



Mission Critical Work for the Future of Theological Education

'Teaching in seminary is my destiny'

In her mid-20s, Gina A. S. Robinson was happy and successful, a young Emory University graduate working at an Atlanta law firm.

Life started "taking a turn," as she became deeply involved with youth ministry at Elizabeth Baptist Church in Atlanta, working with middle school girls, Robinson says.

"I began to realize the difference between loving something and feeling passionate. I loved my job at the law firm, but I was passionate about the work I was doing in my church," she says. "As I prayed for direction, I heard the Spirit telling me to go to seminary. I said, 'If You say I need to go, I'll go.'"

Robinson did go. She earned a Master of Divinity degree from Candler School of Theology at Emory, followed by a Master of Sacred Theology degree from Yale Divinity School. Then Robinson heard a call to teaching and entered the Ph.D. program at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois.



In 2020, she began work on her dissertation about efforts to elevate the voices and experiences of Black girls in theological discourse and to create spaces where Black girls and women can thrive and contribute to the flourishing of Christian communities. Putting research into practice, she has worked with youth at Atlanta’s historic Ebenezer Baptist Church and with students at the Children’s Defense Fund Freedom School in Evanston.

Her goal is to find a permanent faculty position. “I feel that teaching in seminary is my destiny,” Robinson says.

During her graduate school journey, Robinson has had support from the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE). For nearly 70 years, FTE, which has awarded more than 6,000 fellowships, focused its efforts on inspiring young people to explore careers in ministry and in the academy to make a difference in the world through leadership in Christian communities.

Since 1999, Lilly Endowment has supported dissertation-year fellowships for students of African descent under FTE’s Doctoral Fellowships Program for Students of Color, which also provides fellowships for doctoral students of Latino, Asian, Pacific Islands or First Nations descent.

In addition to providing \$25,000 fellowship awards, FTE leads dissertation writers’ workshops, facilitates mentoring relationships with senior scholars, convenes professional development gatherings and helps build relationships among fellows. The program maintains a 97 percent completion rate among the doctoral fellows.

Robinson’s FTE experience was during a summer program for students of color pursuing doctorates in religion, Bible and theology. Now, as an FTE Doctoral Fellow, she is grateful for how the program nurtures her as a scholar.

“The support I receive from FTE enables me to focus on my studies without the burden of worrying about financial means or seeking mentorship outside of Garrett,” says Robinson. “Now that I am at the dissertation phase, the support and encouragement from FTE not only contributes to my professional development, but more importantly to my overall well-being.”

Addressing the Challenge

FTE is just one Endowment-funded effort that supports doctoral students from communities of color. Others are the Hispanic Theological Initiative (HTI) at Princeton Theological Seminary and the Asian Theological Summer Institute (ATSI), which is based at United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia.

According to Frank Yamada, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, the percentage of faculty from communities of color in theological schools is low. “To adequately prepare their students to serve churches in increasingly diverse ministry contexts, it is mission critical for theological schools to recruit and develop more faculty from

- Gina A.S. Robinson is answering God’s call to become a theologian (opposite).
- Association of Theological Schools President Frank Yamada says seminaries grow stronger when their faculties reflect the diversity within Christianity.



communities of color. It is especially imperative for their increasing numbers of students of color to have faculty who understand fully their particular traditions and can serve as mentors and role models,” says Yamada.

For example, the number of Latino Christian churches in the U.S. is growing rapidly. Yet fewer than five percent of faculty in American theological schools are Latino, which means that many seminaries do not have faculty who understand cultural contexts and are prepared to share their perspectives and expertise with the next generation of students.

The Hispanic Theological Initiative (HTI) was established in 1996 to address this challenge. It is a consortium of 24 universities and theological schools collaborating to increase the number and quality of Latino faculty in theological disciplines teaching in theological schools nationwide.

In 2003, the Endowment made its first grant to Princeton to support HTI. Additional grants have been made since 2016 to fund HTI’s work with doctoral students.

