

Understanding Militant Non-violence within Memphis' Modern Civil Rights Movement: The Leadership and Witness of the Rev. James M Lawson Jr.

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Our power does not lie in Molotov cocktails. Our strength is not in rocks and bottles. Our power lies in our willingness to endure suffering and determination to persist in non-violent resistance to wrong. Riots are the desperate cry of the unheard. Summer riots are caused by America's winter of dalliance with justice. But riots are not the answer...I still believe in non-violence. I have watched it work. You can't ride a man's back unless it is bent. In Birmingham they turned dogs and fire hoses on us when we straightened our backs. But we had a fire in our souls that water couldn't put out. Before it was over, we had 10,000 people crying to be locked up in Bull Connor's jail. But there wasn't enough room for them."

**--Martin Luther King Jr. Speaking at Metropolitan Baptist Church in Memphis,
1966¹**

The tension between armed resistance and non-violence was evident in every phase of the Modern Civil Rights movement, but the debate rose to a fevered pitch in 1966 as Stokely Carmichael assumed the helm of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In the summer of 1966, Carmichael confronted the non-violent forces in the movement with his call for "Black Power," effectively challenging Martin King and his non-violent followers with this powerful new rallying cry. But beyond the threat of violence, one of the most alarming elements of Black Power rhetoric was its militancy, a militancy which promised to fight racial injustice by any means necessary. As Jeffery Ogbar points out, "Blacks had become tired of asking whites for acceptance and inclusion. They were intolerant of appeasing white liberals with language that whites

¹ Nat D. Williams, "Riots No Road to Rights, Says MLK," *The Tri-State Defender*, 17 September 1966, vol. xv # 45

approved,” so the movement’s rhetoric shifted to include the unsettling prospect of armed resistance.²

Carmichael and other Black Power advocates demanded changes in a defiant voice and called for a revolution within the movement and America. For many Black Power advocates, this demand was the public rejection of a mentality defined by inferiority and accommodation, an attitude that segregation and enslavement had so insidiously inspired. Black Power advocates rejected the idea that African Americans had ever been inferior, regardless of the legacy of Jim Crow and slavery. While this was far from a new idea in black thought and rhetoric, the decision to openly condemn whites and violently provoke them as a method of casting off the slave mentality took deep root in black urban culture in the years following the riots of 1965.

The call for revolution was aimed both at African American identity, as seen in the popularity of *dashikis* and “natural” hair styles, and at the very fabric of America’s political and economic structures as evidenced in the Black Panther Party’s “Pig Patrols” and Free Breakfast Programs. Militants strove to confront and surpass the economic structures that kept a disproportionate number of African Americans poor in America, and providing resources to care for their community was central to this goal. The Black Panther Party led Black Power’s welfare efforts in the late 60s so that, “by 1969, the Black Panther Party had free breakfast programs in nineteen locations, feeding twenty thousand children weekly.”³ Black Power advocates, in short, worked towards a psychological and political revolution in African American life.

² Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 77

³ Ogbar, 90

Thus, Black Power groups were threatening not only because of their rhetoric but also because of their radical community programming. As militancy simply implies the will to fight to accomplish purpose, violence was not required for a militant paradigm in the civil rights movement. Militancy goes beyond rhetoric and style, and instead is defined by purpose and persistence. Perhaps better than any other civil rights leader, non-violent practitioner James M. Lawson Jr. defies our traditional understandings of the civil rights “militant”: As a militant non-violent theorist, Lawson confronted American ideas about the efficacy of violence. As a militant non-violent practitioner, Lawson waged non-violent warfare on the institutions that oppressed black people in America.

Non-violence is an alternative form of war, but it does not have the brutality of war or the abuse of power of war; and it seeks not to demonize in the process. It seeks rather to sow the seeds so that you can have the beginnings of reconciliation and healing, which war never does. ⁴

While Lawson never advocated picking up a gun, his tactics were still quite threatening to “the white power structure.” ⁵ This was largely due to his militancy.

What could be more militant than the ordinary people in Selma, Alabama, or Greenwood Mississippi, or Ruleville, Mississippi, who walked by themselves into the county office of the registrar to seek to register to vote? What can be more militant across the country and across the south than walking into restaurants and lunch counters and sitting down with dignity and politeness? What could be more militant than me going to jail in 1950 rather than submit to the draft? ⁶

Unto jail and personal injury, Lawson refused to submit to injustice.

Lawson’s theology nurtured a dignified black identity in much the same way as Black Power advocates, though Lawson used Christian language to frame his ideas. As a minister, Lawson preached what his mother showed him after being called a *nigger* at 9: “we all love you, Jimmy, and God loves you, and we all believe in how good

⁴ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

and intelligent you are...With all that love, what good does a little insult do?"⁷ As a non-violent theorist and teacher, Lawson taught his students "the most basic lesson of all, that "nigger" was a word which defined only those who used it, not those whom it was used against."⁸ Thus, dignity was central to Lawson's theology, an idea he kindled in the hearts of everyone who heard him speak. Further, Lawson's theology contributed to the fermentation of a psychological revolution in his students and associates that necessitated the dethroning of Jim Crow. Lawson taught that everyone, both oppressed and oppressor, is a child of God. For Lawson, to embody this idea meant to follow Jesus radically. Since Jesus would never approve of Jim Crow, Lawson used his theology and the story of Jesus as a foundation for his argument that jimcrow should be abolished using non-violent direct action.

Lawson's theology was the generator for his non-violent confrontations with the forces of segregation in Memphis and throughout the United States. As a Methodist Minister and national civil rights leader working in Memphis between 1962 and 1968, Lawson was militant in his effort to redeem both the city of Memphis and the United States of its segregation and its accompanying psychological enslavement. His work with the Memphis branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) locally and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) nationally chronicle a militant challenge to the psychological, political and economic oppression of Jim Crow.

A Non-Violent Trouble Maker: Lawson as "the Ramrod of Strife"

⁷ David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 31-32

⁸ Halberstam, 79

Lawson's inspiration and intellectual basis for understanding the power of non-violence came in 1947 when he heard A. J. Muste, then executive secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (F.O.R.), speak at Baldwin Wallace College. Muste spoke of the Danish and Norwegian non-violent resistance to the Nazis in the 1940s, and celebrated Mohandas Gandhi's non-violent revolution in colonial India. "(Muste) brought together the two main parts of Lawson's youthful philosophy—his political dissidence, based as it was to no small degree on race, and his religious convictions, and made them one strand."

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Lawson soon sharpened his critique to a denunciation of the Cold War, and in particular, the Korean War. In 1951, he refused the draft, turned himself in to the police, and earned a three-year sentence to federal prison. Lawson's undergraduate degree was withheld by Baldwin Wallace College for his resistance, and wasn't awarded until he re-took his last semester of classes. Lawson spent a full year in federal prison for his resistance to the Korean War. In 1959, Lawson traveled to Nashville and enrolled in Vanderbilt Divinity School. He attended school by day and taught classes on Christian non-violence by night. Lawson trained and organized future civil rights workers using techniques of Gandhian non-violent resistance, and framed an understanding of these practices using the Gospel. Lawson's non-violent training came to a head on February 13 1960, as 124 young people marched downtown to sit-in at Nashville's segregated lunch counters. It was the first of what would become four months of demonstrations. The students were trained to come in waves: as the first wave was pulled from the stools and put into the patty wagon, a second wave of students would fill their seats. The students were arrested by the carloads. White toughs confronted the students, provoked them,

⁹ Halberstam, 38

smacked them, and put cigarettes out on their bodies; but Lawson had trained the students to resist with non-violent responses.

Lawson taught that such non-violent resistance to social injustice was powerful, redemptive for the soul. Lawson often began his classes on non-violence with a lesson in how powerful love could be, particularly when confronting hate: “Among (the students) first assignments was one in which they were supposed to discuss what love was and how it could be used as a tactic in a personal or political crisis and why people tended instead, when confronted with a seemingly insoluble problem, to turn to their anger.”¹⁰

Lawson taught that confronting the wrath of segregationists required a profound sense of self-worth: “The students had to come to terms with their own dignity, their own belief in themselves, and their motivation before they dealt with those who would oppress them.”¹¹ Lawson forged in his students a vision of the “Beloved Community” to bridge the rift of segregation. The Beloved Community was the idea that the hurdles to equal citizenship could be toppled so that African Americans and whites could live as equal partners in civil society. This idea recognized the laden value and worth in human beings, and identified Jim Crow as victimizing both the non-violent practitioner and the oppressor. Non-violent direct action was a physical realization of the Beloved Community, both a means and an end to humanity. Creating the Beloved Community meant directly confronting the proprietors of Jim Crow, but the confrontation revealed the injustice of the social order without de-humanizing the oppressor. While Lawson did not intend to hurt anyone with non-violent direct action, he did intend to provoke a social crisis that made maintaining segregation untenable.

