Leah Gaskin Fitchue, a trailblazer in theological education, dies at age 78

As president of Payne Theological Seminary from 2003 to 2015, she was the first African American woman to lead a seminary belonging to the Association of Theological Schools.

(AME) *Christian Recorder* and *Christian Century staff* in the July 17, 2019 issue

Leah Gaskin Fitchue. Photo courtesy of Leah Gaskin Fitchue family.

Leah Gaskin Fitchue, former president of Payne Theological Seminary in Ohio, died June 18 at age 78. The cause of death was not made public.

She was the first African American woman to be president of a theological seminary belonging to the Association of Theological Schools and the first woman to be president of a historically black theological seminary.

An ordained itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, with which Payne is affiliated, Fitchue served as seminary president from 2003 to 2015. Under her leadership, in 2005–2006, Payne began offering an online degree in which two-thirds of a student's education occurred online and the remaining one-third in residence. It was the first among the six traditionally African American theological schools to offer an online degree. During her tenure, the foundations were also laid for the school's doctor of ministry program.

Prior to that, she was professor of religious studies at Hampton University and the first woman executive vice president and academic dean of the Interdenominational Theological Center.

Fitchue [wrote in the magazine *InTrust* in 2000](#) about strengthening a dialogue with God and her inner voice as a leader addressing gender, race, and other dynamics in institutions."When you experience the repeated privilege of being 'the first,' you learn how to handle silence and not to expect an external companion voice in your immediate setting," she wrote. "Too frequently in theological education settings, one finds a profound silence on issues of racism and white supremacy. And, more often than I can recall, as the only African American in these settings, I have been left with the responsibility of breaking the silence."