

Narrator: Welcome to *UMC.org Profiles*, where each month, we share the spiritual journey of a United Methodist.

This month on *UMC.org Profiles*, the Rev. James Lawson, United Methodist pastor and civil rights justice leader, shares his faith story.

A counterpart of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., James Lawson played a primary role in the Civil Rights Movement. Now retired, he continues to teach non-violence and fight for the rights of the oppressed.

Jim: I was born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. But my father, who was an AME Zion pastor at the time, was appointed to Massillon, Ohio, Saint James AME Zion Church.

... the greatest influences in my life were obviously number one, my family—my sisters and brothers, but my mother and father in particular; the church of which of course we were a part always.

My father and mother were immigrants. Dad is the grandson and the great-grandson of escaped slaves from the United States who went into a Canada. And as a very young preacher Dad returned to the United States to eventually become a citizen and to work. My mother was Jamaican. At age 18 she came to the United States with a job in hand as a nanny. And there in Jamestown, New York my parents met and there they married.

At a very early age I learned one could be treated simply because of the color of my skin on the street, in the parking lot, even on the school grounds.

And through the urging of my mother, in particular I decided that fighting with my fists and with anger were not for me the best way, that I had to learn a better way of resisting wrong and dealing with persons who insulted and what not. And so that led me quietly as an elementary school youngster into experimenting with what then later on I came to call non-violence. It was not until my teenage years that I became aware of Gandhi, especially in the Negro newspapers of the time which were always in our home. My calling in high school became very clear to me as the call of Jesus. The experiences in elementary school I came to understand as God's way of claiming my life and Jesus' way of insisting that I was to follow Him. And that became the paramount spiritual, moral, intellectual discipline of my life by high school days and especially then college.

In 1947 I met A. J. Musti of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in college. He came to lecture on the campus. And I was elated. It was a sanctifying moment for my life because then I realized there was a Christian history, a long tradition, of some people (though not oftentimes the hierarchy and the theologians and often not the pastors preaching and teaching it), but that there was based on the life of Jesus that edge of people who insisted that love was all...all embracing and all compelling, that therefore in the spirit of love and the spirit of Jesus one could not resist evil by imitating the evil, but by seeking to overcome the evil with good. So that threw me in a dither.

The struggle came as I recognized that there was a draft and the United States had just emerged out of World War II, which I, as a high...junior high and high school student supported in my youth, but that war itself was in opposition to Jesus and that I could not therefore

put on somebody's military uniform for the purpose of using arms against other human beings. I did wrestle with that extensively.

And so I sent my draft cards back to the local board and said that I would not cooperate with the classification process. That meant that in 1950 the FBI arrested me and in 1951 I was tried in the Federal Court in Cleveland, Ohio and sentenced to three years in prison.

I recognized that the battle against racism and segregation would be one of my concerns as a pastor, as a follower of Jesus. And I understood myself then as wanting one day to perhaps work in the south.

So this meant that therefore I went to prison in 1951, April of 1951. I was deeply committed at that time to find ways in which I could help break the back of segregation and racism in all of its forms.

My Gandhi studies did lead me to join the Board of Missions of the Methodist Church as a missionary candidate. And initially in 1950-51 I was accepted to go to Africa to what is now Zimbabwe to teach in a high school...to teach and coach in a high school. But the prison term interfered with all of that.

So consequently I...I wrote the Board of Missions and indicated that if and when I was paroled or released from jail I would still want to go overseas. And an opportunity came then in 1953...in 1952 rather, to go to India Hyslip College Napor, which I took. And I was there then for three years as a Methodist missionary, campus minister, helping them organize the World Student Christian Federation in India and what was then Ceylon and also as a coach, coaching basketball and football

and tennis and track and field. I returned from there to Oberlin Graduate School of Theology in 1956 ...

