In 1960, Divinity School student James Lawson was asked to withdraw from Vanderbilt. He chose not to do so.

DAYS of THUNDER

His decision changed the way insiders and the nation viewed the University.

The Lawson Affair

By Ray Waddle, MA'81
On March 21, 1960, the Divinity School dedicated its new building complex and chapel. It was eagerly awaited. The school had been part of Vanderbilt from the beginning, nearly a century before, surviving church squabbles, economic hard times, damage by fire. The new quadrangle was to be a tribute to the school’s growing national reputation. It was to be a permanent symbol of progressive Christian spirituality in the conservative Protestant South.

On dedication day, however, things were not well. Festivities were subverted by a lengthening shadow of conflict. A nightmarish controversy over racial justice, civil disobedience and University power was fast getting national attention. Despite the new building, the future of the Divinity School was in jeopardy. Crisis was nigh. Within weeks, most of the 16 divinity professors would submit resignations, with other University faculty poised to follow. Administrators leaders would soon threaten to shut down the Divinity School altogether and, if need be, hand the newly dedicated building over to the Law School.

The turmoil of the Lawson affair, as it was called, would engulf the campus before it was over. The conflict sprang from the expulsion of a divinity student, James Lawson, for his involvement in the civil rights movement. The controversy over racial justice, civil disobedience and University power was fast getting national attention. Despite the new building, the future of the Divinity School was in jeopardy. The ordeal threatened to set Vanderbilt back by years as a national research institution. Top-notch faculty were ready to leave the University over it, and major foundation funding would likely disappear with them. As it turned out, the Lawson episode was a soul-searching referendum on what the University wanted to be—either a major center of learning or, as critics put it, a “southern finishing school.” It was a showdown of clashing values—Vanderbilt’s reach for national status versus sectional traditionalism and fear of change. In the minds of many, it was the most critical moment in the history of Vanderbilt University.

“It was not possible to build a major university with this problem,” recalls Charles Roos, retired professor of physics who became a key negotiator in resolving the Lawson affair. “This thing just had to be settled.”

In the spring of 1960, the Lawson crisis would test Vanderbilt’s self-identity to new limits. The ordeal threatened to set Vanderbilt back by years as a national research institution. Top-notch faculty were ready to leave the University over it, and major foundation funding would likely disappear with them. As it turned out, the Lawson episode was a soul-searching referendum on what the University wanted to be—either a major center of learning or, as critics put it, a “southern finishing school.” It was a showdown of clashing values—Vanderbilt’s reach for national status versus sectional traditionalism and fear of change. In the minds of many, it was the most critical moment in the history of Vanderbilt University.

In a defining event, and still is,” says Eugene TeSelle, retired professor of church history at the Divinity School. “In a sense Vanderbilt was lucky to have had this crisis at this period in history — the University learned how to deal with conflict — and it was lucky to have weathered it.”

A new book, a history of the Divinity School called Vanderbilt Divinity School: Education, Contest, and Change, revisits the episode, offering fresh perspectives and the clarity of 40 years’ hindsight. The book’s Lawson chapter is a transcript of a 1998 roundtable discussion that included various participants from those days. They include Charles Roos and James Lawson himself, now a retired Methodist minister in Los Angeles after a long career in parish ministry and social advocacy. Edited by church historian Dale Johnson of the Divinity School, the book will stand as one of the crucial sources for understanding that era of campus history. Along with Paul Conkin’s book Gone with the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University, it is used for the narrative to follow.

When it is a conflict like the one in 1960, “where we had the city on one side, a determined movement on the other side, and the University, that has explo- sive qualities that none of us could have predicted or understood. So it was trial by experiment, by error, for all of us.”

The Lawson controversy involved epic negotiations and miscalculations, contested facts, seat-of-the-pants judgment calls, careers put at risk, political naiveté and personal torment. What began as a personnel matter — the expulsion of Lawson — blew up into a national fracas, the result of defensiveness and distrust in a time of rapid social change that no one had an easy time grasping.

