

**CONFLICTING CONVICTIONS
IN WHITE MISSISSIPPI METHODISM:
THE 1963 “BORN OF CONVICTION” CONTROVERSY**

JOSEPH T. REIFF

During the fall of 1962, in the wake of the September 30 riot at the University of Mississippi, as James Meredith finally took up residence at the University, four Methodist ministers in the white Mississippi Annual Conference (then the southern half of the state) wrote a statement attempting to respond to the situation by offering an alternative witness to the segregationist party line. The statement, entitled “Born of Conviction,” called for freedom of the pulpit, reminded readers of the Methodist *Discipline*’s claim that the teachings of Jesus “[permit] no discrimination because of race, color, or creed,” expressed support for the public schools and opposition to any attempt to close them, and affirmed the signers’ opposition to Communism. The full text can be found at the conclusion of this essay. By the time it appeared in the *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* on January 2, 1963, the statement’s creators and others had gathered the signatures of twenty-eight pastors in that Conference, most of them young. The signers were soon dubbed “the twenty-eight.”¹

The reasons for its publication centered on the firm belief of its creators and all who signed that “the clergy has responsibility for leadership” in race relations, “not only in time of crisis but also long before.”² They had looked in vain for their Bishop and Conference leaders to respond publicly to the “Ole Miss” riot and the surrounding turmoil, so they sought to fill that void.³ Sam Ashmore, a North Mississippi Conference minister serving as editor of the *Advocate*, welcomed the publication of “Born of Conviction” and prefaced it with an editorial note claiming that the signers “express the convic-

¹ “Born of Conviction,” *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (January 2, 1963), 2. The statement was written by Jerry Furr, Maxie D. Dunnam, Jim L. Waits, and O. Gerald Trigg. Although the signers ranged in age from 25 to 56, half were under 30, and all but four were under 40. Twelve were serving their first pastoral appointment at the time of publication (all information about the appointments and ages of signers comes from Mississippi Conference Journals of the period and author’s interviews with the signers and families).

² Jim L. Waits, letter to Will Campbell (January 11, 1963), Will D. Campbell Papers, Box 8, Folder 11, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

³ In the *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (October 17, 1962), 2, the North Mississippi Conference Cabinet endorsed a “Call for Repentance” from some Oxford, Mississippi, ministers shortly after the riot, while Bishop Marvin Franklin, whose episcopal area included both white Mississippi conferences, was out of the country. Franklin and the Mississippi Conference Cabinet remained silent on the matter.

tion of the vast majority of the clerical members of the conference.” He had responded forcefully to the Ole Miss riot in October, and in the January 2nd issue he offered a supporting editorial to “Born of Conviction” on “The Freedom of the Pulpit.”⁴

“Born of Conviction” caused a huge controversy in the state and the Mississippi Conference. Though it was supported publicly by the Conference Lay Leader and the pastor of the largest church in the Conference,⁵ the overwhelming response in state newspapers and local Methodist churches was extremely negative.⁶ The twenty-eight and their families got private support through many letters from friends and some strangers both in Mississippi and beyond the state, but they also received anonymous threatening telephone calls and hate mail, and there were some instances of violence to property. In many cases they were also the victims of ostracism by some church members and people in the towns where they lived.⁷

Among the variety of possible perspectives from which to view this complex story, this essay attends to four specifically Methodist aspects of the controversy.

Conflicting Understandings of Methodism

The “Born of Conviction” statement aggravated an already existing tension between the white Mississippi Conference and the Methodist Church as a whole. The statement quoted liberally from the Methodist Social Creed and the Resolution on “The Methodist Church and Race” in the *Discipline*,⁸ reminding white Mississippi Methodists that the official position of the denomination condemned racial discrimination. Attempts on the General Church level to abolish the Central Jurisdiction, a proposal viewed by many of its Mississippi and Southeastern Jurisdiction opponents as a violation of the terms of the 1939 Plan of Union, were becoming more serious,⁹ and

⁴ “Who is to Blame for the Rioting?” *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (October 10, 1962), 3; *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (January 2, 1963), 2, 3.

⁵ J. P. Stafford, letter to “Dear Brothers” (January 3, 1963), Walters (Summer and Betty) Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, J. B. Cain Archives of Mississippi Methodism, Millsaps College (the letter was released to the press); J. P. Stafford, “Thoughts from a Quiet Corner,” *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (January 9, 16, and 23, 1963), 11; “28 Ministers Supported on Racial Stand,” *Jackson Clarion Ledger* (January 4, 1963), 14; “Selah States Stand on Race Integration,” *Jackson Clarion Ledger* (January 7, 1963), 1.

⁶ For example, see “Methodist Mix Furor Flares Out,” *Jackson Daily News* (January 8, 1963), 1. The negative reactions appeared in many editorials and letters to the editor in Mississippi daily papers in January. There were supportive editorials from a few Mississippi editors, such as Pulitzer Prize winners Hodding Carter, Jr. (Greenville), Hazel Brannon Smith (Lexington), and Ira Harkey (Pascagoula).

