

**SANKOFA:
ONE HERITAGE, SIX SEMINARIES, ONE HOPE**

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“The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”

–1 Corinthians 11:23-24 (NRSV)

If America has forgotten her past, then let her look into the mirror of our consciousness and she will see the living past living in the present, for our memories go back, through our black folk of today, through the recollections of our black parents, and through the tales of slavery told by our black grandparents, to the time when none of us, black or white, lived in this fertile land.

–Richard Wright,
12 Million Black Voices (1941)

The Challenge of Remembering and Theological Education

Memory and the art of remembering, more and more, is becoming a global challenge in our so-called information age. Indeed, “*remembering*” does involve, to some extent, the process of pulling together what has become *dismembered*. Cyber-based technology has given us virtually unlimited access to an abundance of information. Yet, one of the great ironies of our time seems to be that our global village is becoming,

¹ This article is based upon the address delivered on 8 April 2011 by Dr. Ronald E. Peters on the occasion of his inauguration as the eighth president of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

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more and more, a victim of its own historical amnesia. People just do not remember how we have come to where we are now. Philosopher Cornel West noted his concern that ours is an increasingly a historical society: that we too easily ignore or forget lessons from the past contributing to the nihilistic threat within black segments of our plural cultural and urbanized context globally.²

“This is my body. Do this in remembrance of me” are words typically quoted from scripture³ as part of Christian Church observances of the sacred ritual known as Holy Communion or celebration of the Eucharist. While this reference to memory is imbedded in a ritual that literally defines, in part, what it means to be uniquely “Christian” in belief, it also reflects a constellation of values, historical outlooks, and behaviors across countless cultural groups that each bring their own particularity to what the phrase represents contextually. This is the continuing challenge for accredited theological education in the North American and European contexts as African descended persons engage their heritage theologically in the urbanized context of the global twenty-first century.

The faculty, staff, and students at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) have been pondering the significance of the *Sankofa* concept for better understanding of *who we are* at the Theological Center and what this means for our approach to pedagogy in this accredited theological academy. This embrace of the metaphorical concept and language of *Sankofa* has been helpful in shaping my thoughts about the unique contributions of the African American heritage to theological education in the plural world of the twenty-first century. Clearly, remembering one’s past is critical to an understanding of present realities, and a vital component of envisioning future direction. As such, I offer these reflections on the topic: *Sankofa... One Heritage* (looking backward), *Six Seminaries* (flying forward), *One Hope* (future generation in our mouths, heads, and hearts).

² Cornel West. *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

³ Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25.

Sankofa: Look Back While Remembering to Fly Forward

Years ago, the Center's first Dean of Faculty, Dr. Charles B. Copher,⁴ broke ground in theological education by insisting that in order for African descended persons to understand themselves in their present context, it was necessary to reach back to more clearly understand from whence they had come. Indeed, we are in the debt of ITC professors Randall Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant for pulling together that wonderful collection of writings in tribute to Dr. Copher's work entitled *The Recovery of Black Presence*.⁵

The high value accorded to the art of memory as an essential component to enhancing the quality of life for Akan people of West Africa is encapsulated in a phrase which says *Se wo were fin a wosankofa a yenkyi*⁶ which means *It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten*. For the last few months, we at the Interdenominational Theological Center have been pondering what it means for us to be of "one heritage" carved from the common African American experience in America as reflected in the "six seminaries" that constitute our consortium as we affirm "one hope" in Jesus Christ in a plural, global, and urbanized context of the twenty-first century.

These discussions have been couched in the embrace of a metaphorical symbol, a *Sankofa* bird, which emerges from West African culture. The *Sankofa* is a mythical figure of a bird that flies forward as it peers backward to see how far it has come from its starting point. The symbolism of the Sankofa bird has merit for ITC in three unified, but distinct ways. First, the forward flight of the Sankofa suggests that ITC's missional journey must be directionally focused *forward* in its research

⁴ Dr Charles Copher was the inter-disciplinarian professor of the Hebrew Bible who devoted his academic life arguing that there was a close relationship between Old Testament ideas and those of the African people.

⁵ Randall C. Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant (eds). *Recovery of Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.

⁶ Quoted from Sweet Chariot: The Story of the Spirituals Website. "African Tradition, Proverbs, and Sankofa" <http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/literature/sankofa.cfm> /31Mar11.

and teaching with the purpose of advancing accredited theological scholarship and pedagogy in North America and globally from the unique and particularized perspective of the African American theological heritage.

