Michelle Alexander wins award, takes job at Union seminary

by Christian Century staff in the October 25, 2016 issue

Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, won a prestigious award and became a visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City as she focuses more on partnership with religious groups.

She received the 2016 Heinz Award for Public Policy, one of five awards honoring the late Senator John Heinz of Pennsylvania. The prize includes $250,000 in "unrestricted cash," according to the mid-September awards announcement.

The awards jurors recognized Alexander "for drawing national attention to the issue of mass incarceration of African American youth and men in the United States, and for propelling a movement to take constructive action on criminal justice reform."

Alexander wrote in a social media post that she is creating a fund with the award money and book royalties to support racial justice work.

"My book," she wrote, "would never have had a national impact if it wasn't for the many, many people who not only read the book, but decided to take action by handing it to others, teaching it in classrooms, organizing study circles, holding forums or town halls, going into prisons, providing support to people returning home, and engaging in protest and direct action—in short, doing something meaningful rather than simply letting the book sit on a shelf."

The Heinz Family Foundation noted that "Alexander's current focus is largely centered on collaborating with faith communities and others who recognize the moral imperative of this work."

That includes leaving her role as a law professor at Ohio State University in order to teach and study at Union Theological Seminary. Alexander described the move as a way of stretching herself beyond comfort zones, in part because she was not raised in a church.

"I no longer believe we can 'win' justice simply by filing lawsuits, flexing our political muscles, or boosting voter turnout," she wrote. "Yes, we absolutely must do that work, but none of it—not even working for some form of political revolution—will ever be enough on its own. Without a moral or spiritual awakening, we will remain forever trapped in political games fueled by fear, greed, and the hunger for power."