Through exaggerated effort and courage, the thing was settled by mid-June 1960. Reper- cussions were felt on campus for years and still leave their mark. And it has led to endless debate ever since about the legacy and char- acter of Chancellor Harvie Branscomb, who had Lawson expelled in the first place. Iron- ically, it was Branscomb who led Vanderbilt into racial integration (one of its schools, that is) in 1952, but he was blamed for the racial- ly charged Lawson episode eight years later.

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...the Lawson episode was a soul-searching referendum on what the University wanted to be—intellectual, a well-traveled Methodist minister and an African American. He brought other uncustomary credentials: He was an dropout of school or be kicked out, and, meeting March 3, the executive committee of the Board of Trust agreed.

The book Vanderbilt Divinity School notes, “At this meeting the executive committee determined that Lawson would be given until 9 a.m. the next day to decide whether to withdraw from the University or be expelled.” Lawson refused to quit, so he was expelled the next day. This pleased powerful board member James Stahlman, publisher of the Nashville Banner, which was editorializing stoutly against Lawson’s off-campus agitation. To the rest of the board, too, Lawson’s expulsion seemed a relatively straightforward matter, over and done with. This came at a time when the board was contemplating a major capital fund drive for the University. Lawson’s sudden notoriety was ill-timed publicity nobody wanted. Chancellor Branscomb, eager to bring a southern university to national prominence, had pondered the matter of segregation him- self for years.

When Branscomb arrived as chancellor in 1946, Vanderbilt was thoroughly traditional, segregationist, southern. It was a white monolith, like any other major school in the South at mid-century. There was no mingling of races, no black students or faculty. The only jobs for blacks were menial ones. But the post-war climate was changing. New ideas of racial integration weren’t going away. Branscomb knew desegregation had to be faced sooner or later. He aimed to raise the University’s profile and eliminate barri- ers to regional and national stature in the post-war boom of progress. As Conkin notes, he unveiled plans for starting new construction, expanding the campus, raising faculty salaries. He worked to subdue the power of the fra- ternities and sororities and inject a more stu- dious spirit into campus life.

Branscomb had special fondness for the Divinity School. He had been dean of Duke’s Divinity School when he accepted the Van- derbilt chancellorship. He trained as a New Testament scholar himself, a Methodist the- ologian who appreciated Nashville’s religious establishment. During his Vanderbilt tenure, he was pleased to see the Divinity School attract nationally known scholars for the first time. In 1952 Branscomb issued a plan for inte- grating the University, aiming to complete it by the time he retired in 1962. Prompt- ing the action, in part, were Divinity School professors who declared they could no longer in good conscience abide segregation in the school. (It was called the School of Religion at the time. The name changed to the Divin- ity School in 1956.) As Branscomb saw it, the integration of the University would be an exceedingly del-icate operation to carry off. The timetable had to unfold slowly. There was no point student from Oberlin School of Theology in Ohio when he entered the Vanderbilt Uni- versity Divinity School in 1956. He was an intellectual, a well-traveled Methodist min- ister and an African American. He brought other uncustomary credentials: He was an Ohio Yankee, and a pacifist. Lawson’s passion was social justice. He had gone to jail as a conscientious objector during the Korean War. Then, as a mis- sionary abroad, he had studied philosophies of non-violence in India, the homeland of Gandhi. He returned to Ohio, eager to apply activism to the American scene. At Oberlin he met Martin Luther King Jr., whose prestige as civil rights prophet was nearing its height. Lawson’s experiences fascinated and moral calculus—non-violent civil dis- obedience and direct action. James Lawson was instrumental in bringing it to town. Black students staged sit-ins at Nashville’s downtown department store lunch counters, which did not admit blacks. The young pro- testers had been trained for weeks in non- violent strategies of civil disobedience—trained to take verbal and physical abuse and arrest without fighting back—in order to challenge unjust or immoral social practices.