¹⁰ Halberstam, 78

¹¹ Halberstam, 79

The provocation of crisis made Lawson's efforts at non-violent reconciliation suspect for both white and black leaders. South Carolina Congressman Mendell Rivers called Lawson and leaders like him "the ramrod of strife," claiming they were the "roving agents of (communist) social revolutions."¹² Rivers painted the demonstrations in the starkest possible terms, saying "sit down demonstrations that threaten the public peace may be symptoms of a world wide conspiracy against law and order...The sit-downs are planned by agitators with ample experience in troublemaking."¹³ Rivers concluded by characterizing the sit-down demonstrations as "an invitation to a race riot."¹⁴ Thus, Jim Lawson's reputation as a troublemaker would precede him to Memphis.

A Young Preacher Arrives to "Shock" the Plantation Mentality

Lawson faced a number of challenges upon arriving in Memphis. According to Halberstam, Lawson did not find the Memphis equivalent of a trailblazing civil rights leader like Kelly Miller Smith or Fred Shuttlesworth.¹⁵ Lawson arrived as an outsider to Memphis; he hadn't grown up in the south and he was educated in northern schools. Lawson had been expelled from Vanderbilt Divinity School in 1960, a hallmark amongst southern institutions, and while many of the faculty threatened to resign if he was not reinstated, by the time he was readmitted the damage had been done. Lawson opted to earn his Masters of Divinity from Martin Luther King's alma mater, Boston University.

¹² Congressional Records Appendix, 17 March 1960, A-2378, Clipping from the James Lawson file, Memphis Shelby County Room, Benjamin J. Hooks Library

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ Halberstam, 473.

¹⁶ It was clear that Lawson simply didn't understand the way things were done "down here." He was a 34 year old minister taking over the largest Methodist church in the Southern Conference, and because of this many clergy and community leaders predicted his failure in Memphis. Perhaps worst of all, Lawson was a "jailbird."¹⁷ He had been sent to prison for resisting the draft in 1950, and was arrested in 1960 for his work in the Nashville movement.

Despite the difficulty of the context, Lawson's arrival in Memphis was no accident. He had been called to Memphis by Conference Bishop Charles F. Golden for many of the reasons that made his arrival un-settling: as a city still clinging to segregation, Golden felt that Memphis needed Lawson's bold leadership. His promotion to Centenary United Methodist Church made Lawson an annual conference leader in the Southern Methodist Church, and positioned him in an urban environment that needed help destroying segregation. The appointment to Memphis demonstrates that, for Lawson, the church was the most promising vehicle by which to re-shape society, and Bishop Golden recognized that as a pastor, Lawson could help redeem the city of Memphis.

Lawson arrived to pastor Centenary United Methodist in the third week of June, 1962. Centenary supported his activism in the movement, and provided a

¹⁶ In a meeting with Nashville Mayor Ben West in 1960, 75 ministers gathered to talk about the events of Big Saturday. Big Saturday was the name given February 27th 1960 by Lawson and his students of non-violent direct action. 81 were arrested during a sit-in campaign that provoked beatings from groups of white thugs gathered to intimidate the protestors. In the meeting following the Big Saturday demonstrations, Mayor Ben West told the ministers that they had relinquished their right to sit-in when the lunch-counter operators closed the counters. Lawson replied that closing the counters without closing the stores themselves meant the law was being used as a gimmick to stop the protests. The *Nashville Banner* then "portrayed Lawson as the architect of a blanket attempt to get students to break the law." Vanderbilt Chancellor Harvey Branscomb demanded that Lawson recant what he had said about civil disobedience. Lawson refused in writing to cease drawing attention to a community wide injustice, and on March 3 1960, Harvey Branscomb expelled Jim Lawson from Vanderbilt Divinity School. Lawson was arrested by the Nashville police four days later. Halberstam, 188-207

¹⁷ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

foundation for his public witness. In July of 1962, Lawson hosted a panel at Centenary entitled “To Demonstrate or not to Demonstrate?”¹⁸ Though Lawson had arrived amidst desegregation sit-ins led by LeMoyne College students and supported by the NAACP, demonstrations and direct action were not the preferred response from the Memphis civil rights establishment. The July panel is important because Lawson had found that “there is always resistance to demonstrations. There is resistance to that now and there was then. I think that in Memphis, in a few of the demonstrations that took place, there was no concerted effort to understand demonstrations within the theory and practice of non violent struggle.”¹⁹

As a seasoned leader in the movement, Lawson sought to provide both a theoretical and practical understanding for direct action in Memphis, which inevitably radicalized his local reputation. In spite of the concerted effort made by LeMoyne College students to desegregate libraries, museums, downtown lunch counters and the zoo, Lawson felt that the Memphis civil rights establishment was still moving too slowly in challenging segregation. The NAACP had not initiated these direct actions in Memphis, but rather students had initiated the actions and the NAACP had joined in support. Lawson felt a precise understanding of non-violent direct action was lacking in Memphis, and this early panel was an early effort to educate the movement on the importance of direct action.²⁰

A few months later, Lawson hosted “Newspaperman as critics of Memphis,” another panel held at Centenary which included representatives from local

¹⁸ *The Memphis World*, July 20 1962 vol. 12, #36

¹⁹ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

²⁰ *ibid*

papers *The Memphis World*, *The Tri-State Defender*, *The Commercial Appeal* and the *Memphis Press Scimitar*. Lawson said

The forum will be the first step in a depth survey of Memphis from a cosmopolitan point of view, of the needs of Memphis in helping to make it a better city. During the forum the city's weak points as well as its strong points will be discussed. The forum will help demonstrate that Christian churches can be dynamically involved in helping to make Memphis a better place. The church can engage in a dialogue with other city agencies to speak to citizens about their civic responsibility.²¹

As a minister, Lawson felt called to engage the injustice present in the community, and Centenary provided a foundation for this effort. He believed the church and its people should be involved in a city-wide effort to re-shape the city according to Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God. For Lawson, the Beloved Community was analogous to the Kingdom of God—a place where humans related to one another as brothers and sisters, as people recognizing the image of God in each other. Lawson “defined the freedom movement as a ‘spiritual, moral, social, cultural revolution’ that aimed ‘to overturn all the systems of slavery and racism across the board.’”²² As such, Lawson taught movement activists to behave as he felt Christ would in confronting the modern slavery of Jim Crow. Halberstam notes that

In his teaching (Lawson) emphasized the life of Jesus. Jesus, he pointed out, turned away from his tormentors again and again, and triumphed using the power of his love...nonviolent responses to violence, non-violence as a political instrument, he taught them, was the best kept secret in human history.²³

Lawson is quick to point out that non-violence is not pacifism. “It is power which is the argument that Gandhi and I had with pacifism, especially religious pacifism, which has only pretended to deal with power or coercion.”²⁴ Lawson knew that the city of Memphis must be forced into destroying Jim Crow, and as a militant, Lawson attempted

²¹ "Newspaperman to Speak on Forum at Centenary,"

The Memphis World, Sept. 15 1962, vol. 12, #43 p. 4

²² Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, (New York: Norton Press, 2007), 80.

²³ Halberstam, 78

²⁴ James M. Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

to force segregationists to relinquish the de-humanizing patterns of Jim Crow by confronting them with a Christ-like, nonviolent demonstration of humanity. At Centenary, Lawson promoted this theology and encouraged Memphis churches active, non-violent involvement in the movement.