I met Martin Luther King, Jr. around December 6, 1955 through the front page of the Nadpor Times in India where a major story in the front page was of the Negroes marching, boycotting in Montgomery, Alabama. That, of course, was a big story in India, the land of Gandhi. And Martin Luther King was the newly selected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the MIA, which was the organization that was formed on December 2<sup>nd</sup> to become the vehicle to conduct the bus boycott that began on December the 5<sup>th</sup>. I shook his hand then around February the 6, 1957 at Oberlin College where he came to speak. And I had been invited by Harvey Cox, the campus minister, to be in the small, private dinner after his speech so that we...I would have a chance to meet Martin King. And he and I arrived within about 10 seconds of each other in the dining room. And so we visited and we discovered we had a number of things in great common—he a Baptist, I a Methodist. But most of all we recognized that we had a common commitment to soul force as the way to help the United States transform itself into a purer form of equality and liberty and justice for all. And at one point in our conversation I said that at...since the late '40s I had thought one day I would work in the south and maybe when I completed the theological education I wanted that I might come directly south. And Martin, without missing a beat, said to me, “Come now. Don't wait. We need you now.” And then he went on to say that there was not a clergyperson in the south with my depth of experience in nonviolence or my study in nonviolence. So I recognized that as another moment in which I was being called from beyond myself, by eternity. And so I very quietly, though I did not know what I

was saying, and though I did not know how this would happen, I said “I will come as soon as I can.”

The Montgomery bus boycott was still going on then. And...but felt again that I would one day work in the south. So I dropped out of school in 1957. And in January of '58 I was in Nashville as the southern secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation which meant immediately I was traveling in the trouble spots of the south ...

Along the way it became clear to me that while the Montgomery bus boycott was a powerful and effective matter in using soul force or nonviolence that we needed to demonstrate the next stage. We needed to demonstrate the efficacy of nonviolence. So with a group of colleagues in Nashville, Tennessee I joined the Nashville Christian Leadership Council executive board as the chairperson of direct action. And through many, many conversations and workshops we decided we would launch a nonviolent movement in Nashville to desegregate downtown Nashville, which meant that in the fall of 1959 we began workshops on nonviolence. And those workshops were a kind of summary review of what nonviolence was about using strategies of Gandhi, the Congress of Racial Equality from the United States, the Freedom Rides from the 1840s of the United States, especially the Montgomery bus boycott. We did a review of nonviolence from the point of view of Jesus and the Bible. We made it clear that nonviolence was not something secret or hidden, but that it was in almost every generation of the human race from the very beginning though it was not called that.

I was following Jesus in a fashion that was consonant with the spirit and the heart that I had met across the years through the scriptures and elsewhere. So the clear part of spiritual development is the notion that if you try to stand for the truth and for the right, if you stand with love, there are times when of course you will be persecuted and harassed. And there are times where, in fact, you can be jailed and expelled from school. So the expulsion from Vanderbilt took place as that movement hit its power and its stride in February and March of 1960 in Nashville. My expulsion from school was without a hearing, no due process, though I was a graduate student in the school of religion and a student in very good standing.

I saw Martin the last day of his life, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968 at the Lorraine Motel on two occasions.

... I was in Memphis at that time as pastor at Centenary Methodist Church and happened to be chairman of the strategy committee for the sanitation strike. The strategy committee was the community union committee that worked together and managed, basically, the entire strike. The community had asked me to be the chair. So I did.

By that time I had come to sense that Martin King was God's extraordinary prophet for that part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States if not the world.

He was a marvelous friend and brother.

He was a man who loved to sing, to dance, to eat, to preach, to teach. He loved athletics. On our staff retreats we played basketball or

football—touch football. We went swimming, walked the beaches. So he was an ordinary man who accepted an extraordinary calling and did that with great faithfulness.

I remain one who wrestles with what it means to follow Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is my personal journey. It's my journey...continuing journey in the community of faith.

I think the Wesleyan message, John Wesley's notion of mission and his being captive to the love of God as an overwhelming, transforming power in his life that called him to join God in transformation of the earth, is witness to the power of the Scripture and reason and its tradition and experience, to me, I think this is a form of Christianity that the world desperately needs. It's one of the reasons why I am a Methodist and remain a Methodist ...

Narrator: Our thanks to Rev. Lawson for sharing his faith story with us.

This month's profile was produced by Matt Carlisle; interview by Tom McAnally; editor was Lane Denson; audio engineering by Profound Sound. I'm Hilly Hicks and Profiles is brought to you by UMC.org, the official web site of the United Methodist Church, and a ministry of United Methodist Communications.