

Celebration of Life

Rev. James M. Lawson Jr.



September 22, 1928 - June 9, 2024

July 6, 2024

Holman United Methodist Church

3320 W Adams Blvd.

Los Angeles, CA

Rev. Victor Cyrus-Franklin, Senior Pastor

Memoir

Reverend James Morris Lawson Jr. was born on September 22, 1928, in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. His great grandfather was a member of the underground railroad and escaped to Canada and married the daughter of William Still, Sophia. Jimmy, as he was called until age 14, was number 9 of 14 children. His parents were Philane Mae Cover, originally from Jamaica, and Reverend James Morris Lawson Sr., originally from Guelph, Ontario in Canada. His father was a Methodist minister who was often moved to different churches and widely known because he started NAACP chapters in any town or city to which he was sent.

At some point in their travels, the family arrived in Massillon, Ohio where his father was Pastor of a local Methodist church. It was in Massillon that his mother decided that the family would make roots, despite his father continuing to travel to different churches throughout the south. He played sports in high school, led the debate team, and played tuba for the band.

After an encounter where Jim slapped a child for calling him a racial slur, his mother admonished him and gave him the advice that would influence the course of his life; "What good did that do Jimmy... there must be a better way."

Jim was committed to finding a better way to deal with the troubles of the world. He dedicated his life to following the examples of Jesus and creating a nonviolent way for dismantling injustice and racism. His nonviolent direct action began early in his life when he and some classmates tried to desegregate a local diner in town after school one day. In another instance, he and his brothers went to one of the movie theatres and refused to sit upstairs.

His early reading of Mahatma Gandhi further nurtured his growing understanding and use of nonviolence or ahimsa. This commitment to love led him to refuse the draft for the Korean War during his senior year at Baldwin Wallace College. As a result, he spent 13 months in prison. Upon release, he served as a missionary in India to further his study of Gandhi's principles of nonviolent resistance. While in India, he learned of the Montgomery Boycott which was the sign he needed to return to the states and be engaged in the nonviolent struggles for equality.

While attending the graduate school of Theology at Oberlin College, he and Martin Luther King Jr. first shook hands in 1957. At the urging of Rev. King, Jim moved to Nashville, Tennessee as the field organizer for the Fellowship of Reconciliation and began his studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. In Nashville he trained students in nonviolent strategy for the lunch counter sit-in movement. He was eventually expelled from Vanderbilt for his leadership in the movement. His expulsion led to the resignation of every professor at the Divinity School and many professors from other disciplines.

It is in Nashville where Jim met Dorothy Dolores Wood. That initial meeting in 1958 led to a wedding on July 3, 1959, in Charleston, Tennessee. Jim often reflected that his life would not have been possible had God not put Dorothy as his partner. Together they had three sons, John C. II, James Morris III; and Curtis Seth.

After being expelled from Vanderbilt, Jim finished his M.Div. at Boston University. Jim was a Methodist pastor of many congregations in his lifetime. As a staunch United Methodist, he served nationally and internationally on numerous boards and agencies, such as the Board of Global Ministries and The Commission on Religion and Race. He also helped to establish the Black Methodist for Church Renewal (BMCR) and encouraged the United Methodist church to include HBCU's as part of their financial commitment. He believed that his activism was part and parcel of his ministry. He organized and participated in freedom rides, voter registration drives, and other nonviolent campaigns throughout the South. He was Pastor of Centenary United Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee from 1962 to 1974. It was in his capacity as a pastor that he strategized for the Memphis Sanitation Strike, ultimately recruiting Dr. King to march and speak before that fateful day in April of 1968.

Memoir

In July of 1974, Jim became the Pastor of Holman UMC and remained there until his retirement in 1999. As part of his ministry in Los Angeles, Jim worked with Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta, led the Los Angeles Chapter of SCLC, challenged the United Methodist Church in its stance on war, LGBTQ+ issues, racism, women's rights; and constantly pushed the church to be followers of Jesus. He hosted a successful 30-minute talk show known as "Lawson Live," trained union workers in how to utilize nonviolent direct action to grow in membership and in strength and supported the development of strong Black and Latino union representation across the city, state and world. He taught courses on nonviolent social action at both UCLA and California State University, Northridge and held nonviolent workshops at Holman monthly until 2023, constantly speaking on the continuous harm of plantation capitalism.

In 2007, he was asked by Vanderbilt to return as its first Distinguished Visiting Professor and he and Dorothy lived in Nashville until 2011. Rev. James M. Lawson Jr. is the recipient of many awards, citations and honors. He is referenced in numerous books, articles and news clippings. He has a Memoir set to be released in 2025, which will serve as a guide for the continued usage of nonviolence in the transformation of this planet, starting with the United States.

Jim will be remembered by his wife, Dorothy; his son John (Cima); his son Morris; his son Seth (deceased); his grandchildren Raven, Devin and James Charles; his brother Phillip (Jo Ann); his first cousin, Helen Lawson Glover (106 years old); two goddaughters Amber (Mark) and Jennifer (Todd); and a myriad of nieces, nephews, great nephews, great nieces of the Lawson and Wood tribes; the extended Centenary and Holman families; and the numerous friends, colleagues and sojourners he had the privilege of knowing along the way.

