

# Dr. James M. Lawson Jr.

Module 1 | Centenary Memphis 1968 -- The Phone Call That Brought King

*"Dr. Lawson is the leading nonviolent theorist in the world." -- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., describing the man who would, fifteen years later, ask him to come to Memphis.*

## MODULE SNAPSHOT

<b>Grade level</b>	8-12 (adaptable for 6-7)
<b>Time</b>	45 min single class OR 90 min block
<b>Subject fit</b>	U.S. History   African American Studies   Religious Studies   Civil Rights
<b>Co-built with</b>	Centenary UMC Memphis (Pastor Keith Caldwell)

## ESSENTIAL QUESTION

**Who called King to Memphis -- and why did the church matter?**

Every American student is taught that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. died in Memphis in April 1968. Almost none are taught who picked up the phone and asked him to come. That man was Dr. James M. Lawson Jr., pastor of Centenary United Methodist Church on McLemore Avenue, and the most sophisticated theorist of nonviolent direct action America has ever produced. This module restores the local Memphis leader to the center of the story he made possible.

## PART 1

### Who Was James Lawson?

- > Born September 22, 1928 in Uniontown, Pennsylvania; raised in Massillon, Ohio in an AME Zion preaching family stretching back four generations.
- > Refused induction into the U.S. Army during the Korean War (1951) on grounds of religious pacifism. Sentenced to federal prison. Served 13 months in the federal penitentiary at Mill Point, West Virginia.
- > 1953-1956: Traveled to India as a Methodist missionary. Studied Gandhi's satyagraha at the source -- the same training Bayard Rustin received on his 1948 trip. Lawson and Rustin are two of only a handful of Americans of their generation to study Gandhian nonviolence in India.
- > 1958-1960: Ran the Nashville Workshops on Nonviolence at the request of Rev. Kelly Miller Smith. Trained John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, C.T. Vivian, Bernard Lafayette, Marion Barry -- the generation that would lead SNCC, the Freedom Rides, and the southern movement.
- > Co-founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960. Dr. King personally named him 'the leading nonviolent theorist in the world.'
- > 1962: Called to pastor Centenary United Methodist Church at 584 E. McLemore Avenue in Memphis. He would serve there for twelve years -- the most consequential pastorate in the civil rights era.

## PART 2

### Memphis 1968 -- The Phone Call

On February 1, 1968, Memphis sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death inside a malfunctioning garbage compactor truck. Eleven days later, on February 12, 1,300 Black sanitation workers walked off the job. Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb refused to recognize their union or negotiate. The strike was breaking the city -- and the workers were running out of community support.

Lawson was named chairman of the Community on the Move for Equality (COME) -- the strike's strategy committee. He understood immediately that a local labor dispute would not move Memphis without a national moral spotlight. AFSCME's president Jerry Wurf agreed. The question was: who could bring the spotlight?

### Lawson picked up the phone and called Dr. King.

King and Lawson had been friends since 1957, when they met at Oberlin College. King trusted Lawson's judgment more than almost anyone in the movement. When Lawson said Memphis mattered, King came. He came on March 18, 1968 -- and gave a speech at Mason Temple to 15,000 people. He came back March 28 for a march that turned violent. He came

back again April 3 and delivered, that night, the speech we now call 'I've Been to the Mountaintop' -- his last.

Dr. King was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel at 6:01 p.m. on April 4, 1968. The sanitation workers won their contract twelve days later, on April 16. None of it -- the spotlight, the speech, the contract, the legacy -- happens without the phone call from Centenary UMC.

### PART 3

## Why Centenary -- and Why Pastor Caldwell Today

Centenary United Methodist Church was founded in 1841 and has stood at the corner of McLemore and Mississippi since 1958 -- in the heart of South Memphis. Locals call it 'The Miracle on McLemore.' During Lawson's pastorate (1962-1974), the sanctuary doubled as the strategy headquarters for the 1968 strike. Strike meetings, training sessions, and press conferences happened in those rooms.

Today, Centenary is led by Pastor Keith Caldwell -- himself a former union member and a seasoned grassroots organizer who champions racial, economic, and social justice in the community. The Memphis & West Tennessee Central Labor Council already partners with Pastor Caldwell's ministry. The bridge between labor and the church that Lawson built in 1968 has never been torn down -- it is the same bridge, walked by different feet, leading to the same place.

### PART 4

## After Memphis -- 50 Years as a Labor Educator

Memphis was not the end of Lawson's labor work -- it was the beginning. After leaving Centenary in 1974, he pastored Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles for 25 years (1974-1999) and spent the rest of his life teaching American unions how to organize without violence. The labor movement Lawson built in Los Angeles is arguably as consequential as the civil rights movement he built in Nashville and Memphis.

