

James Lawson, pastor and nonviolent activist, dies at 95

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James Lawson Jr., known as "the architect of the civil rights movement," talks about Black Lives Matter and nonviolent protest during a break from teaching at the Proctor Institute in Clinton, Tennessee, in 2016. (File photo by Mike DuBose, UM News)

James M. Lawson Jr., who made it his life's work to create a nonviolent nation, died June 9 at age 95.

Lawson, the son and grandson of Methodist pastors, received his local preacher's license in 1947 when he graduated from high school. He was introduced to the nonviolence teachings of Gandhi when he joined the [Fellowship of Reconciliation](#), the

United State's oldest pacifist organization, during his college days. He spent three years in India as a missionary.

Lawson introduced the principles of Gandhian nonviolence to young leaders of the 1960s civil rights movement. In his training of pastors, Lawson said, "Gandhi was not our major teacher, Jesus was."

Ashley Boggan D., top executive of the United Methodist Commission on Archives and History, said Lawson's pacifist influence within Methodism was unmatched.

"Jim Lawson taught 20th-century Methodists how to do nonviolent protest," she said. "A lot of Methodist women were doing protests in different ways, but I would say Jim Lawson taught Methodists how to do public acts of nonviolent protest."

While a pastor at the Centenary Methodist Church in Memphis, Lawson invited Martin Luther King Jr.—who once called Lawson "the leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence in the world."—to support their efforts in the 1968 sanitation workers' strike. King delivered his "Mountaintop" speech on the eve of his assassination.

Lawson served as pastor of Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles from 1974 until his retirement in 1999. He remained on staff as pastor emeritus until his death.

In 2023, James Lawson High School, named in his honor, opened in Nashville, Tennessee, and the following year, a portion of Adams Boulevard in South Los Angeles was named [the Reverend James Lawson mile](#).

In a 2022 interview, Lawson reflected on the power of peace.

"One of the things that Gandhi taught me, by my study and research, is that nonviolent power is the creative power of life itself and the power that produced our universe and human life." —United Methodist News