CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF THE CENTER FOR THE CHURCH AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE
This special edition of Aware magazine is dedicated to the founders of the Office of the Church and Black Experience, predecessor of the Center for the Church and the Black Experience at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary.

Bold leadership is far too often sidelined in the name of political correctness. We are indebted to the ways in which your aggressive, creative, and Spirit-filled leadership has left us all changed forever.
A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR OF CBE

"[I’ve] begun this letter five times and have torn it up five times. I keep seeing your [faces]..."

In a very Baldwin-esque sense, I write to you, both in the spirit of sobriety and hopeful expectation. This edition was intended to arrive in your mailboxes sooner. But in the time between the initial “drop date” several months ago and today, much has changed. In fact, the world in which we find ourselves is stunningly different. So much so, the editorial team and I decided to pause production. Contributors amended their writings, some things were taken out and others added, all so that we might be able to offer—ethically—a vibrantly Black edition of the Aware magazine, commemorating the Center for the Church and the Black Experience’s (CBE) 50th anniversary and in ways that speak to the urgency of the present.

It’s no secret that implicit racial bias and racism (broadly) both fracture and constitute this country’s social landscape. Police killings of Black and Brown folks, with impunity—a tradition beginning, in earnest, with the so-called “slave codes”—have revealed this on a macro scale. On a micro scale, recent events in the life of the seminary have reminded us that all institutions must constantly reckon with the ways in which they, themselves, oftentimes imbibe the very same race-based, gender-based, sexuality-based, and class-based assumptions that they simultaneously claim to disavow. This is the nature of institutions.

So, understandably, situating this edition within the context of these realities is a delicate task. But it is also the CBE’s attempt to be a faithful steward of present-day history-making.

I, therefore, invite readers to understand the CBE, its history, and the journeys of Africa-descended folks within our seminary community not as some shining victory of diversity and racial tolerance. Histories are never quite this simple. I’d invite us to refrain from the tendency—especially in these racially tense times—to dismiss these pages as irrelevant for anyone other than Black leaders, Black congregations, or Black communities. We are all implicated, and to believe otherwise, is a great and awful seduction.

In effect, I’d invite us to resist the urge to read these pages romantically—presuming that we have already arrived at some racially progressive utopia, as a nation or an institution. Instead, I hope that we read this special edition (and the stories it reflects) as a love letter of sorts, about the ways in which Black life continues to affirm its own beauty, ingenuity, forthrightness and ethics—especially in moments when institutions do not and cannot (indeed, are not built to) do the same. We should consider it a ballad about how room is made for God to move, an ode to how intentional Black community has become a balm for the daily indignities of racism and hetero-patriarchy. CBE is “an institution within an institution”—a pioneering center within a flagship seminary—striving to do justice and love mercy. That’s how I understand the CBE and the people who have spent many moons cultivating it.

I’m also aware that there are some reading this magazine who have little to no connection to Garrett-Evangelical or the CBE, how we imagine ourselves in the world, or how we try to affirm the uniqueness of Black experience. My prayer is that you find in these pages a message of hope.

Friends, I invite you to walk with us. Be inspired. Be convicted. Be re-committed to the work in the days ahead.

Taurean J. Webb
Center for the Church and the Black Experience
Director and Instructor of Religion and Race
Taurean J. Webb was named director of the Center for the Church and the Black Experience (CBE) in March 2019 after serving as interim director for the previous nine months. He replaces Dr. Angela Cowser, who left Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary to become associate dean of Black Church Studies at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Webb is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Morehouse College. He holds master of arts degrees in Black and cultural studies from Columbia University and Northwestern University, and he is currently completing studies in the doctor of philosophy program at Garrett-Evangelical. In the interview below, Webb talked about how he got to Garrett-Evangelical, why he is excited to lead CBE into its next 50 years, and what he sees as CBE’s role going forward. This interview was given in March 2019.

How did you get to Garrett-Evangelical?

I started my PhD journey elsewhere, completed exams, and then realized in order to have the intellectual freedom and collegial support that I needed to write the dissertation I was called to write, my research was best suited to a seminary. I transferred to Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in 2016. And for a range of reasons—but specifically, the cutting-edge theology faculty unit with whom I’d be able to study—Garrett-Evangelical was the logical fit for me.

You were named interim director of CBE in 2018 and director in 2019. Why did you say yes to these appointments?

I have always been passionate about administrative leadership, and I thought this post would allow me the creative flexibility to be both scholar and administrator, while really impacting today’s leaders. (In addition to becoming director of the CBE, Webb also joined the faculty as instructor of religion and race and will be named assistant professor of religion and race upon completion of his dissertation.) Additionally, I was deeply moved by the center’s storied history. It is no secret that the CBE rests in the tailwind of giants, since its inception, cultivating “leaders among leaders.” So, continuing that work, along with helping Black folks wrestle with what it means to be religious leaders, for church and world, in the 21st century, remains compelling.

After you were appointed, you said you would focus on building a strong financial and programmatic foundation for the Center. What did you mean by that?

Presently, the CBE is in pursuit of a $1 million dollar fundraising goal. So, when I mentioned strengthening its financial foundation, I meant just that. At present, we are a little shy of $650,000, and it’s our goal to reach the $1 million mark as a first of many milestones.