Order of Service

Prelude	“Steal Away/Oh Fix Me Jesus” arr. by David Bowick Holman Choir
Processional	
Hymn of Faith	“For All the Saints” UMC Hymnal #711
Greetings and Welcome	Pastor Victor Cyrus-Franklin
Call to Worship	Rev. Louis Chase
Invocation	Rev. Louis Chase
The Lord’s Prayer (unison)	
Reflections	Mayor Karen Bass Mayor of Los Angeles Lee Saunders President, AFSCME International Dr. Lou Outlaw Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus Vanderbilt University Kent Wong Project Director, Labor & Community Partnerships UCLA Labor Center
Scripture	Psalm 121 Rabbi Steve Jacobs
Musical Selection	“His Grace and Mercy” by Franklin Williams Holman Choir Soloist, Charles Dickerson
Memoir (read silently)	
Scripture	Joshua 1: 1-7, 9 Rev. Sandra Olewine
Hymn	“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” UMC Hymnal #298

Order of Service

Reflections

Senator Maria Elena Durazo
California State Senator

Gloria Bailey
Holman United Methodist Church

Dr. Mark Ridley Thomas
Senior Advisor
Institute for Nonviolence, Los Angeles

Negro Spiritual

“Plenty Good Room” by Henry Smith
Holman Choir

Reflections

Dr. Jon Meachum
Historian/Distinguished Visiting Professor
Vanderbilt University

Family Acknowledgements

John C. Lawson II

The Gospel Reading

John 14: 1-7, 15-17, 27
James Morris Lawson III

Anticipatory Music

“Be Strong in the Lord” by Tom Fettke
Holman Choir

Homily

Pastor Victor Cyrus-Franklin

Commendation Prayer

Bishop Dottie Frank-Escobedo

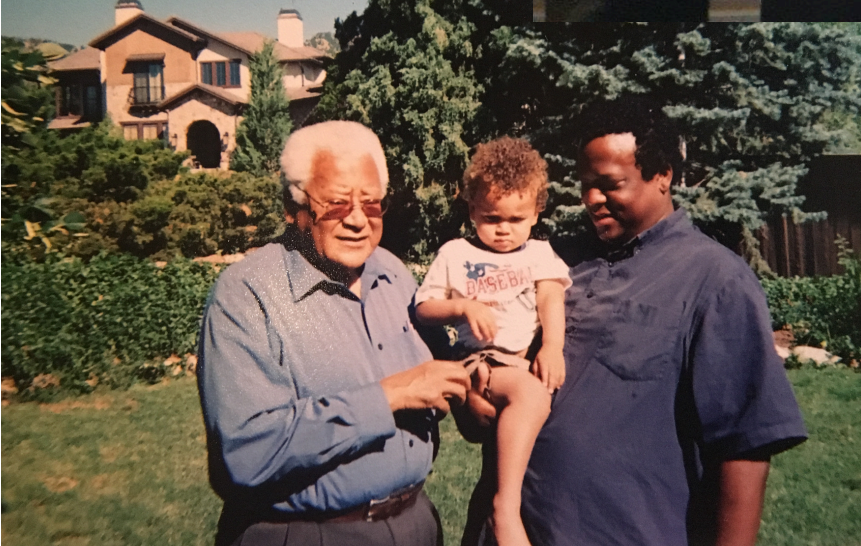
Benediction

“Just One More Day” arr. by Nolan Williams Jr.
Holman Choir

Recessional Music

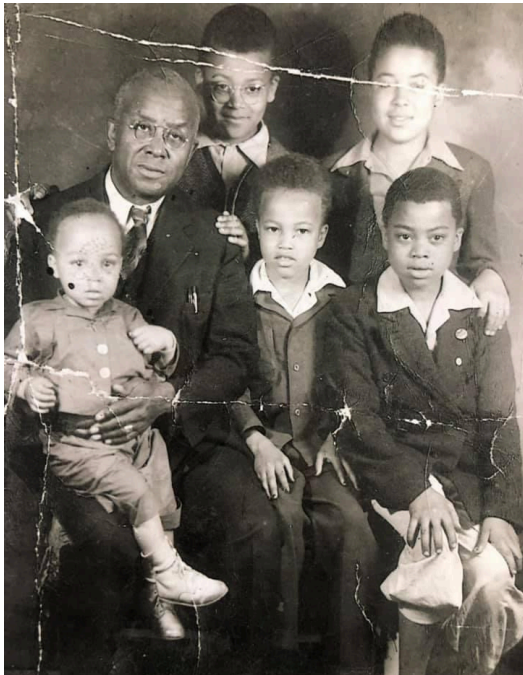
“God is Still Moving” by Keith Hunter
Holman Choir

Postlude













Active Pallbearers

Quincy Brown Sr.
Stephen J. Faulk
Delmus Harris III
Todd Hightower Jr.
Mark King
Justin Wilburn

Acknowledgements

The family wishes to express their deepest gratitude and appreciation for all expressions of sympathy shown to them during this difficult time. Your visits, cards, calls, flowers, and prayers will serve to brighten the days ahead.

Thank you,
The Lawson Family

In Lieu of Flowers

The family requests that donations be made to the Lawson Justice Fund at Liberty Hill Foundation, Holman United Methodist Church, or SCLC Los Angeles Chapter.

Angelus Funeral Home
3875 Crenshaw Boulevard
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