

Breaking Down Racial Roadblocks in Theological Education

“What kind of life is worth wanting?” asks Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun in “For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference.”

They argue that the Christian faith is a response to this question. A life well-lived, one that flourishes, finds purpose and meaning in the way of life modeled by the Christ we follow, the God who creates and the Spirit that stirs.

The Christian faith offers a distinctive voice by claiming the worth and value of all persons.

“Religion gets sick when one person can point to another person and see a difference that depersonalizes that other person,” said Wade Rowatt, senior professor of pastoral care and counseling at [Baptist Seminary of Kentucky](#). “It doesn’t matter if it’s gender, it doesn’t matter if it’s sexual orientation, and it certainly doesn’t matter if it’s race or nationality or age or anything else.”

In our racially charged culture, churches are increasingly asking how they can be thriving communities and meaningfully be part of God’s work to bring justice to, and honor the worth of, our black brothers and sisters.

How are congregations to approach this work of love, healing and justice? How can churches play a central and powerful role in their communities to bring

healing?

Baptist Seminary of Kentucky is asking a similar question: How do we help form ministers in both the black and white church traditions in ways that serve the purpose of God and bring healing and community?

In 2015, Kevin W. Cosby, president of [Simmons College of Kentucky](#), a historically black college in Louisville, invited Baptist Seminary of Kentucky to provide theological education on their campus.

In the fall of 2016 and spring of 2017, we offered Clinical Pastoral Education in the Parish with four black and four white ministers on the Simmons campus.

We offered an additional class in the fall of 2017. In January 2018, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky began offering the ability to pursue the master of divinity degree entirely at Simmons College.

Sharing this vision for a predominantly white seminary to serve in what Cosby calls “black space” were the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (Kentucky CBF and the national organization).

The Baugh Foundation is providing \$300,000 over three years, and the CBF \$50,000.

This generous funding has been critically important in Baptist Seminary of Kentucky's ability to live into this vision. Already, more than half our students are at the Simmons campus and our enrollment is up by more than 50%.

Cosby described the unique relationship: "In most instances, racial integration has been a unilateral process where blacks move into white space. BSK (Baptist Seminary of Kentucky) has reversed this model and decided to move into black space. This is a reversal of the white flight of former generations."

Understanding this invitation is crucial. Baptist Seminary of Kentucky is choosing to be a guest in black space, to honor the power structures and culture of a black-led institution, to follow our mission by listening, learning and being shaped.

It is hard to overstate how large a shift this is. We expect to be in charge, to do things our way and to be able to dictate choices. Part of the partnership is a discovery of how our position and power inhibit or even prevent true conversation and listening.

Although the partnership is young, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky is already being formed, informed and reformed.

As our work and conversations at Simmons have deepened, those relationships and the warm, joyful community at Simmons has blessed and encouraged us.

What are we learning about the power of these relationships that can help ministers and churches to form what Martin Luther King Jr. called "the beloved

community”?

Our curriculum is being shaped in significant ways. We have become increasingly aware of the preference for white perspectives in Western-style theological education.

To better include black voices and leaders, for example, the recent Women in Mission course taught by Laura Levens, assistant professor of Christian mission at Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, included black women mission trailblazers, such as Nannie Helen Burroughs, Ida B Wells, Julia Foote and Mary McLeod Bethune.

Levens also taught a course combining the topics of World Christianity and Justice. Simmons and Baptist Seminary of Kentucky students, valuing justice in their contexts, wanted to know what justice means and how it’s practiced by Christians across the world.

John Inscore Essick, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky’s associate professor of church history, explains a shift in approaching Christian history: “In looking more deeply into past events, all those in my class, regardless of race and including me, are challenged to think more historically and theologically about land, freedom, power, religion and ministry. The Simmons partnership made me pay closer attention and listen to the voices and stories that had been there all along.”

Mark Medley, professor of theology at Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, described how his theology course has been affected. “I have deepened students’ exposure to black liberation theology as well as womanist theology. My aim is that black theology and womanist theology be understood as canonical not merely

contextual theology.”

Rowatt invited Dartanya Hill, pastor of West End Baptist Church in Louisville and a licensed psychologist, to co-teach his course on pastoral care with small groups for the spring 2019 semester.

Care groups function in organic ways in black churches that deepen the organizational, structural style in many white congregations.

Dalen Jackson, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky’s academic dean and professor of biblical studies, has also led the faculty in the development of a new policy around language that will affect grading and assignments.

The document recognizes that the language of theological education often prioritizes a white expression of English and affirms the existence of dialects in our culture that are also effective and valuable ways of communicating.

This spring, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky announced the Kevin and Barnetta Cosby Seminary Scholarship for American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS).

This full-tuition scholarship is awarded to 10 entering students as an act of repair and opportunity. It is likely the first ADOS scholarship in the United States.

In July, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky announced Lewis Brogdon as visiting professor of preaching and black church studies.

<https://ethicsdaily.com/breaking-down-racial-roadblocks-in-theological-education/> August 28, 2019 David Cassady

To support students at Baptist Seminary of Kentucky's Simmons College campus, click [here](#).

Baptist Seminary of Kentucky is already being shaped and formed by our presence at Simmons College.

As our students journey with us in black space, we are witnessing the power of their insights, creativity and energy toward a new community that brings joy to God and promises transformation for congregations.

Editor's note: This article is part of a series this week focused on trends and issues in theological education. Previous articles in the series are:

[*Churches, Pastors Can Access Tailored Theological Education*](#) | David Bronkema

[*Why We Must Rethink Theological Education in Time of Flux*](#) | Lina Toth

[*6 Ways Seminaries Train Church Leaders on Their Home Turfs*](#) | William D. Shiell

[*Serving the 90%: The Challenge Facing Theological Education*](#) | Dennis Tucker