

Katie Geneva Cannon raised up black women's voices for the sake of church and world

Cannon created a womanist approach to theology and wove it through her vocation as a pastor, professor, and ethicist.

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Katie Geneva Cannon delivering the keynote lecture at the 2017 Women in Ministry Conference at Princeton Theological Seminary. Photo courtesy of Princeton Theological Seminary.

Reflecting on her decades of teaching Christian ethics at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, Katie Geneva Cannon recently said, "Teaching is my ministry. I love to teach. To empower. To equip. To set people free . . . to live into the graces and gifts they've been given." When Cannon died on August 8, the

church, academy, and world lost a transformational leader whose groundbreaking scholarship and influence have been felt across the globe.

Cannon embodied a life of firsts. She was the first black woman ordained in the United Presbyterian Church, a predecessor to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She was the first African American woman to receive a Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary in New York. She was *the* pioneer of womanist theology, an interpretive approach that seeks to empower the neglected voices of African American women and the entire African diaspora.

Her theological and ethical commitments can be traced to her childhood. Cannon was born in the highly segregated town of Kannapolis, North Carolina, in 1950. Raised in a Presbyterian church, she and her three sisters and three brothers were formed in the context of the segregated Catawba Synod. Their parents, Esau and Emanuelette Corine Lytle Cannon, were ruling elders in the church. They placed Katie in the only school available to black children, which was part of a local Lutheran church. Reflecting on these years in a recent forum on race that was published in Union Presbyterian Seminary's journal *Interpretation*, Cannon observed the following:

During the first two decades of my life, my overarching sociocultural reality was a world where black people were surrounded by death-dealing dominating whiteness. Jim Crow, the chief cornerstone of apartheid in the United States of America, was the political panoply of state and local laws requiring a fixed, rigid system of racial segregation.

It was against the law for Cannon to go to the library, play in the public parks, or swim in the local pool. She could not even enter the Kannapolis spelling bee.

The young Cannon responded to this reality with keen insight and faithfulness. She explained in a recent interview: "By five, I could recite the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, Psalm 23, the Ten Commandments, and answers to catechism questions, such as 'Who is God?' and 'Why did God make us?'" She recognized early on a profound disconnect between the egalitarian spirit of the gospel and her oppressive, racist context in Kannapolis. Cannon asked herself repeatedly: "What did we do as black people that was bad? A good God would not do this." She would continue to address these provocative questions later in life by focusing on Christian ethics and the culpability of human beings in perpetuating systemic injustice.

As Cannon lived out her prophetic vocation, she recognized that education would be a primary means for her to transcend the harsh circumstances of her youth. After earning an undergraduate degree in education and a master of divinity, she moved to doctoral work at Union Theological Seminary in New York. During her doctoral years, Cannon found herself caught between feminist theologians and black male theologians. She realized she would have to cultivate her own approach to theological inquiry, and she did so using the voices of black women in literature.

This approach led to womanist theology, a branch of inquiry that did not exist prior to Cannon's writings. The term *womanist* owes its origins to novelist Alice Walker (a friend of Cannon's). This approach seeks to inspire, equip, connect, and support black women to serve as change-makers in their communities. Cannon recognized that both in the academy and in the church, the voices of African American women had been too often mocked or seen as insignificant. In her landmark book, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, she writes passionately about the task of the womanist interpreter:

Womanism requires that we stress with urgency the African American women's movement from death to life. . . . We investigate contestable issues according to the official records, which seldom offer any indication why things have gone wrong nor why benefactors of oppression strive to maintain certain principles, values, and taboos as the center of social reality. In other words, womanist religious scholars insist that individuals look back at race, sex, and class constructions before it is too late and put forth critical analysis in such a way that the errors of the past will not be repeated.

In creating this womanist approach, Cannon sought to answer for herself and the world some of the profound questions stemming from her segregated childhood.

Womanism runs through all of her major works, which include *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988) and *Teaching Preaching: Isaac Rufus Clark and Black Sacred Rhetoric* (2002). It also informs the books she coedited: *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, with Emilie M. Townes and Angela D. Sims (2001), and *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, with Anthony R. Pinn (2014). Cannon's groundbreaking approach has enabled subsequent practitioners to look at the experiences of black women across the African diaspora and has influenced other methodologies,

including *mujerista*, LGBTQ, and postcolonial theologies.

Her guidance led to the founding of the Center for Womanist Leadership at Union Presbyterian Seminary, in collaboration with the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University. The center's [inaugural gathering](#) occurred in April, bringing together artists, activists, scholars, and clergy who are committed to consciousness raising among black women and unearthing their gifts for the sake of their communities. Exercising these gifts is the crux of the center's understanding of leadership. Cannon always insisted on the need to identify "gifts and graces" among women of color and to utilize them in the interest of liberation and empowerment.

A lifelong Presbyterian, Cannon approached her pastoral work with brave determination. When she was ordained as the first African American woman in the United Presbyterian Church in 1974, there was little fanfare. Yet her ordination inspired countless others to answer a call to ministry.

Cannon's greatest legacy is her pedagogy and mentorship of generations of students—not only at Union Presbyterian Seminary but also at Harvard Divinity School, Episcopal Divinity School, and Temple University. She sought to instill an "embodied, mediated knowledge," opening her students' eyes and hearts to the world as it truly is. She lifted the veil of racism, sexism, and classism while affirming who her students were and making them feel valued. She required engagement from all voices because she believed everyone had something to say. White males in her classes were not ostracized but included in the conversation for the benefit of all. She saw the *imago Dei* in every individual.

Cannon taught with humility and a witty streak that could both disarm students and keep them on their toes. She surprised students regularly with her encyclopedic knowledge of everything from pop culture to college football. She had empathy even for students who were not under her immediate supervision, and the stories of her generosity were legendary. She sent funny cards and pictures to the children of her graduate students and remembered their birthdays and graduations. As one of her advisees explains, "There was mother-bear warmth to her edgy, erudite mind."

We also remember her effectiveness and kindness as a colleague. She expected diligence and good work from her peers on the Union faculty, and her remarkable work ethic inspired her colleagues to dig deeper into their own projects with an eye toward honest inquiry. Even while she insisted on excellence, she also blessed her

coworkers and students with generosity and humor. She knew how to meet them where they were and find common points of interest, whether the topic was sports, politics, music, or movies.

We are fortunate to count ourselves among the many believers whose lives and faith have been influenced by Cannon's prophetic witness and transformative pedagogy. As her students at Episcopal Divinity School wrote after her death: "Those of us whose lives have been forever changed, whose vision of the world can never be the same, and who count ourselves thrice-blessed by her life, her witness, and her work do hereby seek to express our gratitude for this water walker among us."

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