

Civil rights leader Gil Caldwell calls on Duke Divinity to confront its past

More than 60 years ago, the divinity school denied Caldwell admission because he is black.

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [November 22, 2017](#) issue



Gilbert Caldwell. RNS photo by Yonat Shimron.

Gilbert Caldwell, an 83-year-old retired United Methodist elder, was “a foot soldier” in Martin Luther King Jr.’s nonviolent army. When Duke Divinity School invited him to speak at Goodson Chapel recently, he asked whether the school was willing to confront its past.

Caldwell recounted how he had applied to Duke Divinity in 1955 and received a rejection letter that said the trustees had a policy of racial segregation.

“What is it that God would have Duke Divinity School do in light of that history?” he asked. “For if one is not honest about that history, one can’t be fully present.”

When introducing Caldwell in chapel, Dean Elaine Heath said the school wants to “reckon with its inglorious past.” Later, over lunch, she, Caldwell, and a group of Duke Divinity School students talked about racial healing.

Caldwell recounted that in the early 1950s, he was studying as an undergraduate at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, about 50 miles to the west, when he felt a call to ministry. Duke, which is affiliated with the United Methodist Church, seemed like a good fit for Caldwell, who is Methodist. But back in 1955, he told the students, the rejection letter he received said that “they hoped that I would find a seminary that would meet my needs,” he recalled.

Caldwell attended Boston University’s School of Theology instead and there met King, who led him to a life protesting racial injustice. Caldwell marched alongside King to protest school segregation in Boston, to rally for jobs on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington in 1963 and to register black voters in the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

More recently, Caldwell has taken up the call for LGBTQ rights, championing full inclusion in the United Methodist Church, where he is a retired elder.

Caldwell is executive producer of the documentary *From Selma to Stonewall: Are We There Yet?*, which was being screened the same day at a different Duke venue. The film follows Caldwell and LGBTQ activist Marilyn Bennett, who directed the movie, in an exploration of the similarities and differences between the black civil rights and LGBTQ rights movements.

“For me, he reflects a generation of clergy who have their pulse on the need for social justice,” said Carl Kenney, an African-American graduate of Duke Divinity School, speaking of Caldwell.

Today, five of the divinity school’s 42 faculty members are African Americans and 95 of its 608 students reported that they were either African American or black.

Caldwell urged the school to do more by offering classes that explore the psychology behind injustice related to race and sexuality.

He recalled the story of Jesus meeting an invalid at a healing pool. When Jesus asked the man if he wanted to be healed, the man gave an excuse: “I have no one to help me into the pool.” Jesus told him to “pick up his bed and walk,” according to John

5:8.

“I ask the divinity school at this point: are you willing to pick up your bed and walk?”
—Religion News Service

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