Lawson, planning to graduate from Divin- ity School in May 1960, trained students for the sit-ins. He wasn’t interested in testing the constitutionality of current laws by taking a grievance through a skein of ponderous court decisions. He and others wanted instead to draw on higher laws of faith and civilization, the power of biblical righteousness, hoping to shame the merchants into seeing the immorality of their practices against fellow human beings. The sit-ins reached an early peak at the end of February 1960. Scores of black stu- dents (and some white students) were taking part. Hostilities edged toward confrontations with angry whites who surrounded the sit- ins at the downtown lunch spots. Lawson was portrayed in the local newspa- pers as an outspoken leader of the new move- ment, an outsider who defied local authorities in the name of divine laws of justice and dиг- nity for black Americans.

On Feb. 27, 1960, the young demonstra- tors were rounded up and arrested by the dozens, charged with disorderly conduct or loitering. Lawson denounced these as trumped-up misdemeanous, legal “gimmicks,” he said, for shutting down the protests and legitimating injustice. He urged demonstra- tors to continue the sit-ins. Thus Lawson urged defiance of local laws.

Timing proved fateful. Media publicity about Lawson’s off-campus activities erupt- ed at the same time the executive commit- tee of Vanderbilt’s Board of Trust was meeting in early March 1960. Alarmed that Lawson was on record flouting the law, Branscomb pressed for clarification of the views of this troublesome student. He knew the con- servative-minded Board of Trust would be upset, too. Through the dean of the Divin- ity School, Robert Nelson, Lawson provid- ed a statement of his beliefs and strategies. But Branscomb didn’t get what he wanted— a strong assurance that Lawson would obey the laws of the land. So Branscomb declared Lawson should drop out of school or be kicked out and, Branscomb made a major error in his life,” Lawson says. “He obviously did not have enough people around him to help him get through in a fashion that could have reduced the tension in the University. My own major reflection as I look back upon it is that we have to accept the man as he was, as we have to accept ourselves, because in the situation we get, we all make errors.”

From the University’s viewpoint, James Lawson in 1960 was sabotaging Branscomb’s careful plan of easing the broader Universi- ty into a new world of racial equality. The Law- son episode, coming when it did, forced an unwelcome resolution of thought and action.

“Until 1960, Chancellor Branscomb suc- cessfully, but not without difficulty, walked a tightrope over the volatile passions of a racial revolution in the making,” Conkin writes in Gone with the Ivy.

“But all political maneuvering ran aground in 1960 in the complicated case of James Lawson, the most divisive episode in all of Vanderbilt’s history.”

James Lawson was a 30-year-old transfer King, who urged him to come South in the struggle for justice for black Americans. Impressed with Vanderbilt and with the cadre of educated African American students in the local black colleges, Lawson came to Nashville as staff organizer for the peace-ori- ented Fellowship of Reconciliation, as well as a divinity student.

January 1960 was the last moment the bub- ble of southern segregation could still appear complacently safe and sound in Nashville. Segregation was being tested or struck down elsewhere. The year 1954 was the beginning of the end, when racial separatism was legal- ly discredited by the Brown v. Board of Educa- tion decision against a segregated education system. Desegregation of Nashville schools was slowly under way, with gusts of resistance and even violence along the way.

But social segregation of black and white continued—restaurants, movie theaters, restrooms, taxi cabs, every nook of public life. In Nashville in early February 1960, this age-old pattern was challenged in a new way, by a revolutionary but untested paradigm of non-violent civil dis- obedience and moral calculus—non-violent civil dis- obedience and direct action. James Lawson was instrumental in bringing it to town. Black students staged sit-ins at Nashville’s downtown department store lunch counters, which did not admit blacks. The young pro- testers had been trained for weeks in non- violent strategies of civil disobedience—trained to take verbal and physical abuse and arrest without fighting back—in order to challenge unjust or immoral social practices.