Regarding the programmatic foundation, I knew that one challenge of accepting this position immediately before the CBE’s 50th anniversary was that my first year would be spent planning celebration events. But aside from the 50th anniversary, I see the CBE programming organized into three pillars.

1) First, the CBE is a vehicle of student advocacy and support—for all students, but particularly reclaiming space for African and Africa-descended students. The support is academic and otherwise. We support activities like the Black student orientation at the beginning of the academic year and sponsor a tutoring program open to all students. We also try to support students when they need assistance navigating multiple departments at the seminary for complex non-academic challenges.

2) Pillar two would be our work as a community convener. We take seriously the collaborative work we are doing outside of Garrett-Evangelical. Ongoing partnerships with places like Northwestern’s Herskovits Library of African Studies, the Baha’i House of Worship in Wilmette, and several Evanston-based Black churches all help us live more deeply into our commitment to the communal production of knowledge.

3) The third pillar focuses on training present and future leaders to do public ministry. Contrasted to the first pillar that helps students succeed in the classroom, this pillar is intended to help students succeed in the world—a world full of complex
socio-political ministry needs. For instance, we’ve hosted trainings in local churches to better equip students interested in doing prison abolition and re-entry ministry in their congregations. Also, we’ve partnered with the Fleetwood-Jourdain Theatre to put on a production of Maya’s Last Poem, a historical fiction performance, written by Tim Rhoze, that imagines an encounter between Maya Angelou and God, as they complete her final poem. This was primarily intended to open our students to greater possibilities in creative worship arts ministries.

CBE has also been known for its scholarship. Where does that fit in?

The CBE is and has been an important research center for the circulation of knowledge related to the Black church experience. For example, this past fall, the CBE, the religious studies department at Northwestern University, and some external institutions partnered to convene the James Hal Cone Symposium. By all accounts, this was the definitive Cone commemoration to date. We have video archives of the experience, transcripts of papers presented, and other paraphernalia. With these materials and a host of other archives, we have a location for students, pastors, and scholars to come, research, and continue to produce scholarship that captures Black religious experience in Chicagoland and beyond.

How has the COVID 19 crisis affected CBE’s 50th Anniversary Events?

Many of our events occurred in January, February, and March of this year, but we have had to postpone events that were scheduled for later in the spring—a lecture, a worship service, and a couple of smaller ceremonies. The large event—our Founders’ Gala, originally scheduled for October—was also postponed.

What are some of the unique challenges facing Black students today?

Populations that are already marginalized in society are in a no less precarious position within institutions of higher education. We see that playing out in several ways: racial dynamics within the seminary, for instance. Or, we see it in the disproportionate number of Black students, especially those outside of the Pan-Methodist family, who don’t have the sufficient financial support they need when they come to seminary. I’ve had a number of students who have had to incur debt and find outside jobs to make ends meet, and that puts strain on their coursework. And imagine, these things are exacerbated when considering our international student population. This is one of the reasons that the CBE endowment is so critical.

Additionally, I’d note the general challenge of doing 21st century ministry in a way that helps Black communities flourish. In this COVID 19 moment, emerging data shows that in major metropolitan areas, Black (and Brown) communities have positive testing rates and death rates that are proportionately astronomical in relation to their percentage of the city’s population. A daunting task is helping our students figure out how to navigate ministry in a U.S. cultural context—for those who are U.S.-based—that generally cares little to nothing about Black and Brown folks. This moment reminds us of that. But if there is one thing that uniquely positions our seminary to do this work and not normalize the struggles, I think it is how we try to build Black community, imperfect as it may be.

Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the CBE?

There is one thing I didn’t mention that I think is important when considering how we’re trying to envision the CBE going forward. In addition to my work as an administrator and scholar of religion, I’m also a creative, who takes seriously the power of the arts in theological education (and higher education, broadly). I’ve been fortunate to be able to bring relationships (artists, gallerists, curators, conservation specialists, professional handlers etc.) from my work as a curator and producer to the seminary community to enhance this integration. The relationships have been especially important as we’ve launched both the “Maya’s Last Poem” Reading (referenced earlier) and the month-long exhibition featuring collage works from Andrea Coleman, a rising star on the Chicago visual arts scene. I’ll actually be producing an exhibition/show for Harvard University sometime next year that I hope to eventually bring to Garrett-Evangelical. These sorts of things illustrate an important theological point, as the CBE joins in the seminary’s commitment to the arts as a critical theological source. For us, cultural production that organically arises from communities is as much a sacred text as any other. The CBE takes this seriously—constantly re-imagining the sites of the sacred.
ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Since its founding in 1970, the Center for the Church and the Black Experience (CBE) has empowered and trained persons to be prophetic “leaders among leaders.” Fifty years later, CBE alums continue to make significant impacts on our churches, communities, and the world.

Aware recently reached out to CBE alums who graduated in the past 20 years to learn more about them and their ministries. Each was asked to consider the following question: Given what you know from your own vocational journeys and life experiences, why is it important to be mindful of the flourishing of Black community/communities? And how have you tended to this ministry work, especially in times like the present—overrun with challenge, fear, and uncertainty?

Dr. Kamasi C. Hill

History Teacher, Evanston Township High School
Chicago, Illinois

Doctor of Philosophy in Theology, Ethics, and Historical Studies, 2013

There are three primary reasons one should be mindful of the flourishing of Black Communities. The first reason is to sustain individual focus. It is truly important that one understands that their journey is unique. My journey as an educator, curator, and filmmaker has been one that has had many curves and twists, but I’ve been able to work out and through distractions because my journey has been unique.

