

# Sankofa Institute providing education program for ministry among African Americans

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**SAN ANTONIO** • Oblate School of Theology will launch an entirely new initiative this fall, the Sankofa Institute for African American Pastoral Leadership, that will provide professional training for pastoral ministers who wish to minister among African Americans, regardless of denominational affiliation. Twelve to 15 students are expected in the inaugural class this academic year.

The Sankofa Institute provides an opportunity for men and women in South Texas to receive academic training for pastoral ministry close to home and earn master's or doctoral degrees approved by the Association of Theological Schools. Protestant as well as Catholics have earned degrees at Oblate for many years; now, for the first time, students will have an option to choose courses with a focus on African American studies.

"This is a very exciting development for Oblate School of Theology as well as for the students who will enroll in the Sankofa Institute," said Sister Addie Lorraine Walker, SSND, PhD, director of the institute. "It's rare in that it invites Protestant and Catholic students to learn together while pursuing professional degrees with a specific concentration focused on an African American context." Walker joined the OST faculty last year and developed the curriculum. She previously had been associated with the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans and was anxious to see an educational program for ministry among African Americans in Texas.

"For Oblate School of Theology to extend its curriculum to meet this need is fitting and proper — even courageous," Walker said. "We are not only welcoming but inviting people who are not traditionally Catholic. This is going to force both us and them to change our attitudes about each other. This is a wonderful opportunity for faith formation and for building up our ability to witness to our faith to others and for others to witness to their faith to us, as well as to study together with a better understanding of the other. It will break down barriers and stereotypes; it will build bridges. This is not for proselytizing but for proclaim-

ing the Gospel in all its richness. This way, we move to dialogue rather than confronting each other with apologetics that is underinformed about the other."

Students in the institute may pursue their choice of any of the master's and doctoral degrees OST already offers, with the option of a concentration in African American studies. The institute's interdisciplinary categories will include black church history, black biblical studies, black theologies, sociology of black religion, contemporary issues in the black church, African American Christian social ethics, African American Christian education, black church worship and nurture, black preaching and social justice. Aspects of African American spirituality, art, music, history and culture will come into play in any given course.

The degree program curricula are tailored to fit the students' academic and professional goals, though many of the core courses will be taken in common. The courses required for the concentration are open to all students. Walker anticipates that some students will take courses listed in the black church studies series as electives in their curriculum plan.

"Wherever there can be an option, there will be; for example, where there is U.S. church history, they can take black church history; for catechetics, they can take black Christian education; for religious history of the Southwest, they can take black church history," Walker explained.

Oblate has had good numbers of African American students enrolled in its degree programs for years, mostly from non-Roman Catholic denominations, said Dr. Scott Woodward, vice president for academic affairs and dean of OST, who conceived the idea that became the Sankofa Institute.

"They've been very happy at Oblate. With this many coming here without any programming directed specifically to African American pastoral needs, I thought, 'Imagine what we could do with a program that *did* address those needs,'" Dr. Woodward said. Father Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, the school president, and OST's Board of Trustees were immediately enthusiastic and embraced it wholeheartedly. Generous donors pledged to support the institute for three years.

"This seemed like a natural move for us at Oblate; we've been addressing issues of culture in formation for decades," he explained. "However, there's also been a real lack of attention to the African American

church in this area. Protestant seminaries in Texas have had students from historically African American churches, but few have offered programming in Black Church Studies as far as we know, and none has offered so many degrees in it." Oblate will offer all its academic degrees with an optional concentration in African American pastoral leadership.

Besides expanding the diversity of OST's academic community, Dr. Woodward said, the Sankofa Institute fits well into the school's mission of keeping one eye on the Gospel and one eye on the people OST serves. "It offers us a chance to expand the ecumenical sense we have here as well. Faculty have been working with Sister Addie to strengthen bibliographies and reading lists for these new students." There also is an element of the Oblate charism in the Sankofa initiative. "The African American community has been underserved with regard to offering theological formation. We hope to improve the quality of pastoral leadership while improving our own school community at the same time," he added.

Dr. J. Alfred Smith, chair of the institute's Council of Elders and professor of preaching at the American Baptist Seminary of the West in Oakland, Calif., characterized the Sankofa Institute experience as "unique, ground-breaking and seminal," adding, "I'm glad to be a part of something so distinguished. This will be a paradigm of the kingdom of heaven."

"It epitomizes true ecumenicity. This is not ghettoized education; it's broad and rich. The context for it is the African American religious experience, but it doesn't stay there; it embraces a cosmopolitan catholicity and universality," he declared, adding: "One who goes through the program will be rooted in the soil of the African American experience, but will emerge much bigger than that experience."