Second, as the Sankofa flies forward, it does so with an egg lodged in its mouth. Clearly, the egg is a symbolic representation that the present generation must be intrinsically concerned for the welfare of future generations. This cultural tenet reinforces the pedagogical mandate that the theological institution must never become so esoteric in its approach to theological reflection, an ever present threat in so many accredited seminaries today in North America, that it loses focus on communally-grounded praxis that paves the way for future generations.

Third, the Sankofa's backward glance while flying forward underscores the validity of the bird's journey since its flight can only achieve its directional goal with knowledge of its starting point. None of the New Testament makes sense without attention to the discovery of an empty tomb as recorded in the Gospel writings. Indeed, those particular writings "fly forward" as they glance backward in effort to discern events that led to discovery of an empty tomb. The continuing challenge in accredited theological education in North America is its habitual propensity to engage the Black experience as a sociological phenomenon rather than a theological one. As such, ITC's approach to theological research and pedagogy, as informed by the Sankofa metaphor, must continually mine the theological resources of the African American religious experience in order to give validity to theological education that directionally moves forward in the plural world of the twenty-first century.

In looking back to fly forward, Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* remembers women who knew of life's beauty even amidst unspeakably ugly contradictions with which they lived as they flew forward for our generation:

*They were women then
My Mama's generation
Husky of voice – Stout of
Step*

*With fists as well as
Hands
How they battered down
Doors
And ironed
Starched white
Shirts
How they led
Armies
Head-ragged Generals
Across mined
Fields
Booby-trapped
Kitchens
To discover books
Desks
A place for us
How they knew what we
Must know
Without knowing a page of it
Themselves.⁷*

Today as we attempt, as a Christian Church in 2011, to fly forward toward a brighter future for all society in the 21st century, what can be learned from a backward glance to see how far we've come? How do we fly toward a brighter future for all of society, with the mythical egg in our mouths, hearts, and minds of today's youthful generation? What is it that we remember in 2011 about theological education from our one heritage by peering back to see how far we've come?

1811: Theological Education at the beginning of the 19th Century

When we look back two hundred years ago to 1811, it is important to remember that just four years after the Reverend John Gloucester founded

⁷ Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, 242.

First African Presbyterian Church (1807) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,⁸ for most persons of African descent in the United States, their children were not considered their children. Their children were legally defined as the chattel property of the people who owned the so-called female slaves who had given birth to them.

This helps us better understand why, in 1811, a then little-known former slave by the name of Richard Allen had to sue in Pennsylvania courts for the right of his 13 year-old Philadelphia congregation to exist as an independent institution. Actually, the seeds of that congregation, Bethel AME Church, dated back some 20 years to 1787 with the founding of the Free African Society by Allen along with Absalom Jones. History records that, in 1787, they had been dragged from their knees in prayer at Philadelphia's St. George Methodist Church.

In 1811, it was illegal to teach people of African descent to read and write. As such, theological education for Black people in those days was not available in Ivy-league and similar institutions in this country. In 1811, theological education for Blacks came by way of the theology in slave spirituals as they tried to fly forward toward the challenges then-new nineteenth century. Their theological education consisted of songs like "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," "Go Down Moses, Way Down in Egypt Land... Tell Ole Pharaoh, Let My People Go;" "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," and "Oh Mary Don't You Weep." This was the essence of transmitting theological education in their "invisible church" congregations in 1811 according to people like Albert Raboteau in his book entitled *Slave Religion*,⁹ or Katie Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics*,¹⁰ and James Cone's *The Spirituals and the Blues*.¹¹

⁸ http://www.brynmawr.edu/cities/archx/05-600/prpk/p2/jcecb/FirstAfrican_rev.html / 2Apr11.

⁹ Albert J. Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. Oxford, 1978.

¹⁰ Katie G. Cannon. *Black Womanist Ethics*. Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 1988.

¹¹ For further insight into the antebellum worship among the descendants of Africa, see Raboteau's *The Slave Church*; Gayraud Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*; James Cone's *The Spirituals and the Blues*; Jacquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ and*

1911: Theological Education at the beginning of the 20th Century

One hundred years later, in 1911, we must remember how the times had changed. Scarcely more than forty years earlier, the nation had just emerged from a most bloody and costly Civil War. Rebels fought fiercely against government forces to insure that the children of Black mothers would remain the property of the people who legally owned their mothers as property. Indeed, we sit in the city of Atlanta, Georgia that was once the rebel-held capital.

