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Rev. James Lawson, SCLC and COME, September 23rd 1969

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James Lawson- We were at the end of the (Muffled) march you say?

Joan Beifuss- Yes sir.

David Yellin- Yeah the summer of 1966. We want to indicate some of the things just to refresh your memory of what they are?

Joan Beifuss- Well we still need to cover (muffled).

James Lawson- Oh I am sorry, ok.

Joan Beifuss- Listen you can't be a genius in every area.

David Yellin- Yeah that is true, I am enough of a genius today. Again this is September 23rd 1969 we are at Jim Lawson's office, this is now our second attempt. Again the question, refuted trip to...

James Lawson- Yes this was the front for the committee on enlightenment on communists or some such thing as that whichever the case may be. As charged that I went to Northgate, this charge of course was one of any number that they had made against me. The charges of course are to supposed to mean that I am a dupe for communism, or a communist, or a near communist. The, in this case again the specific charge is false because I did not go to North Vietnam. The interfaith and an international team that made a trip to Southeast Asia in June and July of 1965, made an effort to go to North Vietnam but this effort was aborted, we could not get in.

David Yellin- And you were one of those?

James Lawson- Yes, the international, the European members of the team tried it as well, both from Europe as well as from Cambodia and Thailand and of course were also failed at that time.

David Yellin- What organization again was this, just the full?

James Lawson- The specific trip was sponsored by the fellowship of reconciliation of the united states and it was suggested however by the interfaith conference of peace that was held in Washington some months before that and a number of various churchmen were saying that we ought to try and get a team of people to go over and look for themselves and try to talk to all kinds of people and particularly to talk to the religious leaders in some of the southeast Asia countries and find out what their views were.

David Yellin- What was the purpose of this to seek for peace or to find out what was going on?

James Lawson- Well it actually the purpose of this trip was to really go and find out for ourselves to talk to various groups of people and pump them with questions to see what the situation is from actually being there, that was the purpose of it. We

went of course with the understanding that we weren't an interfaith group for peace and our concern was peace but we also went with the intention of seeing what the situation itself would teach us and what we would learn from talking to various Buddhists, Christian, protestant, roman catholic, pastors, laypeople and members of the hierarchy which of course we did.

Joan Beifuss- You went into South Vietnam?

James Lawson- Yes we did, we did get into Saigon and some of the outlying regions of South Vietnam.

Joan Beifuss- How long were you there?

James Lawson- We were actually in South Vietnam I think about a week total.

David Yellin- Oh so you indeed did make a trip.

James Lawson- Oh yes we did make a trip. We were away most of the summer of 65 because in Thailand we started in Thailand where we had some (muffled) with various American state department people, Thai leaders, intellectuals and politicians, and churchmen., Both western church people in Thailand as well as Buddhists and non Buddhists. I think from there we went immediately in Saigon. Where of course the state department had ordered the embassy in Saigon to make every way possible to meet as many people as we could. SO we met for example the prime minister at that time. We met a number of members of the South Vietnamese government and (muffled). Foreign Affairs people, labor people, military people, and all just a great number of the newspaper men that were stationed in Vietnam , the American newspaper men. Then we talked to students, we talked to a good number of the leaders of the unified Buddhist church and a number of the very conservative protestant churches. The archbishop of South Vietnam, Roman Catholic. (Muffled) catholic priests. We spoke to (Muffled). We went into the villages we saw some of the rehabilitation programs the pacification programs, we visited some of the villages where they had former Viet Cong soldiers trying to rehabilitate them and we visited a couple compounds like that and talked with some of the men there, interpreters and what not.

David Yellin- Was there ever a report made of this trip?

James Lawson- Oh yes there was a public report made and we signed and that....

David Yellin- When and what is it, I mean is it available?

James Lawson- I have forgotten now exactly what we titled it the report did become an ad in the New York Times set to president Johnson to Dean Russ and to (muffled) and then was sent all across the church through various kinds of publications.

