



Accomplished African American Women Continue Their Journeys at Duke Divinity School

The face of the nation's divinity schools continues to change as more professionals pursue a theological education as a way to meld their high-profile careers with a love of scholarship and their passion to make a difference in the church and the world.

"We celebrate dynamic Black Christian women and rejoice to share in their ministry formation, particularly during March, Women's History Month," says Dr. David Emmanuel Goatley, Research Professor of Theology and Black Church Studies; Director of the Office of Black Church Studies; and Associate Dean for Vocational Formation and Christian Witness. "Duke Divinity School is enriched by the experience and wisdom of women like those we highlight this month. They thoughtfully interrogate ideas and assumptions that were formed without their contexts in mind. This makes us all better."

About 20% of Duke Divinity School students are African American. They are continuing their theological studies in response to God's call and want to enhance their learning, revamp their ways of thinking, and come up with solutions that may not change the whole world but make it better for those living in the margins.

We present four women with impressive credentials and inspiring resumes whom the Spirit led to Duke Divinity School to test and contest established notions and, perhaps, create new rules that challenge both church and state. Here are their profiles:

Sonja Natasha Brown, JD: 'Burning Could No Longer Be Contained'

Judge Sonja Natasha Brown is a highly accomplished lawyer and a former deputy district attorney for DeKalb County, Georgia. She is now an associate judge on the Cobb County Magistrate Court in the state and is active in several local bar associations and her Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. To say she is passionate about her work in the justice space and in her community tells only half the story. For the past 15 years, she has known that she also had another calling: a call to ministry.

Raised a Methodist in her native Freeport, Bahamas, and active for many years in her current church, Central United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Brown never felt her path was ordination as a pastor or elder. If not that, then what? she wondered. Brown worked with her church's youth, taught Christian education classes, and prayed for discernment about what the call to ministry might actually look like for her. "I put it off until that burning could no longer be contained," says Brown. She had to find a way to bridge what she was already doing in the world with what she was called to do in the church. "I started researching what could be a happy marriage," Brown says in explaining how she ended up doing theological studies.

She told God that if going back to school was the plan, she needed two things: A school that was affiliated with the United Methodist denomination and a seminary offering a hybrid program that would allow her to do work in the context of faith and justice and social action as well as in ministry and advocacy. She started researching, believing that such a program did not exist. "But then there was Duke, as perfect as it could be," she says.

She began her studies at Duke in 2020 and expects to graduate in 2022 with a Master of Arts in Christian Practice. She is also working on getting a Certificate in Faith-based Organizing, Advocacy, and Social Transformation. "I told myself I'm going to trust God and go where God told me to go and not to ask questions." Brown says there are more than two dozen students in her cohort at Duke and most have been out of college for more than five years. The program is set up for people who already have a profession "to engage in

disciplined theological work and use their Christian service in the world," says Brown who, although she is a lay member, is in the preaching rotation at Central United.



Brown earned her bachelor's degree from Clark Atlanta University and the Juris Doctor from John Marshall Law School in Atlanta. Finding time for another degree program given her busy schedule has not been easy. She currently serves on John Marshall's Alumni Board Association and the Board of Trustees of the North Georgia United Methodist Conference. "As bad as Covid-19 has been, it has created space for me," Brown says. Scheduled in-person sessions of the Duke program moved online as did her work on community boards and committees.

As far as her job, Brown says she went home on March 13, 2020, and didn't come back to the office until January 2021. "That helped a lot — being in the virtual world and sitting down and prioritizing and listening to what God is calling me to do."

The oldest of three girls, Brown says neither of her parents were surprised by her move toward ministry. Perhaps that is because Brown is named for her aunt S. Annette Poitier, an educator and licensed local pastor in the Bahamas, who has served as the Methodist church's representative to the World Council of Churches and on various Methodist boards internationally.

Brown carries in her spirit a sermon she heard just weeks after accepting the call 15 years ago. Rev. Dr. Byron Thomas, then-pastor of Central, who — in speaking about God's keeping power when we confront hard times in life — used the analogy of a palm tree in a hurricane that bends but never breaks for those who are rooted and grounded in the truth of who God is in our lives.

"Being a Christian doesn't make it easy to do life, it makes it possible to do life," she says. Brown did not see many women in powerful roles in the church growing up, so she hopes those who look at what she is doing will be empowered to own and use their voices in the church, whether they are in law or healthcare or other areas where women are working and giving back.