⁷ This brief summary of the experiences of the 28 is based on author’s interviews with them, letters and written accounts from private papers and archival collections, and Ned Kellar, *Sandersville* (Xlibris, 2010).

⁸ *Discipline of The Methodist Church*, 1960, ¶s 2020 and 2026.

⁹ Dwight W. Culver, *Negro Segregation in The Methodist Church* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953), 81, 113-115; see also “Bishop Kern Reassures Southern Methodists,” *Christian Century* (November 10, 1937), 1380; and “Southern Methodists Would Retain Race Divisions,” *Christian Century* (February 23, 1955), 229.

white Mississippi Methodists criticized and sometimes rejected the denomination's Sunday School literature because of its "pro-integration view."¹⁰

The second paragraph of the "Born of Conviction" statement invoked the authority of "the expressed witness of our Church" as foundational for the twenty-eight's conviction "as to what is morally right," pitting this expressed witness against the Mississippi Closed Society's "orthodoxy" of white supremacy and massive resistance to desegregation.¹¹ Signers quoted in the press just after the release of the statement emphasized that it simply reflected the position of The Methodist Church. Wilton Carter explained, "This is not a rabid stand a few preachers have taken but what Methodists have believed all along. It is the position of the officials of the church."¹² But for many Mississippi Methodist laity and some clergy at the time, there was virtually no distinction between being a segregationist and a white Methodist, and thus they rejected the Church's "expressed witness." A member of Oakland Heights Church in Meridian, commenting to the press after a close but unsuccessful attempt in their Official Board to oust pastor and "Born of Conviction" signer Ed McRae, put it this way:

We do not believe in integration. We do not believe that all races are brothers as stated in the document signed by the twenty-eight pastors. We believe in the freedom of worship and feel that we do not have this if we are forced to listen to a minister who has shown by his actions that he does not care about our Southern way of life but will betray part of his membership by signing what we believe is a politically inspired document.

A few weeks later, the same Official Board notified Bishop Marvin Franklin that they wanted a new pastor in June and would not accept any other member of the twenty-eight.¹³

This conflict can be understood as a disagreement about Methodist tradition. Knox Broom, a 1915 Millsaps College alumnus and Jackson layman, accused *Advocate* editor Sam Ashmore and the twenty-eight signers of participating in a larger conspiracy in The Methodist Church that both violated and involved "potentially shameful damage to the basic cause for which the Articles of Religion of the church stands." The "28 neophite [sic] preacher Resolutors" had fallen prey to a growing tendency in the denomination to abandon "the controlling purpose of the Methodist Church," winning souls to Christ. In Broom's view, other examples of this supposed tendency to

¹⁰ See the report from the Mississippi Conference Committee on Social and Economic Relations in *Journal of the Mississippi Conference, SEJ* (1959), 132. Henry Bullock, a member of the Mississippi Conference, was Editor of Methodist Church School Publications at the time and thus a target of this criticism.

¹¹ Ole Miss historian James Wesley Silver called Mississippi the "Closed Society" in those years and used religious language to describe the commitment of most white Mississippians to segregation in Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society*, New Enlarged Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966).

¹² "Freedom of Thinking' Stressed By Pastors" *Meridian Star*, January 3, 1963, 1.

¹³ "Oakland Heights Church Decides Not to Seek Pastoral Change," *Meridian Star* (January 11, 1963), 1; H. H. Buchanan, letter to Bishop Franklin (February 11, 1963), Bishop's Office Papers, Box 1, Folder 19, J. B. Cain Archives of Mississippi Methodism, Millsaps College.

stray from the Church's true purpose were language opposing racial segregation from the Council of Bishops, in the *Discipline*, and in Methodist church school literature, the tactics used to gain approval of Amendment IX to the Church's Constitution (allowing for the possibility of gradual dissolution of the Central Jurisdiction), and objectionable Sunday School Lessons written for *The Mississippi Methodist Advocate* by "young preachers," including "Born of Conviction" creators Maxie Dunnam and O. Gerald Trigg.¹⁴

The segregationist Mississippi Association of Methodist Ministers and Laymen (MAMML), which had no official relationship to the Conference, joined the fray with a statement entitled "A Methodist Declaration of Conscience on Racial Segregation," released to the press January 10 in response to "Born of Conviction." John Wesley, MAMML claimed, founded Methodism because he "rejected ecclesiastical authoritarianism" and "preached the witness of the spirit to the individual believer—there has never been any infallible source of authority within the Methodist Church." "Born of Conviction" and related national church pronouncements showed "a developing spirit of authoritarianism. Too many of our clergy seem servile toward the episcopacy and supercilious toward the laity. Too much attention seems to be going to organizational discipline, as if the Church were an instrument of social revolution or control."¹⁵

