

Andrews University Black History Month 2019

Focused on Afrofuturism and the theme "Black to the Future"

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Jacqueline Dohna served as the moderator for The Agora, "Exploring the Controversy: The 'N' Word." (Photo by Autumn Goodman)

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From February 1 through March 1, Andrews University celebrated Black History Month with a variety of activities, speakers and events. This year's Black History Month focused on Afrofuturism and the theme "Black to the Future."

"I was once again reminded of the diversity and beauty of black culture," said Michael Nixon, vice president for Diversity & Inclusion, "and the power that is available to all of us when the various members of the African Diaspora come together and celebrate each other all while discovering new ways to work together for the further progression and advancement of black people."

Black History Month celebrates—and raises awareness of—the accomplishments of people of African descent. The Black History Month Committee noted in a statement that Afrofuturism is "a coming together of creatives, artists, imaginers and visionaries. It is the romantic union of past resilience and future triumphs. Afrofuturism is an opportunity for the dreamers and builders to combine their superpowers in order to construct a better future. It is a call for expressive inventors to begin recreating their world right now!"

Keynote speaker Ty-Ron Douglas, PhD and associate professor of PK12 Leadership and Policy at the University of Missouri, explored this topic alongside other faculty and student speakers throughout the month. Douglas—an author, border crossing scholar, songwriter and motivator who specializes in Black education, athletics, leadership development and Black identity curriculum development—spoke for Black History Chapel, Celebration Vespers and Celebration Sabbath.

At his vespers presentation on February 7, Douglas highlighted two themes: “Border Crossing” and “Challenging Systems.” He began with a Grace Tour promotional video showing the power of Jesus and redemption in people’s lives, then asked the audience, “What’s your why? What is the reason that you want to bless others?” He established the point that a relationship with Christ is not based on affiliations, stating, “... just because we are at Andrews University does NOT mean we have a personal relationship with Jesus.”

He then addressed the importance of asking questions and challenging systems. He noted that the systems of today’s society were developed in a time when racism and discrimination were acceptable. Douglas described this concept of broken systems, saying, “It’s very hard to have an anti-racist system born in a racist system.”

He closed with an appeal to the audience: “Go out into cities to raise up churches to reach inner-city children.” He explained that when we adopt the mindset of border-crossing brothers and sisters, we step out of our comfort zone to spread the message of Christ to redeem and change lives. This new mindset of “border crossing” gives us the confidence to enter and challenge systems that have left people secluded from the life-changing power of Christ and a new life in Him.

On the afternoon of Saturday, Feb. 9, The Agora took place in Newbold Auditorium. The program was titled “Exploring the Controversy: The ‘N’ Word.” The Agora, originally founded to engage the campus community in an open dialogue on important issues facing our campus, church, world and students after graduation, creates a safe space to debate beliefs and ideas.

In this format, two speakers represented opposing views of the “n” word. Christopher Whittaker, Master of Divinity student, was pro-use of the word—changing the definition for those who have the social license and only depending upon the correct context. Michael Miller, also an MDiv student, was against the use of the word entirely—the definition in its original form was used to oppress. Jacqueline Dohna, a student chaplain for graduate initiatives and MDiv student, served as the moderator.

This panel discussed the history of the “n” word as well as the many different movements, such as “Black is beautiful” and the Civil Rights Movement, to empower black people to embrace their own cultures despite the ongoing oppression and segregation in the world around them. They also examined how the word is used in American pop culture.

The conversation continued for over two hours, with the resolution that use of the “n” word is an individual choice by each member of the black community as to whether to use the word or not. Those who attended The Agora appreciated the experience.

Yvonne Nunga, a junior double major in public relations and Spanish, said, “I’m glad the speakers were people who have the black experience and gave both points of view.”

Brandon Shin, a junior biology major, said, “I thought there was a balanced discussion, which was great! Both speakers had a solid foundation of what they were speaking on and

making their points, whether it was the question they were asked by the mediator, the other speaker, or from the open mic.”

Other Black History Month events included a BSCF Book Club, Black Spirit Week and the Black Like Me Comedic Story Slam. Dining Services provided a dinner in honor of Black History Month that was inspired by the state-of-the-art menu at the Sweet Home Café in the Smithsonian National Museum of African-American History & Culture. The menu was also prepared with feedback from faculty, staff and students, who were given an opportunity to submit a favorite recipe.

“‘Black to the Future—Welcome to Afrofuturism’ provided us a great opportunity to frame some wonderful events,” said Nixon. “I believe we were able to put together thought-provoking and edifying content that both celebrated Black culture and invited our broader campus community in to learn, celebrate and discover pathways into ally-ship.”