Lawson would often preach about direct action from Centenary's pulpit, never faltering in his public commitment to the birth of the Beloved Community. Lawson was fond of using Luke, 4:16-31 as an example of Jesus' employment of loving but bold direct action.²⁵ In the passage, Jesus reads from the book of Isaiah, saying "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives..."²⁶ Jesus made a parallel between himself and Elijah in the story, saying to the Jewish crowd that the prophet Elijah had been called to the aid of suffering Gentiles over Jews. The idea was that Jesus had come to release both Jew and Gentile, insiders and outsiders. Angered, the Jewish crowd cornered Jesus and threatened to throw him off a cliff. On the edge of the cliff with nowhere to go, Jesus calmly "passed through the midst of them and went on his way."²⁷ Lawson preached that the calm deployment of such confidence and peace, when publicly employed, could effectively re-shape the relations between human beings. Jesus, he taught, left the best examples of such behavior.

Still, a central component of Lawson's non-violent philosophy was creating crisis. During the summer of 1963, *The Memphis World* reported that

The quiet of Memphis may be shaken soon by a wave of civil rights demonstrations. Pressure for such action is coming from several local freedom movement leaders who are demanding more and better job opportunities, desegregation of more of the better eating places, and an immediate end to double shifts set up by the board of education for five all Negro high schools. Chief among those urging demonstrations as a means of bringing

²⁵ Halberstam, 78

²⁶ New Oxford Annotated Bible, (2001: Oxford University Press, New York), Luke 4.18, NT 104

²⁷ *ibid*

about more gains for the Negroes are Dr. Vasco Smith, vice-president of the Memphis NAACP, The Rev. James Lawson, Jr., a leader in the nonviolent movement and the Rev. Billy Samuel Kyles, chairman of the NAACP's freedom committee...Rev. Lawson said that complete desegregation will not come about unless Negroes make a public issue of it.²⁸

Lawson knew that a public airing of Memphis' racial problems was the only way to call attention to them, and confrontation through demonstration was a way to raise the profile of the problem. Significantly, Lawson and NAACP leaders are in agreement here about their commitment to use demonstrations as leverage for change.

Lawson appears more frequently in NAACP sponsored direct action campaigns as the 1960s wear on, a trend that reflects Lawson's commitment level to the Memphis movement. His national responsibilities kept him pre-occupied much of the time, so he "made no effort to have big ticket actions in Memphis except as there was a readiness amongst certain black leaders, the NAACP in particular, who was prepared to move out and do it."²⁹ Thus, much of Lawson's direct action was done in partnership with the NAACP, which had a very strong chapter in Memphis. In 1966, the Memphis NAACP won best chapter in the nation amongst branches with paid personnel.³⁰

In spite of their occasional cooperation, Lawson's philosophy of direct action and militancy flew in the face of the Memphis civil rights establishment. Lawson's leadership style in Memphis was defined by his bold and independent approach: He was not afraid to set the tone or take the lead when it came to justice, no matter how unpopular his stance may have been. And though the NAACP did engage in some direct action, Lawson claimed that "the NAACP was a conservative force. The National NAACP did not support mass action... They had to be pulled into it, by King, by local

²⁸ "Memphis Leaders Push for More Jobs, end of Double Shifts", *The Memphis World*, June 27 1963, Vol. 32 #6, p. 1

²⁹ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

³⁰ *The Memphis World*, July 30th 1966, p.1

chapters and by the force of the unfolding situation. They had no theory concerning direct action.”³¹ Though Lawson was a national leader, he still remained vehement and outspoken about the importance of direct action in Memphis. In August 1963, *The Memphis World* wrote:

The Rev. James Lawson Jr. defended peaceful demonstrations as a necessary factor in the current freedom movement during his Sunday sermon to members and visitors...He said that Memphis is the capital of the Tri-State area and that small towns and cities surrounding the Bluff City usually try to do what Memphis does. ‘If Memphis gets rid of segregation, then other towns like Somerville and Brownsville will do likewise,’ he said. The young minister insisted that Memphis is now more segregated than at any other time. ‘Memphis has desegregated a few classrooms in some of its elementary schools, but last year three all-white schools became all Negro Schools. This is nothing but segregation. A few movie houses here are desegregated and so are a few restaurants, but who knows about it? A few years ago, some Negroes and Whites lived next to each other, but this is almost a thing of the past.’³²

Memphis was moving too slowly for Lawson. More than a year after he had arrived, Memphis was still a very segregated city, and African Americans were suffering because of it. In 1963, *The World* reported that:

5,000 Memphians signed an NAACP petition calling for a citywide civil rights bill and immediate desegregation. The NAACP called attention to discrimination in public education, saying ‘there are still two school systems, one for Negroes and one for whites...There are separate spelling bees, academic award banquets for honor students, science fairs, journalism clinics and quiz programs to mention a few...Housing patterns in Memphis are more segregated today than ten years ago...All of the hospitals of this community continue to refuse to accept Negro patients, although they are subsidized by taxes from the local, state and federal levels.’³³

Court injustice, employment discrimination, police brutality, lack of Negro representation on the Police Dept., and refusal of service at restaurants, drive-ins, and other public places were among the injustices cited by the NAACP’s petition. The zoo still maintained “colored” and “white” signs, black folks were looked over when it came time for public appointments to local leadership, Negroes were not represented in the media except to

³¹ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

³² “Demonstrations Needed—Lawson”, *The Memphis World*, 3 August 1963, Vol. 32 #7, p. 4

³³ *The Memphis World*, 27 July 1963 Vol. 32 # 6

their detriment, and rare appointments of African American leaders combined with spotty integration efforts were condemned as tokenism by Memphis' NAACP leaders: "We are not satisfied with the pace of progress. We, today, request of you action which should have been taken 100 years ago."³⁴

While the NAACP had its finger on the pulse of the African American community and the challenges it faced, Lawson felt the NAACP typically did not have a bold and effective strategy for solving Memphis' racial problems. "Memphis would use limited demonstrations, only so long as it forced the white community to start negotiating. Once negotiating started, they were prepared to call them all off."³⁵ The NAACP's limited use of non-violent direct action was in Lawson's view a circumscription of the single most potent weapon available for combating racial prejudice and bridging the rift of segregation. Here Lawson' militancy, his refusal to use the courts and petition based activists as the primary vehicle for change, shows that Lawson sought not only not a revolution of the law but a relational revolution between individuals, both oppressed and oppressor. Lawson remembers that "the old preachers used to say you couldn't get to heaven with a segregated heart," an idea that demonstrates Lawson's concern about the effects of Jim Crow on black and white alike.³⁶ As a minister, Lawson sought to revolutionize both the law and individuals concurrently using direct action, a method he believed restored humanity to individuals and society.

Lawson contended that direct action was necessary to "shock" Memphis out of its *modus operandi*. Lawson called for

non-violent demonstrations in Memphis and every Hamlet in America 'to try to get at the heart of the problem of racial segregation...Human nature is like that, it must hear and see truth...' Speaking out against employing the technique of 'negotiation only' as the best way

³⁴ibid

³⁵ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

³⁶ ibid

to solve racial differences involved in obtaining full civil rights, the young minister said: 'We cannot end 350 years of social evil by negotiating only. We need a revolution in America—a revolution of the inner-man. A revolution tries to get at the heart of the problem. We need demonstrations to show our brothers in Mississippi and in Arkansas the need for direct action.' Lawson claimed that negotiation was only part of the non-violent demonstrations.³⁷

These ideas came from the pulpit at Centenary Methodist in August of 1963. Lawson's sermon, entitled "Why are Demonstrations Essential?," continues:

'Demonstrations are very old. Moses used them by placing blood on the door of the chosen ones; Jeremiah used them by wearing the wooden and iron yokes while marching through the street; Jesus Christ used them as well as our earlier Americans—Thomas Paine and participants in the Boston Tea Party. We do not advocate heaping burning coals upon the enemies' head to destroy him, but to awaken him to the truth. If the denial of civil rights is never made a public issue, it will never be solved. The consciousness of Memphis must be shocked'...Lawson accused Mayor Henry Loeb of being more loyal to white citizens 'than he is interested in Democracy'. Rev. Lawson concluded that Segregation 'is morally wrong.'³⁸

Lawson preached that segregation was at odds with God's will for the world, a will Lawson defined as justice for all people.

Lawson's goal for any direct action was "to reconfigure the power in such a fashion so that you can begin the process of making changes in the direction of racial justice, economic justice, and social justice."³⁹ Ending segregation required active resistance to its order and a direct but humane confrontation with its proprietors. These confrontations put bodies, minds and souls in space previously off limits to African Americans. This process of reclaiming social space corresponded with the engendering of courage and self-worth, which Lawson believed redeem the segregated mentality of oppressed and oppressor and nurtured the beginnings of a just society.