The second reason is to develop a communal focus. This is one of the most difficult principles for me because I find myself at times disconnected with certain segments of the “community” because the notion of “community” is often fraught with several inconsistencies. However, what I have learned is that with the Black community, there are sub communities from within. As such, it has been important to find my own tribe.

The third reason is to reimagine and imagine what the world will look like. This is probably one of the most important features of my journey. The flourishing of the Black community cannot happen without an acknowledgement of both possibility and hope. As such, I try my best to create standards based on this imagination and reimagining.

And how have I tended to this ministry work, especially in times like the present—overrun with challenge, fear, and uncertainty?

As such I have tended to this ministry work to focus on a balance between existence and hope. That is to say, how do I prepare for the reality of what is happening on the ground while projecting for a better and more productive tomorrow? For me, it isn't simply a theoretical enterprise; it is a practice of moving through the world with the disposition of acknowledging this uncertainty.
Since the founding of this nation, the existential realities and treatment of Black and indigenous communities have been the quintessential barometer of this nation’s humanity and witness of the sacred commandment “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” The epic work, *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman is the call to the Christian church to examine its mission and ministries by the mindfulness and presence of flourishing Black communities. The incisive analyses of 21st century Black condition in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James Hal Cone (GBI 1961 and 1965), lays bare the transgenerational systemic disinheritance, disinvestment, and dehumanization Black families have endured. And the womanist voice of Katie Cannon speaks purpose, “Even when people call your truth a lie, tell it anyway.” This nation is in an epic storm – a kairotic moment.

The garden planted by the likes of Thurman, Cone, and Cannon, fertilized by the legacy of Samuel DeWitt Proctor, feeds my soul, in good times and bad times, to attend to the ministry of global justice to which we have been entrusted. As co-founder of the organization in 2003, I have seen us grow from a conversation to an institution. I have been blessed by the transgenerational testimonies that have allowed us to become a trusted partner of seminaries all over the nation. I have humbly been able to take our truth to the United Nations as a NGO. We stand in the gap for the many who are victims of systems of racialized oppression and degradation.

And, just in the past two months, the ravages of the COVID-19 virus has not only wrecked havoc throughout the world, but also in the United States, the disproportionate consequence upon the African American communities has unleashed individual and communal trauma, fear, and lamentation. The truth be told, the cry of Habakkuk echoes throughout Black communities in the United States and it is for such a time as this that I and the SDPC remain faithful, speaking truth to power, offering hope to the people, and standing on the ancestral witness of generations gone before us.

By God’s grace and mercy and the power of remembrance of what God has already done, we declare each and every day a new opportunity to sow seeds of resistance, interruption, and hope in the generations who follow. My life and the journey have taught me to never forget that, as African and woman, I was born in the image of God. God’s righteous claim for justice and Jesus’s promise of salvation are inextricably woven. It is my responsibility and honor to live and minister with conviction that the spirit of a Holy God rebukes evil and abides in all that is good.
When I look over my life and consider the reasons I have come to this space, I’m reminded of the influence of my parents and so many others who have gone on before me. I stand today on the shoulders of those who thought it was their duty and responsibility as a Christian to extend themselves on behalf of others. When I consider the works of Jesus Christ as my example for ministry, I am left with no other alternative but to be mindful of my Black community and its need to flourish in spite of the times we live.

Black folk historically have been challenged, facing fears and living with an uncertain future. This is a part of who we are, people who live in the midst of struggle, yet find a way to have hope for better days. The Gospel comes to provide hope and an expected outcome of liberty for all. So, my life experiences have shown me that even the “least of these” are yet made in the image of God. I’m reminded by a statement from Rev. Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. that we are all “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Therefore, I cannot look down on my sister or brother without having a desire to lift as I climb.

This is not unique for me, for we all are commanded to love one another and love should cause all of us to be moved to action and not be idle spectators. With everything I do, I try to ensure that my voice is the voice of those who represent the minority, voiceless, and often marginalized. Yes, we do live in turbulent times, and many of us are struggling to find God in the midst of this pandemic. However, I am compelled to shine a light on the cross of Christ and expose the darkness that exists in the world so that all people can be free. This is how I, as Dietrich Boenhoffer referred, share in “Christ’s large-heartedness.”

It’s important to be mindful of the flourishing of Black communities because we remain disinherit by dominant power structures and ruling bodies, to the point of death. Sadly, this isn’t only in the United States. Rather, this is throughout the African Diaspora. When the present COVID-19 pandemic arrived to the United States, many of us knew that it would be only be a matter of time before we had data that revealed that Black Americans were disproportionately impacted.

The Coronavirus thrives off of pre-existing physical conditions, both physical and political, and it has shown us, once again, which communities are most at-risk. In my ministry, I’ve worked collaboratively with the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) campus ministry professionals to bring creative, encouraging, and informative content to our students, while they’re navigating the abrupt change to remote learning and attempting to stay academically engaged. I’ve also built out my personal ministry platforms to include more digital resources, including at-home liturgies for Black women to do in their homes, live streaming, and podcasting. In so doing, I believe that I have created resources for spiritual nourishment that can be accessed from within the safety of one’s home, during this time of great anxiety.
Rev. Jon Robinson

Senior Pastor, St. Peter's AME Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Master of Divinity, 2008; Current Student in the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching Program, Class of 2021

For almost 20 years, I have been blessed to serve as a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest Black denomination in America. I have served in a ministerial capacity in Lisle, Illinois; Trenton New Jersey; Manassas, Virginia; Haymarket, Virginia; Chicago, Illinois; and presently, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

My ministry is a continuation of more than 200 years of prophetic service that has always recognized, celebrated, and affirmed the full humanity of a people who have historically been dehumanized.

