

MEET PTS



BRIDGE BUILDER SHANNON GARRETT-HEADEN LEADS AS STUDENT ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT

For M.Div. student Shannon Garrett-Headen, growing up in the Black church rooted Sunday worship is the “deepest core of my being.” Having loved church since childhood, Shannon says further, “It is a part of my identity, my culture, my inheritance, as the Black church was the first Black American institution.” Shannon’s mother instilled in her an intense love for African American culture, “for our beauty, ingenuity, strength, and faith. In worship, the walls of our church building felt alive when the choir sang, clapped, and swayed—like they breathed in our suffering and exhaled salvation. On any given Sunday it wouldn’t have surprised me one bit if Jesus himself walked through the sanctuary doors just to witness our worship. That’s how deeply we lamented; that’s how highly we praised.”

While still in early elementary school, Shannon became “completely mesmerized by the pastor. He didn’t just preach—he sang, he danced, he twirled, shouted, and stomped. He dived and dipped all across the chancel. He insisted that we had to choose Jesus—not tomorrow, but immediately.” Hearing one of his regular altar calls, young Shannon knew exactly she wanted to do. “I told my grandmother I wanted to be a preacher just like him! She smiled sweetly, and told me, ‘No Baby—that’s only for men.’” Nonetheless, that day marked the beginning of Shannon’s call to pastoral ministry.

Later, Shannon prepared for that call by earning her bachelor’s in theology and pastoral ministry. “Reading, thinking, and arguing theology—my passion—keeps me up at night!” Shannon notes. She went on to earn a graduate certificate in youth theology and youth ministry and served as director of youth ministries and a pastoral intern at Forest Hill Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio. “I was the first African American hired in a staff position there,” says Shannon. In her roles, she directed Christian education for grades 6-12, including Confirmation; developed and trained youth volunteers; planned and conducted mission trips, service opportunities, and fellowship and fund-raising events; and assisted in planning and leading worship.

Having grown up in a multicultural, multiethnic neighborhood, it “didn’t occur” to Shannon until she moved away that not everyone had the same background she did. Her “normal” wasn’t everyone’s “normal.” When she began visiting seminaries to extend her theological education, PTS felt right.

“During my time here, that call has gotten louder and clearer. I believe God directed me here to be a voice for those whose lives echo my experience. Based on my background, age, and experience, I am uniquely suited to be a bridge builder between races, cultures, and generations,” she observes. And as 2020-2021 Student Association president, Shannon will have a unique opportunity for leadership in that way.

Shannon brings a rich variety of seminary experiences to her position. She’s traveled to Cuba, South Africa, and Columbia on World Mission Initiative / Metro-Urban Institute intercultural trips—“some of my most vivid and transformative experiences at seminary,” she comments. She founded Syngeneia, PTS’s student group for seminarians of color, to “celebrate and honor the richness of our diversity and seek ways to weave our voices, traditions, and stories into the fabric of the PTS community.” And most recently she served on the chapel team, where she got to “combine my two favorite things: theology and writing. As a former slam poet and lover of literature, preaching is what gives me life. Preaching gives me the language to attempt to know something about God and to share God’s word with God’s people. It is a tremendous responsibility and a tremendous joy,” she notes.

On track for ordination in the PCUSA, after seminary Shannon will seek a pastoral placement ideally with a congregation that shares her passion for racial reconciliation and social justice. She also plans to pursue doctoral studies in sociology, “because God isn’t housed only in the discipline of theology. Truly to seek God, one must go where God is—and God is with the people,” she says. In the meantime at the Seminary, this self-described academic will continue to be easily recognized by her keen fashion sense and purple headphones!

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