Elaborating on this point, Dr. Smith continued, "If I study the richness of the Desert Fathers and the spiritual tradition of Teresa of Avila, I become an agent of reconciliation." He noted that the Catholic Church has long been perceived as teaching that non-Catholic Christians will not go to heaven. Thus, in Oblate's welcoming Protestants to study alongside Catholics in a Catholic institution, "we see reconciliation that's expressed not only in creed but in deed." He was alluding to a comment by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. whom he quoted as saying: "How often are our lives characterized by a high blood pressure of creed and an anemia of deed!"

Dr. Smith continued, "I am proud to join Sister Addie. I know what kind of woman she is: She's a bridge builder. She's equally at home in a high-church liturgy that epitomizes

the best of Catholicism, and in an African American worship service where we might sing 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' or 'There is a Balm in Gilead.'"

The Rev. Joni Russ, another council member who serves on the Board of Examiners for the 10th District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, also serves on the institute's Council of Elders. She said that the AME Church, a historically African American denomination more than 200 years old, operates no seminaries in the Southwest. For candidates seeking the Master of Divinity degree required for ordination, the nearest Protestant institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools are the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas Christian University's Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth and Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology in Dallas.

"The Sankofa Institute provides an opportunity to keep our people here in San Antonio and to offer them a program tailored to the African American religious experience," the Rev. Russ said. "It will train them in African American preaching, church history and many other areas. It's been a dream of all of us on the Board of Examiners to have a program through which our clergy, working with the Board, could receive credit for at least a Master of Divinity degree from an institution accredited by ATS," she continued.

She also noted that district officials have discussed starting an AME seminary in Texas, but the challenge would be enormous. "We've prayed about this, and now it seems God has dropped a facility, a faculty and accreditation right into our laps. We're very happy about the many opportunities this allows us to offer our clergy and our laity. We're also very excited because Oblate has welcomed us. The authenticity of the spirit here is the thing that's been most welcoming to me. There's an authentic caring, spirit and fellowship at Oblate."

The Rev. Russ added that the Sankofa Institute is also a wonderful opportunity for students to study in an ecumenical community. "The chance to listen, learn and respect others is the core of seminary life. You get an opportunity to see people from everywhere," she added.

Dr. Dwight Hopkins, professor of theology at The University of Chicago Divinity School, also expressed excitement, noting that the institute is unique on several levels: it's ecumenical, offering an opportunity for Catholics and Protestants to study and worship together, and it's offered at a Catholic institution; the program is interdisciplinary, combining theology, history, culture, music, preaching, wor-

ship and social justice as they relate to the African American Christian experience; it offers balance among pastors, laity and academics in providing the program; and it offers multiple master's and doctoral degrees.

"This is very rare. Most other institutions in the United States have programs that focus only on the Master of Divinity. At Oblate, they'll be able to choose among four, five, or six degrees, each with a concentration in African American pastoral leadership. That is quite striking. This program could be a paradigm for denominations and other faith groups as far as what pastoral leadership education should be like. It's rooted in the African American religious experience, but its comprehensiveness can be duplicated in any situation," Dr. Hopkins said.

"So Oblate is making a real contribution to the wider community regarding pastoral leadership preparation." He noted his own denomination, the American Baptist Church, is increasingly emphasizing such academic credentials for ordination, and the importance of multicultural sensitivity in pastoral leadership.

Besides Dr. Smith and Dr. Hopkins, other faculty members include Dr. Michael Battle of the Peace Institute; Dr. Shawnee Marie Daniels-Sykes, SSND, assistant professor of theology and bioethics at Mt. Mary College in Milwaukee; Dr. Sharon Grant, adjunct at the University of the Incarnate Word; Dr. Diana Hayes, professor of systematic theology emerita at Georgetown University; Dr. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, professor of religion at Shaw University Divinity School; Dr. Stephen Reid, professor at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary; and Dr. Dwight Webster, pastor of Christian Unity Baptist Church in New Orleans. All have taught at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies and are thoroughly familiar with and comfortable in a Catholic academic environment, Walker said.

The name Sankofa comes from King Adinkera of the Akan people of West Africa, Sister Walker explained. It literally means, "It is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot." "Sankofa" teaches us that we must go back to our roots in order to move forward; we should reach back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us so we can achieve our full potential as we move forward."

Walker said plans also include an annual six-part lecture series; monthly pastors', ministers' and lay leaders' joint study days; monthly interdenominational praise and worship; and research and writing groups that facilitate students' making their research and writing projects clearer and more presentable for meeting degree requirements.



Walker

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