

# Rhodes College Digital Archives - DLynx

**Rev. James Lawson, SCLC and COME, July 29th 1969**

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Bill Thomas- This is July what Joan?

Joan Beifuss- 21<sup>st</sup>.

Bill Thomas- 21<sup>st</sup>. We are with Reverend James Lawson at Memphis State Oral History Project, 1969 and this is what tape? 4 or 5?

Joan Beifuss- 6, 7. Tape 6.

Bill Thomas- Ok tape 6. Why don't we see if we can't skip through some fairly quick like perhaps the Vanderbilt thing and those years which really started you right into the movement.

Joan Beifuss- Where we left off you were down as secretary of fellowship of reconciliation and you mentioned the coming of (muffled).

James Lawson- Is that where we were last time? I don't remember at this time?

Joan Beifuss- Yeah that is where we were.

James Lawson- Ok well. Of course I think I said that the, that being committed to the whole idea of nonviolent approach came really out of the understanding of new testament the bible, new testament in particular. ION having a long time commitment to working either in the south or in Africa when I returned from India in 56. I spent the year you know (muffled) graduate school theology at (muffled) and then moved south taking a job with the fellowship of reconciliation as southern secretary. And that began then my direct involvement in the movements in the south. This was of course at a time when the bus boycott of Montgomery came to end in January of 57. As an illustration, you had a boycott going on in Tallahassee Florida that year and Orangeburg South Carolina. Then of course in the fall of 57 you had the Little Rock school situation with the 9 black students going to Central High School for the first time. I Should say of course that all of that process, that Little Rock experience began the drama that we are still seeing being played out today in school desegregation. And a drama which neither black nor white has really understood. As an example in the Little Rock situation the court decreed the slow process of desegregation. And invariably in every instance where the NAACP took suits against school boards the NAACP brought in educators who proposed a far more, a far more, what is the word....

Bill Thomas- Lenient blow?

James Lawson- No I was going to say they have proposed a far more comprehensive approach to education and they proposed approaches that kept the question of racial segregation within the context of quality education. Which the boards of education universally across the south have not done. For as a vacation always operate from the premise that racial segregation is the chief issue of the NAACP has again and again brought in the educators to come from the premise of how do we get a better

education, how do we get a better education for everyone. Which is a very interesting thing because some people now particularly among some of the young black militants accuse the NAACP and black leadership at this point of negligence and not knowing but this is because they interpret these things without an awareness of the extent to which the NAACP sought to pull in sociologists and psychologists and educators to direct their.....

Bill Thomas- Was all this in harmony do you feel reverend Lawson? The pace at which segregation probably should have taken place?

James Lawson- No I think this, I think we are still going through the drama here in Memphis largely because the board of education has simply failed and the superintendent and in are measure are responsible for this. Has simply failed to ask the singular question, how do we have produce quality education for every child, black white blue green and what not.

Bill Thomas- Just every child.

James Lawson- Right, period. And then to work out a comprehensive program that will involve every child. Instead of that they have said we can't have black children and white children in school together. We can't do it this way, we can't have black teachers and white teachers working together as teachers. The net result of this therefore, it continues to have trial and error and stress and the result is not better education. Because the teacher transfer program, of today for example, you transfer the best black teachers, in fact teachers who talk to me have said that the teachers with masters degrees are the ones being transferred out of black schools and into black schools. In reality you see they ought to eliminate a racial tag on the school.

Joan Beifuss- This isn't a lottery?

James Lawson- No, it is not that impartial because as I say the teachers who have talked to me have indicated tot eh people who were moving out were the people taking the ones out of their schools are the people with master's degrees. Of course that has been going on for some time, they have not placed a comparable, t hey have not placed comparable people in the schools and this is true also in the county. The people, the negro teachers they transferred to white schools first were the best teachers, at least from the point of view of qualifications and all and they did not replace them with a white teacher of a comparable level. It is the same old game you see that has been played elsewhere not just in the south. Well anyway that is sort of a digression but in any case this brought mw to direct involvement in the whole southern movement which in a sense was at its beginning. So I traveled extensively, some of the first, not some of the first work shops, the first workshops on nonviolence, calling negros essentially to movement in places like Nashville, Little Rock, Memphis, Jackson Mississippi, Columbia South Carolina. Charlottesville Virginia, Aniston Alabama, Savannah Georgia, I led and conducted and sponsored always of course by some local group or some local people.

Bill Thomas- The, excuse me the one in Memphis was that the time of the bus thing basically?