In 1787, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and several other faithful Christ followers walked out of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia because they refused to be marginalized and relegated to second-class status in the house of God.

More than 200 years later, Black communities are still living in the margins, fighting to have our full humanity recognized. We're told that all lives matter, but whether it’s a lack of access to affordable healthcare, educational disparities, income inequality, food insecurity, the prison industrial complex, repeated acts of police brutality, gentrification, voter suppression, or generational poverty, America has continuously failed to recognize or honor the value of Black lives.

Yet, the prophetic legacy our ancestors bequeathed to us requires that we work to ensure the churches and communities we serve are able to flourish.

When I pastored in Chicago, we fed 500-600 people weekly through three feeding programs, and we partnered with the Boys and Girls Club of America to provide after school programming for 75 school age children. Since moving to Minneapolis in October 2019, we have launched youth mentoring and senior care programs, as well as a strategic partnership with local chefs to feed essential employees during the pandemic.

Although the ministry contexts in which I have served have been varied, the mandate “... to loose the bonds of injustice...” (Isaiah 58:6) remains the same. If we pay careful attention to the needs of the people around us and move beyond the comfort of our pews, God will empower us to provide impactful, transformative ministry.

Since 1502, Africans in the American diaspora have always found our circumstances to be fraught with uncertainty and trepidation. But we have also always found a God who meets us in the midst of our uncertainty and does exceedingly and abundantly above all we can ask or imagine.

In this season, when the viral COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of America’s original pandemics of racism and white supremacy have unleashed unprecedented chaos in Atlanta, Louisville, Kenosha, Minneapolis, and countless other cities, it is comforting to know, that even in crisis, the same liberating, transforming God our ancestors relied on is still at work in our midst, empowering our churches and communities to flourish.
LOOKING BACK, STEPPING FORWARD
A PHOTO EXHIBITION IN HONOR OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF CBE

The Center for the Church and the Black Experience (CBE) has served as a site of hospitality, inspiration, innovation, and hope for Black students, faculty, staff, and community members since its inception 50 years ago. This photo exhibit, displayed throughout the seminary’s campus in early 2020, seeks to commemorate select historical moments that highlight the beauty and brilliance of Black life cultivated through the intentional work of the CBE.

Curator and doctor of philosophy student, Gina A. S. Robinson, (picture on the top left), and creative director and master of divinity student, LaSheena Williams, (pictured on the bottom left), wrote: “This installation is not a full representation of the history of CBE. We know our history often goes beyond what is chronicled in archives, so we want to acknowledge the unnamed faces, unheard voices, and personal stories of the Black folks unrepresented in the annals. We honor your intelligence, leadership, voices, and bodily presence because without the collective effort of each Black person existing and persisting at Garrett-Evangelical, we would not have made it to this 50-year milestone. So, we celebrate every Black body that has inherently radicalized Garrett-Evangelical through irrevocable joy, artistic expression, Black brilliance, Black worship, impeccable fashion and style, bold leadership, transformative protest, and communal love. Take a look back by re-membering the past as we step forward into a moment of redefining and reimagining Black life for the days to come.”
The Looking Back, Stepping Forward photo exhibition seeks to capture more than 50 years of Black life at Garrett-Evangelical. Sifting through a host of archives—including seminary, university, and several private collections of key stakeholders—this exhibition’s curator and creative director hope to take participants on a historical journey that remembers and re-members the shoulders upon which the Center for the Church and the Black Experience’s extraordinary legacy stands.

To view the Looking Back, Stepping Forward photo exhibition online, go to Garrett.edu/CBE50.
Objectively speaking, Rev. Dr. Charley Hames, Jr. (G-ETS 2000) has known success in his almost 30 years in ministry. He is currently the senior pastor at Beebe Memorial Cathedral CME, one of the fast-growing CME (Christian Methodist Episcopal) churches in California with more than 3,000 members and 1,000 in worship each week.

Additionally, he is the author of two popular books, a sought-after speaker, and a long-standing radio show personality. He has been named “Pastor of the Year” by the CME 9th Episcopal District and was asked to pray over the U.S. Congress. In 2012, he was invited to the White House to discuss the killing of Trayvon Martin with President Barack Obama. And those are just a few of the highlights.

Yet, when asked about what he considers his greatest success so far, Hames said that it is connecting with people and watching them grow. “Seeing people’s lives change excites me more than some of the so-called pinnacle moments,” he said.

The desire to change lives is one of the reasons Hames and his wife created an endowed scholarship at Garrett-Evangelical. The Charley Hames, Jr. scholarship, which became fully funded and permanently endowed in February, will go to master of divinity students with financial need.

“I think it is critical to create scholarships because it allows you to make your mark on someone’s life permanently,” Hames said. “If you’ve been effective, successful, and faithful, you ought to give back. It’s a way to leave a legacy beyond your work.”

