

# Biennial Meeting program highlights race/ethnicity issues and changing educational models and practices

BY ELIZA SMITH BROWN

At the 50th Biennial Meeting of The Association of Theological Schools in St. Louis, June 28–30, two themes were prominent: the need to tend to issues of race and ethnicity and the changing educational models and practices that will come to define theological education in the years to come.

## Opening address

Daniel Aleshire, ATS executive director, opened the meeting with an address in which he lifted up both themes.



ATS Executive Director Daniel Aleshire delivers his opening talk at the Biennial Meeting.

“A part of our calling as religious and educational leaders is to face the challenges of our day and to see in them our calling to develop new strategies, rework systems, and build structures that will serve this moment and the next,” he said. “Our task is to use equal parts of realism and hope to innovate and preserve our way into the future.”

Aleshire noted that issues of race and ethnicity touch almost every member school, with persons of color now constituting nearly 40 percent of total ATS enrollment and 20 percent of the faculty. And while ATS schools disagree on many issues, he said, they are agreed that racism is destructive. Acknowledging that “many ATS schools have engaged this issue with hard work over time,” he added that “the more schools deal with the issue, the more issue there is to deal with.”

He offered three suggestions: (1) live with the dis-ease to engage in serious discussions, (2) take responsibility in structures that have privileged some and oppressed others, and (3) take intentional action.

Turning to the topic of changing educational models, Aleshire described how theological schools are now educating students for a much broader array of occupational forms of ministry in ever more varied patterns of course delivery.

He asked, “What educational models can meet the multiple needs of stressed communities of faith, be faithful intellectually to the every-growing fields of knowledge, and provide the diversity of pedagogical style and educational delivery that students require?” He also advised that “ATS members that have learned to accommodate theological diversity among member schools will need to become comfortable with educational diversity as well.”

[Read a full transcript of Aleshire’s opening address.](#)

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## **Race and ethnicity: Theological education after Ferguson**

On the second day of the meeting, the afternoon plenary was devoted to a review of ATS work on issues of race and ethnicity and a panel discussion about theological schools' responses to better educate and form future religious leaders for service in multiracial contexts where issues of race relations and racial justice are prevalent.



Willie James Jennings of Yale University introduces the panelists for the Ferguson Plenary at the Biennial Meeting.

Willie James Jennings of Yale University, chair of the ATS Committee on Race and Ethnicity (CORE), opened the afternoon session, noting that “all of us are faced with the same crucial question: How do we receive the diverse gifts embodied in the women and men that God is sending to us today?” Describing “a world at war with its own diversity,” Jennings said, “The task is painfully clear: Find ways to overcome the deep cultural conflicts and racial antagonisms that characterize life here or become foot soldiers or complicit bystanders in the coming race war.”

He shared a summary of CORE's work over more than 14 years, noting that it has matured from nurturing and encouraging racial/ethnic faculty, to cultivating institutional capacity, to strategic diversity planning. Looking ahead, Jennings set forth an agenda for future ATS work in this area that includes determining what success looks like, developing resources, encouraging collaboration, and continuing to convene conversations that support this work.

He concluded by posing the question, “What do Ferguson and the widely troubled racial realities that it signifies mean for our work as theological educators?”

Jennings then introduced NPR's Michel Martin, who moderated a panel consisting of Loida Martell-Otero of Palmer Theological Seminary, Gregory Heille of Aquinas Institute of Theology, Mark Harden of Ashland Theological Seminary, and Leah Gunning Francis of Christian Theological Seminary, author of *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership & Awakening Community*.

Martin opened the discussion with a question posed to all four panelists: “How do you define the problem, and what would success look like?” As the conversation developed, several points emerged that may help schools continue to work toward greater sensitivity and more productive engagement with issues of diversity and inclusion:

- Schools need to learn the art of difficult conversations that need to be maintained on an ongoing and regular basis, despite the discomfort they may engender.
- Engagement around these issues requires direct contact and dialogue.
- Issues of race and ethnicity will be most successfully addressed when all individuals value the humanity in all people and embrace the differences among all children of God.



Efrain Velazquez of Inter-American Adventist Theological Seminary makes a comment during the plenary.

- Theological educators need to understand that people of color live under a mantle of fear and increasingly cannot find “safe” places and that color blindness denies the history, experiences, and contributions that are integral to the identity of people of color.
- Having different people in the room does not constitute diversity. Diversity must include inclusion and equity.
- Schools must create leaders and pastors and people who will become allies in dismantling white privilege.
- Schools might benefit from addressing these issues from a theological perspective in terms of sin, redemption, and grace.
- Students need to be taught how to deal with these issues in a pastoral way, providing a space of outreach and understanding.
- Success in achieving these goals can be measured in terms of core competencies that students should

develop: to cope with the stress that they feel, to self-regulate their emotions, to be intellectually flexible, to switch and adapt, to relate to others interpersonally, to take the perspectives of others with empathy, and to express gratitude.