"What are the ways in which you fight oppression?" Lawson asked. "The whole tackling of racism, not from the external side but from the internal spirituality, in slavery even, [meant that African American folks] retained their sense of humanity in spite

³⁷ "Local Methodist Pastor Calls for 'Demonstrations' to Solve Racial Segregation Problem" *The Tri-State Defender*, 3 August 1963, Vol. 8 #38, p. 4

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

of slavery.”⁴⁰ Lawson saw the retention of dignity as a recurrent theme in African American History. “There are stories of the ancient slave preacher who went into the darkness of the plantation...[and] one of the essential messages [was] you were not born to be a slave, you are a man. You are somebody. So...in the movement... this was taught and preached.”⁴¹

Lawson understood nonviolent direct action against injustice as providing two basic outlets: one for the spirit and one for the body. When asked in 1968 if non-violent demonstrations furnish an outlet for emotions that exist and would otherwise be pent up in the community, Lawson responded:

Yes, very definitely. When you have an injustice, you have to give a great number of people a legitimate and hopeful way of changing that. So that demonstrations, mobilizing people, and getting people to commit themselves to nonviolent direct action gives them hopeful means, and I think we have to say also that this has been the most effective way of social change in the second half of the 20th century in the United States.⁴²

Lawson further notes how effective non-violence has been for American society, claiming that “any change that has taken place in this nation towards justice for workers, justice for people generally, social security, has been through direct action on the part of millions of people.”⁴³ Non-violence, then, reshaped both the social and the spiritual landscape, winning concessions from power and providing hope for the oppressed.⁴⁴ “You’ve got no major change in the direction of democracy in the United States without direct action. And plenty of it.”⁴⁵

Lawson and the Memphis Movement: Searching for God Called Troublemakers

⁴⁰ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² “Out of Turmoil,” *Memphis Magazine*, May 1998, 61

⁴³ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ *ibid*

In 1967, Lawson called on his fellow ministers to stop focusing on Cadillacs and “their own birthday gifts” and start focusing on the community and its needs. The church needs to be “shaken up by God-called trouble makers” he claimed, calling on community leaders to focus on the plague of racial injustice in “the city of good abode.”⁴⁶ Lawson’s career in Memphis shows that he was willing to lead the way as a “troublemaker” who challenged Jim Crow.

In August of 1963, Lawson joined the Memphis NAACP in a fight to abolish staggered school hours. The staggered hour system required African American students to arrive at school in two shifts because there were an inadequate number of teachers, classrooms and resources to teach everyone at once. Children lingered throughout the morning without supervision, waiting for later classes to start, which increased truancy and made “playing hookie” easier. Lawson and the NAACP also felt that staggered hours were a wholly inadequate way of dealing with a lack of resources in segregated, black high schools.

Lawson would lead the charge against staggered hours as he spoke to the school board on August 1st 1963:

The Rev. James M. Lawson, pastor of Centenary Methodist Church and a leader of the non-violent movement, held the rapt attention of every person in the Board of Education Auditorium when he said: ‘We must not allow this staggered system to be forced upon us without making some effort to change it. We intend to see this through. This is not the last word. We intend to follow up...Civilization is judged by the way it treats its weakest, and the city of Memphis will be judged by the way it treats its minority citizens.’⁴⁷

In protest of staggered hours in Memphis area high schools, Ronald Young, a white youth worker from Centenary’s integrated staff, led 600-900 protesting students in a march down Main Street. The NAACP urged students to arrive at school at

⁴⁶ “Inside Memphis,” *The Memphis World*, 28 October 1967, p. 1

⁴⁷ “Board Silent as Citizens Rap 2-Shift School Plan”, *The Memphis World*, August 3 1963, Vol. 32 #7 p. 4

7:30 a.m. to discourage students from attending class at 7:30 a.m. so that all students could attend classes together at 8:30 a.m.⁴⁸ The action effectively overloaded the system, revealing its flaws and creating a problem for administrators seeking to perpetuate the staggered hour policy. Lawson and the NAACP had joined together once again. As Lawson points out,

The NAACP was a big deal (in Memphis) and though they did not have my philosophy or approach, they did raise up issues from time to time that I could join, both as a pastor and as a non-violent practitioner. And I joined them when I could.⁴⁹

If the NAACP used direct action between 1962 and 1968, Lawson was almost always involved.

As the debate over staggered hours heated up, Lawson called on students and parents to march on the school board. The *Tri-State Defender* reported that:

More than 600 students and parents answered the NAACP's call for a demonstration at the City Board of Education last Monday...Shouting '1-2-3-4 double shifts must go!' and '5-6-7-8 we want to integrate!' the youngsters formed a ring around the building and later entered to fill up the halls, upstairs and downstairs. Rev. Lawson was on hand to 'personally conduct the demonstration.'⁵⁰

The board soon agreed to negotiate and correct the staggered hour system. But while staggered hours would soon be eliminated, the fight to integrate Memphis City Schools would carry on for nearly ten years.

The Ebb and Flow of the Memphis Movement and Lawson's Persistence

In 1964, Centenary hosted a panel entitled "Where are Civil Rights in Memphis." Jesse Turner, NAACP president, stated that

⁴⁸ "School Protest Shaping," *The Memphis World*, 7 September 1963, vol. 32 #12

⁴⁹ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

⁵⁰ "600 Picket Board of Education," *The Tri-State Defender*, 18 September 1963, vol. 8 #64, p. 1

We are in a sad plight and have become complacent [in Memphis]. We do not now have the forces or drive to continue the fight. Many of us feel that whites are going to do more for us because of the significant gains we have made... There are about 70,000 Negroes registered here but no Negroes were elected in the last election. We lost an excellent opportunity to show our strength at the poles.⁵¹

Despite Turner's lament, there is no apparent falter in Lawson's stride towards freedom during this time, and he certainly did not rescind his assault on the political structures in Memphis that kept African Americans disenfranchised. Over the next two years, Lawson would host marches from the doorstep of his church and rattle the economic pillars of racial injustice in Memphis.

In March of 1965, Memphis leaders organized a march to honor the Rev. James Reeb, a Unitarian minister killed in Selma, Alabama during the push for voting rights. Six hundred people gathered in Confederate Park downtown to commemorate the death of Rev. Reeb. *The Memphis World* reported that the

Rev. James Lawson, pastor of Centenary Methodist Church, said the presence of a number of whites in the group of Negroes let him know that Selma was not a 'Negro Problem, but a human problem. We are engaged in century of revolution' he stated, and Selma, Alabama is a part of this revolution. Progress must be measured by the length of the club that hit Jim Reeb over the head.'⁵²

The World reported that "Negroes and whites singing and praying and marching together gave Memphians a picture that they had never seen before...the Rev. James A. (sic) Lawson Jr. electrified the crowd with a brief but stirring address..."⁵³

Lawson's speech demonstrated that the fight for freedom was far from over in Memphis. The political lethargy that Jesse Turner had observed in 1964 seemed distant, as Lawson and others began vying for political power and sharpened their critique. The African American community in Memphis responded with support.

⁵¹ "Negroes Too Complacent," *The Memphis World*, 25 January 1964, vol. 32 # 33, p. 1

⁵² "600 Assemble in Park Before Memorial Walk," *The Tri-State Defender*, 20 March 1965, Vol. x #19, p. 1

⁵³ "A New Picture for Memphians: Negroes, Whites March Together," *The Memphis World*, 28 March 1967, Vol. 32 #37, p. 1

In the November 1964 elections, strenuous precinct by precinct efforts by the Shelby County Democratic Club resulted in a massive black voter turnout—over 70,000 out of 80,559 registered—that placed attorney A. W. Willis in the Tennessee legislature and H. T. Lockard on the Shelby County Court, the first African Americans to win election to these offices since reconstruction.⁵⁴

In spite of this political success, Lawson remained clear about the reason blacks in Memphis had a hard time winning top jobs and positions of leadership. As the debate over schools continued to simmer, Lawson responded to the question, “Why do you think no Negroes are employed in high positions in local public schools?” by saying,

Racial prejudice is the reason Negroes are not holding top jobs in the education system. I wonder why we can't have one or two assistant superintendents in Memphis that are Negroes”. On the question of inferiority, Rev. Mr. Lawson said “Personally I doubt that Negro teachers are inferior to white teachers. This is mostly a propaganda tactic. If and when we have integration across the board we will have more quality education.⁵⁵

Lawson observed that segregation was merely a symptom of a greater problem, which in his assessment was racial prejudice. In a direct challenge to such prejudice, Lawson would run for School Board in 1967, asserting himself as a black political leader in Memphis. Lawson wanted to be part of a new wave of black political leadership in Memphis, and changing the schools was an active frontier in the struggle for a black Memphis not bound by poverty and disenfranchisement.

