

ATS hosts global theological education conversations

BY *MARISSA DECHANT*

ATS held conversations in October aimed at engaging school leaders on the topic of global theological education. The Association's Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative hosted two speakers via Zoom for two separate conversations—one with ATS presidents and deans and one with the ATS Board of Directors and ATS Board of Commissioners.

Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, ATS director of accreditation and global engagement, coordinated the two conversations that centered around the theme, *The Future(s) of Global Theological Education*. Charles Conniry, president of Western Seminary and a former member of the ATS Board of Commissioners, moderated the discussions featuring Jason Clark, visiting professor and lead mentor for the Doctor of Leadership in Global Perspectives program at Portland Seminary of George Fox University in Portland Oregon, and Martyn Percy, dean of Christ Church—a constituent college of the University of Oxford in England.

“The conversations allow different constituencies of ATS to have informal conversations with resource persons on topics that we have found to be interesting and timely,” Ruiz said. “These conversations were first in a series of similar discussions to come, with presenters that will be drawn from the diverse global partners of ATS.”

The conversations offered ATS school leaders a chance to interact with Percy and Clark, who are key leaders in global theological education. They shared their thoughts on where they see global theological education heading, and they offered insights about the kind of leadership needed for theological education to thrive globally.



Clark’s talk was informed not only by his role at Portland Seminary, but also by his position as full-time pastor of Sutton Vineyard Church in London, which he and his wife planted in 1997. As regional and national leader for Vineyard Churches UK, Clark oversees church planting and church development in London for Vineyard Churches UK. He also serves as a member of the Vineyard Institute Board and Leadership Team, which oversees the training of leaders and pastors for the Vineyard Church International Movement.

During his discussion, Clark shared three tips that have helped aid his work at Portland Seminary and Sutton Vineyard Church: (1) moving from alibis to stories of transformation, (2) integrating theology through hybrid courses, and (3) partnering strategically for courses.

In discussing students’ initial alibis, or the reasons they give for wanting to pursue theological education, Clark said that he and his colleagues noted a change in that reasoning from the start to the finish of a student’s career.



Jason Clark

"[At first, students say] I'll be studying very hard, and it will help me be better in my leadership or institution, but when you ask students at the end of the process, they don't mention those alibis. What they talked about was their friendships, life-changing relationships," Clark said.

"It was a wake-up call for us—to look at how we communicate to potential students."

Clark also spoke about strategic partnering and how communication with global cohorts opened more pathways for church planting.

"I'm really passionate about this broader appreciation of theology that is available that people, if we present it to them, get excited about. There are multiple routes into theology that are integrated so people appreciate and value it," Clark said.

Percy presented from the context of his current role as dean of Christ Church and from his decade of experience as principal of Ripon College Cuddesdon—one of the largest Anglican ordination training centers in the world. He writes on religion in contemporary culture and modern ecclesiology, teaches for the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford, and tutors in Oxford's Social Sciences Division and its Saïd Business School.

Percy spoke on the strategy and productivity-driven outcomes that often surround higher education, presenting his opinion on what truly matters in forming students.

"I think that one of the difficulties that we face these days in theological colleges and seminaries is what I would call its instrumentalization and its mechanization," said Percy. He explained that "there's a real temptation sometimes to make a theological college like a factory...

producing products—ordinary seminarians, graduates, pastors—who will go out and be productive."

"Of all the things that we want from our pastors and from people who emerge from our theological colleges and seminaries—first and foremost—we want them to be really good," Percy said. "Goodness matters because goodness is on the heart of God, and goodness means kindness, gentleness, self-control, humility, grace, and compassion."

Percy continued, "We've got to find ways of educating people into being good, and that requires structured and engaging ways of teaching people about emotional intelligence and self-awareness."

"The other thing I think that's really important about theological education at the moment, globally, is that we have to face the fact that we are in the 21st century—dealing with a profoundly religious century—and yet, religious knowledge is deteriorating at a rapid rate," said Percy. "It seems to me that we've got to put theological education right back at the heart of how we do our formation, so that our values and our character is matched by wisdom and a hunger for learning."



Martyn Percy



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Video recordings of the conversations will soon be made available on the [ATS website](#).