- > Co-founded CLERGY AND LAITY UNITED FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE (CLUE) -- a religious-labor coalition that linked Los Angeles churches to union organizing campaigns.
- > Played a founding role in UNITE HERE LOCAL 11, the Los Angeles hospitality workers union that revolutionized hotel and restaurant labor on the West Coast.
- > Mentored SEIU's JUSTICE FOR JANITORS campaign -- the national fight that won union recognition and living wages for janitorial workers across America.
- > Helped lead the LIVING WAGE CAMPAIGN to raise the minimum wage across California cities.
- > Taught 'Nonviolence and Social Movements' at the UCLA Labor Center for 22 years alongside Kent Wong -- training a generation of organizers, union staff, and student labor activists.
- > Worked on the UCLA OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL CAMPAIGN, securing job rights for undocumented students within the UC and California State University systems.

*"His work here in Los Angeles has continued that process of using the power of nonviolence in supporting major movements for economic and social justice." -- Kent Wong, UCLA Labor Center*

In 2018, UCLA awarded Lawson the UCLA MEDAL -- the university's highest honor. In 2021, the UCLA Labor Center renamed its headquarters building the UCLA JAMES LAWSON JR. WORKER JUSTICE CENTER -- the first major American labor institution named for a Black pastor while he was still alive to walk through the door. In 2023, the LA County Board of Supervisors unanimously designated SEPTEMBER 22 as REV. JAMES LAWSON JR. DAY -- his birthday.

### PRIMARY SOURCES

## Read the originals

- > 'I've Been to the Mountaintop' -- Dr. King's final speech, delivered at Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ World Headquarters), April 3, 1968. Full text widely available.
- > James Lawson oral history interviews -- Vanderbilt University Special Collections.
- > Joan C. Browning, 'James Lawson: The Search for the Beloved Community' (documentary, 2014).
- > AFSCME 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike archives ([afscme.org/about/history](http://afscme.org/about/history)).
- > Centenary UMC parish history ([centenarymemphis.com](http://centenarymemphis.com)).

- > UNITE HERE Local 11, 'Remembering Reverend James M. Lawson Jr.' (unitehere11.org).
- > UCLA Labor Center -- James Lawson Jr. Worker Justice Center (labor.ucla.edu).
- > California Museum, Reverend James M. Lawson Jr. Hall of Fame inductee (californiamuseum.org).

#### DISCUSSION

#### Take this back to your class or congregation

1. Why did Dr. King trust James Lawson's judgment about Memphis more than almost any other movement leader? What does that tell us about who really runs a movement?
2. Lawson studied Gandhi in India (1953-1956) -- the same study trip Bayard Rustin made in 1948. Why did Black American freedom workers keep traveling to India? What were they learning?
3. Centenary UMC was a SANCTUARY -- a place of worship -- but it was also a STRATEGY ROOM. What does it mean for a church to be both? Can it be one without the other?
4. Pastor Keith Caldwell -- a former union member -- now leads Centenary. What does it say about Memphis that the same church is still doing the same work, 56 years later?
5. Memphis 1968 was the beginning of Lawson's labor education work, not the end. He spent the next 50 years in Los Angeles helping UNITE HERE Local 11, the Justice for Janitors campaign, and CLUE win for low-wage workers. What does it mean that a Memphis pastor became one of the most important labor educators in American history?
6. If you had to teach a 12-year-old who called King to Memphis, what would you say?

#### CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

#### Map the Phone Call

On a single sheet of paper, students draw a map showing FOUR Memphis locations and the relationships between them: (1) Centenary UMC at 584 E. McLemore -- where Lawson lived and led; (2) Mason Temple -- where King gave the Mountaintop speech; (3) Clayborn Temple AME -- where the 'I AM A MAN' signs were stored and the daily marches began; (4) the Lorraine Motel -- where King was killed and where the strike was won. Label each with one sentence explaining what happened there. Then draw an arrow from Centenary outward to show how the phone call rippled across the city, the country, and history. This is how you teach Memphis: as a map of decisions, not just a list of dates.

#### CO-BUILT BY LABOR EDUCATION x CENTENARY UMC MEMPHIS

This module honors Dr. James M. Lawson Jr. (1928-2024), pastor of Centenary UMC from 1962 to 1974, and the architect of nonviolent direct action in the American civil rights movement. Today the work continues under Pastor Keith Caldwell at 584 E. McLemore Ave -- the same sanctuary where the strategy for Memphis 1968 was set. Companion curricula: [laboreducation.org/a-philip-randolph](http://laboreducation.org/a-philip-randolph), [/bayard-rustin](http://laboreducation.org/bayard-rustin), [/bill-lucy](http://laboreducation.org/bill-lucy).

*"Memphis would not have called King without Lawson. Lawson would not have called King without Centenary."* -- Labor Education  
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