On August 26th 1967, *The Memphis World* officially reported that Lawson would run for the Memphis City School Board.⁵⁶ There was excitement in the air, as Lawson reminded voters of the late President Kennedy; “They see him as an energetic and aggressive candidate, admire his leadership ability and are swayed by his personality

⁵⁴ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 256

⁴⁹ “Propose Two Assistants for Stimbert,” *The Memphis World*, 7 August 1965, vol. 34 #5, p. 1

⁵⁶ *The Memphis World*, 26 August 1967, vol. 36 #9

and oratory.”⁵⁷ *The World* reported that Lawson expected a big white vote in Memphis, and on Sept. 30th 1967 *The World* formally endorsed Lawson’s campaign.⁵⁸

Lawson declared that, if elected to the school board, he would “emphasize quality education, initiate a modern schools program embracing all schools in the mid-city section, and emphasize experimentation and the latest educational form and structure.”⁵⁹ Lawson’s platform was concise because his reasons for running were concise: Lawson ran for the board simply because other black leaders weren’t running.⁶⁰ He felt that the board needed more black leadership, needed to be challenged to take segregation seriously, and as was his habit, he decided to lead by example. Though his campaign was unsuccessful, Lawson earned nearly 8,000 white votes and 18,000 black votes.⁶¹ For Lawson, the bid for the board was another way of engaging the white power structure, and the mix of black and white votes demonstrates the appeal that Lawson retained even as a militant leader.

Lawson and the NAACP Confront Memphis Banks

Working with the Memphis NAACP in 1965, Lawson challenged and confronted the discriminatory hiring practices of Memphis’ downtown banks and financial institutions. NAACP leader Dr. Vasco Smith Sr. outlined the significance of the bank protests, saying that the banks would be picketed “Because of their discriminatory practices in hiring

⁵⁷ “Young Voters to Give Rev. Lawson Support,” *The Tri-State Defender*, 16 September 1967, vol. xvi #46, p. 1

⁵⁸ *The Memphis World*, 22 September 1967, p. 1

⁵⁹ *The Tri-State Defender*, 4 October 1967, vol. xvi # 48

⁶⁰ James M. Lawson, interview by author, 16 July 2007

⁶¹ *The Memphis World*, October 1967

Negroes' despite the fact that (Negroes) have deposits with them.”⁶² *The Memphis World* reported that “the banks are a target primarily because they refuse to employ Negroes as tellers, cashiers and clerks.”⁶³ Dr. Smith further stated that “The Negroes public attitude in this protest... will largely determine whether today's children will be gainfully employed tomorrow or will have to settle for work as maids, messengers, chauffeurs, yard boys, or other lesser paying jobs.”⁶⁴

The Tri-State Defender reported on April 20th that

Marchers assembled at Clayborn Temple AME church for pep talks and the distribution of posters at noon, and then marched to the downtown on a route which carried them by all of the leading banks... Approximately 40 participated in the inside demonstrations at Leader Federal, and police diverted traffic around Madison Ave.⁶⁵

Leader Federal Loan and Savings Association was subjected to stand-ins and participants from the NAACP and Intercollegiate youth council marched on the Manhattan Branch of Union Planters.⁶⁶

Lawson led the stand-ins at First National, Leader Federal and Union Planters banks, which were an almost instant success. Lawson called the demonstrations the most successful yet.⁶⁷ He recalls that “The bankers panicked, and (they) wanted to immediately sit down and talk about it.”⁶⁸ After the demonstrations, *The World* reported that “In a joint statement last week, officials of banks and other financial institutions announced a non-discrimination policy in hiring.”⁶⁹ Lawson and others had again proven the effectiveness of non-violent direct action in re-shaping the policy of private companies. The policy of the banks had been changed, demonstrators had been

⁶² “NAACP Gives its Stand on Banks,” *The Tri-State Defender*, 30 January 1965, vol. x # 12

⁶³ *ibid*

⁶⁴ *ibid*

⁶⁵ “Marchers Invade Leader Federal,” *The Tri-State Defender*, 24 April 1965, vol. x no. 24, p. 1

⁶⁶ *ibid*

⁶⁷ “NAACP Protest Gaining,” *The Memphis World*, 1 May 1965, vol. 32 # 43, p. 1

⁶⁸ James M. Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

⁶⁹ “Decision by City Halts Demonstrations,” *The Memphis World*, 1965

empowered in the fight to change the context of their lives, and Jim Crow had been confronted and defeated without inflicting any physical harm on the bankers. “Direct action is another way to use power,” Lawson said. “As violence and war are ways of using power...non-violence is another way of accomplishing (an) end, which is the definition of power: accomplishing purpose. Only (non-violence) is aimed at altruistic change.”⁷⁰

No Bullets nor Billy Clubs Can Stop Us Now

In the summer of 1966, James Meredith was gunned down just south of Memphis as he attempted to walk across the state of Mississippi in a demonstration against fear. Having left from Memphis, Meredith was carried to a local hospital, where he would recover from three shotgun blasts. As soon as James Lawson heard that Meredith had been shot down, he called his friend Martin King. Lawson recalls that he first met Martin King on the front page of *The Nagpur Times* during his three year mission trip in India. Lawson lived in an *Ashram* in India, a village centered on and inspired by the life of Mohandas Gandhi. He studied Gandhi’s role in evicting the British from India in 1946 and worked with children in the village. When Lawson read about the Montgomery Bus Boycott in *The Nagpur Times*, he was thrilled to see an American leader effectively practicing non-violence. In 1957, Lawson met King face to face at The Oberlin College School of Theology, and King told Lawson he was desperately needed down south. In 1957, inspired by a newspaper photo of a black minister in Nashville waving a gun in front of a white mob, Lawson moved to Nashville to work with the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

⁷⁰ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

This move marks the beginning his role as a non-violent theorist and practitioner in the movement.⁷¹

Lawson and King worked closely throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1959 Lawson was appointed head of SCLC's direct-action committee. In 1960, SCLC appointed Lawson director of non-violent education.⁷² After working together for so many years, it was only natural that Lawson would call King when Meredith was gunned down. The Meredith March against Fear offered the non-violent movement a chance to openly confront the vicious violence of racism with courage. Both Lawson and King agreed that the march had to be continued. "We still had an obligation from a non-violent perspective not to allow that shooting to stop...a peaceful effort."⁷³

Lawson and A. W. Willis went to Meredith's hospital bedside and gingerly proposed that Lawson, King and the SCLC be allowed to pick up the march and continue on down to Jackson, Mississippi. Meredith consented, and the next day Lawson traveled to pick up King from Memphis International Airport. When Lawson arrived at the airport, he met King and a few surprise guests: Stokely Carmichael and his colleagues had trailed King with the intention of joining the non-violent Meredith March against Fear. Lawson recalls "I had a big station wagon that would seat 9 of us, so we all crawled into it, stopped off at my house for a few moments, made some phone calls and what not, and then we headed south to pick up where James Meredith was knocked down."⁷⁴

Lawson agreed to organize the re-mobilization of the Meredith march from Centenary's basement, so his church was designated as headquarters for the march. Lawson recalls that "I went in the morning to the march site and walked from there to whatever mileage

⁷¹ Joan Turner Beifus, *At the River I Stand*, 2nd ed. (Memphis: St. Luke's Press, 1990), 177-178

⁷² Honey, 79

⁷³ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

⁷⁴ *ibid*

we took the rest of the way. So I walked almost everyday, coming back to Memphis (to sleep) at night.”⁷⁵

Lawson understood the message the Meredith March would send, a point *The Memphis World* captures:

Editorial writers for most of the southern daily press and some of the northern TV commentators are yakking about James Meredith’s Mississippi March. They contend that the March was useless, that it had no point, that it was not needed and that it proved absolutely nothing. Well, for their information, the March meant something to the Mississippi Negro who knows how it feels to be called ‘Nigger’ and “boy”. It meant something to the Mississippi Negro who has had his hat knocked off because he forgot to take it off. It meant something to the Mississippi Negro who has felt the fist of a bully cop. It meant something to Mississippi Negroes to see Negroes and whites marching together and, most of all, it meant something to Mississippi negroes to see other Mississippi Negroes stand up to Mississippi cops without fear of getting their heads busted.⁷⁶

As a system promoting the “plantation mentality,” Jim Crow was founded on degradation, humiliation and intimidation. As a minister, Lawson knew that his public witness and theology had to be aimed at healing those wounds.

