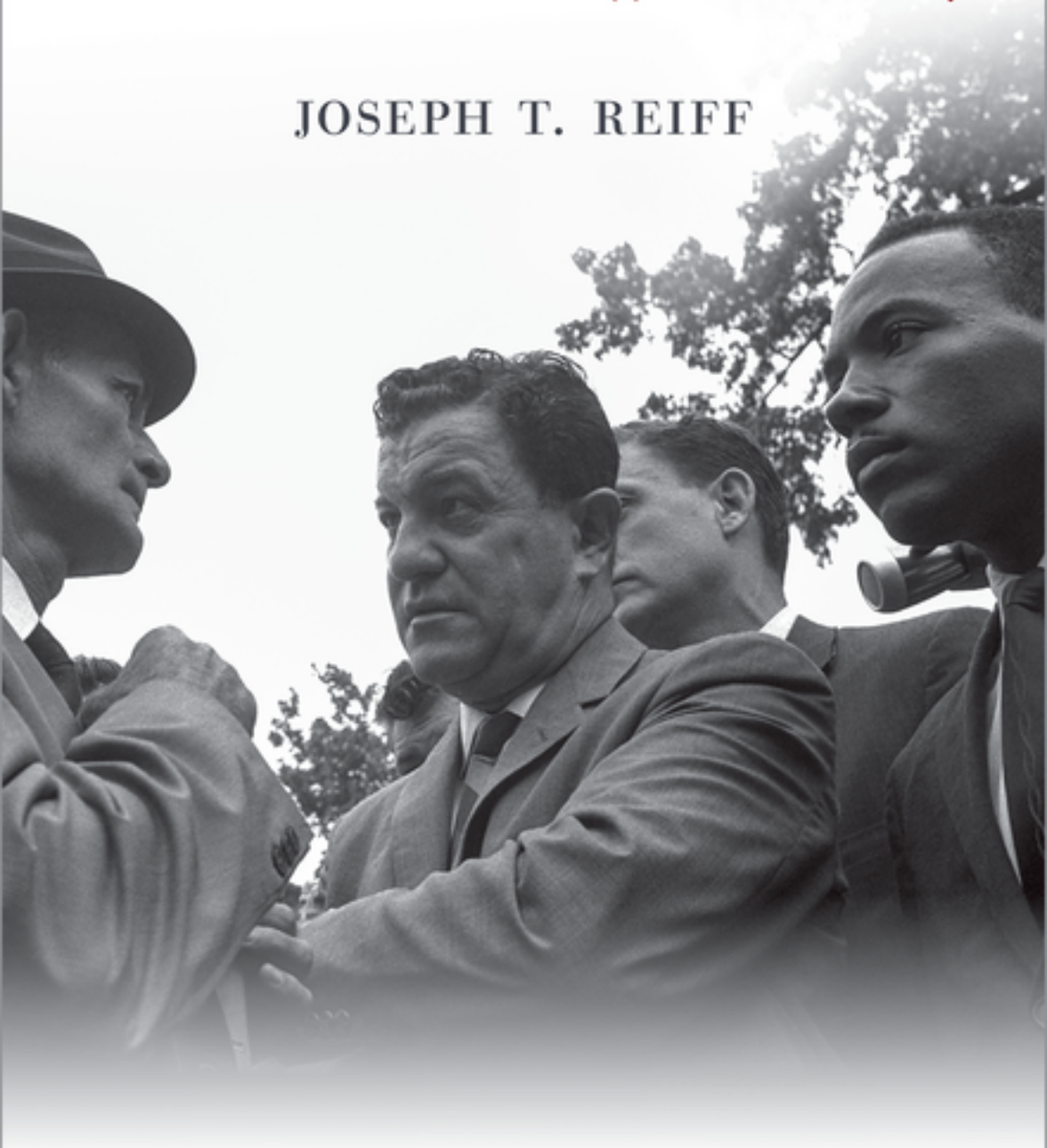


BORN OF CONVICTION

White Methodists and Mississippi's Closed Society

JOSEPH T. REIFF



Born of Conviction

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*White Methodists and
Mississippi's
Closed Society*



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*To my parents,
Lee H. Reiff and Geraldine Long Reiff,
whose words and example taught me to give
true respect to all persons,
in Mississippi and throughout the world;*

*and to my wife,
Betty Clark Reiff,
whose tenacious love and support have sustained me in our
partnership in marriage, parenting, ministry, and life in and
beyond Mississippi*

*Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor,
except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and
in their own house.”*

—MARK 6:4, NRSV

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Born of Conviction *Cast of Characters*

The twenty-eight signers in signature order, church served in 1962–3, and left or stayed?

- *Jerry Furr, associate pastor at Galloway Memorial, Jackson; left Mississippi in 1963
- *Maxie D. Dunnam, pastor at Trinity, Gulfport; left Mississippi in 1964
- *Jim L. Waits, pastor at Epworth, Biloxi; left Mississippi in 1965/1967 **M**
- *O. Gerald Trigg, pastor at Caswell Springs, Jackson County; left Mississippi in 1964 **M**
- James B. Nicholson, pastor at Byram; left Mississippi in 1963
- Buford A. Dickinson, pastor at Decatur; left Mississippi in 1964
- James S. Conner, pastor at Brandon; stayed **M**
- J. W. Holston, pastor at Carthage; left Mississippi in 1963 **M**
- James P. Rush, pastor at Philadelphia Circuit, Neshoba County; left Mississippi in 1963 **M**
- Edward W. McRae, pastor at Oakland Heights, Meridian; left Mississippi in 1963
- **Joseph C. Way, pastor at Soule's Chapel, Lauderdale County; left Mississippi in 1964 **M**
- ***Wallace E. Roberts, pastor at Vimville, Lauderdale County; left Mississippi in 1963 **M**
- Summer Walters, associate pastor at Jefferson Street, Natchez; left Mississippi in 1963 **M**
- Bill Lampton, pastor at Pisgah, Pike County; left Mississippi in 1963 **M**
- Marvin Moody, pastor at Oak Grove, Lamar County; left Mississippi in 1963/1964
- Keith Tonkel, pastor at Guinn Memorial, Gulfport; stayed **M**
- John Ed Thomas, associate pastor at First, Gulfport; stayed **M**

Inman Moore Jr., pastor at Leggett Memorial, Biloxi; left Mississippi in 1963 **M**

