenced Mrs. Poinsette’s behavior in regard to the practice of
Black female concubinage and surrogacy left over from the ante-
bellum and Reconstruction eras. “On our street,” Clark said, “were
four women with families who were mistresses of white men.” Mrs.
Poinsette warned her daughters against “sinful relationships” and
disallowed their earning money by nursing white children because
“she felt that in a white home a situation might develop in which
there would be temptation with the man of the house or delivery
boys or even men on the street.” Mr. Poinsette agreed with his wife’s
assessment of the need to guard their children, especially the daugh-
ters. Her father, Clark said, “would never allow me, for instance, to
work in a hotel or in domestic service; he feared the temptations and
possible dangers sometimes associated with that sort of work.”85

Mother Poinsette also forbade playing with children born out of
wedlock. Living across the street from the Poinsettes were a man and
woman with a family of eight. “But still we didn’t play with them
because the mother and father weren’t married. ‘Being a kept
woman,’ that is the way my mother used to say it. We went all the
way uptown and played with our cousins instead of playing with the children on that street.” In addition, Clark and her siblings were prohibited from talking to unmarried adults who cohabited. She said, “my mother used to always say: ‘You can’t go to the Kallenbecks’. Because the mother was not a married woman, the black people felt that you couldn’t talk with them.”

Despite her severity, however, Mrs. Poinsette was not entirely insensitive to her neighbors. When Ms. Kallenbeck became very ill while Septima was still in grade school, Mrs. Poinsette responded to Ms. Kallenbeck’s request for companionship. “She wanted me to come and read the Bible to her, and my mother did let me go to do that.” Mrs. Poinsette admonished Septima to give assistance where she could. “If people sent you to the store or to get water, she didn’t want you to take money for it. She always said you must learn to share your service.”

Septima Clark’s own religious self-understanding, sense of dignity, and sense of duty to help others derived from her parents’ morality and beliefs. In an autobiography, written near the end of her work for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Clark wrote: “Many a day I have thanked a kind Providence for my parents, for the fact that they were persons of strong character, of great personal integrity, for the pride they had in their family and themselves. What they have bequeathed to me of those qualities has stood me in good stead in all the struggles that have marked so many of my years.”

While she grew and developed her own sense of self, Clark was deeply influenced by her parents, beginning with a lifelong understanding of herself as a church person. In spite of opposing and later differing with her mother, Clark says her religious perspectives originated in her mother’s teaching and in her mother’s church. “I was christened in my mother’s church,” she says, and even though during revival at another congregation she “felt a difference” when she “was thirteen years of age, and so . . . became born again,” Septima went “for several months [to] be trained up into the workings of my church. After that I was confirmed on an Easter Sunday in my church [Old Bethel Methodist].”

She grew into an active membership in this congregation. “In the Sunday School when I got big enough I became chairman of the youth group,” Clark recalled. “A little bit later on our church bought an organ. The lady who was chairman took sick, and raising money for that organ fell on me. I went from house to house raising over $4000. That was when I was eighteen years of age.” By then a young adult with a teaching certificate, but uncertain about how to move forward in the profession, Septima experienced in this congregation what she called “a real pastor” who helped determine her life’s possibilities. “Fortunately for me,” she said, “we had as pastor of the Methodist church of which we were members a man who was a real pastor warmly concerned with the welfare of each member of his flock. His name was Burroughs, the Reverend E. B. Burroughs . . . Mr. Burroughs, it happened, knew some of the trustees of the schools on nearby Johns Island. He communicated with one of those men and interceded for me. Then he asked me to write this trustee and apply for a job, which I did. I got the job.”

Three years later, in 1919, Septima had what may have been her first date at Old Bethel when she invited the young man who would later become her husband to go to church with her there.

In addition to passing on the religious perspective and orientation to help others, Mr. and Mrs. Poinsette motivated Septima to strive to become educated, as well as her decision to become a teacher. This influence on Septima’s educational achievements reflected the Poinsettes’ participation in the practices of racial uplift that emphasized education. Clark said both her parents insisted that their children do well in school. Although Mr. Poinsette usually deferred to his wife in matters of discipline in the home, when it came to the children getting an education, he was equally fervent. “One thing he wanted was for us to have an education.” Clark said. “This was the only thing that I know he would whip you for, if you didn’t want to go to school.” Like her husband, Mrs. Poinsette was resolute about their children’s schooling. Although Septima was qualified with a teaching certificate after finishing seventh grade, she said her “mother positively refused to allow me to end my schooling in order to seek a teaching position. ‘You must get some more education,’ she declared. ‘You’ll go to Avery next year.’ . . . Mother didn’t know just how she was going to contrive to send me, because it was going to mean some money, but nevertheless she said I was going. ‘And you start getting ready,’ she instructed.” As things worked out, Septima’s aptitude at Avery came from her first job working for a Black couple who moved into the neighborhood. The husband traveled frequently as a railway clerk, and his wife, who was afraid to stay alone, asked Septima “to stay with her and help her as house maid.”
While the Poinsettes insisted that their children be educated, realities of the family’s financial condition also motivated Septima’s striving for education and her decision to become a teacher. In her autobiography, Clark wrote: “My father made very little money and it was always difficult for him to earn enough to keep his wife and four daughters and four sons going. But with Mother’s help he not only fed and clothed us and kept that roof on Henrietta Street over our heads, but also sent us all to school. And it was in those early years of my schooling that I determined I would be a teacher. So I feel that it was my parents’ interest in our getting the best education we could obtain that steered me into my life work.”

Aware of her parents’ financial difficulty, she felt becoming educated and becoming a teacher would help:

My mother was renting all the time. My parents didn’t own their home… [The owner] lived right in back of us on another street, and he’d come through an alley way and knock on our door to collect his rent. It was $5 a week that she had to pay for that house. One day she didn’t have the money to pay him, and boy, he serenaded her. I heard him, and I felt, ‘If I could be a teacher, I could have this money, and my mother wouldn’t have this kind of humiliation.’ Right from that time I wanted to be a teacher, and I must have been either nine or ten years old then.

When Septima started school in 1904, free public education for Black children in Charleston was limited and poor. Her parents sent her “to a private school from first to third grade, then to public school from fourth to sixth, then to Avery Normal School, a private school for educating black teachers operated by the American Missionary Association.” The extent to which the Poinsettes sacrificed to provide their children opportunities they thought education would bring reflects the value of education to them and coincides with the perspective of many other African Americans of the period. Her parents’ role in instilling education as valuable for improving life was evident throughout Clark’s life. Their understanding of education as racial uplift deeply influenced Clark’s own practices of racial uplift and social responsibility.

At Avery, Septima became engrossed with the regular curriculum and library, and, because the school was a program of the American Missionary Association, Avery both complemented and expanded the religious instruction she received at home and at church. “To me Avery was a paradise. We studied astronomy, and my child’s mind began to expand and question and consider as with mounting astonishment and awe I learned a little of the illimitable stretch and embrace of God’s creation.” Not only did she relate the study of astronomy to her own religious development, she also thought the astronomy course “fit well with the emphasis Avery put on religion. Each morning we had worship service, and twice a year the school had what they called a religious emphasis week,” she said. “During these periods meetings were held by men who came down from the national office to conduct them. And in the ninth grade we had a regular course in the study of the Bible.”