My counseling, my teaching, my preaching was all directed to that. There was a strong feeling in black thought that stretches way back that says that. Howard Thurman in his 1947 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, said the gospel is a survival kit for those whose backs are against the wall. You didn’t have any control over the hostility, but Jesus taught that you can have control over the way you responded to it. You do not need to respond with an eye for an eye. You could make a decision; you have the power of choice, not to imitate the evil, the hostility. Thurman points out that anger, fear, deception and hatred are the four hounds of hell that often will be nipping at the heels of the oppressed.⁷⁷

The Meredith March against Fear was a public confrontation of the anger, fear, deception and hatred upon which Jim Crow was hinged. Mile by mile, the marchers relieved their fear and anger in song and step. Lawson recalls that “Centenary was a church where we expressed hospitality to everybody,” and the Meredith March captures the intersection a congregation’s Christian hospitality with Lawson’s own public witness to justice.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ *ibid*

⁷⁶ “The March!,” *The Memphis World*, 2 July 1966, vol. 34 #52, p. 1

⁷⁷ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

⁷⁸ *ibid*

The March against Fear revealed local movement leaders from all around the country uniting in an effort to demonstrate that Civil Rights activists were “on the move,” and that no bullets or billy-clubs or shot-gun blasts could stop them. But activism in the movement was shifting. Marches were becoming less important as the critique leveled against the power structure shifted from a focus on de-segregation towards the internal development of communities stricken by poverty. The riots that had shaken Watts, Newark, Detroit and scores of other cities in 1965 and the rise of Black Power re-oriented the focus of the movement to men and women drowning in urban poverty. Lawson was in-stride with this shift in priorities, and perhaps made his deepest impact in Memphis through the anti-poverty initiative, Memphis Area Project—South (MAP South).

Lawson Combats Memphis Most Insidious Enemy: Poverty

In March of 1966, George C. Latham, Shelby county Director for Public Welfare said that,

Bedrock poverty is not going to be wiped out in one bold stroke...But by understanding the basic causes of poverty it can be decreased proportionately...The real cause of poverty is ignorance. As the benefits of public education become more widespread we can look forward to a day when there will be few who cannot qualify for gainful employment and more who will understand the demands they face in modern society...Eventually, however, the real need is a new attitude which permeates both the poor and the earners above the poverty level. Desire on the part of both to lift future generations out of the grip of ignorance and into productive lives must prevail.⁷⁹

By the time Latham wrote this editorial, Memphis had been struggling for months to understand the depth of its poverty and combat poverty’s effects. Beyond providing resources for the impoverished, changing the attitudes of “the poor and the earners above

⁷⁹ George C. Latham, “Poverty Feeds on Ignorance,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 31 March 1966, Clipping from War on Poverty file in the Memphis and Shelby County Room, Benjamin J. Hooks Library

the poverty level” would prove to be a persistent challenge for Lawson and the local administration. However, Lawson would prove far more successful than the local government in combating poverty and the attitudes of Memphians about the poor. Perhaps most importantly, Lawson’s methods ultimately re-shaped the attitudes the poor developed about themselves.

In January 1965 the Urban League hosted a two day Workshop on Poverty in Memphis. The conference was praised by Memphis Mayor William Ingram, “who promised to integrate committees and administrative personnel soon to be appointed to carry out government sponsored projects and programs designed to aid the poor in this area.”⁸⁰ Ingram stressed that “this is not a give-away, this is one of the best improvement projects ever attempted”.⁸¹ James Lawson helped draw up these suggestions from the conference attendees:

1. That all efforts be made to spread the news of anti-poverty projects and programs among the really poor.
2. That Negroes be a part of committees and personnel responsible for planning and operating anti-poverty projects
3. That people residing in poverty pockets be included on advisory committees working with sponsors on the war on poverty.

Ingram promised that “representation in the war on poverty would come from pockets of poverty” from all around the city.⁸²

By 1965, the Federal War on Poverty was picking up steam. Tennessee Congressman George Grider reported that 61 cents of every dollar would be spent on space research and military, 5 cents would be spent for veterans, 12 cents would go to war debt, and 22 cents would be dedicated to the many services demanded by this nation

⁸⁰ Successful 3-Day Workshop Staged By Urban League,” *The Memphis World*, January 1965,

⁸¹ *The Tri-State Defender*, 13 February 1965, vol. x. no. 15
79 ibid

that is “restless, growing, and full of hope.” (e.g. the War on Poverty)⁸³ But trouble was brewing in the Memphis anti-poverty program. At a workshop on anti-poverty efforts in Memphis hosted by LeMoyne College in February of 1965, the NAACP demanded that African Americans be placed on the board of anti-poverty efforts.⁸⁴ This was the first of what would be a line of complaints from the NAACP regarding representation in local poverty efforts.

By August 1965, complaints of under-representation on the anti-poverty committee had reached a boiling point. Baxton Bryant, executive director of the Tennessee Council on Human Relations, said “there are two ‘glaring’ deficiencies in the present CAC (Community Action Committee)—the lack of representation of the ‘militant Negro community, and the poor.’” The Community Action Committee had been set-up and appointed by the Mayor, and many accused the mayor of retaining too much control over the committee. Bryant “termed it ‘inconceivable’ that the committee did not include such Negro leaders as Russell Sugarmon Jr., Maxine and Vasco Smith, and Jesse Turner.”⁸⁵

At the national level, the Federal Office of Economic Opportunity was quickly becoming “critical of the setup of Memphis’ Community Action Committee in the city’s War on Poverty.”⁸⁶ “Mrs. Francis Coe lambasted the setup when she resigned as coordinator of the city and county anti-poverty efforts. She charged that Mayor Ingram exercised too much control. The OEO sent down a directive with instructions for the city

⁸³ *ibid*

⁸⁴ *The Memphis World*, 27 February 1965, vol. 32 #38

⁸⁵ “Dump CAC, Insists Anti-Poverty Unit” *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, 14 August 1965, Clipping from War on Poverty file, Memphis Shelby County Room, Benjamin J Hooks Library

⁸⁶ *ibid*

to follow, saying the CAC should provide more opportunity for major public and private agencies to participate in the program.”⁸⁷

Soon, federal funding to the Memphis War on Poverty was frozen due to complaints from the NAACP.⁸⁸ Under-representation from the poorest sectors of the city was the root cause of the funding freeze. As representatives of the African American community, James Lawson and local attorney A. W. Willis had both been appointed to the Community Action Committee. But on October 4th, *The World* reported that Lawson and Willis had been pushed off the committee.⁸⁹ It’s likely this was a response to the funding cut requested by the NAACP. The presence of Lawson and Willis on the CAC was tokenism when compared with the number of African Americans living in poverty in Memphis, and as such did not reflect true representation from Memphis’ “pockets of poverty.” The OEO ruled that The Community Action Committee was a temporary body, as it did not represent a cross section of the community and was handpicked by the mayor. In the wake of his removal from the CAC, Lawson wrote Mayor Ingram:

I assumed that you were appointing me because I was pastor of a congregation in a poverty area and obviously interested in the progress and welfare of the city...I felt then and feel now that any program which offers an opportunity to serve others requires my support. The anti-poverty program is the most wonderful chance Memphis has ever had to make redemptive changes in the lives of the poverty stricken citizens. I sought to serve on the committee representing all our citizens and also seeking to be faithful to the finest ideals of the Christian faith. You know my ultimate allegiance is to God. As a person, I struggle to be a follower of Christ and to bring everything I do under the criticism of his mind and spirit. You were one of the first mayors in the country to recognize the possibilities of the anti-poverty program, but instead of encouraging a committee to work and operate with an imaginative program, you have kept the city embroiled in controversy. This will make the Memphis war on Poverty no more than a rear-guard skirmish after the battle has been lost.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ “Poverty War Set-up Here Hit by U.S.,” *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, 10 August 1965, Clipping from War on Poverty file, Memphis Shelby County Room, Benjamin J. Hooks Library