Thus various opponents of the twenty-eight understood Mississippi Methodism as defined by assumptions of the dominant culture, or as an institution charged with the purely spiritual duty of "winning souls," prohibited from any "political" activity which sought social change. The signers of "Born of Conviction" believed that in the severe crisis in Mississippi brought on by years of massive resistance to desegregation and the lawlessness of the Ole Miss riot, it was time for them to respond critically: "Indeed, as Christian ministers and as native Mississippians, sharing the anguish of all our people, we have a particular obligation to speak."¹⁶

Connectionalism

A central concept in Methodist tradition is connectionalism and its many facets. The call for freedom of the pulpit in "Born of Conviction" rests on the assumption that ministers will be supported by the Annual Conference, even when their sermons and the stands they take challenge the cultural sta-

¹⁴ Knox M. Broom, "Memo" and "Cover Pulling," n.d. (January, 1963), Ashmore (Dr. Sam E. and Ann Lewis) Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, J. B. Cain Archives of Mississippi Methodism, Millsaps College (emphasis in original).

¹⁵ "Methodist Group 'For' Segregation," *Jackson Clarion Ledger* (January 11, 1963), 1. The statement was written by Citizens' Council staffer Medford Evans, a Yale Ph.D. in literature and son of a Methodist minister. The interpretations of Wesley are problematic—although he did defy Church of England authority on occasion, such defiance was hardly his central motivation for founding the Methodist movement, and to suggest that the witness of the Spirit to the individual trumped any other source of authority for Wesley is absurd. See Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodist* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), especially 10, 318, and chapters 2-3.

¹⁶ A quote from the statement, *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (January 2, 1963), 2.

tus quo and draw fire from church members or others in the community. As a specifically Methodist story, the “Born of Conviction” controversy contains several examples of the failure of the Methodist connection.

Two of the twenty-eight signers were ousted from their congregations almost immediately with the cooperation of the District Superintendents involved; a third left because of violence and threats of violence.¹⁷ One of them, James Rush of the Philadelphia Circuit in Neshoba County, learned at the last minute of a charge-wide meeting, called for the purpose of voting on whether to keep him as pastor, only because a few sympathetic members informed him. When he arrived at the meeting, he found his District Superintendent presiding, and in spite of Rush’s protests, members of two of his three churches voted to dismiss him.¹⁸

A few weeks later, Bishop Franklin insisted in a private letter that “No appointment has been changed and those churches which refused to pay or hear their appointed preachers still have the same appointed pastors.”¹⁹ This had been technically true during January, but a week before the Bishop wrote the words, a retired supply minister had been appointed to replace Rush on the Philadelphia Circuit,²⁰ and the other two ousted pastors remained appointed to their churches in name only. Either Franklin was not yet aware of the new appointment at Philadelphia, or he chose consciously or unconsciously to deny it. Franklin stuck to this story months later when he was quoted in a follow-up *New York Times* article on the twenty-eight: “I took the position that I would not change any of these men last January, and no pastoral appointment was changed because of that statement. I think that’s pretty fair, don’t you?” He also described his position “to minimize frictions within the church, to resist pressure for immediate removal of pastors, and to try to offer all 28 ministers positions within Mississippi.”²¹

The twenty-eight experienced a lack of public support from the Bishop and Cabinet. Two weeks after its publication, Bishop Franklin and the Mississippi Conference Cabinet issued a statement ostensibly in response to “Born of Conviction” but failing to mention it directly. While expressing

¹⁷ Claude Sitton, “Three Pastors Ousted by Mississippians,” *New York Times* (January 19, 1963), 4.

¹⁸ Author’s interview with James and Libby Rush (July 22, 2004); “What Has Happened to Me,” attached to James Rush letter to James W. Silver (January 17, 1963), James W. Silver Papers, Box 23, Folder 9, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi; *Neshoba Democrat* (January 10, 1963), 1. The remarkable story of the third church’s vote to retain Rush is told briefly in “Three Pastors Ousted by Mississippians,” *New York Times* (January 19, 1963), 4, but Rush was unable to stay on the charge.

¹⁹ Bishop Marvin Franklin, letter to Paul Hardin (February 8, 1963), Faculty Meeting Minutes, Memos, and Reports, Folder 1962-1963, Millsaps College Archives.

²⁰ *Journal of the Mississippi Conference, SEJ* (1963), 113.

²¹ Hedrick Smith, “Racists in Mississippi Harass Clergy Fighting Discrimination,” *New York Times* (June 29, 1963), 1. The Bishop offered a similar argument in a letter to William M. Justice (April 5, 1963), Bishop’s Office Papers, Box 1, Folder 19, J. B. Cain Archives of Mississippi Methodism, Millsaps College. It is ironic that Franklin should claim this (presumably) after the Annual Conference meeting in late May, because by the time the article appeared, eleven of the twenty-eight had already transferred out.

support “of the doctrines and historic positions of the Methodist Church,” the Bishop’s statement reminded the Conference that “integration is not forced upon any part of our church” and urged the Conference to rededicate itself to its “great program in evangelism, education, missions, and other areas.”²² Because it failed to respond directly to “Born of Conviction” and the controversy it had caused, and because it sought to assure church members that they would not be forced to integrate, the twenty-eight considered this statement “a repudiation of what we had done.”²³

