

“For the ones who don’t fit”

Process and Womanist Theologian Monica A. Coleman joins LSTC faculty

by Jan Boden

Looking at Coleman’s credentials—undergraduate degree from Harvard-Radcliffe, graduate degrees from Vanderbilt and Claremont Universities; scholarship support from the Mellon Foundation, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Fund for Theological Education—one is prepared to meet a hard-core academic—reserved, maybe a bit stuffy—and, as a systematic theologian, probably someone who communicates in the jargon of her area of expertise. Instead, a brief encounter in a conversation or in the classroom reveals that Monica Coleman is determined to make the connections between the head and the heart, the academy and the pew. She is someone devoted to learning and teaching, but equally grounded in the church and what it can offer a hurting world.

Among the “Top 20 to Watch”

Coleman joined the faculty July 1 as assistant professor of systematic theology, filling a position that has been open since Albert “Pete” Pero retired two years ago. She is energetic (rides her bike 15 miles along Lake Michigan every morning) and enthusiastic about her new position and the responsibilities it entails.

“I love every part of what I do,” Coleman stated. “Teaching, research, and writing. There isn’t one part I like better than the others.” She has distinguished herself in all three areas, as well as being named one of the “Top 20 to Watch—The New Generation of Leading Clergy: Preachers Under 40” by *The African American Pulpit*.

Coleman has served as a staff minister in African Methodist Episcopal and interdenominational churches. She was the founding director of the Womanist Religious Studies program and assistant professor of religion at Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, N.C. Although she knew by her sophomore year of college that she wanted to be an academic, she didn’t anticipate that she would be a theologian.

“When I started college, I intended to be a math major. I loved math and I thought I’d have a career in business—that’s where the money was,” she said. “But in my first economics class at Harvard I got ‘weeded’ out. I did a well-paid internship after my first year and



Monica A. Coleman

was bored by it.” Henry Louis Gates, Jr., had just come to Harvard, and from him she soon discovered that she could follow her love for African-American literature and history. That’s when she decided to become an academic.

She intended to examine religion in literature and to earn advanced degrees in English and anthropology, not theology.

God had other plans for her.

Moving from the academy to the pulpit

While at Harvard, Coleman bridged two groups—the academic and the Christian. She was part of the Campus Crusade for Christ, which she describes as a “very interdenominational and multicultural group of people.”

“Something said at one of those gatherings had a big impact on me,” she recalled. It was the statement “What you think when you think about God is the most important thing that you think.”

Coleman’s “call to ministry” came one morning while she was doing her devotions. “God led me to the book of Amos,” she began. “You know that you don’t just flip through the book of Amos. You might flip through the book of John or Matthew—but God has got to lead you to the book of Amos.” In Amos 7:14-15, she read “I am no prophet, not a prophet’s

son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"

"This wasn't what I was looking for, but this is what God wanted me to do. And I said 'No.' I heard it clearly, but I didn't want it."

Before attending Harvard, Coleman had never seen a female minister. The congregation she knew in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church was, in her words, "led by old men." At Harvard she met young women and men in ministry who were doing the things she did. She also met young women who were studying for ministry who were fighting the patriarchy of their denominations. But she didn't want to fight that battle.

"Whenever I thought about being a minister, I felt scared," she confessed. What changed her mind was coming into contact with theologian Renita Weems—via Angela Davis. "I ran into Angela Davis in a coffee shop and as we talked she told me that I needed to meet Renita Weems. Shortly after that, I heard Renita Weems deliver a lecture at a conference. By the time she was done talking, I wasn't scared any more about being a preacher."

Coleman's parents were delighted with her decision, but immediately began trying to shape her into their image of a minister. "They told me that I needed to dress differently; wear my hair differently. I didn't fit the clergy image and I didn't want to. I realized I didn't know how to be a minister. I knew I was called, but I didn't know to what ministry I was called."

In the A.M.E. church the pastor of the "candidate's" home church must affirm the call to ministry. Because she didn't look or act like other ministers, her pastor doubted the authenticity of Coleman's call. That changed when he heard her preach—just days before she entered seminary.

"There is something very holy, very sacred in people taking three to four years out of their lives to think about God," she said. "That's what seminary was for me." She applied to Boston University and several other places, but chose Vanderbilt. In retrospect, it was the perfect school for her, a place "where I could be a Christian intellectual and an intellectual Christian."

Speaking out against sexual violence

Another life-changing experience occurred during her first year at Vanderbilt. She was raped. "My life fell apart for awhile and I didn't know why," Coleman said. "I couldn't write. I couldn't study. I lost my job. I was post-traumatic, but I didn't know how to talk about it." Coleman said. Through student services

offered at Vanderbilt, she finally found her way to a rape clinic. After working through some of her own denial and betrayed trust (it was a minister who raped her), Coleman got involved in speaking out against sexual violence. "I wanted to create the ministry that didn't exist (when I needed it)," she said. She had received support from therapists and friends, "but there was no one to teach me how to pray again."

While continuing her studies, she volunteered in a rape and sexual abuse center in Nashville, Tenn. After graduating from Vanderbilt, Coleman took a job with a domestic violence program. There she began connecting what she was doing inside and outside the classroom. She created the Dinah Project, an organized church response to sexual violence. It is named for one of Jacob's daughters whose rape and its consequences are found in Genesis 34. Her book, *The Dinah Project: A Handbook for Congregational Response to Address Sexual Violence* is widely used and recommended by a number of organizations including the Alban Institute.

Working with the suffering pushed Coleman to be a better theologian. "I needed a better answer for them than the ones I had," she said.

Returning to the academy

It was then Coleman came across process theology, which, for her, echoed approaches she had heard in indigenous cultures. She decided that this was the topic she wished to pursue in her doctoral studies. She studied at Claremont Graduate University, the leading center in the world for process theology.

In both the ministry and in the academy, it's taken Coleman time to figure out who she is and what a minister looks like. She's decided that she's "for the people who don't fit." As minister and as scholar, she feels that she bridges the things that don't go together: being a young female and an A.M.E. minister; being a womanist and a process theologian.

"Being a theologian is about how you see the world. In all the experiences you have, in all that's around you, do you hear the 'God' parts? That's what theologians hear."

Coleman is excited about teaching at LSTC and having both master's and doctoral level students. "I loved the relationships and mentoring of undergraduate teaching—but you can't teach process theology to undergrads."

She feels that her ability to bring together different ideas is something she can offer LSTC. "At LSTC diversity is becoming increasingly important," Coleman observed. "Ideologically as well as culturally, ethnically, and in many other ways. I think I can be a helpful part of that conversation."