Students, Clergy, and Nonviolent Direct-Action:
The Forces Behind the 1960 Nashville Sit-Ins

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To my grandmother, Agustina Justa Katz de Czarny—
My most beloved teacher

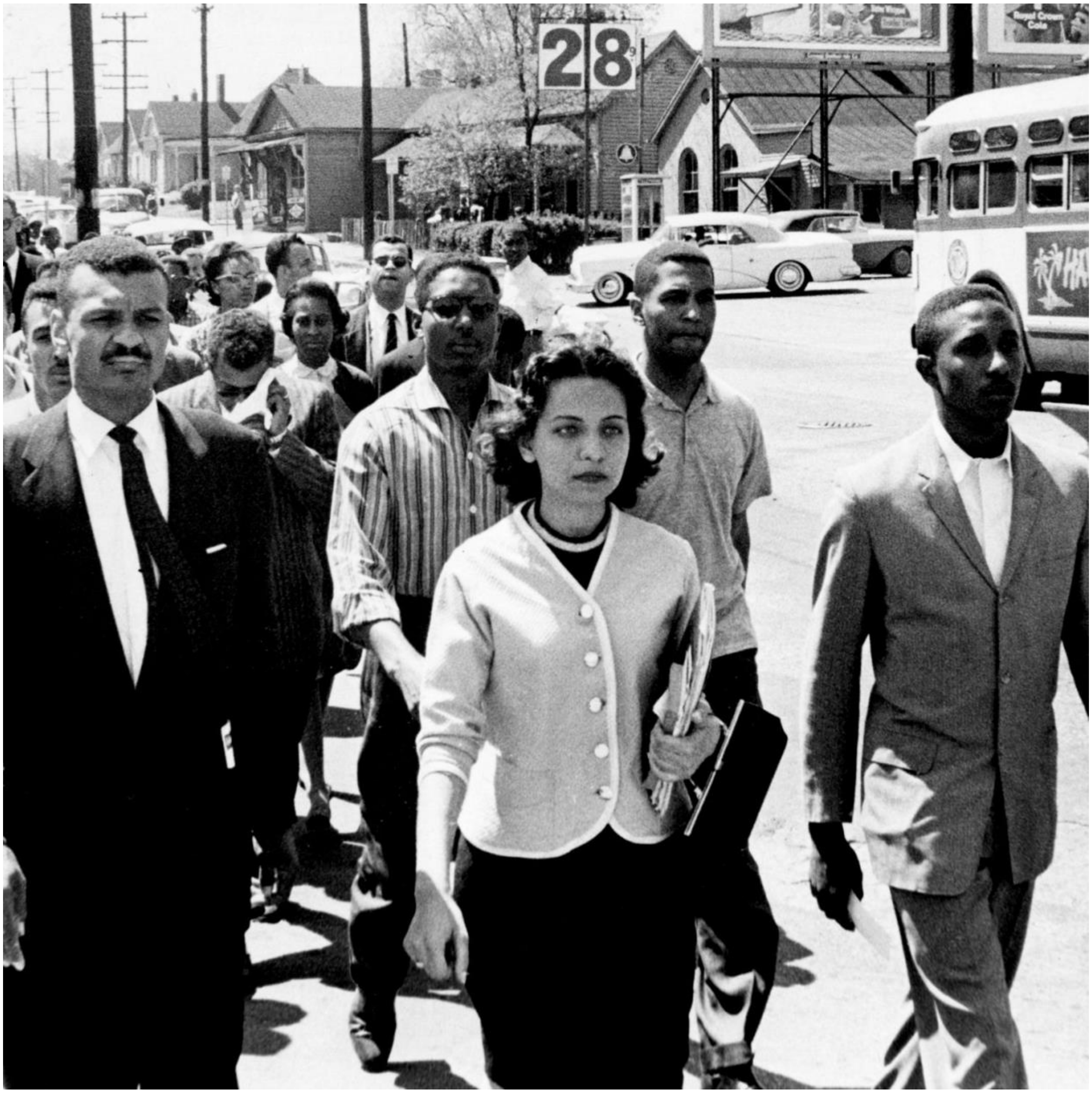

Image: Diane Nash and other Nashville students marching downtown for a sit-in.[1]

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[1] Samuel Momodu, *Nashville Student Movement (1959-1964)*, 1960, black and white photograph, 1513 x 1513, BlackPast, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/nashville-student-movement-1959-1964/.

“A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.”

—Mahatma Gandhi

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Introduction

On the night of February 26, 1960, John Lewis stayed up in his dorm room at the American Baptist Seminary cutting a typed-up paper into half sheets. Earlier that day, at a meeting with other members of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC) preparing for a sit-in the next day, Lewis had been given the assignment to draft a "dos and don'ts" list to hand out at the demonstration.[2] Through word of mouth, the group leaders expected segregationist violence the next day, so they wanted to remind the demonstrators about their training in nonviolence. The papers instructed: "Do not strike back nor curse if abused. Do not laugh out. Do show yourself friendly and courteous at all times."[3] At the end of the slip, there was a reminder: "Remember the teachings of Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King. Love and nonviolence are the way."[4]

These instructions were not new to the young activists, however. Since the spring of 1958, James M. Lawson, Jr., a 30-year-old nonviolent organizer and Vanderbilt University Divinity School student, had been teaching workshops on nonviolent direct-action in expectation of desegregating public spaces in downtown Nashville. Although the workshops began with ministers only, it was the deliberate introduction of students a year later that propelled the Nashville Nonviolent Movement, as it came to be known at the time, to success in the spring of 1960. This happened when student demonstrators successfully desegregated many restaurants and department stores in the downtown area. In these protests, the activists displayed a uniformed commitment to nonviolent direct-action, whereby they responded to physical and verbal segregationist backlash with the principle of *ahisma*, or "do no harm."[5] As such, the Student Central Committee, led by committed students from nearby universities like John Lewis and Diane Nash, joined forces with the clergy-led Nashville Christian Leadership Council, led by Kelly Miller Smith, a young and activist minister in the city. Together, the organizations—who both claimed Lawson as a member—formed a coalition that sought for Nashville's "shame to give way to the glory."[6]

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[2] John Lewis, *Civil Rights Documentation Project*, interview by Katherine Shannon. 08/22/67
[3] Ibid.
[4] Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 28.

From February to May 1960, the activists centered their sit-in campaign around just that. Although the first demonstration on February 13 took the white Nashville community by surprise, it only took a few weeks for the students to face segregationist backlash from white toughs on February 28—a demonstration so large that it was dubbed "Big Saturday." Throughout the next few months, the students marched downtown and continued their campaign, even with the bomb scares, mass arrests, and segregationist harassment that followed.[7] Although the local government, led by Mayor Ben West, made efforts to reconcile with the protestors, such as appointing a biracial committee to "bridge the communication gap" between the Black and white communities, they were nominal at best.[8] Meanwhile, segregationists continued their onslaught against the Nashville activists—such as Lawson, who was expelled from Vanderbilt on March 3 and arrested the next day for his participation in the movement. Despite the backlash, the NCLC affirmed its support of the students with flyers proclaiming, "We were called of God to continue this resistance."[9]

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[5] Mahatma Gandhi, Letter to V.N.S. Chary, quoted in Mahatma Gandhi, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Essential Writings*, ed. Judith Brown, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 53.

[6] Kelly Miller Smith, Manuscript of "Chapter 1: The Shame and Glory: The Setting," in *Pursuit of a Dream*, (n.d.), Box 28, Kelly Miller Smith Papers (hereafter KMSP), Special Collections and University Archives, Jane and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

[7] Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 127.

[8] Ibid, 129.

[9] Ibid, 132.

Although the activists did not know it at the time, the turning point came weeks later. On April 19, a few hours after Martin Luther King, Jr. declared to a crowd of thousands of eager students at Fisk University that the Nashville movement was “the best organized and the most disciplined in the Southland,” a bomb exploded in the home of Z. Alexander Looby, who was an attorney for the NCLC.[10] Miraculously, although the home was destroyed, he and his family escaped unharmed, and images of a dazed 61-year-old Looby taken immediately after the blast sent shockwaves throughout the country. Later that day, around five thousand people marched silently two abreast to the steps of City Hall, where Diane Nash asked Mayor West, “Mayor West, do you feel that it’s wrong to discriminate against a person solely on the basis of his race or color?”[11] In response, the shaken mayor responded that he believed that Nashville should begin to integrate, and on May 10, Nashville became the first Southern city to begin downtown desegregation.[12] Throughout the next decade, the Nashville students continued their activism across the U.S., which is most clearly seen in their involvement in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee throughout the organization’s “Nashville Era.”[13]

This thesis, however, is concerned not with the Nashville sit-ins themselves, but with the organized efforts that preceded them and trained the demonstrators in nonviolent direct-action. Indeed, before the Nashville Nonviolent Movement came to full fruition—that is, before the students became full-fledged demonstrators—they began as students of nonviolent philosophy, with Lawson as their teacher. In a series of workshops that began on March 26, 1958, Lawson set out, in his words, to “make Nashville a laboratory for demonstrating nonviolence.”[14] In the workshops that followed, he borrowed heavily from the teachings of Jesus and Gandhi, and developed an interfaith curriculum focused on the transformative praxis of nonviolence. Through role-play—realistic enough that activists beat and taunted one another in the name of training and preparation—Lawson's pupils learned to confront the violence they would soon face as demonstrators. The workshop's dialogical approach provided a space for the activists to learn and master the precepts of nonviolent direct-action before their implementation in the sit-ins. Because of the Lawson workshops, by the time the student activists staged their first sit-in on February 13, they were proficient in self-restraint and the power of nonviolence in action.

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[10] Martin Luther King, Jr., “Speech at Fisk University” (April 18, 1960), in Ibid, 138.
[11] Diane Nash quoted in *Eyes on the Prize*, directed by Orlando Bagwell, written by Steve Fayer, featuring Diane Nash and others, aired February 4, 1987, in broadcast syndication, Blackside, 1987.
[12] Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee*, 140.
[13] Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 32-40.
[14] Ibid, 17.

As such, this thesis argues that the Nashville movement's nonviolent direct-action workshops provided the necessary training and framework for the successful 1960 sit-ins. In other words, were it not for Lawson's workshops, the students and clergy would not have successfully operationalized the movement that desegrated the downtown lunch counters. It was these workshops, then, that unified the diverse group of students and adult clergy members into one cohesive unit fighting the same battle with the same tactics. Equipped with a powerful teacher in James Lawson and his interfaith curriculum, the group developed a commitment to the philosophy and praxis of nonviolent direct-action. Rather than focus on the events of 1960, like other secondary literature has done, this thesis will focus on the workshops that preceded them, showing how the sit-ins were not just spontaneous events, but were actually reflections of months of training and education in nonviolence from Lawson. So, although the Nashville sit-ins were not the first of their kind, and although the movement was just one of dozens simultaneously occurring throughout the nation, the Nashville coalition incorporated the intense training on nonviolent philosophy and praxis that the others did not.

The Nashville Nonviolent Movement's successes can also be traced to the organizational structure present among its two subgroups: the clergy-led and community-based Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC) and the Student Central Committee. Although the students served as proud foot-soldiers on the front lines of the movement, they were not its progenitors. Rather, the students inherited the framework for the sit-in campaign from the NCLC, which was led by Smith and other executive officers, like Andrew N. White.[15] As such, the Nashville movement was an intergenerational one— the adult clergy members and their congregations provided the students with funding from the Black community in Nashville, a central meeting hub in Smith's First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, and support for their activism.[16] Although the students and adults operated in two different sub-coalitions, the Student Central Committee and the NCLC reinforced each other—the students needed the meeting spaces and funds from the adults, who then relied on the students to actually carry out the movement. Moreover, in their executive board positions within the NCLC, Smith and Lawson served as links between the students and the Black community in Nashville. This way, the students felt the financial and physical support of the congregation—one that would only grow stronger as the movement progressed after the sit-ins. Thus, the workshops not only engaged the students, but also closely collaborated with the clergy and community members.

As a result, the Nashville Nonviolent Movement's division of labor vis-à-vis the Student Central Committee and the NCLC made it a highly organized mission. In fact, when students got word of the sit-ins in Greensboro, NC that beat the Nashville sit-ins by just a few days, they were frustrated because it was the Nashville group that had been preparing in the workshops for months. As Lawson put it decades later, the influence of the Nashville movement was great precisely "because we had combined trying—helping people to be students and to read and to think, and to have a whole picture of a nonviolent approach and methodology, we therefore had produced the best trained people."[17] In other words, the Nashville sit-ins were just the tip of the movement's iceberg—more noteworthy and influential was Lawson's months-long philosophical boot camp that unified students and clergy in their nonviolent direct-action.

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[15] The current literature on the Nashville movement largely excludes Andrew White, who was a Methodist minister and an early member of the NCLC, as a key figure. Yet interviews with the Nashville activists conducted after the sit-in campaign, namely Lawson and Smith, credit White with developing the NCLC in its beginnings and throughout the movement. See Kelly Miller Smith, interview by John Britton, *Civil Rights Documentation Project,* Howard University, December 22, 1967.

[16] Larry W. Isaac, Daniel B. Cornfield, Dennis C. Dickerson, James M. Lawson Jr. and Jonathan S. Coley, "'Movement Schools' and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis: Nashville Workshops in the Southern Civil Rights Movement." *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change* 34 (2012): 169.

Literature Review

Due to its sociological and historical components, the Nashville Nonviolent Movement lends itself to both types of analyses that focus on both the key players and the movement itself. On the historical side, many scholars have cited the Nashville movement as just one part of the broader U.S. civil rights movement throughout the 1960s. This observation, then, raises the question: should historians focus on the national movement vis-à-vis the federal government's actions or local movements pushing for change within their own communities? Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne address this debate head-on in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968.*[18] Lawson and Payne, both historians of the civil rights movement, argue for different sides. Lawson defends the importance of the federal government and national organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People (NAACP), for providing the "power and authority to defeat state governments intent on keeping Blacks in subservient positions."[19] Payne, on the other hand, credits the actions of "unsung activists" and their grassroots efforts for coordinating a bottom-up Civil Rights Movement that was unique to each and every city.[20] It is Payne's position that figures most prominently in the thesis, as he argues for a view of the movement as a collection of smaller movements that organized at the local level. He rejects his colleague's "naïve, top-down, normative perspective on movement history" that effectively teaches of one homogenous national movement.[21] This approach, Payne continues, undermines the local battles for justice fought by "ordinary people."[22] Although the Nashville activists went on to become seminal figures of the broader civil rights movement, they began as students in Lawson's workshops. Consequently, Payne's focus on these local movements invites others to study these grassroots institutions and organizations, such as the NCLC and the Student Central Committee, which operationalized the Nashville movement.

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[17] James M. Lawson, Jr., interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize*, December 2, 1985.

[18] Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968,* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998).

There is a rich literature surrounding the local civil rights history of Nashville and the state of Tennessee. Lawson and Payne focus on a research topic that encompasses the grassroots Nashville movement, but does not limit itself to a study of the city's past. Others, then, have focused exclusively on local civil rights history. Bobby L. Lovett's *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* examines the trajectory of Tennessee's civil rights history, from the 1930s to the present day.[23] Through a detailed chronology of racial injustice and Tennessee's responses to it—or lack thereof—Lovett reveals a state that has historically failed to provide equality for its Black community. As such, Lovett's focus on the battles for school integration and voting registration for Black Tennesseans sheds light on the political organizing that preceded the Nashville sit-in campaign in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Lovett shows that the habit of "whites resigning themselves to treating non-whites as *constitutional* equals" rather than as "socioeconomic partners" is widespread across the history of Tennessee. His depiction of the entire state's civil rights history continues on Payne's mission of highlighting the importance of local grassroots civil rights campaigns within a larger movement.

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[19] Ibid, 3.
[20] Ibid, 2.
[21] Ibid, 109.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee*.

Lovett's *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930: Elites and Dilemmas* dives further into the civil rights history of Nashville. In this work, the historian looks at the distinctions and divisions within the Black community in Nashville by highlighting the presence of a Black elite within different institutions in the city, such as Fisk University and First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill.[24] In his chapter on higher education in Nashville, Lovett expands on a topic introduced in the thesis—the socioeconomic divisions between Nashville's historically Black colleges. Lovett delves deep into the history of Nashville's first colleges, which were controlled by patronizing Northern white missionaries throughout their first decades of existence.[25] Lovett also focuses on the elitist divisions between different churches in the Black community, such as First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, but also emphasizes how important these churches were in pushing for economic and social integration since the nineteenth century.[26] This social role that churches occupied, Lovett asserts, is explained by the church being "a multi-purpose organization, the first institution that [Black Nashvillians] were allowed to control in a white-dominated society.[27] Although Lovett's work encompasses a different time period than the one this thesis focuses on, his book provides an understanding of the socioeconomic dynamics present among the Nashville activists who attended Fisk University and First Baptist.[28]

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[24] Bobby L. Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930: Elites and Dilemmas,* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999).

[25] Ibid, xvi.

[26] Ibid, 197.

[27] Ibid.

Other historians have centered their scholarship around this veneer of racial moderation across many "progressive" Southern cities. In her dissertation "The Black Community, Politics and Race Relations in the 'Iris City': Nashville Tennessee, 1870-1954," Yollette Trigg Jones exposes two themes explaining what kept Nashville's Black community stratified and segregated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[29] First, she reveals the clash between Nashville's ostensibly progressive policies and its "time-honored, mostly aristocratic traditions" that in practice subjugated its Black community. Second, Jones exposes the generational distinctions within Nashville's Black community between the "turn-of-the century, Old Guard entrepreneurs" and a younger, idealistic generation of intellectuals, such as Kelly Miller Smith, James Lawson, and Andrew White, who mounted the city's civil rights campaign in the second part of the century. By discussing this dynamic within the city's "split personality," Jones provides an explanation for "Nashvillians' demonstrated ambivalence in accepting new forms of growth."[30] This reluctance figured prominently in the city's at-best lackluster response to Black political organizing in Nashville. Similarly, William H. Chafe explored the discrepancies between these contrasting images of racial harmony and racist realities in *Civilities and Civil*

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[28] This thesis references other scholarship on local Nashville history. Don H Doyle's *Nashville Since the 1920s* maps out the history of the city throughout its second century of existence. In his book, he refers to a city that, despite its explicit and implicit segregationist practices, saw itself as "too genteel to hate." See Don H. Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 224. Historian Benjamin Houston also discussed Nashville's veneer of racial harmony in *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City*. Houston also devotes a chapter to this faux-progressivism's relationship with the creation of the sit-in movement. See Benjamin Houston, *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

[29] Yollette Trigg Jones, "The Black Community, Politics and Race Relations in the "Iris City": Nashville Tennessee, 1870-1954," (doctoral thesis, Duke University, 1985).

[30] Ibid, 4.

Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom.[31] Although his book focuses on how this paradox played out in Greensboro, NC, its lessons apply to other "New South" cities, like Nashville. Indeed, Chafe's concern with civility as a method for these cities to mask their deeply stratified racial realities illuminates a key cornerstone of Nashville's self-image as a haven of good-mannered race relations. In fact, the book was even quoted by John Lewis in his memoir for its discussion of these cities' "etiquettes of civility" and "progressive mystiques."[32]

This scholarship sheds light on Nashville's civil rights history, but it does not explain the movements that comprised these campaigns. For this reason, another type of secondary literature concerning the Nashville movement is sociological and movement study. In *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, Aldon Morris uses a sociological perspective to study the history of the Nashville movement in a seminal and foundational study.[33] Morris begins his book by cautioning against the prevailing view of movement history as portraying "the masses as a flock of sheep reacting blindly to uncontrollable forces."[34] This, Morris argues, minimizes the decades-long efforts in internal organization that seep under the surface of social movements, like the one in Nashville. Morris credits both secular and religious institutions for their roles in successful civil rights campaigns, but he pays close attention to the organizational role of the Black Church. Like Lovett does in his discussion of churches as institutions that opposed the exclusivity of white religious organizations, Morris writes that the Black Church "filled a large part of this institutional void by providing support and direction for the diverse activities of an oppressed group."[35] Additionally, churches' multipurpose role as a site for religious, social, and political gathering made them "a place to observe, participate in, and experience the reality of owning and directing an institution free from the control of whites."[36] His discussion of the "well-defined division of labor, with numerous standing committees and organized groups" is spot-on when applying it to the multiple sub-groups within the NCLC and Student Central Committee that "coordinated [their] activities through authority structures."[37]

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[31] William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
[32] Ibid, 7-9.
[33] Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984).
[34] Ibid, 10.

Although Morris focuses on the underlying dynamics of multiple grassroots movements across the civil rights era, he uses the Nashville Nonviolent Movement as an example of a campaign that owed its successes to its internal organization and sub-structures. Morris credits the framework of the Nashville sit-in campaign, such as Lawson's workshops and the centrality of Black religious activism vis-à-vis the NCLC and First Baptist Church, with the success of the movement. These structures were rooted in the Black religious community, and local churches became movement centers whose leaders and committees "prepared the black community for protest by training future leaders in the philosophy and tactics of nonviolent direct-action."[38] Morris also highlights more indirect factors in the success of the movement, such as the charisma of its religious leaders, namely Kelly Miller Smith. As Morris points out, "the highly successful minister developed a strong, magnetic personality capable of attracting and holding a following."[39] Morris also emphasizes the importance of the origins of these ministers' educational training, which "under the direction of leading black educators and theologians of the day."[40] As the thesis will show, Nashville's religious leaders, like Smith and Andrew White, studied under ministers and intellectuals who were experts on the convergence of religion and activism, such as Howard Thurman. In the case of Nashville, these same educators began applying Gandhian nonviolent philosophy to the Black freedom struggle, which was replicated by Lawson in his workshops. In fact, Lawson praised Morris for accurately describing the dynamics of the movement as one that required expert methodology and organization, rather than happenstance.[41]

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[35] Ibid, 5.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid, 6.
[38] Ibid, 178.
[39] Ibid, 8.