With Endowment funding, HTI provides doctoral students with \$25,000 dissertation fellowships, a mentoring program, professional development conferences and other resources to help them progress through their Ph.D. programs.

Since 2002, HTI has achieved a 94 percent completion rate for doctoral participants, and 144 HTI alumni are now teaching in seminaries and universities across the nation. Their academic

leadership in places where pastors and lay leaders are being formed holds the potential to influence theological and religious conversations for future generations.



An Affirming Space

Financial support for HTI scholars is critical because funding pools for theological graduate education have dried up dramatically,

according to the Rev. Joanne Rodríguez, HTI’s executive director. “Our students already come to this endeavor at a deficit, because there is very little wealth built up among first- and even second-generation Hispanic students,” Rodríguez says. “Too often, the choice is either that you increase your debt, or you don’t continue your studies.”

But the financial piece of HTI is not all that inspires loyalty among alumni. “HTI has stood out as exemplary for so many reasons,” says Daniel Ramírez, associate professor of American religions at Claremont Graduate University in California.

“The gatherings of scholars have been so affirming in terms of providing a friendly context in which to try out ideas and a rare forum for deep ecumenical dialogue, for everyone from Catholics to Pentecostals and everything in between,” he says.



● The Rev. Joanne Rodríguez directs the Hispanic Theological Initiative (above). ● The Forum for Theological Exploration gathers students enrolled in Ph.D. programs in theology for workshops and networking (right).

Born and raised in California, Ramírez was a first-generation college student at Yale as well as the son—and grandson—of Pentecostal church members, part of a wave of evangelical Christianity conversion in the U.S. Southwest that dates back to the early part of the 20th century.

While working as a university administrator at Stanford in the early 1990s, Ramírez began exploring his family story and the history surrounding it. The result was a paper presented at an academic conference where he met Grant Wacker, a well-known expert in American religion, who invited Ramírez to pursue religious studies at Duke University.

Since earning his Ph.D. in 2005, Ramírez has carved out a career of teaching, researching, and writing about U.S. and Latin American religious history and culture at Claremont and in previous faculty postings at the University of Michigan and Arizona State University. He also is the first Latino elected president of the American Society of Church History.



HTI served a “catalytic function” at the beginning of his career and continues to play an important role, Ramírez says. He attends at least one HTI gathering each year, has served as an official HTI mentor three times, and currently serves on the HTI steering committee.

“Inspired by my own mentors, I try to pay it forward,” he says.

Ramírez and other HTI scholars bring much needed diversity to

academe, Rodríguez says. “Lilly Endowment provides us with resources to work with diverse Hispanic communities, which allows us to bring different perspectives and ways of nurturing to all of God’s people,” she says. “HTI is life-transformative work that is done en conjunto [altogether] for the edification of all God’s creation.”



Stronger, Diverse Leadership

In his work as president of FTE, Stephen Lewis brings many lessons he learned as a young banking officer before experiencing a call to ministry in 1997 and leaving the corporate world for seminary.

As part of a leadership cohort at the bank, Lewis benefited from mentoring and other experiences and he believed they could help the church and its young leaders, too.

“The way the bank invested in us was not out of a sense of crisis, its leaders recognized that the strength and future of the institution depends on the next generation. I thought that I could bottle up all that I had experienced and learned about cultivating leadership and take it to the church,” Lewis says.

FTE helps create stronger, more diverse leadership in theological education. And, whether inside the academy or out in the world, Lewis believes that addressing society’s challenges depends on a capacity to harness a collective genius. “Diversity is our superpower,” he says.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke of the ‘living water’ of the Spirit. “That living water is right before our eyes, in our young men and women,” Lewis says. “At FTE, we say, ‘yes’ to that next generation. The church is worthy of your gifts, your voice and your leadership.”

- Daniel Ramírez, a religion professor at Claremont Graduate University, is an alumnus of the Hispanic Theological Initiative (above).
- Stephen Lewis is president of the Forum for Theological Exploration.