Denson Napier, pastor at Richton; stayed

Rod Entrekin, pastor at Wesson; stayed **M**

Harold Ryker, pastor at Beauvoir, Biloxi; stayed

N. A. Dickson, pastor at First, Columbia; stayed **M**

Ned Kellar, pastor at Sandersville; left Mississippi in 1963

Powell Hall, pastor at Scooba; left Mississippi in 1971

Elton Brown, pastor at Lovely Lane, Natchez; stayed **M**

****Bufkin Oliver, pastor at Ellisville; left Mississippi in 1963 **M**

Jack Troutman, pastor at Big Point, Jackson County; left Mississippi in 1964

Wilton Carter, pastor at Lake; left Mississippi in 1963

*Creators of the statement **M** = Millsaps College graduate

**Never transferred out of Conference; returned to Mississippi in 1987

***Went to seminary in 1963; transferred to North Mississippi Conference upon return to Mississippi in 1966

****Returned to North Mississippi Conference in 1967

Other important characters

Marvin A. Franklin, bishop of white Mississippi and North Mississippi Conferences, 1948–64

Edward J. Pendergrass Jr., bishop of white Mississippi and North Mississippi Conferences, 1964–72

J. Willard Leggett Jr., Jackson District Superintendent, 1959–65; conference political leader and opponent of Born of Conviction **M**

Sam E. Ashmore, Editor, *Mississippi Methodist Advocate*, 1955–66; public supporter of Born of Conviction **M**

J. P. Stafford, Mississippi Conference Lay Leader, 1947–64; public supporter of Born of Conviction

W. B. Selah, senior pastor at Galloway Memorial, Jackson, 1945–63; public supporter of Born of Conviction

Roy C. Clark, senior pastor at Capitol Street, Jackson, 1953–63; supporter of Born of Conviction **M**

Abbreviations

| | |
|-------|--|
| BOP | Bishop's Office Papers, J. B. Cain Archives of Mississippi Methodism, Millsaps College |
| CME | Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (formerly Colored Methodist Episcopal) |
| COFO | Council of Federated Organizations |
| CORE | Congress of Racial Equality |
| DH | Mississippi Coast <i>Daily Herald</i> |
| DMC | <i>Discipline of The Methodist Church</i> , 1940–64 |
| DUMC | <i>Discipline of The United Methodist Church</i> , 1968–present |
| GM | <i>General Minutes of The Methodist Church or The United Methodist Church</i> |
| JBCA | J. B. Cain Archives of Mississippi Methodism, Millsaps College |
| JCL | <i>Jackson Clarion-Ledger</i> |
| JDN | <i>Jackson Daily News</i> |
| JMC | <i>Journal of the Mississippi Conference</i> , SEJ, 1939–68 |
| JPS | Jackson (Mississippi) Public Schools |
| JSCAC | <i>Journal of the Southern California-Arizona Conference</i> |
| MAMML | Mississippi Association of Methodist Ministers and Laymen |
| MCA | Millsaps College Archives |
| MCHR | Mississippi Council on Human Relations |
| MCJ | <i>Mississippi Conference Journal</i> , SEJ, 1969–present |
| MDAH | Mississippi Department of Archives and History |
| MEC | Methodist Episcopal Church |
| MECS | Methodist Episcopal Church, South |
| MEJ | <i>McComb Enterprise-Journal</i> |
| MFDP | Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party |
| MMA | <i>Mississippi Methodist Advocate</i> |

| | |
|--------------|--|
| <i>MS</i> | <i>Meridian Star</i> |
| MSM | Methodist Student Movement |
| MSSC Records | Records of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission |
| MSUSCD | Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University |
| MUMM | Mississippi United Methodist Ministry |
| NAACP | National Association for the Advancement of Colored People |
| NCC | National Council of Churches |
| <i>NYT</i> | <i>New York Times</i> |
| <i>PMPC</i> | Pascagoula/Moss Point (Mississippi) <i>Chronicle</i> |
| PP | Private Papers |
| PTLA | Pitts Theology Library Archives, Emory University |
| SEJ | Southeastern Jurisdiction, The Methodist Church and UMC (all-white from 1939 to 1968) |
| SMU | Southern Methodist University |
| SNCC | Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee |
| SSN | <i>Southern School News</i> , a monthly publication of the Southern Education Reporting Service, 1954–65 |
| UMC | United Methodist Church |
| UMDASC | Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi |
| USMMLA | McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi |

Introduction

At the Church Steps

Confronted with the grave crises precipitated by racial discord within our state in recent months, and the genuine dilemma facing persons of Christian conscience, we are compelled to voice publicly our convictions. Indeed, as Christian ministers and as native Mississippians, sharing the anguish of all our people, we have a particular obligation to speak.

—“BORN OF CONVICTION” STATEMENT, MMA,
January 2, 1963

IN HIS APRIL 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” addressed to eight white clergy leaders, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. confessed major disappointments in the white moderate, whom he had come to see as a greater “stumbling block” to the black freedom struggle than the White Citizens’ Council or the Ku Klux Klan, and in “the white church and its leadership,” whom he had hoped “would be among our strongest allies” and “would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure.” White moderates and church leaders had earned the criticism, though King noted some exceptions. One he could have mentioned occurred three months earlier in Mississippi, when twenty-eight white Methodist ministers, frustrated with the silence of their own annual conference leaders, issued a public manifesto in support of race relations change. Signed by white moderate and liberal pastors, the “Born of

Conviction” statement illustrates the difficulties suffered, lessons learned, and rewards gained by mainstream Mississippians who dared to question the segregated, white supremacist status quo.¹

“Born of Conviction,” written in October 1962 and published in the *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* on January 2, 1963, responded to the turmoil surrounding the September 30, 1962, riot at Ole Miss when James Meredith finally arrived to enroll as the school’s first known African American student. The statement 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 when desegregation came, and affirmed the signers’s opposition to Communism. On January 3, every Mississippi daily paper reported on it. Though a few lay and clergy persons affirmed it publicly, the overwhelming majority expressed shock, outrage, and in some cases, bewilderment.²

Most of the signers experienced ostracism, persecution, threats, and some violence. Their conference leaders provided little support, and some of the Twenty-Eight, as they were quickly dubbed, received reprimands from church superiors. The few Mississippi Methodists who defended the statement after its publication also suffered repercussions. The signers also received messages of gratitude, mostly private. Though they appreciated the encouragement, they needed more public affirmation; just as Dr. King expressed frustration at the silence of white moderates, so also the public reticence of all but a few Born of Conviction supporters represented a moral failure and contributed to the exodus of many of the signers. Within eighteen months of the statement’s release, seventeen signers had left the Mississippi Conference. Two others departed shortly thereafter, and the twentieth left Mississippi in 1971. Eight of the signers remained in the Mississippi Conference for the rest of their careers, and three others eventually returned to the state—two in the mid-1960s.