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The lawson affair boiled through the semester. Various delegations of divinity faculty still hoped to resolve the conflict with administrators. Depth of feeling about the issue flared periodically. At the March 21 dedication of the divinity school, some of the out-of-state guest speakers publicly embraced Branscomb by criticizing the university for expelling Lawson, as Conkin’s book notes. Divinity alumni circulated a petition urging Lawson’s return. Outside the divinity school, cadres of professors were making their own pro-Lawson views known to Kirkland hall. A thousand miles away, other divinity students were protesting the Lawson case. At Yale, they followed the news from Nashville, and one spring day more than 200 students marched to publicize support for Lawson. “Here was a guy, Jim Lawson, who was objecting to segregation, and he was in divinity school, and we were in divinity school, and so we wanted to be in solidarity with him,’’ recalls Johnson, editor of Vanderbilt divinity school, who protested as a Yale student. Four students marching that day at Yale would soon in the destiny of Vanderbilt divinity school, Johnson, Kellogg, Peter Hodgson, and Sallie McFague were eventually hired and became part of a faculty core that gave stability and identity to the place through the three decades of the ‘70s, ‘80s and ‘90s. Lawson, no longer in school in March 1960, meanwhile went about his civil rights field work across the South. There was plenty to do. He provided sit-in leadership in Nashville, too. Also, his new fame brought him invitations from divinity schools nationwide asking him to enroll there. Back at the divinity school, as the semester ended, the issue was ready to detonate. Professors were eager to take some sort of action before graduation. Talks with administration had stalled. By mid-May, segregation had been achieved at some of the Nashville stores, and without riotous violence. That seemed to vindicate the sit-in strategy. The nation was watching. Other divinity schools were watching. Editorials declaimed about Lawson, pro or con, in newspapers coast to coast. Divinity faculty decided to vote to admit Lawson for the summer session so that he could complete his degree. They would bring their recommendation to Branscomb—and quit if their proposal was rejected. On May 30 it was indeed turned down. More than half of the divinity faculty turned in their resignations. The plot thickened. A number of other university professors (perhaps 20 out of more than 400) decided they too should resign. It was Roos, a 33-year-old associate professor of physics. He had joined the Vanderbilt faculty in 1959 and had a cordial relationship with the chancellor. Now he used that good will to press Branscomb for a solution before it was too late. On June 8 he met with Branscomb and the chairman of the board of Trust, Harold S. Vanderbilt, a great-grandson of founder Commodore himself. Roos pleaded with these two elders to find a compromise before the resignations could take effect and damage Vanderbilt immeasurably. Conditions were not favorable. There was mutual hostility between Branscomb and the divinity faculty. Reporters were all over campus, chasing tidbits and rumors, half expecting a final conflagration would bring the university down. Now, though, serious but private negotiations ensued involving Harold Vanderbilt, Branscomb and Roos. Terms were complicated. There had to be a way to reimburse Lawson while allowing administration and board to save face. There had to be a way to bring back the faculty but also arrange for the removal of the divinity dean, Robert Nelson, a conspicuous defender of Lawson. At this point, Roos recalls, Harold Van- derbilt, well into his 70s, took charge. The eminent New Yorker had been on the board since 1930—a legendary figure from America’s monied class, a world-famous yachtsman, the inventor of contract bridge. But he was never much emotionally involved with the southern university that bore the fami- aced academic freedom and moral principle at one school that touches the whole university. This group notably included a half-dozen professors in the medical school. Their resignations would mean that millions of dollars in research funds would probably go with them and muddy the Vanderbilt name. This got Branscomb’s attention. One of the non-divinity professors ready to resign was Roos, a 33-year-old associate professor of physics. 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ly name—until now. The bad publicity was becoming a family embarrassment for Harold Vanderbilt.

“To him it was a ridiculous situation,” Roos says in Vanderbilt Divinity School. “He did not appreciate that the administration had not been able to handle it correctly. He did not appreciate the divinity faculty. To him, he was in charge of a university with problems about to explode. The people from Life were there, and he didn’t like it. He sat there and drooled that meeting.”

A proposed solution, to be presented to the board, was hammered out over several hours by Branscomb and Harold Vanderbilt, with Roos there as advisor, go-between and messenger to the divinity faculty. The proposal was: Faculty resignations would be welcomed.