Perhaps the Bishop and Cabinet meant their affirmation of Methodist doctrines and historic positions as a faint endorsement of “Born of Conviction,” since it quoted the *Discipline* and some of the signers had asserted they were simply expressing the official Methodist position on the race issue. However, interpretation of that sentence in the Bishop and Cabinet’s statement depended on one’s perspective. A Mississippi Conference clergy critic of “Born of Conviction” insisted in a letter published in the press that integrationist views had been “inserted” recently in the *Discipline*,²⁴ and J. Melvin Jones, senior pastor at Gulfport First Methodist (where “Born of Conviction” signer John Ed Thomas served as associate), wrote Sam Ashmore that the twenty-eight were mistaken to claim the words they quoted from the *Discipline* were the “official position of The Methodist Church.” Because they were part of the Methodist Social Creed found in an Appendix to the *Discipline*, Jones argued this made the words the “‘unofficial’ position” of the Church.²⁵ Although this interpretation is strained at best, those who agreed with Jones’ view could have read this sentence from the Bishop and Cabinet’s statement as saying, “We support the doctrines and historic positions of the Church, but the views quoted in ‘Born of Conviction’ are not included in those ‘historic’ positions.”

In spite of these failures of the connectional system in the Mississippi Conference, the connection also supported the twenty-eight in a number of ways. Sixteen of them graduated from Millsaps College, a Methodist school where they were nurtured and challenged by some professors to think critically about the segregated system in Mississippi, while seven others were influ-

²² “A Statement from the Bishop & Cabinet of the Mississippi Methodist Conference,” *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (January 16, 1963), 2. The “integration is not forced” language was a reference to Amendment IX to the Church’s Constitution, passed in 1956 to establish a voluntary process for the merger of Central Jurisdiction Conferences with conferences in the geographic jurisdictions.

²³ Bufkin Oliver to James Silver (April 9, 1963), Silver Papers, Box 23, Folder 9.

²⁴ Roy Wesley Wolfe, letter published in Charles Hills’ “Affairs of State” column, *Jackson Clarion Ledger* (January 8, 1963), 3.

²⁵ J. Melvin Jones, letter to Sam Ashmore (January 4, 1963), Ashmore (Dr. Sam E. and Ann Lewis) Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, J. B. Cain Archives of Mississippi Methodism, Millsaps College. “Born of Conviction” signer Summer Walters claimed Jones’ argument was also Bishop Franklin’s view (author’s interview with Summer and Betty Walters [June 13, 2004]). While it is true that the statements in ¶s 2026 and 2020 were not Church law, they were indeed official because they were adopted by the General Conference, the only body with authority to speak for The Methodist Church.

enced by the remarkable ministry of Sam Barefield at the Wesley Foundation at Mississippi Southern College during the 1950s. When they wrote and signed “Born of Conviction,” the Conference newspaper published it, thanks to the leadership of its editor, Sam Ashmore. The Conference gave at least two of the three pastors who immediately left their churches some salary support.²⁶ In addition, those who left Mississippi found places to transfer, eventually ending up spread across all five geographic jurisdictions of the General Church.

Itinerancy: “Spoke Out, Forced Out?”

Many of the brief published mentions of the “Born of Conviction” event over the years can be characterized as “narratives of forced departure.” Here are two examples:

“...when twenty-eight young Methodist ministers in Mississippi signed a mild statement regarding the University of Mississippi desegregation crisis, all of them were gone within the year.”²⁷

“Twenty-eight Methodist ministers once lost their churches in Mississippi for a stand on the race issue.”²⁸

Aside from problems with the factual accuracy of these statements, I offer them as evidence that “Born of Conviction” has often been cited by historians and others as part of a larger narrative tradition, summarized as follows: Whites in the Deep South (especially Mississippi) during the Civil Rights era who dared to speak out against the tide on the race issue were usually forced out—of church, community, state, and/or region. This narrative is most often used in discussing Southern white clergy and implies that the departures were all due solely to the race issue. While there is a great deal of truth to this account, a closer look at the experience of the twenty-eight signers of “Born of Conviction” clouds this simplistic summary in at least two significant ways by questioning the amount of “force” (i.e., lack of choice) involved and by offering some other reasons besides the state’s racial climate and negative response to “Born of Conviction” for the departure of many who left Mississippi.

Contrary to the “all lost their churches” perception, eleven of the signers

²⁶ Author’s interview with Jerry Furr (June 3-4, 2004); Bill Lampton, letter to Bishop Franklin (May 1, 1963). Bishop’s Office Papers, Box 1, Folder 19, J. B. Cain Archives of Mississippi Methodism, Millsaps College.

²⁷ Will D. Campbell, *And Also With You: Duncan Gray and the American Dilemma* (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 1997), 141.