In 1963, University of Mississippi historian James W. Silver labeled Mississippi the “Closed Society.” Its “all-pervading doctrine” of white supremacy demanded adherence to the “true faith” and the appearance of a “united front.” True commitment “[required] that nonconformists and dissenters from the code be silenced, or, in a crisis, driven from the community. Violence and the threat of violence . . . confirmed and enforced the image of unanimity.” With white Mississippi’s very identity threatened in the early 1960s by the civil rights movement, “no forthright challenge of

the society [was] tolerated for long and . . . repercussions [were] quick and sure.” Silver used the response to *Born of Conviction* as a prime example and reported that the Closed Society “battered the outspoken young preachers upon the anvil of public opinion.” The Closed Society seemed monolithic, and its view of the world captivated most white Mississippians, including many Methodists. *Born of Conviction* signers articulated the “genuine dilemma facing persons of Christian conscience” in early 1963, even though they knew that no dilemma existed for the majority of whites, who could only imagine segregation now, tomorrow, and forever. In response to Dr. King’s frustration at the general failure of the white church, its leaders, and the moderates within it to support the movement, the *Born of Conviction* story offers an explanation, though not a justification, for that failure.³

In the midst of the public commotion, private response told a more complicated tale: the statement struck a nerve with whites who did perceive a dilemma and struggled with the guilt they felt at the multiple injustices of the system, even though they could not articulate it well and felt powerless to act. The *Twenty-Eight* spoke to and for them “as Christian ministers and as native Mississippians, sharing the anguish of all our people.” In some congregations, the controversy pushed church members to talk about race relations on a deeper level. White Methodists could more easily dismiss the witness of civil rights activists, whom they saw as radicals and outsiders, than they could ignore what their preacher said about race.⁴

Historians have given much attention to the role of religion in the civil rights era on all sides, from the Beloved Community inclusivity of the movement to the segregationist concern for racial purity. Dr. King characterized the white church as mostly silent in response to the evils of the segregated system, and Samuel S. Hill’s 1966 classic, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, supported King’s criticism. Yet, in his 2004 work, *A Stone of Hope*, David Chappell argues the religious perspective of civil rights leaders triumphed because “white churches were unwilling to make sacrifices to preserve segregation” and splintered into “hopeless disarray and confusion over racial matters.” In his view, the white church’s lack of support for the movement matters less than its failure to back the movement’s opponents and rally to the segregationist cause.⁵

Not surprisingly, this claim has evoked dissent. Jane Dailey finds evidence of a “titanic struggle waged by participants on both sides of the conflict to harness the immense power of the divine to their cause.” Peter Slade

demonstrates how members of Jackson, Mississippi's First Presbyterian Church employed "a consistent and effective ecclesial strategy for maintaining the Southern white hegemony running unbroken from the debate on slavery through to school desegregation." Carolyn Dupont asserts that in Mississippi, not only did white Protestants "fail to fight *for* black equality, they often labored mightily *against* it."⁶

Each of these characterizations of mainstream white religious response to the civil rights movement—that whites sat on the sidelines, or significantly failed to support segregation, or indeed actively resisted race relations change—captures a part of the whole truth, and the *Born of Conviction* story provides ample evidence for all three and adds an example of white mainstream support for the civil rights movement represented by the statement. The Twenty-Eight broke the deafening silence of white Mississippi Conference Methodists in the months following the Ole Miss crisis and offered a theological alternative to white supremacy. Their manifesto fell far short of the prophetic pronouncements of Dr. King, but their white Mississippi Methodist clergy colleague and Jackson Movement leader, Ed King, understood and appreciated the significance of their effort. He called it "the strongest, most carefully thought out statement by any group of white Mississippians up to that time about the racial problems of the state."⁷

Responses to *Born of Conviction* ranged all the way from scattered violence, numerous threats (mostly anonymous), and the doctrinaire pronouncements of the segregationist group Mississippi Association of Methodist Ministers and Laymen (MAMML) to a few public and many more private expressions of support. On the local level, church members who rejected their offending pastors exemplify white Christians struggling mightily to maintain segregation, but some segregationist members, who considered new perspectives as the result of their pastor's witness or disagreed but still supported their pastor, illustrate Chappell's claim that whites failed to rally for the cause.

This array of viewpoints illustrates the complex role of religious faith and practice in the civil rights era, and thus this book adds to recent literature attending to nonmovement perspectives in the civil rights years in the Deep South. As Dailey states, religion was important for all parties involved in the struggle. No recent work illustrates that better than Charles Marsh's *God's Long Summer*, which describes and interprets the faith of Mississippi movement leaders Fannie Lou Hamer, Cleveland Sellers, and Ed King, as well as two segregationists: Jackson First Baptist Church

pastor Douglas Hudgins and Ku Klux Klan leader Sam Bowers. Marsh omits a profile of the faith of white folks like the Born of Conviction signers and the significant minority of white Mississippi Methodists who supported them, and the present volume offers a complex portrait of the faith of many such persons—primarily the Twenty-Eight, but also others—all of whom sought to live out their Christian convictions in a difficult time. In some ways they were heroes, but they were also flawed human beings who finally refused to go along with the white Mississippi status quo or wanted to protest but struggled with their fears and remained silent.⁸

Focus on the religious faith of white Mississippi Methodists necessitates attention to Christian theological concerns. Aside from the practical meaning of the command to love one's neighbor, the central issue was ecclesiological—the purpose of the church and its relationship to the world. Because the Twenty-Eight objected to the white Mississippi Conference's apparent complicity with the Closed Society ethic, they offered an alternative witness. Among the many critical responses to their statement came the claim that they had abandoned the central purpose of Methodism: winning souls to Christ. White Southern Protestants, Sam Hill explains, insisted "Christian congregations have neither example nor instruction impelling them to forsake their soul-winning duties in the interest . . . of Christianizing the social order. Absorption in efforts of this kind only serves to dilute the authentic Christian responsibility." Southern Presbyterians elevated this dualism between temporal and spiritual matters to a doctrine, the "spirituality of the church," and Joel Alvis, Peter Slade, and Carolyn Dupont have each shown how important it became as support for the segregated white supremacist system in Mississippi. Born of Conviction rejected this dualism and asserted that if the church said nothing in response to the Ole Miss riot and the larger climate of massive resistance, then it participated fully in the evils of the segregated system. Signer Elton Brown insisted to his Natchez parishioners in 1963 that the church could not avoid involvement in social and political issues, because "everything that touches human society at any point has a religious significance."⁹