Others, like C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, have devoted entire books, like *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, to document the role of the Black Church as a social movement center.[42] Importantly, this piece defines the Black Church "as a kind of sociological and theological shorthand reference to the pluralism of black Christian churches in the United States," thus providing the thesis with a basic framework for placing the Black Church as a sacred and dialectical institution at the basis of many social movements.[43] The church's movement-oriented role was not restricted to activism within its walls—rather, clergy members became the architects of secular campaigns for justice.[44] Lawrence and Mamiya oppose the prevailing notion of separating the influences of church and state on social movements that "assume a poster of complete differentiation, where the spheres of the polity and the economy separated from religion, do not intersect, and have very little interaction."[45] This approach, the authors argue, "confuses the historical uniqueness of that institution," which was not only participatory in social movements, but deeply embedded in them.[46] The scholars center on the dual role of the Black Church as a religious and political institution in their chapter on civil rights militancy within the Black Church. Like Morris does in his book, Lawrence and Mamiya cite the creation of the SCLC—which they deemed "the political arm of the Black Church"—as a key example of political organizing within the religious community.[47] Juan M. Floyd-Thomas's *Liberating Black Church History: Making It Plain* continues this discussion of "liberation [as] the central theme of Black religious life" in his chapter on the role of faith in the civil rights struggle.[48] Although the historian writes about both "the great figures and famous names at the top of society" as well as the "ordinary folks" that were active in their own communities, he asserts that the latter is a better representation of the civil rights movement, which "should always be seen as a grassroots movement."[49] In this sense, Floyd-Thomas sides with Charles Payne in their shared focus on the roles of local grassroots actors who championed change within their communities. Floyd-Thomas credits, among others, the Black clergy members, such as Smith, who "became the chief strategists who shaped the objectives and methods of the movement that sought to redress these grievances."[50] Yet he also writes that these religious leaders were not just the ministers—they were also "lay church leaders and community activists."[51] As the thesis will show, Lawson's students—such as John Lewis, who was deeply tied to his religious background—fall into the latter category.

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[40] Ibid.
[41] James M. Lawson, Jr., interview by Phillis Sheppard, Walter Fluker, and Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Boston University Oral History Project*, Boston University, November 26, 2011.
[42] C. Eric Lincoln and Mamiya, Lawrence H., *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).
[43] Ibid, 1.
[44] Ibid, 9.
[45] Ibid, 9-10.

Other sociological studies have expanded on the concept of movement centers, such as "'Movement Schools' and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis: Nashville Workshops in the Southern Civil Rights Movement," by Larry W. Isaac, Daniel B. Cornfield, Dennis C. Dickerson, Jonathan S. Coley, and James M. Lawson, Jr.[52] As Morris does in his book, these scholars document the factors that facilitated the creation and growth of social movements, like the one in Nashville. This study, however, focuses specifically on the diffusion of nonviolent philosophy and praxis vis-à-vis the workshops, which served as a movement school—"an organized, underground site where the deeply intense work took place, the dialogical labor of analyzing, experimenting, and resocializing human agents who had previously been shaped by a culture of violence."[53] Like Morris, the authors reject the impersonal view of movement study, which adopts "usually rapid, superficial communication flow from [movement] transmitters to adopters."[54] This unidirectional approach, they argue, peripheralizes the actual dialogical diffusion of these movements. In other words, movement schools allowed for the "intensive labor, debate, and struggle involved in learning, translating, and applying the foreign repertoire," which was Gandhian nonviolent philosophy. The authors also give special attention to Lawson himself, who served as both an architect of the movement and as "the lynchpin—present in each node of the organizational network"—including the student activists (through the Student Central Committee) and the church and its community (through the NCLC and First Baptist Church).[55] The importance of the study's sociological discussion of the historical movement cannot be overstated—it was through highly organized underground movement schools that the students operationalized their sit-in campaign. The authors also trace the continued trajectory of Lawson and his students after the workshops, where "they carried nonviolent praxis extending the movement across the South," which highlights the more long-term implications of the movement.[56]

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[46] Ibid, 10.
[47] Ibid, 211.
[48] Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, *Liberating Black Church History: Making It Plain*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 13.
[49] Ibid, 68.
[50] Ibid, 79.
[51] Ibid, 80.

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[52] Isaac, Cornfield, Dickerson, Lawson, and Coley, "'Movement Schools' and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis."
[53] Ibid, 158.
[54] Ibid, 161.
[55] Ibid, 169.

A third variety of secondary literature concerning the Nashville movement is biography. Although Lawson has figured prominently in many works concerning the Nashville sit-ins and its workshops, biographies of Lawson are scarce. Dennis C. Dickerson's "James M. Lawson, Jr: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement" offers a comprehensive look at Lawson's life.[57] Following Lawson from his early life to his leadership in Nashville and beyond, Dickerson highlights the trajectories that influenced the nonviolent philosophy that Lawson used to train the Nashville students. Indeed, his focus on Lawson's time imprisoned as a conscientious objector—although Lawson preferred to be called a "Jesus follower"—and the young man's stay in India lays out how deeply embedded Lawson was in his nonviolent praxis. Like he does in "'Movement Schools' and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis: Nashville Workshops in the Southern Civil Rights Movement," Dickerson highlights how important independent biographical trajectories, such as that of Lawson, were to the Nashville movement. In other words, Dickerson's biography of Lawson is essential in understanding the roles of architect, strategist, and teacher that Lawson played in the movement. In "Kelly Miller Smith: The Roots of an Activist and the Nashville Movement" and "'A Different Kind of Prophet': The Role of Kelly Miller Smith in the Nashville Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1960," Crystal DeGregory and Leila A. Meir embark on similar missions in historicizing the life of Kelly Miller Smith.[58] Both scholars discuss Smith's religious upbringing and formal training as a charismatic leader of

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[56] Ibid, 158.

[57] Dennis C. Dickerson. "James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement," *Methodist History* 52, no. 3 (2014): 170.

[58] Crystal DeGregory. "Kelly Miller Smith: The Roots of an Activist and the Nashville Movement" in *The New A.M.E. Church Review* 123, no. 408. (African Methodist Episcopal Church, 2007); Leila A. Meir, "'A Different Kind of Prophet': The Role of Kelly Miller Smith in the Nashville Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1960," (master's thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1991).

Black political organizing in Nashville. As DeGregory and Meir show, Smith's alma maters—Morehouse College and Howard University—were no small feature of his biographical trajectory. Instead, these schools and their professors, like Howard Thurman and Benjamin Elijah Mays, introduced Smith to the precepts of Gandhian nonviolence and its applications to the Black freedom struggle. By shedding light on Smith's life, from his upbringing to his professional life, DeGregory shows the "illustrations of the development of valuable activist qualities...[that] help to constitute what the roots of an activist are."[59] Her analysis, then, extends beyond Smith's own life to reveal the effects that his personal and intellectual background had on the movement, where he became a key strategist. *His Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope*, written by Jon Meacham with contributions from John Lewis himself, centers on Lewis, from his childhood in rural Alabama to his key role in the Nashville movement.[60] Similar to the biographies of Smith and Lawson, Meacham's book provides insight into how Lewis's background impacted his participation in the movement. Certainly, Lewis became proficient in nonviolent direct-action from his time in the workshops, but his commitment to the power of love was inherent, as is seen throughout his upbringing in rural Alabama. Although this book is used throughout the thesis to introduce Lewis as a protagonist of the movement, it is especially helpful in describing Lewis's continued dedication to the broader U.S. civil rights movement in the Conclusion.

The last key biographical source used in this history of the Nashville movement is David Halberstam's *The Children*, which focuses on the intertwining lives of the activists.[61] Halberstam, a former reporter for *The Nashville Tennessean* who covered the sit-ins on assignment, provides a comprehensive narrative of the movement with descriptions of the activists' backgrounds before they joined the movement. As this thesis does in its first chapter, Halberstam sheds light on the individual biographical trajectories that brought activists to the Nashville movement. In doing so, Halberstam confirms that the convergence of students and clergy in the Nashville movement was far from serendipitous. Rather, the commitment to nonviolence through religion was something that the movement's key players carried with them to Nashville from their respective backgrounds. As for the two key adult figures in the movement, James Lawson and Kelly Miller Smith, it was their spiritual and political backgrounds that emboldened their efforts in the Nashville movement. Although both men found their separate ways to Nashville—Smith as a seminary minister and Lawson as a trained organizer—they shared a commitment to nonviolence fostered by their own relationships with religion and justice. Despite his discussion of the activists' backgrounds, Halberstam does not offer as much insight into the dialogical diffusion that transpired in the Lawson workshops. In this sense, his book restricts itself to the biographical histories of the activists, rather than with the sociological history of the Nashville movement vis-à-vis the workshops. Additionally, unlike the other scholarly sources employed, *The Children* serves as both a primary and secondary source due to Halberstam's firsthand role in the movement. As such, Halberstam's book is used in both forms throughout the thesis—as a reliable narrative of the movement and as a glimpse into the sit-ins from a reporter on the frontlines—and will be cited as such.

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Jon Meacham and John Lewis, *His Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope*, (New York: Random House, 2020).

[61] David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998).

Throughout the next chapters, this thesis will incorporate these three varieties of scholarship regarding the Nashville Nonviolent Movement: the national and local civil rights history, the sociology of movements, and biographies of key activists. Taken together, this literature on the Nashville movement sheds light on many of its key aspects—the diffusion of the movement through Lawson's workshops, the crucialness of the activists' biographical trajectories, the history of Nashville's veneer of racial harmony, and the role of the Black Church as a movement center. Since they concern different topics, all of the sources open conversations and debates of their own that are outside of the scope of this work. Yet what concerns this thesis is the intersectionality of all these aspects in the Nashville Nonviolent Movement. In other words, this thesis does not focus on the events of 1960 as much as the underlying dynamics that made them *happen*. By incorporating civil rights history, sociological movement studies, and biographies of the activists, this analysis seeks to show that the 1960 sit-in campaign was not a spontaneous occurrence. Rather, Lawson's intellectual boot camp staged that trained demonstrators in nonviolent direct-action made the movement a deliberate one.

Despite the essentiality of the aforementioned literature to an analysis of the Nashville movement, it was primary sources that gave life to the hidden dynamics formed in church basements between students and clergy. Although the dialectical diffusion that occurred in the Lawson workshops is understudied by historians of the civil rights movement, archives in Nashville abound with primary sources that shed light on these interpersonal dynamics. As such, this thesis relies heavily on archival sources from the Civil Rights Collection and the Civil Rights Oral History Project at the Nashville Public Library Special Collections as well as the James M. Lawson Papers and the Kelly Miller Smith Papers at the Vanderbilt University Special Collections. First, the Nashville Public Library Special Collections house interview transcripts, periodicals, pamphlets on nonviolent philosophy, and video and audio recordings of activists that breathe life into this history of the movement. The author also benefits from attending school at one of the nation's centerpieces for Nashville civil rights history. As such, Vanderbilt University Special Collections has provided the correspondences, book manuscripts, newspaper clippings, NCLC meeting minutes, and other miscellaneous sources that give a voice to Lawson and Smith. These archival sources have provided invaluable information on the dialogical processes that transpired in the Nashville workshops.

Plentiful published primary sources comprise an essential part of this work. The thesis incorporates interviews—both transcribed and filmed—from virtually all of the key figures mentioned. Additionally, memoirs allow for perceptions of the movement through the activists' own eyes. John Lewis's evocative *Walking With the Wind* describes his experiences in the sit-ins and the workshops in church basements that preceded them, along with the subjective dynamics at play among Lawson and his students.[62] Diane Nash contributed a brief memoir to a collection of African American women prominent in the civil rights movement that discussed her personal experiences confronting the segregated reality of the South.[63] Although it is not classified as a memoir, Kelly Miller Smith's *Social Crisis Preaching*, which was published after his role in the Nashville movement, discusses Smith's view of the Black Church as a vehicle for social change.[64] As such, *Social Crisis Preaching* provides a helpful framework for understanding what came before both the Nashville sit-in movement, which was the individual relationship that the activists had with social organizing vis-à-vis the Black Church. As the first chapter will show, these individualized biographical trajectories converged in Nashville, where the activists united in their commitment to Christian nonviolence.[65]

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[62] John Lewis, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

[63] Diane Nash, "Diane Nash," in *Lighting the Fires of Freedom: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Janet Dewart Bell, (New York: The New Press, 2018).

[64] Kelly Miller Smith, *Social Crisis Preaching: The Lyman Beecher Lectures, 1983*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984).

[65] Beyond these published primary sources that reveal the voices of the movement's key figures, the thesis incorporates other works that influenced the trajectory of the Nashville movement. Specifically, these books were written by individuals in the early twentieth century and used by key figures, namely Lawson, in the organization of the movement. Richard B. Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence* was one of the earliest works to introduce the principles of nonviolent direct-action to an American audience.[65] In fact, Lawson incorporated Gregg's book, which teaches nonviolent philosophy and praxis, such as "moral jiu-jitsu" into his workshops. See Richard B. Gregg, *The*

Thesis Structure

Before discussing the Lawson workshops and the development of the Nashville movement, it is essential to discuss the individual biographical trajectories of the activists. As Chapter 1 shows, Lawson and Smith were not only actors in the nonviolent movement, but they were carriers of its philosophy and praxis. In this sense, both men were the first step of the diffusion path of the nonviolent philosophy that was used in Nashville. In other words, the relationship between religion and social organizing was not unique to Nashville, and, in fact, was something that the movement's key players carried with them to Nashville from their respective backgrounds. For this reason, Chapter 1 focuses on this biographical convergence in Nashville and the movement's introduction to nonviolence.

Yet the convergence of Lawson and Smith in the Nashville movement was far from serendipitous. Rather, it was a reflection of the centrality of Nashville's Black religious community in its racial justice organizing that allowed for a movement that was created and developed in local churches. Before discussing the lives of Lawson and Smith, this chapter will first explore white Nashville's veneer of civility that clouded and ignored its segregationist practices. In doing so, it will provide a background to the development of Black political and religious organizations that responded to these injustices—specifically, the founding of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC) as an organization that sought to change "the

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Power of Nonviolence, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1935). Another key influential source for the activists was found in the works of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian nonviolent leader. Indeed, as the following chapters will show, it is difficult to understate the impact of Gandhi on the Black nonviolent freedom struggle in the U.S. More specifically, Lawson, who lived in India in order to learn about its anti-colonial nonviolent history, cited Gandhi as an inspiration and used Gandhi's books in his workshops. Although a deep analysis of Gandhi's works is beyond the scope of this thesis, it will incorporate his teachings on concepts like *satyagraha* and *ahisma* found in Judith M. Brown's edited version of *Mahatma Gandhi: The Essential Writings*. See Gandhi, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Essential Writings*.

Nashville way" beginning in the 1950s. As Aldon Morris discussed in his book, this section will highlight how the NCLC and its parent organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), exemplified church-based activism in their communities. Next, the chapter will provide brief biographical histories of Smith and Lawson, who were both instrumental in organizing the NCLC's mission of Christian social-action. Additionally, it will describe how these men found their ways to Nashville as well as how they met and decided to begin the workshops. Once the foundations of the movement are laid out, the thesis will discuss the organization of the movement. It will describe how the NCLC officers finally decided to focus their movement on the desegregation of public spaces in downtown Nashville.

The NCLC, however, was just one part of the Nashville Nonviolent Movement, and Chapter 2 will discuss the second key component of the movement: the students. As such, the chapter will explain how students were introduced into the movement. It will detail the different relationships that Lawson and Smith had with college students in Nashville, such as John Lewis and Paul LaPrad, who were among the first few students to join the workshops. Although the most involved students came from two notable, but socioeconomically quite different, institutions of Black higher education in Nashville—Fisk University and the American Baptist Seminary—they unified into a cohesive coalition ready for instruction from Lawson. This chapter will describe the beginnings of the Student Central Committee and the curriculum that Lawson presented to his students, including instructions on the both the philosophy and praxis of nonviolent direct-action. The chapter will pay special attention to the highly organized methodologies for teaching and practicing nonviolent direct-action—such as role-playing segregationist backlash and investigating the protest scene at the lunch counters. Additionally, it will provide a brief chronology of the events leading up to the group's first sit-in on February 13, including a wave of sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina a few days before that surprised the Nashville students and forced them to quicken their pace. Most importantly, this chapter will show how Lawson trained the workshop attendees beyond simply philosophy lessons, as he practiced the actual implementation of nonviolence with his students.

Finally, Chapter 3 will depict the city's largest sit-in on February 27 known as "Big Saturday" as a case study of nonviolent direct-action put into practice. As such, it will describe how the workshop's lessons on nonviolence figured in the face of violent backlash and police arrest. From the clothes worn to the sit-ins to the self-restraint practiced by the activists when beaten, the chapter will show in detail how instrumental Lawson's teachings were in the day's events. In other words, the chapter will try to dispel any notions of spontaneity about the movement by showcasing the organization and discipline that went into the implementation of Lawson's lessons in nonviolent direct-action.

Chapter 1: "The Shame Will Fade and the Glory Made Known":

Building the Nashville Movement

Introduction

Nashville in the 1950s liked to distinguish itself among other Southern cities and towns, priding itself as a self-proclaimed "moderate city." Unlike other cities that lived under Jim Crow laws, Nashville called itself a place of racial harmony, tranquility, and, importantly, moderation. The reality, however, portrayed a different picture. Although Nashville was not known for the segregationist violence that plagued other Southern cities, the rules of Jim Crow routinely disenfranchised its Black residents. In nearly every facet of public life, from transportation to dining, Black Nashvillians were excluded from the privileges given to their white counterparts. For all of white Nashville's efforts to mask the violence of Jim Crow, Black Nashvillians were well-aware that this was self-serving rhetoric. In response, the Black community created its own educational and religious institutions to combat its exclusion and maltreatment. Through these institutions, namely Black churches and colleges, Nashville's Black educational and religious elite organized their communities and congregations in the fight against Jim Crow through efforts such as voter registration and school desegregation.

The political and institutional history of Nashville and its role as a magnet for Black religious activism is instrumental in understanding the development of the Nashville Nonviolent Movement. This history, however, is just one part of the background to the movement. Equally important is a discussion of the biographical convergence of the movement's key players, namely Kelly Miller Smith and James M. Lawson, Jr., before they even pictured the sit-in campaign. As such, this chapter discusses their respective backgrounds and sheds light on how the men found their respective ways to Christian nonviolence. Additionally, it will historicize the creation of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC) by Kelly Miller Smith and other Black ministers, including Andrew White. Although Smith founded the NCLC to enact "non-partisan social action and service," it was not until the introduction of Lawson to the movement that the group made lunch counter sit-ins its target.[66]

Confronting Jim Crow

During his tenure as mayor of Nashville in the 1950s, Mayor Ben West was known to proclaim, "In Nashville, we don't have race relations, we have human relations!"[67] These claims of civility, however, were not endemic to the city's government. The mayor espoused a trope common to Nashville's public relations branding as a "self-possessed 'genteel Old South.'"[68] The nicknames that its residents assigned to Nashville, like the "Athens of the South," "The Wall Street of the South," and "The Protestant Vatican" contributed to this image of Nashville as a bastion of progressivism.[69]

Yet a deeply segregated city lay behind this façade. Though Nashvillians like Mayor West would never admit it, Nashville lived under a veneer of so-called racial harmony. Like most other cities across the U.S., overt racism ran rampant, of course, but Nashvillians—especially elite Nashvillians who lived in the still white-dominated Belle Meade neighborhood—made a concerted effort to mask their prejudice so as to uphold their racial etiquette. Indeed, well aware of the discordance between their superficial Southern charm and their psychological acceptance of Jim Crow segregation in place throughout the South, the white community, in the words of historian Benjamin Houston, adopted "unspoken codes of conduct" that kept the two races divided in Nashville.[70] Without needing to wag a finger or raise their voice, well-off white Nashvillians made sure that Black residents did not live in their neighborhoods, eat in their restaurants, shop in their stores, or go to their schools. "Nashville was as segregated as Johannesburg at the height of apartheid," one Tennessean reporter described. "And for the most part, totally satisfied with having it like that."[71]

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[66] "Nashville Christian Leadership Proposed Structure," Box 134, KMSP, Special Collections and University Archives, Vanderbilt University.
[67] Benjamin West quoted in Houston, *The Nashville Way,* 4.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid, 2.

Yet the city that, as local historian Don H. Doyle explains, was "too genteel to hate" espoused a reality that contradicted this self-image.[72] Indeed, by the 1950s, life in Nashville could not have been more segregated.[73] This reality was seen in housing patterns. Between 1940 and 1960, the share of the city's population that was Black rose from 28 percent to 43 percent, while the white population comprised nearly 98 percent of the suburban population.[74] This, however, was not due to the influx of Black residents to the city as much as the exodus of white residents to the suburbs.[75] Nashville's job market was equally, if not more, segregated than housing. Due to unequal hiring practices, most Black residents were forced to work low-wage jobs with little opportunity for upward mobility. The lack of higher-paying opportunities prompted many Black professionals to move to the North, and the few professional opportunities that were available in Nashville served a segregated clientele.[76] Additionally, the white Nashville elite—who controlled the city both politically and economically—disapproved of lower-class whites who were more overt in their racist thoughts. As one observer noted, "the middle and upper class [white] southerner may insist on the following caste behavior, but disapproves of the rudeness and discourtesy with which lower class persons often treat Negroes."[77]

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[70] Ibid, 21.

[71] John Seigenthaler quoted in *A Force More Powerful*, directed by Steve York (International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 1999), YouTube video.

[72] Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 224.

[73] Ibid, 230.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid, 234.