Joan Beifuss- (Muffled)

James Lawson- Well in large measure I think this is correct but of course the report once it came to, once it came to the united states a lot of church groups picked it up and made it available because it was public information, it wasn't something that was secretive and we wanted it of course to be a basis for a further dialogue and discussion.

Joan Beifuss- Jim who all went on that trip?

James Lawson- Well I have to start conjuring up my memory (muffled) but as I said it was an international team. Let's see if I can conjure it. From Europe came (muffled) the great protestant, French protestant pastor and underground leader against the Nazi movement in France.

Joan Beifuss- Would you spell out his last name?

James Lawson- T-r-o-c-m-e as I recall it. From Germany came Martin Niermoher, of course German submarine Helo at that time then one of the presidents of the world council of churches. From the United States I think those were the only two men or was there a third from New York I have forgotten. Then from the American group of course there was Bishop William Crittenden, the Episcopal bishop of Pennsylvania. There was Monsignor John (muffled) from the famous Roman Catholic church in Boston Massachusetts, one of the largest Roman Catholic churches in the country in fact. His last name slips me. Elvin Hostler the executive director of the fellowship reconciliation came as staff and one of the members of the team. Wow, one of our interpreters and all was Dr. Robert Brown. Who was an economist from Fairlane Dickerson University of New Jersey and he had worked in Vietnam for the south, for the American Embassy, for 4 or 6 years in an economic aide program. He came as an interpreter with us. Oh Lordy who are these other people that went there.

David Yellin- Just to keep to our...

James Lawson- Well the president of Chicago Theological School, Howard Schomer, Congregational Christian was on the team.

David Yellin- How many black men were there?

James Lawson- Just myself.

David Yellin- You were the only one.

James Lawson- About 11 of us all total I guess, of course it had to represent Roman Catholic and Jewish and Protestant, so it was a...

David Yellin- How come you were selected this maybe an unfair question, or...

James Lawson- One reason was of course I had been a long time, I have had a long time with international affairs and the problems of peace. And I went to this interfaith conference when it was held in Washington several months before. I was one of the early supporters of the lay clergy committee concerned about Vietnam. So

in other words I, many people know of my interest I served of course I was the division of World Peace on the United Methodist board of Christian...

David Yellin- Were there other southerners or were many other people southerners?

James Lawson- I think not. I think I was the only southerner.

David Yellin- is there any, are we making anything of it?

James Lawson- That report?

David Yellin- No that there were not southerners, and only one black man.

Joan Beifuss- (Muffled)

David Yellin- (Muffled)

James Lawson- Sure they tried to make it as representative a team as possible, we had people who were supporting the war and people who were not supporting the war in Vietnam.

David Yellin- Yeah I think it is, I am not trying to read anything into it but I think it must be mentioned at this point that back in 1966 was it or 65.

James Lawson- 65.

David Yellin- Well even more so certainly the hawk attitude, I mean the (muffled) here was very unpopular. Where as in the north it was a little more...

James Lawson- Well certainly it was a little bit more critical looking at it. It really began to get its real escalation at that time and all. But that is essentially the team of course if the virtuous want to say that because I go over seas to a communist country that makes me therefore a communist than that makes a great number of Americans who are communists.

David Yellin- Even Henry Ford.

James Lawson- (Muffled) is increasing at a very rapid rate as is Russian tourism to the United States.

David Yellin- (muffled).

James Lawson- This is right and I have been behind the iron curtain but had to cancel one trip into (muffled) Where (muffled) took on in 68 because of the sanitation strike. And it so happens that this October, the end of October I am supposed to go to East Germany for a (muffled) Christian peace assembly, the political committee. And I am hoping that (muffled) happens I will go to it, And that will be my first trip behind the iron curtain.

David Yellin- To wrap that other thing up. The group that you mentioned (muffled) to include Hanoi?

James Lawson- Oh yes if we could have gotten in.

