The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York

Union Theological Seminary Archives 1

Finding Aid for John B. Coburn Papers, 1930-1997



Portrait of Reverend Coburn. Bishop John C. Coburn Papers, 1930-1997. Series 5, box 1, folder 1, the Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Finding Aid prepared by: Rebecca Nieto, November 2016 With financial support from the Henry Luce Foundation and the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation

Summary Information

Creator:	Bishop John B. Coburn Papers, 1914-2008
Title:	Bishop John B. Coburn Papers, 1930-1997
Inclusive dates:	1930-1997
Bulk dates:	1964-1998
Abstract:	UTS '42; Episcopal minister and rector in Amherst, Newark and
	NYC parishes; Dean of Episcopal Theological School and ordained 13 th
	Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Papers consist of
	textual materials including manuscripts, creative writing by Bishop Coburn,
	prayers and sermons, lectures and research materials.
Size:	13 boxes, 12.5 linear feet
Storage:	Offsite storage
Repository:	The Burke Library
	Union Theological Seminary
	3041 Broadway
	New York, NY 10027
	Email: <u>burkespecial@library.columbia.edu</u>

Administrative Information

Provenance:	The Coburn Papers were originally donated by the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts with additions from Reverend Coburn's son and Harry Havemeyer of St. James Episcopal Church in New York. These papers are part of the Union Theological Seminary Archives, which comprises institutional and administrative records of the Seminary, combined with the papers of many organizations, scholars, pastors, laypersons, and others connected with the school.
Access:	Archival papers are available to registered readers for consultation by
	appointment only. Please contact archives staff by email to
	burkespecial@library.columbia.edu, or by postal mail to The Burke Library
	address on page 1, as far in advance as possible
	Burke Library staff is available for inquiries or to request a consultation on
	archival or special collections research.
Access Restrictions	s: The collection is unrestricted to readers. Please note that boxes are held in
	Offsite storage and will require 48 hours' notice in response to a weekday request for retrieval.
Preferred Citation:	Item description, UTS: Bishop John B. Coburn Papers, series #, box #, and folder #, The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Biography

Reverend John Bowen Coburn was born on September 27, 1914 in Danbury, Connecticut. Coburn's childhood was impacted early on by the ministry as his father, Reverend Aaron C. Coburn, was himself an Episcopal minister and founder of the Wooster School in Danbury. Bishop Coburn would go on to attend Wooster, graduating as class valedictorian in 1931.

After graduating, Coburn went on to attend Princeton University, graduating in 1936 (he would eventually also receive his Doctorate of Divinity from Princeton in 1960) with a Bachelor of Political Science. Though his father hoped he might return to take over as headmaster at Wooster after graduating, Coburn pursued further education in political science at Robert College in Istanbul before moving to New York in 1939 to attend Union Theological Seminary, where he earned his Bachelors of Divinity in 1942. Bishop Coburn was ordained in the Protestant Episcopal Church in January 1943.

Shortly after moving to New York, Reverend Coburn met Ruth Alvord Barnum, whom he married in 1941. Coburn also began his formal ministerial work shortly after his arrival in the city, initially serving as an assistant minister at Grace Church on Broadway and 10th Street, where he remained between 1942 and 1944, shortly before he was called to serve in the Chaplains Corps of the United States Naval Reserve on the USS Sheridan from 1944 to 1946.

Following the war, Coburn returned to the States and began serving as rector at Grace Church in Amherst, Massachusetts, a post he held from 1946 to 1953, concurrent with an administrative role as the director of religious activities at Amherst College. In the 1950s, the sudden death of

UTS1: Bishop John B. Coburn Papers, 1930-1997

Bishop Coburn and his wife's infant daughter spurred a poignant change in Coburn's ministry toward a particularly compassionate approach to care in the communities he served. The postwar years marked the beginning of Coburn's extensive ministry in theological schools and episcopates in New Jersey and Massachusetts. From 1953 to 1957, Coburn served as Dean of the Episcopal Cathedral in Newark, which he succeeded with a position as dean of the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, a celebrated post he held from 1957 to 1968. In this period he also co-founded the Chapel of Saint James the Fisherman in Wellfleet, Massachusetts with James Pike.

