Biography of James Lawson: MLK, Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle - Stanford University

As a minister who trained many activists in nonviolent resistance, James Lawson made a critical contribution to the civil rights movement. In his 1968 speech, ‘‘[I’ve Been to the Mountaintop](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_ive_been_to_the_mountaintop_3_april_1968/),’’ Martin Luther King spoke of Lawson as one of the ‘‘noble men’’ who had inﬂuenced the black freedom struggle: ‘‘He’s been going to jail for struggling; he’s been kicked out of Vanderbilt University for this struggling; but he’s still going on, ﬁghting for the rights of his people’’ (King, ‘‘I’ve Been,’’ 214).   
  
The son of Philane May Cover and James Morris Lawson, Sr., Lawson was born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, in 1928. He earned his AB from Baldwin-Wallace College in 1951 and his STB from [Boston University](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_boston_university/) in 1960. A draft resister, Lawson was imprisoned in 1951 for refusing to register with the armed forces. Following his parole from prison in 1952, he traveled to India and performed missionary work with the Methodist Church. While in India, he deepened his study of [Gandhi’s](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_gandhi_mohandas_karamchand_1869_1948/) use of [nonviolence](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nonviolent_resistance/) to achieve social and political change. In 1956, Lawson returned to the United States and resumed his studies at Oberlin College’s School of Theology from 1956-1957, and Vanderbilt University from 1958-1960.   
  
When Lawson and King met in 1957, King urged Lawson to move to the South and begin teaching nonviolence on a large scale. Later that year, Lawson transferred to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, and organized workshops on nonviolence for community members and students at Vanderbilt and the city’s four black colleges. These activists, who included [Diane Nash](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nash_diane_1938/), [Marion Barry](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_barry_marion_shepilov_jr_1936/), [John Lewis](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_lewis_john_1940/), [Bernard Lafayette](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_lafayette_bernard_1940/) and [James Bevel](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_bevel_james_luther_1936/), planned nonviolent demonstrations in Nashville, conducting test sit-ins in late 1959. In February 1960, following [lunch counter sit-ins](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_sit_ins/) initiated by students at a Woolworth’s store in Greensboro, North Carolina, Lawson and several hundred local activists launched a similar protest in Nashville’s downtown stores. More than 150 students were arrested before city leaders agreed to desegregate some lunch counters. The discipline of the Nashville students became a model for sit-ins in other southern cities. In March 1960, Lawson was expelled from Vanderbilt because of his involvement with Nashville’s desegregation movement.   
  
Lawson and the Nashville student leaders were inﬂuential in the founding conference of the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_student_nonviolent_coordinating_committee_sncc/) (SNCC), held April 1960. Their commitment to nonviolence and the Christian ideal of what Lawson called ‘‘the redemptive community’’ helped to shape SNCC’s early direction (Lawson, 17 April 1960). Lawson co-authored the statement of purpose adopted by the conference, which emphasized the religious and philosophical foundations of nonviolent direct action.   
  
Lawson was involved with the [Fellowship of Reconciliation](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_fellowship_of_reconciliation_for/) from 1957 to 1969, SNCC from 1960 to 1964, and the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_southern_christian_leadership_conference_sclc/) (SCLC) from 1960 to 1967. For each organization, he led workshops on nonviolent methods of protest, often in preparation for major campaigns. He also participated in the third wave of the 1961 [Freedom Rides](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_freedom_rides/). In 1968, at Lawson’s request, King traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, to draw attention to the plight of [striking sanitation workers](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_memphis_sanitation_workers_strike_1968/) in the city. It was during this campaign that King was [assassinated](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kings_assassination_4_april_1968/) on 4 April 1968.   
  
Lawson continued to work with various civil rights groups following King’s assassination. In 1973, he became a board member of SCLC and served as president of the Los Angeles chapter from 1979 to 1993. He was also the pastor of Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles from 1974 to 1999.   
  
**SOURCES:** <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_lawson_james_1928/>

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