

African American Leaders in the PC(USA)

Katie Geneva Cannon



Leading Womanist theologian and the first African American woman to be ordained in the United Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A. (UPCUSA), Katie Geneva Cannon, was born in North Carolina on January 3, 1950. Though her parents, Esau and Corine Cannon, were elders at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Kannapolis, NC, Katie and her six siblings attended a Lutheran school for their early childhood education—the only education available to her during that time as a Black girl.

After graduating from George Washington Carver High School in 1967, Katie went on to graduate from Barber-Scotia College with a bachelor's degree, Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary with a Master of Divinity, and Union Theological Seminary with both a Master's and Doctor of Philosophy. Shortly after she graduated with this degree, in 1974, Cannon became the first Black woman to be ordained in the UPCUSA. In 2001, the Rev. Dr. Cannon began teaching at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA. Prior to this faculty position, she had worked at Temple University, Episcopal Divinity School, and Harvard Divinity School.

As she made history as an African American woman scholar of religion, the Rev. Dr. Cannon also broke ground as a founder of Womanist theology. Novelist and poet Alice Walker is often acknowledged as the coiner of the term Womanism—Katie Cannon took this term and weaved it into her theological studies and teachings. Womanist examines the intersection of feminism, racial identity, and more; the Rev. Dr. Cannon applied a womanist approach to theology, and made history doing so.

In 2018, Cannon was honored at the PCUSA's General Assembly, where she received the Excellence in Theological Education Award a few months before she passed. Cannon's final success in her long legacy was the founding of the Center for Womanist Leadership at Union Presbyterian Seminary in April 2018. After her death in August 2018—she had been diagnosed with acute leukemia—the Center was renamed The Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership in her honor.

The Presbyterian Historical Society, in collaboration with Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond and The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary (Columbia University Libraries), has digitized over 450 sermons, lectures, and writings of Cannon's. The Rev. Dr. Katie Cannon's memory and influence lives on, and the Katie Geneva Cannon Digital Collection, which exists in Pearl, PHS's digital archive, is only one fragment of her legacy.



Read more about Katie Cannon on the PHS blog
history.pcusa.org/about/blog/african-american-leaders-series



Learn about the AALC Initiative
history.pcusa.org/aalc



The Rev. Dr. Cannon teaching, 1983.

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