Upon completing Avery, Poinsette wanted to attend college at Fisk University, but her family could not afford it. Even though teachers encouraged her, Clark said, “I knew what a struggle we were having to get along even at that time and how hard it was to get the $1.50 a month for the Avery tuition, and I couldn’t see how my parents could possibly send me to Fisk.”

Since she could not attend Fisk, Septima completed her third teaching certificate and at age eighteen began looking for her first job, which she found on Johns Island, just off the coast of Charleston, with help from her pastor at Old Bethel Methodist Church. Poinsette recalled that both she and her parents were “happy that I had got the teaching job. Teaching was an honorable work that ranked well above most other work available to Negro girls. And it would be a life of service; I think this appealed particularly to my father, who as I have said, had an almost passionate love of people.” In addition to appeal of the job as honorable work and providing service, it also brought financial support for the Poinsette family. Septima made thirty dollars per month as a teaching principal. While it was fifty-five dollars less than white teachers holding comparable certificates, she was able to pay for her room and board and send home twenty dollars; she “allowed” herself two dollars for spending, most of which she used to send food home to her family.

Clark’s Early Practice of Community Work as a Moral Value

Although a young teacher at age eighteen, Septima knew the value of being known and accepted in the community. Furthermore, not only
did she consider it her responsibility to provide "service" through teaching; she also assisted the community in other ways. On Johns Island she joined in community life by attending church, the main non-work activity on the island. "They'd have church this Sunday at a church here, then you'd go to another church; sometime you'll row across the creek to another church. That's the way I did. I went all around when I was over there. So all the people knew me." When Poinsette arrived on Johns Island, it had "dismal economic, social and health conditions." She "lived in an attic room with no inside toilet. Workers signed contracts and were employed in tasks on large plantations. Women carried their children to the fields and placed them in boxes at the end of the row where they were working. A 'sugar tit'—lard and sugar—was placed in the babies' mouths to squelch crying. A health problem began as a result of the flies and mosquitoes that bit the babies, often causing malaria." Almost immediately Poinsette began seeking improvements. Because so many babies died before age two, she assisted in "bringing health reforms to the Sea Islands," which included conducting workshops on health issues.

In addition, she spent extra time after school tutoring adults when some began to ask for her assistance.

There were very few people over there who could read. They wanted to speak in church or at a large meeting, and they did not know how to read at all. So for my own pleasure at nights I would teach the adults how to read and to write. It was really a kind of recreation for me to work with them at nights after they got out of the field.

In addition to wanting to speak in church, other Johns Islanders began to develop concern about civic activities. Soon after Poinsette went down to Johns Island, I discovered that some of the men were beginning to get interested in a movement that was to mean much for the island folk. . . . The Odd Fellows was a big thing. . . . The men had to know the rituals, had to make speeches to their fellow members, even had to keep books. And to do these things it was almost necessary to be able to read and write. . . . Some of the men began coming to the other Negro teacher and me for help.

Poinsette taught adults to read by the same methods she used with children during the day. There was no blackboard and very little chalk or other school supplies. She and her colleague used dry cleaner's bags to write things for students to copy. "When I taught reading," she said,

I put down "de" for "the," because that's the way they said "the." Then I told them, "Now when you look in a book, you're going to see 'the.' You say 'de,' but in the book it's printed 'the.'"

Anyway, to teach reading I wrote their stories on the dry cleaner's bags, stories of their country right around them, where they walked to come to school, the things that grew around them, what they could see in the skies. They told them to me, and I wrote them on dry cleaner's bags and tacked them on the wall. From the fourth grade through the sixth grade they all did that same reading. But they needed that because it wasn't any use to do graded reading when they had not had any basic words at all.

Although she had not had formal training in curriculum development, Septima Poinsette designed a method of relating the world of her students to the words they learned. In doing so she both taught them to read and affirmed the life with which they were familiar. The development of the citizenship schools for which she became so well known during the Civil Rights Era began with the necessity of creating tools for and making sense of her work as a teacher in this first job on Johns Island.

After two years at Johns Island, Poinsette took a one-year appointment at her alma mater, Avery Normal School, in 1918. Although the salary was the same as on Johns Island, thirty dollars per month, it was advantageous because she saved on board by staying at home and had better living conditions. She said later that Avery was a turning point in her life and that she "was providentially sent to Avery that year." It was at Avery during the 1918–19 school year that Poinsette first became actively involved with the NAACP. Poinsette joined the NAACP's drive to collect ten thousand signatures to present to the South Carolina legislature, demonstrating a desire of Black Charlestonians to have Black teachers in Charleston's public schools.

In the city of Charleston, African Americans could only teach in private schools. Clark described her concern:

White teachers taught both black and white students, but they taught them in separate buildings. . . . We had white teachers...
who... didn’t like for black children to speak to them in the streets; I guess they didn’t want other people to know they were teaching blacks. They were embarrassed to be teaching black children and they would have you whipped. That was one of the things we had to work against. When I finished high school and had a teaching certificate and went to teach, the first thing I worked on was getting black teachers in public schools in Charleston, because I felt that it was such a disgrace to have children whipped just because they said, “How do you do, Miss Gibbs?” or whoever the teacher was.105

Thomas E. Miller, a Black leader and former Reconstruction Congressman, led efforts of the NAACP to have Black women teach in Charleston public schools. During that school year, Miller requested that Principal Cox at Avery ask his teachers to canvas door-to-door obtaining signatures for the petition. Septima Poinsette was among those who volunteered, and taking some of her students with her, in no small measure she helped fill the “tow sack” presented to the legislature with more than the ten thousand required signatures.106 The law was changed the next year so that African Americans began teaching in Charleston’s public schools in 1920.

During that school year, another of Poinsette’s volunteer activities brought a dramatic change in her life. As a port city, Charleston was one of the places from which servicemen departed or to which they returned during World War I. Civic groups in Charleston asked teachers to serve on social committees to entertain returning servicemen. Poinsette worked with the Black USO group, and in January 1919 met Nerie David Clark, a sailor from the USS Umpqua, whom she invited to attend church with her family at Old Bethel Methodist.107 Although her mother objected to Clark’s being “somebody she didn’t know” and being “of a darker-brown complexion than were members of [her] family,” Septima Poinsette married Nerie Clark in 1920.

The couple had two children, a daughter who lived only twenty-three days and a son.108 After the death of her daughter, Septima Clark said she had “a real hard time,” because she thought that God might be punishing her for disobeying her parents and marrying a man of whom she knew little. “I really had that feeling,” she said. “I thought it was against the will of God, according to the religious laws that I learned of it, and I felt very strongly about that. . . . Night after night, I had to pray about it.”109 Her husband was still serving as a sailor, and Septima was “too proud” to go to her parents, so she went to live near her in-laws in Hendersonville, North Carolina, and eventually went to live with them in Hickory, North Carolina.110 When her husband left the Navy, Clark moved with him to Dayton, Ohio, where he returned to work as a country club waiter. Shortly after their move to Dayton, however, Nerie Clark became ill with a kidney disorder. He died in December 1925. Clark never remarried.111

Although she experienced difficulty moving away from Charleston, Clark also began to have an enlarged view of religiosity as a result. For her in-laws, being Christian did not mean “there were so many different rules you adhered to” as in Charleston. “My in-laws were all members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. And I felt that I’d better join, too, and be with them or else I would not be considered too high with them.”