Linda Silver Coley, PhD: 'The Poor and Oppressed Will Be Blessed Through You Who Follow Jesus'

If you ever wonder why it's so tough to defeat poverty and injustice, Dr. Linda Silver Coley recommends reading Ephesians 6:12 (KJV): "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

Coley, a brilliant woman with a slew of degrees, is currently at Duke Divinity School on a dual quest — to attain her Master of Divinity and heighten her sensitivity to evil, specifically how it is responsible for socioeconomic ills. In an interview and during a recent sermon at the school's Goodson Chapel, she spoke of the "clear direction from the Holy Spirit" to come to Duke and explore her theory.

"I now understand that I was sent to become more conscientized about religious extremism and poverty and injustice in our society

so that I might be more actively involved in seeking innovative solutions," says the daughter of a custodian and domestic worker. Her husband, Bobby, is a retired corporate Vice President of manufacturing and product development of a Dutch confectionary company, and a fast food and UPS franchisee.

Coley argues that racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism give birth to and sustain poverty and injustice for too many in the U.S. and around the world. But those things are not the cause of those conditions. Evil is, she declares, adding that the church as an institution must play a greater role in fighting it.

"Instead of looking at the outcomes — inadequate housing, disparities in healthcare, education, and employment — I'm looking at evil in high places and seeing if there's a way to address that,"

says Coley, whose academic and professional credentials crisscross science, business, and theology. “We should be addressing evil. If we address the root cause of the social disparities, I believe we would get more at the problems.”

She points at duplicitous politicians and churches that support them as reminders that evil resides in high places and twists justice for its own purposes.

Says Coley: “How can we ever forget that the white supremacists and Christian extremists who (stormed the U.S. Capitol) claimed the love of God and the love of country equally. Therein lies the problem for God’s church. When anything or anyone is an ‘and’ with the name of God, the idolatry that 8th century B.C. prophets warned us about is alive and well.”

Some in the mob carried a Confederate flag, a noose, and a cross — “intergenerational and persistent symbols of hate, intimidation, and marginalization,” she says. “The work of justice is hard because the evil of hate is also intergenerational, and it is persistent,” she adds, alluding to lynchings in the late 19th and early 20th century and the 2020 killing of George Floyd by police.

Ultimately, Coley sees herself as a peacemaker who wants to apply innovative solutions to social and economic challenges. She says

her background and time at Duke will make her ready to answer whatever God assigns her to do when she graduates in May.

“I know that it’s the Holy Spirit that has guided me and helped me to choose courses and do the work,” says Coley, who relishes the

academic freedom and support Duke offers. She will add the M.Div. to her other degrees — Ph.D. in Business Administration from the University of Cincinnati; MBA in Marketing from Xavier University in Cincinnati; M.S. in Pharmaceutical Chemistry from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; and B.S. in Chemistry from Bennett College, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Coley hopes that looking at social challenges in new ways — such as through integrating theology with public policy, business and social innovation — may lead to new solutions, even as activists continue to confront establishment power and demand positive change. And she believes her comfort in the corner office and serving alongside the downtrodden on the street will lead to new

revelations.

“When you follow Jesus, you can end up in places that may not make sense at first glance,” she says. “Then one day, you will receive a God wink that will signal perhaps you are here for a time such as this.”



Sequola Collins, PhD: ‘I’ve Been Critically Chosen to Carry This Cross’

Rev. Sequola Collins has walked through the valley of the shadow of death and emerged victorious — but not without a struggle. It took a year of surgeries and other treatments to triumph over a critical illness in 2010.

“At the beginning of the illness, there was no guarantee of survival. I began to give my clothes away to my daughter, and I told my family which robe to bury me in,” says Collins, a Duke Divinity School Doctor of Ministry candidate, who is also a U.S. Army vet, an engineer, and director of bereavement at Russell Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Durham, North Carolina.

A cancer survivor, she sees herself as uniquely qualified to help bare the cross and pain of others, as a bereavement specialist. “As a cancer patient, I was in the face of so much grief and death,” says Collins, who enjoys baking, running and theater with her adult daughter, Destiny, an actress. “I have been able to comfort people because I can say, ‘I know what you’re going through,’ when others could not say the same.”

Collins, who is called “Cola,” says her calling to comfort families who are experiencing loss and death is from God. “I’ve been critically chosen to carry this cross. And what a humbling cross it is, to be able to walk alongside those that are suffering.”

She feels she is being led to a new place in her ministry, which is why she is working on a third doctorate at Duke. She is not sure what her new assignment will include but she trusts the Holy Spirit will reveal it at the appropriate time.