James Lawson- No, I ma not sure of the year now, it was either 58 or 59 and it was the summer and it was actually done through John Nickel and Peter Cooper at Lemoyne and Margaret McCullough. Those were the ones with whom I worked as I recall.

Joan Beifuss- Who is Margaret McCullough?

James Lawson- She was a former teacher at Lemoyne and she still lives here, she is a sociologist, long time activist in the south in one way or another.

Joan Beifuss- Where were you headquartered when you were traveling around the south?

James Lawson- In Nashville, I lived in Nashville, and worked out of Nashville. I think that was the summer of 59 I did this workshop in Memphis. Not absolutely certain about that.

Bill Thomas- Nonviolence tactically had become pretty well foreseen had it?

James Lawson- Oh no, no, this was again one of the errors going on today. Nonviolence has never really been accepted as such as either tactically or philosophically. The same question that you get now from among young people about nonviolence, I got them 10 years ago from old and young, very same questions. There has never been an acceptance of the nonviolent approach and this is one reason I tend to dismiss those commentators who say well you know the negro accepted nonviolence once and now he doesn't. This is nonsense. King as the symbol of this was never really accepted by black leadership essentially. And I can document this and I am going to.

Bill Thomas- Roy Wilkins and..

James Lawson- Sure. In 57 when he won the Spring Iron medal from the NAACP he urged the board the national board to become the vehicle for direct nonviolent action and the board declined. I find it ludicrous now that Roy Wilkins always says that the NAACP remains committed to nonviolence. And what he means by that is precisely what then John Killin's the black novelist means when he says that nonviolence is passivity. Or what Leroy Jones means when he says that nonviolence is the status quo which is not what, obviously not what...that is precisely (muffled) even then see. So for Wilkins to make this kind of statement is extremely misleading.

Bill Thomas- Reverend Lawson how about you yourself in terms of nonviolence and the movement even at this point did you think that these two things would harmonize and blend?

James Lawson- What do you mean?

Bill Thomas- Well at that time in the movement I think really the nonviolence as you say really hadn't gotten in the form of any acceptance and you were going around...

James Lawson- And organizing the workshops sure.

Bill Thomas- And this would have been...

Joan Beifuss- Excuse me where you able to do this because Montgomery had been successful, if Montgomery would have failed would it have set back the idea?

James Lawson- Oh I am sure, I am sure that if Montgomery had failed then possibly the time may not have been as ripe. But I think that, I think the impact of 50,000 negroes acting together as they did for such a long period even if they had failed would have probably still left a lot of people still grasping for that time of approach. It would have still been a watershed of movement in the country. Which is another thing, when you read most commentators on how the modern period began they always date it from May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1954. And I maintain that is not true no matter that being an important date, that court decisions do not cumulate popular movements. Well sure primarily they educated and the leadership to become aware of court decisions. What promotes people waking up and moving is direct confrontation on their level and Montgomery was much more than the Supreme Court. I mean Montgomery was 50,000, the busses emptying for everyone to see it all over the world. And people walking everywhere and everyone seeing it. And articulate spokesmen holding them together and enabling him to walk through various kind of obstacles. That is a far more direct confrontation with the ordinary person, than the fact that 12 justices, or 9 justices rather in Washington voted for a supreme court decision. This is precisely one of the reasons why so many of the supreme court decisions are so badly misunderstood by the masses. The misconceptions of what the supreme court has said on issue after issue. Because that is primarily a pursuit, those people have some degree of ability to read and understand what they are saying.

Joan Beifuss- Now during this period of workshops, this fellowship of reconciliation were meeting directly with SCLC?

James Lawson- Yes, right we worked very closely and in cooperation with SCLC in fact, there is a lot of this history the people don't know, for example the people are unaware of the fact that the first, that when the Montgomery boycott began, Martin King called the National Council of Churches to ask for help, who are the people who can help us in terms of teaching and training and the National Council got in touch with Bayard Ruston F.O.R., so that right away then Bayard Ruston went to Montgomery and Glenn Smiley of the fellowship of Reconciliation and these men did all the workshops in Montgomery during that 55, 56, and were involved in all the planning of strategizing and what not with Martin King and Ralph Abernathy and others. So King and Abernathy then began to get some of their training from people like Smiley and Bayard Ruston. Now this isn't that commonly known but that is the reality of the matter.

Bill Thomas- And then you yourself reverend Lawson you came in...

James Lawson- Yeah I came in 57 and I did some of the same things the first year I was involved with...from that time on from 57 on I spoke at every SCLC convention, led workshops, did staff retreats, institutes for SCLC and what not from that time on.

Bill Thomas- And your primary job now then was what?