This proved to be a very fortunate move for me. I found them to be good people, with a healthy attitude toward life and people about them, white and Negro. They had what I felt was a more advanced idea of what being a Christian really means than the more strict code under which I had been reared had taught me to believe it was.112

In addition to living and worshiping with her in-laws, Clark continued her education, taking courses at North Carolina A&T College in 1922. That fall she took a teaching job in the North Carolina hills.113 Along with the time she spent with her husband’s family, Clark grew from other travel and encounters.

As I started getting experiences in various places, my religious ideas changed. When I went to Dayton, Ohio, common-law living is great up there. . . . And there was a woman across the street who became very friendly with me and helped me with my baby, because . . . I had a fever, and couldn’t nurse this boy. And she would come over and get the clothes and things and do them. And she was living in a common-law life. . . . And just experiences of people like that . . . I started looking for the differences. I never wanted to do those things myself, though . . . And all of those things made me feel, you know, there isn’t any one [way].114
Clark returned to Charleston in 1926, taking a job teaching at her former school on Johns Island. On Johns Island, Clark also returned to the work of adult literacy with which she had been involved previously. After one year, she sent her son to live with her in-laws because life on Johns Island was so difficult. In 1929, she took a teaching job in South Carolina's capital city, Columbia, where she lived until her mother became ill in 1946.115

In Columbia, Poinsette's perspectives and experiences became even more broad. Like Baker, she took advantage of being exposed to new ideas and opportunities. She continued her education as she had done throughout her life. During the summer of 1930 Clark studied curriculum development at Columbia University in New York. In 1937 she took a course with W. E. B. Du Bois at Atlanta University. Clark persisted in her study, finally receiving a bachelor's degree from Benedict College of Columbia in 1942, and continuing with summer study until she completed a master's degree from Hampton Institute.116 She participated in teacher-training programs through her school district, engaged in an array of civic activities, and took advantage of invitations teachers received to hear "well-known speakers" at local colleges, often white institutions, for lectures or other programs. While living in Columbia, Clark joined a local chapter of the Federated Women's Club of South Carolina, which sponsored various projects to relieve poverty. She also participated in the Black Columbia Young Women's Christian Association, the state teachers' association, and the Columbia chapter of the NAACP. For much of her time in the evenings Clark worked with Wil Lou Gray in the state's Board of Education program teaching adults to read and write. She also joined J. Andrew Simmons, her principal at Booker T. Washington School, in acquiring affidavits to support the NAACP's court case seeking to equalize Black and white teachers' salaries. Clark called this her "first 'radical' job" since it was her "first effort in a social action challenging the status quo, the first time [working] against people directing a system for which I was working." Clark valued opportunities to provide service to others, and again said her time in Columbia "was providentially sent," since it was so important to preparing her for later work with the citizenship schools. "My participation in the programs of the various civic groups not only strengthened my determination to make my own life count for some-

thing in the fight to aid the underprivileged toward the enjoyment of fuller lives, but also gave me excellent training in procedures that could be used effectively in that struggle."117

In Columbia, her son, Nerie Jr., lived with her again, but when she had difficulty providing for him, she sent him back to his grandparents in North Carolina, where he stayed until he reached adulthood.

In 1947 Clark took a job teaching seventh grade with the Charleston County Schools, returning in order to care for her ailing mother. Back in Charleston Clark continued activism and expanded her work to promote community advancement. Her Charleston civic work included supporting efforts of the Tuberculosis Association; the Young Women's Christian Association, where she chaired the administrative board; the Community Chest; the Charleston Federation of Women's Clubs; the Metropolitan Council of Negro Women; and the NAACP. She also served as president of her sorority's local chapter, Alpha Kappa Alpha's Gamma Xi Omega chapter, initiating what became a broad children's health program.118

Clark's work with the YWCA soon led to her notoriety. As chair of the Black YWCA Administration Committee, she coordinated preparations for the group's annual meeting. Clark suggested inviting as a guest speaker Mrs. J. Waites Waring, wife of former U.S. District Court Judge J. Waites Waring, a native Charleston aristocrat who opposed segregation and whose 1947 ruling struck down the state's all-white primary. Many white Charlestonians disliked Mrs. Waring, apparently because she was the judge's second wife and a Northerner and because she agreed with Judge Waring on race issues. Leaders at the Charleston Central YWCA resisted Mrs. Waring's appearance at the Black YWCA celebration. Clark said:

when the women in the central YWCA learned what we had done—we had a dual system with white and Negro groups separate—they were greatly perturbed, and they called a special meeting... to find out just how the invitation might be quietly recalled... I still remember how strange I thought that meeting was. The woman who had conducted the devotional program had talked about walking in the light and walking with faith and walking with courage. And then after listening to her pleading for courageous walking, they had professed their desperate fear of having a woman speak to them... I said to them, I personally
knew nothing of the things they had been telling me and certainly I would not be willing to sign a letter to her asking not to speak to us. . . . But they weren't willing to let me alone. The executive director of the YWCA asked me to come into her office. I went in and found that she had a statement prepared which she wished me to sign; it was a statement to the newspapers saying in effect that we did not intend for Mrs. Waring to speak. I declined to sign that, too. I told them that I was sorry but that just couldn't stand up on that sort of platform.\textsuperscript{119}

As Clark persevered in refusing to recall the invitation to Mrs. Waring, "newspapers carried stories, the telephones buzzed, the gossipers had a field day."\textsuperscript{120} Preparing for the meeting, Clark and others took precautions to avoid troublemakers causing problems. When the hour arrived, the meeting overflowed because of the publicity. Mrs. Waring, perhaps responding to assaults upon her and Judge Waring, "laid the whip to the backs of the people of Charleston and the South" for their treatment of African Americans. Clark continued to receive calls from as far away as New York, and local papers printed the speech extensively, resulting in a deluge of letters to the editors. One result was that Clark's friendship with the Warnings grew.

As controversy over the Warings continued, both whites and Blacks began to oppose Clark's affiliation with them. In one instance, Clark's principal emphasized to her "his feeling that 'the time just isn't right' for [her] doing what [she] was."\textsuperscript{121} Soon all Clark's civic activism was challenged as she was accused of subversive affiliations. Her relationships with the United Council of Church Women, which ran an interracial center at Monteagle, Tennessee, came under question. "I know they felt that I was really a Communist then. I was too much of a head woman, a controversial leader," Clark said.\textsuperscript{122} In 1954, Clark attended a summer workshop at the Hortons' Highlander Folk School, founded as an interracial laboratory for teaching local people, especially the poor, how to cooperate and attend to social and political problems confronting them.