⁸⁸ Maxine Smith Papers Collection, *Executive Secretary’s Report*, Sept. 8th-Oct. 5th 1965 Box 1, folder 5, Memphis Shelby County Room, Benjamin J. Hooks Library

⁸⁹ *ibid*

⁹⁰ “Lawson and Willis Hit Back at Mayor, Blast Ingram for Kicking Them Out,” *The Memphis World*, 9 October 1965, vol. 34 # 14, p. 1

Lawson had been pushed from the committee in large part because he wanted to wage an all out war on Memphis area poverty, and he would not support anything less. Lawson was somewhat relieved at his dismissal as he did not intend for his ministry to the poor to be bogged down in the bureaucracy of racist local politics. Lawson knew that the local government would be less than cooperative in the struggle to eradicate poverty in his South Memphis neighborhood. He understood that the Community Action Committee was a bureaucratic tool designed by a disinterested administration to meet federal requirements, rather than a focused local committee with a commitment to correct Memphis area poverty. So Lawson and MAP-South and Autry Parker, soon to be MAP-South director, began an initiative to empower South Memphis residents to find gainful employment, feed their children, and develop a support network for the poorest in the neighborhood.

As Lawson recalls, MAP-South initially operated independent of the local government. Before any federal money for anti-poverty initiatives came to Memphis, MAP-South had been approved as a community agency.

We had to go around them (city and county government) to organize MAP South. We went directly to the Democratic Party. We couldn't go through our congressman who was a republican; we couldn't go through the city government because those boys said there is no poverty in Memphis and we don't need an anti poverty program because we don't have poverty... we got our grants directly from Washington DC by virtue of the process that we were not willing to yield to the superior wisdom of the white political structure, political process.⁹¹

Lawson felt that city officials were in denial about the extent of poverty in Memphis. But for Lawson and his church community, it was impossible to ignore. The *Press Scimitar* reported that the "Population of the MAP-South area is 38,721. Of these, 37,159 are Negroes, according to census figures. Median family income in the area is \$2,344, and

⁹¹ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

67% of families have incomes below \$3,000.”⁹² Noting that the poverty line in 1967 was \$3,000 dollars, the average income of MAP-South residents was below the poverty line. Lawson had an understanding of the social terrain in his community, and saw MAP-South as an effort to correct poverty in South Memphis.

In May of 1965, Lawson discussed the MAP-South grant proposal at Centenary’s May fellowship day. The title of his talk was “Community Development Aspects,” which defined the internal focus of the program: community re-development by community residents. The *Press Scimitar* reported that “one of the main features of the program would be to put ‘practical social workers’ to work in the community. These workers would be paid up to \$18.75 weekly to work with their neighbors in the war on poverty. Mrs. Francis Coe said these workers would be trained to do case work designed ‘to involve people in the area in taking more leadership in solving their own problems.’”⁹³

One of the complaints leveled at the Memphis War on Poverty was that folks living in poverty were not invited to dialogue and work on their own problems. In January of 1965, before the War on Poverty began to move forward, Mayor Ingram had stressed that the programs were “not a give-away, this is one of the best improvement projects ever attempted.” He had also promised “representation will come from pockets of poverty” in Memphis. MAP-South officials felt that these promises were hollow, so they had organized a response to poverty intended to change the attitudes of the MAP-South population as well as the material conditions of their lives. A year after MAP-South received its first grant, *The Defender* reported that MAP-South had decided “do

⁹² Alan Bussel, “Anti-Poverty Plan for Big City Area,” *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, 13 July 1965, Clipping from War on Poverty file, Memphis Shelby County Room, Benjamin J Hooks Library

⁹³ *ibid*

something about poverty in this section of Memphis, which is regarded as one of the most poverty-stricken sections of the city. The project is sponsored by the Memphis War on Poverty Commission. It is funded by the Office of Economic opportunity in Washington...A unit of seven social workers and fifty neighborhood aides are already at work in the MAP-South area..."⁹⁴ MAP-South's governing committee was composed of members appointed by neighborhood organizations, so that "by September of (1967), seventy five block clubs and public housing tenant associations were holding weekly meetings to address such issues as landlord neglect of housing and the treatment of African Americans by housing and welfare officials."⁹⁵ MAP-South sent youth to a creative arts program held at Stax Records, and combated the images of the poor in their newsletters with articles like "Myth of the Welfare Chiselers."⁹⁶

The group's focus was to provide a voice for the poverty stricken:

Thursday's [MAP-South] meeting will be the first general meeting in the city's history in which the victims of poverty will be asked to describe their situation and encouraged to give suggestions on how to relieve them. All segments of the area's residents, businessmen, ministers, professional people, factory workers, domestic servants, laborers, and the unemployed are urged to be present.⁹⁷

Lawson recognized that people suffering from poverty as a result of racial discrimination had to be enlisted in the re-development of their own communities—both as a part of restoring personal dignity and revolutionizing the context of their lives. So while Federal funding to the Memphis War on Poverty had been restored in January of 1966, MAP-South had been moving ahead independent of the local administration for nearly a year.

In October of 1967, the Memphis War on Poverty Commission and MAP South were joined together by a grant of \$364,302 from the federal government.

⁹⁴ "'Poor' Will Speak at MAP South Meet," *The Tri-State Defender*, 22 April 1967, Vol. xvi #24

⁹⁵ Green, 271

⁹⁶ *ibid*

⁹⁷ "'Poor' Will Speak at MAP South Meet," *The Tri-State Defender*, 22 April 1967, Vol. xvi #24

Washington Butler, executive director of the WOPC said that “MAP-South’s share of the grant will be about \$202,662, (and) will be used to continue present projects, such as furnishing daycare centers for working mothers in poverty neighborhoods, counseling centers, recreation, and other neighborhood projects.”⁹⁸ But for the first two years of its existence, MAP-South organized and funded itself, setting a precedent in the fight against poverty that Memphis attempted to duplicate but never could. The local government’s attempt at forming a MAP-North was short-lived, and unsuccessful.

Since block-by-block organizing was the strategy for MAP South, the group inevitably had to deal with the more fierce, angry and vocal youth in the community. Lawson reflects that many authors have been too romantically engaged with this element of the Memphis movement, often mistaking them as representatives of a positive constituency in the community. Lawson recalls that one such neighborhood youth leader, Charles Cabbage--a student from Carver High School--called Lawson when he returned to Memphis from Morehouse College in 1967.

Upon Cabbage’s arrival in Memphis, Lawson and A. W. Willis spent the better part of an afternoon and evening talking with him and few others about the young people’s plans for Memphis. Lawson recalls that Cabbage told him, “I’m going to organize a militant group.”

We (Lawson and Willis) asked questions about their philosophy and in the process of that long conversation Cabbage and whoever else was with him said that ‘We intend to organize young people and we intend to fight the system. And we will use Molotov cocktails, we will steal and cheat and lie we’ll do anything we need to do in order to change the way things are.’ (That was) The first time I sat ever with a group of young adults who said that they were concerned for change and spoke in those terms.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ “Poverty Agencies Share OEO Grant,” The Commercial Appeal, 5 October 1967, Clipping from War on Poverty file, Memphis Shelby County Room, Benjamin J Hooks Library

⁹⁹ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

Lawson told Cabbage that the militants would need to be as disciplined as the forces they were combating: the local police at first, and then the army, the navy, the marines and the National Guard. “I quoted them the wisdom of Jesus” Lawson recalls sardonically, “who has a little parable in which he said what people with five thousand troops decide to go out against ten thousand troops without first considering the cost?”¹⁰⁰ In the end, however, Lawson decided to allow these young men to work with MAP-South in their effort to organize the community. Lawson had tried to work with Coby Smith, another young militant, when Smith was in high school. But Smith refused to comply with Lawson’s non-violent program. Smith would later earn recognition as a founding member of Memphis armed resistance group, “THE INVADERS.”