James Lawson- In this period we are talking about.

Bill Thomas- Yes.

James Lawson- I was southern secretary for the fellowship of reconciliation.

Bill Thomas- But now...

James Lawson- Which meant a variety of kinds of hats but essentially it was to try to move in the various crisis situations and to help spread the whole idea of nonviolence., of the nonviolent approach for social change.

Bill Thomas- I think probably the purpose of this is basically in reference to Dr. King's statement when he came here, very early and referred to you as probably the master of nonviolent technician of tactics. SO I am trying to pinpoint that, why he would have said that.

James Lawson- Yeah well that is the basic reason because from 57 on we worked, I worked in a great variety of ways with SCLC inside and outside. Cooperative positions and (muffled) volunteer staff.

Joan Beifuss- How big of a staff would the fellowship have had down here in that period?

James Lawson- I was the only one, I was the southern secretary.

Joan Beifuss- You didn't have any helpers of anything?

James Lawson- No. Well I could always get Glenn Smiley to come when I wanted him. Of course for workshops we always try to get a variety of people in for workshops. And institutes and staff retreats. And in fact when Martin King and Ralph and one or two others fell out with Bayard, you know there were some problems there, I again brought Bayard back in for workshops with SCLC. Reconciliation had to take place.

Bill Thomas- That was a job.

James Lawson- Yes. So, I mean you know.

Bill Thomas- Were you at some point you mentioned volunteer staff member of SCLC was that (muffled) the capacity or what?

James Lawson- No, they at one time I was director of nonviolent education for SCLC. This is probably when, oh 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66. And in 67 I did workshops for them again.

Joan Beifuss- Well does that put you on SCLC staff?

James Lawson- I was then receiving some, you know I was receiving a per diem and influx of expenses as well.

Bill Thomas- And you were doing most of the nonviolent training at that time?

James Lawson- I would say most of it, and in some of those years I did most of it and some of those years I did, I was working probably 50% of my time with SCLC.

Bill Thomas- Were you working out of Atlanta then?

James Lawson- No Nashville. Still.

Bill Thomas- I see. So I think we may be getting away from ourselves we want to know about Vandy right?

Joan Beifuss- No back to the beginning the sit in movement.

James Lawson- Well in 58 then I enrolled at Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

Joan Beifuss- You are still working full time?

James Lawson- I am still working but then I moved over during school year time, academic time, I start moving over to part time. I would work part time for SCLC, FOR rather. And one of the things that I said we would do is we would try to bring about a movement in Nashville and so I worked closely then with SCLC the affiliate in Nashville.

Joan Beifuss- Who was head of SCLC in Nashville?

James Lawson- That was Keller (muffled) Smith at that time. And we had workshops in the spring of 58 as I recall. In Nashville the first time. In any case, sometime in 58 we also made the decision, sometime in 58 or 59, that we were going to begin to try to work in the downtown area of Nashville for changing some of the signs of segregation and all. So in the fall of 59 we conducted a series of workshops, which were training workshops again. Where we included students and adults incidentally included among those students were Jim Bevel, Diane Nash, Bernard Lafayette, Marion Berry, John Lewis, two of those names became chairman of SNICK. Jim Bevel of course and Bernard Lafayette are on SCLC staff and Diane was on the staff for a time, a SNICK staff person. We were going to begin in the restaurants, so what we did was have workshops in the fall of 59 and then we would send people to restaurants downtown to test their training.

Joan Beifuss- What college are they coming out of?

James Lawson- They came out of American Baptists theological school, Fisk and we had one or two from Tennessee state.

Bill Thomas- Where was Bevel at?

James Lawson- Bevel was at ABT American Baptist Theological School in Nashville, John Lewis was too and Bernard....

Joan Beifuss- Are you (muffled) by this time?