Highlander sought to help persons in local communities combat issues affecting them. This work excited Clark:

Persons who came to Highlander to participate were concerned with specific problems. . . . They came up to the mountains to discover and consider ways of attacking these problems in their own communities. . . . Highlander workshops weren't set up merely to theorize and ponder problems; they expected and demanded that theory and discussion and decision be galvanized into action and achievement.\textsuperscript{123}

Impressed with Highlander's work, Clark took a group of others from Charleston to a workshop later the same year. She invited the Hortons to lead workshops she developed for parent-teacher groups in Charleston and on Johns Island. Clark also invited Myles and Zilphia Horton to help organize a teachers' credit union. According to Clark, banks feared implications of the\textit{Brown} decision, and "teachers who had done three or four years on a master's degree would have to start all over if they didn't get money to go that summer." The credit union helped finance their continuing education.\textsuperscript{124} By the summer of 1955 Clark both attended and directed workshops at Highlander and continued leading groups from Charleston and Johns Island to experience the Highlander program.\textsuperscript{125}

\textbf{Clark's Civil Rights Participation as Living Out Religious Belief}

In 1954 the NAACP won its protracted battle to desegregate the country's schools. In\textit{Brown v. Board of Education} the Supreme Court struck down as unconstitutional a former Court's ruling that legalized separate schools for Black and white students. Around the country and particularly in the South, state and local legislatures acted quickly and vehemently to circumvent the ruling. In South Carolina this included developing a state committee on segregation and a 1936 statute that made "unlawful the employment by the state, school district or any county or municipality . . . of any member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and to provide penalties for violations."\textsuperscript{126} In time the Waring controversy subsided but was not forgotten, as Clark continued civic activism and especially as she continued work with the NAACP. "I knew from the conversations going around that I was being discussed freely, and . . . I was expecting at any moment to be dismissed as a teacher." In spite of this expectation, Clark remained composed, asserting that "trying to do what I think is right" bolstered her. "I was trying to do what I felt was my duty. I was trying then as I had tried through the years
before and have been trying in the years since to contribute something to the advancement of our southern community by helping elevate the lives of a large segment of it."

Pursuant to the Brown decision, like many other teachers across the state and the South, Clark completed a questionnaire that required listing organizational affiliations. Clark said, "I refused to overlook my membership in the NAACP, as some of the teachers had done, and listed it." That spring Clark was dismissed quietly, and her pension was lost when, after more than thirty years of employment with the state's public schools, she received no contract for the fall term.

"Before the June 3 deadline in 1956 I received the letter announcing that I was not being considered for the term beginning that fall. No reason was given for my dismissal. It was simply a curt announcement that I was through." Clark said she sent "a registered return letter to ask them why. And the only thing they said to me was...no principal, no superintendent, no president of a college had to tell you why; your services are just not needed. That's what they said."

Shortly after her termination, Myles Horton invited Clark to direct workshops at Highlander, continuing work she had done during two previous summers at the center. Clark again said she believed " Providential direction" intervened in carrying her to work at Highlander. For the next five years, Clark moved about the South, as Ella Baker had done in the 1940s, initiating what became the civil rights Citizenship Education Program. Again, like Baker, she emphasized empowering local people and taught local leaders to teach their relatives, friends, and neighbors "to write their names, balance check books, vote in elections, and write letters." Through this work Clark served as a catalyst for transforming Southern political life. In her emphasis on basic reading and writing as preparation for citizenship, Clark contrasted herself with Baker, saying her (Clark's) focus "had to do with teaching people to read and write first. And I think she [Baker] was trying to get over to them to become first-class citizens without reading and writing. . . . Because she was concerned about not being recognized." Clark realized the need to help African Americans overcome the literacy requirements used throughout the South as barriers to Black enfranchisement. The purpose of adult literacy, Clark said, was to teach "them to read and write so they could register and vote."

All of these states had these stringent registration laws. They had to write their names in cursive writing here in Charleston and read a section of the election laws. In Georgia they had thirty questions they had to read and give answers to. In Alabama they had twenty-four questions they had to read and give answers to. In Mississippi they had twenty-four questions. And in Louisiana there were thirty questions that they had to read and answer. Now eastern Texas did not have that; in eastern Texas they had to pay a poll tax, and we had to work with them to get them not to pay the poll tax. And they had to do that each year. So we had these differences all around. And in each state we had to do different things.\(^{130}\)

The "citizenship schools" began on Johns Island, growing out of Clark's community work there. While driving a bus between Johns Island and Charleston, Esau Jenkins, one of the adults with whom Clark had worked and whom Clark had taken to a Highlander workshop in 1954, successfully helped one of his passengers become qualified to vote. After this success others approached Jenkins for assistance. As a result Jenkins sought to develop a school "to interest the islanders in equipping themselves for citizenship, and . . . to combat adult illiteracy." He discussed the idea with Clark, who, as director of workshops at Highlander, assisted him in purchasing a building. After the building was secured, Clark sought a teacher.

I was directing the work at Highlander, and that work took me into so many different places that I would not have the time to do the day-by-day teaching. Besides going into the deep south states, holding meetings, getting people to realize that we should have Citizenship Schools, I was also going to the north, the midwest, and the west fund-raising for the Highlander Folk School.\(^{31}\)

A local beautician and dressmaker, Bernice Robinson, took the job as teacher, and the school opened on January 7, 1957. In a 1980 article reflecting on the work of the citizenship schools, Clark described the criteria for teachers:

Our major requirements are that the persons be able to read well aloud, and that they write legibly on a blackboard. It has been our experience that these persons, without a great deal of formal training, can be taught to teach a few basic things, and that often they make better teachers than persons with a great deal of aca-
demic background. Their approach is a "folk" approach to learning rather than a classical one. Their vocabularies are similar, and there is usually an existing relationship upon which we build.\textsuperscript{132}

Success of the first school was immediate: "every single one of our pupils who had attended school those five months was able to get his registration certificate!" Clark recalled. Soon, Black residents of other coastal Charleston islands followed Johns Island's model. In the summer of 1958, after hearing of Johns Island's success, Wadmalaw Islanders also requested assistance. In October, Edisto Island asked to start a citizenship school, and eventually, a program opened on Daufuskie Island as well.\textsuperscript{133}

To develop curriculum for citizenship schools, Clark used methods she learned from experience while teaching at Johns Island and from work with Wil Lou Gray in Columbia, combatting adult illiteracy for the state's Board of Education. "We were teaching words," Clark said, "but the words were words of an adult world and they were words an informed citizen, a participating citizen, would often be using."\textsuperscript{134} Moreover, because the barriers to enfranchisement varied widely from state to state, curriculum content was tailored to needs in each state. "We used the election laws of that particular state to teach reading. We used the amount of fertilizer and the amount of seeds to teach the arithmetic, how much they would pay for it and the like," Clark said. "We did some political work by having them to find out about the kind of government that they had in their particular community. . . . Each state had to have its own particular reading, because each state had different requirements for the election laws." Clark also developed a general workbook discussing election, registration, and voting laws, social security laws, tax laws, and other important topics.\textsuperscript{135}

As Highlander continued interracial meetings, and Clark continued directing Highlander's workshops, Tennessee authorities sought to interrupt the school's operation. In July 1959, while Horton was away teaching in Europe, Tennessee State Police raidied Highlander and charged Clark with possession of whiskey. The charge was a ruse, since "most of the people I worked with knew that I was a teetotaler."

When I was director of the educational program at Highlander, they didn't have any beer. That's one thing I spoke about with Myles. The men did like to drink beer, but I felt as if we didn't need to have the beer, because I saw quite a few of the union men that the beer made almost crazy. They didn't act like themselves. Some of them couldn't get out of bed to come to the workshop the next day, and I didn't want to be wrestling with people with beer. When Myles had to go to Europe on a trip, I certainly put my foot down that I was not going to have any beer-selling.

Nevertheless, after the arrest, Clark was convicted. In spite of the raid, training at Highlander continued. By 1961 "eighty-two teachers who had received training at Highlander were holding classes in Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee."

