

The Reverend James Morris Lawson, Jr.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., called you the “leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence in the world.” *TIME* magazine identified you as one of seven icons of the civil rights movement, paving the way for President Barack Obama’s historic election. The Reverend James Morris Lawson, Jr., your contributions as a preacher, nonviolent strategist, teacher, and activist are far-reaching, and you continue to create positive change through your commitment to social justice and nonviolence.

The son and grandson of Methodist ministers, you received your preacher’s license in 1949. You attended Baldwin–Wallace College, a Methodist college in Ohio. There you joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation, America’s oldest interfaith peace organization, and continued your study of Gandhi.

A draft resister before the Korean War, you were sentenced to three years in prison for refusing to serve. Paroled after 13 months, you resumed your studies and graduated in 1952. You spent the next three years in Nagpur, India, where you served as a coach and campus minister at Hislop College and continued to study the principles of nonviolent resistance.

Upon returning to the United States, you enrolled at the Oberlin School of Theology in Ohio. On February 6, 1957, you and King shook hands for the first time and had a face-to-face encounter, where he urged you to move south to teach the principles of nonviolence. In answering his call, you not only changed your life but also helped to change race relations in America.

You dropped out of Oberlin and moved to Nashville, traveling around the South in crisis situations as field secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, including counseling the Little Rock Nine. You were an architect of a plan to desegregate downtown Nashville, leading workshops to prepare participants for the nonviolent campaign. You and the Nashville students were lead supporters of the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, you wrote its statement of purpose, and you delivered the keynote speech at the organization’s founding meeting in April 1960. As a result of your leadership of those workshops on nonviolent strategy, the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees of Vanderbilt Divinity School expelled you from the institution. You later completed your degree at Boston University.

During the 1960s, you were a mentor to King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a volunteer for campaigns in cities across the South. In 1968, while serving as pastor of Centenary Methodist Church in Memphis, you were chair of a strategy committee for 1,300 sanitation workers who went on strike in a successful campaign to address their grievances, which included dangerous working conditions, inadequate pay, and racial discrimination.

In 1974, you moved to Los Angeles to lead Holman United Methodist Church, serving as pastor until your retirement in 1999. You have continued to work for justice and civil rights for all people. You are a founder of the Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice and Interfaith Communities for Justice and Peace, and you have served as a consultant for Soulforce, a group that works to end oppression of LGBTQI people.

In 2006–2007, Vanderbilt University, in an act of reconciliation, invited you back as a distinguished visiting professor and established the James M. Lawson Jr. Chair to build upon your legacy of nonviolent activism and leadership. During the last 15 years, you have served as a visiting lecturer at several institutions, including Harvard Divinity School and UCLA.

In recognition of your life’s work as a leader for justice, peace, and equality, I have the honor of presenting you, the Reverend James Morris Lawson, Jr., for the degree of Doctor of Divinity, *honoris causa*.

Joanne Berger-Sweeney
President and Trinity College
Professor of Neuroscience

Philip S. Khoury ’71
Vice Chair, Trinity College Board
of Trustees

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