²⁸ Robert Canzoneri, *“I Do So Politely”: A Voice from the South* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 142. Other examples include Reed Sarratt, *The Ordeal of Desegregation: The First Decade* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 267; Randy J. Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi* (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 2001), 237; Jack E. Davis, *Race Against Time: Culture and Separation in Natchez Since 1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2001), 200; and Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 56.

were re-appointed to the same congregations at the 1963 Annual Conference session five months after the statement's publication, and at least two others are convinced they would also have been re-appointed had they not chosen to leave the Conference.²⁹ In addition, eight of the twenty-eight never left Mississippi and continued to serve as Methodist ministers for the rest of their careers, while three others who left returned later to serve churches in Mississippi, two within less than four years.³⁰ Given the persistence of the "spoke out, forced out" tradition, it is not surprising that those who stayed are seldom mentioned.

It is true that twenty of the signers left Mississippi, but how many of them "had" to leave? For the eighteen who left by June, 1964, reaction to "Born of Conviction" and the racial climate in Mississippi were certainly factors in their decision.³¹ Two of the three who left their churches in January, 1963 had no choice (especially since both of their District Superintendents went along with those in their congregations who wanted them out), while the third chose to leave because of some violence to his property, threats from the community, and a lack of support from his congregation. Two other signers were told privately by Bishop Marvin Franklin that no Mississippi Conference church would accept them as their pastor. These five can justifiably be said to have been forced out of the Conference with little or no choice to stay.³²

²⁹ Two of the eleven, Jerry Furr and Bufkin Oliver, decided to transfer out after the appointments had been finalized and so only served a few weeks in the new Conference year before leaving. The two who believe they would have been re-appointed had they not transferred are Wilton Carter and Ned Kellar.

³⁰ The eight were Elton Brown, James S. Conner, N. A. Dickson, Rod Entrekin, Denson Napier, Harold Ryker, Keith Tonkel, and John Ed Thomas. Two of them worked primarily in ministries outside the local church (campus ministry, hospital chaplaincy, etc.) for most of their careers. Significantly, the two who left and then returned to Mississippi later in the 1960s both served as pastors in the North Mississippi Conference, for reasons which will become clear below.

³¹ The other two who left did so for reasons mostly unrelated to "Born of Conviction." Jim Waits went to graduate school in another state from 1965 to 1967 and intended to return to Mississippi but eventually transferred to Tennessee; Powell Hall left in 1971, mainly due to the experience of his children as virtually the only whites in the public schools in the rural communities where he served.

³² Author's interview with James Nicholson (June 12, 2004); James Nicholson, letter to James Silver (January 22, 1963), Silver Papers, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Box 23, Folder 9; J. W. Leggett, Jr., letters to James Nicholson (January 11, 1963), and to T. E. Nicholson (January 11, 1963), both in James Nicholson Private Papers (copies in author's possession); author's interview with James and Libby Rush (July 22, 2004); Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New Enlarged Edition, 1966), 59-60; W. E. Lampton, letter to James Silver (January 30, 1963), Silver Papers, Box 23, Folder 9; author's interview with Summer and Betty Walters (June 13, 2004); Summer Walters, "My Ministerial Experiences in Mississippi 1961-1963," (notes from a September 24, 1963, presentation to Indianapolis District ministers, copy in possession of author); Summer Walters, letter to James Silver (June 18, 1963), Silver Papers, Box 23, Folder 9; author's interview with Jerry Furr (June 3-4, 2004). Note that the "little or no choice to stay" is qualified a bit: James Nicholson received a new Mississippi appointment in May, 1963, and perhaps could have stayed, but transferred to Southern Iowa in August, 1963 (*Journal of the Mississippi Conference* 1963, 102, and 1964, 94; Nicholson interview).

The story becomes more complicated in the cases of other signers. At least three more received “no place to appoint you in the Conference” messages from someone in the Conference hierarchy and left, but most of the others who left were clear that it was their choice to leave.³³ Bufkin Oliver, who at forty-five was one of the oldest signers, told James Silver in April, 1963, that “My own thinking is about fifty-fifty for staying or leaving. I don’t want to run from a fight for what I know is right, but I have a wife and four children who are also involved.” Oliver was reappointed to his pastorate in Ellisville in May, 1963, but transferred in late June to the Southern California-Arizona Conference. Years later he told his son the decision to leave Mississippi was one of the biggest mistakes of his life, and he returned to the North Mississippi Conference in 1967.³⁴

To varying degrees, roughly a dozen of the twenty who left Mississippi could have stayed, and if they all had, “Born of Conviction” would not be so commonly cited as an illustration of the “spoke out, forced out” narrative. There were many conditions that influenced the choices to leave, but I will focus on two overlapping elements of the particular culture of this Annual Conference, each of which doubles as both a reason for the ministerial exodus and an interpretation of the response to “Born of Conviction” in the Mississippi Conference.