By 1911, our nation had been laboring for some 28 years under the weight of the 1883 Supreme Court decision that declared *the Civil Rights Act of 1875*, unconstitutional. The Court had struck down the law that make discrimination in hotels, on trains, and other public places illegal, and in so doing, paved the way for legalized racial segregation, “Jim Crow” laws, or America’s form of Apartheid that would last most of the 20th century.

Theological education in 1911 took place in a society coping with the sad fact that during the sixteen years leading up to the beginning of the twentieth century, the lynching of more than 2500 people had been documented and the vast majority of these were African Americans in the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana.

In 1911, Atlanta was still recovering from the horrible race riots of 1906 spawned by the city’s 60 percent population increase the decade between 1900 and 1910 and all the social, economic, and political problems of its fast-growing Black middle class. Atlanta was not the only city having recently experienced race riots: so had New York (August, 1901), Springfield, OH (August, 1904), and Greensburg, IN (1906).

Great financial titans of American industry, in 1911, included such names as Alexander Graham Bell, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller, and J. P. Morgan. Because of her great skill in preparing and promoting of hair products around the nation, Madame C.J. Walker’s legendary wealth and influence in the field of cosmetology was the closest

Black Women’s Jesus; Henry Wetchel’s African American Church; Riggins Earl’s Dark Symbols; Marsha Snulligan Haney’s Black Evangelism.

replica back then of what Oprah Winfrey would become a century later in the area of media and entertainment.

Tuskegee Institute President Booker T. Washington was at the height of his public influence as he was attempting to define a practical solution for the new challenges the twentieth century was posing both socially, economically, politically, and spiritually. His most out-spoken critic, the Harvard-educated sociologist, Dr. William Edward Burghardt DuBois, had already defined a central challenge of the twentieth century as being “the problem of the color-line.”¹²

In 1911, the Gammon Theological Seminary, a Methodist school and founding member of the ITC consortium, was well established as a central meeting place for seeking out solutions to help Atlanta through its social challenges as it had done during the riots of 1906. The Turner School of Theology, also a founding ITC consortium member, was originally established as part of Morris Brown College in 1894. It was named in honor of the public leader and African Methodist Episcopal preacher who later became Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, who had been elected to the Georgia Legislature in 1868 during Reconstruction.

It is important to remember that in February 1867, a school for the training of clergy and other church leaders was organized in the Springfield Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia giving rise to eventually what would become known as Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. Some ninety years later, Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, as the college's president would move to have this school, rooted in the Baptist tradition, move its department of religion to become a founding member of the ITC in 1958 in collaboration with Dr. Harry V. Richardson, then president of Methodist's Gammon Theological Seminary.

Charlotte, NC's Biddle Memorial Institute formed in 1867 by Presbyterians to educate newly freed Blacks for public leadership, by 1911 had been in existence for more than 40 years. It had graduated its first of three persons in 1872. As it looked toward the twentieth century in 1911, little did its leaders realize that it would eventually become Johnson C.

¹² W. E. B. DuBois. *Souls of Black Folk*. Originally published 1903.

Smith University in 1923, later giving rise to a religion department that would ultimately become known as the Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary, which in 1969 became part of the ITC consortium in Atlanta.

How could the people in 1911 know that in 1945, the Christian Methodist Church would establish its Philips Theological Seminary as part of Lane College (Jackson, MS) to further the cause of theological education as a means of strengthening social justice for all people and in 1959, become a founding member of the ITC? How could anyone have envisioned that in 1970, the Charles Mason Theological Seminary of the Church of God in Christ would establish its campus as part of an Interdenominational Theological Center with the same spiritual goals in mind?

Because of segregation laws in 1911, Black clergy who wanted graduate theological education were able to do so through one of these schools. In fact, more than *ninety-five percent* of all Blacks receiving theological education in 1911 were students of one of these seminaries or others like them.

2011: Theological Education at the beginning of the 21st Century

Unlike 1911, we err if we do not take cognizance of the fact that in 2011 more than *eighty-percent of all Black students receiving theological education* today are enrolled in historically White theological institutions whose heritage, 100 years ago, did not know the theological perspectives that shape the heritage of the students they now serve.

As we fly forward in the 2011, many have declared the twenty-first century to be the age wherein we have entered the “post-racial society.” Exhibit “A” for this broad assertion is the fact that, for the first time in its history, a person of African American heritage has been elected President of the United States of America. Today, more and more voices are being heard suggesting that historically Black schools and colleges have outlived their usefulness and are no longer needed. Besides, it is claimed, they ordinarily are assumed to be inferior to most of their historically Euro-American counterparts.

