



25 YEARS & COUNTING

Reflecting on the Past and Future of SBL's Committee on Underrepresented Racial/Ethnic Minorities in the Profession

This fall SBL's Committee on Underrepresented Racial/Ethnic Minorities in the Profession celebrates twenty-five years of official existence. We have planned a panel with reflections from founding and crucial members over the years, a plenary address discussing the challenges minoritized scholars confront in our guild, a reception celebrating our twenty-five years of work, and a luncheon where we invite minoritized members to think about plans and strategies for the years ahead, especially with regard to the cultivation of mentoring programs.

Yet we write this reflection in a moment of crisis, especially for racial/ethnic minorities in the U.S. and migrants from the two-thirds world around the globe; in the U.S. racist, Christian supremacist, misogynistic, and anti-immigrant rhetoric has played an important role in the presidential election. The U.S. as a nation is in the midst of a demographic transformation that has impacted the student bodies of many colleges and seminaries but has yet to significantly transform the demographics or discursive commitments of many of the professors who teach those students. Most notably, last year's Society Report revealed the demography of its own membership, and the numbers of self-identified minoritized scholars were disproportionately small, even by the standards of the broader U.S. academy. These numbers compel us as a Society to wonder about what kind of scholarship we are truly committed to; if we recognize that diversity is about both numbers of bodies as well as a substantive intellectual commitment to varying perspectives and approaches, then we do have to think strategically about what makes our Society and the field of biblical scholarship comparatively restraining of diversity.

Many of these challenges are similar to those that led to the formation of this committee in the wake of the landmark publication of the edited volume *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (1991).¹

¹ In addition to the volume edited by Cain Hope Felder, there were other anthologies that were published around the same time or shortly after and were moved by the similar challenges, needs and spirit, among them are the following: *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (edited by R.S. Sugirtharajah, 1991); *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (edited by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, 1995); *The Bible in Asian America* (edited by Tat-Siong Benny Liew, 2002).



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The scholars involved with that project and their allies felt that one book publication was not enough, that more scholarship and support for the work of minoritized scholars must follow; these early scholars cared about forming spaces of solidarity that could enable self-recognition and coming into their own voices as minoritized critics. At the same time, the initial committee work targeted recruitment, hosting conferences and working to convince minoritized students, especially seminary students, to pursue Ph.D.s in biblical studies. The conferences worked to identify potentially interested students and then set up time to frame conversations, helping to nurture critical voice-giving capacities among participants. Beyond these early recruitment conferences, the committee saw itself as providing space for networking and voice cultivation among scholars who might otherwise feel quite isolated in their individual institutional contexts. Networking and combating institutional isolation remain central to the committee's work today.

While the recruitment conferences only lasted a few years, and it may be a good idea to revisit recruitment efforts in light of our numbers, the committee also wishes to spend time this fall examining all we have accomplished in the past quarter century. Two of the founding members of this committee have gone on to serve as president (Vincent Wimbush and Fernando Segovia), and many members of the committee have also served the Society in a range of other leadership positions, most notably on Council. Publications, panels, and additional groups that provide voice to minoritized scholars and scholarship have proliferated. Students from those initial recruitment conferences have gone on to be scholars and to serve the fields of biblical studies and religion in varying capacities, including serving as academic and administrative leaders in their institutions. Our luncheons continue to be spaces for minoritized scholars to find each other, to combat isolation, to celebrate individual achievements, and to remind the broader SBL that we are also present and active participants in our guild.



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When we come together to celebrate twenty-five years of service to the guild this fall, we also call on our membership to join us in thinking about what we can do differently and do better in the future. Minoritized scholars and scholarship remain statistically underrepresented in our Society and especially within the institutions that support and grant Ph.D.s. Our current committee views the development and expansion of mentoring programs within the SBL as a crucial step forward in cultivating and supporting minoritized scholars from the start of graduate school and hopefully on into their middle and senior career positions. Marking and representing difference still remains a challenge to the scholarship (and scholars) so often viewed as central to biblical studies. Our committee must continue to work with SBL's leadership and broader membership in transforming not only the demography but also the discourses and practices that have restrained demographic diversification.

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