David Yellin- So that the publication that you started out here and you went on a trip that went (muffled).

James Lawson- They said I went to Hanoi which of course was inaccurate.

David Yellin- Right so but when did you find out that you couldn't go?

James Lawson- Well we didn't really find out we couldn't get in until we got to Thailand, even in Thailand efforts were made to get in and then a small group of us Andre Trocme and Bob Gilmore and myself and Howard Chalmer I think went to Cambodia and there we did talk to the North Vietnamese trade mission team that was in Cambodia at that time. We talked to a couple of members of that group and also to some people in the Cambodian government and the international commission, what is it, the international control commission, Canadians, the Poles, and the Indians make up the international team from Geneva in 1954 and they are stationed in Cambodia so that we tried to again make the effort but were unsuccessful once more.

David Yellin- Let's see Harry Ashmore went in 67.

James Lawson- Is that correct? Well several teams of people have gone on...

David Yellin- he was here in 66.

James Lawson- Of course much has happened since then including the fact now that I am a member of the denomination which has of the protestant churches now we have some 90 out people in South Vietnam working to relieve hunger, of who a 1/3 of them are from my own denomination. They are working in schools, I mean rather in hospitals primarily trying to relieve the cruelty of the war. It is very interesting that none of these people have been shot or hurt even though any number of them are in territory that is considered under the control of the central Vietnam.

David Yellin- Do you recall anything about that trip that was significant or was it?

James Lawson- Yeah, the biggest impression I got from that trip, is proving to be true everyday and that is what the newspaper men said to us. And this included people like the Time Magazine man in Saigon, the Newsweek man, The New York Times, and AP man. There was unity among them and their assertion, I had dinner one evening with the Time man and he said very flatly there was no possibility of the war ending soon. He said that the country in South Vietnam, Saigon government (muffled) of being summarily defeated because he said that they had become too smart and we were not adjusting to (muffled). I asked him then well how do we, how do you think this could be averted. His response was well, though in several thousands of troops from America, we do that quickly he said, we can stop the

defeat, the inevitable defeat. Then I said then you think we can then move on towards military victory. He said oh no, if we pull in that kind of massive support in 5 years time we could prevent the Viet Cong from winning. IN about ten years time we could get a stalemate.

David Yellin- 65.

James Lawson- That was 1965.

(Muffled)

James Lawson- That was a shock to me, that was a real surprise to me but they have been proven absolutely correct now I asked the man who was in charge of the church world service relief program in Vietnam. Man by the name of Harry Ames who was a New Zealander but was working out of New York. He served as a chaplain in World War 2 and so has had an experience of being in Vietnam for over 17 years now.

David Yellin- (Muffled).

James Lawson- Yeah this was right, well when we were giving military (muffled) and aiding Hoche Mena, he was in the northern section there which means just outside the border of China. So during World War 2 he was in and out of there and all and then he has been back in Vietnam any number of times, his family, his father was a missionary to India himself and in China he himself was a missionary for a time in china. So that he is out in Vietnam once or twice a year for the last 6 years. SO I said to him the other week, when we were there this last time, what did people think about, well I asked him, I asked him I told him it seemed to me that the Nixon administration trying to move towards a career like solution and what did he think the possibility of this was? And the people he talked to you know. He said that was his question as well and would he talk to newspaper editors and others in Vietnam the last time and they said that those Vietnamese including those in the south who were really nationals would never settle for a Korean situation. He said I asked this personally of any number of my friends and people I have known for a number of years and they said that absolutely the north would never agree to it. I said ...(Tape Break).

James Lawson- (muffled). One of the speakers at our Memphis conference pastor's school. Where he spoke on how he saw the world from similar places where he had been working and all that.

David Yellin- Ok, I want to get back here a little bit we will get back to something in relation to the trip. Was that he first time that the local Birchers the local people who (muffled) was that the firs time they attacked you publicly in that way? As a result of that trip or had that come before?