As such, in the words of John Lewis, who would later become one of the key student demonstrators during the sit-ins, Nashville "was an odd mix of racial progressiveness on the one hand and conflict and intolerance on the other."[78] As Lewis suggested, despite its "progressive mystique," Nashville was governed by a "racial role-playing" which benefitted white Nashvillians, while disenfranchising Black residents.[79] Like other ostensibly "progressive" Southern college towns, like Greensboro, NC, Nashville's veneer of toleration "existed side-by-side with social and economic facts that contradicted profoundly the [city's] reputation."[80] In other words, behind white Nashville's polite condescension was a Jim Crow system where Black and white residents lived entirely differently lives. These injustices, as one activist recalled, were the "unsightly blemishes that spoiled the picture."[81]

Nowhere were these racial disparities more pronounced than in the downtown area—the almost exclusively white-owned commercial center of the city. The only exception in this regard was the First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill—which would play a critical role in the future sit-in movement's organization.[82] In the mid-twentieth century, the downtown shopping experience—especially in the area's high-end stores—could not have been more different between white customers and their Black counterparts. Although the stores welcomed Black customers, who were an essential part of their clientele, staff would "politely" escort them to a separate dressing room in the back. After all, keeping in line with the aura of civility, painting a “Colored” sign above the Black-designated dressing room seemed too crass for the white well-off. With the exception of the single Black-owned movie theater, entertainment venues also restricted access for Black residents, who were forced to enter from an alleyway and sit in the balcony.[83] Even in public facilities, the rules of Jim Crow reigned. In Union Station, the city’s main railway station, Black passengers entered the train through separate entrances and sat in different railroad cars than their white counterparts, and they were forced to use separate restrooms in the basement when visiting City Hall.[84]

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[77] Houston, *The Nashville Way*, 25.
[78] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 80.
[79] Houston, 21; Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights,* 9.
[80] Chafe, 5.
[81] Smith, Manuscript of "Chapter 1: The Shame and Glory: The Setting," Box 28, KMSP, Special Collections and University Archives, Vanderbilt University.
[82] Houston, 22.

Although going to a department store or a bank were entirely different experiences for Blacks and whites, “[t]he racial line hardened when it came to food.”[85] Indeed, no downtown restaurants served Black customers, although lunch counter-style eateries allowed them to order take-out meals[86]. Although some stores made fifteen percent of their profit from the Black community, the act of eating a meal in the same space provided a shared intimacy that the white community could not accept.[87] Knowing that they depended on the Black community as customers, the downtown eateries adopted a “courteous but speedy” approach, where they benefitted from the influx of customers but maintained strict segregationist policies within their restaurants.[88]

The segregated downtown experience was not felt uniformly across the Black community, however. As first-hand accounts from the 1950s show, the experience was particularly harrowing for Black women in Nashville who sometimes spent entire afternoons at the downtown department stores shopping for food, clothing, and other necessities. Unlike the white female shoppers, who could rest their feet at a lunch counter or eat a meal throughout the day, Black women were not offered these amenities. Additionally, since they oftentimes shopped alongside their children, it was especially distressing to explain to their children why they could not sit down to eat like the white families.[89] Many described fears over how to *explain* to their children why they could not use the store's restrooms or play in the playgrounds inside the stores like the white children.[90] The downtown department stores, however, relied on these Black women to shop for their essentials. The introduction of the automobile into the middle-class white community, who preferred to shop in larger stores outside of the city, meant that they relied less on the downtown stores.[91] The Black community, on the other hand, relied on the bus schedule to run their errands downtown.[92] Throughout the 1950s, they comprised an increasingly larger portion of its clientele.[93]

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[83] Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s,* 234.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Houston, *The Nashville Way,* 23.
[86] Ibid, 23.
[87] Ibid, 81.
[88] Ibid, 23.

Importantly, divisions did not just exist between Blacks and whites in Nashville— the Black community itself was rife with internal divisions within its own class system. By the mid twentieth century, Black residents were "either prosperous or poor, with few in between."[94] Indeed, a lack of economic opportunity in the city meant that only a few Black residents made up the professional class. These class distinctions governed what spaces Black Nashvillians occupied. The more well-off—who, after factoring in the disparities between the Black and white upper classes, were still considered middle-class—were students or faculty at one of the city's nationally acclaimed Black colleges, such as Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and Tennessee A&I University.[95] Although many of these schools, such as Fisk, were born out of paternalistic benevolence from Northern whites, some faculty members were among Nashville's Black elites. They believed that a liberal college education could, in the words of Tennessee historian Bobby Lovett, "build a respectable and capable leadership class."[96] Yet, with a few exceptions, the administration at Fisk was white and largely out of touch with the broader Black community in Nashville until the late 1920s, when its student body protested the dependence on the Northern white financiers and began hiring Black deans and professors to lead the school. [97] The move led Fisk to become a bastion of Black higher education in the city and took part in Nashville being known as the "Athens of the South."[98] Despite their elitist image, these schools "proved to be an important medium through which Blacks were able to transmit racial value," as historian Yollette Trigg-Jones suggests.[99] Not only did they cater to the young Black community, but they also engaged professors and the broader Black community through academic discussions and homilies on race relations in Nashville.[100] These historically Black institutions, then, became key avenues for intergenerational interaction within Nashville's Black community.

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[89] Lawson, tape recorded interview with Nashville Public Library Staff, October 21, 2002, Box 7, Tape 111, Civil Rights Oral History Collection, Nashville Public Library, Special Collections Division, Nashville, Tennessee.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Halberstam, *The Children*, 112.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Houston, *The Nashville Way*, 33.

The Black Church was another institution that emerged from the elite Black population, but that later came to serve the community as a whole. Although Black churches had their origins in the 1830s, it was only free Black residents that were permitted to charter a church.[101] Yet with the emancipation of slavery and the increase in the free Black population, the number of Black churches skyrocketed.[102] By the beginning of the twentieth century, the *Globe*, a Black-owned publication in the city, estimated that at least 90 percent of the Black community regularly attended church.[103] Throughout the Reconstruction period and the early twentieth century, the number of Black congregations in the city skyrocketed—by 1930, there were over 100 Black-led churches in Nashville.[104] Without white control, the Black Church became, in the words of Lovett, "the first institution that Negroes were allowed to control in a white-dominated society."[105] Despite the increase in churches, divisions along economic lines existed between the different congregations. Although religious life was a bastion of the Black Nashville community overall, First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, founded in 1865 and located in downtown Nashville, was considered the church of the more well-off. Yet its members, like those of other congregations for the Black community, were not only part of the social and economic elite, but they also became champions in advocating for the broader Black community. As such, the clergy and congregation within Nashville's Black churches were heavily invested in the city's Black politics and business.[106] In fact, the political organizing within Nashville's Black community largely grew out of the city's Black churches. As sociologist Aldon Morris points out, in Nashville, like other cities governed by Jim Crow, "the institutions of the larger society were of very little use to Blacks."[107] The churches, then, provided the physical and social space for political expression in the Black community. Additionally, as dialogical centers for the community, Black churches were the ideal location to center social movements.[108]

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[95] Ibid, 33.
[96] Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930,* 166.
[97] Ibid, 167.
[98] Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s,* 3.
[99] Jones, "The Black Community, Politics and Race Relations in the 'Iris City': Nashville, Tennessee, 1870-1954," 142.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid, 143.
[102] Ibid.

Several factors point to why Black churches served as "movement churches" and played an integral role in the social and religious fabric of Black Americans' lives. First, the Church's role as a regular gathering spot for Black Americans led it to become a natural center for movement diffusion. Since Black churches owned more property compared to other Black institutions in Nashville, it lent a space for not only religious services, but also for social and political gatherings.[109] Additionally, Black ministers oftentimes weaved in the injustices of Jim Crow into the sermons and forced white churches to grapple with the segregation they condoned in their own establishments. In the words of Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, who preached at the First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill: "...aware of its role in the process of fundamental social change, [the Black church] can bring to bear upon white precociousness its non-tradition of the biblical faith through relentless efforts in social integration of communities and churches."[110] Most importantly, however, was the Black church's commitment to the needs of Black people, who were routinely excluded from white churches, even if white pastors appeared to be sympathetic with the Black struggle. Remarking the need for a space dedicated to the welfare of Black people, Smith writes in his essay "The Black Churches: A Surrogate World":

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[103] "National Baptist Convention Finishes Labors," *Globe* (Nashville, TN), Sept. 26, 1913, in Ibid.
[104] Ibid, 143.
[105] Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930*, 197.
[106] Ibid, 151.
[107] Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 5.
[108] Ibid, 7.

> "But, more importantly, we contend that the black churches have a unique history in being the single most important institutions embodying goals and purposes that pertain primarily to the welfare of black people. That uniqueness is significant because in America there have been no other enduring institutions with such purposes. Rather, white institutions have always aimed at the welfare of whites even when they espoused causes that were seemingly focused on the welfare of blacks."[111]

Within their churches, Nashville's Black ministers took center stage in promoting the welfare of their congregations. As some of the wealthiest members of the community, minsters used their influence to support Black commerce, education, and politics.[112] The involvement of Black preachers in the social and civic life had roots in the establishment of Black churches in the early nineteenth century, but it began to accelerate by the early twentieth century. United under organizations, like the Conference of Nashville Colored Baptist Ministers, Black ministers created Black-led banks, streetcar companies, and publishing companies for their communities.[113] Their roles outside of the pulpit extended beyond commerce, however, and into battling against Jim Crow. These ministers connected the segregation they and their congregations witnessed to the biblical texts they studied in church. From their pulpits, they connected the role of the Christian faith with Black oppression. As religious historian Juan M. Floyd-Thomas describes, perhaps the most common theme in Black liberation theology was "the vision of Jesus as the liberator of the poor and oppressed Black masses."[114] In his book *Social Crisis Preaching*, Smith writes that "beneath the surface of almost any Black preaching is the theme of Black oppression and Black liberation."[115] These claims applied to the Black churches in Nashville, where ministerial activism played a seminal role in addressing injustice.

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[109] Jones, "The Black Community, Politics and Race Relations in the 'Iris City,'" 144.
[110] Smith, "The Black Church in the U.S.A" (n.d.), Box 112, Folder 30, KMSP, Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.
[111] Smith, "The Black Churches: A Surrogate World" (n.d.), Box 112, Folder 21, KMSP.

To be sure, there was significant overlap between the educational and religious Black elite in Nashville, as well as other cities in the Jim Crow South. Throughout the 1930s and 40s, these intellectual elites continued to rise in their social influence. These men—and they were, with few exceptions, only men—set out to study the Black Church and apply its religious teachings to the segregationist reality that they lived under. By the mid-twentieth century, they became part of a new class of what historian Dennis C. Dickerson calls "ordained Baptist clergymen whose advanced degrees made them familiar figures in both campus and church settings."[116] Rather than discuss Jim Crow laws as racist policies from a strictly secular perspective, they referred to it as a sin. Speaking from both college auditoriums and church pulpits, these men had a similar message: "Segregation was immoral, it was un-Biblical, and moral methods could be used to undermine it."[117] In Nashville, Black higher education institutions created centers devoted to Christian education.[118] Fisk University, for example, was home to the Hoffman Hall Episcopal Seminary, and Black ministers in 1910 established the American Baptist Seminary to bring more theological education to the city.[119]

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[112] Jones, "The Black Community, Politics and Race Relations in the 'Iris City,'" 144; Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930*, 194.
[113] Lovett, 196.
[114] Floyd-Thomas, *Liberating Black Church History,* 15.
[115] Smith, *Social Crisis Preaching,* 72.

By the mid-twentieth century, these Black educational and religious elites oversaw a significant growth in Black political participation in Nashville. In 1947, the Black residents organized the "Solid Bloc" to repeal the poll tax in Nashville, which in its existence had disenfranchised over 70 percent of the eligible voting population and affected the Black community disproportionately.[120] Although it took four years, the effort proved successful when Tennessee eliminated the tax in 1951.[121] Around the same time, a series of voter registration drives increased the number of registered voters in Davidson County from 45,000 in 1939 to nearly 149,000 in 1952. Since many of these drives were targeted in predominantly Black neighborhoods in Nashville, which had significantly lower voter turnout rates than their white counterparts, the number of Black voters jumped by the early 1950s. The city also had strong chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Regional Council, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership

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[116] Dennis C. Dickerson, "African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930-55," *Church History* 74, no. 2 (2005): 219.
[117] Ibid, 220.
[118] Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930*, 196.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 225.
[121] Ibid.

Council (SCLC).[122] By the mid 1950s, these groups set their sights on school desegregation. Under the current system, Black students received an inferior education in decaying and underfunded buildings with relaxed academic standards. Despite the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision and its instruction to desegregate schools "with all deliberate speed," Nashville had yet to begin integration three years later. After Black students and their families began suing the Nashville Board of Education, the latter introduced the "Nashville Plan" in September 1957. Although these groups celebrated the new policy, many saw change as too slow. For instance, the NAACP celebrated "The Nashville Plan," which envisioned desegregating schools one grade per year, but critics saw "an evasive tactic designed to delay integration with token desegregation."[123] This critique was even more dramatized by the explosion of a bomb at Hattie Cotton Elementary School, which participated in The Plan, that same year.[124] As Tennessean reporter David Halberstam remarked years later, the bombing was "a quick reminder that even the most cautious venture into the South's future, in a city largely judged as moderate, and even genteel, always risked a violent outcome."[125] So, despite the occasional small wins for the Black community, Nashville was a city that, in the words of one observer from the *Saturday Evening Post*, "viewed any change with caution and suspicion."[126] Overall, the white ruling elite maintained the status quo, which was "rooted in a paternalism so unconscious it would never be called such by whites."[127]

Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, the pastor at First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill and a self-proclaimed "social crisis preacher," was among the parents suing the Nashville Board of

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[122] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, 81.
[123] DeGregory, "Kelly Miller Smith: The Roots of an Activist and the Nashville Movement," 59.
[124] Lewis, 81.
[125] Halberstam, *The Children*, 55.
[126] Rufus Jarman, "Nashville," *Saturday Evening Post* 224 (October 27, 1951): 22, in Houston, *The Nashville Way*, 45.
[127] Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 8.

Education.[128] His conviction that "the Church is always on the side of the right" followed him to his future efforts to fight against Jim Crow.[129] Starting in January 1958, Smith led a group of Black ministers in challenging segregation through the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC). Through the organization, Smith, along with executive board members like James M. Lawson and Andrew N. White, sought to expose the city for the segregated reality it really was, and hoped to change it. Under their direction, the NCLC organized a series of lunch counter sit-ins beginning in February 1960 that worked to desegregate public spaces in downtown Nashville.

Biographical Convergence and the Origins of the NCLC

On January 10, 1957, Martin Luther King Jr. summoned a group of Black ministers and clergymen from around the nation to Atlanta. In Ebenezer Baptist Church, which was pastored by his father, Martin Luther King Sr., King convened local movement leaders from cities around the South, such as Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Montgomery, and Nashville.[130] That day, which mostly consisted of ministers mingling and breaking off in smaller groups to discuss their local efforts, marked the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). According to a document from the first meeting, the SCLC agreed that "movements could be generated, coordinated, and sustained by activist clergy and organized Black masses working in concert"[131]. Once the Atlanta conference ended, the ministers returned to their respective congregations, "ready and eager to use the white man's Christianity as a weapon against him in the struggle over segregation."[132] One by one, they told stories of violent bus segregation in Tallahassee, the struggles of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and bombings in Birmingham—or, as one minister present at the meeting called it, "Bombingham."[133]

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[128] Smith, *Social Crisis Preaching,* 5.

[129] Smith, "The Church in Our Today," KMSP, Box 23, File 2, Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.

[130] Dennis C. Dickerson. "Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)" in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 3: History,* edited by Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 332.

[131] Carl F. Walton. "The Southern Christian Leadership Conference: Beyond the Civil Rights Movement" in *Black Political Organizations in the Post-Civil Rights Era,* edited by Ollie A. Johnson III and Karin L. Stanford (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 12.

Listening to others' stories, Kelly Miller Smith, the minister at Nashville's First Baptist, wondered why he was invited to participate in the conference. Nashville had its problems, he admitted, but it had none of the violent segregationist backlash that had afflicted the other cities represented at the conference. "Nashville is mature enough to accept social change," Smith remembered thinking.[134] After all, Smith would know—the young minister had plenty of experience in pushing back against racist policies and practices in Nashville. In his work with the "Nashville Plan," he learned the importance of balancing the "political and racial forces" of the city by controlling his anger toward both covert and overt segregationist sentiment—including mobs of angry men yelling slurs at his daughter, who was a new student herself.[135] Also, the experience solidified his role in Nashville as a man for the people, and one that was willing to fight for equality for both the elite Black Nashvillians that made up his congregation and the less fortunate who did not frequent his church. From his work with school desegregation, he became a main figure in Nashville's Black Christian leadership.

Yet Smith had not learned everything about activism through his ministry in Nashville. Born in Mound Bayou, a small and all-Black town in Mississippi, Smith did not know too many white people growing up. His first real interaction with white Mississippi residents, however, was one that stuck with him his whole life. Walking around town as a child, he saw a lynch mob and, in the center, a local doctor that Smith and his family knew very well. The men surrounded the doctor because he had treated another black man who had shot and killed a white man who had attacked him first. As the mob inched closer and closer to him, the doctor simply waited and looked patiently at his attackers. “If you’re going to shoot, shoot. See if I’m going to tell you anything,” Smith remembered him saying.[136] The assertiveness and calmness of the doctor moved Smith. The incident showed him the racism that many white people felt in the South. As he remembered years later, “I became aware, or more keenly aware of...the real problem of racial hatred and bigotry and the kind of thing which, unfortunately, still exists in Mississippi to too great an extent.[137]

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[132] Halberstam, *The Children,* 54.
[133] Smith, Manuscript of "Chapter II: Inspired Amateurs (The Nashville Christian Leadership Council)," in Manuscript of *Pursuit of a Dream*, (n.d.). Box 28, KMSP, Special Collections and University Archives, Jane and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Halberstam, *The Children*, 55.

Smith’s educational background throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s was seminal in his future ministerial activism. After two years of college at Tennessee A&I University in Nashville, Smith enrolled in Morehouse College in Atlanta under the leadership of President Benjamin Elijah Mays. The Morehouse president was heavily influenced from his 1936 trip to India, where he had met Mahatma Gandhi, the legendary nonviolent activist. Upon his return, Mays grew determined “to shape a professionally trained Negro clergy as educated religious leaders and insurgent militants to defeat Jim Crow laws and customs.”[138] With this in mind, he set out to train “Morehouse men” who represented the school’s “civic and social awareness.”[139] Upon receiving his degree in music, Smith enrolled in Howard University’s School of Religion. There, he became the student of famed dean Howard Washington Thurman, who further cemented in Smith the relevance of Christianity and Jesus to the Black freedom struggle.

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[136] Smith, interview by John Britton, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*

[137] Ibid.

[138] Randall M. Jelks, "Benjamin E. Mays and the Creation of an Insurgent Negro Professional Clergy,’" *A.M.E. Church Review* 118, no. 387 (July-September 2002): 32, 35, in Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930-55,” 224.

[139] DeGregory, “Kelly Miller Smith: The Roots of an Activist and the Nashville Movement.” 59.

Thurman, who had himself trained Mays, had traveled to India nearly a year before the Morehouse president. From his visit, Thurman drew parallels between the plight of Gandhi and his acolytes with the Black freedom struggle.[140]

Although Thurman had not yet published his 1949 book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, which became famous for its social gospel, the dean further cemented in Smith the relevance of Christianity and Jesus to the black freedom struggle.[141] Throughout his enrollment in Morehouse College and Howard University, Smith was surrounded by Black religious intellectuals, such as Mays and Thurman, who combined their theology with Black liberation. Like Mays and Thurman, these Black theologians connected their own advocacy with that of Gandhi in India. At the 1931 Yale Seminar on the Negro Church, where attendees discussed new methods to expand their religious advocacy, one professor said that “every Negro church must discover and develop a type of leadership that would do for America and the Negro race what Gandhi has done for India and what Jesus has done for the world.”[142] In the following years, Black religious intellectuals, including Thurman in 1936, undertook pilgrimages to India, where they learned about Gandhian nonviolent philosophy and praxis—oftentimes from Gandhi himself. In fact, in Thurman’s case, it was his conversations with Gandhi, who openly admitted the commitment of Christianity to fellowship, that ultimately inspired Thurman’s future career trajectory. Indeed, Thurman began making connections between his studies on the Black Church and the Black freedom struggle, which later inspired *Jesus and the Disinherited.* Although Smith studied under Thurman—who the latter described as “the foremost Black American mystic on the horizon”—before the book was published, it is easy to see the effect that Howard University had on the student.[143]

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[140] Howard Washington Thurman was instrumental in bringing Gandhian nonviolence to the Black freedom movement. For Thurman’s meeting with Gandhi and his role in diffusing Gandhian principles to the United States, see Peter Eisenstadt and Quinton Dixie, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman’s Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011). For a compilation of Thurman’s insights into Gandhian nonviolence and Black liberation, see Howard W. Thurman, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, ed. Walter E. Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998). For Thurman’s famous 1949 book on the plight of Jesus and its relationship with Black liberation, see Howard W. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1949).

[141] Smith, interview by John Britton, *Civil Rights Documentation Project*.

[142] Jerome Davis, “Whither The Negro Church?” (April 13-15, 1931), in Ibid, 220.

