

Episcopal Divinity School to Affiliate with Union Theological Seminary

The Rev. Kelly Brown Douglas, Scholar, and Racial Justice Activist Named EDS's New Dean

CAMBRIDGE, MA, UNITED STATES, May 19, 2017 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) and Union Theological Seminary today announced that they have signed an agreement that will allow EDS to continue as an Episcopal seminary through a collaboration with Union at its campus in New York City beginning in the fall of 2018.



"We had three goals when we began to plan this news phase in EDS's life," said the Rev. Dr. Gary Hall, chair of the EDS board. "We wanted to continue providing Episcopal theological education within an accredited, degree-granting program, deepen our historic commitment to gospel-centered justice, and provide financial strength and stability for EDS's future. Today, I am delighted to say that we have achieved all three."

"This is an historic moment," said Rev. Dr. Serene Jones, President of the Union Faculty and Johnston Family Professor for Religion and Democracy. "We are honored that EDS has chosen to partner with us and are certain that the stewardship of our deepest commitments will be fulfilled in the years ahead."

EDS appointed the Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, Susan D. Morgan Professor of Religion at Goucher College in Maryland and canon theologian at Washington National Cathedral, as the first dean of EDS at Union. Douglas will also join the Union faculty as a professor. She is the author of many articles and five books, including "Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God," which was written in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin.

"Kelly Brown Douglas is one of the most distinguished religious thinkers, teachers, ministers, and activists in the nation," Jones said. "We are confident that Union's longstanding commitment to both the Gospel and social justice will be strengthened and enhanced under her leadership."

Ordained as an Episcopal priest in 1983, Douglas holds a master's degree in theology and a Ph.D. in systematic theology from Union. Her academic work focuses on womanist theology, sexuality, and the black church, and she is a sought-after speaker and author on issues of racial justice and theology.

"Kelly is an Episcopal Church leader and an eminent scholar—and she is a daughter of Union," Hall said. "Working together, EDS and Union aim to advance the causes of social justice and theology in the world and Kelly is the ideal leader for this new venture."

"I am excited for the challenge," Douglas said. "What I am really happy about for the wider EDS community, is that this isn't the typical bad news of a small seminary closing. This is the news that this place believed enough in its mission that it went out and found a way to carry that mission forward in a viable fashion, and found a way for the mission to grow. EDS is going to continue. The EDS community has found the platform to do that, and they have found a partner in Union that shares their mission. I feel privileged to be a part of this next chapter in EDS's life."

Beginning in 2018, students who enroll in the EDS program at Union will earn graduate degrees from Union and also fulfill requirements for ordination in the Episcopal Church. In addition to Douglas, EDS will hire a professor of Anglican studies to join the four Episcopal priests currently on Union's faculty.

"I look forward to the amazing possibilities that will be brought forth through this affiliation," said Union's Board Chair Wolcott B. Dunham, Jr. "Our work together will surely expand the ways we serve the church and the world." A life-long Episcopalian, Dunham is also senior warden of St. James' Episcopal Church in the City of New York and a former trustee of the Episcopal Diocese of New York.

EDS plans to purchase a floor in a new building being constructed at Union that will house offices, residential space for the dean, and other facilities. The EDS campus in Cambridge will be sold after operations there cease in July, and the proceeds will be added to the school's endowment, currently valued at \$53 million.

The EDS board has voted to cap spending at four percent of its endowment once expenses associated with the move to Union are paid. "We are in this for the long haul," said Bonnie Anderson, vice chair of the EDS board. "Enshrining our commitment to sensible, sustainable spending in our affiliation agreement was important to us."

EDS alums will enjoy the same library and campus privileges accorded to Union alums. The EDS library and archives will be reviewed by representatives from both schools and Union will accept items that do not duplicate its own holdings. The Burke Library at Union, part of Columbia University's library system, is one of the largest theological libraries in North America with holdings of more than 700,000 items.

The initial term of the EDS-Union affiliation agreement is eleven years, and both schools have the option to agree to extensions beyond that time. EDS will remain its own legal entity with its own board of trustees.

The two seminaries began negotiations in February after Union was chosen from among nine potential partners who expressed interest in an alliance with EDS. The EDS board, spurred by financial challenges that were depleting the school's endowment, voted in 2016 to cease granting degrees in May 2017 and to explore options for EDS's future.

EDS has adopted a generous severance plan for its faculty and staff. All students who did not complete their degrees this month are being "taught out" at other seminaries with EDS's financial support so as to avoid additional costs.

About Union Theological Seminary

Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York is a seminary and a graduate school of theology established in 1836 by founders "deeply impressed by the claims of the world upon the church." Union prepares women and men for committed lives of service to the church, academy, and society. A Union education develops practices of mind and body that foster intellectual and academic excellence, social justice, and compassionate wisdom. Grounded in the Christian tradition and responsive to the needs of God's creation, Union's graduates make a difference wherever they serve.

Union believes that a new interreligious spirituality of radical openness and love is the world's best hope for peace, justice, and the care of God's creation. Empowered by groundbreaking inquiry aligned with practical realism and a bias for action, Union is charting a profound new course for enduring social change. Union's graduates stand out wherever they serve, practicing their vocations with courage and perseverance, and speaking clearly and acting boldly on behalf of social justice in all of its forms.

About Episcopal Divinity School

Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was formed in 1974 by the merger of Philadelphia Divinity School (1857) and Episcopal Theological School (1867). For more than 40 years, EDS has offered a bold and expansive vision of inclusion and social justice in the service of preparing students to lead faith communities.

In July 2016, the EDS Board of Trustees voted to cease granting degrees in May 2017 and to explore options for EDS's future that would carry on the seminary's historic mission, continue accredited degree-granting theological education, and provide financial strength and stability for EDS's future. More information is available at eds.edu/news/transition.

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