Assaults on the Highlander Folk School continued, however, and by December 1961, Tennessee revoked the school's charter and auctioned its property.\textsuperscript{136} Anticipating the shutdown, Horton had conversations with Martin Luther King Jr. about transferring the Citizenship Program to the SCLC, an idea Ella Baker initiated that came to fruition during the summer of 1961. As Clark explained,

After the raid on Highlander in July of 1959, Dr. King and Myles Horton got together to see if they could use the program that we had already planned, and they decided they could. Andy Young came to the SCLC at that time, sent by the United Church of Christ in New York. . . . So I went to Atlanta. I stayed in Atlanta on weekends; on Monday morning I would get into a car and be driven somewhere in the South. I would stay for a week or two.

Funds the Marshall Field Foundation granted Highlander for citizenship schools transferred to the SCLC along with Clark as director.\textsuperscript{137} At the SCLC Clark continued developing the citizenship school movement. Andrew Young secured housing for the program in a United Church of Christ facility, the Dorchester Cooperative Community Center in Liberty County, Georgia, about 293 miles south of Atlanta. Young and Dorothy Cotton worked with Clark as citizenship program staff. "Three of us . . . drove all over the South recruiting people to go to the Dorchester Center," Clark recalled. "Andy Young was the administrator; Dorothy Cotton was the director or the educational consultant, and I was the supervisor of teacher training. The three of us worked together as a team, and we drove all over the South bringing busloads of folk—sometimes seventy people—who would live together for five days at the Dorchester Center."
Although most persons participating in training to lead citizenship classes came to Highlander School or the Dorchester Center, on occasion it was necessary to take the program into Southern communities where people lived. Sometimes before a workshop could be held, Clark spent weeks “just talking and talking to people.” In most cases, she eventually set up schools using local people as leaders. Teachers received a modest wage to attend training sessions and a monthly stipend to lead classes. Ever mindful of the desperate circumstances of Black people during that time, Clark said, “They were always in debt. We felt that if they didn’t make anything on the farm, we had to pay them.” They used funds from the Field Foundation to encourage attendance and to help alleviate distresses of their poverty.

By 1961 work preparing African Americans to vote increased exponentially as the Kennedy Administration sought to diffuse violent retaliation and tension against direct action campaigns like the sit-ins and Freedom Rides. Engineeried by U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy to direct civil rights energy away from direct action projects, the Administration perceived as confrontational, the Voter Education Project focused on Clark’s citizenship program as a means of vastly increasing Black voter registration. Funded by the Taconic, Field, and Stern Foundations and administered through the Southern Regional Council, the Voter Education Project officially began in 1962 with separate programs of the SCLC, SNCC, CORE, and the Urban League to prepare and register Black voters. Over the next four years the programs trained about ten thousand teachers for the citizenship schools. During this period almost seven hundred thousand new Black voters registered across the South. Moreover, after the 1965 passage of the Voting Rights Act, Black voter registration increased very rapidly. At least a million more Black people registered by 1970, the year Clark retired from her work with the SCLC.

Clark’s Religious and Moral Perspectives
Throughout her life, Septima Poinsette Clark held quite traditional evangelical Christian perspectives deeply connected to her self-understanding as a church woman. Clark took very seriously her identity as a church person and what she perhaps understood as a responsibility to have a relationship with congregations wherever she lived. It is likely that this reflected both her identity as a church woman and her concern that others perceive her as such.

After Septima married and moved from Charleston to Hickory, North Carolina, she joined her in-laws’ congregation. Yet she held continuity of her church membership as important. When she joined the Clarks’ congregation, she took the formal step of having the two churches correspond with each other. “Well, I had a letter to go to the African Methodist when I was up there living with them, and then when I came back I had another letter to come back here, is what I did.” In Monticello, Tennessee, where she established the work in citizenship education at the Highlander Folk School, Clark was a regular congregant at the “only place I could go to church... up at a town called Sewanee. Up there I went to the church they had designed for seminarians to preach to the Black people who worked on the grounds. The other churches in the town of Monticello I could never go to. I simply couldn’t go.” After she retired from Highlander and moved back to Charleston, Clark became fully active again in Old Bethel Methodist Church, where she served on several local church boards and did not hesitate to speak her views on church matters. In going back to Old Bethel, Clark returned to the place where beliefs that undergirded her activism originated in the ritual of regular church participation and instruction of her parents.

As a participant in Black religious communities throughout her life, Clark expressed perspectives coincident with Black religious traditions. In keeping with beliefs Delores Williams identifies among Black women, Clark held that God “makes a way for life and flourishing.” This is reflected in her frequent references to “providence” as providing opportunities, direction, and care throughout her life. She wrote in her autobiography that, after losing both teaching job and pension, “I was not nervous and not afraid. I was somewhat surprised, of course, and considerably hurt. But I was not frightened. I felt then—and I feel now—that a kind Providence directs us when we strive to do what we think is right, and I have sought all the years since as an eighteen-year-old girl I went over to Johns Island, to do what is right, not only for my own people but for all people.” Clark described providential participation in her appointment to teach at Avery and in her teaching career in Columbia. Likewise, she identified providential direction in her work at Highlander, even though the invitation came from the school’s director and evolved as a natural next step in her activism. “I was out of a job,” Clark said later; however, “this I do believe—Providence directed me.” Clark held
that God wills human observation of divine intention, "destining" persons to cooperation and community, but humans succumb to powerful systems that subvert this intention. 144

In a speech delivered after her retirement from the SCLC, titled "Why I Believe There Is a God," she said, "I was sure that the seed for my belief in God's existence had actually been sown in my childhood by Christian parents who told me about God and made me know that He was a living reality for them." 145 As she grew older, as conditions changed, and as she experienced life beyond the world of her parents, her perspectives about the nature of God and about God's expectations evolved and became less severe. As a young person, Clark feared God's punishment of disobedience. 146 In contrast to the focus on personal morality as the demand of Christianity that her parents passed on to her, as an adult Clark reinterpreted the meaning of religious duty as having quite explicit implications for participation in social and political life. She cites both living with her in-laws, who were less strict about the meaning of practicing Christianity, and exposure to other persons and perspectives as contributing to the broadening of her own views. Unlike Ella Baker, who fashioned beliefs that fit more fully with her growth through exposure to new ideas and experiences, Clark maintained a fairly close adherence to traditional Christian doctrine throughout her life. Baker developed a reasoned, strongly pragmatic, deeply political understanding of the nature and meaning of religion and civil rights practices; in some sense, Septima Clark maintained a precritical perspective about faith and connected her practice directly to the example and teaching of Jesus.

Still, for Clark, who regularly observed rituals like worship attendance, prayer, and scripture reading, living her belief meant observing daily practices in keeping with what she understood as religious duty, expressing Christian principles in an interracial context. She felt her behavior as a Christian should reflect the life of Jesus. This is particularly how she characterized her work at Highlander and with the Citizenship Education Program.

I do not like to be described as a Negro leader fighting for the integration of the schools, the churches, the transportation facilities, the political parties, or whatnot. I don't consider myself a fighter. I'd prefer to be looked on as a worker, a woman who

loves her fellow man, white and Negro alike, and yellow, red, and brown, and is striving with every energy, working—not fighting—in the true spirit of fellowship to lift him to a higher level of attainment and appreciation and enjoyment of life. I hope that I have—surely I wish to possess and I do strive to attain—something of the spirit of the lowly and glorious young Man of Galilee, who, as I read him and understand him and worship him, saw no color or racial lines but loved with a consuming devotion all of the children of God and knew them all as his brothers.