Historian Wayne Flynt claims that in the white church in those years, "lay people charted the course on race relations." The Born of Conviction controversy explores the classic problem of the locus of authority for interpreting Christian tradition in light of life in the world. The Twenty-Eight exercised their mandate as clergy to apply the "expressed witness of our Church" in an explosive social crisis. A dramatic contest resulted, with many lay and some fellow clergy voices expressing strident opposition and

invoking a different practical theological understanding colored by their failure to distinguish the Christian faith from undying maintenance of the “Southern way of life” and the orthodoxy of the Closed Society.¹⁰

The conflict also aggravated deep denominational tensions between white Southern Methodism and the more liberal national church, as well as a generational struggle between a traditional paternalistic understanding of clergy leadership in an annual conference and the new perspectives on social justice garnered from seminary education by the mostly younger ministers who signed *Born of Conviction*. This thoroughly Methodist story examines how representatives of a white religious institution, the Mississippi Conference of The Methodist Church, dealt with a cataclysmic social, ecclesial, and fundamentally human crisis in the early 1960s and struggled to make sense of their vocation to witness to the Gospel of Christ in that historical moment.¹¹

Though several other clergy groups issued public statements on race relations in the South during those years, most were ecumenical and included more signatures. Some individual Southern ministers took a stand on the race issue in their churches in the 1950s or 1960s and often suffered as a result, but this is the story of twenty-eight ministers of one denomination and one judicatory unit within that church who took a stand together in Mississippi, generally considered the most recalcitrant Southern state, during the time when its resistance peaked. Responses to individual signers and the effects that signing had on their subsequent careers varied and illustrated the range of white Methodist engagement with the social upheaval caused by the Mississippi civil rights movement in 1962 and beyond.¹²

The Twenty-Eight suffered consequences for their stand, and more than two-thirds of them either felt forced to leave Mississippi or chose to do so. The history of white Southern dissent in the century or so after the Civil War contains many examples of persons who challenged the racial status quo, experienced varying levels of persecution, and left their homes, most often to reside outside the South. The *Born of Conviction* story not only provides a case study on the white Methodist Church’s response to the civil rights movement in Mississippi, but it also explores a larger institutional and regional drama. From the mid-1950s through the early 1970s, scores of pastors transferred out of the Mississippi Conference, including nineteen of the Twenty-Eight. The race issue played a major role in those departures, but it must also be understood in light of the conference’s internal politics.

Most interpreters have cited *Born of Conviction* as a prime example of the “they spoke out and were forced out of Mississippi” narrative to show the state’s characteristic rejection of the “nonconformists and dissenters” who earned James Silver’s sympathy. Viewed through this lens alone, it is a hero story focused exclusively on the statement and the majority of signers who departed. As the record shows, however, many who left chose to leave; only a few were truly forced. In addition, as the widow of a signer who left declares, the “real heroes [are] the ones who stayed,” and this claim invites emphasis on a different part of the plot.¹³

This story involves more than thirty major characters, several minor characters, and thirty-nine white Methodist congregations served by the signers in twenty-three South Mississippi communities, along with other churches that responded publicly or privately to the statement. Because interviews with signers and many others done forty or more years after these events took place provide a major (though by no means the only) source for this story, the book occasionally makes use of remembered dialogue. Though well aware of the vagaries of human memory, I have chosen to use such dialogue because the ways participants remember these events play an important role in interpretation of the story.

The narrative introduces the signers across nine chapters and reveals both the longer and the more immediate historical contexts for the statement, the influences on those who signed, and their reasons for signing. The January 1963 controversy merits telling both as a media event on a statewide and national scale and as a series of local church and community events across South Mississippi where the Twenty-Eight served as pastors. The third section of the book critiques the “spoke out, forced out” narrative in detail by examining what became of the signers and how they continued their social witness in subsequent ministry. The final section evaluates the importance of the *Born of Conviction* statement and considers the experiential and interpretive divide between the signers who left the state and those who stayed, followed by a discussion of the legacy of *Born of Conviction* in the lives of signers, their descendants, and the current generation of Mississippi Conference ministers; in a contemporary social controversy in the United Methodist Church; and in Mississippi race relations, including the ministry of United Methodism in the state.

Martin Luther King criticized the eight white clergymen whom he addressed in the Birmingham letter because they urged blacks to adopt a gradualist strategy: be patient, do not support demonstrations in the streets, and “unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham.”

His classic response argued for civil disobedience and “constructive, non-violent tension which is necessary for growth.” The situation in early 1960s Mississippi called for something much more radical than gradualism; as King reminded his readers, “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” The courageous work of hundreds of “local people” in the civil rights movement in the state, joined by outsiders like Bob Moses and the 1964 Freedom Summer workers, proved indispensable to the black freedom struggle. The *Born of Conviction* statement played a crucial role in the white community in early 1963 because it created a significant crack in the Closed Society’s united front, and those who signed truly did the right thing.¹⁴

However, statements alone do not suffice; they must be lived out in continued action in subsequent years. Extensive race relations change accomplished through direct action, legislation, and court decisions must be implemented over time in local communities. Gradualism had an appropriate place as a secondary strategy, after adequate recognition of the injustices of the system and the unavoidable push toward revolutionary change. The work of the eight *Born of Conviction* signers who stayed, along with many other leaders, black and white, played a profound role in transforming churches and communities toward a new Mississippi. Those efforts did not achieve complete success but deserve recognition nonetheless.