After receiving his master’s degree in 1945, Smith moved to Vicksburg, another town in Mississippi, and began preaching at a local church. As a minister, he drew attention and accusations of naivete from the townspeople when he insisted that the church’s doors would be open to all people, regardless of race. Smith also used the ministry to denounce local segregation and became popular among the Black community in Vicksburg for challenging the racist status quo of the town. Using his role as a religious leader, he brought to light the evils of Jim Crow and organized against them. In one case, Smith remembered urging his ushers to give equal seating to both white and Black attendees—a piece of advice that backfired when ushers began giving whites the worst seats in the house.[144] Beyond serving on the executive committee of the local and unaggressive NAACP chapter, Smith hosted a radio show where he delivered sermons that denounced racism using biblical parallels. In one 1949 radio address, Smith called out “those unthinking Americans who will eat food prepared by black hands, and have their children—their most prized possession— cared for by black women” even though these same parents saw Black people “as less than human.”[145] Smith’s devotion to dismantling segregation and calling out racial injustices in Vicksburg was something unprecedented for a Black minister in a town known for its segregationist violence.[146] When he appeared on a white-run radio station and said that racism was considered a sin, he was told that a preacher could not talk about sin.[147] The comment, which openly tore at the very fabric in Vicksburg, provoked such fury that a white mob reportedly tarred and feathered a Black physician in response.[148]

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[143] Smith, “The Religious Thought of Howard Thurman,” (n.d.), Folder, Lectures, Jan. 22 - April 20, 1981, Box 28. KMSP. Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.
[144] Ibid.
[145] DeGregory, “Kelly Miller Smith: The Roots of an Activist and the Nashville Movement,” 59.
[146] Smith, interview by John Britton, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*

In 1951, Smith moved back to Nashville to become the pastor at First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill. There, he soon became president of the local NAACP chapter— a position that took him to the first meeting of the SCLC. Smith returned from Atlanta feeling encouraged to "go back to [his] community and to start a non-violent movement" and, like the other ministers at the conference, set out to create an affiliate of the SCLC.[149] By the time that Smith attended the SCLC Atlanta conference in 1957, the relationship between the Black Church and the Black freedom struggle was growing —in fact, at the SCLC meetings, discussions of social ills were sprinkled with references to the Hebrew prophets.[150] On January 18, 1958, Smith made his project a reality when he founded the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC).[151]

In Nashville, Smith was not alone in his ministerial activism. Andrew N. White, another young Black minister in Nashville, helped Smith create the NCLC. Both White and Smith shared similar backgrounds. Like Smith, White was born in the South— Monck's Corner, South Carolina—where he was exposed first-hand, historian Dennis C. Dickerson writes, to "the injustice of state sanctioned segregation and legalized racial discrimination."[152] Enraged and inspired to counter this reality, he moved to Washington, D.C., where he attended college, and later divinity school, at Howard University. There, he encountered its divinity dean, William

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[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Smith, Manuscript of "Chapter II: Inspired Amateurs (The Nashville Christian Leadership Council)."
[151] Smith, interview by John Britton, *Civil Rights Documentation Project;* Dennis C. Dickerson, "African Methodism and its Wesleyan Heritage: Reflections on AME Church History" *AME Sunday School Union* (2009): 187.
[152] Dickerson, "African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930-55," 228.

Stuart Nelson, who had also taught Smith when he was a student at Howard. Nelson also had visited India and lectured on the need to incorporate Gandhian nonviolence into the Black liberation movement.[153] As was the case for Smith, the academic and political climate at Howard University encouraged White to use Gandhian nonviolence in the civil rights movement. Also similar to Smith was White's decision to combine his activism with his religion when he became certified as a minister soon after he moved to D.C. As a pastor, he served at various African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) churches throughout the South, eventually transferring to the A.M.E. Sunday School Union in Nashville, where he served as a denominational executive. Once in Nashville, White immersed himself in the A.M.E. tradition of religious activism, as the founder of the A.M.E. denomination, Richard Allen, himself had practiced. As such, along with Smith and other contemporaries, who were also encouraged by the growing role of the "preacher/activist" in the emerging civil rights movement in the South, White helped establish the NCLC and became its secretary.

Yet the key ingredient in the development of the NCLC came when Smith met James M. Lawson, Jr., who had recently arrived in Nashville to study at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Unlike Smith, Lawson was born in the North, in Uniontown, Pennsylvania to a family of well-educated Methodist ministers.[154] His father, Rev. James M. Lawson, Sr., the grandson of an escaped slave from Maryland who moved to Canada, spent his early life in the United States before returning to Canada to attend McGill University. After graduating, he moved back to the U.S. and served as a minister around the country. Wherever he was placed, the elder Lawson made sure to establish a chapter of either the NAACP or the Urban League, and, as his son recalled, he never missed a chance to stand up for a Black man who was being mistreated. This courage in defense of justice, Lawson, Jr. recalled, applied for his father as well, who “wore on his hip a thirty-eight pistol and insisted that he was going to be treated as a man.”[155] Like Lawson’s father, his mother unequivocally called out injustice, but, unlike her husband, she refused any violent method in doing so. When a young Lawson came home one day to tell his mother that he had beat up a boy who had called him a [n-----], she asked him if his violence had accomplished anything. “Jimmy, what good did that do? Jimmy there must be a better way,” he remembered her saying.[156] “Love,” she continued, “was a superior way.”[157] For Lawson, that day changed his life. Years later, Lawson told an interviewer:

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[153] Ibid.
[154] Dickerson. "James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement," 170.

> “The world stood still. And in the midst of that experience, I heard a voice which I later began to recognize was my own voice, and yet it was not my voice because it didn’t come from me. It came from far away beyond me, and it was also in the depth of me. That voice said, “Jimmy, never again will you get angry on the playground and smack and fight. Never again.” And then I heard it say, “You will find a better way.” So, I did from that moment on never again strike out at youngsters who used the “N” word on me. I never again got angry and engaged in a fight on the playground. I tried to find a better way.”[158]

Consequently, from a young age Lawson learned the importance of both activism and nonviolence, and how the two could go hand in hand. When in 1947 he began attending Baldwin-Wallace College, a Methodist school in Ohio, he felt surrounded by other like-minded young people who wanted to change the segregated status quo that they lived under.[159] It was in that environment where he first became involved in the local chapter of the Fellowship of

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[155] Ibid, 171.

[156] James M. Lawson, Jr., interview by Diane Lefer, *Satyagraha Foundation for Nonviolence Studies*, January 12, 2017.

[157] Dickerson, “James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement,” 172.

[158] Lawson, interview by Diane Lefer, *Satyagraha Foundation for Nonviolence Studies.*

[159] Halberstam, *The Children,* 35.

Reconciliation (FOR), a nonviolent organization that dispatched him to Nashville a decade later. As a freshman, Lawson lectured in workshops and helped organize other students—an experience that he later deemed part of his "nurturing process."[160] In November 1949, Lawson met Reverend A.J. Muste, who was then the executive director of the FOR, at a lecture in Baldwin-Wallace. Muste commended Lawson, who as a conscientious objector had recently refused to return his Korean War draft card, on his commitment to pacifism.[161] Muste's comment reinforced the student's disillusion with the war effort and refusal to serve in the armed forces. Although he could have easily responded to the draft letter by deferring for academic or ministerial reasons, Lawson decided that he had no moral right to defer his service. Although Lawson had promising post-graduation plans to serve as a missionary in Rhodesia, he knew that his decision would mean that he would have to spend time in prison, which he entered in 1951, the same year that Kelly Miller Smith moved to Nashville.

Lawson left Ashland Federal Correction Institute in 1952 and, much to his surprise and honor, was offered a job as a Methodist missionary in India.[162] Having looked up to Gandhi from an early age, Lawson saw this as an opportunity to feel closer to a martyr who had inspired his nonviolence. Once in India, Lawson had the opportunity to "see his faith in the context of a different culture, entirely, and to try to figure out what that meant."[163] Though Gandhi had critics even among the nonviolent camp, in the three years Lawson spent in India, his admiration for the pacifist leader only grew.[164] Indeed, Lawson saw Gandhi as an embodiment of Jesus Christ himself, and as a person who lived out the highest ideals of both Christianity and nonviolence.[165]

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[160] James M. Lawson, Jr., interview by Aldon Morris, in Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 163.

[161] Dickerson, "James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement," 174.

[162] James M. Lawson, Jr., Prison Correspondence from James Lawson to Ashland Prison Community, (February 22, 1952), Folder, Federal Prison, Box 32. James M. Lawson, Jr. Collection (hereafter JMLC), Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

[163] Lawson, interview by Phillis Sheppard, Walter Fluker, and Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Boston University Oral History Project.*

Lawson saw in Gandhi and his followers the practice of nonviolent direct-action, which, combined with his deeply rooted Christian beliefs, moved him. Indeed, he could not divorce the biblical parallels from the injustices he saw every day, from the streets of India to his own hometown in Ohio. As a Methodist, he grew up understanding that society should be "purged of the social sin of slavery, segregation, poverty, and war."[166] Moreover, his time in prison—which he served as a self-described "Jesus follower" rather than as a "conscientious objector"—showed him the depths that a true nonviolent activist should take to make the world more equal.[167] Even while incarcerated, Lawson organized among the prisoners and pushed for equality for those housed at Ashland. In memos that circulated around the prison, Lawson expressed empathy for those who, in moments of frustration, acted out in self-defense. Lawson reminded them that "manhood is not determined by the amount of noise we can make, or how heavy we curse, or our number of female conquests—manhood is best displayed when we show others that we can live good lives despite the conditions we live under."[168] His nonviolent philosophy also extended beyond the prison walls. In letters, Lawson wrote, "I am convinced of the rightness of my position," and denounced the U.S. in its complete rejection of "unlimited love, moral and spiritual armament, courage, trust, and nonviolence."[169]

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[164] Halberstam, *The Children,* 49.

[165] Due to the visits undergone by Black theologians, such as Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays, to India, Gandhi was highly influential in the Black nonviolent liberation movement. For the relationship between Gandhi and Black Americans throughout the early civil rights movement, see Gerald Horne, *The End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008). For Gandhi's perspective on the Black freedom movement, see Mahatma Gandhi, "Gandhi's Advice to Negroes," in *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of His Writings on His Life, Work, and Ideas*, ed. Easwara Eknath and Louis Fischer (New York: Vintage Books, 2002). On the vision of Gandhi as an American prophet, see Preston Williams, "The Third World and the Problem of God-Talk," *Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 4 (1971).

[166] Dickerson. "James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement," 171.

[167] Ibid, 168.

[168] Lawson, Prison Correspondence between James Lawson and Ashland Prison community, (February 22, 1952).

Lawson's focus on Christianity did not preclude him incorporating the beliefs of other non-Christian religions into his work, including the Hinduism practiced by Gandhi. Rather, he saw religion as an interfaith vehicle for social justice, and "could then embrace a Hindu like Gandhi and a Buddhist like Gautama Buddha and view them as religious counterparts to Jesus of Nazareth."[170] Lawson recognized that what unified these religions and their individual relationships with activism was their commitment to nonviolence as a method of protest. In India, Lawson admired how, in their fight against colonialism, Gandhi and his followers "could hate the actions of the British, but never hate the British soldiers or British people."[171] This principle of nonviolent direct-action, of loving one's enemy and treating them as equals, stayed with Lawson throughout his activism and was instrumental years later in the Nashville sit-ins. In fact, he saw a direct parallel between the mistreatment of the Dalit caste in India and the marginalization of Blacks in the U.S., remarking that "Untouchableness is segregation gone mad."[172] With this in mind, Lawson wondered whether the same principles and praxis that Gandhi used in India could apply to dismantling Jim Crow segregation in the American South.

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[169] James M. Lawson, Jr., Correspondence between James Lawson and Carol Hamilton, August 15, 1951. Correspondence Incoming August 1951, JMLC, Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.

[170] Dickerson. "James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement," 169.

[171] Ibid, 175.

[172] The term "Untouchable" used by Lawson in this quote is outdated and has been replaced by the term "Dalit," which I will use in this thesis. See Lawson to Hamilton, n.d. Correspondence Incoming May 1951, Folder, Scott/Lawson Collection, JMLC, Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, in Dickerson, "James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement," 176.

In 1955, while in India, Lawson got word of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, where Black activists protested segregation in the city's public buses.[173] Flipping through newspaper photographs of crowds of Black demonstrators being led in nonviolent protest by Martin Luther King Jr., a man with a similar background and ideology as him, Lawson saw a parallel to Gandhi's nonviolent work in India. He felt drawn to the Black protestors using Christian pacifism to enact change in the struggle for Black freedom in the United States. It also helped that Gandhi had predicted the growth of a nonviolent movement in the U.S., a country that he felt was as shackled by inequality as India was. When his missionary's contract ended in 1956, Lawson felt prepared to return to the U.S.[174]

Once Lawson was back in the States, he enrolled in Oberlin College to get his master's degree in religious studies. Coincidentally, a few months after Lawson started classes, King was invited to speak at Oberlin in the fall of 1956 for a presentation on Christian pacifism and Gandhian nonviolence.[175] By the end of the day, Lawson was deeply moved by King's impassioned speaking voice, and he identified with King's simple background as the son of a preacher, despite their different denominations.[176] The day-long event attracted a large crowd, but the professor who invited King to Oberlin also planned a more exclusive luncheon for some guests. Though Lawson was just a newly enrolled graduate student, and not among the other professors and notable people invited to the lunch, he was asked to come along.[177]

When they got a chance to speak, Lawson and King fell into the kind of impassioned conversation that only two men with similar goals and backgrounds could have. "In the process of [the conversation]," Lawson remembered years later, "we felt we knew each other as colleagues and brothers in Christ and struggle."[178] King mentioned his studies at Boston University School of Theology, where Lawson had friends and acquaintances. Lawson spoke of his time in India, and King—who, despite his immersion in Gandhian philosophy, had never been to India---replied that it was a journey he hoped to make someday.[179] To this, Lawson replied that he hoped to go to the South one day, but that first he wanted to "maybe take a few classes, get a few degrees," and make that move much later.[180]

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[173] Adam Fairclough, "The Preachers and the People: The Origin and Early Years of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1959." *The Journal of Southern History*, 52, no. 3 (1986): 416.
[174] Halberstam, *The Children,* 49.
[175] In his book, Halberstam dates this event in 1956, but in an interview, Lawson says the year was 1957. See Ibid, 14.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid, 15.

In Lawson, King saw a genuine man who deeply understood the connections between Christianity and social action. The minister interrupted Lawson mid-sentence and insisted that he was needed in the South right then. Lawson remembered King's instructions years later: "Don't wait—come now."[181] Lawson sensed the urgency in his voice, and he understood what the fellow 28-year-old Gandhian pacifist meant: things are happening now, and he could not waste time while the movement was at its peak. With these thoughts in mind, Lawson recalled, "I heard myself saying to Martin, quietly, I will come as quickly as I can."[182]

Having already resolved to move South to get involved with the emerging civil rights movement, Lawson asked his peers at the FOR if they had any job openings available. In the fall of 1957, the opportunity came: Lawson received a call from Glenn Smiley, who was the national field secretary of the FOR at the time, that the organization needed a Southern field secretary. The job called for "a roving troubleshooter to watch events in this part of the country where events seemed to speeding up at so surprising a rate," and Lawson quickly accepted the position that January.[183] Although the job implied a great deal of travel, Lawson and Smiley brainstormed the best location for the new worker to be based, and they decided on Nashville, whose elimination of the poll tax a decade earlier changed the city's political landscape.[184] Now, greater numbers of Black citizens in Nashville were voting, which made the city's politics far more progressive than before. Additionally, although Nashville was at the heart of a conservative state, it benefited from a liberal newspaper in *The Nashville Tennessean* as well as its reputation as "The Protestant Vatican" for its high number of respectable colleges and seminaries.[185] With this in mind, Lawson departed on a bus from Oberlin to Nashville in January 1958, excited to begin his new position.[186]

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[178] Lawson, interview by Phillis Sheppard, Walter Fluker, and Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Boston University Oral History Project.*

[179] Halberstam, *The Children,* 16.

[180] Lawson, interview by Phillis Sheppard, Walter Fluker, and Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Boston University Oral History Project.*

[181] Lawson, *Boston University Oral History Project.*

[182] Ibid.

"An Opening Wedge": Choosing Lunch Counter Sit-Ins as the Movement Methodology

Knowing that the SCLC had chosen February 13, 1958 as a "kick-off date" for the social action plans that the founding ministers had envisioned, Smith invited Nashville's Black ministers to the NCLC's first meeting on January 18. Perhaps out of enthusiasm for the call to action—or perhaps because Smith mentioned that Martin Luther King, Sr., would be present—the majority of those invited attended.[187] In that first meeting, Smith indicated the chapter's purpose: "If we are to see the real downfall of segregation and discrimination it will be because of a disciplined Negro Christian movement which breaks the antiquated methods of resolving our fears and tensions and dramatically applies the gospel we profess."[188] That day, the NCLC also welcomed to the committee "all persons who accept the tenets of the Christian faith" as members. The group also decided that it would meet on the first and third Saturdays of every month, “or at any other time mutually agreed upon.”[189] Although there was a consensus among the committee members that NCLC must fill the vacuum of Black political leadership in Nashville, the group had not yet decided on a specific project.[190]

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[183] Halberstam, *The Children,* 17.
[184] Ibid, *20.*
[185] Ibid, 20-22.
[186] Ibid, 25.
[187] Smith, Manuscript of "Chapter II: Inspired Amateurs (The Nashville Christian Leadership Council)."
[188] Kelly Miller Smith, "Proposed Structure: Nashville Christian Leadership Council," (n.d.), Box 134, KMSP, Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.

In other words, the NCLC was established as a Christian social action organization, but its methodology was unclear: What would make NCLC different from the other Black organizations in Nashville that promised genuine change? In the January 18 meeting, a few ministers motioned to make voting registration the NCLC’s first project.[191] The motion, however, was met with backlash from members who wanted to differentiate the NCLC from other social action organizations in Nashville. One member, Andrew L. Porter, pointed out that the local NAACP chapter was tackling these two issues and, unlike in Alabama, they had not been outlawed.[192] Another committee member promptly responded, “Maybe you should have added the word ‘yet’, because we don’t know how soon this will be done in Tennessee.”[193]

Despite his concern for voting registration, which he had championed as NAACP president, Smith agreed with Porter. The NCLC president remembered a working paper he received at the SCLC conference earlier that year that advised the ministers on how to organize effectively in their respective cities. Titled “The Role of Law in Our Struggle: The Advantages and Limitations,” it called for the rise of an organization outside of the NAACP, which mainly fought for issues through legal advocacy, emphasizing that “the center of gravity has shifted from the courts to the community.”[194] With this in mind, Smith gathered that not only would they need to establish a new organization, but they would have to make one that "would get at the grass roots of the community, particularly the Negro community...[with] such independence of action as would permit the use of methods heretofore untried in the community."[195] After all, Smith added that "removing the legal barriers [in voter registration] may be *desegregating,* but it is not necessarily *integrating*."[196]

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[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Smith, Manuscript of “Chapter II: Inspired Amateurs (The Nashville Christian Leadership Council).”
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid.
[194] SCLC Working Paper No. 7 (from first SCLC meeting in Atlanta, January 10, 1957), in Smith, Manuscript of “Chapter II: Inspired Amateurs (The Nashville Christian Leadership Council).”

By March 1958, the NCLC had neither a project nor a methodology to achieve its goal of what Andrew White called a "Kingdom of God in reality."[197] In order to address this gap, the NCLC broadened its horizons beyond its original founding group of local Black ministers and welcomed others from the Nashville community. From March 26-28, the NCLC planning committee hosted its first series of workshops in Bethel A.M.E Church.[198] The guest speaker was Ralph Abernathy, a leading figure in nonviolent direct-action and one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "lieutenants" who had led the Montgomery Bus Boycotts two years before.[199] The meeting at Bethel A.M.E brought together representatives from multiple nonviolent groups, like the Congress on Racial Equality's Anna Holden, who had previously worked on school desegregation, and FOR's James Lawson and Glenn Smiley.[200] By that time, FOR was well-known among Black nonviolent theologians for its comic-style pamphlet on nonviolent direct-action called "Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story" that was "devoured by Black college students across the South," including future activist John Lewis.[201] As Smith would remark decades later, it was the presence of Lawson and Smiley, who were in town on other FOR business, that would make all the difference in the future of the NCLC.

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[195] Smith, Manuscript of "Chapter II: Inspired Amateurs (The Nashville Christian Leadership Council)."

[196] Houston, *The Nashville Way,* 79.

[197] Andrew White, interview by Leila A. Meir (n.d.), in Meir, "'A Different Kind of Prophet': The Role of Kelly Miller Smith in the Nashville Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1960," 14.

[198] Kelly Miller Smith, interview by John Britton, *Civil Rights Documentation Project,* Howard University, December 22, 1967; Houston, *The Nashville Way,* 80.

[199] Linda T. Wynn, "The Dawning of a New Day: The Nashville Sit-Ins, February 13-May 10, 1960," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1991): 44.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 83.

At that meeting, Smith was also delighted to learn that Lawson was moving to Nashville permanently and enrolling in Vanderbilt Divinity School as its second Black student.[202] Smith, welcomed Lawson to the NCLC and was particularly drawn to his extensive training and practice in nonviolence. Indeed, prior to Lawson's first workshop in Bethel A.M.E., there had not been any discussion of nonviolent direct-action as a form of protest. As Smith himself admitted, "the fact is that none of [the NCLC members] knew enough about [nonviolence] to bring it into the discussion in any meaningful way."[203] Yet the minister recalled Working Paper 5 from the SCLC meeting, which highlighted "the need for a small disciplined group of non-violent volunteers...[who] should receive intense training in spirit technique."[204] With this in mind, Smith hoped that Lawson would hold workshops on both the philosophy and practice of nonviolent-direct action— an expert role for the FOR Southern field secretary. Impatient to begin the NCLC movement, Smith encouraged him to begin as soon as possible.[205]

Although those present at the March meeting in Bethel A.M.E were impatient to create a nonviolent movement "to overthrow the system of racial domination" in Nashville, there was no clear decision about the means necessary to achieve that objective.[206] Throughout the next few months, the NCLC members discussed different avenues for nonviolent direct-action. After the committee members had discarded voting registration as their project, there was a motion was providing economic assistance for Black Nashvillians. Andrew White, the NCLC secretary, insisted that the group focus on something "that really had some economic meaning" like creating jobs for Black Nashvillians.[207] An economic approach to tackling discrimination, argued White, could actually touch on the systemic issues that Black people dealt with on a daily basis, such as by increasing representation in the Nashville Police Department.[208]

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[202] Carawan, Guy, ed. "The Nashville Sit-In Story." New York: Folkway Records, 1960; Introduction to recording by Kelly Miller Smith, Box 76, File 24, KMSP, Special Collections and University Archives, Jane and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University; Houston, *The Nashville Way,* 80.
[203] Smith, Manuscript of "Chapter II: Inspired Amateurs (The Nashville Christian Leadership Council)."
[204] Ibid.
[205] Halberstam, *The Children,* 56.
[206] Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 177.