Coburn was elected 13th Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts in 1975. He spent a decade leading the Episcopal Church in a career punctuated by a number of achievements within his ministerial practice as well as his ecumenical activities on behalf of the Church. Reverend Coburn's service as Bishop of the Massachusetts Episcopate was situated in a number of community-based initiatives, including his participation in the founding of the National House of Deputies (the same group that approved ordination of women to the Episcopate in 1975), serving on the Council of Diocesan Executives, and serving as rector at numerous parishes in New York and Massachusetts including St. James Church (1969-1976). Following Bishop Coburn's ordination, he was also heavily involved in speaking engagements in ecumenical and lay settings, including spiritual retreats, the Beecher lecture series at Yale Divinity School, and more.

Bishop Coburn had an extensive publishing career, but as mirrored through his service, his formal academic writing was matched in breadth by his creative output. The papers amassed here include an extension selection of prayers authored by Coburn as well as poetry and short stories. This balance between Reverend Coburn's spiritual and creative life are traceable through the collection arranged here.

Bishop Coburn's life and ministry was widely celebrated. A teacher, leader and minister in parishes large and small, he died in Bedford, Massachusetts on August 8, 2008.

Collection Scope and Content Note

The Coburn papers are divided into six series:

• Series 1: Education and Teaching, 1930-1988 (2 boxes, 2 lin. ft.)

This series comprises textual materials relating to Bishop Coburn's education at Wooster, a diary from his bachelor's work at Princeton, and course materials from theological schools and seminaries where he taught as bishop, specifically Grace Church School for Boys, Episcopal Theological School, and Virginia Theological Seminary, where he led seminars on contemporary spirituality and religious education well into the 1980s. Also included are two files relating to Coburn's application for a Guggenheim fellowship and sabbatical from the ETS in the early 1960s. Materials are arranged in loose chronological order.

• Series 2: Ecumenical Relations, 1946-1997 (2 boxes, 1.5 lin. ft.)

This series reflect Bishop Coburn's paired investments in Episcopalian organizations that he participated in as well as spiritual and religious retreats and conferences he attended

or helped organize. Materials are entirely text-based and consist of ephemera, pamphlets, programs, correspondence and clippings organized by subject. Of particular interest will be programs and planning documentation relating to the "quiet days" retreats Coburn was central in organizing with the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. At the end of the series is a box of bound bulletins from St. James Church, where Coburn served as rector from 1969 to 1976.

• Series 3: Talks and Sermons, 1946-1997 (5 boxes, 5 lin. ft.)

This series consists of professional talks and sermons given by Coburn in a number of settings, mostly in as part of lectureships, visits as Bishop to congregations around the country, and for commemorative or celebratory settings. Several folders are marked "meditations" – these are prayers that were given as part of lectures or to support services held at different conferences and retreats Bishop Coburn attended or helped organize.

• Series 4: Writings, 1939-1997 (1 box, 1 lin. ft.)

This series consists of manuscripts and drafts of writings that extend beyond Bishop Coburn's formal publications. Materials cover compelling moments from Coburn's ministry, including diaries and clippings from Coburn's years teaching in Harlem, short stories, collections of poems and personal prayers, and essays.

• Series 5: Personal, 1940-1994 (2 boxes, 2 lin. ft.)

Materials comprise biographical and research-related materials collected by Coburn, including naval records from Coburn's brief service as part of the chaplains' corps during WWII, portrait photographs used for memoirs, research files arranged by subject, as well as general correspondence. Also included are audiovisual recordings of Bishop Coburn's talk "Grace Upon Grace" (1988).

• Series 6: Unprocessed, c. 1930-1997 (1 box, 1 lin. ft.)