I like to think of Highlander as a place where the simple but profound ideals of Christianity were not only preached but practiced. 147

While Baker seems to have examined, interrogated, and reinterpreted the faith of her family and community, Clark remained close to the faith of her mother and father, although she did reinterpret the meaning of living that faith. Describing her own religious feeling, Clark said her faith and activism represented the flowering of what was planted in her by her parents and community and also by God. "This feeling that God exists is a feeling that I share with all mankind," she wrote. "Nothing seems more universally woven into the consciousness of all men in every age than an apparent compulsion to acknowledge divinity. It was this disposition, this incurable religious feeling in me that caused the seed of belief sown by my parents and society to flourish." 148 The extent to which Clark maintained a traditional interpretation of Christian faith, in contrast with Baker, is also seen in her language and descriptions of experiencing God. Clark described the survival and recovery of an aunt struck by a car as a miracle from God and a contribution to the flowering of her faith.

My own religious experiences have given me insights into the reality of God that would have been unattainable otherwise. On a rainy soaked street I saw my mother's sister knocked down by a speeding automobile and her great-grandchild who was holding her hand just escaped going into the tidal drain. We were all leaving church getting into our cars[,] and[,] I asked God to send her back to her children and although she was in her late seventies with a broken hip, a concussion of the head, and a broken collar bone[,] after many months in the hospital and at home she
came back safe and sound... My belief in the power of God was greatly strengthened whenever I visited her and thought of the miracle God had wrought.\textsuperscript{149}

While not fundamentalist in her perspectives about Christian scripture, Clark's approach to Scripture often was a kind of literal translation of ideas and even words from Scripture for use coincident with ideas and circumstances of her work. In this regard, Clark's interpretation of Scripture coincides with the legacy in Black Christian traditions to evaluate the Bible based on its relevance for daily life.\textsuperscript{130} When assessing the relevance of the relatively small number of persons who participated in citizenship workshops on Edisto Island, Clark used a verse from 1 Corinthians to identify the anticipated impact of the small group's work on the whole community. A "total of thirty-eight men and women enrolled. That was a large group, but small in comparison with the size of the group of illiterates not interested in advancing themselves through study of the ABC's of learning. Nevertheless, as the Scriptures point out, often a small bit of yeast will be the leaven that raises the large loaf."\textsuperscript{137} She also used ideas and words of New Testament letters to describe the interracial and inter-class sense of community that developed among workshop participants at Highlander. Clark wrote that "because they are sharing ideas, they are enjoying a true unity of purpose, and I might go on to add, with the Apostle Paul, a unity of faith, hope, and love. And sometimes even there is a unity in sacrifice, too."\textsuperscript{132} Finally, Clark generalized the movement of history as in accord with pronouncements of Christian scripture, saying she was encouraged by what she saw in the correlation.

When I would be discouraged by the seeming triumph of injustice and wrong in our world or my life at any given time, the Bible and the broad sweep of history which validates what the Bible says about the nature and destiny of men and institutions not only come to my rescue but also strengthen my belief. When I survey the broad sweep of history and watch the winged flight of Christian faith from an obscure province in Asia Minor through severe persecutions at Rome to the decay of the Dark Ages, the challenge of the Enlightenment to its present sway over the life and thought of men I cannot help but believe there is a God.\textsuperscript{133}

In spite of her allegiance to traditional evangelical Christian perspectives, Clark never was limited to the viewpoint that being Christian simply meant personal piety and praying. In keeping with another emphasis of her parents, on service and religious duty, and correlating with traditions of Black religion to execute racial uplift and social change practices, Clark strove to live out in daily life what she saw as the meaning of her religious convictions. In doing so, she was propelled into public life and public activism, a realm far beyond the interpersonal and immediate local community service her parents conceived as Christian duty. For Clark, racial uplift and Christian duty included offering traditional works of charity, challenging persons to move out of oppression, and struggling against conventions and systems that oppose human dignity. Describing the civic work she did with the NAACP and other groups in Charleston, Clark expressed her concept of duty as a life calling: "I was trying to do what I felt was my duty; I was trying then as I have tried through the years before and have been trying in the years since to contribute something to the advancement of our southern community by helping elevate the lives of a large segment of it."\textsuperscript{154}

While Clark was specific in addressing her work primarily to African Americans excluded from exercise of the franchise, from full citizenship, and from full human flourishing, she conceived the work she did as universal, calling it work toward "a new and fairer day for all God's children."\textsuperscript{135} In the dedication of her autobiography, using language comparable to Baker's, Clark describes her activism as working in "the struggle for human dignity."\textsuperscript{156} This struggle for Clark meant attending first to those persons who experience least the meaning of being fully human as defined in the society of which they are a part. "The ability of the United States to cope with racial difference within her borders," Clark wrote, "is the key to her role as a leader of a world that is made up largely of colored peoples. Our day of judgement may well be decided by the way we treat the least of these, our brothers, within our midst." During the Civil Rights Era, this logically indicated attending to African Americans and segregation: "For, after making every allowance, every fair-minded and informed citizen must know that segregation is in itself evil that has done our nation—not simply the Negroes or other peoples segregated—untold harm and has held back by many years the rightful
development of the South." Clark believed that she should expect nothing less than that the socially proximate meaning of justice be available for all society's citizens.\textsuperscript{157}

Clark's Emphasis on the Least

The size of the segment of the Southern community Clark sought to elevate reflects the focus of Clark's racial uplift and social responsibility practices on the masses of persons whom she felt were most oppressed by Southern race and class conventions. In keeping with what womanist theologians Jacqueline Grant identifies as attending to the least and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes calls responding to the most oppressed and deprived, Clark felt the masses often were in no position to help themselves. They were, she wrote, "lonely and lost, those frantic to find a future endurable, those who have stood by helpless and watched loved ones being destroyed by merciless power structures and unprincipled individuals who were destined instead in the providence of God to be their brothers."\textsuperscript{158} Clark saw work of uplifting the oppressed as work that Christians ought to do in the world.

Clark equated the citizenship program with Jesus' ministry to the least. For her, it was in attending to the needs of the masses that the entire society improved.

Despite the fact that during virtually my whole adult life I have been fighting the dominant citizenship of my Low Country—though I feel that actually I am fighting for them as well as for the less privileged and the silent—I love them, all of them. I want to see their lots, as well as the lots of the less fortunate, improve steadily. And I am convinced that the advancement of our lowly ones to the opportunities of first class citizenship also will lift to a better life those who now enjoy a higher status. . . . I work among the Negro people, who, we must agree, have the fewest of the democratic freedoms and many of whom have inadequate education or none at all, who live constantly under the fear of intimidation, insult and violence, I am reminded that here is the continuing test of our democratic form of government. In the recent rise of the image of hope for the segregated black man and his deliverance from this state of pseudo-slavery I see clearly the form of challenge. If permanent social patterns are to be created that are truly democratic, I maintain, then the most lowly being must enjoy equally with every other American the fruits of democracy. Only then will the Negro, and particularly the Negro parent, see the glimmer of light ahead, only then will he see a way out of his dilemma.\textsuperscript{159}

For Clark, attending to needs of the least meant more than providing traditional gifts of charity. Like Baker, who advocated human responsibility in changing society, Clark thought attending to the least also included empowering and challenging "the least" to overcome and move beyond their present circumstances.