James Lawson- I don't really know if they had.

David Yellin- Or did they do that in specifically on that or did they wait?

James Lawson- Because the first organized effort that I know of their actually doing that kind of thing occurred in 68, now that is the first time I got a document about it. They were passing out. At various other times they were calling me names over the radio, I know of this because during the 67 campaign they were, when I ran for the board of education in 67 they were quite active in terms of accusing me of being communist and what not. Based in part on this based also upon stuff they conjured up out of Nashville. (muffled) I don't know any publications they put out in that day.

David Yellin- Before 68?

James Lawson- Yeah.

Joan Beifuss- When did the peace movement in Memphis start then?

James Lawson- Well I have to do some thinking.

Joan Beifuss- (muffled) Spring of 57 when there was a German professor at Memphis state who was, picketing.

James Lawson- The lay clergy committee concerned about Vietnam which was Roman Catholics and Protestants, Jews, had its first large mobilization I think in January or February of 56.

David Yellin- In Memphis?

James Lawson- In Washington.

David Yellin- Oh this was national?

James Lawson- Nationwide, and in order to try and help support that group we got a committee, a similar type of committee in Memphis that again was Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, in character. And we didn't do very much of anything except write supporting letters to those senators who were then raising serious questions about the escalation. But we did go to Washington then and go to senator (muffled).

David Yellin- (Muffled)

James Lawson- He was raising questions.

David Yellin- Who were some of the (muffled) in Memphis?

James Lawson- Well we John (muffled) of Second Congregational church and I, then sister Adrian Marie, let me see, Dr. Wax, people like Dr. Wax and Dr. Paul Tudor Jones and a number of other signed telegrams at different times. I think we sent two or three long telegrams with a lot of names on it and signed those telegrams (muffled) that it was sent to different people in Washington. Coming to meetings was (muffled).

David Yellin- That was a biracial group?

James Lawson- Oh yeah biracial. Interfaith too.

Joan Beifuss- (muffled)

James Lawson- Beg your pardon.

Joan Beifuss- Then you actually got into picketing or marching?

James Lawson- Yes then we started having these peace vigils and I have forgotten when the exact day was we did that, what year that was. It must have been, I don't think 66 it might have been 67 but we did have this peace march down Union avenue at the post office and where we did some leafleteering and we had a weekly vigil (muffled). I think that must have been (muffled) or 67.

David Yellin- Unitarians in that too.

James Lawson- Unitarians, some Memphis state people, some students there were a few of us pastors and what not but not very many maybe 15 to 20 because the peace march had maybe 75 people. But these vigils tended to attract more (Muffled).

David Yellin- And as far, the reason I know is there was a Unitarian or two I can't remember the man. He had troubles, he had to eventually leave town. I don't know if that was direct but it didn't help any.

Joan Beifuss- Well it didn't help the German professor either I can't think of what his name was.

David Yellin- I mean whatever kind of pressure it was calls and just...personal life whatever it was.

James Lawson- So, (muffled) at Memphis state that was the same spring if you remember the students who were putting out that papers..

David Yellin- That was a counter riot.

James Lawson- Logos.

David Yellin- Logos.

James Lawson- And they tried to pass on and what not hidden support of peace efforts and what not.

David Yellin- It was the counter thing to Berkeley. Where Berkeley the people were after peace and (muffled).

James Lawson- That is right.

David Yellin- They ran to the..

James Lawson- They almost lynched a number of the campus preachers we had to step in between them to keep them from being lynched.

David Yellin- They got refuge at the Catholic...

Joan Beifuss- New man center.

James Lawson- Newman center.

David Yellin- I remember the helicopter coming over and I walked on campus and I said I wonder what that helicopter was doing.

James Lawson- Yeah that is what it was.

Joan Beifuss- So the peace movement in Memphis was not too strong was it?

James Lawson- No.