Others disagreed with centering the Nashville movement around indirect financial empowerment, but few more vociferously than Lawson. Passive forms of resistance, he insisted, would not, and did not, bring about the lasting change they promised. Lawson distinguished between passive acquiescence and nonviolent direct action; he saw the local civil rights efforts countering voting and employment discrimination as the former. Contrary to what many thought at the time, voting rights legislation did not enact the change necessary to remove segregation from American life, he averred. Lawson critiqued these "so-called political social progressive forces" that poured money into efforts like voter registration, but that did not have a tangible effect on desegregation. The seasoned organizer viewed these efforts as ineffective in battling against de facto segregation. Instead, Lawson wanted to genuinely "engage in domestic issues and mold...a coalition for justice" that actively fought for these issues.[209] Lawson expressed frustration at the passive activism enacted through what he saw as half-hearted civil rights efforts, like voting registration. Indeed, the SCLC itself, which under King Jr.'s leadership began the Crusade for Citizenship in February 1958 to expand Black voting registration, was struggling to enact actual change. Although the Crusade garnered media attention—helped by King's demand that "We want the right to vote now...we do not want freedom fed to us in teaspoons over the next 150 years"—it failed to actually bring about substantial change in the mobilization of Black voters.[210] Eighteen months after the Crusade was launched, King said, "Honesty impels us to admit that we have not really scratched the surface in this area."[211] Beyond the issue of voting rights, legal historians have documented the insufficient impact that both Supreme Court and congressional decisions had on desegregation. Perhaps the most notable was the *Brown v, Board of Education* decision in 1954 on segregation in schools. Although the justices famously ordered schools to act "with all deliberate speed," data for the years 1955 to 1964 shows no change in the rates of desegregation in schools—in fact, by 1964, less than one out of every 100 Black children went to school with white students.[212] As legal historian Gerald Rosenberg pointed out: "The numbers show that the Supreme Court contributed virtually *nothing* to ending segregation of the public schools in the Southern states in the decade following *Brown.*"[213]

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[207] Kelly Miller Smith, interview by John Britton, *Civil Rights Documentation Project,* Howard University, December 22, 1967.
[208] Houston, *The Nashville Way,* 80.
[209] James M. Lawson, Jr., interview by Phillis Sheppard, Walter Fluker, and Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Boston University Oral History Project,* Boston University, November 26, 2011.

Like Lawson, Smith did not want to witness another empty promise like the Nashville Plan. While Smith agreed with White's point that the Nashville movement should focus on actual injustices at hand, he believed it was better to start off small. Rather than tackle the big social and economic issues all at once, Smith advocated beginning with an individual problem that the committee members could handle more effectively. With this in mind, Smith began on the NCLC's first direct-action effort in Nashville's race relations: reaching out to white clergymen. So, on November 29, 1958, five NCLC members refused seating at the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Crusade and were met with responses ranging from outrage to confusion to nonchalance. In other words, the trial did not produce the intended change that NCLC wanted.

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[210] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Give Us the Ballot," (May 17, 1957), in Branch, *Parting the Waters,* 232.
[211] Ibid, 232.
[212] Gerald N. Rosenberg, *The Hollow Hope: Can Courts Bring About Social Change?,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 43-52.
[213] Ibid, 52.

After this unsuccessful experiment, the NCLC sampled Andrew White's employment discrimination approach. The executive board members donated "truckloads" of clothing and supplies to workers in the outskirts of Nashville who had been fired for voting in city elections, but the effort failed to garner much traction in the NCLC and soon ended.[214] In another effort, the NCLC met with Nashville Mayor Ben West and voiced its concern over the city's poor record of hiring Black residents for high-paying jobs. Although the conference successfully convinced West to promote at least one Black policeman to the role of detective, the NCLC still felt that their framework was unclear and indistinguishable from other civil rights organizations.

After these experiments, the NCLC continued to explore other methodologies. In a meeting in early 1959, a Black woman in Smith's congregation spoke up about her experience in the segregated downtown area. She described the department stores downtown, where white mothers could enjoy a cold beverage as their children enjoyed the indoor playground. Black mothers and their children, however, were not afforded this privilege. As Lawson remembered over two decades later, she exclaimed:

> You men don't really know what life is like in segregation. We are the ones who shop. When we go into downtown Nashville there is no place that we can stop with dignity and rest our feet...so, as we do your shopping for you, you're in... your own offices and the like, but we're the ones who bear the brunt of the racism, of the segregation in Nashville.[215]

Lawson was moved by her words. He again became aware of how diverse the experience of being Black in Nashville was for everyone in the room. Indeed, "even the black middle class, teaching in all-Black schools, working in an all-Black hospital could be very insulated from the insult and the put-down that went on for those people who worked in the department stores or in the downtown area."[216] Soon enough, others began sharing testimonials and stories similar to the first woman's comment, which only solidified the NCLC's conviction that downtown lunch counters would be the perfect target for a movement to dismantle segregation in Nashville. Smith concurred with Lawson on the relevance of lunch counter sit-ins. Although he agreed with White that desegregating lunch counters was not the most pressing issue, Smith explained that it could serve as "an opening wedge, from which other things would come."

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[214] Carawan, Guy, ed. "The Nashville Sit-In Story." New York: Folkway Records, 1960; Introduction to recording by Kelly Miller Smith. Box 76, File 24, KMSP, Special Collections and University Archives, Jane and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.

[215] Ibid.

The NCLC, then, had settled on desegregating the downtown lunch counters as its focus, and it experimented with negotiations as a means of desegregation. The NCLC members spent the next months visiting restaurants and department stores downtown to discuss the matter with merchants. These meetings, however, were largely unsuccessful. Although the merchants, as Smith recalled, "expressed the willingness to desegregate *after* the rest of the city had changed," they explained that they would lose too much business if they desegregated at that time.[217] The committee members, especially Lawson, were unimpressed and called on the committee to "think creatively in terms of nonviolence" in an NCLC meeting on October 17, 1959.[218] Seeing that the negotiations proved unsuccessful, Smith remembered the initial NCLC proposal to "break with the antiquated methods of resolving our fears and tensions and dramatically applies the gospel we profess."[219] Smith and Lawson, then, decided on sit-ins as a nonviolent methodology. After some discussion, the NCLC counted the benefits of lunch counters as its strategy. Most importantly, the very location of downtown lunch counters made them the perfect site for publicity—the large store-front windows and visualization of two distinct lines for Blacks and whites dramatized the issue for an imagined audience.[220] By exposing the violence of Jim Crow through lunch counter sit-ins, "the shame would fade," Smith asserted, "and the glory would be made known."[221] On the October 17 meeting, the committee members voted to make Lawson the chairman of the Projects Committee and assigned him the role of organizing the sit-ins.

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[216] Ibid.

[217] Carawan, Guy, ed. "The Nashville Sit-In Story." New York: Folkway Records, 1960; Introduction to recording by Kelly Miller Smith.

[218] "NCLC Meeting Minutes from October 17, 1959," Box 75, Folder 22, KMSP, Special Collections and University Archives, Jane and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.

[219] Carawan, Guy, ed. "The Nashville Sit-In Story." New York: Folkway Records, 1960; Introduction to recording by Kelly Miller Smith.

Conclusion

Kelly Miller Smith and James Lawson found their ways to Nashville through very different routes. While the former was a Southern-born Baptist minister who had not traveled outside of the U.S., the latter was born in the North and traveled around a great deal, including a brief stint in prison for his conscientious objection to the Korean War and a missionary stay in India. Yet it was what unified the two men that made all the difference in Nashville's civil rights history. Indeed, Smith and Lawson shared a life-long commitment to Christian pacifism and non-violent direct action. They both connected Christianity to their devotion to social justice and saw biblical parallels to the inequality that they saw in the Jim Crow South. With this in mind, they sought to connect their Christian teachings to the fight for racial equality in the South—a battle that the NCLC sought to continue with its establishment in January 1958. From the time that Smith and Lawson met later that year to the start of the first workshop in Bethel A.M.E. Church, the executive board of the NCLC had much to organize. There was the question of what social issue the activists would rally around and, after floating voter registration and economic mobilization as potential options, the leaders decided to use sit-ins as their method of action.

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[220] Houston, *The Nashville Way*, 81.

[221] Smith, Manuscript of "Chapter 1: The Shame and Glory: The Setting," Box 28, KMSP, Special Collections and University Archives, Vanderbilt University.

Still, this was not yet how the Nashville movement would grow to become what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the "model movement." Instead, the NCLC was but one part of the broader Nashville movement, which came to be known as the Nashville Nonviolent Movement. Indeed, it was the addition of student activists from nearby universities that provided the foot-soldiers to carry out the movement. Once Lawson, who delivered lectures to historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) around the country, heard word that college students in the area wanted to get involved, the movement transformed into a joint one that united student and religious leaders. It was then, when students blended into what had started as an "adult movement," that the Nashville movement cemented its role in the national civil rights movement.[222]

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[222] Kelly Miller Smith, interview by John Britton, *Civil Rights Documentation Project,* Howard University, December 22, 1967.

Chapter 2: "The Kids Become Interested":
The Introduction of Students into the Movement

Introduction

By the beginning of 1959, the NCLC had laid the foundations for a nonviolent movement that rallied around Christian social action. Although the executive board had flirted with methods like voting registration and economic mobilization, the NCLC decided on sit-ins as the method of protest. Importantly, the addition of James Lawson to the NCLC brought the experienced movement organizer into center stage along with Kelly Miller Smith, the minister at First Baptist.[223]

Yet at this time the Nashville movement was restricted to the work of the NCLC ministers. Although there were a few notable exceptions who attended the Lawson workshops while the Nashville campaign was still an "adult movement," it was only in the fall of 1959 when the movement gained its key component—the students. Through the creation of the Student Central Committee and a larger, yet less defined, coalition of student activists, the Nashville movement blossomed into its full form—the Nashville Nonviolent Movement. Indeed, it was then that the NCLC, along with the Central Committee, became but one of the two substructures of the Nashville Nonviolent umbrella. As David Halberstam, then a reporter for *The Nashville Tennessean* who covered the sit-ins on assignment, showed, the movement owed its success to the collaboration between students, who served as eager foot-soldiers in the workshops and sit-ins, and the NCLC's adult clergy who provided governing ideas, funds, and infrastructure for the movement. Once Lawson and Smith introduced the students into the movement in the latter months of 1959, the movement grew into one that would dismantle local Jim Crow segregation in the coming months. After discussing the development of the Nashville Nonviolent Movement from a strictly clergy-led adult movement into one that welcomed students, this chapter will delve into the lessons from the Lawson workshops. By focusing on the trainings in nonviolent philosophy and praxis that Lawson provided for students in church basements, it will shed light on how the highly disciplined nature of the movement paved the way for success in the spring of 1960. Thanks to the intellectual boot camp that Lawson had set up, by then the students were proficient in nonviolent protest.

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[223] "Purposes and Principles of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council," Box 62, JMLC, Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.

How the Students Became Involved

Although Lawson devoted much of his time to the Nashville movement as an NCLC officer, he also delivered workshops to students on campuses throughout the country, where he "traveled a great deal, preaching, speaking, lecturing and advising local groups in the fields of Christian peace-making and reconciliation in race relations."[224] As in Nashville, Lawson connected Christian pacifism and the emerging civil rights movement to encourage students to begin grassroots movements on their campuses. Students received him with warmth and excitement and saw the minister and graduate student as a "superior" and thought-provoking teacher. In a letter to Lawson, the Wesley Foundation, a Methodist organization at the University of Oklahoma, commented that "many of the students are still recovering from the impact of the retreat: thought processes began, introspection, idols shattered, commitments deepened, more too numerous to mention...your presence in our group was the most stimulating and worthwhile experience of this school year for us."[225] That letter added that three days after the workshop, one of their students announced that he was entering the ministry.[226] Clearly, Lawson was a force that propelled young people to act.

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[224] James M. Lawson, Correspondence between James Lawson and Anita House, May 22, 1958, Box 36, JMLC, Special Collections and University Archives, Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.

But before the workshops evolved into the packed auditoriums that reeled in hundreds of Nashville undergraduate and graduate students, they began on a low-key note. At the end of a Sunday morning sermon in the fall of 1958, Smith announced to his congregation at First Baptist that an FOR workshop would be held that evening in the church basement. Amidst the congregation listening to Smith was John Lewis, a student at American Baptist Seminary, a college in North Nashville that trained students for the ministry. Born in Troy, Alabama to a family of tenant farmers, Lewis moved to Nashville in the fall of 1957 and worked his way through college at the seminary's kitchen.[227] Lewis, who like Lawson derived his devotion to nonviolent direct-action from his Christian faith and the lessons of "the Great Teacher," had a commitment to nonviolence that predated his formal studies.[228] Lewis remembered his first experience in nonviolent protest as a young boy on the farm. Responsible for tending to the chickens, Lewis began preaching to them the sermons he heard at the church that he traveled to with his family on a mule-drawn wagon, growing so attached to his congregation of poultry that he refused to eat them after they were killed by his parents.[229] He even tried baptizing a chicken to "save its soul," although ironically the religious act ended up drowning the animal.[230] Despite this unfortunate occurrence, Lewis attributed his selfless love to these animals. As he remembered years later, “The kinship I felt with these other living creatures, the closeness, the compassion, is a feeling I carried with me out into the world from that point on.”[231]

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[225] James M. Lawson, Correspondence between James Lawson and Methodist Student Learning Center, May 2, 1959, Box 36, JMLC, Special Collections and University Archives, Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.

[226] James M. Lawson, Correspondence between Clyde Chestnutt and James Lawson, May 2, 1959, Box 36, JMLC. Special Collections and University Archives, Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.

[227] John Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project,* Howard University, August 22, 1967.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Jon Meacham and John Lewis, *His Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope*, 27.

[230] Ibid.

With his deeply rooted commitment to spirited love and nonviolence, it is easy to see how Lewis would grow disillusioned with half-hearted movements. Indeed, when he began attending youth chapter meetings of the Nashville NAACP in 1957, he became disappointed with the non-action of the members, who “just met and paid their membership fees”[232]. Although he was disillusioned, Lewis began reading Gandhi and hearing Martin Luther King Jr. preach on the power of Christian nonviolence. Still, Lewis felt “useless and helpless in the system”—that is, until he attended a discussion in February 1958 hosted by the NCLC that featured Martin Luther King, Sr. There, Lewis had an opportunity to see how he could put his ideas into practice.

Speaking at the event, which commemorated Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, was Smith, who taught homiletics at American Baptist and had developed an affectionate mentorship with Lewis, his student at the time.[233] Smith sensed Lewis as a pure-hearted student wholeheartedly devoted to Christian social action.[234] Conversely, in Smith, Lewis saw “one of the most articulate ministers...able to move people, to move masses with his words—he had a passion for peace, social justice.”[235]

After the NCLC event, Lewis, a self-described “poor boy from Alabama” began attending services at Smith’s First Baptist Church, where the Black doctors, lawyers, and professors of Nashville convened.[236] When his pastor announced the Sunday evening FOR workshop, Lewis immediately was keen to attend the event. So, at around six-thirty that night,

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[231] Ibid.
[232] Ibid.
[233] Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement,* 176.
[234] Halberstam, *The Children*, 71.
[235] John Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project,* Howard University, August 22, 1967.
[236] John Lewis, interview by Julieanna L. Richardson, *The History Makers,* April 25, 2001.

Lewis walked into a small room with other young, Black college students and watched Lawson introduce himself.

Although Lewis was taken aback by Smith, the 18 year-old student was even more amazed by Lawson.[237] In his memoir, Lewis described first hearing Lawson speak with "a way about him, an aura of inner peace and wisdom that you could sense immediately upon simply seeing him."[238] Lewis especially liked how the graduate student—who was just a few years his senior—made his students feel, describing that "there was something of a mystic about him, something holy, so gathered, about his manner, the way he had of leaning back in his chair and listening—really *listening*—nodding his head, saying, 'Yes, go ahead,' taking everything in before he would respond."[239] That night, Lawson gave his modest audience an overview of world religions—Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity—and emphasized that "all these religions share a fundamental tenet: the concept of justice."[240] When he finished speaking, Lawson told the group that this interfaith approach to justice would be the theme for all future workshops, which he explained would be held in the nearby Clark Memorial United Methodist Church.

That Sunday evening at First Baptist marked the beginning of the student involvement in the Nashville Nonviolent Movement. Inspired by Lawson's life story and devotion to non-violence, Lewis tried to convince his closest friends at American Baptist, Bernard Lafayette and James Bevel, to start attending these meetings with him. Although both Lafayette and Bevel were Lewis's closest friends from school, the pair had very different dispositions. While both of his friends were outgoing, Lewis remembered Lafayette as far more patient and soft-spoken than

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[237] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 83.
[238] Ibid, 83.
[239] Ibid, 85.
[240] Ibid, 84.

Bevel, who Lewis described as a "human hurricane."[241] Like Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, who was in his first year at American Baptist, had a "stick-to-it-iveness" to him—a desire to "be *out* there, to sacrifice, that belief that somehow, some way, things *will* get better."[242] Indeed, Lafayette and Lewis shared a hopeful and positive view of how their faith could shape the emerging civil rights movement.

James Bevel, however, was a traditional literalist and Christian nonviolent activism did not seem like a feasible path for him. Like Lewis, Bevel grew up in the South, but not with the same devout background. In fact, the "brash, quick-tongued, and sociable" Bevel had just signed onto a rock-and-roll contract when he suddenly felt divinely called to the ministry.[243] After his religious awakening, he moved to Nashville to attend American Baptist, where he was considered "the natural leader of the seminary."[244] While at school, he became the pastor of a small church on the outskirts of the city, where he preached on the "necessity of people having the right relationship with their God...the whole idea of people needing to be born again...to be saved from something."[245] Yet Bevel, like Lewis, began to think through this connection to religion, and started feeling that these sermons were not making enough of a dent in their goal of liberating Black Americans. Lewis remembered Bevel explaining that, rather than concerning themselves "with the streets of some Heaven, some pearly gates, [they] must be concerned with the streets of Nashville."[246]

While it was easier for Lewis to convince Lafayette to ride along, it was tough to do the same for Bevel, who then felt that his friends "were straying away from their true purpose at

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[241] Ibid, 88.
[242] Ibid, 89.
[243] Branch, *Parting the Waters,* 263.
[244] Ibid.
[245] John Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project,* Howard University, August 22, 1967.
[246] Ibid.

American Baptist, which was to study the teachings of Jesus Christ so that they could better pass them on to their congregations."[247] Yet Bevel, unlike his two friends, owned a car, and was asked by his friends to drive them five miles away to the workshops. For the first few meetings, Bevel dropped his friends off at Clark Memorial and made his way to the nearby Nashville Public Library, where he passed the time before he picked them up. While at the library, Bevel picked up books on Gandhi and Tolstoy, who wrote on the power of nonviolence as a means of protest. As he read their works, Bevel began to see Lawson as a man so devoted to the cause that he was imprisoned for his actions.[248] Now familiar with ideas of pacifism and non-violence he gleaned from reading Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy, Bevel began to see the importance of nonviolence in the Black liberation movement.[249] In these books, Bevel learned the sheer force that nonviolent protest had in dismantling oppressive systems abroad. Nonviolence, Bevel learned, was not just restricted to philosophy, and he began to see the merits of its application. By the fall of 1958, Lewis and Lafayette succeeded in pulling him into the workshops.

Throughout the semester, the three friends from American Baptist regularly attended Lawson's workshops, which by this time consistently had less than ten people in attendance—all Black students.[250] Yet for their small numbers, the students that convened in the basement of Clark Memorial every Tuesday night were fully committed to the nonviolent cause.[251] So, when Lawson told his audience that there would be a retreat at the nearby Highlander Folk School late that fall, Lewis, Lafayette, and Bevel all signed up. Founded nearly three decades earlier, Highlander had been the training ground for the nation's most prominent civil rights activists, including Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr.[252] Although Highlander was originally centered around issues of class-conflict, by mid-century, Highlander began holding workshops on civil disobedience and movement organizing around the Black liberation struggle.[253]

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[247] Halberstam, *The Children*, 72.
[248] Although this is not specified in the sources, it is likely that Bevel was reading Tolstoy's famous work on nonviolence, *The Kingdom of God is Within You.* See Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (Rockville: Wildside Press, 2006), 17.
[249] Bevel, interview by Larry Crowe, *The History Makers,* January 14, 2003.
[250] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement,* 93.
[251] Ibid, 84.

Once at Highlander, the three friends were honored to be at a location so historic and sacred in the history of nonviolent movement. Through seminars, workshops, and singing, the attendees told stores of their own organizing and Gandhian nonviolent philosophy. One such inspiration was Myles Horton, a white man who had founded Highlander. In this role, Horton became a Lawson-like figure in the rural Tennessee mountains to "enlighten and organize a huge range of 'students,' from Appalachian whites to Alabama Blacks."[254] When the weekend retreat came to a close, Horton delivered a warning to the young and idealistic attendees— "never to let any organization or group capture our spirit [or] become the slaves of any of the old, established civil rights organizations."[255]

The students left Highlander even more inspired than they were when they began the weekend retreat. Through a series of other events in Nashville hosted by the NCLC and NAACP, like the Institute on Nonviolent Resistance to Segregation, Lawson and his students discussed their emerging movement with other civil rights organizations in the city. Heeding Horton's advice to not be drowned out by institutions, the students stayed committed to their Tuesday night gatherings, which began gathering traction among other college students in Nashville.