Mississippi Conference Culture: Politics

In the Mississippi Conference of the 1950s and 1960s, a political machine led by J. Willard Leggett, Jr. and a group of lieutenants heavily influenced Conference affairs and maintained its power because of a fiercely loyal cadre of rank-and-file pastors and influential lay leaders. One cannot fully understand the almost complete lack of support for the twenty-eight from Conference leadership without knowledge of this political situation. Although the Leggett machine clearly supported the maintenance of segregation in the state and Conference, they also saw the twenty-eight as attempting to wrest power from them and define new directions for the Conference.³⁵ This story is therefore not only an instructive case study on the white Methodist Church’s response to the Civil Rights Movement, but it is also part of a Methodist institutional drama. Between 1952 and 1971, 160 ministers transferred out of the Mississippi Conference; sixty-five of those left between 1960 and 1964. Although the reasons for this exodus were

³³ Author’s interviews with Joe Way (June 12, 2006); Jack Troutman (June 3, 2004); and Ken Roberts (brother of deceased signer Wallace Roberts, November 3, 2005). General comments here and in the next paragraph characterizing how much choice the twenty-eight had to stay in Mississippi are based on oral history interviews with surviving signers and family members of deceased signers, along with several documents.

³⁴ Bufkin Oliver, letter to James Silver (April 9, 1963), Silver Papers, Box 23, Folder 9; author’s interview with Buff Oliver (October 5, 2006).

³⁵ Author’s interview with O. Gerald Trigg (June 10, 2004); and author’s interview with James McCormick (a Mississippi Conference minister whose father was a Leggett lieutenant, July 6, 2005).

complex, the ways the Conference power structure (mostly non-seminary trained ministers) dealt with a threat to its power from ministers like the twenty-eight who represented new perspectives (including seminary training) are partially to blame for a leadership drain that affected the Conference for decades.³⁶

As documentation for this claim, I am not simply relying on my own experience of the Conference.³⁷ Two surveys conducted in the Conference in 1963 and 1964 mention conference politics prominently as a problem (which is significant, since public/published mentions of such ecclesiastical political realities are not common). The chief researcher for one of the studies, an official connected with the General Church, wrote, "A large number of ministers and laymen felt politics and/or personal friendships with a small group of key ministers influenced the appointments in the Mississippi Annual Conference."³⁸ In recent interviews with dozens of ministers active in the Conference in the 1950s and 1960s, I have asked respondents to characterize the Conference's culture in those years. Most of them mentioned Conference politics and the Leggett machine in the first sentence or two in response. As one put it, "You have to understand that in those days the Conference was small enough to be dominated by one personality, and that's what happened."³⁹

How did this affect the decisions of the twenty-eight to leave or stay in Mississippi? Some who stayed did so partly because they were unwilling to admit defeat in their fight against the Leggett machine. On the other hand, several who left viewed their prospects for advancement in the Conference as bleak, given the Leggett machine's control. This concern extended beyond those who were told directly that there was no appointment for them to some who could have stayed but transferred out and rose to prominence

³⁶ Transfer numbers come from the Mississippi Conference Journals for those years. An extensive study of this exodus, including survey and interview data from many of those who left, is found in Thomas Stevens Burnett, "Ministerial Roles and Institutional Restraints: The Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church," D.Min. thesis, Claremont School of Theology (1976). For a treatment of politics in another Methodist Annual Conference, see Ted A. Campbell, "Political Alignments in the Texas Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, 1939-1970," *Heritage Journal* (Texas United Methodist Historical Society), 4 (2008), 15-29.

³⁷ My father, Lee H. Reiff, taught at Millsaps College beginning in 1960 and transferred his ministerial membership to the Mississippi Conference in 1966. I was a pastor in Mississippi from 1980 to 1985 and remain a ministerial member of that Conference.

³⁸ Alan K. Waltz, *The Mississippi Annual Conference, Southeastern Jurisdiction* (copy in possession of author), quoted in *Journal of the Mississippi Conference* (1963), 135.

³⁹ Author's interview with Bishop Clay F. Lee (August 15, 2003). For further comments on the conference political situation, see Alan K. Waltz, *The Mississippi Annual Conference, Southeastern Jurisdiction*, 47-49, 79, 85-86; George L. Berry to "Rev. [Wilton] Carter" (February 29, 1964) [form letter with survey questions attached sent to forty-five former Mississippi Conference ministers], Wilton Carter Private Papers (copy in possession of author); "Report of Special Committee of Investigation—Why Ministers Are Leaving the Mississippi Conference," *Journal of the Mississippi Conference* (1964), 152. For responses from members of the twenty-eight who left Mississippi, see Wilton Carter to George L. Berry (March 31, 1964), Wilton Carter Private Papers; and R. Inman Moore, Jr. to Berry (March 12, 1964), Inman Moore Private Papers (copies in possession of author).

in places that would not have been possible had they stayed in Mississippi. In addition, at least two of the youngest ministers received overtures from a Leggett lieutenant who essentially offered to “take care of” them in their rise up the appointment ladder if they would stay in Mississippi. Both had smoothed things over sufficiently in their congregations that they could have stayed in the same appointment for another year, but both chose to leave the state, partly because of their distaste for what they had learned about the political realities of their conference.⁴⁰

