

Harvard Divinity School selects first Black woman as dean

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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Marla Frederick (photo courtesy of Emory University)

A cultural anthropologist of the Black religious experience has been named dean of the Harvard Divinity School beginning January 1.

Marla Frederick, a professor of religion and culture at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, will succeed David Hempton, who has served as dean of the divinity school since 2012.

Frederick will become the first woman and the first Black woman to lead the school in its 207-year history. (Preston N. Williams, acting dean from 1974-75, was the school's first Black dean..)

For Frederick, it is a return of sorts. She previously served on the Harvard faculty for 16 years as a professor in the Department of African and African American Studies.

"I am thrilled to welcome Marla back to Harvard," said Claudine Gay, the president of Harvard, in an email to the Harvard Divinity School students and alumni. "I am confident that Marla's leadership qualities, her academic stature, her wide-ranging curiosity, her collaborative mindset, and her thoughtful and caring approach to all she does will combine to make her an excellent new dean."

The author or co-author of four books, Frederick's expertise has been in religion and media, religion and social activism in the US South and the sustainability of Black institutions.

In 2012 she served as president of the American Academy of Religion and has been president of the Association of Black Anthropologists.

A native of Sumter, South Carolina, Frederick earned her bachelor's degree from Spelman College and her Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Duke University.

Frederick is the author of the book *Colored Television: American Religion Gone Global, Televised Redemption: Black Religious Media and Racial Empowerment*, and of an ethnography of Black women churchgoers in North Carolina, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*. A 2007 book, a collaborative examination of American democracy in an ordinary North Carolina community written with six other academics, *Local Democracy Under Siege: Activism, Public Interests, and Private Politics*, won the book prize of the Society for the Anthropology of North America in 2008.

“I am honored to return to Harvard as the next dean of Harvard Divinity School,” Frederick said in a [news release](#). “It is a place bustling with conscientious faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends who are committed to the work of justice and human flourishing informed by deep study.”

David F. Holland, a professor of New England church history, will serve as interim dean from September 1 until December 31. —Religion News Service