Hames was born and raised on Chicago’s south side. He heard his call to ministry at 17. After being saved at 16, Hames said he got so involved in church that he skipped his junior prom to go to choir practice. “I was just that much in,” he said.

About eight months after being saved, a woman who was active in his church said to him, “I believe you have a calling on your life.” Hames said he was confused at first. “The only pastors I saw were older grey-haired men and grey-haired women, and here I was 17,” he recalled.
He then took himself through a series of tests to determine if he did indeed have a calling and found them inconclusive. Finally, one Sunday morning, his father, who was not a church goer, walked by his room and said to his mother, “I think that boy is going to be a preacher.” From that moment on, Hames said that a still, small voice told him that “it’s time.”

“I knew then, I had to pursue this calling,” he said.

Hames went to Chicago State University, graduating in 1997 with a degree in African American studies. While at Chicago State, he decided to apply to Garrett-Evangelical. “There were several CME Christian Methodists who graduated from Garrett-Evangelical, and they influenced my decision to attend the seminary,” he said. Additionally, he said he was attracted to the student diversity at Garrett-Evangelical and its mantra of “faith brought to life.”

“I had a great experience at Garrett-Evangelical—both academically and socially,” Hames said. He served as vice president of the Garrett-Evangelical Black Seminarians and co-coordinator for Student Council. He also preached at Chapel multiple times.

Preaching was not new for Hames. A year before he enrolled at Garrett-Evangelical, he became a student-pastor at New Hope CME Church in Evanston, where he served until 2001, a year after he graduated from Garrett-Evangelical. In 2001, he went to Mt. Zion Church in Evanston and was "on loan" for a about a year. While serving those churches, he began his doctor of ministry degree in evangelism at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas.

While at New Hope CME, Hames met Dr. Evelyn Parker, a Garrett-Theological/Northwestern University graduate. She became a professor at the Perkins School of Theology and recommended the program to Hames, saying she thought it would be a good fit. He traveled back and forth to Texas and took intensive courses. He graduated in 2004.

In the meantime, Hames had accepted a post in California. In 2002, Bishop Henry Williamson, Sr., a graduate of Garrett-Evangelical who had known Hames since he was a teenager, suggested he go to a church in southern California. He spent one year at Curry Temple CME church in Compton, California, where he helped the congregation finish building its church. In the short time he served the congregation, weekly attendance at services went from 42 people to 350.

A year later, Bishop Williamson asked him to serve another church, Beebe Memorial Cathedral CME in Oakland, California. When he first arrived in 2003, there were only 81 members, and 38 of them passed away his first year. Today, 17 years later, there are more than 3,400 members.

In addition to leading a church, Hames has written two books, Pressing Reset: When Life Forces You to Start Over Again and Exchange: Trading Your Brokenness for Exceptional Purpose. He serves as chaplain of 100 Black Men of the Bay Area, Inc. and has been heard across the Bay Area as KBLX's (102.9 FM) “Voice of Inspiration" for the past 15 years.

Hames is married to Michelle Gaskill-Hames, senior vice president of Hospital and Health Plan Operations, Kaiser Permanente, one of the nation's largest healthcare providers. She is currently on the front lines of the COVID 19 crisis as she manages 11 hospitals and seven service areas for Kaiser in Northern California. One of her hospitals was in one of the most infected areas in California. "She's been in the trenches working 12- to 14-hours days," Hames said. The couple has three children—daughter Jael and sons Charles and Elijah.

Currently, Hames is a candidate for bishop in the CME Church. He said he evaded the suggestion to run for bishop for several years, but he now believes that it is the correct time for his candidacy. "I feel that I have an apostolic calling to share what I've learned about ministry and what I've learned about being effective and having a healthy church," he said. "I owe it to other pastors and leaders, so we can continue the great legacy of Methodism." The election will take place at the CME General Conference in 2022.

Hames said the foundation of his success over the years is his prayer life and his seminary degree. He also attributes his success to having strong interpersonal relationships and building systems that work.

At Beebe Memorial Cathedral CME, the mission statement to witness the word, worship the Lord, and walk in love is their system, Hames said.

“That is our discipleship process," he continued. “We ask people to share the Gospel, the good news of Christ with people. We get them to come to worship, then go back out and serve and walk in love. That starts the whole process over again."
Committed to Flourishing

Compared to other PhD-granting Methodist academic institutions, as well as predominantly white PhD-granting academic institutions overall, Garrett-Evangelical, proportionately, has one of the highest concentrations of Black-identifying PhD students in the fields of religion and/or theology. This is remarkable, and it, of course, has not happened accidentally.

It is partially attributable to the stellar quality of Black faculty that the seminary has maintained in every field. It is partially attributable to the cutting edge, integrative theological and justice-oriented work that has historically found a home here. But, in no insignificant way, it is also attributable to the ways in which Black folks, at Garrett-Evangelical, have been able to carve out intentional community for themselves.

We asked a few doctoral students to respond to the following question: When reflecting upon their seminary experience, alums say that the Garrett-Evangelical community is what made their theological education like none other. What has it meant for you to participate in carving out an intentional, Black community, as doctoral students within a predominantly non-Black institution? And how do you imagine this intentionality as enhancing both Garrett-Evangelical and your own vocational calling?”

