

Tears to hearts—Baptist Seminary of Kentucky responds to racial injustice

By DAVID CASSADY

As the United States grapples with a past and present rife with racial injustice, particularly toward American descendants of slavery, what might theological schools offer in this painful but teachable moment?

In his afterword for *Disruption and Hope*, Daniel O. Aleshire writes, “Theological schools are about ideas, big ideas that begin with the love and grace of God, continue with the goodness and justice of God, and end with hope in the mercy of God. These ideas shape and mold; they bring revelation to minds and tears to hearts. They give meaning to life and evoke action in the world.”

Several ideas are shaping and molding the journey of the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky (BSK) as we have found ourselves compelled to act. We are learning to follow through the gift of partnerships, our curriculum is being transformed as we learn, and we are discovering ways to evoke action in the world.

Formed in 2002, BSK is a freestanding seminary that offers a single degree—the Master of Divinity—with concentrations available in pastoral care and counseling or rural ministry. Students may pursue a degree in Georgetown, Louisville, or online. Since its inception, BSK has partnered with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF)—a theologically moderate to progressive group centered in the South. Our commitment to adding new partners has helped diversify our student body beyond the predominately white CBF constituency. Over the past three years, BSK has moved from having less than 15% non-white students, to now having a student body with more than 50% African Americans. Our faculty, staff,



administration, and trustees are predominantly white, yet BSK has found itself called into the work of racial justice, particularly in Louisville—Kentucky’s largest and most diverse city.

Following

In 2018, BSK accepted an invitation from Dr. Kevin Cosby, president of Simmons College of Kentucky, to establish a site on that historically Black institution’s campus in Louisville. Cosby welcomed BSK to campus.

“In most instances, racial integration has always been a unilateral process where Blacks move into white space,” Cosby said. “BSK has reversed this model and decided to move into Black space. This is a reversal of the white flight of former generations.”

Moving into “Black space” has required BSK to assume a posture of following and learning. This is harder than it sounds, given that white institutions traditionally have set policy and direction from the standpoint of

the dominant white culture. Admittedly, our differing perspectives present challenges in decision-making and process execution. However, as we follow Black leadership, BSK is learning and, therefore, becoming a better institution.

The partnership with Simmons College led to opportunities to meet and learn from other Black leaders. Dr. Samuel Tolbert, president of the National Baptist Convention of America International, Inc. (NBCA), became a valued conversation partner. He helped BSK realize the enormous need for theological education across his denomination. Together, we grappled with how to mitigate the burdens of cost and to support quality distance education, allowing NBCA pastors to learn in-place where they serve. In February 2020, the NBCA named BSK its official seminary, with new students beginning their studies this fall. Two people from the NBCA have also been added to the BSK Board of Trustees.

Our presence in Black space, listening to Black leaders, has increased our awareness of the economic advantages our white tradition has been afforded. It also has awakened us to the awful burden racism has placed on American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS). In 2019, BSK established the Kevin and Barnetta Cosby Seminary Scholarship for American Descendants of Slavery, offering ten full-tuition scholarships to ADOS students each year. This is an act of reparations by BSK.

Changing

Theological education has too often emphasized white voices and stories over the exclusion of others. During the last two years, BSK has worked to revise its curriculum and other offerings to treat voices and content from the Black church tradition as canonical rather than supplemental. A Black and womanist theology class is now required of all students but—just as important—attention to Black and other suppressed voices is woven throughout our new curriculum, from spiritual formation, to courses on scripture and theological traditions/history, to pastoral care and other areas of practical theology.

In June—after the killing of George Floyd—BSK’s Flourish Center, with participation from all full-time faculty members, released a non-credit course titled, “America in Crisis; White Silence, Black Suffering, Protest, and Transformation.” With 85 participants from across 14 states, the series reflected BSK’s commitment to engage congregational education as a way of promoting meaningful change.

Connecting

I am often asked how schools might join the work of racial justice but I only have clues to share, given that BSK is still trying to discover our best role. Some of the ways we have found to live into solidarity and promote change is through connections with groups already doing good work.

In Louisville, one such group is Empower West. This Black-led ministerial alliance of white and Black pastors gathers regularly at Simmons College to strategize ways to work with local government, businesses, and community leaders to improve life and overcome challenges faced by predominantly Black West Louisville. Our participation among this group allows us to amplify and join in the work of a Black-led organization making a real difference on the ground.

As ministers and leaders in other states have learned of BSK’s partnerships with Black organizations, we have found ourselves fielding questions about how congregations might develop effective strategies and partnerships in their contexts. One response has been to connect these leaders to those leading this work in Louisville. We do not have answers, but we can play a role in networking. During this past summer—as racial tensions have mounted—we were invited into conversations with Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, and others seeking to address racial dynamics within their own congregations and communities.

Perhaps BSK and other theological schools can best “evoke action” around the work of racial justice by

forming connections with Black-led groups and then seeking to connect congregational leaders with these resources. It will take all our efforts to produce the kind of systemic change needed to truly bring about a better future characterized by “the goodness and justice of God.”

Inaction and silence are not options for theological schools. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Our lives begin to

end the day we become silent about things that matter.” While our public statements matter, perhaps theological schools speak most effectively through action. This includes rethinking our curriculum, forging transformative partnerships, and inviting our networks to learn and act alongside those seeking justice.



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