Dr. King also spoke for the civil rights movement when he considered white churches in the Deep South: “What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification?” He wanted the white church to support the black freedom struggle or at least consent to participate in meaningful dialogue about it. Yet the church usually refused to do either.¹⁵

On Sunday morning, October 20, 1963, I sat with my mother and brother in our 1954 Chevrolet, parked at the curb on Jackson, Mississippi’s West Capitol Street, and watched as some visitors approached the entrance of our church, Capitol Street Methodist. Male ushers and a Jackson policeman at the church steps blocked the group of three women—two black and one white—and two white Methodist clergymen from Chicago, whose presence represented the claim that ongoing segregation was an issue involving the whole church and could not be considered simply a local Mississippi matter. After some conversation we could not

hear, the policeman arrested the visitors, who had sought to engage the church guards in dialogue toward a new understanding of Christian race relations.¹⁶

Those church visitors stood in the wide gap between mainstream whites and the civil rights movement and invited the church members guarding the steps to join them, but the guards refused. The episode, one of many at the steps of this and other Jackson congregations between 1963 and 1966, represents the dominant civil rights era historical narrative of the barriers to change zealously guarded by white Mississippi Christians. The signers of the 1963 Born of Conviction statement, frustrated at the failure of conference leaders to take the first steps, seized the moment in early 1963 and sought to bridge that gap. They believed that “as Christian ministers and as native Mississippians,” they had “a particular obligation to speak,” to join the conversation and address the intersection of the black freedom struggle with the faith of white Methodist Christians in Mississippi. Their effort created numerous “theaters of complex theological drama,” that shed light on the past, present, and future struggle toward racial reconciliation and justice in church and society. This book tells their story and the story of the white Methodist church in Mississippi, a diverse institution that both resisted race relations change and fostered the ministers who took a bold step to end that resistance.¹⁷

Born of Conviction

PART I

Prelude to a Crisis

I

Methodism and Mississippi

*[The] Annual Conference from the first has been
the minister's church.*

—NOLAN B. HARMON, *The Organization of The Methodist
Church*, 1953

*Also, an annual conference is a dramatic public focus-
ing of the highest thought and deepest conscience
of Methodism.*

—ROY C. DELAMOTTE, 1955

BORN OF CONVICTION is a Mississippi story and a Methodist story, and the narratives intertwine. Mississippi, which National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) national leader Roy Wilkins called “absolutely at the bottom of the list” because of its “inhumanity, murder, brutality, and racial hatred,” powerfully influenced white Mississippi Conference Methodism. In that world, several perennial American Methodist issues colored the Christian witness of Mississippi Conference clergy and laity: regionalism, tradition in tension with new ideas, emphasis on individual sin at the expense of a larger social/systemic awareness, and the white Methodist struggle to understand and confront racism. As the 1950s faded into the 1960s, the conference’s response to the race issue became increasingly naïve and irrelevant.¹

American Methodism in the South: Race and Regionalism

Founded in eighteenth-century England, John Wesley’s Methodist Movement sought to “spread scriptural holiness over the land,” and Wesley emphasized both personal and social holiness in the Christian life. The latter entailed a communal focus in which individuals supported and held

each other accountable in class meetings for their growth in faith and Christian witness in the world. Methodists established societies in the American colonies in the late 1760s, and the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) came to life officially in 1784.²

From the beginning, American Methodists struggled with the issue of race and the place of blacks in the church. Wesley's opposition to slavery led to initial prohibitions against Methodist slave ownership in the new nation, but the principle proved difficult to enforce in practice, especially because Methodism took hold so successfully in the southern states. The Methodist combination of "heart religion" and an inclusive gospel attracted white and black alike. Yet even as Methodists reached out to blacks, both slave and free, the growing church exhibited a thoroughgoing ambivalence regarding adherence to antislavery beliefs and full inclusion in worship. A double standard developed that accommodated to the culture of the slave states while it upheld the slavery prohibition in the North. The tensions—between antislavery and racism, between inclusion and exclusion—resulted in gradual changes in Methodist race relations, including

the softening of Methodist critiques of slavery, the exclusion of African Americans from leadership roles in the church, the close monitoring (where possible) of black religious gatherings, the denominational prescriptions of more acceptable forms of religious expression, and the gradual separation of blacks and whites, first within interracial churches and then into separate congregations.³

As the nation pushed at the limits of the frontier, so did American Methodism. In 1799 Tobias Gibson founded a MEC congregation at Washington, near Natchez in the Mississippi Territory, and he soon established a circuit extending north to Vicksburg. The Methodist presence grew along with the territory's settlement; the Mississippi Annual Conference held its first session in 1813, four years before Mississippi statehood.⁴

Methodists did not escape the growing conflicts over slavery before the Civil War, and their inevitable division resulted from the clash between the abolitionist fervor in the North and the hardening insistence on honoring regional cultural norms and law in the South. When Bishop James Andrew, residing in Georgia, became a slaveholder due to his wife's inheriting slaves, northern delegates to the 1844 General Conference

insisted he must free his slaves in order to continue in the episcopal office. Southerners resisted, pointing to Georgia law that prohibited manumission of slaves; they also claimed the General Conference had no authority to make such a demand. By the end of the debate they had split into northern (MEC) and southern (Methodist Episcopal Church, South—MECS) bodies.⁵

After the Civil War, the division in American Methodism remained. The MEC created a segregated structure with separate African American annual conferences, and it also extended its mission work into former Confederate territory to invite freed slaves to become Methodist. In Mississippi, this resulted in the creation of a mission conference in 1865 that became the black MEC Mississippi Conference in 1869. The MECS had grown sufficiently in the state to warrant a new white North Mississippi Annual Conference in 1870, while the same division occurred in the black MEC conference in 1891 with the first session of the Upper Mississippi Annual Conference. Thus at the turn of the twentieth century, there were four Methodist Episcopal judicatory bodies in the state—two white MECS and two black MEC annual conferences. By that time the MEC and the MECS had established a fraternal relationship and begun conversations about unification into one Methodist denomination. These discussions included the smaller Methodist Protestant Church, which had split from the MEC in 1830. The talks stretched across decades before they achieved the goal.⁶

The more serious conflicts plaguing ecclesial bodies burrow into church institutional frameworks for generations, and the two main issues at stake in the 1844 split—race relations and the tension between connectional allegiance to the General (national) Church and regional cultural concerns—remained central in the negotiations toward reunion. In 1918 the MECS insisted the proposed new church should be white, with MEC blacks completely separated into an independent body joined with the three existing African American Methodist churches—African Methodist Episcopal (AME), AME Zion, and Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME). The Southern church eventually accepted a plan dividing the reunited church into five geographical jurisdictions plus the Central Jurisdiction for the black annual conferences. This represented a concession from the Southern church: they agreed to join a denomination with African American members. However, the new jurisdictional structure allowed Southern whites to elect their own bishops and remain segregated from blacks in the new

