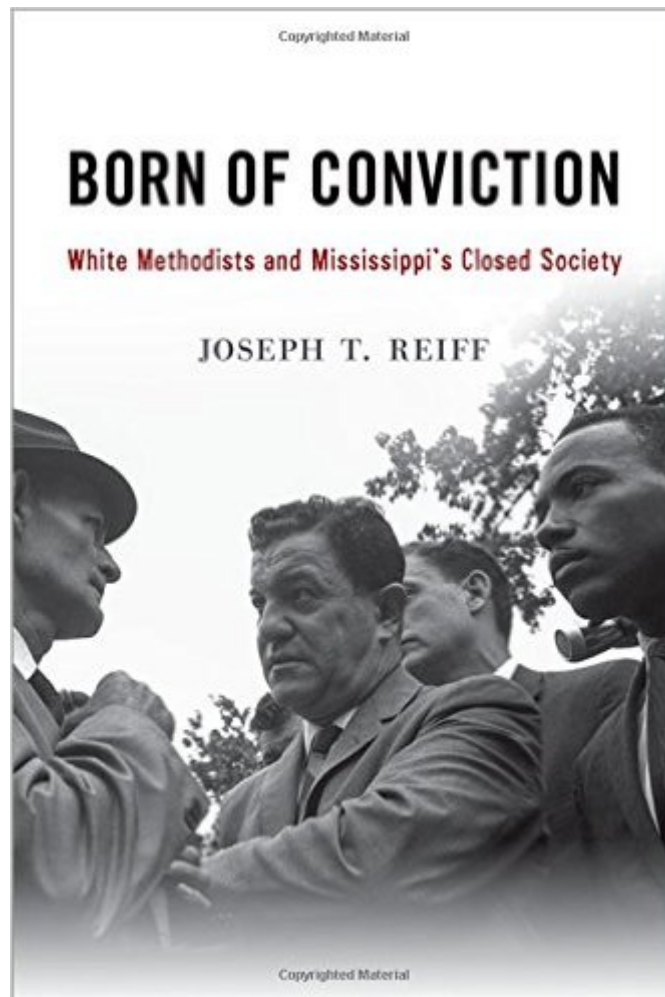


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# Born Of Conviction: White Methodists And Mississippi's Closed Society



## Synopsis

Winner of the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters' Nonfiction Award The dominant narrative of the role of white citizens and the white church in Mississippi's civil rights era focuses on their intense resistance to change. The "Born of Conviction" statement, signed by twenty-eight white Methodist pastors and published in the Mississippi Methodist Advocate on January 2, 1963, offered an alternative witness to the segregationist party line. Calling for freedom of the pulpit and reminding readers of the Methodist Discipline's claim that the teachings of Jesus permit "no discrimination because of race, color, or creed," the pastors sought to speak to and for a mostly silent yet significant minority of Mississippians, and to lead white Methodists to join the conversation on the need for racial justice. The document additionally expressed support for public schools and opposition to any attempt to close them, and affirmed the signers' opposition to Communism. Though a few individuals, both laity and clergy, voiced public affirmation of "Born of Conviction," the overwhelming reaction was negative-by mid-1964, eighteen of the signers had left Mississippi, evidence of the challenges faced by whites who offered even mild dissent to massive resistance in the Deep South. Dominant narratives, however, rarely tell the whole story. The statement caused a significant crack in the public unanimity of Mississippi white resistance. Signers and their public supporters also received private messages of gratitude for their stand, and eight of the signers would remain in the Methodist ministry in Mississippi until retirement. Born of Conviction tells the story of "the Twenty-Eight" illuminating the impact on the larger culture of this attempt by white clergy to support race relations change. The book explores the theological and ethical understandings of the signers through an account of their experiences before, during, and after the statement's publication. It also offers a detailed portrait of both public and private expressions of the theology and ethics of white Mississippi Methodists in general, as revealed by their responses to the "Born of Conviction" controversy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Joseph Reiff has written a brilliant book about folks who are real heroes for standing up to injustice. Mississippi in the early 1960's was a closed society. Those who didn't live there can never understand the world we lived in. Dissent with the "southern way of life" would cause friendships to end, and families to be ostracized. Any departure from orthodoxy was communism. The church, which should have been an agent of change was a part of the system of dysfunction. Preachers were content to save souls and build institutions. As race issues reached a crisis point with the admission of James Meredith to Ole Miss, a handful of Methodist clergy persons began to ask questions about the church's role. They gathered and wrote a statement of conscience—a rather innocuous statement when read today, but at the time considered revolutionary. It emphasized that the church belonged to God, not the members and that they agreed with the position stated in the Discipline of the Methodist Church that all persons were precious in God's sight and discrimination was contrary to God's intention. Twenty Eight clergy, mostly young, mostly seminary educated at a time where this was a rarity signed. They published their statement in the Methodist state paper and all hell broke loose. This is the story of the men and their families who risked their lives and careers to do what was right in the face of brutal opposition. Many eventually left Mississippi. Many have been leaders of the church for a generation. Mr. Reiff does a great job of painting the cultural picture, telling their story, and explaining the complicating factor—internal Mississippi Methodist Conference politics— that increased the feeling of isolation. These folks are heroes—many who stayed in a system and fought for change. A great read. Belongs on a shelf with Will Campbell's *Brother to a Dragonfly* to fill in some of the rest of the story