- Schools should examine their defining documents, boards, budgets, syllabi, and teaching methods to determine what they implicitly value.
- We should create structures that help us to remember what has happened and to sustain commitments that these tragedies should not happen again

Many of those present expressed a desire to acknowledge successes already realized and felt that schools would benefit from more practical guidance as to how they might implement these ideas in their curricular and extracurricular programs and institutional structures.

To that end, a blog series through the ATS website will begin to build on this conversation, and a video of this discussion will be available later in the summer.



NPR's Michel Martin (far left) served as moderator for the Ferguson Plenary. Panelists included (left to right): Loida Martell-Otero of Palmer Theological Seminary, Gregory Heille of Aquinas Institute of Theology, Mark Harden of Ashland Theological Seminary, and Leah Gunning Francis of Christian Theological Seminary.

## Educational Models and Practices

The meeting also showcased the work of the Educational Models and Practices project, the largest initiative ATS has ever undertaken. Various models and practices under examination were the topics of many of the 14 workshops offered.

On the final morning, Stephen Graham, ATS senior director of programs and services, and Deborah Gin, ATS director of research and faculty development, presented a snapshot of some of the findings to date on the Educational Models and Practices project, invited table conversations to provide feedback on what schools are learning and doing, and described next steps in the project, including a forthcoming grants program.

Graham and Gin reviewed findings that have emerged from the project's mapping survey of deans and program directors and that can be reviewed in detail in past and forthcoming articles about the project. They reveal a rich range of activities beyond the 250 different professional master's degrees that member schools offer and included course delivery methods, schedule and calendar modifications, educational partnerships, alternative tuition and fee structures, programs to serve particular constituencies, and more.

During the past year, Graham pointed out, 18 peer groups involving more than 110 schools have been formed to study particular educational models and practices. The work of these peer groups is rooted in assumptions that much of the wisdom about this work resides in the schools, where a lot of good work is underway, but that much of that work is being done in

relative isolation and collaboration can make the work more creative and fruitful.

The 18 peer groups range from global partnerships, to work on particular degree programs, to programs for particular constituencies, to online and competency-based education, to programs that are predominately residential. Each peer group is charged to explore key issues for its particular model or practice, think creatively together about the possibilities and challenges of the model or practice, and prepare a report on the model or practice for the benefit of schools across the association. These reports will inform the next redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation.



One of the goals of the Educational Models project is to determine which programs are most effective, and for which types of schools, as measured by student learning, institutional identity, enrollment, and finances. Gin pointed out that it is important to think about effectiveness/

purposes that strike a balance between missional values and institutional finances.

“In general,” she said, “there appears to be a heavier emphasis among the schools on fulfilling their missions than on the financial implications of educational activities and programs.”

“The survey of program directors also listed nine potential challenges ranging from insufficient resources to lack of adequate enrollment, from lack of sufficient planning to unwillingness of faculty to be adaptive,” Gin reported. “Program directors consistently named a lack of human and financial resources as the most significant challenge for most programs, while some also listed a lack of clear

understanding of the target constituency as a frequent challenge.” (An important next phase of the project will gather more data about the religious workforce to help schools understand better their target constituencies.) Interestingly, they noted, while the particular challenges faced vary among different types of schools or programs, restrictions in the Standards of Accreditation ranked last overall among the challenges schools face.

### **Next phases**

Finally, Graham outlined next phases for the Educational Models and Practices project. A survey of graduates will gather information about what they are doing and the places they are serving. A study of other graduate professional education will evaluate what other programs are learning that might be of relevance to theological schools.

Late this fall, ATS will distribute a request for proposals for innovation grants. As many as 35 to 40 schools will receive grants of up to \$50,000 to explore new educational possibilities. Then, in spring 2017, a request for proposals will invite schools to apply for as many as 30 grants of up to \$15,000 to help faculty re-tool and adapt to new educational models and practices.

A copy of this presentation is available in both [visual](#) and [text](#) form.



ATS Executive Director Daniel Aleshire offers final thoughts and a blessing at his last Biennial Meeting.

### **Closing remarks**

Aleshire closed the meeting with reflections on his nearly three decades with ATS, for which he received a standing ovation.

Read his [closing remarks](#) and view the [benediction slide show](#) featuring the diversity of ATS member schools as shown through their broad range of worship styles.



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