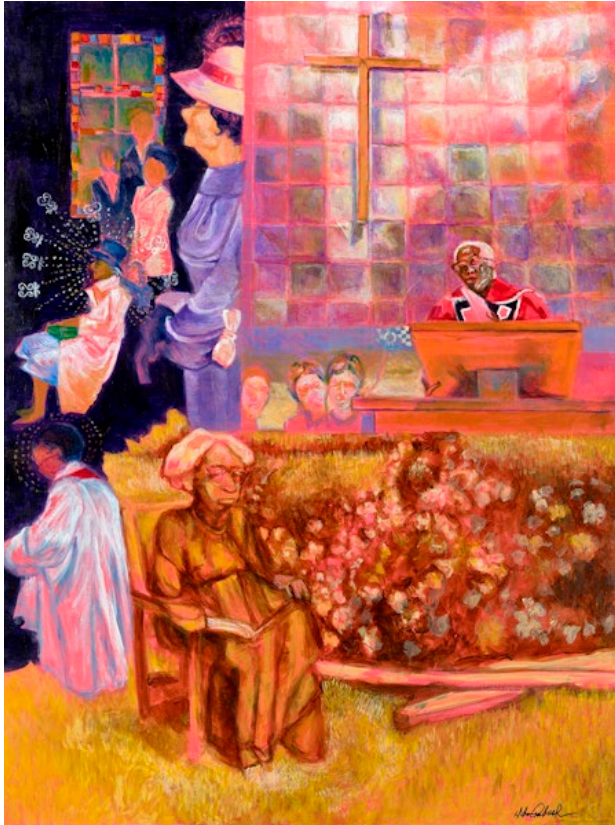


# Oxnam Chapel Installation: New Artwork by Graduate, Dr. Debra Ambush



On Tuesday, September 5, Wesley community members gathered in the Oxnam Chapel Narthex to view new work created and presented by Dr. Debra Ambush '21. Dr. Ambush is an artist, researcher, and activist. As an educator for over 35 years, Dr. Ambush has taught kindergarten through graduate level art education programs. As a Wesley Theological Seminary Master of Arts graduate, she earned both a certification in Arts and Theology and the African American Church Studies.

Dr. Ambush shared, “My art making process is shaped by the work I do as an African American female Liturgical Artist. My studio practice, in any particular medium, is driven by the faith work a particular historical site evokes in my commitment to Toni Morrison’s ‘site of memory’. Through her literary criticism, she has served to influence artists who seek to ground their work in the visual attributes of memory and faith. In tandem, the work of theologian Melanie Harris concerning Ecowomanism, has enabled me to explore the development of an iconography relating to African American physical and spiritual connection to the land. My liturgical work spans from creating compositions during a live worship experience, to public installation commissions, to exhibitions.

The particular body of work being celebrated as an installation at Oxnam Chapel this fall focuses on my family ancestors’ experience of living in Farmville, Virginia from emancipation until the early 1960s. Through the four panels that comprise the installation, I tell the story of the significance of the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education decision and the way in which it impacted my entire family. I accomplished this by visually exploring seventeen family letters I recovered from our ancestral farmhouse in Farmville.

These found letters illuminate struggles, joy, and determination expressed as family ancestors wrote to each other across geographies of autonomy and resistance, simultaneously building a dynamic family faith heritage. The letters, spanning from post emancipation to the closing of the Prince Edward County Public Schools in 1959 in defiance of the Brown decision judicial ruling, are deeply moving and shed light

on a necessary migration to Washington for my ancestors. I use these letters to elucidate and give a personal voice to the civil rights struggle as amplified by faith.

The intersectional nature of research, meditation, and prayer are empowering methodologies that came out of my graduate work at Wesley in the areas of African American Church Studies, art, and theology. The mural glass installation also pays tribute to the scholarship and devotion to the Wesley community by the late Professor Rev. William B. McClain and Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology and Church History, Dr. Beverly E. Mitchell.

Through a generous Luce Center for the Arts Research Grant under the directorship of Dr. Aaron Rosen, I have been able to extend my research and studio art practice to amplify the work of African American artists who have produced important and influential work in the African American beloved community of faith. One such individual, the Late Dr. David C. Driskell is the topic of my upcoming lecture sponsored by the Frederick County African American Resources Cultural and Heritage Society Museum and the Delaplaine Arts Center entitled 'Heart of the Matter'. This lecture brings my three-year commission full circle in highlighting sixty-four stained glass window designs Dr. Driskell created for Talladega College in Talladega Alabama and also here in Washington D.C. for Peoples Congregational Church of Christ."