Methodist Church except at the General Church level, where clergy and lay delegates represented the Central Jurisdiction annual conferences at General Conference and on General boards and agencies.⁷

By 1938 the Plan of Union had gained approval by all bodies involved, including the Methodist Protestants, but a minority of MEC members (black and white) opposed it because of the segregated structure, and a smaller minority of MECS members voted against it because of their historic mistrust of the MEC and a desire to remain in a white-only church. After the 1939 Uniting Conference, the first General Conference of the new Methodist Church met in 1940. Membership in the denomination exceeded 7.7 million, including more than 350,000 African American members. Though they were less than 5 percent of the total, the Methodist Church numbered more black members than all other mainline white Protestant denominations combined.⁸

Without the jurisdictional structure, the MECS would not have approved the Plan of Union. "Segregation was the price of unification," many claimed. The resulting formalized regionalism proved an additional price, and the establishment of the Central Jurisdiction made Methodist segregation more institutionally formal. The approval of the Plan of Union represented a victory for institutional concerns (the desire for unification) over justice concerns (arguments against the segregated structure). Though the majority of black members (clergy and lay) had opposed the plan, they remained a part of the new church because they believed the future of American race relations would not be served well by an exclusively white denomination. In addition, the Central Jurisdiction gave them opportunities for self-determination (e.g., electing their own bishops) and for a demonstration of their abilities as full participants in the life of the unified church. Ultimately, in Central Jurisdiction leader James S. Thomas's words, they "maintained a stubborn belief that the racial diversity of the church was important and that the Central Jurisdiction, though a high price for the union of the church, would not live forever."⁹

However, most Southern white Methodists understood the Plan of Union to imply an unwritten agreement that there would be no changes for a time, and conservatives viewed the Central Jurisdiction as permanent. The arrangement preserved segregation in the church and in the minds of members of the white Mississippi Conference and North Mississippi Conference; its ministers and churches exhibited scant awareness of and had little if any contact with their Central Jurisdiction Mississippi Conference and Upper Mississippi Conference counterparts (Figure 1.1).¹⁰



FIGURE 1.1 Map of Mississippi, showing dividing line between the white North Mississippi and Mississippi Annual Conferences and between the Central Jurisdiction (black) Upper Mississippi and Mississippi Annual Conferences, 1962–3. Map by Edward H. Davis.

The Mississippi Annual Conference, Southeastern Jurisdiction

Twenty years before the creation of the Born of Conviction statement, the Mississippi Annual Conference of the Southeastern Jurisdiction of the new Methodist Church met in November 1942 at Crawford Street

Church in Vicksburg. Two weeks earlier in the same town, the *other* Mississippi Conference held its 1942 meeting. The ministers and laypersons attending the prior meeting came from churches in the same South Mississippi communities as the white conference's churches, but as African Americans they belonged to a separate annual conference in the Central Jurisdiction.¹¹

The 1940 Methodist *Discipline* (the church's law book) defines the annual conference as "the basic body in the church." It has functioned in American Methodism as a mediating structure between the General Church and local churches and as the central link of the Methodist "connection," the ties binding all Methodists together across the entire organizational structure and the responsibilities they share from the local level to national and global levels. Annual conferences are divided into geographic districts, each led by a district superintendent chosen by the bishop; the district superintendents comprise the bishop's cabinet. The white Mississippi Conference, covering the southern half of the state, had six districts then: Meridian, Jackson, and Vicksburg, with Hattiesburg and Brookhaven to the south and Seashore on the Gulf Coast.¹²

The bishop and cabinet appoint a pastor to serve each local church. Many smaller Mississippi Conference churches share a pastor with one or more neighboring congregations, forming a pastoral charge. Churches do not hire or fire pastors; appointments are reviewed annually by the bishop and the cabinet in consultation with churches and pastors and formalized at the annual conference session. Ministers serve the same church or charge for a period of years until they move to another appointment or depart by another route (retirement, leave of absence, transfer to another annual conference, etc.). Appointments can change mid-year in unusual circumstances.¹³

In early American Methodism, annual conference meetings consisted mainly of ministers; by the 1930s, the official membership of annual conference sessions had become half clergy and half laity. Ministers saw the conference first as a body of Methodist clergy—a sacred community of men called to preach and committed to church service. This understanding of "conference" developed from John Wesley's conferences: gatherings of preachers to confer about theological, missional, organizational, and practical issues and to set the pastoral appointments for the coming year.¹⁴

Thus an integral part of any annual conference is the "traveling preachers" who enter the ministry by fulfilling qualifications specified by the

Discipline. In the 1940s, a minister seeking ordination graduated from college and either earned a seminary degree or pursued the denomination's four-year Course of Study while serving as an approved supply pastor. Through successful completion of either route, ministers eventually qualified for elder's orders and full membership in the conference, subject to a vote by ministerial members. An appointment is guaranteed to full members, who promise to "go where [they] are sent."¹⁵

Annual conferences develop their own culture, especially among the clergy members, because as Mississippi native Nolan Harmon, a MECS and Methodist preacher eventually elected a bishop, wrote, the conference is the "minister's church," a fellowship of deep significance that "becomes increasingly dear to him with the passage of time, and as the different conferences develop their own special ways of thought, and those inconsequential but characteristic ways of doing things, which speak of a corporate individuality, the members themselves seem to partake of the same characteristics which enwrap all." American Methodist historian Russell Richey characterizes annual conferences as centrally meaningful, not only for their political organization but also for the way they structure time and space for American Methodists. Like any community with deep emotional bonds, this sense of kinship in Methodist annual conferences has fostered a perennial mixture of feelings, ranging from shared celebration and genuine love to bitter conflict.¹⁶

In the 1940s white Mississippi Conference, the traditions of the MECS still remained strong among clergy, including training for the ministry through the Course of Study instead of attending a seminary and honoring one's "father in the ministry," the pastor most responsible for one's decision to become a preacher or the clergy leader to whom one looked first for guidance and example in the conference. This traditional conservative worldview also assumed segregation in the church structure as a given and valued the Southern white regional perspective to the point of provincialism.¹⁷

