

ATS partners with Asian-descent leaders to form community of conversation and collaboration

By MARY H. YOUNG

In November 2017, ATS extended an invitation to Asian-descent leaders at member schools to support them in their formation as an affinity group in much the same way as has been done with African American presidents and deans and Latino/a presidents and deans serving ATS schools.

A planning team composed of Susan Abraham, vice president of academic affairs and dean of Pacific School of Religion; Ekron Chen, academic dean of Logos Evangelical Seminary; David Han, vice president for academics and academic dean of Pentecostal Theological Seminary; and James Seung-Hyun Lee, president of International Theological Seminary, began a series of conversations with ATS that led to the establishment of this group. The group held a successful strategy-building dinner meeting at the 2018 ATS Biennial Meeting in Denver that was attended by 29 Asian leaders and five ATS staff members. Han, who has taken the lead in convening the planning team, is a strong advocate for the formation of the affinity group and serves as coordinating liaison with Mary Young, ATS director of leadership education.



ATS Asian-descent presidents and deans, joined by several ATS staff members, pose for a picture at an April meeting in Newport Beach, California.

The most recent face-to-face gathering of ATS Asian-descent leaders was earlier this month in Newport Beach, California, on the heels of the Women in Leadership Deans' Consultation and the annual ATS Academic Officers' Conference. Strategically planned, as many of the leaders are on the west coast, this gathering drew 17 Asian-descent presidents and deans together—75% of whom serve institutions in California.

Five ATS staff members met with the group and assisted in facilitating their conversations and dialogue. Frank Yamada, ATS executive director, spoke to the state of theological education in ATS and the role of Asian-Descent presidents and deans. Deborah H. C. Gin, ATS director of research and faculty development, provided a data analysis on demographic trends among Asian-descent theological educators and students. Lester Ruiz, ATS director of accreditation and global engagement, spoke on the topic: "Cultivating a Culture of Collaboration in Theological Education: ATS and Asian Communities in North America and Beyond." Lee, a member of the planning team, shared perspectives and data about

immigration trends for some schools and the impact upon Asian-descent theological educators. With robust data and information to consider from the various presentations, the group engaged in a series of small group table conversations to discern their way forward.

Two reflective questions guided the table conversations of the day and helped to both establish and focus the group's deliberations:

- How do we understand ourselves as a “group” considering diverse Asian perspectives on theological thinking and imagination?
- How do we form alliances with other minoritized groups at ATS in fulfilling our vocation as theological educators?

Acknowledging both the gift and the challenge of its immense diversity, this group spoke of varied concerns from which its mission/purpose might emanate. Among the causes that are important for their work as theological leaders are building relationship capital, advocating for Asian students, sharing scholarly resources, discovering/exploring new markets of collaboration, strengthening pipelines for next-generation theological educators, building connections with other affinity groups around commonly shared concerns, and determining a collective voice that speaks to the leadership of Asian-descent academic and executive leaders in ATS member schools.

When asked about important factors for their participation in this affinity group, some of the leaders responded with the following:

- Exploring the question of what does the “Asian” tradition(s) bring to the critique of current religion tradition/practices in North America/Canada
- Relationship building, expansion of perspectives and resource sharing
- Leadership development among Asian-descent faculty and administrators in ATS
- Representation of the Asian American community to the larger ATS base
- ATS assistance/support is significant

The planning team will continue its work with the group, exploring options for annual meeting times and other forms of regular and sustained dialogue and conversation. ATS is pleased to help facilitate the formation of this group in support of Asian-descent presidents and deans as well as in its efforts toward improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.



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