Bryson White

Fresno, California
PhD: Theology and Ethics

Intentional Black community is of critical importance for Black students at all levels of education. At Garrett-Evangelical, my advisor Dr. Stephen G. Ray Jr., was intentional in bringing in a group of Black emerging scholars who can study in community and not have to face the soul damage that can result from being Black and isolated within a non-Black institution. I forged lifelong friendships with Black students at Garrett-Evangelical, as well as Northwestern University. This community deepened my confidence in myself as a person capable of high quality scholarship. Furthermore, crafting intentional Black community blessed me through the expansion of ideas, conversations of care, good food, big laughs, experiencing the broader Black community of Chicago, providing a home away from home. Without this community, my experience at Garrett would be drastically different.

A healthy, thriving, and valued Black community is critically important for an academic institution because Black scholarship matters. Black preaching matters. Black organizing matters. And these are just a few of the categories of vocation that Black students who attend Garrett-Evangelical are called into. Black students at Garrett-Evangelical can continue to push the institution in a progressive direction that can unsettle the racial architecture of the institution and re-train and re-direct students to return to their varied ecclesial commitments with new eyes to see what the Spirit is calling for the church to be in this moment of time.

My own vocational calling was enhanced by the Black community of Garrett-Evangelical through the affirmation that the intersection of scholarship and community organizing is a true vocational calling—I don’t have to pick between the two. Furthermore, in an era of resurgent white supremacy and white nationalism—which Garrett-Evangelical as an institution unfortunately reinforces—the gathering of Black people, the bonds formed, and the intellectual conversations held by Black colleagues, was a balm for my weary soul. As a Black student, navigating PhD studies in an institution intentionally structured for the flourishing of its white students has many difficulties: the not being seen, the felt judgment, the culture of anti-Blackness—ie, the explicit and implicit ways of being that deny, dismiss, or even unintentionally belie the dignity, experiences, work, ideas, or emotions of Black-identifying people. But all these dynamics are counteracted by my community support, a space wherein I feel seen, supported, encouraged, and loved.

I’m appreciative of the Black community that forges life at the periphery of Garrett-Evangelical; they provided me water in a dry land.
GINA A. S. ROBINSON

Hephzibah, Georgia
PhD: Christian Education and Congregational Studies

Beginning with the visit to Garrett-Evangelical the spring semester before embarking upon this leg of my scholarly journey, Black PhD students welcomed me with open arms. After completing my visit, I believed I would find genuine care and support from my colleagues. After arriving in Evanston and settling into my new home, I realized even more how much I needed this community.

As we all know...life happens! Break-ups, divorce, pregnancy announcements, fellowship awards, questioning calls to various spaces, and missing home are all experiences we supported one another through over the last three years. Intentionally carving out space for us to lament, experience joy, dance, laugh, or even sit in silence while trying to meet the demands of a doctoral program has been a way in which we affirm our humanity and celebrate Black life.

My Black PhD colleagues at Garrett-Evangelical are my chosen family, and we have formed a village. I am reminded by my village that while my work does matter to this world and will make a difference, I am more than what I produce. I am especially reminded of this by my sister-colleagues. Five of us started a tradition in fall of 2019, which we call “Monday Funday!” We pause on Monday afternoons to check-in with one another and hopefully do something our body needs, whether the activity is bike riding or sipping wine. During this time, we leave the woes and beauty of PhD life behind to simply be free Black women.

Each sacred moment shared with members of the village is a reminder that the divine Spirit continues to work in and through beautiful Black bodies. Our intentional community gives me the strength I need to forge ahead on my life’s journey.

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For me, the idea of “carving out” hearkens back to Black aesthetics of faith and practice where room is made for God and one another, often despite previous designation and external reservation. It is as much Lucille Clifton’s “shaping into a kind of life” as it is my grandmother’s command to make room at the table for an unexpected guest. Blackness, oftentimes at Garrett-Evangelical, has felt quite unexpected. And yet, when Black bodies gather to eat, gather to worship, gather to organize, I have found that room is made for God, ourselves, and others that leads to new possibilities and new ways of knowing/being known.

One such moment happened recently as the students gathered virtually on a Zoom call in protest of unilateral actions of the Board of Trustees. As students waited in solidarity, a solidarity that was birthed and burgeoned by Black women, a suggestion was made that we sing our Zion’s songs in this strange and unique time. And as we sang and called upon God as we knew Her, Spirit and the Holy Spirit’s powerful presence fell upon us, and we were made community. At no other time nor in any other moment have I ever felt so at home at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary than this. On this day, room was being made for Black flourishing in a way that was transformative for all who were blessed to be present.

Perhaps then, the power of making room is an aspect of divine life to which we all might aspire. Often initiated from a place of power and privilege, God’s call to me, to Garrett-Evangelical, to the wider world in this moment of upheaval seems to be: make room. Not on the margins. Not at the kid’s table. In the center. At the seats of power and influence. In the boardroom. In the classroom. In the spaces of worship and fellowship. Knowing and trusting that as we make room for one another, we also make room for the Spirit-filled power of liberation and transformation that lies at the heart of theological education.
BLACK FUTURES AND BLACK FLOURISHING

In what ways might a specific commitment to Black flourishing help us imagine a different type of future?