James Lawson- Yes, so we had these workshops and training sessions and then of course the Christmas break came and we said well right after we get back we will start the effort in concert downtown. I have forgotten how I got involved, I got involved somewhere else in January and then went back to it and was out most of the time, but in the mean time February 1<sup>st</sup> the sit ins began in Greensboro and the 4 students sat in and a number of us began calling across the south, this isn't commonly known, Doug Moore who was a Methodist ministers in North Carolina, began to get people together in North Carolina, Ella Baker who was then executive director of SCLC. And I and one or two others, the result then was that I called together quickly some of these students that we have been working with and we had a meeting at Fisk which about 75 people showed up and we planned demonstrations for the following Saturday. I think that was the 13<sup>th</sup>, that was the first big sit in. We had about 500 people go down and sit in all across the city downtown. We talked to the police about it and they were cooperative and they kept people moving along and so that started the sit in campaign in Memphis. In Nashville rather. I was of course then a student also at Vanderbilt as well as traveling quite a bit. And then, it became clear to people, of course a number of people at Vanderbilt knew what I was doing, they knew I went in these hotspots all the time. A number of the faculty people knew it and a number of the students knew it. So they knew that what I was about, and in any case after about 2 weeks of sitting in, all the merchants became panicky and they asked the mayor to do something and he called in the police and the police agreed that they would do something. That we heard about this going on and we sent delegations to the police and we were told quite clearly then that if you continue you are going to be arrested for trespassing. We made it clear to the chief of police then that arresting us would not stop the movement, they needed to know that, that was up to him that he was doing it illegally anyway that if he was going to arrest us when we are peaceful we are being nonviolent but at the same time we aren't going to stop. Well he threatened anyway. Well what they sought to do then, the police then in Nashville just simply moved off the main street and let the thugs take over. Up tot his time they were keeping people moving and they let no groups like this organize. They moved off the street out of the stores so of course this began a hectic period of violent harassment. They thought this would break us up but this of course did not and when finally they saw that it was not driving us away they came in and they proceeded to arrest people.

Joan Beifuss- Can you describe some of the harassment.

James Lawson- Oh sure. A couple of instances they pulled fellows off stools and beat them. They threw all kinds of objects they put out cigarettes on the backs of people including a number of the girls, they were doing all kinds of yelling screeching and cussing and filth. And they were slamming people and they were pushing up into people. At one point a group in I recall in Woolworth's, I think it was Woolworth's had a double balcony counter and a group of fellows went in there and were systematically pulling people off of those stools one by one and a lady from the board of education of the Methodist church who was a long time pacifist, who had been an observer all along, because in these things I saw to it that we had all kinds of observers, downtown so that if we needed them in court we would have chiefly white people who knew what had happened, this is one way in fact (muffled) in other places. So, she walked up and down that counter and shamed those fellows into stopping and literally stopped them from pulling our demonstrators off the stools there for I don't know how long.

Joan Beifuss- Now what were your demonstrators doing, what do you do if somebody puts out a cigarette on your back?

James Lawson- Well, at this time we told, we of course we had preparations for this, we had demonstrations were this kind of, we had workshops where this kind of role playing went on. Our response was, our effort was to let people try to do their own thing if they could. If they could not try to respond in a fashion of turning the other cheek then essentially kept quiet and take it. But if they could find a way to open up with a person is doing it if they could see them do so. That was the kind of thing that we did, so people did various things, some took it without saying anything, and others tried to resist by talking and diverting the person. But from the point of view of our group there was no breaking of discipline in the demonstrators at no time. And the police had to admit this because when they finally arrested everyone and went into court all these cases were thrown out finally, they didn't have a single instance where they could say anyone from our group.

Joan Beifuss- How many (muffled) arrested?

James Lawson- Well the arrests, as I say about two weeks later the police after the mob couldn't do their thing then the police came in and arrested people. Well of course that only fed the movement. That only educated the black community to hectic action and we immediately called a downtown boycott then. We have got the black preachers together in large numbers and the mayor had been available and they called a meeting and they sent him a telegram saying we are going to be at First Baptist church on Monday and we want to see you there at 11:00 or 10:00 or something. Well he finally came out of seclusion and answered the telegram and said I can't make it at 10:00 I will be there at 11:00. Well after, everything over Wednesday, Sunday, Monday, no Saturday night.. After the arrests everyone was bonded out by property bonds and the next morning we had a minister's meeting and I had to go to Chattanooga because Chattanooga was having sit-ins and they had asked me to come down there. And visit with the young people who were high school students and were doing it. So I spent Sunday in Chattanooga and when I got