Processing

Metal clips and staples were removed from materials and folded items were flattened. Materials were placed in new acid-free folders and boxes. Acidic items were separated from one another by interleaving with acid-free paper as needed. Any items in an advanced state of deterioration were placed in Mylar envelopes.

Further Sources

Information about Reverend Coburn's career and life can be found in his obituary in the New York Times dated August 14, 2009. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/15/us/15coburn.html

Biographical information taken from the Union Theological Seminary Alumni Catalog 1836-1927: http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/cul/texts/ldpd_6093721_000/pages/ldpd_609 3721_000_00000001.html

Contents list

Series 1: Education and Teaching, 1930-1988

			Contents
Series	ROX	Folder	Contents
			Education and Alumni Relations
1	1	1	J.B. Coburn CV Materials, Undated
1	1	2	Wooster School Newsletters, [1930]-1985
1	1	3	Wooster School 50 th Anniversary, 1976
1	1	4	Princeton Diary, 1935
1	1	5	Honorary Degrees – Correspondence, 1958-1970
			Teaching
1	1	6	Young Men's House, 1942
1	1	7	Grace Church School for Boys – Religious Education, 1941-1942
1	1	8	Grace Church – Recommendations for Use of Building, 1943
1	1	9	Course Notebook, 195?
1	1	10	Course Bibliographies, 1930-1967
1	1	11	Episcopal Theological Seminary Course Bibliographies, 1957-1968
1	1	12	Episcopal Theological School, 1958-1964
1	1	13	Episcopal Theological School – PT 122 (Notes), 1962
1	1	14-20	Junior Preceptorial Lectures, 1962-1966
1	1	21	ETS Tutorial (Course Reading), 1964
1	1	22	ETS – General, 1965-1966
1	1	23	Practical Theology (PT) 122, Spring 1966
1	1	24	PT 122 – The Life of Prayer, 1967-1968
1	1	25	Recommended Readings and Course Notes [1968]
1	1	26	ETS – Letter of Resignation, 1968
1	1	27	Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) – Episcopal Charismatic Fellowship, 1977
1	1	28	VTS – Administrative Material, 1986-1988
1	1	29	VTS – Course Materials, 1987-1988
1	1	30	VTS – Seminar on Explorations in Spirituality, 1987
1	1	31-32	VTS – Contemporary Spirituality, 1987
1	1	33	VTS – Contemporary Spirituality Small Group Meditation, 1987
•	•	00	
1	2	1	VTS Seminar – Contemporary Spirituality, 1987-1988
1	2	2	VTS – Meditation for Quiet Days, 1987
1	2	3	Quotations for Use in VTS Seminars [1987]
1	2	4	VTS Courses on Contemporary Spirituality, 1987-1988
1	2	5	VTS Lecture – Modern Mystic [198?]
1	2	6	VTS – Lectures on Contemporary Spirituality [I-XIII], Undated
1	2	7	VTS – Trotter Inaugural Address – Christian Wholeness, Undated
1	2	8	VTS – Contemporary Spirituality Bibliography, Undated
1	2	9	[P.R. 103] Course in Contemporary Spirituality, Undated
1	2	3 10	Guggenheim Fellowship, 1963
1	2	10	Sabbatical Feb-March, 1965
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Series 2: Ecumenical Relations, 1946-1997