John Willard Leggett Jr. best represented that ongoing conservative leadership tradition. Born in the Copiah County community of Allen in 1907, he graduated from Copiah-Lincoln Junior College and Millsaps College and then joined the Mississippi Conference on trial in 1930. He received additional training through the MECS's Course of Study program and began serving as a pastor in 1931. He claimed Tom Prewitt, a minister eight years his senior, and his uncle, J. T. Leggett, the recognized conference leader in the 1920s, as his fathers in the ministry. Willard Leggett

married Louise Finch in 1933. By 1942, he was pastor at First Methodist in Laurel.¹⁸

A moderate perspective also developed in the conference, which honored the MECS's past but valued seminary education and expressed less suspicion of non-Southern ideas. Moderates also accepted and assumed the segregated denominational structure but did not necessarily see it as permanent. Brunner M. Hunt, pastor at Main Street Church in Hattiesburg in the mid-1940s, and William Bryan Selah, pastor at Galloway Memorial Church in Jackson beginning in 1945, exemplified this view. Hunt was born in 1900 in Georgia and moved to Mississippi at age twelve, while Selah, born in 1896, grew up in Missouri. Hunt graduated from Emory University's Candler School of Theology and Selah from Yale Divinity School.¹⁹

Four Future Born of Conviction Signers

Four of the eventual signers of Born of Conviction had initiated the process toward ministerial membership in the conference by the fall of 1942. Like Leggett, all of them graduated from Millsaps College, but unlike their senior colleague, they earned seminary degrees. Seminary education for Mississippi Conference ministers had not yet become the norm, but the percentage of seminary-trained pastors had begun to grow and increased steadily after World War II. All four of these men gravitated to the conference's moderate faction.

Howard Bufkin Oliver was born in 1917 near the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The seventh child of his family, his mother steered him toward a call to the ordained ministry. He graduated from Jones County Junior College in Ellisville and went to Millsaps from 1940 to 1942, where he met and married Elizabeth Robinson. Bufkin Oliver served his first pastorate at Sharon in Madison County as a student, and he joined the Mississippi Conference on trial in 1942. In 1943 he enrolled in seminary at Drew University and served a church in Lebanon, New Jersey. When he returned to Mississippi in 1946, the conference appointed him to Scooba.²⁰

Born in New Orleans in 1918, James Sydney Conner grew up in Hattiesburg and graduated from high school at sixteen. An accomplished pianist, he performed a rare sophomore recital at Millsaps College and earned a bachelor of arts in history at twenty. He worked in a Hattiesburg bank and decided in 1940 to enter the ministry. At Emory's Candler School

of Theology, Conner developed an interest in philosophical theology, the field of L. E. Loemker, a professor for whom he worked as student assistant. In June 1943 he returned to Mississippi, served briefly at Tylertown, and was admitted on trial and sent to Scooba at the November 1943 annual conference.²¹

James William Holston, born in the small Stone County community of Bond in Southeast Mississippi in 1923, preached his first sermon at seventeen and became a student pastor at Mentor in 1942 while a junior at Millsaps. His mother had wanted to be a missionary, but her father forbade it; two of her sons became Methodist ministers. During Holston's senior year he served as pastor at D'Lo and then went to Candler. He married Jacksonian Bennie Hunnicutt in 1945, and they returned from Atlanta in 1946 for him to serve at Clinton, just west of Jackson.²²

Nathan Andrew Dickson, born in Hattiesburg in 1918, graduated from Jones County Junior College and went to Mississippi State to study entomology; he soon felt called to the ministry and transferred to Millsaps. There he met Mary Myers, and they married in 1941. By 1942, N. A. Dickson had been approved as a local preacher, and in March 1943 he was appointed student pastor at the Barlow Charge in Copiah County. Admitted on trial in 1944, he attended Candler from 1945 to 1948 and returned to Mississippi for an appointment at Pachuta.²³

The Conference Leader

One MECS tradition that continued in the conference in the 1940s and beyond related to leadership and a sense of conference identity. Every four years, annual conference clergy and laity each elect delegates to the denomination's quadrennial General and Jurisdictional Conferences—the former is the worldwide legislative meeting and the only body that can speak officially for the denomination; the latter serves primarily to elect bishops. The minister elected first to General Conference is considered the conference leader, the one whom the majority of ministers see as their best representative. Chosen seventh of eight in 1943 by his clergy colleagues as a 1944 Jurisdictional Conference delegate, Willard Leggett (Figure 1.2) joined a delegation led on the laity side by Mississippi Governor Thomas Bailey. At the 1947 annual conference, Leggett, by then pastor of Jackson's Capitol Street Church, was elected on the first ballot to lead the 1948



FIGURE 1.2 J. Willard Leggett Jr. in 1971. Courtesy of the Mississippi United Methodist Foundation, Inc.

General Conference delegation. This began Leggett's leadership and even dominance of the conference, which lasted for decades.²⁴

At the 1948 Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference, Mississippi received a new bishop. Marvin Augustus Franklin (Figure 1.3) was born in the northeast Georgia hills in 1894, licensed to preach at age sixteen, and joined the North Georgia Annual Conference in 1913. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Georgia in 1915; he did not attend seminary. By the time of his election to bishop in 1948, he had served as pastor of prestigious churches in Atlanta, Jacksonville, and Birmingham. Many in the Mississippi Conference came to believe that Willard Leggett unduly influenced Bishop Franklin, episcopal leader of the conference from 1948 to 1964. Southeastern Jurisdiction episcopal elections are fierce political battles with behind-the-scenes vote trading, and 1948 was no exception. A story made the rounds that Leggett supported the unsuccessful candidacy of John Branscomb of Florida. At a dinner of Mississippi delegates for the newly elected and Mississippi-assigned Bishop Franklin, Leggett



FIGURE 1.3 Bishop Marvin A. Franklin. Courtesy of J. B. Cain Archives of Mississippi Methodism, Millsaps College.

reportedly welcomed Franklin to Mississippi and claimed he had worked hard to get the new bishop elected. Some cited this supposed sense of obligation Franklin felt to Leggett as evidence for Leggett's influence over him. True or not, the story became part of the lore surrounding Leggett's power in those years.²⁵

In the MECS, nonresident bishops had presided over several annual conferences and left many of the details of running each conference to one or more trusted presiding elders (the previous name for district superintendents). In the post-1939 church, bishops lived within their episcopal territory; Franklin resided in Jackson and led two and eventually three white annual conferences that together formed his area: Mississippi, North Mississippi, and Memphis. In such an arrangement, bishops still depended on their district superintendents in each conference, due to the virtual impossibility to know every pastor and congregation well. For eleven of Franklin's years in Mississippi, Leggett served on the cabinet and made it his mission to know pastors and churches all over the conference.