By the beginning of the fall semester in 1959, students at Fisk University got word of the workshops in Clark Memorial, which was mere steps from their campus. The connection started when Lawson met Paul LaPrad, a white transfer student at Fisk.[256] LaPrad, a member of a Christian sect called the Church of Brethren, which preached nonviolence, had come to Nashville hoping to meet other like-minded people. Before he left for Fisk, he asked around for someone who could help him make these contacts, and he was given Lawson's name. Once he began school at Fisk, LaPrad contacted Lawson, who nonchalantly mentioned that he was conducting workshops on nonviolent direct-action aimed at desegregating the downtown area. In a fateful moment, Lawson asked LaPrad if he knew of any other students who would want to get involved with the movement.

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[252] Ibid, 88.
[253] Karen A. Johnson "Highlander Folk School," in *Encyclopedia of African American Education*, ed. Kofi Lomotey, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2010): 316.
[254] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 93.
[255] Ibid, 90.

LaPrad, who frequented the Fisk International Center, had befriended other students who were equally disillusioned with the apathetic student body at Fisk.[257] In fact, they sometimes found themselves discussing the lack of fiery commitment to transformative change in the Black community since the Brown v Board of Education decision five years prior.[258] When Lawson asked LaPrad if he and his classmates would like to get involved, he agreed and mentioned other students who would, too.

Diane Nash was one of the Fisk students that LaPrad contacted about the workshops. Nash grew up on the Southside of Chicago, which, although segregated, did not see the same overt forms of segregation as Southern cities like Nashville.[259] As such, she was shocked at the difference in the treatment of Black people in Nashville. Thinking about her move from Chicago, she explained: "When I actually went South, and actually saw signs that said "white" and

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[256] Ibid, 56.
[257] Diane Nash, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize,* November 12, 1985.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Diane Nash, "Diane Nash," in *Lighting the Fires of Freedom: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement,* ed. Janet Dewart Bell, (New York: The New Press, 2018), 97.

"colored" and I actually could not drink out of that water fountain, or go to that ladies' room, I had a real emotional reaction."[260]

Her visceral reaction, combined with the frustration she felt at coming "...to college to grow, and expand, and [feeling] shut in," propelled Nash to actively stand against this segregation. This was hard, however, because the student population at Fisk was, in her words, "not interested in trying to effect some kind of change."[261] Instead of the growth and enthusiasm that she hoped to find in college, Nash recalled "getting, almost, depressed, because [what she] encountered was apathy."[262] When Nash suggested changing the racist status quo to her peers while they lounged around their dormitories or sat in class, many asked her, "Why are you concerned about that?"[263] Instead of the idealistic students and environment she had hoped for, what Nash encountered was a student body that reluctantly accepted its unjust reality. Nash was beginning to lose all the hope she brought with her to Nashville until she met LaPrad. Considering that the workshops were taking place just a few blocks off campus, she agreed to join the movement. "That was the only group even trying to combat segregation that I knew about," she explained years later.[264]

Despite the fact that Fisk and American Baptist were just a ten-minute car ride away from each other, their student bodies could not have been more different. Unlike students at Fisk, which had a reputation for belonging to the Black elite, American Baptist students attended a tuition-free school that did not attract the famous Black theologians that frequented the Fisk campus. Ironically, while the school was built by the Southern Baptist and National Baptist

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[260] Nash, interview by Blackside Inc.
[261] Nash, interview by Blackside Inc.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ibid.
[264] Diane Nash, interview with Steve York, in *A Force More Powerful*, directed by Steve York (International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 1999), YouTube video.

Conventions to prevent Black theological students from attending the predominantly white Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, the school became a source of pride for the Black community. The school's proud and low-key atmosphere made it the ideal spot for down-to-earth students who were eager to get involved in religious grassroots movements.

Although Lawson's students came from different social worlds, what they liked about his workshops was how little these socioeconomic differences mattered. For the students drawn into the meetings, wealth and social status were not on the agenda— they were only focused on the nonviolent cause. Each member of the group contributed his or her own devotion to the movement. For example, the American Baptist students—namely Lewis, Lafayette, and Bevel—provided a genuine commitment to Christianity and a level of resilience that they learned from their humble roots.[265] Although Fisk students shared this discipline, they also brought the sophistication of their school to the workshops. Indeed, prominent Black theologians and scholars were known to frequent the Fisk campus, bringing along with them the national sentiment of civil rights change. Lewis, for instance, recalled walking around the campus with his friend when W.E.B. Du Bois "strolled right past [them]"—an opportunity that was not afforded to him and his fellow American Baptist peers.[266] Throughout the workshops that fall, the students that Lawson and Smith gathered began to bond into one collective body united in the same cause. Lawson delighted at seeing the students leave together from the workshops and chat on Fisk's campus. Although there were occasional feelings of competition and jealousy—much of which was aimed at Nash, who "had won more than her share of beauty pageants as a young teen"—the students, John Lewis recalled, "became brothers and sisters, a family...completely together, totally solid, a unit bound by trust and devotion."[267] Clearly, despite the diversity and potential fractures within the group, in the workshops, they were one.

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[265] Ibid, 70.
[266] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 81.

In fact, the unification of the movement into a homogeneous entity was an idea that Lawson had borrowed from Gandhi. From his time in India, Lawson gleaned that decentralized movements were successful movements. Unlike groups that coalesced around one leader which "tended to act in name of the subordinated population," group-oriented organizations "encouraged the repressed community to help itself."[268] So, when it came time to organize the group dynamics of the Nashville students, Lawson encouraged them to adopt a collective leadership style that relied on the group as a whole, rather than on one student. After all, back at Highlander Folk School, it was Myles Horton's last warning to the students before they embarked on their movement.

By October 1959, that collective leadership had a name. The students adopted the name of the Nashville Student Movement and formed themselves into a Student Central Committee.[269] As such, a group of students—led by a rotating spokesperson position— represented the interests of the entire movement.[270] In line with Horton's comment about power getting the best of leaders, the students feared individual power, instead making the central committee about "group effectiveness and responsibility."[271] Almost instantly, the notion of collective leadership put into practice through the governing style of the Student Central Committee "weeded out" some students, for whom "this sort of activity—*any* kind of organized activity—represented an opportunity to take control, to direct, to lead."[272] In fact, two of the three first central committee chairs quit after a week, leaving Diane Nash as the sole remaining chair—a position she would hold again in the coming months.[273] This new position made Nash afraid of her newfound responsibility. As she remembered years later:

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[267] Ibid, 91-2.
[268] Dickerson, "African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930-55," 33.
[269] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 93.
[270] Ibid.
[271] Ibid.
[272] Ibid.

> "That same evening after I was elected, I thought, 'My goodness, what will have happened in the next two months? We will be coming up against, oh, man, white men in their forties and fifties and sixties who are businessmen and politicians.' And here we are students. You know, seventeen, eighteen, maybe to twenty-one or twenty-two years old. It was daunting."[274]

Despite her fear, which she called "a great motivator," Nash remained on as the committee spokesperson.[275] Within the first few weeks of the formation of the Student Central Committee, it became clear that, after "those who were not serious just dropped away," there remained a core group that made all the decisions with consensus.[276] In order to ensure that the leadership was indeed collective, and because they needed "everybody's enthusiastic support," the committee took straw votes and held discussions if there was widespread disagreement.[277] Although the central committee's core leadership was only around a dozen students, sometimes around forty students would attend their weekly meetings, which were open to the entire Nashville Student Movement.[278]

For all this emotion and excitement, however, the students were at first slightly apprehensive of Lawson. Since they were accustomed to the charismatic ministers, like Smith, who led social movements, the students had expected an outspoken and energetic speaker eager to start a social revolution. So, when they heard Lawson speak in a low-key manner, with a habit of growing quiet to the point of whispering when he reached the main point of a story, the students thought he was disinterested.[279] The mystic qualities that Lewis had sensed in Lawson—including his tendency to lean back in his chair when listening to a story and nod for a long time before finally answering—were seen by some of the others as detached.[280] As David Halberstam, *The Nashville Tennessean* reporter pointed out, the students "were all accustomed to spellbinding preachers, men who as they reached the climax of their sermons became louder and more passionate."[281] Lawson, it seemed, was the complete opposite. Perhaps more frustrating for the students was how calmly Lawson approached the racist laws and systems that they were setting out to dismantle. Rather than share the students' anger and impatience, he emphasized the power of loving the enemy and showing him empathy.

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[273] Ibid.
[274] Nash, "Diane Nash," in *Lighting the Fires of Freedom: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement,* 98.
[275] Ibid.
[276] Ibid.
[277] Ibid.
[278] Halberstam, *The Children,* 128.

Lawson was not oblivious to these frustrations, and he empathized with the uncertainty and doubt that these first students felt. The group leader, however, did not want to "touch the powerful emotional chords within them."[282] Instead, Lawson tried to be patient and hope that they would find the confidence to peacefully stand up against the enemy of Jim Crow. He hoped that with regular meetings, they would grow comfortable with vulnerability and come to see that the ideas he was impressing on them were far from naïve. As such, he planned his teachings around the doubts that his students felt and set their agenda to first focus on the principles of Christian nonviolent philosophy.

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[279] Ibid, 60.

[280] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, 85.

[281] Halberstam, *The Children*, 60

[282] Ibid.

Lessons in Nonviolence

Although the students assembled before Lawson were eager to act, Lawson insisted on beginning the workshops with the philosophy of nonviolence. Lawson, who had devoted much of his life to the practice of nonviolent direct-action, wanted to impress these ideas on his students. In doing so, Lawson used the teachings of both Gandhi and Jesus to show the power of nonviolence as a means of protesting social ills. The workshop coordinator centered his curriculum around the theme of *satyagraha*, which Gandhi translated as "truth-force" or "soul-force."[283] Throughout his workshops, Lawson showed his students that the pursuit of truth does not have to implicate violence—but, instead, should use patience and compassion to counter injustice.

Lawson emphasized in the early workshops that the journey they were embarking on was far from small. Although their current action was limited to discussions in a church basement, although they were few in number, and although they confronted a powerful racist system, the students, Lawson instructed, were "of infinite worth and dignity."[284] He emphasized that, because their motivation was so strong, the strength of the movement would follow, and he encouraged them to act virtuously. Such individuals, believed Lawson, "...would no longer be anonymous."[285] Instead, Lawson continued, they would be known as "heroes, men and women who had been abused and arrested for seeking the most elemental of human rights," and these effects would reverberate across other spaces.[286] Lawson impressed on his students the power of redemptive suffering—the notion of suffering as a holy social good. Indeed, Lawson's own role-models for his nonviolent philosophy were martyrs—he reminded his students that Jesus was crucified and Gandhi shot to death.[287] Not only does suffering affect its victims, the ever-eager student in John Lewis learned at the time, but it "opens us and those around us to a force beyond ourselves, a force that is right and moral, the force of righteous truth that is the basis of human conscience."[288] Lawson's discussion on suffering took Lewis back to his childhood, where his mother would "groan and moan when she was praying, [saying] 'The seeds of the righteous must never be forsaken.'"[289] With these ideas, Lawson showed his students that their suffering was not in vain—instead, it would give them the compassion necessary to change their worlds.

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[283] Mahatma Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha),* (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Trust, 1961), 1.
[284] James M. Lawson, Jr., interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize*, December 2, 1985.
[285] Halberstam, *The Children,* 62.
[286] Ibid.

Similarly, Lawson sought to show his students that nonviolence was more than just the absence of violence. Borrowing from Gandhi, Lawson claimed that it was not enough to just refrain from violent action, which had resulted in the "indignity, humiliation and sin of racial segregation by law and custom" to which Blacks long found themselves subjected.[290] As Gandhi himself explained, "Satyagraha differs from Passive Resistance as the North Pole from the South."[291] Indeed, unlike passive acquiescence, which does not require any mental strength, nonviolence direct-action is an active state.[292] In other words, pacifism cannot lead to a revolution because it does not imply any form of rebellion. Gandhi considered simple pacifism to be a "weapon of the weak," as opposed to active non-cooperation, where strong-willed people "openly and civilly break "laws" and quietly suffer the penalty of their breach."[293] Lawson himself was not naïve to the dangers of aimless pacifism; he was aware that this practice could do as much "emotional and spiritual violence" as physical violence.[294] This, Lawson explained, was the case for many Black Americans, who were "largely submitted to the indignity, humiliation, and sin of racial segregation by law and custom."[295] As a result, Lawson tried to strike a balance between simple pacifism and outright violence—he encouraged students to actively confront evil "not by imitating the evil, but with good-will, with an effort to convert the evil-doer."[296]

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[287] James M. Lawson, "Non-Violence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change," (1958), Box 38, JMLC, Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.
[288] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 85.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Lawson, "Non-Violence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change."
[291] Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha),* 3.
[292] Ibid, 68.
[293] Ibid, 7.
[294] Lawson, "Non-Violence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change."

Lawson also emphasized the power of love in nonviolent direct-action, which, he taught his students, could "change situations."[297] The divinity student drew heavily from his studies of Gandhian nonviolence when he claimed that transformation and liberation came from loving the enemy—in this case, those who promoted Jim Crow segregation. In his *Satyagraha*, which heavily influenced Lawson, Gandhi writes that "the motive is to convert the opponent and make him one's willing ally and friend."[298] Likewise, Lawson saw nonviolence as "the aggressive, forgiving, patient, long-suffering Christ-like and Christ-commanded love or good-will for all humankind even in the face of tension, fear, hatred, or demonic evil."[299] He empathized to the students that there was a divine spark in every human being, no matter how small. Some people, of course, are taught to hate others based on the color of their skin, but even they are inherently good. The students, Lawson continued, should not hate even those who deemed them as inferior. John Lewis recalled one example that Lawson would give in the workshops:

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[295] Ibid.
[296] Ibid.
[297] James M. Lawson, "Preliminary reading for Feb. 1959 Boston F.O.R discussion group 'The Basis and Power of Non-Violence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change,'" (1959), Box 36, JMLC, Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University.
[298] Ibid.
[299] Lawson, "Non-Violence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change."

> “[Lawson] would say, "If you accept nonviolence as a technique, as a tactic, it's like a faucet. You can turn it on, or you can turn it off. You have to decide well one day I'm gonna love Sue. Then the next day I'm gonna hate Mary. And one day I'm gonna love Joe and then the next day I'm gonna hate Bob." He said, "Just love everybody. Love is a better way. It's a more excellent way." And then he said, "Means and ends are inseparable."[300]

In Lawson’s eyes, for a nonviolent movement to be successful, it was essential to understand the reasoning of the opponent and meet him or her with empathy and love. As Diane Nash put it: “A person who is being truthful and honest, actually, is standing in a much more powerful position than a person who’s lying or trying to maintain his preference even though, on some level, he knows he’s wrong.”[301] In order for the compassion to arrive more genuinely for his students, Lawson actively encouraged the students to imagine their aggressor as a newborn child. The approach stuck with his students, like Lewis, who later remarked: “If you can see this full-grown attacker who faces you as the pure, innocent child that he or she once was—that we *all* once were—it is not hard to find compassion in your heart.”[302] Indeed, forgiveness—another concept that Lawson emphasized in his workshops—required compassion for what led the attacker to grow violent. Similar to Lawson’s own theorizing while in prison, where he empathized with the traumas and tribulations that brought many of his fellow inmates to commit crimes, he reminded his students that the attacker is a victim, too.[303]

Once Lawson taught the philosophy of Christian nonviolence to his students, he turned his attention to another critical lesson: the actual practice of nonviolent direct-action. Although the students now understood concepts like *ahisma* and *satyagraha*, they were not trained in applying them.[304] Lawson, then, wanted to teach his students the power of that "soul force" which would guide them "through the ugliness and pain that lay ahead."[305] From his own experience, Lawson was acutely aware of the physical and verbal backlash his students would receive for their demonstrations. As a result, beginning in December 1959 the workshops began to focus on how the students should respond to this violence.

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[300] John Lewis, interview by Julieanna Richardson, *The History Makers*.
[301] Diane Nash, *Eyes on the Prize.*
[302] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 86.
[303] Ibid.

To do this, Lawson borrowed from his lessons on the power of love. Diane Nash, interviewed in 1985, remembered these lessons clearly over two decades later.[306] Lawson, she explained, invoked passages from the Bible, where Jesus defied his tormentors using forgiveness and love. Likewise, as "true children of God," his students should not act in anger towards those who were hostile towards them.[307] Lawson knew that each and every one of the activists had the power to rise above the violence they encountered on a daily basis, and he called on them to use this hostility to better themselves as human beings. With this in mind, one of their first assignments was to resolve the ways that love could be used in a crisis and discuss the reasons why people often resorted to anger instead. Lawson, however, knew that some taunts paralyzed his Black students more than others, especially the paralyzing word: "[n-----]." As such, Lawson devoted sessions to role-playing with an emphasis on that particular word. In these skits, part of the group acted out the role of white segregationists violently and abusively resisting the demonstrations and the others tried to move past their racist taunts.[308]

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[304] Ahisma roughly translates to "do no harm." Gandhi credited the practice as one of the tenets of nonviolent direct-action. See Mahatma Gandhi, Letter to V.N.S. Chary, quoted in Judith M. Brown, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 53.

[305] Ibid, 87.

[306] Diane Nash, *Eyes on the Prize.*

[307] Ibid.

[308] Anatomy of a Demonstration, directed by Charles Ed Rickey (KPIX-TV, 1965), DVD. Civil Rights Oral History Collection, Nashville Public Library, Special Collections Division, Nashville, Tennessee.

The students also practiced protecting their peers—and each other. Like a doctor, Lawson showed his students how to contort their bodies after they were attacked so that their "internal organs would escape direct blows."[309] Similarly, he taught them the ultimate act of nonviolent self-defense—looking into the eyes of their attackers, which the students would learn "could be a viscerally disarming thing."[310] Lawson also taught the students how to assist one another in times of aggression. He presented the likely situation where a student was beaten by a white segregationist. They "would practice other people putting their bodies in between that person and the violence," Nash recalled, "...so that the violence could be more distributed and hopefully no one would get seriously injured."[311] Additionally, the students practiced not striking back when someone beat them, with someone again playing the role of violent agitator. To make the situations more realistic, the students set up "make-believe restaurant or theatre scenes" and instructed students to act like "hoodlums."[312] The students acting as agitators took their role-playing seriously. As John Lewis recalls: "They would actually pump them, beat them, say nasty things, call them vicious names. People really taunted."[313]

For the students, role-playing was the best practice for seeing what would face them in the sit-ins, as it required effort and willpower to not fight back in self-defense. In the workshops, Lawson remembered, he taught the students to perfect their self-restraint. He understood that this was a difficult task to ask of college students, and he advised them to stay collected, no matter how heavy the blow. Lawson advised the students: "If you are in a tough situation, one of the first things you have to do is keep your cool if you can no matter how frightened you are, how ruffled you are by the attack or the hostility, try to keep your head."[314] Importantly, Lawson made sure to never avoid the inevitable backlash that the activists were to receive, and he wanted the students to be prepared.

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[309] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 93.
[310] Ibid.
[311] Ibid.
[312] John Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[313] Ibid.

By December 1959, despite the group's decision to target lunch counters, Lawson did not yet have a set date on the horizon to actually begin the sit-ins— especially with the students' Christmas break fast approaching.[315] Part of the group proposed that they stage the sit-ins before they returned home for the holidays. After all, Christmas time was peak season for sales at many of the downtown stores, and a demonstration would be especially harmful. Others, however, saw the downsides to protesting during the holiday: the possibility of white backlash from those who believed that the students were destroying the spirit of Christmas.[316] Seeing as they needed the most support possible from the white community, the group abandoned this plan.

Instead, they decided to spend the month of December doing reconnaissance of the targeted stores downtown. As Lawson recalled years later, this fell in line with the first step of Gandhian philosophy: to investigate the scene of the protest.[317] Dressed up with ties for men and heels for the women, the group split in small groups of no more than four people and visited downtown restaurants and department stores.[318] Their assignment was to sit down at the lunch counter, order something to eat and, most importantly, not get arrested.[319] If the waitresses refused to serve the groups, then the activists would request to speak with a manager. They asked why they were not served, and if the reason was policy or custom. Nash recalled that if the answer was unsatisfactory—which it often was—her group reminded the employees “that it really was immoral to discriminate against people because of their skin color.”[320]

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[314] Lawson, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize*.
[315] Ibid.
[316] Ibid.
[317] Lawson, tape recorded interview with Nashville Public Library Staff, October 21, 2002, Box 7, Tape 111, Civil Rights Oral History Collection, Nashville Public Library, Special Collections Division, Nashville, Tennessee.
[318] Lawson, *Eyes on the Prize*.
[319] Ibid.

The goal of the reconnaissance activity was to gauge the mood and resistance the groups found at the stores, and it was largely a success. Although the reactions of the waitresses and store managers varied from sympathetic to hostile, the activists got answers to their questions. More importantly, they were able to see the types of reactions they would receive on the day of the actual sit-in. Motivated by this small victory, the activists planned to return in January 1960 from their holiday break and plan the sit-ins for February.