DR. BRIAN BANTUM

NEIL F. AND ILA A. FISHER
PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY

As we celebrate 50 years of the Center for the Church and Black Experience, we hold the witness and life of those who have taught, learned, and served at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. But our moment also asks us to turn and begin to imagine our collective future, an act that is no small task when it seems as though agents of death and systems of oppression only seem to strengthen and walk with impunity. In this critical moment, we might ask not only what will the future bring, but also what type of future should we imagine?

This act of imagination is a practice of holding time—stretching between past, present, and future. It is recalling the manifold and brilliant aspects of Black life, seeing people who continued to live, to work, to laugh, to create in the face of evil, a fact that can never be overlooked. Toni Morrison, who reflected on these acts of life that Black people continued to assert, asked, "Black people could be enslaved for generation after generation and recorded in statistics along with lists of rice, tar, and turpentine cargo, but they did not turn out to be cargo . . . Why was the quality of my great-grandmother's life so much better than the circumstances of her life?" Morrison's answer to this question invokes another ancestor, Bessie Head, who said, "We tolerate strangers because the things we love cannot be touched by them."

The things we love. When we love, we attend, we study, prepare for them. When we love, there is a peculiar admixture of intention and intuition. We orient our life around the person or the place or the thing. We give it a special place on a shelf or put it carefully in its box after each use. We know what makes them smile or shout, and we're sure to repeat it whenever they seem to be a bit down. But it's also intuition, it's spirit, it's the space between the sounds that fills in each note's meaning. When we love well, it seems almost natural, like it's in the roots and in the berries. Morrison is pointing us to the genius of her grandmother and her ability to create futures within her present. She created life in her midst because she believed there was life in her and in her people that was worth fighting for and worth preserving.

In the shadow of death, love imagines a future, a life that might be—and grasps at whatever it can to make that life possible. This love is not an instinct or an intuition of survival. Love is a technique, a posture toward observation and repetition and small innovations that slowly perfect the process. Not unlike a musician or a visual artist or a writer or a dancer, Morrison's grandmother saw something, heard a tune, and cultivated a life around that idea, that belief, what Emilie Townes would call, “the true, true.”

Academic tendencies can lean toward reconstructing histories or deconstructing problematic ideas and the afterlives of those ideas in our present. These scholarly approaches provide tools and frames to name processes and identify patterns in data that allow us to advocate for change and social transformation. At the same time, we also recognize that this wisdom has persisted in our communities from the very beginning. Black
people have cultivated strategies of rest and resistance and survival, but even more, found ways to flourish, (even if in moments) despite the unrelenting pressure of white supremacy. By flourish I do not mean measures of success counted by systems of capital. How can we measure success or flourishing using tools that presuppose our inhumanity as part of its calculus? By flourish, I mean that deep resonating song that hums within our history, that certainty that white power always seems to fear so ferociously—the knowledge that we know who we are—this is what they try to beat out of us, what they try to shoot dead, what they try to pen inside food deserts and prison walls. But it is a lesson that we too, too often forget or we diminish the brilliance and the wisdom and the power it takes to survive as a Black person in this world.

The art of survival always requires skills of diagnosis and critical reading of our context. It takes the leftovers and the discarded and makes them into something more than palatable; the art of survival creates sweetness and joy even in the shadow of bitterness. But can we hope for more than survival? More than getting by and settling for leftovers and making do in a world whose success is seemingly built on Black death?

Bessie Head gestures toward something more than survival. Where love is, people flourish. People are invited to know themselves, to discover themselves and one another. In so many ways, this is one of the legacies of the Black church that the CBE continues to carry. The power of the Black church was a body of people who confessed in their song and in their gathering and in their enduring, sometimes with a building, sometimes without, that their bodies and lives and persons were seen and loved and known.

The art of love, of flourishing is a creative act that requires us to see the ways our communities move and bend and hold together. Whether in meals or in weekly gatherings or in the timbre of the preacher’s voice, these small threads are always tied to deep histories of belonging and recognition. As we imagine a different future, we might be tempted to ask why do people not sing these songs anymore or gather in this building or say these prayers. But love is not a legacy. Love and flourishing are alive.

We also cannot ignore how the church has not always been a space of belonging or wholeness or life or love. And yet, outside those walls, Black people continue to create spaces of survival, even flourishing despite the efforts of the church to diminish or even kill who they are. There is no future without learning the techniques of flourishing. These communities continue to foster. A church committed to flourishing, a church committed to the radical and disruptive habit of nurturing life wherever it springs up, might also begin to discover its own future even as it lives into its past. And this future might turn up in surprising places.

I am reminded of one of the closing images in James Baldwin’s short story, “Sonny’s Blues.” The story is narrated by Sonny’s older brother, the one who had lived how he had been expected to. Sonny had struggled with addiction, spent time in prison, but he also played the piano. Baldwin nears the end of the story with the narrator happening upon his brother playing the piano, and this is what he saw.

Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn’t hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. (“Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin)

The art of Black flourishing is more than an accident. Perhaps if we let ourselves sit in the room with Sonny for a moment, we might find the creativity, the techniques, and the love that has animated Black life for this long. And in that dark room, we might see a glimpse of the freedom we all long for.
I hope you have enjoyed reading this issue of Aware. It is a joyous milestone to reach the 50th year of the Center for the Church and the Black Experience and to bear witness to its contributions to the wider seminary community and to its evolution in supporting Black faculty and students. We celebrate and are edified by the good news that Garrett-Evangelical is still educating and equipping our Black students to be “leaders among leaders.”