Series	Box	Fold	der Contents
2	1	1	Calls to Parishes, 1946
2	1	2	Quiet Days Retreats, 1949-1953
2	1	3	National Commission on College Work (Seabury CT) – Priests in a Pagan Community, 1950
2	1	4	World Council of Churches – Second Assembly, 1954
2	1	5	Union Seminary, 1956-1957
2	1	6	Bishop Pike Controversy and Correspondence, 1958-1967
2	1	7	Ecumenical Relations, 1961
2	1	8	World Council of Churches – Faith and Order Working Committee, 1961-1962
2	1	9	World Council of Churches – Symposium on the Laity, 1961-1962
2	1		Documents on Church Unity, 1961-1963
2	1	11	Ecumenical Relations, 1961-1967
2	1	12	Rev. Samuel Tyler Jr., 1961-1970
2	1		East-West Churchmen's Colloguy, 1962
2	1	14	Union Seminary – Confidential, 1962-1963
2	1		Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1964
2	1	16	Retreats – Adelynrood, 1964
2	1	17	Retreats and Meditations – Craigville, 1964
2	1	18	Lilly Foundation Retreat, 1964-1965
2	1	19	Lay School of Theology, 1965
2	1	20	Spiritual Life Institute – Collegeville MN, 1965
2	1	21	World Council of Churches – Ministry Reports, 1965-1966
2	1	22-2	23 Ecumenical Institute of Spiritual Life – Pendle Hill PA, 1966
2	1	24	Consultation on Church Union, 1966
2	1		Clergy Conferences [Kansas Diocese], 1969
2	1		House of Deputies – General Convention, 1970
2	1		Retreats – General Materials, [1972]
2	1		Liturgical Commission, 1972-1974
2	1		Retreats – The Story of Jesus Christ, 1973-1974
2	1		Calls and Possible Calls to Churches, 1974
2	1		Ordination of Women in the Episcopal Church, 1975
2	1	32	Episcopal Diocesan Ecumenical Offers, 1976
2	1		Queen Elizabeth II visit to MA Diocese [photograph], 197?
2	1	34	Briarwood Retreat – The Way of the Cross is the Way of Life, 1980
2	2	1	Retreats and Quiet Days – Buffalo, 1981
2	2	2	February Retreat – Southwest Florida, 1981
2	2	3-4	St. Margaret Retreat, 1982
2	2	5	Love First Retreat, 1982
2	2	6	Quiet Days – Massachusetts Diocese Bicentennial, 1984
2	2	7	Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts – Auburn chair, 1986
2	2	8	Retreat Materials, Undated
2	2	9	Advent School of Prayer, 1988
2	2	10-1	12 Council of Diocesan Executives, 1988

UTS1: Bishop John B. Coburn Papers, 1930-1997

2	2	13	Episcopal Church Publishing Consultation, 1988
2	2	14	Boston Theological Institute – 30th Anniversary, 1997
2	2	15	Dept. of Christian Education, Undated
			St. James Church Bulletins, Bound
2	2	16	Notes from Bound Bulletins, 1973-1974
2	2	17	Bound Bulletins, 1970-1972
2	2	18	Bound Bulletins, 1972-1974
2	2	19	Bound Bulletins, 1974-1975

			Contents
Oches			Talks
3	1	1	Amherst College – The Church, 1958
3	1	2	Amherst and Harvard Speeches, 1994
3	1	3-4	Anglicanism, 1958-1981
3	1	5	Approach to Contemporary Prayer, 1960
3	1	6	Bay View Association (MI) Lectures, 1981
3	1	7-8	Bedell Easter Lecture at Kenyon College, 1968
3	1	9-14	Beecher Lecture [Yale] I-IV and Resources [1987-1989]
3	1	15	Boston Theological Institute, 1968
3	1	16	C.S. Lewis Talks, Undated
3	1	17	Cathedral of the Holy Cross – Consecration Remarks, 1985
3	1	18	CDSP – Contemporary Theological Education, 1979
3	1	19	Christian Education – Believing, Behaving, Belonging, 1972
3	1	20	Christian Living (Berchtesgaden), 1963
3	1	21	Clergy/Wives, Undated
3	1	22	Clericus (West Roxbury), 1977
3	1	23	Church and City, 1975
3	1	24-25	College Work of the Episcopal Church, 1953-1954
3	1	26	Committee of Episcopal Young Churchmen – Power to Witness in
			Love and Marriage, 1955
3	1	27	Conference on the Faith and the University, 1957
3	1	28	Conference on Parish Renewal – Greetings, 1982
3	1	29	Contemporary Spirituality, 1965
3	1	30	Corning Glass Works, 1986
3	1	31	Council of Diocesan Executives – Resting Places, Desert Places, Holy
			Places [Honolulu, HI], 1988
3	1	32	Current Literature in Christian Spirituality, 1987
3	1	33	Cynthia Coburn Commemoration (Chapel of St. James the Fisherman),
			1957
3	1	34	Danbury CT, 1988
3	1	35	Daniels Memorial Lectureship – Episcopal Divinity School, 1991
3	1	36	Diocesan Convention Talk (MA), 1952
3	1	37	Diocese of Central New York, 1977
3	1	38-39	Diocese of Dallas Addresses, 1975-1976