Branscomb began to use his power and show that Stahlman. He was trapped. He had seen the just did not feel he had the power to buck a question of his administrative ability. He was

Within days, rumors spread that Branscomb was threatening to resign. Some 160 facult(56 out of 195 contacted from the pool of 428, according to Conkin) signed a petition in support of Branscomb and Harold Van- derbilt against the board. Meanwhile, the University of Chicago reportedly put up an offer to hire all the Vanderbilt Divinity professors who quit.

This runaway climate of chaos set the stage for one final showdown. It was almost anti-

up on getting back in at Vanderbilt and told a by committee of where he graduated in August. He never received a degree from Vanderbilt University.

Branscomb, who died in 1998 at age 103, always said the Lawson affair had nothing to do with race and everything to do with a renegade student unwilling to uphold the law.

The University’s position,” Branscomb wrote in March 1960, “thus was not to oppose the sit-in movement, nor to discipline the individual for infringement of a particular law, but to state that no student could remain in good standing who in a potentially riotous situation commits himself to an organized program of deliberate violation of law.”

During the turmoil, Lawon and Branscomb never met face to face. Battle was waged through

Battle was waged through intermediaries, written communiqués, and newspaper quotes. To this day, debate is unsettled about whether they [Branscomb and Lawson] should have met, gotten to know each other, and somehow defused the crisis early on.

withdrawn, Dean Neilson’s resignation would be accepted, and Lawson would be allowed to take his degree. As Conkin and others note, the policy of integration in 1962. It happened undergraduate college officially adopted a policy of integration in 1962. It happened

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Off campus, the turmoil of 1960 became part of the legend of the Nashville sit-in movement. It solidified the Nashville movement’s reputation as the most effective model of non-violent resistance against the regime. “My expulsion became an example in the movement of a person’s willingness to pay the price,” Lawson says. “It became a way to strengthen our witness.”

In the short term, the Divinity School itself suffered loss of prestige after the bumpy ride of that spring semester. As Conkin notes, it was placed on probation for a year by the Amer-

can Association of Theological Schools, owing to low faculty morale and poor relations between faculty and Vanderbilt administration and board. Dean Neilson left the school in August 1960 and eventually became dean of Boston University’s of academic institutions was already taking

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“The Lawson affair, and the courage of the faculty, looms large in my own under-

standing of the identity of the school,” says ethics professor Howard Harrod, who retired in spring 2002 after a Vanderbilt teaching career of more than 30 years. “The published commitments are logically related to that maestros.”

Divinity officials say this comprehensive roster of committed values, unusual for a major seminary, is a significant recruiting tool for Vanderbilt.

In later life, both Branscomb and Lawson regretted never meeting in the wake of those stormy days and weeks of 1960.

In Vanderbilt Divinity School, Joseph Hough, divinity dean in the 1990s, recalls elderly Branscomb’s lingering feelings: “As our friendship deepened, he began to share with me some of his reflections on his own career at Vanderbilt, his high points and his low points. The one matter that seemed to trouble him most was his decision to expel James Lawson. He said that he put himself into a very difficult position by referring to his Board of Trust in what he later saw as an administrative decision.”

In 1996, 36 years after the storm, that regret was redressed. Hough arranged a meeting between these two would-be ideological rivals, in the Nashville home of Branscomb, then 101. Branscomb had never met Lawson, Roos recalls, “as men who had been seen as adversaries. We had a very pleasant visit in his home. I felt no animosity in the man, and I had none toward him. By then he had recognized that he allowed some things to take a wrong turn in 1960, and let me know he had moved beyond where he was. I let him know that at no time did I harbor any ill will toward him, and that I never broke our friendship deepened, he began to share with me some of his reflections on his own career at Vanderbilt, his high points and his low points. The one matter that seemed to trouble him most was his decision to expel James Lawson. He said that he put himself into a very difficult position by referring to his Board of Trust in what he later saw as an administrative decision.”

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