

Get to know the next ATS executive director: an interview with Frank Yamada

At its January meeting, [the ATS Board of Directors elected Frank Yamada, president of McCormick Theological Seminary, to be its next executive director](#). In a recent interview, Yamada shared his vision for theological education and the future of ATS as well as a bit about himself.

- **You have said that you view this appointment as a calling. Could you elaborate on that?**

I have always thought of my work in theological education, whether as a professor, as an Asian American center director, or as the president of a seminary, to be a calling. The Presbytery of Chicago (PCUSA) has formally recognized my service at McCormick and my prior time at Seabury-Western as a call to ministry. It is a high calling to serve theological schools that are training the current and future leadership of communities of faith. To train and form these leaders is the ministry of our ATS schools. Because of this, the ATS executive director's work of collaborating with our schools to enhance and innovate theological education is also an important call in the work of the ministry to God's church and the world.

- **ATS has been described as a "big tent" whose membership includes evangelical and mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox schools. How have your own faith journey and career prepared you to lead and serve the breadth of diverse ecclesial constituents in the ATS membership?**

ATS' mission provides the church with an incredible witness to the best of ecumenical cooperation. In a time when religion is a divisive force in society, it is inspiring to see the different family traditions of the Christian faith working together toward the same goal of excellence in theological education.

As a young adult, I converted to the Christian faith from my family's Buddhist background. Since that time, I have



been privileged to work and serve in a variety of ministry contexts. I have served with a youth group at a large, 20,000-person charismatic megachurch and was a leader in a non-denominational church plant that emphasized discipleship among young adults while I lived in Southern California. I was trained at a PCUSA seminary, where I also received my PhD in Hebrew Bible. While in seminary, I worked in ministry contexts that spanned from program-sized congregations to rural churches to a small, Korean immigrant congregation's high school ministry. In my first academic teaching job at Seabury-Western, I taught and worshipped with Episcopalians,

who taught me how to pray in new ways through the daily offices. After the financial crisis of 2008–2009, I began at McCormick Theological Seminary.

While McCormick is one of the oldest PCUSA schools, dating back to 1829, it currently serves predominantly people of color from congregations located mostly within the Chicago area, especially on the south and west sides. At McCormick we do not have a denominational majority. Baptist traditions make up the largest percentage of our student body, while Presbyterians represent only about 15–18 percent. Our fastest growing group is Latino/a Pentecostals. I have been blessed to see and experience so many different expressions of the Christian faith, and I have deep appreciation for what each brings to the task of theological education.

- ***What do you see as the most pressing issues—both challenges and opportunities—in theological education today?***

Dan Aleshire has boldly and candidly talked about much of the challenges that confront theological education. Financially challenged schools, declining enrollments, and the changing shape of North American religion all make this a unique time to do our work together. In my 2012 presidential inaugural address, "The View from 2040," I discussed three vectors of change that will impact theological education in the next couple of decades: 1) Diversity—sometime in the middle of this century, the United States will no longer have a racial/ethnic majority in this country; 2) Innovation—advances in digital technology and in higher education will impact the delivery of seminary education; and 3) The Next Generation—the Millennial generation has now surpassed the Baby Boomer generation as the largest in the history of the United States. What happens with the Millennials and religion will definitely shape the future student bodies of ATS schools.

In each of these areas of change, there is significant opportunity and challenge. How can ATS schools adapt to the growing diversity among its student bodies? In what ways can ATS schools innovate their current models

to meet the needs of the 21st-century student? If large numbers of young adults are no longer members of communities of faith, how do seminaries inspire this generation of leaders to seek change in the world and in their communities using the wisdom inherent in our traditions of faith? How our schools answer these questions will go a long way to shaping the near future of our enterprise.

- ***What is your vision for how ATS can address these issues?***

We must embrace two things at the same time. First, we must enhance our legacy of ecumenical cooperation to the end that we continue to seek the improvement and ongoing excellence of our schools. Second, we must continue to foster a culture of innovation among our schools to enable them to bend faithfully toward the changes that today's environment requires. In our development of ATS leadership, we must continue to provide opportunities for ATS presidents, deans, and faculties to learn the skills and develop the capacities to address 21st-century challenges. On the accrediting side, we must continue to uphold standards of excellence while also providing enough flexibility and experimentation so that schools can respond to their ever-changing contexts.

- ***As a seminary president, you have dealt with accrediting from the school's perspective. How has that experience formed your philosophy of accreditation?***

McCormick has recently successfully navigated its most recent 10-year reaccreditation process. The process has taught all of us at the school a distinctive characteristic of ATS accreditation, namely that healthy schools seek to continually improve, and the best way that we improve is to be a learning organization. Leaders of thriving schools are always assessing what they say they do, comparing their stated vision and mission with how well they are accomplishing these objectives. ATS accreditation is a supportive process. It is not merely compliance-oriented. ATS seeks to walk alongside of schools, assisting them to be their best by learning how to assess their own progress toward excellence.



Frank Yamada and his wife, Michelle.

- ***How do you plan to get acquainted with the ATS membership?***

I have already begun a process of learning about our more than 270 schools, and I look forward to visiting the majority of them over the next three to five years to learn more about their distinctive missions, their current challenges and opportunities, and their hopes for the future.

- ***What else should we know about you?***

I grew up as a surfer in Southern California. People call me a foodie, but that is not what I call myself; I enjoy both cooking and eating fine food. I also enjoy fishing, playing softball, and engaging folks on social media. I will be moving to the Pittsburgh area with my spouse of 26+ years, Michelle.

In his most recent blog post, [“Transition: A good organization and a good leader have found a mutual calling,”](#) Daniel Aleshire reflects on ATS success in succession.