Congratulations on the first four years!

The Center for Religion and Cities (CRC) is excited to celebrate our first four years! The CRC was established in 2018 with generous support from The Henry Luce Foundation, The James H. Gilliam Jr. College of Liberal Arts, The School of Architecture and Planning, and The Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Morgan State University.

During these four years we have collaborated and established relationships with many community organizations and partners such as the Black Church Food Security Network, Plantation Park Heights Urban Farm, and Jews United for Justice (to name a few). These collaborations inspired many of the CRC’s projects including our 2020 Relief and Restoration work, Betting on Hope, and the Good Life Project. We’re extremely grateful for the continued support and excited to see what the future holds!

Betting on Hope

Betting on Hope was an exhibition that emerged from the 2020 Relief and Restoration grants to community partners. Student artists and curators documented and artistically responded to the initiatives that were supported and documented by the CRC during the pandemic. These grants supported food and housing security efforts, PPE, and organizational infrastructure. The work was documented through archived oral history recordings which then inspired artwork by Morgan students.

These works and others were then featured in an exhibition at the James E. Lewis Museum of Art at Morgan State University from October 2021-February 2022. In April 2022, we held a closing reception and auction of student work to acknowledge our community partners, the curatorial team, project organizers, and the student artists. The reception had a great turnout and all the student art was auctioned off. Thank you to Amy Landau and everyone who helped make BOH a huge success!

To view the online exhibit and recorded reception please visit: BettingOnHope.org

September 2022  www.religionandcities.org/  Follow us on social media!
The Center is changing! Our “new” official name is the Center for Religion and Cities.

Our previous title, the Center for the Study of Religion and the City, reflected our origins within and dedication to academic studies/research while framing both ‘religion’ and ‘the city’ as the category we sought to engage. Over the last few years, we’ve come to realize that what really animates us is collaborative work with community partners aimed at improving our shared quality of life. Our revised Mission and Vision Statement states: “a justice oriented, collaborative, and caring ecological approach to religion and cities will be needed to ensure the survival and thriving of our communities within urban environments.”

Our mission is to bring together “community partners, academics, and students to collaboratively learn about and critically engage unjust structures in our cities and to support and grow innovative solutions to more equitable futures.” We do this through mentorships, projects, programming, and funding opportunities. Our vision is then to “become a nationally recognized collective dedicated to collaboratively engaging moral issues at the intersection of religion and cities.” Thank you to everyone who helped articulate who we are, what we do, and where we hope to go as a collective.

Join the CRC in Denver during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion.

Our Center’s work will be featured on two roundtables and we are collaborating with the Colorado Village Collective, AAR’s Religion and Cities Unit, and the Institute for Religion, Politics + Culture at ILIFF to host a tour in Denver. Also, we will be hosting a reception to celebrate our Center’s continued growth.

To learn more, please visit https://www.religionandcities.org/aar. We look forward to engaging with you in some form at the AAR!
Building on our 2020 Relief and Restoration work, the Good Life Project (GLP) sought to learn about, document, and reflect on how marginalized communities in American cities navigate the pandemic and imagine better futures. The GLP supported 8 Lifegiving events in cities across the US during which community members discussed their emerging visions of the good life while actively bringing them to life. We supported basket weaving and intergenerational conversations on reciprocity with land at the Cahuilla Indian Reservation in Southern California, food and book give-aways at farmers markets in Baltimore, a mural painting for healing at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, a panel discussion with Mardi Gras Black Maskers and drumming in New Orleans and other events where we had existing community partners in San Diego, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Denver. In addition to holding 8 lifegiving events, we’ve produced first drafts of our 5min documentary films, collected nearly 500 oral history recordings, have produced a website draft which will feature webpages and infographics (thanks to Katie & Ann for their input) for each city, and organized a panel discussion on the project for the AAR that we hope to see you at! Over the next year, the GLP team will continue to reflect on the work while developing a book of stories for our community partners in collaboration with the Facing Project, teaching materials in partnership with the CRCs Curriculum Lab, continue to reflect on lessons learned regarding collaborative community engaged work along with with a working group of the American Council of Learned Societies, and support Lifegiving events in other cities as part of a second exploratory phase. Thank you to all who have supported this work and the accomplishment of so many impressive and varied project goals, the most important being the collaborative spirit we’ve nurtured and continue to grow along with the rest of the CRC collective!

Learn more about the project:
To learn more about this project and how you can support please visit https://www.religionandcities.org/goodlife.
Meet the Team

Within the past 5 years the Center for Religion and Cities has expanded. The CRC would like to welcome our new staff members/fellows!

Dr. Anika Simpson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Morgan State University (MSU). She has dedicated the majority of her career to teaching at an Historically Black College/University (HBCU), where she has invested in the work of institution building through the establishment of MSU’s Women’s, Gender, and Sexualities program and marshaled full university support for MSU’s LGBTQ+ communities through the creation of the LGBTQ+ Presidential Advisory Council. Dr. Simpson is currently completing a monograph entitled Single Black Mother: Queer Reflections on Marriage and Racial Justice, under contract at Oxford University Press.

A graduate of Spelman College, Dr. Simpson is deeply committed to supporting and advancing racial justice, gender justice, and LGBTQ equity through advocacy and education. She currently serves as Co-Chair for the National LGBTQ Task Force Board and serves as a Commissioner for Washington, DC’s Office of Human Rights.