One of the first signers to leave was Inman Moore, Jr., a thirty-seven-year-old pastor in Biloxi serving his fourteenth year in the Conference. Moore’s decision to transfer to the Southern California/Arizona Conference, while certainly related to the response to “Born of Conviction” and the racial climate in Mississippi, did not result from his being forced out of his congregation. Although a few of his church members protested his stance, he could easily have stayed. Moore left primarily because of Conference politics; his father, Inman Moore, Sr. was one of Willard Leggett’s lieutenants. The son had aligned himself with the group opposing Leggett and in the wake of the “Born of Conviction” controversy decided to remove himself from that conflict, both because of the tensions it caused with his father and because he had no respect for the Leggett machine and all it represented. Writing from California in 1964, Moore, Jr., described Mississippi as “the sickest Conference in Methodism. For many years, the Conference has been tightly controlled by a small group of shrewd, and . . . rather capable men. I use ‘capable’ in the sense that they know how to get things done and how to manipulate people.”⁴¹

Mississippi Conference Culture: Conflicting Views of Leadership and Ecclesiology

This leads to another factor in the departures of several of the twenty-eight. The “Born of Conviction” controversy in the Mississippi Conference can be interpreted as a battle between an “old guard,” represented by the Leggett machine and Bishop Marvin Franklin, and a younger group of ministers of the post-war generation. The old guard’s style of leadership was paternalistic, with leaders taking care of their protégés while expecting unquestioning loyalty from them. One minister who was invited to sign “Born of

⁴⁰ Again, these general statements are based on my interviews with signers and families of deceased signers, along with documentary evidence; among those who left, one rose precipitously after his transfer to Southern California/Arizona, eventually becoming World Editor of *The Upper Room* and then a seminary president, while two others became top seminary administrators and one served for over 20 years as pastor of the largest Methodist congregation in the Western Jurisdiction; author’s interviews with Wilton Carter (June 7, 2004); and Ned Kellar (August 9, 2004), and letters from Tom Prewitt to Carter (March 13, 1963), Wilton Carter Private Papers, and Tom Prewitt to Ned Kellar (April 4, 1963), Ned Kellar Private Papers, copies in possession of author.

⁴¹ Author’s interview with Inman Moore, Jr. (June 4, 2004); Inman Moore, Jr., to George Berry (March 12, 1964), Inman Moore Private Papers (this letter was written in response to the early 1964 Mississippi Conference survey letter sent to ministers who had left the Conference).

Conviction” declined until he could consult with his District Superintendent, who also happened to be his “father in the ministry;” he did not get the chance to do so and did not sign the statement.⁴² In addition, because Bishop Franklin either consistently avoided conflict or was unduly influenced by Leggett, he failed to offer any public support for “Born of Conviction.”

The younger ministers, including the twenty-eight, were looking for leaders who would respond with courage and conviction to the crisis in Mississippi to lead the Church and the state toward needed change. Ministers needed to be free to speak their conscience in sermons to their congregations (thus the “freedom of the pulpit” emphasis in “Born of Conviction”), and they needed Conference leaders both to support them in this effort and to model it themselves. They were disappointed in this hope by the Mississippi Conference leadership. Assessing in 1965 “the relative importance of church politics versus the race question” in his decision to leave Mississippi, James Holston, another of the older signers of the statement, wrote the following: “Church politics was the crushing blow. The silence of church leadership (Bishop and Dist. Supt.) was revolting.”⁴³

Many of the twenty who left Mississippi transferred to annual conferences led by bishops they considered to be much stronger leaders. Eight went to Southern California/Arizona, led by Bishop Gerald Kennedy, well-respected as a courageous and visionary church leader; three were attracted to Indiana and the leadership of Bishop Richard Raines, and one to Iowa, led by Bishop Gerald Ensley. This can also be understood as a difference in ecclesiology. The twenty-eight perceived Bishop Franklin and the Leggett machine as understanding the church primarily as a preserver of tradition, as an institution of the status quo, while the twenty-eight viewed the church as called to take the lead toward social change in a time of crisis.

Aside from views on race, some of the negative response to “Born of Conviction” came from a sincere if misguided desire to protect the institutional church. This view was expressed by an Associate Conference Lay Leader in the conference newspaper in response to “Born of Conviction” two weeks after it was published:

I do not understand why any minister would commit himself to implications that might divide him from his people and bring bitterness to his church . . . I do not understand why, in the face of magnificent progress, unparalleled growth in stewardship and unlimited opportunities, that we would bring down upon ourselves an unnecessary social crisis that lashes a staggering blow to the church and the unity of our people. Why would any layman or minister of his own will lend support to a

⁴² Author’s interview with George Currey (August 1, 2004)—since the ministerial “father” in question was a Leggett lieutenant, there is no doubt he would have advised Currey not to sign; among other sources, the analysis here is aided by my July 6, 2005, interview with James McCormick; another example of paternalism is the Leggett lieutenant’s offer (mentioned above) to take care of two of the twenty-eight. Both explanations for Bishop Franklin’s lack of support for the signers have been advanced frequently by people I have interviewed.