At the time they were hired to MAP-South, Coby Smith and Charles Cabbage, were working with the Black Organizing Project (B.O.P.) doing “consciousness raising” amongst Memphis young people. Smith and Cabbage were hired to MAP South as block organizers, and worked on the MAP-South staff until the War on Poverty Commission (W.O.P.C.) “found (Smith and Cabbage were) associated with organizations advocating violence. Funds for their salaries were withheld by the WOPC which also sought their dismissal.”¹⁰¹ The two “were ordered removed from the Memphis Area Project South payroll by WOPC on grounds of being identified with organizations whose purposes ‘don’t coincide’ with the War on Poverty.”¹⁰² Lawson rose to their defense during the controversy because he saw the two as important allies in the fight against poverty. Cabbage and Smith were connected to an element in the community that spent

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*

¹⁰¹ K. W. Cook, “Poverty Group Learns Lesson,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 18 October 1967, Clipping from War on Poverty file, Memphis Shelby County Room, Benjamin J Hooks Library

¹⁰² *ibid*

time in pool halls and on the corner, and appeared to represent an important cross section of the community. Lawson later changed his mind about this.

Lawson and others called a meeting at Centenary on the night of August 10th to approve a hearing for Smith and Cabbage. The two had been fired without a hearing, and he wanted this discussed amongst MAP-South staff members.

Then, at 8:25 p.m., about 30 minutes after the meeting started, an outside door to the hall burst open and a crowd of Negro Youths entered. 'We came to tell these people what we want' one said in a loud voice... 'We want to show our support,' one youth told Lawson... Lawson followed the crowd outside, then stood on the porch. 'Who hired Coby (Smith)?... I did. And I hired Cabbage. As long as I'm in there, you know the battle's being fought. I've been marching since before you even thought about it.' ¹⁰³

Lawson wanted to keep the youth in the dialogue, and asked what could be done to help their neighborhoods. When "asked if MAP-South was helping the situation in their neighborhoods, several youths replied 'no.'" ¹⁰⁴ After the meeting, Lawson and MAP-South director Autry Parker asked youth for suggestions, and the youth urged more recreational facilities. Many youth complained that police run them from their yards. "We pay our rent, but can't sit in our own yard," the youth said. ¹⁰⁵

Lawson suggested that the group get organized so that they can carry picket signs for 'non violent' demonstrations to back up their demands. A suggestion by Lawson that he try to set up a meeting with Police Commissioner Armour was cheered by the youths. 'Then you can pump him,' Lawson said. ¹⁰⁶

Smith and Cabbage were soon reinstated to the MAP-South staff. According to *The Defender*, Lawson said the two were "well qualified and willing to work for the meager wages that MAP-South could offer them for the summer. (Lawson) said that he was told that they were potential 'troublemakers', but as a result of an investigation he personally made, it was discovered that 'the rumors were

¹⁰³ "Anti Poverty Group Demands Hearing for Two Controversial Workers," *The Commercial Appeal*, 11 August 1967, Clipping from War on Poverty file, Memphis Shelby County Room, Benjamin J Hooks

Library

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*

unfounded.””¹⁰⁷ The two were eventually let go, but not because of their association with any one group. Their spotty attendance, their refusal to conform to the standards and expectations of MAP-South management, and their increasingly hostile rhetoric towards both the black and white communities led to their removal from MAP-South. Lawson recalls that the two probably did not last more than six months in the program. Ultimately, it was MAP-South’s decision to remove the two from the staff, not the local government. This was key, as MAP-South was a community association governed by community members. The decision to fire Coby Smith and Charles Cabbage was not the local government’s decision to make.

Coby Smith’s comments on Memphis during this time reveal his perspective. When asked about racial troubles, Smith said:

I don’t think poverty alone is responsible for the rioting, but the black people are seeking an end to the police state society they have been made to endure. They resent handouts given them, and that is one reason for the destruction they cause.¹⁰⁸

For Lawson and MAP-South, enlisting community residents in the re-development of their neighborhood had the potential of transforming resentment and anger into constructive action and community programming. Smith and Cabbage professed a philosophy that stood at odds with Lawson’s effort to revolutionize the mentality and the social structure of the MAP-South Community, and in the end, it was Lawson’s commitment to an ongoing and viable fight against poverty and despair that prompted the termination of Smith and Cabbage.

¹⁰⁷ “Anti-Poverty Workers are Reinstated in Jobs,” *The Tri-State Defender*, 2 September 1967, vol. xvi # 43 p.1

¹⁰⁸ “Anti Poverty Group Demands Hearing for Two Controversial Workers,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 11 August 1967, Clipping from War on Poverty file, Memphis Shelby County Room, Benjamin J Hooks Library

The Lasting Impact of Lawson's Ministry in Memphis

James Lawson's witness in the 1960s reveals a militant confrontation with the "plantation mentality" of accommodation and inferiority and the political structures bolstered by such a mentality. Lawson's goal was to establish a non-violent paradigm that could challenge this attitude and revolutionize the social fabric of America. His time in Nashville reveals this sense of national purpose:

In those years (59 and 60), since I was stationed in Nashville, we had to develop a model that could stand next to the Montgomery Bus Boycott and could demonstrate the feasibility of a non-violent approach. That in fact was our intent in Nashville, it was the intent of the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference, and FOR (The Fellowship of Reconciliation) supported me in saying that I had to make an example; I had to show forth what non-violence could do. And we could not afford to have the Montgomery bus boycott as a piece apart from itself. That was a very critical decision that Kelly Miller Smith and C.T. Vivian made because Nashville became the catalyst for much that went on the rest of that decade.¹⁰⁹

But as a local leader in Memphis from 1962 to 1968, we can observe the same commitment to non-violent confrontation of the white power structure evident in his national ambitions. In Memphis, Lawson combined his theological conviction that non-violence was a dignified and socially redemptive method of social change with the practical efficacy of direct action as he confronted the school board, downtown bankers, and the white political structure. Lawson waged a non-violent war against racial prejudice, which he sought to destroy through non-violent confrontations with Jim Crow. Lawson believed this honest and non-violent confrontation of Jim Crow could restore dignity to both the oppressed and oppressor.

As a non-violent theorist and practitioner, Lawson challenged America's ideological commitment to violence. For Lawson, the maintenance of Jim Crow required

¹⁰⁹ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

violence, and our foreign policy as a nation was defined by the violence in Vietnam; but Lawson's conviction was that the efficacy of violence had never been challenged or studied. Lawson's witness in the 1960s provides a living test of the potential for non-violence as an alternative which restores dignity to those caught in the de-humanizing tangle of racial prejudice. Lawson suggests that

Violence has been an abject failure in the last 100 years. (It) Hasn't accomplished the end of racism, or the end of economic exploitation, in terms of taming plantation capitalism, in terms of ending colonialism, neo-colonialism or neo-liberalism, it's been useless—impractical. It's only escalated the violence in the world so that we have what we have today—(Violence) like the world has never seen.¹¹⁰

Lawson's critique, then, went beyond lunch counters, banks and department stores: Jim Lawson practiced humane confrontations with the de-humanizing elements of racial injustice, violence and poverty. Lawson felt violence, rhetorically or otherwise, had no place in the struggle for justice.

As a grassroots re-investment in one of Memphis' most-neediest communities, Lawson's efforts with MAP South reveal a creative strategy designed to restore hope and potential for the economically disadvantaged. MAP-South was part of Lawson's non-violent revolution, as he led a financially undernourished community frustrated by poverty and blight in a block by block replenishment of resources. In this way, Lawson established a dignified praxis for his community to begin its own internal development.

Though Lawson rejects the self-characterization of "militant," as a pastor and non-violent practitioner, he provoked and fought Jim Crow with a tenacity characterized by the fearless dedication and persistence of a soldier. He revolutionized methods of social change in America, preached dignity and humanity to everyone he encountered, and reformed the economic structures in his community to support the most

¹¹⁰ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

needy. Lawson, then, in modeling and nurturing a spirit of self-determination against poverty and racism in his community, in confronting our collective violent mentality with his non-violent witness, and in condemning and confronting Jim Crow using non-violent confrontations aimed at reconciliation, demonstrates what true militancy is about: a continual fight to achieve purpose.