Evana is a junior sociology student at Morgan State University and a recent transplant to Baltimore. Previously, she has lived in Chicago, Minneapolis, the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, and Southern California. She is passionate about decolonization, specifically as it pertains to religion and social justice, and learning about how histories of religious oppression impacts lived realities today. Evana loves good food, writing, learning languages, and spending time with her family and friends.
Santana Alvarado (they/them) graduated from CUNY Hunter with a B.A. in Sociology and a minor in Music. Santana is passionate about reindigenizing the arts, education, youth programs, and queer spaces. They have dedicated themselves to BIPOC religious and community organizations. Like their namesake, Santana enjoys playing guitar and writing songs that center justice, liberation, and intimacy with the Divine.

Brandon is a Baltimore native with a background in education and digital marketing. After graduating from Morgan State University, he began teaching music in DC Public Schools and later Baltimore City Public Schools. In addition to teaching students, he began work in digital marketing, graphic design, creating content and managing different media platforms. Brandon is also a professional photographer that has been highlighted by brands and organizations such as the Baltimore Sun as well as the photography company Nikon. Outside of work, he is an adventurous, nature lover that enjoys taking hikes and walking trails while taking photographs, as well as a music lover of all genres.

Congratulations to Kayla Wheeler, who’s coming back from leave to serve as our first Chair of the CRCs Executive Committee. Kayla served as co-PI for our 2020 Relief and Restoration work, director of research, and helped to write the initial letter of interest for our Lifeways grant. She is also author of the Mapping Malcolm’s Boston story map and the CRCs 2020 AAR conference virtual tour.

Congratulations to members of this year’s CRC Advisory Council!

Congratulations to Ariel Mejia who is starting her graduate studies at Eastern Michigan University this year. Ariel started working with the CRC under Kayla’s supervision for our 2020 Relief and Restoration work and subsequently served as our project coordinator. She was an integral part of our Spirit Conference, the GLP, and Lifeways and will continue to work part time with us along with Kayla with our Advisory Council, committees, quarterly meetings, and newsletter.
The very first class I had during my first semester at Morgan State was Dr. Harold Morales’ class: World Religions, Cities, and Baltimore. The course was co-instructed by Malik Nkosi and Stanley Jenkins, which overall gave a full approach to learning. Having all of their perspectives opened up the space to more possibilities, and it made me wish that more classes followed that model of shared leadership more.

Each class began with Tai Chi Chuan exercises and check-ins to see how everyone was doing. Sometimes this led to impromptu conversations that lasted the whole class, including one on a Be Good (Lion’s Song) by Gregory Porter featuring loving scenes of Baltimore. Over the course of semester we also hand drew different maps of cities including our hometowns, Baltimore, and Jerusalem in order to gain a deeper understanding of how religion impacts physical spaces. We also discussed the complex relationships between religions and cities and how different religious groups engage with justice and peace movements around the globe. One major highlight from this class was the requirement to attend the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies’ (ICIS) four-week interreligious dialogue about how the Abrahamic faiths have historically and currently engaged with economic justice work. I loved learning about other religions from the people who practice them.

My favorite part of my entire semester was our trip to a local Masjid that has historically served Baltimore’s African American Muslim community. We went as a class on the last Friday of Ramaadan to participate in the service and it was an incredible honor to be welcomed in by the community and learn about how they’ve responded to and been impacted by the city of Baltimore. My time there was unforgettable, and something I will honestly treasure for many years to come.

- Evana Upshaw
CRC Fellow

Since its inception, the CRC has designed courses at MSU that rethink the study of religion and the classroom. In our inaugural installment of ‘Enriching Experiences,’ CRC Fellow Evana Upshaw shares her experience of taking World Religions, Cities, and Baltimore this past spring.
Lifeways Fellowship & Grant Opportunities

The CRC’s newest project Lifeways of Hope is generously supported through a $1 million grant from the Henry Luce Foundation and centers deep listening and collaborative practices for advancing the quality of life in cities, especially for BIPOC communities who are often excluded from planning processes by cultural and research institutions. Our vision for the work emerged while encountering physical and social infrastructural barriers to the GLP. Drawing on national conversations on infrastructure, Allysa Maldenado-Estrada’s Lifeblood of a Parish and other discussions, we looked for alternative frames to grow our work from. As a possible relative to ‘infrastructure,’ we hope the lifeways frame will help us center the relationships that make our work meaningful and possible. Through many weekly conversations we landed on deep listening as an integral lifeway we could pour our energy and hope into. Lifeways of Hope supports the development of four collaborative-learning initiatives: Listening Lab directed by Rupa Pillai, Museum Co-Lab directed by Amy Landau, Curricular Lab directed by Harold Morales, and Black Queer Everything directed by Anika Simpson.

To improve collaborations between community members, universities, and museums, the Listening Lab will develop workshops, experiential retreats, and lifegiving events that center Circle Processes. Lessons learned from the Listening Lab will be applied in the work of the Museum Co-Lab, Curricular Lab, and Black Queer Everything to encourage and support healthier and more equitable collaboration practices between community members, museums, and universities. This work will be carried out in cities across the country where the CRC has existing partners, including Baltimore and Los Angeles.

Get involved: The Lifeways team will be reading The Little Book of Circle Processes by Kay Pranis, please reach out if you’d like a free copy and/or would like to join future conversation and/or contribute to our collective notes. The CRC’s Visioning Committee will help consider and decide on next year’s Lifeways deep listening model as well as help propose other themes, projects, consultants, partners, and fellows. Our Selection Committee will help discuss and select proposed themes, related small grant projects and lifegiving events, and fellowship applications. Our Events Committee will help organize and carry out public and academic talks, workshops, tours, retreats, and other events related to the work. Lifeways directors continue to organize weekly, so stay tuned to learn more about this project and other ways you can get involved!

The work of the CRC is made possible through generous support from our Collective, Morgan State University, and the Henry Luce Foundation.

Request to nominate future fellows, partners, projects, etc. here

The CRC is always looking to grow! Please click the link if you would like to nominate future fellows, partners, projects, etc.