Christians can never be content with token progress by a fortunate few. They must continually remain sensitive to the will of God for the redemption of "the saints of rank and file," the people of the land around whom Jesus centered his earthly ministry. The Citizenship Education Program is attempting to provide an opportunity for these people to help themselves and their neighbors. By training one or two persons from each community we are able to help them to teach their neighbors about the American way of life and the way in which the ballot is used to create and continue the rule of liberty and justice for all (even dark-skinned persons in Mississippi).\textsuperscript{160}

Still, for Clark, it was not enough to prepare persons to seek the advantages of full citizenship. It was also necessary, she said, to address social structures that operated against their flourishing.

The first words of Jesus' public ministry were quoted from the prophet Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are oppressed." Throughout the New Testament, the concern for the poor and underprivileged is expressed as one of the fruits of grace. Where there is obedience to the gospel, there will be concern for the less fortunate. "The least of these my brethren are no less brothers in Christ than one's social counterparts."

Long experience in Christian missions has taught us that this love and concern for others must be made concrete. Our missionaries could not be content preaching the gospel to hungry folk. They had also to teach them new agricultural methods and help them to provide food for themselves and their families. They provide clinics and hospitals to improve the health of the people, and established schools for the education of these new converts.
Clark held that Christian ministry involved attending to things that prepare persons for self-sufficiency as well as confronting structures that cause persons to be “deprived.”

In recent years we have realized that still another step is necessary. To feed or educate or heal an individual with no thought for the type of community life, or system of government which has contributed to the deprived state of the individual, is too shortsighted indeed. If we really are to contribute to the “deliverance of the captives” it is necessary to do something to redeem the system which keeps them in captivity.161

At the same time, Clark was quite provincial in her understanding of the origin and ultimate meaning of human liberty. Whereas Baker began deeply rooted in and committed to traditional Christian missions as a remedy for social ills and transcended this perspective as she grew in experience and engaged socialist ideas, Clark was quite critical of the context and practices that caused oppression, but throughout her life she remained wedded to traditional Christian perspectives about human life and liberty and to a nationalistic understanding of Christianity. At age eighty-two she wrote:

> In every corner of the globe, there is now heard the cry for freedom. Our Christian Mission stations at home and abroad have done a great deal to plant concepts of freedom, justice, and equality in the hearts of men. Now the march is on to actualize these concepts. At times it scares us, as in the Congo where untrained masses are turned loose with little preparation for running a government, but we realized that this is a part of a dream which is both Christian and American in its inspiration—our fear should be transformed into concern.162

Clark and Black Religious Institutions

Although Clark’s racial uplift and social responsibility activism originated and developed through civic participation and employment at Highlander Folk School, a marginally para-religious institution, Clark engaged Black religious institutions directly in her civil rights organizing. She often worked through and sometimes depended on churches to house and provide other support for citizenship schools as she worked with persons who were often church members. However, the most intense period of her involvement with Black religious institutions occurred when her work moved from Highlander Folk School to the SCLC. The character of Clark’s experiences with these institutions included local support and fear of the work she did; patriarchal oppression, particularly shown through opposition to women’s leadership; and a hierarchy correlating with patriarchy that opposed or devalued local people and local leadership.

Pursuant to Clark’s earliest civic activism, she encountered fear among church members who thought she was too radical in her approaches to racial issues. When Clark was fired for her civic activism and support of Mrs. Waring, her sorority held a testimonial benefit for Clark. The sorority sisters, however, many of whom were teachers, feared taking pictures with her at the event, and members of Clark’s home church, Old Bethel Methodist, did not attend. “They were too afraid,” she said.

> When I was dismissed from school and my sorority gave that testimonial for me, all of my church women were afraid to do anything about it. And I was on their trustee board and working with the missionary group, but not one of them would come and say a word. They sent a little girl [laughter] out of the youth group, and she read a little paper and she could hardly read it.163

However, the pastor of Old Bethel Church did attend the event. As Clark set about developing citizenship programs in local communities, she often depended on churches for assistance. Many provided initial meeting places. In Huntsville, Alabama, for example, Baptist and Methodist ministers were Clark’s initial contacts; they helped her gather persons to begin conversation about citizenship schools. On Edisto Island, a local Presbyterian church provided space for the citizenship program to meet. In addition to local religious institutions, Clark’s Citizenship Education Program also was supported by Christian denominational bodies, such as the United Church of Christ, which initially sponsored the Reverend Andrew Young as field support for Clark while she worked at Highlander. The United Church of Christ later provided a facility to house the program when Clark left Highlander and moved the program to the SCLC.164

In other instances, however, local Black ministers and some congregants feared supporting Clark and her work. “It’s simply a contradiction,” she said later. “So many preachers supported the Movement
that we can say it was based in churches, yet many preachers couldn't take sides with it because they thought they had too much to lose." Although she had some support from clergy in Huntsville, she said another clergyman and church members were afraid to support her. In Selma, Alabama,

black preachers would say, "Who's going to pay for this? Who's going to do so-and-so?" Back of it was the fact that they didn't want the white people to know that we were teaching blacks to write their names, for then the merchants would stop giving the preachers their anniversary gifts. They wanted those gifts. Material things were more to them than the human value of things. . . . Of course, I understand those preachers. I know they were dependent on white people's approval. Even with their congregations' support, they could be run out of town if the white power structure decided they ought to go. Often they weren't against the Movement; they were just afraid to join it openly.  

In those instances where church persons, particularly ministers, clearly supported the Civil Rights Movement, Clark encountered other difficulties consistent with Baker's experience at the SCLC. This included male clergy's and other men's antagonism toward women's leadership, trivializing women's contributions, and opposition to developing and enabling local leaders. During the Civil Rights Era, men were almost always in charge in Black churches. "It was just the way things were," she recalled. However, the reality of this convention, like others she opposed, disturbed Clark. "I see this as one of the weaknesses of the civil rights movement, the way the men looked at women. I used to feel that women couldn't speak up. . . . Of course, my father always said that a woman needs to be quiet and just be in the home. . . . I changed my mind about women being quiet when they had something to say." Moreover, Clark asserted, women's participation often was responsible for initiating and sustaining civil rights activities and practices in local areas: "In stories about the civil rights movement you hear mostly about the black ministers. But if you talk to the women who were there, you'll hear another story. I think the civil rights movement would never have taken off if some women hadn't started to speak up."  

In her own work with Black ministers, Clark directly confronted traditional perspectives about women's leadership. Her role as an executive within the SCLC frequently was questioned, and, as was the case with Ella Baker, her suggestions and contributions often received no serious consideration. "I was on the executive staff of the SCLC, but the men on it didn't listen to me too well," Clark recalled. Her position on the SCLC staff derived from the important role she played in connecting the organization with local people across the South, translating ideas about social change into practices that energized and involved many people. While it had been a goal of the SCLC to build a South-wide base and program, Clark's work with the citizenship schools was essential to many SCLC local programs. "They liked to send me into many places, because I could always make a path in to get people to listen to what I have to say. But those men didn't have any faith in women, none whatsoever. . . . Rev. Abernathy would say continuously, 'Why is Mrs. Clark on this staff?' Dr. King would say, 'Well, she has expanded our program. She has taken it into eleven deep south states.' Rev. Abernathy'd come right back the next time and ask again."  

