

The men and women on the wall

At first the framed photos of my predecessors seemed creepy. But without them I wouldn't have learned an inspiring story.

by [Darian Duckworth](#)

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When I arrived at Grace United Methodist Church in Natchez, my first appointment out of seminary, I couldn't avoid my predecessors.

Outside of the pastor's study was a wall covered with photographs of every pastor who had served the church since its founding. Identical frames with identical matting only varied in the engraved names, dates of service, and photographs within. Every time I walked by, I felt that they were staring at me. I felt like their eyes followed me no matter where I stood or walked.

It was creepy, but gratitude for my own office outweighed the trepidation of the wall of fame. With time, their photos became helpful in establishing timelines in the church. The men and woman who at first intimidated me soon became a valuable resource for learning the congregation.

There is no question which name I heard the most: Bernard Walton, who served 1974-1984. I looked at his photo so much that the dates are as engraved in my memory as they were on that frame. "Brother Walton" served longer than any other pastor at Grace, and the stories I heard were of a beloved, kind pastor devoted to his flock. One day in the hallway, an elderly congregant pointed to one photo after another and told me stories. I expected her to pause and smile at Brother Walton, but instead she pointed to the photo of the pastor who immediately preceded him: James Conner. Quiet, with tears in her eyes, she eventually said, "He was good. He was very good."

It was the first time since I arrived that anyone had specifically named James Conner. Even though he served the church for five years, I felt like he was lost in Brother Walton's ten-year shadow. The woman's short, emotional comment let me know that Conner was not a shadow but rather a light in his own way.

I did not learn the story of the light that James Conner was until years after I'd left Natchez. In 1963, he was one of 28 white Methodist ministers in Mississippi to sign the "Born of Conviction" statement, a declaration against racial discrimination and segregation. Of those 28 ministers, eight chose to stay and serve in Mississippi in the years that followed. James Conner was one of the eight.

In his brilliant, carefully-researched book, [*Born of Conviction: White Methodists and Mississippi's Closed Society*](#), Joseph T. Reiff offers a history of the statement, the stories of those who signed and supported it, and a picture of the turbulent context where it emerged. All of the signers faced anger and fear for the stand they took, and Conner was not immune to those negative reactions. Even though he looked into opportunities to leave the state, he felt that God had called him to stay in Mississippi, even if it would be more difficult. Six years after signing the statement, he and his family moved to Natchez to serve Grace Church. His photo went on the wall. And he left behind a legacy that was "good ... very good."

It is important to remember with thanksgiving not only who the men and women on the wall are but also what they did to "share the gospel." For five years, little did I know that one set of eyes staring at me from the wall belonged to someone who saw what was unjust, named it, and kept on walking in love. Little did I know that everyday I walked into the church building, I was following such "good, very good" footprints.

Little do we know all the stories of sacrifice that have preceded us in the church. Let's not be afraid of those who have gone before us. Let's learn their stories. Let's tell their stories. Let's live the story that unites us: we, as all God's children, must be born of conviction.

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