Scope and Content Note

This collection consists of Dean J. Robert Nelson’s materials relating to the events at Vanderbilt University that were known as “the Lawson affair.” In 1960, a graduate student in the Divinity School was dismissed from the University, despite the Dean’s objections, for his participation in local lunch-counter sit-ins. In protest Nelson resigned as Dean of the Divinity School. Most of this collection is comprised of correspondence ranging from before Nelson’s appointment as Dean in 1957 until after his resignation from that position in 1960. Also included are materials relating to Nelson’s publication of “The Lawson-Vanderbilt Affair”, the publicity resulting from Nelson’s resignation, and other publicity about Dean Nelson and his family and Harvie Branscomb, Vanderbilt’s Chancellor during this time. Of particular interest are the voluminous notes and reconstruction of these events written by Dean Nelson.

Biographical Sketch

John Robert Nelson, who throughout his life preferred to be known as J. Robert Nelson, was born in Winona, Indiana on August 21, 1920. He earned an A.B. from DePauw University in 1941, a B.D. from Yale University in 1944, and was ordained to the Methodist ministry in that same year. From 1944-1946, he served as a chaplain in the Marine Corps in the Far East. In 1951, he earned a D. Theol. from the University of Zurich in Switzerland.

Dr. Nelson travelled, lectured, preached and consulted in numerous countries throughout his career. Before serving as Vanderbilt University’s Divinity School dean from 1957-1960, he was the Secretary of the Commission on Faith and Order for the World Council of Churches in Switzerland. Among the many other places he served are: Princeton School of Theology; United Theological College, Bangalore, India; Oberlin College Graduate School of Theology; and Boston University School of Theology.

He was the author of numerous articles and books, including One Lord, One Church, Fifty Years of Faith and Order, and Science and Our Troubled Conscience. In the 1970s he became interested in medical ethics as they relate to theology. He was known throughout his career for his role in the ecumenical movement and civil rights.

Box 1

1. Correspondence---Incoming---Abernathy-Ayers
2. Correspondence---Incoming---Babcock-Boyles
3. Correspondence---Incoming---Branscomb
4. Correspondence---Incoming---Breen-Butler
5. Correspondence---Incoming---Cain-Cushman
6. Correspondence---Incoming---Dabbs-Durham
7. Correspondence---Incoming---Early-Fuson
8. Correspondence---Incoming---Gans-Gwinn
9. Correspondence---Incoming---Hackett-Hay
10. Correspondence---Incoming ---Heacock-Hunter
11. Correspondence---Incoming---Hyatt-Hyslop
12. Correspondence---Incoming---Ingram-Jordon
13. Correspondence---Incoming---Kale-Kummel
14. Correspondence---Incoming---Lagerman-Lyons
15. Correspondence---Incoming---MacIntyre-Mishler
16. Correspondence---Incoming---Mohr-Muste

Box 2

1. Correspondence---Incoming---Nall-Pierson
2. Correspondence---Incoming---Pike-Ruark
3. Correspondence---Incoming---Rupprecht-Silverman
4. Correspondence---Incoming---Simpson-Swomley
5. Correspondence---Incoming---Taylor-Viets
6. Correspondence---Incoming---Wagoner-Witt
7. Correspondence---Incoming---Wolcott-Zimmerman & 3 letters from unidentified senders
9. Correspondence---Outgoing---March 2, 1960-October 26, 1960
10. Correspondence---Outgoing---November 6, 1960-September 11, 1976
11. The Lawson Conflict---Dean Nelson’s Notes---1959-1960
12. The Lawson Conflict---Publication Materials---“The Lawson-Vanderbilt Affair”
14. The Lawson Conflict---Publicity and Commentary---Within the Vanderbilt Community
15. The Lawson Conflict---Publicity and Commentary---Local, National, and International
16. Vanderbilt University Divinity School---General Publicity---1958-1963
17. Vanderbilt University---Publicity, 1952-1963---Harvie Branscomb, Chancellor

BOX 3

Scrapbook---Newspaper Clippings, Invitations, Pamphlets---1957-1960