

Dr. James M. Lawson Jr.

Pastor of Centenary UMC 1962-1974 | Nonviolence Theorist | Architect of Memphis 1968

"Dr. Lawson is the leading nonviolent theorist in the world." -- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Memphis Pastor Who Called King

Dr. James M. Lawson Jr. (1928-2024) was the architect of nonviolent direct action in the American civil rights movement -- and one of the most consequential labor educators in American history. He studied Gandhi's satyagraha in India from 1953 to 1956. He ran the Nashville Workshops on Nonviolence from 1958 to 1960, training John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, C.T. Vivian, Marion Barry. Dr. King called him 'the leading nonviolent theorist in the world.' In 1962 he came to pastor Centenary United Methodist Church on McLemore Avenue in Memphis. In February 1968, when sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death and 1,300 of their brothers walked off the job, Lawson picked up the phone and asked Dr. King to come. King came -- and gave his last speech, 'I've Been to the Mountaintop,' at Mason Temple on April 3, the night before he died. Lawson then spent the next half-century in Los Angeles teaching American unions to organize without violence. He co-founded CLERGY AND LAITY UNITED FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE (CLUE), played a founding role in UNITE HERE LOCAL 11, mentored SEIU's JUSTICE FOR JANITORS campaign, and taught 'Nonviolence and Social Movements' at the UCLA Labor Center for 22 years. In 2021 the UCLA Labor Center named its headquarters the JAMES LAWSON JR. WORKER JUSTICE CENTER. In 2023, LA County designated September 22 -- his birthday -- as REV. JAMES LAWSON JR. DAY. He passed June 9, 2024, in Los Angeles at age 95.

CENTENARY UMC TODAY -- THE BRIDGE STILL STANDS

Centenary United Methodist Church still stands at 584 E. McLemore Ave, Memphis, TN 38106 -- 'The Miracle on McLemore.' It is led today by Pastor Keith Caldwell, a former union member and a seasoned grassroots organizer who champions racial, economic, and social justice. The Memphis & West Tennessee Central Labor Council 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.

The Four Pillars of Black Labor Power

RANDOLPH (1925) gave Black labor its first major union. RUSTIN (1947-1963) gave the civil rights movement its tactics. LAWSON (1968) brought those tactics home to Memphis through the local church. LUCY (1968-2024) carried the Memphis moment into a national institution (CBTU) that still defends Black workers today. Take away any one of the four and the movement we inherited does not exist.

Co-built with Centenary United Methodist Church Memphis

584 E. McLemore Ave, Memphis, TN 38106 | centenarymemphis.com | Pastor Keith Caldwell