			<u>Sermons, 1934-1990</u>
			Contents
3	1	40	Diocese of Massachusetts Conventions, 1977-1979
3	1	41	Diocese of Southwest Florida, 1986
3	1	42	Dudleian Lecture – Harvard Divinity School [brochure], 1978
3	1	43	Ecumenical Ministries Oregon, 1980
3	1	44	EDS Consecration Luncheon, 1976
3	1	45	Episcopal Church Foundation, 1967-1983
3	1	46	Executive Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church [Interview Trans.], 196?
3	1	47	General Convention – Deputies' Orientation, 1976
3	1	48	Groton School 100 th Anniversary, 1985
3	1	49	Headmasters' Association – Education, Honor and Values, 1977
3	1	50	John Hines Dinner, 1984
3	1	51	Homilies and Speeches for Special Collections, 1978-1984
3	1	52	Honor System at Princeton, 1968
3	1	53	Hood Conference, 1956
3	1	54	Hunger Convocation at Noble and Greenough School, 1976
3	1	55	Institute for the Humanities Talk – Excellence, 1964
3	1	56	Introductions and Invocations, 1981
3	1	57-59	Johnson Chapel Talks, 1946-1953
3	1	60-61	Kellogg Lectures, 1985
U	•	00 01	
3	2	1	Lectures and Sermons [interfiled], 1959-1973
3	2	2-6	Life of Prayer Lectures and Course Materials, 1963-1968
3	2	7	Louisville, 1973
3	2	8	Marriage Homilies Talk, 1967
3	2	9	MECA – Cathedral Clergy Gathering, 1984
3	2	10	Ministry, 1968-1978
3	2	10	Nat'l Association of Independent Schools (NY/SF), 1969
3	2	12	Nat'l Commission on College Work at Seabury House, 1950
3	2	13	New Mood in Spirituality [1967]
3	2	13	Old North Church Bicentennial, 1984
3	2	14	Papers for Conferences and Conventions, 1934-1952
3	2	16	•
3	Ζ	10	PECUSA [Protestant Episcopal Church USA] – Dinner for Ecumenical Officers [Memphis], 1976
3	2	17	Perspective on Preparing Men for Ministry, 1968
3	2	18	Protestants and Catholics on the Spiritual Life (Collegeville MN), 1965
3	2	19	Report as President of House of Deputies (Exec. Council Committee), 1973
3	2	20	Priest-Minister Dialogue – Some issues in Cont. Spirituality, 1965
3	2	21	Religion and Psychiatry – Competitors or Collaborators, 1956
3	2	22	Remarks to Retiring Trustees (Princeton), 1981
3	2	23	Retreat and Conference Talks on Christian Marriage, 1949-1964
3	2	24	Speeches for Special Occasions, 1973-1974
3	2	25	Spirituality in Administration, 1978
-	_		