back to Nashville late Sunday night, I was informed that the minister's asked that I would, they selected several of us to talk to the mayor. The first part of the effort was for them to raise questions with him. Then they asked me to summarize at the end and let the mayor know what we were trying to do, what we were all about. So when the mayor got to the First Baptist at 11:00 the church was filled probably, just about every negro preacher in town was there plus a few white preachers, of course the press was everywhere and you have to understand in a sense this finished mayor West and the negro community. The negro community had helped to elect him. And so these men were irate with him. And they said why didn't he police protect our students and why did they let this go on, where were they? Why were you arresting them and you didn't arrest any white people who were in the mobs. You know they really worked them over good, well he was fighting for his political life and he knew it so he made a lot of statements such as one of the statements he made was you know I am for law and order and that is this new slogan and all. And they were trespassing on private property and all that kind of thing. So when they had finished cross examining him and they were closing they asked me to come down and summarize that I took issue with the mayor on these points and said to him you know that human rights take precedence over property rights any time and that the charges against us were not trespass charges they were disorderly conduct charges and we were obviously not doing anything other than sitting or standing. And then I went on to say you know that this is where it so often in the world law is used, I used the specific term that law becomes a gimmick to trample over the rights of others. And that when the law is used as a gimmick rather than as a form of justice from men of conscience, will break that law. And that this is precisely what took place on Saturday. They used the law of disorderly conduct and a means of trying to trample on legitimate rights of black people so therefore we took the arrest. Well of course he, this statement of course was created with a great deal of enthusiasm from the preachers and he again was still fighting for his life and so he again jumped up and said immediately I hope I didn't hear what his man said because he is calling for a bath of blood in the streets of Memphis, or Nashville. So of course that is what got the headlines that afternoon and the next morning that mayor accuses Lawson you see of calling for anarchy and a bath of blood and blood will flow in the streets and all that kind of junk. Well of course then what that meant then was that the news media then went to the old (muffled) tactic. You can't stop the movement by violence or arrests then it is not disappearing so it is not a spring panty raid. So therefore, then you start to separate. You try to blame it on agitators and communists and anarchists and what not. So that is the next tactic that began. Well it just so happened that Wednesday the executive board of the trustees of Vanderbilt were meeting in their monthly meeting I guess. On that executive committee was Stahlman, editor and publisher of the Nashville Banner and whose articles and editorials were he most hysterical. Also John Sloan, president of Cain-Sloan a store being boycotted and picketed. Sat in. Of course a number of business men were like this. Well the net result was, of course Stahlman had started an attack on Tuesday about Lawson using Vanderbilt as a base to hide behind and it was his base of operation (Muffled). Vanderbilt was providing him with immunity, I had no protection but that is what he said. So of course that he should be dismissed so that

the (muffled) this kind of stuff. So the net result of this thing was that on Wednesday afternoon the board of the executive committee without reference to the faculty of the divinity school or the faculty of the university voted for my expulsion. And this was announced the next morning by (muffled). So that is what happened, of course here again they misread the signs because when that happened it then threw in jeopardy the whole university. Because this was an academic issue and the trustees going past the faculty to dismiss a student. For no reason other than propaganda, no specific charges, no hearing. Nothing like that of any kind. Of course that meant that Vanderbilt (muffled) had done a better job than he had thought because he had been trying to attract good scholars to Vanderbilt and the net result was that he attracted a contingency of men who saw this issue very fast and made this clear. So the result of this was that the faculty as a whole of the university tried to move to get me reinstated which he didn't figure at all. When that didn't succeed then the divinity school faculty resigned in mass. And faculties in the rest of the university also wrote their letters of resignation what forced Brandstrom to reinstate me then in the middle of June was that literally the entire faculties of the law school and the natural sciences, the med school, everything but the English department which is the old fugitive school. Everything except the English department, literally over 400 of the faculty members sent a special committee with their letters of resignation to Brandstrom and said he is either reinstated without penalty or we are to give you and your medical school is gone this fall, your law school is gone. Most of your scientists are gone.

Joan Beifuss- Kind of surprising the Med School came in on this?

James Lawson- Well the only trustee we could depend upon was Dr. Morgan with the medical school, former dean from the med school.

Joan Beifuss- (Muffled) to graduating from Vanderbilt.

James Lawson- One semester.

Joan Beifuss- What degree were you going for?

James Lawson- Bachelor of Divinity.

Joan Beifuss- (Muffled).

James Lawson- 1 semester. My last semester. So, well that is essentially that picture, of course during most of that period I was working full time for FOR again and giving full time to the movement while I am not in school and helped then to organize the Easter conference of students from around the country that came together in Raleigh North Carolina and out of which then came the student nonviolent coordinating committee.

Bill Thomas- Now can you go into that since you are there?

James Lawson- Fine, while Easter of course we, with Ella Baker of SCLC myself and Doug Moore we called this Easter convention of all the people who have been engaged in the sit in movement. To share experiences and determine whether or not there were some things that we wanted to do together.

Bill Thomas- I am sorry reverend Lawson where was this now?

James Lawson- This was in Raleigh.

Joan Beifuss- Do you have any idea how many sit ins were going at that point?