Joan Beifuss- Is (muffled) the most organized they have gotten?

James Lawson- Yeah.

David Yellin- Well this seems unless you want to go on something that occurs to me that with the time table here I don't remember, do you then with Martin Luther King took up peace, was it right about that time?

Joan Beifuss- He had spoken at Riverside Church Easter of 67 or something like that.

James Lawson- It was certainly after 66. I think you have to say that Martin King for a long time had relayed international to the question of nonviolence. And he was also critical of Vietnam to in the escalation days. However of course it didn't really catch the attention of the press, that is, this is the thing. It really didn't catch the attention of the press, the press sort of glossed over it until he made the major statement at Riverside Church in a very large meeting sponsored by clergy and layman concerned about Vietnam. Interfaith group.

David Yellin- He won the Nobel Prize first.

James Lawson- He won the Nobel Prize in 64.

Joan Beifuss- That was a lot earlier. But that specific statement, was late wasn't it?

James Lawson- Yes it was either, I think it was 66 that specific statement was made. But where he, where he made it before he made one single speech on Vietnam at Riverside Church at a very large meeting that was the speech then that the press began to pick up and become aware of the fact that he has been saying that, but he was actually saying things about problems with peace quite persistently before that.

Joan Beifuss- Wasn't there pressure on him though not to make a specific statement on Vietnam?

James Lawson- Yes there were people, there were people in the black and white community that wanted him not to make, not to expand his participation and concern in the peace movement and of course when he finally did, I had to look it up and to see exactly when it was and I have it home because I have taken a lot of my stuff home. But as I recall that was 6-, that was 66, no 67.

David Yellin- I don't remember.

James Lawson- That started the (muffled) of, that started the ruckus I guess.

David Yellin- Well maybe to finish out this trip were there any repercussions or did you do anything specifically after you return?

James Lawson- Well I did a fair amount of speaking around the city. Around the country on the question of Vietnam reporting about the trip and talking about it.

David Yellin- Maybe this is the time I don't know if you had been asked this before but we discover that you are more well known outside of Memphis. Can you give some kind of a not an accounting but some of the places that you did and have been speaking in the past couple of years. I am not saying this very well but somehow of your activities outside of Memphis.

James Lawson- well.

David Yellin- Particularly in relation or particularly following your trip or that summer of 65? You are now looking up something on Martin Luther King.

James Lawson- I was trying to find something that would give me a clue as to what Martin made that statement.

Joan Beifuss- We have got a copy of that statement.

James Lawson- I do too, somewhere I have it here but I am trying to think. (Tape Break)

David Yellin- I think we could get back to the life of Jim Lawson.

James Lawson- Well (muffled) I have had a varied kind of life, growing up in (muffled) church and being involved in the youth and student movements, international student officer from time to time when I was in college automatically gave me a set of peers who knew of me. And particularly since I wrote for church publications I wrote for power (muffled) for young people and I wrote for concern which was a magazine for young youth, a newspaper I would try to raise issues about social concerns and all. And then when I went into the prison in 51, it was called the Lawson Defense Committee that had people all around the world. So...

David Yellin- Incidentally are you keeping a collection of your writings all the way back there do you have a collection of them?

James Lawson- I a afraid I don't, I don't.

David Yellin- Would it be possible to gather it, I mean somebody if they wanted to?

James Lawson- OH sure. (Muffled) Anyways so during all that period see we are speaking in different places around the country so that you know this is a steady kind of life since my early days in college.

David Yellin- So you have been, obviously you have not only kept in touch internationally (muffled).

Joan Beifuss- (muffled) Served on those committees.

James Lawson- Yes I have been an advisor to two of the assemblies 61 and 68 and I am a member of the church's society committee of (muffled). Of course as I said I am a member of the political economic commission of the Christian peace assembly which is a another ecumenical movement that has been able to go around the question of peace and get far greater numbers of people from the iron curtain countries which is one of its big values and...(Tape End)