SeriesBox FolderContents3226St. Botolphs Club Luncheon, 19783227Theological Education, 1958-19643228Trinity Church – An Appeal, 1977	
3 2 27 Theological Education, 1958-1964 3 2 28 Trinity Church – An Appeal, 1977	
3 2 28 Trinity Church – An Appeal, 1977	
3 2 29-31 Trinity Church – Price Lecture, 1985-1988	
3 2 32 UTS/Trinity/Harvard/Michigan Lectures, 1978-1981	
3 2 33 What Difference Does a Church School Make?, 1981	
3 2 34 Women's Triennial Denver – The Theological Basis of Life for Cr	eative
Decision Making, 1979	ounro
Sermons	
3 2 36-41 Grace Church Sermons, 1941-1948	
3 3 1-9 Grace Church Sermons, 1947-1953	
3 3 10 Bethesda, 1944-1945	
3 3 11 Amherst Council of Ministers – Prayer and the Service of God, 1	945
3 3 12 USS Sheridan and Hutchinson Sermons, 1945-1946	
3 3 13 Sermons and Related Materials, 1945-1954	
3 3 14 St. Johns Church (Northampton), 1948	
3 3 15 Trinity Cathedral – First Impressions, 1953	
3 3 16-20 Sermons, 1953-1955	
3 4 1-7 Sermons (including index to sermons by year), 1955-1957	
3 4 8 Trinity Cathedral – On Meeting One Another, 1953	
3 4 9 Trinity Cathedral – Peter Becomes a Disciple, 1953	
3 4 10 Services, 1955-1985	
3 4 12 Prayer on Healing, 1957	
3 4 13 Cambridge Council of Churches – Thanksgiving Sermon, 1957	
3 4 14 Chapel of Saint James the Fisherman, 1957-1996	
3 4 15 Meditations – The Peace of God [I] – Through Sacramental Expe	eriences,
1960	
3 4 16 The Peace of God Through Sacramental Experiences, 1960	
3 4 17 Meditations – Returning, Rest, and Lent, 1960	
3 4 18 Good Friday Service, 1961	
3 4 19 Good Friday, 1963	
,,,	
3 4 20 Trinity Church Sermon, 1963	
 4 20 Trinity Church Sermon, 1963 4 21 Lay School of Theology – Prayer and Devotional Life, 1965 	
 4 20 Trinity Church Sermon, 1963 4 21 Lay School of Theology – Prayer and Devotional Life, 1965 4 22 Coventry Cathedral, 1965 	
 4 20 Trinity Church Sermon, 1963 4 21 Lay School of Theology – Prayer and Devotional Life, 1965 4 22 Coventry Cathedral, 1965 4 23 Wellsprings, PA – Prayer and Mission, 1966 	
 3 4 20 Trinity Church Sermon, 1963 3 4 21 Lay School of Theology – Prayer and Devotional Life, 1965 3 4 22 Coventry Cathedral, 1965 3 4 23 Wellsprings, PA – Prayer and Mission, 1966 3 4 24 Diary and Notes for Sermons, 1970 	
 3 4 20 Trinity Church Sermon, 1963 3 4 21 Lay School of Theology – Prayer and Devotional Life, 1965 3 4 22 Coventry Cathedral, 1965 3 4 23 Wellsprings, PA – Prayer and Mission, 1966 3 4 24 Diary and Notes for Sermons, 1970 3 4 25 Prayers Given in Public, 1970-1981 	
 3 4 20 Trinity Church Sermon, 1963 3 4 21 Lay School of Theology – Prayer and Devotional Life, 1965 3 4 22 Coventry Cathedral, 1965 3 4 23 Wellsprings, PA – Prayer and Mission, 1966 3 4 24 Diary and Notes for Sermons, 1970 3 4 25 Prayers Given in Public, 1970-1981 3 4 26 Service – Westminster Abbey, 1971 	
 3 4 20 Trinity Church Sermon, 1963 3 4 21 Lay School of Theology – Prayer and Devotional Life, 1965 3 4 22 Coventry Cathedral, 1965 3 4 23 Wellsprings, PA – Prayer and Mission, 1966 3 4 24 Diary and Notes for Sermons, 1970 3 4 25 Prayers Given in Public, 1970-1981 	