While this is indeed a moment of celebration, it is also a moment to renew our partnership with CBE in the commitment to be “weapons of light” not only inside the Garrett-Evangelical community, but also for the church and the world. However, the struggle for equity, for anti-racist embodiment in all that we do and teach, and for the dismantling of white normativity within our school continues. Our work is ongoing and must be so for years to come.

To put it in a larger context, as Christians we find ourselves inside a global, kairotic moment. God is at work. It is a moment ignited by the witness of the police killing of George Floyd, May 25, 2020. In full public view, with police and civilian bystanders, we watched as the life was literally suffocated out of Mr. Floyd. Though some verbal interventions were attempted, the presence of armed police officers made the situation seem too dangerous for anyone to physically attempt to stop the killing. Mr. Floyd had been detained for using an alleged $20 counterfeit bill, and for this, he lost his life.

As extended global protests continued, a cautious new hope emerged. This time we saw persons join together across many differences: religious, racial, generational, and LGBTQIA inclusive. This was not a predominantly Black protest but had become a broader human rights movement. These events and more have made a deep impact on many of us, and we recognize we are far past the hour of waking from our slumber. We are finally “mad as hell and we’re not taking it anymore” to quote a line from the movie, Network.

In a similar way, the Garrett-Evangelical community finds itself in a related kairotic moment. Recent events at the school have revealed again the insidious life of white normativity at work among us. I hasten to note that the matter of white normativity is only “insidious” to many of the white members of our community. For our Black students and colleagues, as well as our Asian, Asian-American, and Latinx community members, white normativity is all too real. We, the white, are blinded to the assumptions that our ways of doing, being, and working are universally preferred here and function as if they are superior to other ways of being community. It is not a moment to deny, to defend, or to run for cover. Neither have we edited this edition of Aware to accomplish such a thing. It is time we face into this institutional kairotic moment as an opportunity to proceed with humility, to listen, to learn, to take action, and to be transformed not only “by the renewing of our minds,” but also by our hearts. We simply must turn to new ways of being and doing that are truly hospitable and equitable for all our students, staff, and faculty.

I am moved by Dr. Bantum’s final reflection and the plaintive note in his observation of the “unrelenting pressure of white supremacy.” And, I am mightily encouraged by his belief that “where love is, people flourish.” Perhaps this is our best weapon of light. It is the love that we as Christians are called upon to embody in our relationship to God and to each other. Is it not from the root of such love, the love manifested in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that the deepest prophetic call for justice comes? Garrett-Evangelical is poised as never before to live into this kairotic moment. It will be hard work, but we have begun. Let us take great courage and embrace the gift of this opportunity from God.

Dr. Lallene J. Rector
President
The Center for the Church and the Black Experience (CBE) at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary has been a beacon of hope and inspiration for Black students, pastors, churches, and communities for 50 years. As the Center looks toward the future, CBE recognizes its unique position to become the leading academic center for teaching, research, action, and reflection on Black life and Black Church life.

To support this vision, Garrett-Evangelical seeks to create a $1 million CBE endowment. Thanks to gifts, pledges, and estate commitments from generous donors, we have already raised $650,000 toward our goal. This fully endowed fund will ensure that academic and vocational initiatives focused on the multifaceted nature of Black life remains an essential component of the seminary's institutional identity and curriculum. It will also preserve the seminary's legacy and further distinguish CBE as a center dedicated to improving the quality of life for Black people, the Black Church, and all people.

ENRICHING BLACK STUDENT LIFE ($200,000)
- Scholarships for Black Students
- Support Services for Black Students

EQUIPPING OUR GRADUATES TO BE TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE AGENTS ($200,000)
- CBE Black Alumni Network

SUPPORTING THE UNRESTRICTED FUND ($500,000)
- Unrestricted Endowment to Support Annual CBE Programming

ENHANCING BLACK CHURCH LIFE ($100,000)
- CBE in the Church and Community

Join us in making certain that future generations of “leaders of leaders” benefit from CBE’s work by joining our endowment campaign. By pulling together our resources as a community of friends and partners, we can meet and surpass our goal of $1 million.

In honor of the 50th anniversary of CBE, alumni and friends may consider gifts of $50 to $500 ($50 semi-annually over five years) or up to $50,000 or more ($5,000 semi-annually over five years). Each gift, of any level, will help us continue to resource Black seminarians, congregations, and communities.

To make a gift in support of CBE today, go to Garrett.edu/Giving and be sure to designate “CBE Endowment” in the “restricted to” field. To learn more about endowing CBE, visit the seminary’s website at Garrett.edu/LivingIntoOurPurpose or contact the Development Office at 847.866.3923 or by email at joe.emmick@garrett.edu.
THE BENEFITS OF A CHARITABLE BEQUEST

A charitable bequest is a wonderful way for you to help further the work of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and its mission.

There are many reasons why you might consider making a charitable bequest. Here are just some of the benefits of bequest giving:

- It costs you nothing today to make a bequest
- Your bequest can be changed down the road
- You can still benefit your heirs with specific gifts
- A bequest may produce estate tax savings
- You can leave a legacy through a bequest

To learn more about the benefits of bequest giving, contact us today at 847.866.3970 or visit us online at PlannedGiving.Garrett.edu.

Be sure to inquire about or download our free estate planning guide, Planning Your Legacy.