Roy Clark, pastor of Capitol Street Church from 1953 to 1963 (and later elected a bishop), describes Franklin as more passive in the appointment process than other bishops of that era. Clark, a leader in the conference's moderate faction, remembers criticizing Leggett in a conversation with the bishop, and Franklin defended Leggett by saying that in cabinet appointment-making sessions, when the group had difficulty deciding how to match pastors with congregations, Leggett usually proposed the best solutions. Leggett had mastered the complex puzzle of Methodist appointment making.²⁶

An annual conference is an arena of achievement for ministers, and most of them measure their success in terms of the churches they have served and how well they have done there. In the usual pattern, ministers serve a few years in an appointment and then move to a place with a higher salary. Ministers with more experience, ability, success, and the right political connections usually ascend to the top churches in the conference. This "appointment ladder" ideally encourages better pastoral leadership because ministers who wish to succeed in the system will work harder and perhaps become better pastors. It also introduces a strong element of competition, and some ministers learn to work the system to their advantage. Thus itinerant ministers who have promised to go where sent and share communal bonds with their colleagues sometimes view those whose climb up the ladder is faster than their own with envy and even bitterness.

In this system, the persons who make pastoral appointments exercise a great deal of power. During the 1950s and 1960s, Willard Leggett was the power broker of the Mississippi Conference, the de facto "Bishop of Mississippi." In any annual conference there is influence to be wielded in the making of pastoral appointments and many other aspects of conference business. In response to a request to describe the culture of the conference in those years, virtually all of the Twenty-Eight and other Mississippi Conference ministers from that era interviewed for this study promptly mentioned conference politics and the power of Leggett and his group. One minister summed it up: "The conference was small enough so that it could easily enough be dominated by a strong personality, and that's exactly what happened."²⁷

This created a conflict in the conference between the more conservative traditionalists and the moderates. General Conference elections in the Mississippi Conference became battlegrounds with high stakes. In 1951, Leggett was again elected first by clergy, with moderate Brunner

Hunt second and Leggett ally Tom Prewitt third. Moderate W. B. Selah won a spot on the Jurisdictional Conference delegation, joined by another moderate and two ministers identified with Leggett.²⁸

In 1955, a group of moderates determined to unseat the nascent Leggett power bloc organized and recruited votes for their alternate slate with talk of a new day in the conference and a larger vision than Leggett represented. They wrested the top two clergy delegate slots from Leggett hands, with Hunt, then pastor of Central Church in Meridian, elected on the first ballot and Selah, still at Jackson Galloway, on the second. Leggett was chosen on the third ballot, and the selection of Prewitt completed the delegation. This setback may have surprised Leggett, but his troops organized better for the 1959 election, when Leggett returned to the top spot, and the other three clergy General Conference delegate slots went to persons clearly associated with him. At least half of the Jurisdictional Conference delegates elected that year were also Leggett men.²⁹

During annual conference meetings when elections were held, the Leggett forces exercised extreme discipline, with a slate of candidates and a cadre of ministerial sergeants who made sure their troops stayed on or near the conference floor, always ready to vote as soon as the previous ballot was reported. With the exception of the 1955 election, no opposition attempt could match the Leggett group's structure and commitment. In 1959, after the moderate group met in Jackson at the King Edward Hotel, Leggett informants reported by phone to their leader with a list of attendees.³⁰

Leggett's remarkable organization can be documented through oral histories, election results, and my own experience in later years, but his opponents also claimed that the conference leader and his group manipulated people. J. W. Leggett mastered not only Methodist appointment making but also the skills of power politics. Even perennial opponents recognized him as a leader of great ability, and one said that if Leggett had been a lawyer, he could have been governor of Mississippi. Art O'Neil Jr., a new minister in the conference in the late 1950s, considered Leggett his friend in those years and remembered how Leggett endeared himself to many conference preachers through assistance in their financial difficulties and with personal visits and genuine expressions of care, especially in times of trouble.³¹

This generous, paternalistic style of leadership and relationship fostered intense loyalty and obligation to Leggett among many conference ministers. Sometimes Leggett or his lieutenants tried to gain new

supporters with claims of responsibility for a good pastoral appointment to supposed beneficiaries. The usual pattern involved Leggett devotees cultivating younger ministers and promising them career success and other benefits in exchange for support of the Leggett faction. This was part of the Methodist tradition of close relations between older and younger ministers, and the paternalism of Leggett and his group was not unusual. However, Leggett opponent Roy Clark summed up his criticism in a 1965 interview: "When you move into a highly charged political situation and a man deliberately sees this as the means whereby he will ingratiate people, . . . where it becomes a technique, then . . . it becomes more . . . 'corrupt' than it is normally, in the sense that this [takes advantage of] a natural selfishness, a natural desire to have myself protected and cared for."³²

Some ministers claimed in those years, either through personal experience or knowledge of the fate of other pastors, that "If you didn't go along, you didn't get along." In other words, failure to support Leggett could result in punitive consequences—poor pastoral appointments, efforts to discredit opponents, and occasional attempts to push ministers out of the conference. Such pressure came in a variety of ways, including conversations with Leggett or persuasive visits by Leggett supporters to ministers who needed to be brought in line. The report to Leggett on the 1959 opposition meeting illustrates the usual political desire to know the plans of one's opponents, but the spying activity intimidated opposition ministers with fear of appointment punishments and other reprisals because they dared to challenge the Leggett group's dominance. This atmosphere led Art O'Neil to transfer out of the conference in 1960 at twenty-seven years of age. Though Leggett, O'Neil's district superintendent at the time, never asked him for any favors, the young minister saw men coming out of annual conference sessions in tears because of perceived punishments from the Leggett forces. O'Neil's nonpolitical father, a minister in the conference, had friends in both political groups; the younger O'Neil felt pressured from both directions to join a side. When an opportunity came to transfer to the North Georgia Conference, O'Neil took it, partly because of Mississippi Conference politics.³³

O'Neil's story exemplifies a larger narrative of Mississippi Conference Methodism in those years, as well as the perennial Methodist clash of tradition and new ideas. The postwar boom meant growth, with total church membership increasing about 6 percent in the 1950s and many new ministers joining the conference, more than half of them seminary graduates. By 1960, however, an increasing number of seminary-trained