It was Thursday 1 December 1955. Mrs Rosa Parks, who did so much to inspire the young Melba Pattillo, was 42 years old when she was arrested. Returning home after her day’s work as a tailor’s assistant in a department store in Montgomery, Alabama, she took her seat on the bus and soon it was full and a white man was left standing. The bus driver ordered her and three other African American passengers to move because under the city ordinance no black was allowed to sit parallel with a white passenger. The others reluctantly moved but Mrs Parks did not. Three times the bus driver, J. F. Blake, told her to move and then she simply said: ‘No.’ Warned that she would be arrested, Mrs Parks told him to go right ahead. Blake left the bus, called the police, and Mrs Parks was arrested. The events that sparked off the Montgomery bus boycott were completed with her being charged with violation of the city bus segregation ordinance (Garrow, 1988).

All too often Mrs Parks has been portrayed as an old woman whose failure to obey the driver was due to her tiredness, or because her feet hurt. As Angela Davis has observed: ‘Now of course, this particular way in which history is remembered represents the central woman as a passive participant – as someone without agency’ (Davis, 1994). In her recent autobiography Rosa Parks has pointed out that at 42 she did not think of herself as old and although she was tired after a day at work her refusal to give up her seat was because she was tired of giving in.

African Americans throughout the South were tired of giving in. It was this emergence of a mass movement of African American
women and men, young and old, middle class and poor that would destroy Jim Crow. The national parties were forced to act because of pressure from people, most of whom were denied the vote and all of whom were denied political office. By segregating their fellow black citizens, white southerners forced black southerners to teach in their own schools and to study in their separate colleges, to worship in their own churches. Out of these institutions African Americans forged an army and weapons to war against their daily humiliations. And although Marxists regard religion as an opiate of the masses, it was this Christian faith taught in the black churches which inspired the civil rights movement. The Bible, with its stories of slavery to the Egyptians and the flight of the chosen people to the promised land, had inspired African Americans when they were slaves. It was this deep and passionate Christian longing for justice and belief in redemption that inspired the struggle for freedom.

Many of these black church leaders and their congregations, educators and their students would find themselves in the front line in the assault on segregation because southern racists in their resistance to change in their way of life, following the Brown decision, attacked the major campaigning organisation, the NAACP. Many states either abolished it or restricted its activities and often forced state employees to resign from the Association. African Americans responded by turning to their community leaders, especially in the churches and educational institutions, and they formed groups which operated at city, state and regional level such as the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), the United Christian Movement Inc. (UCMI) of Louisiana, the SCLC and the SNCC. These were just a few of the many groups formed throughout the South. Many of the leaders had been members of the NAACP. Ella Baker served as national field secretary for the NAACP in 1941 and 1942 and in 1943 was director of branches. During these years she toured the South extensively, covering nearly 27,000 miles and attending 519 meetings. She was president of the New York branch of the NAACP after the war and became the first associate director of the SCLC (Morris, 1984). But these links between the NAACP and SCLC did not always ensure good relations with the Association’s national leadership under Roy Wilkins.

Most white southerners in 1954 were surprised that African Americans wanted to go to integrated schools, and they were