

March 15, 1960

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To the Faculty and Students of the Vanderbilt University Divinity School:

We, faculty members and students of the Yale University Divinity School Association, are deeply concerned with the events that have recently placed you in a position of difficult decision and decisive witness. We fully support you in your protests against the action of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trust, by which the Reverend James Lawson was expelled, and in your continuing to work constructively in the situation.

We consider the action of the Executive Committee in the expulsion of Mr. Lawson to be unjust. We feel that the position to which Vanderbilt University has been committed by the action of these officials stands in stark contrast to the respect which the University has come to command. Furthermore, we consider that the decision of the Executive Committee was based upon a prejudgment of legal transgression on the part of the defendant, before any final verdict has been rendered by the courts. Also involved, we feel, was a violation of the right of the Divinity School faculty to be fully consulted in the case.

While it is impossible for us to judge from here the complexity of your situation, we can and do, unequivocally and wholeheartedly, support the right for non-violent public protest when basic human rights are violated. It is our conviction that the right of peaceful protest is a necessary right in any democracy, and that any denial of the free exercise of this right to any individual inevitably works damage upon the very structure of democracy. Still more, the witness of the Church is severely handicapped by such attempts to limit the free exercise of Christian conscience. Under such limitation theological education is threatened with shallowness and irrelevance.

Specifically, we recognize the terrible plight in which the Negro citizens of the United States have been kept, and we deplore the fact that widespread demonstrations have currently become necessary in order for men to seek justice. We admire the courageous action that men have taken in order to call attention to injustice and their willingness to submit to the consequences of this action. In this matter of racial inequality we stand judged with our society, and we also feel urgently called upon to act in a responsible manner.

Thus we, in our common brotherhood as Christians, make ourselves available for whatever concrete assistance we can render. To this end we would appreciate any specific suggestions and further information regarding current developments. Please know that, with continued concern, we keep you in our prayers.

For the Association*

Merle Allshouse, President

Jerry Hazelrigg, Secretary

*Adopted in an open and well-attended meeting of the Yale Divinity