*Born of Conviction*, the book, was a long time coming, which is understandable, since Reiff had the daunting task of weaving 28 signers' stories before, during and after stories into one cogent narrative. He did it! When he started his extensive research it must have felt like he would never get it done. If he had managed to get *Born* in some publishable form before 2013, it would not have been the book it is today. Part IV never would have been like it is. To me this is the

most compelling part of the book, not to take anything away from the life sacrifices of the  
"He was able to move to a much deeper level of insight and perspective on the  
January 2, 1963 "Born of Conviction" statement because of what took place at the  
2013 Mississippi Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. Comments made there by  
those that left Mississippi in the 1960s and reactions by some of those that "stayed and not  
run" brought into sharper focus a deep divide in perspectives that existed too long without  
recognition and attention. The Conference on June 9, 2013 may have been a critical tipping point in  
the on-going narrative. Recapturing in a 2015 context what the "did 50+ years ago  
accentuates its relevance for back then, but more importantly now for today. The icing on the cake  
is "Legacies," Chapter 11. "Some plant, some water, and some  
harvest!" William G. McAtee, author of *Transformed: A White Mississippi Pastor's  
Journey into Civil Rights and Beyond*, University of Mississippi Press, 2011

Excellent scholarly research and a fascinating read. I personally witnessed much of this story, and  
knew and was deeply influenced by many of the signers. This book should be required reading for  
all seminarians and candidates for ordained ministry!

Excellent writing and impressively thorough research. Joe Reiff has effectively captured a critical era  
in both the society and in the church. I, too, lived through much of this, though I didn't really  
understand the larger picture at the time. Thanks, Joe, for fleshing it out so well. It took me back  
with new eyes and ears, and for that, I'm grateful.

This is a masterpiece with deep relevance for contemporary pastors. Hands down the best book I've  
read all year. For those pastors who are needing inspiring stories about the courage to speak when  
it's not popular, read this now.

An amazing insight into the events of the civil rights movements in the Methodist Church in  
Mississippi during the early 1960's. As a student at Millsaps College during that time I can attest that  
it was a challenging and dangerous atmosphere for anyone who dared stand up for the rights of all  
people. Mississippi has come a long way since then and it was the courage and faith of people like  
those in *Born of Conviction* who helped bring about better society. Well done Joe!

This was part of my 1st order w/. My father was one of the twenty eight. I wanted to get a First

Printing, wish I could have gotten a signed and dated First Edition, but am happy to have a part of my dad in hardback.

Well written and accurately reflects the "good old boy" politics of Methodism in the south of the sixties. It describes in painful detail the ostracism and persecution of the few clergy who stood up for integration in the church. Demonstrates once again that "No good deed goes unpunished."

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