James Lawson- Oh, it became the sit in campaign became really the first nationwide campaign, you had sit ins in practically every state with the exception possibly of Mississippi. Memphis didn't have very many incidentally. Marion Berry who was very active in Nashville and a graduate of Lemoyne he was doing his masters degree in chemistry rather at Fisk at the time. Marion came over here and tried to get something going and that is when they had the students who sat in at the library and were arrested, that is about the only thing that happened in Memphis, Memphis did not really get with it. But Knoxville, Chattanooga, Clarkesdale, Louisville, it just really swept across the country. And another really important thing about this outsider the south, in the south it was largely black operated and of course this is where some militants in the north get angry with me. Because I know this history too well, but in the north it was primarily white. The black students did not carry on or give leadership to the at large, because I have spoken, I went to some of these campuses and spoke, and he meetings with the supporting groups involved. And 99% white were in, the large numbers of black students even then at places like Ohio State, and University of Pennsylvania where I also went and Boston and other places. I mean they were there but even then they were not engaged and they still weren't getting the message of working, of having to get out and putting yourself on the line for social change. So, that we had this SNICK convention and of course there is a lot of junk now I have seen it in fact I saw it just recently that Martin King then tried to capture the student movement for himself and for SCLC, that is nonsense.

Bill Thomas- Well if you can tell us how SNICK emerged how it....

James Lawson- Yeah well I mean...

Bill Thomas- I assume that SNICK was not quite though of as a organization or anything when you went into this convention?

James Lawson- No, no, no. We went in the convention and of course as we began to share good Friday and Saturday it became very clear that the convention feeling was that there should be some kind of continued organization. So a steering committee for the conference was appointed and I was in fact asked to chair that steering committee. And that steering committee was asked then to go out and come up with some vehicle of continuing coordinating, promoting, what not, nonviolent direct action movement particularly among the young. So, we brought back then the proposal that we call ourselves temporarily, the temporary student (muffled)

coordinating committee. And as recall each state was to have one person on it. Plus one from the national student's association had been very supportive and one from the world student Christian federation which was the ecumenical protestant movement in the united states. Which had been very supportive and then I think there were to be 3 or 4 at large besides that ad that became, and then we immediately established an office in Atlanta and Ed King of Louisville Kentucky became first executive director.

Bill Thomas- Who?

James Lawson- Ed King.

Bill Thomas- Ed King.

James Lawson- Of Louisville Kentucky.

Bill Thomas- And what was SCLC's relationship?

James Lawson- It was a cooperative relationship.

Bill Thomas- As a sponsor or anything?

James Lawson- It helped to sponsor that meeting, but it developed right from the very beginning a cooperative relationship. Martin was the symbol for that movement even then you see and if he had wanted to you know this is nonsense he wanted to capture, if he had wanted to he could have said it and it would have been done. I mean he could have easily said I want you to become the armor of SCLC, we talked about his he and I did. He made it very clear he wasn't about to, his concern wasn't that students would become SCLC armed they could do what they wanted to do. Some incident of some nonsense about King, again this political analysis of King which I detest so much.

Bill Thomas- One or two questions I remember the snake badge at that time it was the white and black hand on the black badge was that one of the other ones?

James Lawson- That emerged later on I don't think it was at that time.

Bill Thomas- What I am wondering was SNICK an integrated organization?

=Yes it always has been.

Bill Thomas- Were there any white obstacles?

James Lawson- There were no white officers that first time, I don't think there has ever been a white officer as such because a white officer, white persons on the committee. Originally conceived SNICK was to be a democratic grassroots organization. With as I say the hope that each state, that students in each state would keep moving and they would be represented by one person on the committee and the 11 or 13 southern states and then as I say these national groups would be represented. There was only a chairmen and vice chairmen and secretary of the

actual committee and then there was a n executive director. Of course this is one of the things that changed then in 66 in the spring of 66 when Stokely became chairmen the committee became a self perpetuating committee, SNICK did.

Bill Thomas- Now what does that mean exactly?

James Lawson- That means that the national committee was no longer dependent upon an annual convention for election and grassroots groups who elected delegates you see, but rather the board or committee itself elected who was on the committee, it was self perpetuated, they lost their grassroots principle at that time.

Joan Beifuss- Early on where did you see the money coming from to support SNICK?

James Lawson- Chiefly volunteer donations which is where it did come from, excuse me, which is where it did come from.

Joan Beifuss- (muffled).

James Lawson- Yeah it never....

Bill Thomas- Did you personally work with SNICK?

James Lawson- Yes I was Martin King and I became t he first advisors to SNICK.

Bill Thomas- I think we have a copy of the charter or something like that.

James Lawson- Yeah we were the first, we were asked to be the advisors in the very beginning.

