

## From James M. Lawson

3 November 1958  
Nyack, N.Y.

*In February 1957 King gave a series of talks at Oberlin College where Lawson, recently returned from a three-year stay in India, was pursuing a master's degree.<sup>1</sup> At a luncheon following King's first address, the two men discussed their mutual interest in Gandhian nonviolence and civil disobedience. Impressed by Lawson's background,*

---

1. James Morris Lawson, Jr. (1928–), born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, earned his A.B. (1951) from Baldwin-Wallace College. A member of FOR since 1947, Lawson spent almost a year in federal prison for refusing to register for the draft during the Korean War. Upon his release in 1953, Lawson spent three years in India as a Methodist missionary, where he studied Gandhi's life and principles. In the fall of 1956 Lawson enrolled at Oberlin College's School of Theology but left at the end of 1957 to work for FOR in the South. He enrolled in Vanderbilt University's Divinity School and conducted workshops on civil disobedience and Gandhian principles that attracted Nashville-area college students. Lawson's teachings helped bring about a student protest movement in that city, characterized by widely publicized sit-ins targeting segregated restaurants and theaters. After being expelled from Vanderbilt for his involvement in the sit-ins, Lawson received his S.T.B. (1960) from Boston University. In 1960 he became director of nonviolent education for SCLC, a post he held until 1967. Lawson also served as an advisor to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1960 until 1964. In 1968 Lawson advised a group of striking black sanitation workers in Memphis; he invited King to Memphis to help in the strike.

*King encouraged him to come South without delay; Lawson followed King's advice and went to work as a southern field secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> Lawson enclosed in this letter a 30 October report on the racial situation in Birmingham that he had prepared for Will Campbell of the National Council of Churches.*

3 Nov  
1958

Dr. Martin L. King, Jr.  
Dexter Avenue Baptist Church  
Decatur Street  
Montgomery, Alabama

Dear Martin:

It is good to know that you are back in Montgomery again and see from your statement from the early part of this month that your recent experience in New York has served only to strengthen your Christian life and understanding.<sup>3</sup> I, like everyone else, was quite shocked to suddenly hear of this incident. The more I thought of it, however, the more it seemed to me somehow that this was God's way of speaking to you. It convinces me further that he has great plans for you in the achieving of a beloved community in our time. Rest assured of my continuing prayer and high regard for you.

I have just returned from Birmingham and thought that you would be interested in the enclosed report made for Will Campbell and Glenn Smiley.<sup>4</sup> The National Council of Churches paid my expenses to the city on Monday in order to have a first-hand observation on the tensions there. As I suggest in this report we may be on the threshold of a major breakthrough in Birmingham. However, so much of this is dependent upon the unity of the leadership. I suspect that Fred Shuttlesworth, in spite of his great courage and drive, is in real need of personal counseling which probably can only come from you.

I have no new word on Little Rock.<sup>5</sup> On my last visit there, a committee was organized with the intention of exploring the possibilities of a non-violent method

---

2. Lawson later recalled the visit: "I told him that ever since college I had planned to come south and work, and he said something like 'Come now, come immediately. We don't have anyone with your background in the South,' meaning that they didn't have a black man, and black clergyperson, with nonviolent background like mine. . . . I told him quietly that I would, that I would make arrangements to get my schedule in place and do it as quickly as I could" (Lawson, Interview by King Papers Project staff, 23 November 1998).

3. Lawson may refer to King's 24 October statement upon returning to Montgomery, in which he said: "Every situation, no matter how trying, helps us understand the truth that God has urged us to seek. . . . I believe that I have sunk deeper the roots of my conviction that nonviolent resist[ance] is the true path for overcoming injustice."

4. On 27 October Lawson arrived in Birmingham to address a mass meeting sparked by the previous week's arrest of fourteen local ministers for violating Jim Crow bus practices. In his report Lawson described many positive aspects of the mass meeting, but noted some "disturbing . . . indications that ministers were unprepared to deal with the situation in spirit of Christian Non-violence." Lawson also noted that local leaders were considering a bus boycott if negotiations with the bus company did not bring "genuine changes" in the seating policies (Lawson, Memo to Will D. Campbell, 30 October 1958; Ted Poston, "Negro Leaders Held Incommunicado in Ala.," *New York Post*, 27 October 1958).

5. Smiley had written King on 31 July about the possibility of holding an institute on nonviolence in Little Rock. King replied with some interest on 7 August, but in a 19 August letter Lawson informed King that the proposed workshop had been postponed: "The affairs of the Negro community in Little

3 Nov 1958 of speaking to the conscience of that city. I have not had a recent report on that committee or any progress made with this idea. I go this weekend to conduct a workshop on Christian non-violence sponsored by LeMoyne College for the entire community.

Although you were greatly missed at the Norfolk meeting of the SCLC, I personally felt that it was a very fine session. The men raised real questions concerning non-violence and some seemed deeply committed to the discipline and study of it. I have been convinced for nearly 12 years now that the only hope for the Negro in this country is a genuine movement of non-violence which reflects many of the characteristics of the Montgomery boycott and which strikes not only at the fear of the Negro but also at the power structure of the nation which continue to perpetuate social injustice. If this is to happen it will be because of the ministry uniting as one body and giving initiative leadership to the countless number of Negroes who urgently want such leadership.

I trust that your recuperation will continue and that you will soon be again engaged in your ministry and in the south-wide task of reconciliation.

Cordially yours,  
[*signed*] J. M. Lawson, Jr. ddw  
J. M. Lawson, Jr.

Enclosures

THLSr. MLKP-MBU: Box 25.

---

Rock are so divisive, that they are fairly well paralyzed. An example of this is that some people feel that if you come to Little Rock for such a workshop it will only cause friction."