“God is preparing me for what’s to come,” says Collins, who will earn a D.Min. degree from Payne Theological Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio, in May 2021. She already holds a Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering from North Carolina A&T State University; a master’s in Christian Practice from Duke University; a master’s in Software

Engineering from Kennesaw State University, and a bachelor’s in Computer Science from Fayetteville State University. “God has shown me that God is the ultimate engineer, creator and designer of my life.”

She believes a divine plan put her at Duke Divinity with other African American women of remarkable accomplishment and enlightenment who are continuing their academic and spiritual journeys in an environment Collins feels is dynamic.

“At Duke, I found a heightened level of scholarly involvement,” says Collins. “It comes across so plainly in class where I have professors who are not only gifted, but they also have a very deep passion about what they do. They artistically present data points; and when you apply your ministry and uniqueness to the chart, you will be able to create a larger picture or see the picture better.”

Collins has founded two nonprofits — Marching Orders, which educates vets about benefits and compensation — and Critically Chosen Ministries, which provides health-related education to cancer patients. She acknowledges that with success, she has experienced failure and loss. Yet, she is strengthened in knowing that “when you can’t trace God’s hand, trust God’s heart.”



Nancy Nealius, PsyD: 'God Bamboozled Me'

When you see something wrong, you should say something. That's what Dr. Nancy Nealius does with patients in her work as a licensed clinical psychologist. And that's what she is doing now in her work consulting with churches, particularly those grappling with some of the challenging issues of today, such as sexual abuse, racism, and the need to recognize the importance of mental health.

"While it has opened up for women to speaking into such things, it's still very hard," said Nealius, who earned her bachelor's degree at Winthrop University in South Carolina, her master's degree in counseling and psychology at Troy University in Alabama and a doctorate in psychology at Illinois' Wheaton College. "I tell people that God bamboozled me into going into psychology," says Nealius, who had originally planned to become an architect.

But her expertise has given her the opportunity to make a difference. "I found that I would go into spaces and people would have a hard time hearing me; or maybe the women would hear me, but the men would have a hard time," she said. "I went through a season of prayer and trying to discern what my next steps should be," she said. That led her to enroll in Duke University's Master of Divinity program. "I really wanted a stronger theological background to talk to pastors and lay leaders about some of the ways in which they were twisting scripture" in dealing with the concerns brought to them by their members. Perhaps some even believe in doing so that they know what's best for their members. "But that's not Jesus-like. It's not something Jesus would do," she says. "If we want a healthy church, these are some things that we need to work on."

She's heard pastors tell rape victims that rape should be forgiven and left in the past as they preached about the biblical story of King

David's daughter Tamar, who was raped by her brother. That type of teaching is "disheartening and actually scary," and can leave victims of rape feeling confused and ashamed. "On one hand you're preaching a sermon where it feels like you're bringing light to a subject and on the other hand you're saying, 'we'll keep it quiet.'"



In some churches, members who have breakdowns, schizophrenia, or other severe mental illnesses are shamed or ridiculed or spoken of as possessed instead of being supported and encouraged to get the psychiatric help they need. "Where I'm from, there's even a stigma around children who have special needs," Nealius says. Fortunately, a lot of larger churches now are trying to create special-needs ministries for parents whose children are on the autism spectrum or need special care. But it's still a challenge for smaller churches that don't have the human resource.

Nealius says her goal in pursuing a theological degree is to enable her to fully bring her expertise in the mental health world into spiritual communities and make a difference. "The church is taking quite a beating — some of it fair and some of it unfair — because of the way it addresses some of these issues," she said. "I very much love the global church and seeing the beauty of God in creation. So, it's out of my love for God and for the body of Christ that I want to do that."

Nealius grew up Baptist in Aiken, South Carolina, and although neither of her parents were ministers, she comes from a large extended family that has a rich ministerial tradition. Her father was killed in a car accident 13 years ago. Last year, Nealius took a leave from her studies at Duke and moved to Augusta, Georgia, to be a caregiver for her mother. She plans to return to her studies this summer or fall. In addition, she will be teaching an online spiritual formation class at Huntington University in Indiana this summer.

Duke Divinity School engages in spiritually disciplined and academically rigorous education in service and witness to the Triune God in the midst of the church, the academy, and the world.

The Office of Black Church Studies (OBCS) enriches the work and witness of Duke Divinity School with theological and spiritual resources from Black Church from the Black Church for the Whole Church.

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