Bill Thomas- And this really was conceived as a youth movement.

James Lawson- \_Yeah it was conceived as a student youth effort.

Bill Thomas- Did the complexion of that movement change at some point and I don't know, I don't remember any time (muffled) but I do seem to recall something where SNICK seemed to become sort of militant and there was some friction or some indications of frictions between SNICK and SCLC?

James Lawson- Well certain people of SNICK saw themselves in a role of competing with King and with SCLC . I think this developed somewhere along the line. SO that there came, there developed a kind of rivalry but this isn't something that Martin himself encouraged I knew that. He in fact moved to see to it that the board of directors of SCLC put on the chairmen of NSICK became a member of his board very early.

Bill Thomas- During the marche4s there was always places for SNICK members too, doing something or taking part in some way?

James Lawson- Well not as such, I think SNICK would always come in and join when there was specific movements, the Birmingham campaign they came in. Participated

in the middle and towards the end of that and the various staff people came in and put themselves to work with SCLC staff. SNICK really in a sense became the vanguard because by 62, by the summer of 61 we were getting a fair number of students who were giving up a year in school and what not and to go into places like Mississippi and southwest Georgia and Alabama, to begin to organize people for a movement in change. It was in June of 61 that we opened a SNICK office in Jackson Mississippi as an illustration. Jim Bevel in fact, helped open that office, Dianne Nash, Lester McKinney. That is the whole beginning in fact of the operation in Mississippi. That summer of 61 of the freedom ride in fact. Then of course later Bob Moses came down from New York and moved into Mississippi and worked. Of course that culminated in the summer of 64, the (muffled) massive demonstration efforts, the freedom democratic party, all them. In fact they had their beginnings in the summer of 61.

Joan Beifuss- Before we leave Nashville, what was the (muffled) of the Nashville movement?

James Lawson- Well Nashville, we went on with the demonstrations daily, weekly, boycott, and then eventually Nashville became the first city in the south where major desegregation took place in the downtown area. I think we worked out, we dismissed every effort to negotiate until the merchants sat down with us and we engaged in some private conversations with them. Encouraged them to put a team together finally and we sat down directly with them with the clear that we are going to have no mediators that they would have to sit with us. SO this finally happened and we presented them a plan of how they could desegregate their restaurants and lunch counters and what not and they accepted the plan. Eventually. And so Nashville led off then in desegregation by somewhere around the middle of May at least. The boycott went on all that time. And the result of that was that in time then all across the south you got major desegregation in restaurants in 5 and 10 cent stores, in department stores, pulling down of signs in well over 150 cities by August of that year, that was just in the southeast now. It wasn't outside of the south. There were a lot of things going on even then.

Joan Beifuss- I remember that summer you did not go back to Vanderbilt?

James Lawson- No I went on to Boston and finished up. So..

Joan Beifuss- In the summer?

James Lawson- Yes. Right.

Bill Thomas- Any particular reason for shifting to Boston?

James Lawson- Well, a number, one is that they had given me the invitation and nothing had happened at Vanderbilt by the time the summer term rolled around and I wasn't going to postpone that part of my education any longer so I just went on and when Franscomb came through with a reinstatement he pulled the wool over my eyes in my own judgment because while reinstating me he fired the dean of the

divinity school, Trey Robert Nelson. SO I issued a statement saying that I wasn't going to return over the body of Trey Robert Nelson and I would go on to finish at BU which I did.

Bill Thomas- Then what?

James Lawson- Then of course I returned to Nashville and took a church in Shelbyville Tennessee which is of course outside of Nashville.

Bill Thomas- And this was?

James Lawson- 1960.

Bill Thomas- This was your first church?

James Lawson- NO it was actually my 3<sup>rd</sup> by that time but it was the first one since 57.

Joan Beifuss- How long had you been ordained?

James Lawson- I was ordained in 52.

Joan Beifuss- 52.

Bill Thomas- Then in Shelbyville.

James Lawson- I was in Shelbyville for about 2 years and of course during this time of course I was working extensively with SNICK and SCLC. I was chairman of the freedom ride in 61.

Joan Beifuss- I thought the freedom ride was a corps?

James Lawson- Yeah it initially began as a corps thing from Washington and by the time it had reached Alabama the 16 people were so brutalized that they voted to stop.

Joan Beifuss- They voted to stop?

James Lawson- Yeah, and we in Nashville in particular heard that and we saw that, we had a couple of students in the group and we said we couldn't let this happen. So we called Fred Shuttlesworth and told him we were coming to Montgomery and we were going to continue the ride to Jackson Mississippi.

