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YOLANDA M. NORTON and BEVERLY WALLACE

Doing the Work One's Soul Must Have

So why all this talk about Vocation? It is to do the work the one's soul must have. It is also a recognition that if we as a community are ever truly going to take seriously the work of racial reconciliation and deconstructing racism and patriarchy, the work can not only be focused on deconstructing systems of power. The work must also center on the flourishing of marginalized groups. This is the understanding of Dr. Kimberly Crenshaw who coined the world "Intersectionality" and is also the work of Womanist Scholars. We recognize in our vocational calling now is the time when Black women scholars and leaders of the

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church must come together to create initiatives that contribute to new generations of Black women leaders who can shift the way that people live in the world. This is what the Womanist Experiential Learning Initiative is all about.



The Womanist Experiential Learning Initiative, a collaborative work of Womanist Hebrew Bible Scholar Dr. Yolanda Norton and Pastoral Theologian Beverly Wallace, will provide students with the opportunity to explore a theological perspective engaged by many African American women theologians—one that takes serious and centers Black women's voices and scholarship as a viable source and resource for theological education. A portion of this project, in concert with the work of the Office of Justice for Women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will allow young women in high school, college,

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Beverly Wallace, PhD, MDiv, an ordained Lutheran clergywoman, is the Associate Professor of Congregation and Community Care at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Dr. Wallace is a member of the Steering Committee of the Lutheran Association of Teaching Theologians, the ELCA's Theological Roundtable, and the Conference of International Black Lutherans—the African and African diasporic teaching theologians of the Lutheran church and is also a member of the Society for the Study of Black Religion. The ELCA's Womanist Initiative, a pilot project for the engagement of ELCA seminaries in providing "womanist" course offerings to their students, is the brainchild of Dr. Wallace.

and seminars “to step into their questions and reconsider their assumptions,” engaging in theological exploration viewed through the lens of race, class, and gender.

The Beyoncé Mass—a Christian womanist worship service that uses the music and life of Beyoncé as a tool to cultivate an empowering conversation about Black women—their lives, their bodies, and their voices. This mass introduces individuals to this womanist understanding. It is a space that encourages a practice of Christian faith that sees and acknowledges people where they are and for who they are. The Mass is a space story, Scripture, and song that calls for the liberation of all people by creating welcome, fostering healing, and engaging contemporary conversation and culture as a part of Christian identity and praxis. Additional “host” spaces are needed to share this experience.

The Womanist Experiential Learning Initiative is also working to provide Black female students at the undergraduate level the opportunity to study abroad in countries like Portugal, Brazil, and Ghana, where they can learn about global intersectionality and participate in service-learning opportunities with Black girls in these locations. We know that studying abroad expands the cultural horizons of students, but this intentional work is also intended to help Black girls who attend predominantly white institutions develop a social and learning network that can combat the isolation they often feel. In addition, this study abroad initiative will be tied to the Black Girl Magic Academy—a new program being launched by a new nonprofit—the Global Arts and Theology Experience—in conjunction with a range of church, academic and community partners.

In addition, the Womanist Experiential Learning Initiative, will pilot The Black Girl Magic Academy in three cities in the United States and two outside of North America. This program will focus on Black girls between the ages of 13 and 17 years old. The curriculum will be a year long experience and will allow them not participate in virtual learning opportunities with their peers around the world but also work with Black young adult women in their context to expand their learning beyond what traditional educational systems provide.

Already several seminary students have taken it upon themselves to engage in this women learning in our Lutheran Seminary. One student explored the use

of a womanist pedagogy with women in prison. Another student is looking at how to engage the arts, specifically opera to share the story of a displaced African American community. And another student is learning about how to use a womanist way of knowing for spiritual direction with the LGBTQI+ community. As part of the reflection on her womanist reading, this same student wrote:

It was in bell hooks' book, Sisters of the Yam, that I found language to describe the pain that I had seen within myself. The daunting reality of being a Black queer woman oftentimes feels like too much to bear, and in order to do so day to day, I had to shut down pieces of myself. I could not go through the day bearing all of myself, knowing that I am the very thing that the white cisgender, heteronormative capitalist society that I live in works so hard to diminish. In abandoning these parts of myself, I have become numb and stuck in survival mode. The grief of that is a lot. There have been countless times where I thought that it was not worth surviving, staying in this world. But it was trusted community that brought me back, and kept me here. Every day it has been their words, smiles, or even a touch that has given me enough strength to carry on to the next moment. Sisters of the Yam helped me to understand this part of my story. Through hooks' writings, I was able to see that I am not alone, that my experiences are not odd, but rather a part of a legacy of surviving, and thriving, because of community. I am because we are.

And another 23 year-old student who was newly exposed to Womanism through her experience with the Beyoncé Mass said: “I’m going to get a concentration in Womanist Theology even if that concentration is not offered.”

The impact of this work is tremendous. To expand this work to colleges and universities, congregations and communities with learnings also in a global context, will assist Black women and persons who want to see the legacy of humanity through the lens of Black women will help inform the world. Our hope too is that this work will inspire, equip, connect and support Black women (and other students) divinely motivated to serve as change makers in their communities doing, as Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon often said, “the work—their vocational calling—that one’s soul must have.”