On February 1, however, the Nashville group learned that “somebody else had made the move for [them].”[321] That day, four college students in Greensboro, North Carolina staged a sit-in at their local Woolworth’s. Unlike the students in Nashville, their counterparts in Greensboro did not have a plan or preparation going into their sit-ins. The day after their demonstration, the Greensboro students asked for local reinforcement and the group multiplied so quickly that within days students in other cities began staging “sympathy sit-ins.” Over in Nashville, the students received word of the Greensboro sit-ins with mixed feelings. On one hand, they were surprised and overjoyed at the idea of a successful sit-in by other students in another city. As Nash put it:

> “It was a total surprise, when other cities joined in the same chains that we were sitting-in. And I can remember being in the dorm any number of times and hearing the newscasts that Orangeburg had had demonstrations or Knoxville or, you know, other towns. And we were really excited. I can remember, we'd applaud, and say, yeah!”[322]

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[320] Nash, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize.*
[321] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 99.
[322] Nash, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize.*

Still, despite their heartfelt enthusiasm for the growing nonviolent movement, the Nashville students were frustrated. It was the Nashville crowd that had been training day and night in their workshops—not the Greensboro students. In other words, they did not want the origin of the sit-ins during the emerging and dynamic civil rights movement to be remembered as beginning impromptu in Greensboro. As such, the February 1 sit-ins quickened the pace and put pressure on the Nashville crowd. While the students wanted to act quickly, they refused to act impulsively.[323] In the words of Lewis, they "did not want to unleash hundreds of eager, emotional college students without properly preparing them in the ways of restraint."[324] Although the Nashville campaign had long planned to extensively train for the sit-ins, they no longer had an indefinite number of weeks for their training: "Now," Lewis remarked, "it was a matter of days."[325]

Lawson himself also felt the clock ticking. Despite feeling regret for not acting earlier and "permit[ing] Christmas to interfere with [them]," he accounted for the new developments in Greensboro. On Wednesday, February 3, Douglas Moore, a Methodist minister advising the Greensboro students, called Lawson to ask him for support.[326] In response, Lawson arranged for 45 Nashville students to stage a sympathy sit-in on February 6.

The Nashville students were taken aback by these developments in Greensboro, and they mobilized to begin their demonstrations as soon as they could. As Lawson explained, "Although we had been making preparations for this for a long time, out timing was suggested by the action in North Carolina."[327] Indeed, while they were eager to support their counterparts in North

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[323] Lewis, *Walking with the Wind,* 100.
[324] Ibid.
[325] Ibid.
[326] John Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[327] Smith, Manuscript of "Chapter II: Inspired Amateurs (The Nashville Christian Leadership Council)."

Carolina, the activists were growing impatient. On Saturday, February 10, Lawson, Smith, Lewis, Bevel, LaPrad, and C.T. Vivian—another adult clergy member of the NCLC—met on Fisk's chemistry building auditorium to decide on a new plan.[328] Concerned by the insufficient funds in the NCLC's account, and knowing that the role of the NCLC was to provide for the students' bail and legal fees, Smith suggested that the group wait until the NCLC raised more money.[329] He pointed out that the group's budget was only $82.50—not nearly enough money to cover all of the costs required for the sit-in.[330] Besides, Smith worried about the backlash from white high schoolers, who would be around the downtown area on a Saturday afternoon, which was when the Nashville group had planned the sit-in. With these considerations in mind, and feeling a sort of "parental responsibility" for the students, Smith suggested that they wait until the following Monday.[331]

The students at the meeting, however, disagreed with Smith. John Lewis, who had been disappointed that the Greensboro students had beat them to the punch, feared if it was not now, then they would never sit-in. He remembered saying, "We don't have hundreds of students. We must do something."[332] Unlike the adult NCLC members present at the meeting, who were mostly ministers, who were tied down to their families, jobs, and reputations, the students "didn't owe anybody anything."[333] In an ironic twist of fate, James Bevel, the former traditional literalist who disbelieved in the power of nonviolent protest, was the most outspoken of the dissenters. He made the argument for why the group was tired of waiting and why the time to act was now. He explained, “If you tell us to wait until next week, then you’ll say wait until next month, next month, next year and all that. I believe that something will happen in the situation, that will provide the solution to the problem we’re talking about.”[334]

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[328] The exact date of this meeting is unclear. While Halberstam says that it was February 10, Lewis implies that it was on February 3—the same day that Moore called Lawson and asked for support. In my thesis, I use Halberstam's date of February 10 because I treat his work as both a primary and secondary source. See Lewis, *Walking with the Wind,* 101; Halberstam, *The Children,* 94.

[329] Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement,* 206.

[330] Smith, interview by John Britton, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*

[331] Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement,* 206.

[332] Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*

[333] Lewis, *Walking with the Wind,* 101; Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement,* 206.

The students’ stance on the urgency of the sit-ins brings home the central role they played in the sit-in campaign that would follow in the months to come. As sociologist Aldon Morris shows, the students’ actions that night proved “the catalytic role “that they played in the organization of the movement. Indeed, after Bevel made his impassioned appeal for acting now, Smith respected the student’s “very wise words, well beyond his years” and agreed with Bevel.[335] Smith understood that the students had waited long enough, and that the time to act was now. Moreover, he knew that the NCLC could not stand in the way of the movement. Instead, the adult clergy members who provided the housing and funds for the movement organization quickly agreed with the students and “committed their...resources to the effort.”[336] It was then, in that Saturday meeting inside the Fisk science auditorium, that the NCLC and Student Central Committee decided that the Nashville Nonviolent Movement would carry on immediately.

Conclusion

The introduction of students into James Lawson’s workshops was a pivotal moment for the Nashville movement. Despite hailing from entirely different schools and backgrounds, the students united under their devotion to the nonviolent cause. Through workshops on both nonviolent direct-action philosophy and practice, Lawson instilled in the students a commitment to showing empathy and love for the enemy along with the self-confidence that would follow them throughout the movement. For this reason, the highly disciplined students were disappointed when they learned of the Greensboro sit-ins, which had not trained with the same level of rigor as the Nashville group. Although the Greensboro sit-ins surprised the Nashville students, the latter used this as motivation rather than discouragement. Moreover, the conversations between the NCLC and the Student Central Committee highlighted the dialogical nature of the movement, and it proved the extent to which both structures reinforced one another: the clergy members provided the financial and community support, while the students served as eager warriors for the fight. With the conviction that the group had waited too long and had to act soon, the Nashville Nonviolent Movement began preparing itself to stage the sit-ins immediately.

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[334] Smith, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[335] Ibid.
[336] Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 206.

Chapter 3- "Big Saturday":

Nonviolence in Action

Introduction

By the time the students and adult NCLC members left the February 10 meeting at Fisk University, the NCLC and Student Central Committee members agreed on the urgency of their situation. While before there was no external force pressuring Lawson and his students to stage their demonstration throughout the majority of the workshops, the Greensboro sit-in on February 1 quickened the pace. Now, with groups of college students staging sit-ins in cities like Knoxville and Orangeburg within days after Greensboro, the Nashville students felt the pressure of a social movement that changed by the day. The students, in the words of John Lewis, were "young, free, and burning with belief—the perfect foot soldiers for an assault like this."[337]

Most importantly, the Nashville group had the unique benefit of having undergone intense training before their sit-in campaign. Indeed, unlike the sit-ins staged by college students in other cities across the nation, the Nashville activists had the benefit of a long thought- and planned-out methodology. As such, they went into the demonstrations with nearly two years of Lawson's workshops that trained and educated the students in nonviolent philosophy and direct-action.

On February 13, the day finally came for the students who convened in the workshops to actually implement the tactics that Lawson had taught them to use in demonstrations. The first sit-in energized and moved the demonstrators, showing them the fruits of their hard-earned labor in church basements. But it was not until February 27, also known as "Big Saturday," when the activists fully tested out their nonviolent direct-action for the first time. Indeed, "Big Saturday" put the nonviolence that the activists had studied and practiced for months into action. The day's events would exemplify the students' and clergy's commitment to nonviolent direct-action that Lawson had taught them.

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[337] Lewis, *Walking with the Wind,* 91.

February 13, 1960: The First Sit-In

After the February 10 meeting, the Nashville Nonviolent Movement picked the following Saturday, February 13, as its date for the first sit-in. Although the students were committed to the urgency of the campaign, they were anxious to begin. In his dorm at American Baptist, Lewis, who had been one of the students most vocally advocating for an early start, could not sleep. Although he "felt a sense of power beyond [him], of a calling, of a mission," it was also tangled with doubt.[338] Despite his training in the workshops, Lewis feared what the next day would hold. As he recalled, "you can prepare and make plans, but in the end, you have to hand it over to the spirit, just let the spirit take control."[339]

On February 13, the students woke up to a city covered in snow. For some of the students, like Lewis, this was an omen: the day would be "so soft, so hushed, so holy.... pure as the driven snow."[340] The events of the day, like much of everything throughout the years-long organization of the movement, were meticulously planned. That morning, the students met on different college campuses—at American Baptist, Tennessee A&I State University, and Fisk. From there, the NCLC sent students and professors with cars to pick up the activists and drive them to First Baptist, where they all convened and readied themselves for the day's events.[341]

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[338] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, 101.
[339] Ibid.
[340] Ibid, 102.
[341] Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 207.

Once there, the students had their last briefing before they proceeded downtown. They ran through their plan for the day: the central committee members would serve as spokespeople for their groups, which would be around 15 to 25 students.[342] These groups would then protest at three five-and-ten stores (variety stores that sold all items in stock for a dime or less): Woolsworth, McClellan's, and Kress, with one or two groups assigned to each store.[343]

For the students convened at First Baptist that morning, they did not feel the thrill they experienced when they first got word of the sit-ins that swept Greensboro. Instead, there was a collective feeling of anxiety. Even though they had prepared for the day for hours upon hours, and even though they were fully aware of the backlash they would receive, the activists feared the violent response from the white community in Nashville.

Lewis, who had not slept the night before, saw the same fear in the faces of the other students, who were either a lot quieter or noisier than usual.[344] There were two important thoughts that assuaged his fears, however—he knew that what they were doing was the right thing to do, and he knew that he was not alone.[345] Lewis, of course, was not oblivious to the powerful segregationist politicians that ruled Nashville, and to the mob-like violence that the demonstrations could incite, even in a so-called "moderate" city. Yet he also remembered that he had full trust in the faith and devotion to nonviolence that unified the activists. In other words, Lewis "did not think of himself as being strong or brave, but he did believe that he had the requisite faith, and now he found in his faith the strength to go forward and do things which in another setting and different conditions would have terrified."[346] With this discipline, Lewis was ready to act.

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[342] The number of students to each group in the first sit-in is unclear. In his memoir, Lewis says that the number was around 25, but in an interview conducted a few years after the sit-ins, he said it was 15. I have included both numbers for the sake of accuracy. See John Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project;* Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 102.

[343] Ibid.

[344] Halberstam, *The Children*, 105.

[345] Ibid.

It was with this mentality that at 12:40 PM a group of 124 students descended the steps of First Baptist and headed toward the lunch counters downtown.[347] They did not carry signs, but they brought their books, papers, and notebooks with them—to show the onlookers that they were innocently eating lunch and studying. The students marched quietly toward the department stores on downtown Nashville's Fifth Avenue North, with the men dressed in suits and ties and women, as Nash recalled, "like [they] were dressing up for Sunday."[348]

The group of Black men and women headed a few blocks away towards the Arcade, a covered walkway that opened up to downtown Nashville's main department stores and eateries, with a pace that Smith compared to "a Saturday football game when it is near kick-off, or a movie when the feature is about to begin."[349] When the spectators who were shopping and dining downtown noticed the solemn students approach them, they were taken aback. Of course, although the Student Central Committee and the NCLC had been planning for the day's events for years, the insulated white community had not been aware. Lewis, who had been assigned to sit-in at Woolsworth, remembered the confused looks from spectators, who "thought it might be some sort of Saturday morning parade...or maybe a funeral."[350] To add to the spectacle, the group made sure to stage the sit-in at noon, when Fifth Avenue, already Nashville's busiest shopping street, was most full.[351]

The students welcomed the confused stares. As Lewis described:

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[346] Ibid, 106.
[347] Wynn, "The Dawning of a New Day," 46
[348] Diane Nash, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize.*
[349] Kelly Miller Smith, "Shame and Glory," in Houston, *The Nashville Way*, 86.; Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 102.
[350] Lewis, 102.
[351] Ibid, 105.

> "We wanted them to see us. We planned each sit-in to begin around lunchtime because we wanted people to be there when we arrived. We wanted white people, everyday citizens, everyday customers to be exposed to us, to see us as we were, not as something in their minds, in their imaginations. We wanted them to watch how we responded to the people who refused to serve us. And we wanted them to watch those people as well. Among so many other things, this was about education, picking consciences, teaching one race about another, and, if need be, about itself. If some of these white onlookers went back to their own homes, their own jobs, their own churches, and began talking about this in heartfelt terms, about what they had seen, then we had achieved one of our main objectives."[352]

Unsurprisingly, the people in the stores were as shocked as the pedestrians outside. The word had begun to quickly spread that a large group of Black students were headed downtown to sit-in. When Lewis's group entered Woolsworth, customers and staff alike gaped at them, but no one said anything, so his group sat down at the two lunch counters downstairs and upstairs. After making a small purchase, they sat down at the counter, spacing themselves out so that "regular customers" could enjoy their meal beside them if they chose to.[353] Then, a waitress walking by saw them and stopped, coolly remarking "Oh my God, here's the [n-------s]."[354] As Lawson's student, trained in responding to the waitress's demeaning language, Lewis politely asked if his group could be served and was denied. Shortly after, another woman came from the back of Woolsworth with a hand-written "Counter Closed" sign.[355]

Following their protocol to stay put and be courteous, the Woolsworth group remained in the store after the lights were turned off minutes later. In the darkness, the group used the fleeting natural light to read and complete homework. As the afternoon went on, some young white men approached the group, verbally taunting the students and demanding they go home. Again, the students simply "looked into the distance and did not deign to answer name-calling with name-calling of their own."[356] As Lawson's students, they were experts at the art of patience. Their role-playing activities throughout the past months, where activists would taunt one another physically and verbally, had prepared them to deal with the real-life harassment they experienced on their walk to the stores.

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[352] Ibid
[353] Ibid, 103.
[354] Ibid.
[355] Ibid.

The students at the three other lunch counters had similar experiences. When the waitresses refused to serve the students, they simply stayed put. Seeing that they would not budge, and placed in an unprecedented situation, the staff got visibly nervous, to a level that humored the demonstrators. Diane Nash, who was also a spokesperson for her group, remembered one waitress who had probably "dropped $2,000 worth of dishes that day...she picked up dishes and she dropped one, and she'd pick up another one, and she'd drop it and another."[357] She later recalled the irony of the situation— "The demonstrators did nothing more than sit on the stools at the lunch counter. Yet, from the reaction of the white employees of the variety stores and from the onlookers, some dreadful monster might just as well have been about to devour them all."[358] In another group, two Black women entered the "white only" restroom to find an elderly white woman who, upon seeing the two students enter the room, yelled, "Oh! Nigras, Nigras everywhere!" before frantically leaving the restroom.[359] Although Nash and the other students found the situation hilarious—cartoon-like white women frightened at the sight of Black students sitting at the lunch counter—they held back their laughter because they "thought that laughing would be insulting and [they] didn't want to create that kind of atmosphere."[360] Besides, Nash added, they were "scared to death."[361]

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[356] Halberstam, *The Children*, 104.
[357] Diane Nash, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize.*
[358] Diane Nash, "Inside the Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides: Testimony of a Southern Student," in *The New Negro,* ed. Mathew H. Ahmann and Stephen J. Wright, (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969), 47.
[359] Lewis, *Walking with the Wind,* 104.

By six in the evening, an assigned group of "runners" who had been journeying back and forth from the lunch counters to First Baptist to report on the situation, called the students back to the Church. Once the demonstrators marched back to First Baptist, they recalled that the atmosphere felt more like a festival night than that of a Saturday afternoon.[362] Lewis, whose nerves had robbed him of sleep the night before, remembered that "[i]t was a sheer euphoria, like a jubilee."[363] Every group remarked on how smoothly its missions had gone—they had all caught the store owners entirely by surprise. The merchants' response was to first refuse the students service and then close down the counters just two hours after the sit-in began when they realized that the activists would not budge.[364]

A *Nashville Tennessean* article published the next day mentioned that the clerks at McClellan's began sitting in front of the counters in order to prevent the students from sitting there, though they "later gave up this attempt."[365] When interviewed for the article Nash explained, "We just got tired of having no place to eat when we shop downtown. So, we decided to do something about it."[366] Additionally, the demonstrators noticed how little backlash they encountered that day, which meant that the activists had not had to practice the full extent of the nonviolent direct-action praxis they had learned in the workshops. Indeed, when police visited the department stores and found the students sitting in, they told the clerks that "authorities could not stop the demonstrations unless there were incidents"—although they warned the press that the students would be back the following Monday, "and maybe every day" that week.[367] The students were trained to deal with physical abuse, certainly, but the insults they received at the first sit-in did not require the entire toolkit they had assembled in Lawson's workshops.

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[360] Ibid.
[361] Ibid.
[362] Ibid, 103.
[363] Ibid.
[364] Wynn, "The Dawning of a New Day," 46
[365] James Talley, "Lunch Counter Strikes Hit City," *The Nashville Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), February 14, 1960.
[366] Ibid.

Still, the students knew that the violent backlash would come at one point or another. Halberstam, the *Nashville Tennessean* reporter, hypothesized that the reason the students had not faced violence was that they had "caught the white community completely unprepared."[368] He explained that, after the first sit-in, the students knew that "the small marauding bands of white toughs, who would soon become a staple of the downtown confrontations, had yet to materialize."[369] Yet the activists also knew that their months of preparation and role-playing in the workshops had prepared them to confront to this violence with nonviolence, and they were confident in their ability to respond peacefully.

Big Saturday: "The Day Which Really Broke the Straw"

After the first sit-in on February 13, the white establishment had thought the demonstrations would fade away. As Lawson remarked, "Their first response was, well it's only college students and it's like a panty raid in the universities with the fraternities, and it'll soon disappear."[370] Instead, after the first sit-in, the activists conducted two more the following week, with their numbers increasing from 140 to 200 on February 18 and 340 on February 20. By this point, the process of the sit-in became a routine: They students at the steps of First Baptist and marched together wearing their fanciest clothing to the lunch counters downtown. Another staple of the routine was the verbal abuse they received from onlookers and customers at the stores.

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[367] Ibid.
[368] Halberstam, *The Children*, 104.
[369] Halberstam, 104-5.
[370] James Lawson, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize.*

Unsurprisingly, for the most part the staff was not friendly, either, and refused to serve the activists by hanging up signs that said, “Closed in the Interest of Public Safety.”[371] Although the students were met with minimal response for their second sit-in, by the third one the clerks began stacking goods on stools so that the students would be unable to sit down.[372] Additionally, groups of angered customers began gathering outside the stores (which now also included Walgreens) and complaining that they had nowhere to eat.[373] Also outside the stores were some adult representatives from local community organizations, including the NCLC, who continued to observe the responses and support the students from afar.[374] Despite the frustration on the part of white customers and staff, the students had yet to encounter the physical violence that would put their nonviolent philosophy to the test. Though they had trained to respond to physical backlash with love and patience, the group had yet to actually implement those lessons.

On the days before the movement’s next planned sit-in on February 27, the Nashville students learned that they would face this violence in their next demonstration. That week, Will Campbell, a white minister and NCLC member, visited First Baptist to offer a warning: the merchants and city officials had conspired to lash back at the sit-ins.[375] As resident representative of the National Council of Churches, Campbell found out that local politicians had organized to meet the demonstrators with violence at their next sit-in, which was that Saturday. While Campbell did not outright discourage them from sitting in, he warned them that violence was a certainty.

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[371] Wynn, “The Dawning of a New Day,” 46.
[372] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, 105.
[373] Ibid.
[374] Houston, *The Nashville Way*, 87.
[375] Halberstam, *The Children*, 127.

The Nashville Nonviolent Movement was torn between continuing on with the protest or cancelling it. Earlier that week, a number of members, including Lawson, went to the police headquarters to meet with the police chief. They requested that one officer be placed inside each store to protect the activists from the violence they were sure would come, but the chief refused, explaining that it would disrupt service.[376] Knowing that they would not have the necessary protection if—and when—they were met with violence, the activists questioned whether they should go on with the demonstration or postpone it.[377] Ultimately, both the students and the adults remembered that the workshops had prepared the group for the threat of violence. As Lewis said, "Our workshops had been like little laboratories in human behavior and response to nonviolent protest. Now we were seeing real humans respond in almost exactly the ways Jim Lawson had taught us they would."[378]

With this in mind, they resolved to go on with their plan, but they set out to ensure that future demonstrators were aware of the violence they would face. In an effort to do just this, on February 26, the night before the sit-in, John Lewis and Bernard Lafayette quietly entered the American Baptist administration building and "liberated" a ream of paper to draft 500 copies of a "dos and don'ts" list.[379] The list included guidelines that reminded demonstrators who may not have routinely about the principles of nonviolent direct-action. According to Lewis, they had to "dramatize the issue" so that new demonstrators in Nashville were well-aware of the risks at hand.[380] They read:

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[376] Wynn, "The Dawning of a New Day," 46.
[377] John Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[378] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 106.
[379] Ibid, 105-6.
[380] Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*

> “DO NOT:
>
> 1. Strike back nor curse if abused.
>
> 2. Laugh out.
>
> 3. Hold conversations with floor walker.
>
> 4. Leave your seat until your leader has given you permission to do so. 5. Block entrances to stores outside nor the aisles inside.
>
> DO:
>
> 1. Show yourself friendly and courteous at all times.
>
> 2. Sit straight; always face the counter.
>
> 3. Report all serious incidents to your leader.
>
> 4. Refer information seekers to your leader in a polite manner.
>
> 5. Remember the teachings of Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Love and nonviolence is the way.
>
> MAY GOD BLESS EACH OF YOU.”[381]

On the morning of February 27, in the midst of yet another rare snowstorm, the students met as usual on the steps of First Baptist. At the church steps, the students felt their most nervous. They wanted to show their strength in numbers to the police and onlookers, but only about 35 students arrived that morning.[382] The Student Central Committee grew concerned and worried that the movement was fading away—they were expecting closer to 100 or 150 demonstrators, and the small number seemed discouraging for what already seemed like a frightening day ahead. Fearing that the newcomers to sense the anxiety of the committee, the committee members moved to the basement where they began to debate tactics for that day ahead.[383] From their previous sit-ins, they knew that there was strength in numbers—and they worried that the small number of demonstrators would make a daunting day even more so. Should they concentrate all of the students into a few stores, or should they disperse the few they had into several five-and-dimes?[384] Eventually, they agreed to demonstrate in as many stores as possible, and to do this in a "human wave," where demonstrators who were either arrested or injured would be replaced by another reserve waiting at First Baptist**.** Having resolved this, the group went back upstairs to find an additional 300 students that had shown up to protest while the committee was deliberating upstairs. This, the committee realized, would bolster their human wave. If students got arrested, then they could easily be replaced by a new wave of activists who were ready to depart from the church headquarters. Additionally, the central committee knew that, by filling the jails, they would garner the attention of the white community.