Although King was supportive of Clark's work with citizenship education and its significance to the SCLC's effectiveness, Clark said, "like other black ministers, Dr. King didn't think too much of the way women could contribute." Describing the reaction of Dr. King and other SCLC leaders to the presence of women during SCLC executive staff meetings and to ideas she presented, Clark commented that during "executive meetings, if [women] had anything to say, maybe we could get to say it at the end of the session, but we never were able to put ourselves on the agenda to speak to the group."  

When seeking to present ideas to the entire executive board during meetings failed, Clark tried sharing her thoughts directly with King through letters and reports. Similar to Baker, Clark sought to convince the SCLC and local SCLC supporters of the relevance of empowering local persons.  

When I heard the men asking Dr. King to lead marches in various places, I'd say to them, "You're there. You going to ask the leader to come to everywhere? Can't you do the leading in these places?"

I sent a letter to Dr. King asking him not to lead all the marches himself, but instead to develop leaders who could lead their own marches. Dr. King read that letter before the staff. It
just tickled them; they just laughed. . . . If you think that another man should lead, then you are looking down on Dr. King. This was the way it was. . . . Here was somebody from Albany, from Waycross, Georgia, from Memphis, Tennessee, from Chicago, from Detroit—all wanting him to come to lead a march. I felt that it wasn't necessary. I thought that you develop leaders as you go along, and as you develop these people let them show forth their development by leading. That was my feeling, but that was too much for them. They didn't feel as if that should be. 171

The reaction to Clark's idea not only reflected the view at that time of many Black clergy toward women, but also revealed the disempowering nature of religious hierarchy to laypersons and the tendency of civil rights celebrity to detract from and weaken the role of local people.

By the early 1960s Clark expressed concern about dissolution of citizenship schools because there was no follow-up from SCLC staff. In one report to King, Clark wrote:

Many states are losing their citizenship schools because there is no one to do follow-up work. I have done as much as I could. In fact, I'm the only paid staff working doing field visitation. I think that the staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference working with me in the Citizenship Education Program feels that the work is not dramatic enough to warrant their time. Direct action is so glamorous and packed with emotion that most young people prefer demonstrations over genuine education.

In some ways, coincident with Baker's feeling that organizing (as opposed to mobilizing) people was essential, Clark felt teaching was indispensable. The deeper similarity between the two women is the emphasis both placed on determining ways to enable people at the grassroots to be self-determining. 172

I don't think that in a community I need to go down to the city hall and talk; I think I train the people in that community to do their own talking. This is what I do. But he [King] couldn't see it. I would not have ever been able to work in Mississippi and Alabama and all those places if I had done all the talking. And when I worked with those young people who came down, the college students, I would say to them, "Don't go and cash the check for this woman. Let her do it; you can go with her, give her

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that much courage. But make her cash her check and do her own talking so that she can have the feeling that she can confront." 173

In her interaction with college students who were civil rights volunteers, Clark, like Baker, emphasized empowering local people, probably reinforcing the idea that Baker had been teaching the students as well. The SCLC's patriarchy did not relent during Clark's tenure. She retired from its staff in 1970.

Empowering Local People as a Moral Value

Religious belief and religious practice were fundamental components of identify formation for both Baker and Clark. Baker came to identify with her mother and grandfather's model of religiosity, which emphasized an essential connection of personal belief and piety to moral practices that express care and concern for others. Unlike the traditional notion of Christian charity, wherein concern for others often means neglecting their agency and responsibility, Baker's models (especially that of her grandfather) anticipated that other persons would also express a religiosity less dominated by emotional arousal and more clearly expressed as a practical responsibility to oneself and others. As a child Baker participated with her mother and grandfather in living out what might be called this witness to their faith. As an adult she continued to do so, even as she expanded her understanding of how to live out her witness by drawing on conceptual resources beyond Christian scripture.

Influenced by her parents' model of traditional practices of charity and true concern for others, and particularly by her mother's devotion to her church, Clark came to understand herself as a church woman with a single-minded duty to live out the principles she learned from her parents and the church. As an adult Clark's steadfastness in living these principles and her competence as an educator meant the circle in which she practiced her faith became increasingly wider. Her work with the citizenship schools across the South was—on a much larger scale—a continuation of her first volunteer work helping adults learn to read and write on Johns Island.

Both Baker and Clark willingly used personal ingenuity in practicing their religiosity as they translated, improvised, and innovated traditions in order to fulfill what each saw as religious duty. This
willingness to be creative probably helped each of them to become quite at ease with the necessity of unconventionality as they became more and more involved in changing the larger society beyond their local communities. As they became more important to the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement, Baker and Clark translated their parents' religious teaching on giving assistance into a focus on helping those most in need of assistance. While Baker emphasized organizing and Clark stressed educating, the signature of both women's work was seeking to empower local persons to take charge of and improve the quality of life in their communities.

While mobilizing suited one important aspect of the Civil Rights Movement—gathering and deploying large numbers of persons toward a common end—mobilizing did not ensure lasting, broad, or continual change. Ella Baker and Septima Clark focused on organizing and educating persons to leave local communities empowered and, therefore, open to ongoing evolution after outside civil rights workers left. Baker and Clark emphasized the reality that real change for African Americans (for racial justice in the United States) would not result instantly from successful (read large) marches, rallies, or demonstrations. Through their work they asserted that change would result from ongoing racial uplift and social responsibility practices, deriving from new visions, new abilities, and new structures originating in and nurtured by local people who are organized and educated for change and who themselves become organizers and educators for change. Both women saw this as helping local people become self-determining and enabling people to take responsibility for their own lives, as small groups and then communities became equipped to evaluate, participate in, and then transform society. As they emphasized preparing persons to take charge of their own circumstances, Baker and Clark reflected the perspective that substantial comprehensive change in the United States would occur in an evolutionary manner. This meant that they both practiced and sought to instill in others a form and exercise of fidelity—identified by Katie Cannon as "quiet grace"—that outlasted the ability to see or foresee what would result from one's practices.

Because they were educated, Elia Baker and Septima Clark had relative access to the middle and upper classes among both African Americans and other groups in the United States. Notwithstanding financial and racial limits on their choices, the factor of education and the era in which they lived presented Baker and Clark professional and civic opportunities and access to travel that were unheard of for slave and free antebellum Black women, as well as for women of the Reconstruction era. Moreover, their education and access to the Black middle classes positioned them for their travel and work, while also making possible the nature of their civil rights contributions. In spite of these influences of social class, however, religious and ideological commitments stimulated Baker and Clark's activism as practices of racial uplift and social responsibility. Throughout their lives both Elia Baker and Septima Clark sought to improve circumstances of African Americans and organized and educated persons in efforts to change society. Emphasizing the importance of empowering the masses—local people—they conceived, carried out, and passed on values and practices that came to define and in some measure systematize programs of the Civil Rights Movement.

Because of their important role as architects of the Movement, Baker and Clark did not also manage and execute each strategy. As Clark once observed, "I was directing the work at Highlander, and that work took me into so many different places that I would not have the time to do the day-by-day teaching." The work of executing Movement strategies, like "day-by-day teaching" in citizenship schools, proceeded as other Movement participants engaged the