			<u>Sermons, 1994-1990</u>
			Contents
3	5	1	Sermons and Prayers, 1973
3	5	2	St. James Church – Good Friday Service, 1973
3	5	3	Prayers and Invocations, 1974-1983
3	5	4	St. James Mission, 1975
3	5	5	Clergy Quiet Day – Norwood MA, 1976
3	5	6	Funeral Prayers, 1976-1994
3	5	7	Services – Cope and Mitre Notes, 1976
3	5	8	Old North Church Services, 1976
3	5	9	Services with Evangelical and Catholic Mission, 1977
3	5	10	Meditations – Good Friday/Easter, 1979
3	5	11	Special Prayers, 1979-1984
3	5	12	Prayers and Poems, 197?
3	5	13	Notes for Sermons [197?]
3	5	14	Meditations – S.S.J.E. (Cambridge MA), 1980
3	5	15	Funerals, 1981-1985
3	5	16	Background Material on Funeral Prayers, 1980-1992
3	5	17	The Bay View Association Sermon – Pilgrims on the Way, 1981
3	5	18	Christmas/Baptism/Good Friday Services, 1982-1984
3	5	19	Meditations – Ash Wednesday, 1982
3	5	20	Meditations – Maundy Thursday, 1983
3	5	21	St. Anne-in-the-Fields (MA) – Consecration/Dedication Service, 1983
3	5	22	Services – Rev. Thomas Kershaw, 1983
3	5	23	Services – Funerals and Ordination, 1983-1984
3	5	24	Meditations, 1983-1984
3	5	24	St. Paul's Cathedral – Prayer with Inclusive Language, 1984
3	5	26	
3	5	20 27	Services – Youth Commissioning, 1984
			Meditations – New Year, 1985
3	5	28	Meditations on the Seven Last Words – Good Friday, 1986
3	5	29	Meditations for Good Friday – The Way of the Cross, 1986
3	5	30	Meditations – Good Friday, 1981
3	5	31	Cathedral of the Holy Cross (Boston) – Consecration Remarks, 1985
3	5	32	St. Mary's Church – Christ the King, 1987
3	5	33	Quiet Days (Calvary Church, Bethesda-by-the-Sea) – Resting Places,
•	_	~ /	Desert Places, Holy Places, 1988
3	5	34	Honolulu Cathedral, 1988
3	5	35	Memphis School of Prayer – First Meditation, 1988
3	5	36	Church of the Holy Communion (Memphis) – School of Prayer, 1988
3	5	37	Retreats on Grace, 1988
3	5	38	Trinity Church (Houston) – Resting, Desert and Holy Places, 1988
3	5	39	Prayers – St. Paul's Cathedral (Boston) and Others, 1990
3	5	40	Sermons – Princeton, 1991
3	5	41	Congregational Prayers, Undated
3	5	42	Meditations – Growth in Christian Spirituality, Undated
3	5	43	Notes for Sermons, Undated

Series	Box	Folder	Contents
3	5	44	Meditations – Prologue to St. John's Gospel, Undated
3	5	45	Prologue to St. John's Gospel – Zimbabwe, Undated
3	5	46	Sermons on Loneliness and Solitude, Undated
3	5	47	Sermon – The Meaning is in the Waiting, Undated