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[381] Houston, *The Nashville Way*, 89.

[382] Lewis, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*

While it was never clear why the remaining activists showed up later than expected, there was no time to waste, and the veterans quickly gave a crash course on nonviolent direct-action to the new and inexperienced. Lewis passed out his leaflets, which directed the activists to remember not only the precepts of nonviolent direct-action, but how to apply them in praxis. That day, unlike the previous sit-ins, the Nashville activists would have to make use of these reminders, along with all the readings, role-playing, and strategizing that the group had done on nonviolent direct-action.

The activists knew that the day had come where they would have to embody the discipline that that Lawson had taught them in the workshops, and they were thrilled to know that the new activists were eager to do the same. Indeed, though most of the 300 demonstrators that showed up that morning did not know anyone on the Student Central Committee personally, and though many had never even attended a workshop, they chose to demonstrate even with the threat of violence.[385] The veteran activists saw this as a testament to their unshakable faith, and they used this in their messaging to the new demonstrators. They spoke of Lawson's advice to "obey Jesus and turn the other cheek" when they were faced with a "hostile assailant who wants to break up the march."[386] For the veterans, turning the other cheek was "an extreme weapon" that Lawson likened to "moral jiu-jitsu"—a concept he adopted from Richard B. Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence.*[387] By welcoming attacks with kindness and self-suffering, the aggressor, according to Gregg, "quite loses his moral balance."[388] Similar to standard jiu-jitsu, he continued, violence itself overthrows those that use it. Lawson implored his students to use this technique, which he believed overpowered the aggression they would face. In his own words:

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[383] Halberstam, *The Children*, 128.
[384] Ibid.

> "They expect from you the hostile response that is conventional. They don't get that, they get respect, and they get resistance and that turns them upside down. It is like the art... of jiu-jitsu, where you use the opponent's strength against him, himself. He rushes at you and instead of you putting up your resistance to stop him, you let him rush, and you stick your foot out in front of him as he rushes by. So, the nonviolence has that same practical capacity."[389]

As for the previous sit-ins, the activists marched in unison to the same three stores they had targeted at their first protest, and added Cain-Sloan as the fourth.[390] Not all of the students were demonstrators—a few were observers, who headed to nearby payphones and stood on guard to call either the white hospital for the injured white activists or a Black funeral home for the Black activists, as there was no Black ambulance in Nashville at the time.[391] The rest of the group, divided into smaller subgroups with spokesmen and women, headed toward the stores.

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[385] Ibid, 129.

[386] Lawson, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize.*

[387] Ibid; Richard B. Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence,* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1935), 41; Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee*, 122.

[388] Gregg, 43.

[389] Lawson, *Eyes on the Prize.*

[390] Wynn, "The Dawning of a New Day," 46

Will Campbell was right to warn the activists about the threats of violence. When the demonstrators entered the stores, they found a more hostile atmosphere than they had previously encountered. On the streets surrounding the stores, there were thousands of onlookers: ordinary white men and women, certainly, but also policemen with paddy wagons, press, and the white toughs.[392] Despite the spectacle, which would surely call for violence, Lewis described it as "a beautiful day."[393] He and his group, including Paul LaPrad, were assigned to Woolworth's once again. When they sat down at the counter, a white man came up to their group and shoved LaPrad out of his seat, only for LaPrad to get back up repeatedly. While the other activists, who were Black, were also thrown from their seats, there seemed to be more violence directed toward LaPrad, who was white and deemed by the aggravators as a "[n-----] lover."[394]

Eventually, Woolworth's closed down the store for the day, and the group moved onto McClellan's down the street.[395] Once they switched stores, they were met with even greater violence and, unlike at Woolworth's, there was absolutely no police presence. Lewis, LaPrad, and the others walked toward the counter and sat down, and almost immediately, a white man knocked LaPrad off of his stool. Once he was on the floor, other men joined in and began kicking and punching him. Feeling a sharp pain, LaPrad reminded himself to not fight back and, instead, he turned into fetal position and used his hands to protect his face, just like Lawson had taught the group.[396] Though the pain was intense, his lessons on how to respond to violence stayed with him throughout the ordeal. Once he gained enough strength to sit back down again, the police arrived. Rather than arrest the white mobs, though, they arrested LaPrad and his group for "disorderly conduct."[397]

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[391] Halberstam, *The Children*, 129.
[392] Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[393] Ibid.
[394] Halberstam, 132.
[395] Lewis, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[396] Halberstam, 132.

When his group saw that the police had arrived and would soon arrest the remainder of the group, one of the veteran activists from Fisk, Angeline Butler, discreetly opened the door so that the next wave of protestors could replace the ones who were arrested. A few minutes later, the first wave of activists onboarded the paddy wagons that had been stationed on Fifth Avenue before the activists had even arrived. As they walked into the wagon, the activists were calm, and some sang "We Shall Overcome," a protest song that would later become the anthem of the national civil rights movement.[398]

The activists saw their arrest as an act of nonviolent direct-action. Throughout the experience of getting handcuffed, entering the paddy wagon, getting finger-printed, and then sitting in jail, the students did not fight back. Instead, they slowly nodded to the police officers when they asked whether the demonstrators understood that jail time would come from their protest. This way, they sought to show the agitators and segregationists that they were disciplined to the philosophy and practice of nonviolence.

For Kelly Miller Smith, who was observing the events of the day, the arrests were "a beautiful operation."[399] When he got news from observers that the first wave of students was arrested, he headed toward the crowd that had begun to emerge around the stores. He was amused at how dismayed the onlookers were at the sight of Black men and women remaining calm as they were led into the paddy wagons. "I got a big kick out of listening to some of the

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[397] Jessica Pasley, "Whites Fought on Front Lines of Black Cause," *Nashville Banner* (Nashville, TN), February 2, 1993.

[398] Lewis, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*

[399] Smith, interview by John Britton, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*

Caucasians in the crowd talking," Smith remarked. "And they just could not, could not *conceive* of this, of people going to jail singing, you know. As soon as one crowd leaves, another crowd comes, ready, they're ready to be arrested and no sadness or anything."[400]

"Big Saturday" was the first time that Diane Nash was arrested. An officer had approached her while she was sitting at the counter, and he warned her that if she did not get up, she would be arrested. This was a moment that Nash had dreaded for months. Indeed, at a workshop some time back, Nash had asked Lawson what would happen if she were taken to jail. She had hoped that Lawson would assuage her fears and tell her that all would be okay, but that was not the case. As Nash remembered years later, "I must have asked him four or five times, that same thing, but...what I was really trying to get him to do, was somehow say, well, everything will be alright, and of course he couldn't really say that."[401] After that conversation, Nash said she told the other students that she would not be joining them at the sit-in. Instead, she offered: "I'll do the telephone work, and I'll type, and what have you, but I'm really afraid to go to jail."[402] Nash, unlike many of the other students, had grown up away from the South and in a more privileged environment. Her middle-class upbringing stayed with her in Nashville and, upon arriving, she did not envision herself as a fearless leader.

Yet there she was months later, being led into the paddy wagon along with dozens of other students. Despite facing a situation she never would have thought to find herself in when she began attending the workshops, Nash remembered not quite ever overcoming her fear.[403] But when she saw the surprise on the policeman's face at the sight of these young students at prestigious universities eagerly going to jail, she was moved rather than scared. As she was being fingerprinted with the others, the officers taunted her and her friends. Multiple officers poked fun at anything they could: whether it was the demonstrators' physical appearances, or the way they smelled, or the fact that one of the activists wanted to be a priest.[404] Throughout all this verbal abuse, Nash and the others remained polite, and they credited this self-restraint to what they learned in the workshops. The students understood that their arrest was an act of nonviolent protest in itself, and, with this knowledge, they were willing to put aside their anger at the policemen. As Lewis put it:

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[400] Ibid.

[401] Nash, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize.*

[402] Ibid.

[403] Nash, "Diane Nash," in *Lighting the Fires of Freedom: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement,* 98.

> "That was the first time that I was arrested. Growing up in the rural South, you learned it was not the thing to do. To go to jail was to bring shame and disgrace on the family. But for me it was like being involved in a holy crusade, it became a badge of honor. I think it was in keeping with what we had been taught in the workshops, so I felt very good, in the sense of righteous indignation, about being arrested, but at the same time I felt the commitment and dedication on the part of the students."[405]

Once in jail, Lewis remarked that the students were now united like "prisoners in a holy war."[406] Thanks to the human wave technique, 81 students had been arrested by the end of the day—but hundreds more students went to First Baptist hoping to be arrested in solidarity as they heard about the events downtown.[407] Jim Bevel, who by this point had only participated in the workshops, but not the sit-ins, "rushed downtown and tried everything he could to get arrested."[408] Although he was once a cynical student unconvinced that the workshops could actually implement their nonviolent teachings, the intensity of the mass arrests transformed his view of the movement. Even the adult NCLC members, who orchestrated the logistics behind the sit-in from their own churches, offered themselves up to be arrested—Lewis remembered one member telling his fellow ministers, "We'll let our vacant pulpits be our testimony tomorrow morning."[409]

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[404] Halberstam, *The Children,* 134.

[405] John Lewis, "Student Sit-Ins in Nashville, 1960: A Badge of Honor," in *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s*, ed. Steve Fayer and Henry Hampton, (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 58.

[406] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 108.

[407] Ibid.

The city jail, wanting to clear the jails of the dozens of students, offered them a bail of 100 dollars. Yet Lawson had taught the activists that refusing the bail money was another way to exercise nonviolent direct-action, and they refused to pay the amount, even when the NCLC ministers and their congregations offered to cover the expense.[410] Even when the jail decreased their bail down to five dollars, they still refused. As Kelly Miller Smith explained, they wanted "to demonstrate to those who are perpetrators of violence, that they [were] not going to frighten [them] off."[411] Ultimately, the students' schools paid their bail money, and the activists were released. The students, however, wanted the police to know that that was the only reason they left and, if it were not for their schools' actions, they would have remained as nonviolent prisoners.[412]

Conclusion

Although the Lawson workshops had been in motion for nearly two years, its participants had not yet had the occasion to put their lessons on nonviolent direct-action into practice. Their first taste of nonviolence in action came on February 13, when the Nashville group staged its first sit-in. Although the day further prepared the students to show their nonviolent discipline, the activists did not have to implement all of the tactics they had learned in their training to confront the violence.

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[408] Ibid.

[409] C.T. Vivian quoted in Lewis, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement,* 108.

[410] Wynn, "The Dawning of a New Day," 47.

[411] Smith, interview by John Britton, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*

[412] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* 108.

It was on February 27, also known as “Big Saturday” for the sheer number of activists, violence, and arrests that occurred that day, when the activists were able to fully put their lessons into practice. Throughout every part of the demonstration—from their walk to the stores, the act of sitting down, and their arrest—the activists met the segregationist violence with the calm and patience that Lawson had taught them. “Big Saturday,” then, was the ultimate test for Lawson’s students, which they passed with flying colors. The February 27 sit-ins proved that the workshops had effectively trained the students into disciplined nonviolent warriors.

Conclusion:

"We Were Warriors"

Although she monitored civil rights demonstrations across the entire South, Ella J. Baker, the acting executive director of the SCLC in 1960 and Dr. King's "right hand," was especially impressed with the Nashville sit-in campaign.[413] Not only had the activists used nonviolent direct-action to desegregate downtown lunch counters, but they did so through a highly organized and strategic movement. Keen on preserving the fire of the movement, Baker invited college students from across the South to her alma mater, Shaw University, in Raleigh, North Carolina over the Easter weekend in April 1960. Her plan was to unite the different student sit-in movements across the United States into one joint effort. Together with Dr. King, who endorsed the meeting, Baker "wanted to pull together and harness this student energy that was sweeping the South."[414]

The Student Central Committee met to decide who would attend that weekend and, although Baker had expected five attendees from Nashville, most of the students were eager to go. While most colleges sent one or two people to the conference, Nashville sent three cars with a total of sixteen students.[415] Once at Shaw University, beyond their obvious over-representation at the conference, the Nashville students were conspicuous for their involvement in the group discussions. The "very eloquent people from Nashville," as one South Carolinian student recalled, fired away with ideas about the new group's organization and methodology.[416] Indeed, at the meeting, the Nashville students instantly emerged as natural leaders of the bigger group. In his keynote address, James M. Lawson, Jr. moved the other delegates in his call for nonviolent movements to spread across the nation, reporting that, "Unless we are prepared to create the climate, the law can never bring victory."[417] Lewis, who had volunteered to stay behind in Nashville, heard that "there was somewhat of a feeling of conflict, a sense of the differences between the students in Nashville and the students in Atlanta," who were late to the sit-in movement and inexperienced in organization.[418] Diane Nash, frustrated that many of the delegates had never even attended a nonviolent workshop, was selected as the coordinating committee chairwoman, and Marion Barry, another Nashville student, as the group's chairman.[419] When it came time to answer where the movement would be based, the Nashville students suggested their city, which they deemed "the Africa of the South."[420] For the Nashville delegates, it only seemed natural for their group to steer the others toward a common mission. As Nash recalled, "Success is very persuasive."[421]

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[413] John Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[414] John Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, 114.
[415] Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 35.
[416] Ibid.

What was perhaps most striking about the Nashville delegates, however, was their confidence—in themselves and one another. In the words of one delegate from Atlanta, "I was very taken by their group personality. Not just the panache and confidence they had in each other, but how far they had already gone."[422] This poise was made evident when one delegate suggested that the group decide on the "goals, philosophy, future, and structure of the movement," to which Lawson instructed him to reverse the first two items—before carrying out the movement, the group must learn the precepts of nonviolent direct-action.[423] These goals were ultimately enshrined in the constitution of the group, which called itself the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which stated: “We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action.”[424]

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[417] Lewis, *Walking with the Wind,* 114.
[418] Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[419] Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 35-36; Lewis, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[420] Lewis, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[421] Nash, interview with Hogan, in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 35.
[422] Julian Bond, interview with Hogan, in Ibid.
[423] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 23.

The meeting at Shaw University marked not only the birth of the SNCC, but also the beginning of the organization’s “Nashville Era.”[425] Throughout the early 1960s, after the Nashville students successfully desegregated their own lunch counters through their nonviolent campaign, they diffused their lessons beyond Middle Tennessee. In May 1961, the Nashville students left the city to travel across the South in Freedom Rides, which were disbanded earlier that year due to the violent backlash the “riders” faced.[426] Despite knowing that they risked death by joining, the Nashville students were “mentally, physically, and psychologically prepared” for the risks.[427] As graduates of Lawson’s workshops, the students—which included Lawson, Lewis, Nash, Lafayette, and Bevel, among others—knew that “if they stop us with violence, the movement is dead.”[428] Lawson explained their reasoning years later when he asserted, “The ride cannot stop, and our people immediately went.”[429] Were it not for the courageous impetus of the Nashville students, who were trained in the workshops to respond to nonviolence with *ahisma*, perhaps the Freedom Rides would have come to a halt. Bob Moses, a SNCC campaigner from Mississippi, was spot-on when he remarked that “only the Nashville student movement had the fire to match that of the burning bus.”[430]

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[424] Ibid.
[425] Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 35.
[426] Ibid, 47.
[427] Ibid.
[428] Nash, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize,* in Ibid.
[429] James Lawson, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize.*
[430] Bob Moses, “Foreword to *Delta Time:* Appeal for Freedom Riders*”* in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 45.

Throughout the rides, the Nashville students faced significant mob violence, to a level even higher than the one they faced at the sit-ins. When the group was arrested for desegregating a bus station in Jackson, Mississippi, they adhered to their Gandhian nonviolent tactics and refused to pay the bail.[431] Soon after they began serving time, Lawson's students, unlike other Freedom Riders, "who were not necessarily familiar or committed to the ways of nonviolence," launched a hunger strike.[432] After being shuffled around different prisons in the city, the students were "herded like horses, like cows" to Parchman Farm, a maximum-security prison in Jackson notorious for its nightmarish conditions. As Lewis remembered years later, the guards "tried to rob you of all of your sense of humanity, of all of your sense of being a human being," including drawing their guns on the students unexpectedly and ordering them to take off their clothes as dozens of them were caged together for hours at a time.[433] When others complained, Lewis remembered James Bevel, an alumnus of the Nashville workshops, demand, "What's this hang-up about clothes? Gandhi wrapped a rag around his *balls* and brought down the whole British *Empire*!"[434] Even the "gulag-like" conditions of the penitentiary did not hinder the students' commitment to nonviolent direct-action—if anything, the suffering only fueled it. The students staged makeshift workshops for those unfamiliar with nonviolent direct-action, they read and discussed the Bible, communicated with the activists still in Nashville through secret code, and sang protest songs.[435] While there, bits of news from the outside world would trickle in, and the Nashville students learned that their movement had expanded—people from across the country were flocking south to join the Freedom Rides.[436]

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[431] Isaac, Cornfield, Dickerson, Lawson, and Coley, "'Movement Schools' and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis," 177.
[432] Lewis, *Walking with the Wind,* 170.
[433] John Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[434] James Bevel quoted in Lewis, 172.
[435] Isaac, Cornfield, Dickerson, Lawson, and Coley, 177.
[436] Lewis, *Walking with the Wind,* 172.

The Nashville students revitalized the Freedom Rides, an instrumental tactic in desegregating the South, and introduced their nonviolent philosophy and praxis to other desegregation efforts across the U.S. Yet their work did not stop there—Lawson's graduates continued to use the lessons from the workshops on nonviolent direct-action throughout their lives. The Nashville Nonviolent Movement, with its highly organized structure vis-à-vis Lawson's workshops, planted the seeds for nonviolent protest, which the activists then carried across the country. Despite the different cultural contexts they encountered—from lunch counters in Nashville to prison cells at Parchman—the students always carried with them the lessons on nonviolent direct-action that they learned in the workshops. In other words, the expansion of the movement that began in Nashville church basements was not spontaneous—but deliberate. It is not coincidental, then, that many of the protagonists of the broader Civil Rights Movement throughout the 1960s started off as Lawson's students. Nor was it inexplicable how the deeply organized and strategized "movement school" in Nashville produced graduates that were overrepresented in the national movement for civil rights. Instead, the organization of the Nashville Nonviolent Movement vis-à-vis the workshops equipped the students with the tools to stage disciplined and structured nonviolent campaigns.

This realization is not merely revealed in the scholarship about the movement. Rather, the Nashville "graduates" themselves have credited the workshops with their commitment to the movement and later successes in civil rights. As Nash recalled, "There were many things that I learned in those workshops that I not only was able to put into practice, at the time that we were demonstrating and so forth, but that I have used for the rest of my life [and] that have been invaluable in shaping the kind of person I've become."[437] In his memoir, Lewis remarked, "Jim

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[437] Diane Nash, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize*.

Lawson knew—though we had no idea when we began—that we were being trained for a war unlike any this nation had seen up to that time."[438] Bernard Lafayette, another veteran of the Nashville movement, also attributed his avid participation in the Civil Rights Movement to the workshops, which he likened to "a nonviolent academy equivalent to West Point."[439] "We understood how to organize a community, we understood how to organize a demonstration, we understood how to negotiate, and we understood how to deal with the media," Lafayette continued. "We were warriors, in that sense."[440]

Through this intensive training, the Nashville group became what Martin Luther King Jr. referred to as "the model movement."[441] Rather than stop their campaign with the desegregation of Nashville's lunch counters, they continued their peaceful attack on segregation with the same recipe they used at the workshops: "combining strategizing with learning and experimentation and struggle."[442] As such, Lawson and his students—including Nash, who once sat in class with sweaty palms and feeling "so tense and tight inside" before a sit-in— transformed into the future leaders of the national civil rights movement.[443] After desegregating the lunch counters in Nashville, they made their way across the nation, becoming "a very dynamic movement setting the pace all across the South for change."[444]

Throughout all these endeavors, which took the activists to other movements across the country, they kept close the lessons from Lawson's nonviolence training. In the workshops,

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[438] Lewis, *Walking with the Wind,* 86.

[439] Bernard Lafayette, interview with Steve York, in *A Force More Powerful,* directed by Steve York (International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 1999), YouTube video.

[440] Ibid.

[441] Lawson, interview by Phillis Sheppard, Walter Fluker, and Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Boston University Oral History Project.*

[442] Lawson, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize.*

[443] Nash, interview by Blackside Inc., *Eyes on the Prize.*

[444] Lawson, *Eyes on the Prize.*

Diane Nash "discovered the practical and real power of truth and love."[445] John Lewis, who went on to become a congressman, began to "feel that he can help make this country a different country and make this world a different world."[446] Even Kelly Miller Smith, who had for years been at the forefront of Nashville activism, understood "the freedom in absolute commitment" to nonviolence. By the time the activists went their separate ways to enact change in other cities, they had internalized the lessons of the workshops. As Lawson described, "we had produced the best trained people... of infinite worth [who] can exercise influence all around us."[447] The Nashville movement, and others that were replicated from it, owed their successes to the intellectual boot camp in Lawson workshops. Throughout the next decade, the highly organized and disciplined Nashville model informed future nonviolent movements across the South. Although the Nashville sit-ins were not the first of their kind throughout the 1960s, it was the movement's organizational structure constructed in Lawson's workshops that proved indispensable to success in the Southern civil rights movement.

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[445] Nash, *Eyes on the Prize.*
[446] Lewis, interview by Katherine Shannon, *Civil Rights Documentation Project.*
[447] Ibid.

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