Joan Beifuss- Did you ride?

James Lawson- Yup. So that is what we did we sent a bus load down that first that day in fact. So I am trying to think which is first Montgomery or Birmingham? Birmingham or Montgomery, Birmingham is, yeah.

Bill Thomas- Now you are talking about the march?

James Lawson- No the freedom ride.

Bill Thomas- Oh I see.

James Lawson- 61.

Joan Beifuss- (muffled).

James Lawson- No Montgomery, mother day's massacre of 61.

Joan Beifuss- You were on the bus then?

James Lawson- No I wasn't on that one.

Joan Beifuss- What I was trying to get straight this was the first group...

James Lawson- No, this was when, we took it up in the south you see. After they voted, I don't know when they voted to not, that they couldn't go on,. We said we couldn't permit violence of the KKK to stop legitimate peaceful demonstration. So we voted in Nashville if necessary to carry on by ourselves and to see to it that they went to Jackson Mississippi. So a lot of us went down for it. So then of course we, Martin King and SCLC came into it and SNICK and so then we formed the coordinating committee made up of SNICK, SCLC, CORE and some of the CORE people including Jim Farman then came on back, and rode into Mississippi and was arrested like the rest of us.

Joan Beifuss- Were you arrested in Jackson?

James Lawson- Oh yeah.

Joan Beifuss- Was there, you were attacked in Jackson too?

James Lawson- No, I don't think so, in Jackson the police were the mob. They simply arrested everyone. Now there was some harassment and brutality of people in jail. Not the county jail, but Parsnich the state prison. There was harassment and brutality there later on of people.

Bill Thomas- So did you personally have any experiences with harassment?

James Lawson- No not of this kind, not during that period.

Bill Thomas- Ok, then after the freedom rides...

James Lawson- Yeah then let's see fall of 61 and 62 that was Albany Georgia, and workshops for SCLC at various spots at various places, staff retreats, national convention. I was of course pasturing all this time too.

Bill Thomas- In Shelbyville?

James Lawson- Yeah, but I was saying I was giving probably half of my time to the movement then.

Joan Beifuss- How big a church was it?

James Lawson- It was about on the rows I think I had 60 members or something like that. We had to build a church building because their old building was falling apart so that was the main task I did there was to get them out from underneath their building and build a new building. Then it was in 62 that I came to Memphis, June of 62. To centenary.

Bill Thomas- How did that happen?

James Lawson- Of course we are appointed by bishops and the bishop wanted me, he wanted me to be in a larger city because he wanted the church to be more relevant to the city.

Joan Beifuss- (Muffled).

James Lawson- Bishop Golden was the bishop at that time and he decided upon Memphis and Centenary was the church and so he sent me here.

Bill Thomas- So this really wasn't your...

James Lawson- No I didn't make the choice, I didn't even have nay notion about it, it came as a complete surprise.

Bill Thomas- Did you have any feelings about Memphis at that time?

James Lawson- No, I came to see what was going on.

Joan Beifuss- Is the bishop happy to have a pastor like you was he...

James Lawson- Well Bishop Golden yes.

Joan Beifuss- He didn't feel you were a kind of a hot potato?

James Lawson- Oh no he is over the years we had been best friends and supporters, anything the church needs (muffled). Finger, Finger I am not sure where Finger stands at this point, he tends to be much more conservative and I don't expect him to do any harassment of me, but I don't expect him to come out and march with me like bishop Durrick.

Bill Thomas- Reverend Lawson at this time, or really I guess during all this time and I guess even now, how do you see the role of the minister. Obviously on different sides of town it seemed that the picture is considerably different.

James Lawson- Yeah well of course my own, one of the reasons that I have stayed in the local church is because I think that he whole, that in part the kinds of things that we have done here in Memphis as an illustration are the kinds of things that local churches ought to be doing that in actual fact that is a main task of the church. Is to try to develop the kinds of movements that will help reconciliation take place. And this doesn't take place you know by people pretending the problems are not there, it

takes place when we have confrontation and of course I think very clearly nonviolent confrontation is really the hope for developing the kind of soil out of which you can have the kind of society where people can live in justice and peace and all.

Bill Thomas- I think probably generally on the east side of town the feeling is that the church is probably where the minister goes to work and it seems like maybe on this level it is the point of which the minister works out of, is that....

James Lawson- Well you see, I think yeah the concept, of course my concept of the church is as a movement of people who are so called by god in the kingdom that they develop then a passionate concern for the life of the world and for the welfare of the neighbor and therefore their real work goes on not...(Tape End)