Within the next decade or shortly thereafter, it is projected that for the first time in the United States' history most of the people in the schools of higher learning in the U.S.A. will be people of color. As such, in 2011 majority educational institutions throughout the United States are preparing for this eventually by aggressively recruiting faculty and students of color and generally positioning themselves so as to be prepared for this new reality in U.S. society. Today, Durham, NC's Duke University's website concerning its strategic plan proudly proclaims that more than a third of its students are students of color.¹³

Frankly, I do not see this as a bad thing. Rather, I see such realities as signs of hope as society begins to acknowledge, at various levels, that the time for White racial supremacy is out. We have to fly toward creating the society Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to as the "beloved community" where all people are judged not by "the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."¹⁴

Indeed, things have changed for the better in last 100 years. Yet, let us remember not be beguiled by false prophets among us who, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "*have treated the (spiritual) wounds of God's people carelessly saying 'Peace, peace, when there is no peace.'*" (Jeremiah 6:14). We must remember that some people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. on August 28, 2010 under the guise of honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. only to declare that "social justice" is not part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ! This suggests that theological education still has not flown as far as is needed to get us to "the beloved community" envisioned by Martin King. Such a misunderstanding of the Gospel is clearly opposed to the understanding of the "beloved community" symbolized in the egalitarian-oriented lives of people like Harriet Tubman, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mohandas Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, or Tibet's Dali Lama.

How do we address the remnants of structural racism that remain with us in 2011? We see, for example, statistics concerning health disparities

¹³ http://stratplan.duke.edu/goals_2.html / 13 March 2012.

¹⁴ Quoted from James M. Washington (ed). *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: Harper, 1986, 219.

like diabetes, asthma, hypertension, and amputations among the poor and people of color as compared to the majority population. We know the prison statistics that document horrendous facts that Black males from 20 to 39 years old accounted for about a third of all sentences prison inmates under state or federal jurisdiction although African American men nationwide account for less than 6 percent of the population. Moreover, there has been a 42 percent jump in the number of Black females incarcerated over the past fifteen years.¹⁵ All this is against a backdrop where historically Black institutions of higher learning continue to struggle financially. Conversely, the financial superiority of historically White institutions in higher education is well documented.¹⁶ These schools are able to buy faculty and students and sports programs. Look at the record of the championship sports teams, whether in collegiate basketball, football, or other sports. The financing of the athletic programs of historically majority institutions dwarfs that of their HBCUs by comparison.

Flying Toward a Brighter Future: One Hope

The challenge for theological education borne of our heritage is great as we fly forward into the twenty-first century. Moving beyond the first decade of 2011, a reality that Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson documented in 1933 sadly still exists today: about eighty percent of Black Clergy still have no formal graduate theological seminary education. Women are still barred from clergy leadership and the pulpits of many churches. As a society, we must fly further. Sexual orientation is still a taboo-subject in most religious education classes in our time and the rights of women to make decisions concerning their own sexual health and well-being are still being challenged by men in positions of policy-making and financial influence and power. Too many of our churches are silent when public attacks are made on the collective bargaining rights of working

¹⁵ Quoted from Ronald E. Peters. *Urban Ministry: An Introduction*. Nashville: Abigdon, 2007.

¹⁶ http://stratplan.duke.edu/goals_2.html See US News and World Report: <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/articles/2012/03/13/us-news-releases-2013-best-graduate-schools-rankings>.

people, the dismantling of pension programs, and the scandalous incarceration rates of Black men and women. Clearly, theological education has got to fly a little further toward the Hope!

Too many Christians are silent, or at best, confused into a spiritual stupor such that we have no clear theological analysis today in the face of all the bizarre lengths to which our society will go to justify spending money on war instead of education of children and on healthcare for the vulnerable. These are matters that require serious theological investigation. As we try to fly forward looking back, history reveals that Christian leaders in Germany got together in 1939 in response to the Third Reich and drafted the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, in effect affirming the ancient biblical admonition (Amos 5:24): “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Nearly 80 years ago, Dr Carter G. Woodson, complained about *The Miseducation of the Negro*.¹⁷ Today, I fear for the *mis-education of the nation* by a proliferation of misinformation through the preoccupation with trivia posing as information or news: who loss how many pounds? Whose house will get a make-over? Who did this entertainer or that athlete sleep with or divorce? Yet, information that should inspire and challenge us to reach higher is frequently down-played in media in favor of sensationalized trivia. Why is there little or no public focus on growing poverty in our nation? Why is no serious attention given to the chronic reality that most of the people in the very community surrounding this Atlanta University Center, one of the great citadels of higher education in the world (notice I did not say “Black” higher education) has an average household income (not personal), of about \$19,000/annually? Theological education must fly a little further and higher toward the HOPE.

