

Odyssey Impact launches Odyssey Fellows program for seminarians

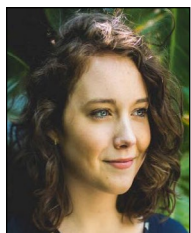
BY KATIE GIVENS KIME

Odyssey Impact, a team of film and social justice professionals based in New York City, creates social impact campaigns to build awareness around critical social issues weighing on society and landing at the doorsteps of congregations. This fall, Odyssey Impact launched the Odyssey Fellows program, supporting seminarians who are working in faith communities and engaging difficult civic issues from faith perspectives.

The pilot phase of the initiative begins in Atlanta, where two MDiv students will guide conversations around race and mass incarceration within their congregational contexts, using documentary film resources provided by Odyssey Impact and its partners.

"The Odyssey Fellows program is a natural next step in Odyssey's 30-year history of engaging with faith communities on the toughest issues in the public square," said Nick Stuart, CEO of Odyssey Impact. "We're excited to support and equip the next generation of faith leaders and learn alongside them and their congregations as we help fortify community coalitions in Atlanta, working on the complex problems embedded within our criminal justice system."

In addition to partnering with seminaries to select promising students, Odyssey selected two Atlanta faith communities that demonstrated readiness to take their



engagement of the issues of race and mass incarceration to a more advanced level. This inaugural class of Fellows are **Erica Bitting**, a second-year MDiv student at Candler School of Theology

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at Emory University, serving at Peachtree Road United Methodist Church, and **Vincent Jones, Jr.**, a third-year MDiv student at Columbia Theological Seminary, serving at Wheat Street Baptist Church.



"I am excited about the opportunity to engage Wheat Street Baptist Church and the Sweet Auburn community in new conversations surrounding mass incarceration," said Jones. "Wheat Street has a rich 150-year history of fighting for social justice issues, so this partnership with Odyssey provides the opportunity to contribute to its legacy in provocative and innovative ways."

"Peachtree Road has recently been engaging the difficult issues of race and justice, and has had some prison ministry efforts," says Bitting. "We're energized to take on a difficult systemic issue in new ways. It's exciting to help think about these challenges, and the opportunities for connection that arise with engaging documentary films."

Odyssey Fellowships operate within the field placement programs of each theological education institution, respecting the intentional design behind structures like those at Candler and Columbia.

"Candler is excited to more formally partner with Odyssey Impact, given the high caliber and faith and justice focus of Odyssey documentary films," said Dean Jan Love. "Candler's nationally recognized Contextual Education Program continues to innovate with congregational placements that are intentionally networked to help effect the change we all are excited to see:

Bitting and Jones will have the support and wise counsel of an advisory team of Atlanta leaders with experience thinking about faithful responses to issues of race and mass incarceration:

- *Liz Bounds, Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, Candler School of Theology of Emory University*
- *Melissa Browning, Interim Director and Visiting Assistant Professor of Contextual Education and International Partnerships, Columbia Theological Seminary*
- *Elizabeth Corrie, Associate Professor in the Practice of Youth Education and Peacebuilding and Director of the Religious Education Program; Director of the Youth Theological Initiative, Candler School of Theology of Emory University*
- *Billy Michael Honor, Director of Faith Organizing, New Georgia Project*
- *Christina Repoley, Senior Director of Experience Design, Forum for Theological Exploration*
- *Paul Roberts, President, Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary*

formation of strong, faithful, and creative leaders, and vitalization of congregations through engagement of civic issues.”

President Leanne Van Dyk noted, “Columbia Seminary deeply respects the values and vision of Odyssey Impact and we are pleased to partner with them for the purpose of forming pastoral leaders for the critical issues of our world.”

The goal of Odyssey Impact is to build awareness around an issue helping to shift attitudes while nurturing positive actions to show how connecting a community can increase the purpose and power of faith. Recent issues addressed can be seen through some of Odyssey's powerful stories produced or co-produced by Odyssey's production company, Transform Films:

- “Serving Life,” documents an extraordinary hospice care program at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, America's largest maximum-security prison, exploring the spiritual aspects of end-of-life care in the context of American incarceration.
- Similarly, “Milwaukee 53206” chronicles the lives of those living in the zip code that incarcerates the highest percentage of black men in America, up to 62%. The intimate stories of three 53206 residents give a glimpse to the high toll that mass incarceration takes on individuals and families that make up the community.
- Due for release in 2020, “Run for His Life” tells the story of parenting through the prison walls in following the life of Pete Monsanto—a celebrity photographer running the 2018 New York City Marathon as a way of connecting with his father and furthering criminal justice reform.
- “The Sentence” explores the devastating consequences of mass incarceration and mandatory minimum drug sentencing through the story of Cindy Shank, a mother of three young children serving a 15-year sentence in federal prison for her tangential involvement in a Michigan drug ring years before. Winner of the 2018 Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival, the film has been acquired by HBO.

Through the course of their field/contextual education unit in the 2019–2020 academic year, the Fellows’ work will have two phases. In the fall, they will engage various subsets of their congregations using the power

of documentary film to spark conversation. These conversations, paired with engagement of those affected by incarceration, will shape discernment of exactly how the Fellows and the congregations feel moved to act.

In the spring, congregations will partner with other Atlanta faith communities and justice organizations to enact a larger response, in addition to expanded responses within their congregational contexts.

“We know that the field/contextual education component of theological education is where the rubber meets

the road for the development of faith leaders,” said Katie Givens Kime, who oversees the program as director of city partnerships for Odyssey Impact. “And, within congregations, we know that when seminary interns are properly supported, they are often allowed to experiment with different ways that they might engage on tough issues with new community partners. Everybody wins—tough conversations are advanced, new partnerships are built, and faithful action happens.”



Katie Givens Kime is Director of City Partnerships for Odyssey Impact, based in New York City.