⁴³ James Holston, response to “Questionnaire [sic] to the 28,” distributed by Jim Waits in 1965, James L. Waits Papers, Box 1, Folder 14, Pitts Theology Library Archives, Emory University.

tragic thing that brings our church to such a sad state of affairs?⁴⁴

In this man's view, "Born of Conviction" was wrong because it hurt the church, posing a clear threat to its stability and long term institutional health.

Willard Leggett most likely understood himself in his many years of power and influence in the Mississippi Conference to be doing what was best for the Church and Conference as an institution, viewing this as his responsibility and calling. Just over a year before his death, Leggett said:

I joined the conference in 1930 and was appointed to the Clinton Methodist Church with J. T. Leggett as my presiding elder. From 1930 to 1990 there has not been an hour in my life that I have been free from the burden and responsibility of a church or some agency of the Methodist Church.⁴⁵

A Mississippi minister who knew Leggett and his family well confirms this by saying:

I think Willard Leggett saw himself as someone defending the church that he loved, defending the church to whom he'd given his life, understood in those terms . . . [and he offered] warm pastoral care for everyone who shared that. You get out of your place and try to do something to the church that he saw as hurting it, [then] some real viciousness could come out of that."⁴⁶ Another minister who knew Leggett well in the 1950s put it simply: "Willard would have said he was doing what was best for the Church."⁴⁷

When this perspective (that one must not hurt the institution/community) is joined with a foundational tenet of a paternalistic system, that protégés are not supposed to question or embarrass their leaders publicly, then the main "sin" of the twenty-eight was their perceived disloyalty to the community of Mississippi Conference Methodists—its lay people, congregations, fellow ministers, and leaders. They had violated not only the orthodoxy of the Closed Society but also the dominant cultural norms of their Annual Conference. The twenty-eight believed that "the grave crises precipitated by racial discord within our state in recent months" called for a different ethic. Communal and institutional concerns had to bow here to the overarching concern for justice. But many white Mississippi Methodists, including most of their leaders, did not see it that way at all. An anonymous letter writer (likely a fellow minister), criticized the twenty-eight for mentioning "Methodist this and that; not once did any of you mention the Bible, which lays bare the fact that woe be unto them that sow dissention [sic] and the

⁴⁴ Bert Jordan, "I Do Not Understand," *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (January 16, 1963), 2.

⁴⁵ Mississippi Methodist Foundation, "Report of Consultant and Investment Manager, Dr. J. W. Leggett, Jr., April 27, 1990," Bishop E. J. Pendergrass Papers, J. B. Cain Archives of Mississippi Methodism, Millsaps College, Box 1, Folder 5.1. Note that true to the paternalistic perspective, Leggett pays homage to his "father in the ministry" in these farewell words (J. T. Leggett was J. W.'s uncle).

⁴⁶ Author's interview with James McCormick (July 6, 2005).

⁴⁷ Author's interview with Arthur O'Neil, Jr. (September 29, 2005); this interpretation of Leggett was confirmed in author's interview with T. Jerry Mitchell, Leggett's protégé and successor at the Mississippi Methodist Foundation (July 30, 2007).

little 28 did just that and the harvest will be great with turmoil and hate.”⁴⁸
One of the twenty-eight who had already left said in 1964 that

If I could have found any encouragement from a single leader in the Mississippi Conference, not excluding the Bishop or my District Superintendent, assuring me that the cause of justice and brotherhood was the concern of the Methodist Church and that this would be a united effort wherein their support could be felt, I would be there to this day.

Instead, what the twenty-eight saw in their Conference was leaders who not only refused to back them in their call for justice but also in a couple of cases failed to enforce Methodist polity and allowed congregations to “fire” their pastors.⁴⁹

The “Born of Conviction” story cannot be told simply as a case of massive resistance to desegregation resulting in “the closed society [battering] the outspoken young preachers upon the anvil of public opinion,”⁵⁰ thus fully explaining the departure of twenty signers from Mississippi. Rather, response to the statement, the departure of twenty signers (three of whom later returned to Mississippi), and the persistence of eight in the Conference all must be understood as resulting from an interrelated set of factors, most definitely including the Closed Society cultural climate, but also significantly involving disputes over the definition of true Methodism, connectional failures and successes, the peculiarities of the Methodist itinerant system, and the complex culture of the Mississippi Annual Conference, Southeastern Jurisdiction, in those years.

⁴⁸ The “grave crises” quote comes from the first sentence of the “Born of Conviction” statement; Anonymous to Wilton Carter (January 9, 1963), Wilton Carter Private Papers (emphasis in original; copy in possession of author); Carter suspected the letter, postmarked Hattiesburg, was from a ministerial colleague.

⁴⁹ Wilton Carter to George Berry (March 31, 1964), Wilton Carter Private Papers, copy in possession of author (this letter was written in response to the early 1964 Mississippi Conference survey letter sent to ministers who had left the Conference).

⁵⁰ James Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* New Enlarged Edition (New York: Harcourt, 1966), 58.