How do we fly forward toward the Hope of a brighter future against this backdrop of current challenges with the egg of our future generation carried in our mouths, hearts, and minds? First, I suggest in looking back what we really see is that our heritage is deeper than we often acknowledge. Although heritage is indivisibly framed by the experience of

¹⁷ Carter G. Woodson. *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Africa World Press, first published 1933.

culture, but it is not limited by the parameters of culture. Culture is but the window that allows us to see much further into the historical lens than segregation, lynching, auction blocks, and slave-ships. The story goes far deeper into Ghanian and Mali Empires.

The heritage, indeed, goes even further and can be found in the glory days ancient Ethiopia and her daughter of the lower Nile, Egypt. We can identify traces of this heritage in stories such as the epic struggles of a people to escape the “Black on Black crime” of a Pharaoh attempting to crush the dreams of enslaved people whose only request was to be allowed to go and worship God as a means of affirming their freedom. This one heritage in ITC’s roots includes the struggles of women identified with legendary Biblical leaders like Naomi and Ruth who, by faith, redefined their own lives from tragedy to triumph. Our heritage grows out of sagas like the biblical story of a Queen named Esther (Esther 1-4), who struggled to expose the imperial oppression of minorities in a nation. Our heritage is defined by men like the prophet Jeremiah, who confessed that the weight of oppressive realities can, sometimes, make one want to keep silent and not speak about God. Yet, Jeremiah had to acknowledge that the believer’s quest for righteousness in society is ultimately like a “fire shut up in your bones.” (Jeremiah 29:9)

The one heritage includes stories of Ezekiel in a “valley of dry bones” (Ezekiel 37:1-10) or Daniel in a “lion’s den” (Daniel 6:16-23). This is the heritage that gave rise to these six seminaries that, beginning in 1958, initiated a unified consortium that affirms its mission as follows:

The mission of the Interdenominational Theological Center is to educate for the Church and the global community, Christian leaders who are committed to and practice a liberating and transforming spirituality, academic discipline, justice and peace, an appreciation of religious, gender, and cultural diversity, and a desire to engage the public arena for the common good.¹⁸

The power of the heritage that prompted these six seminaries is the same power that, in the process, gave rise to every school that is the Atlanta

¹⁸ Interdenominational Theological Center *Academic Catalog, 2008-2012*. 15.

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University Center Consortium. But the heritage did not stop there: can any of us name a historically Black private (or public) college or university that was not started because somebody prayed, or met on their behalf in some church one day? But our heritage does not stop there. As we fly forward toward the Hope, looking back, can any among us name even one of the venerable “*Ivy League*” schools of the dominant culture that did not start because somebody prayed or met on their behalf in some church one day?

“*Re-mem-bering*” the significance of the religious heritage from which the Black experience in America was drawn, it is essential that we fly forward, Sankofa style, toward the Hope a brighter future carrying the egg of a new generation in our mouths, hearts, and minds, that we move contributing toward a world that shall embody the best spiritual and egalitarian values of our foreparents. Looking back to this heritage, we must fly toward that spiritual and physical ecological Hope where the earth and all its inhabitants... will not be exposed to unfettered radioactive melt-downs; where people who happen to live on the wrong side of huge and imposing walls, whether in Palestine or in Ireland, will not be separated from family, jobs, or freedom because of fear; and toward that place where HIV/AIDS and drug addiction will be history. We must surge forward toward that brighter Hope where homelessness will disappear and people will no longer lose their homes to foreclosure while big global corporations, on the heels of huge profits, can still find ways to pay no taxes.

As we fly toward that Hope of a brighter future, it is clear that *heritage that gave rise to these six seminaries is none other than the one built upon the Hope* toward which we still fly: the Hope lifted in the words of the song our parents sang:

*My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’
blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the
sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’
name.*

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*On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand, All other
ground is sinking sand. All other ground is
sinking sand.*¹⁹

¹⁹ Carpenter, Delores and Williams, Nolan E., Jr (eds). *African American Heritage Hymnal*. Chicago: Gia Publications, 2001, 385.

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