Series 4: Writings, 1939-1997

Oches -	T. VV	nings,	1353-1357
Series	Box	Folder	Contents
4	1	1	Short Stories and Articles, 1936-1939
4	1	2	Early Writings, Chapters and Prayers, 1939-1986
4	1	3	Pamphlets, 1950-1956
4	1	4	A Contemporary Mood – Some Issues and Questions about Prayer [1964]
4	1	5	Reflections on Religious Education, 1965
4	1	6	Essays, 1965-1968
4	1	7	The Christian Century – Story of the Boston Theological Inst., 1968
4	1	8	Harlem Street Academies Diary, 1968
4	1	9	Harlem Diary and Notes, 1968
4	1	10	Harlem Street Academy Writings, 1969
4	1	11	Harlem Street Academies Diary, 1968-1969
4	1	12	Prayers for Special Occasions, 1968-1976
4	1	12-13	Prayers and Poems, 1970-1985
4	1	14	Writings on Southern Ohio Diocese, 1970
4	1	15	Spirituality in the 1980s, 1981
4	1	16	Review of Alan Whittemore's 'Spiritual Journal and Miscellanies', 1983
4	1	17	Contemporary non-Catholic Spirituality and the Guidance of Souls –
			Collegeville MN, 1985
4	1	18	Manuscript – A Time for Turning, 1986
4	1	19	Longings – to Sheryl A. Kujawa, 1995
4	1	20	Collections of Poems for Publication, 1997
4	1	21	Ms. – The Cross and the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, Undated
4	1	22	Ms. – God's Sacrifice to the Cross, Undated
4	1	23	Growth in Christian Spirituality I, Undated
4	1	24	Poems of a Pilgrim, Undated
4	1	25	Reflections on the City from the Sea, Undated
4	1	26	Short Stories, Undated
4	1	25	Some Thoughts on the Black Revolution and the Episcopal Church,
			Undated

Series 5: Personal, 1940-1994

Series	Box	Folder	Contents
			Biographical
5	1	1	Naval Service Record and Correspondence, 1940-1945
5	1	2	Draft and Conscientious Objector Form and Naval Registration, 1940 1942
5	1	3	Naval Personnel and Insurance, 1945-1954

Series 5: Personal, 1940-1994

Series 5: Personal, 1940-1994						
Series	Box	Folder				
5	1	4	Ordination, 1942-1943			
5	1	5	Biographical and Notes, 1956-1968			
5	1	6	Christmas Cards – Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, 1956-1986			
5	1	7	Journal, 1962			
5	1	8	Bound Diary, 1975-1976			
5	1	9	Material for Memoirs, 1964-1994			
5	1	10	Portrait Photographs, 197?-198?			
5	1	11	Legacy archival finding aid – Episcopal Dioceses of Massachusetts, 1987			
5	1	12	Coburn Hermitages Dedication, 1987			
5	I	12				
F	4	10	Research by Subject			
5	1	13	Abraham Lincoln, Undated			
5	1	14-16	Alan Whittemore – Spiritual Journal/Miscellanies and Notes [1987]			
5	1	17	Anglicanism, 1975			
5	1	18	Articles for Research [off-prints] [1987]			
5	1	19	Ascetical Theology, Undated			
5	1	20	Baptism, Undated			
5	1	21	Bible Study Materials, Undated			
5	1	22	Bibliography for Arthur Kimber Paper, Undated			
5	1	23	Bonhoeffer Notes, Undated			
5	1	24	Church of South India, 1955-1958			
5	1	25-26	Clippings, 1969-1975			
5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5	2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2	1 2 3 4-5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13-14 15 16 17 18 19-20 21 22	Contemporary Spirituality, 196? Death, Undated Education – General, 1963 Emily Dickinson poems, Undated Faith, the Church and Higher Education, 1955-1956 Introduction to the Spiritual Retreat, Undated John Berryman poems, Undated Meditation Readings [1966] Mysticism and Related Readings, Undated Personal Meditations, Undated Poetry Quotations, 1988 Prayer – General, 1957-1970 Prayer Book, Undated Quotations and Notes, Undated Resting, Desert and Holy Places, 1988 Spirituality Material, 1965-1966 Theological Education – General, 1969-1973 Travel – Africa, 1981-1984 Virginia Theological Seminary Journal – Christian Wholeness and Theological Education, 1988			
5	2	23	General Correspondence – Andrew Wyeth, 1980			

Series 5: Personal, 1940-1994

Series	Box	Folder	Contents
5	2	24	Correspondence – Washington, D.C. Election, 1958
5	2	25	Robert College Ephemera [Istanbul], 1992
5	2	26-27	A/V – Grace Upon Grace [CD and cassette], 1988

Series 6: Unprocessed, c. 1930-1997 Series Box Folder Contents

6 1