

Personal reflections on diversity gathering and lessons we've learned

By LISA KERN

I stepped out of my comfort zone.

I participated in a short prayer service that consisted of listening to Bible verses (as well as some affirming “Amen’s” and the like from the crowd) and then spontaneously bursting into a few choruses of a hymn unfamiliar to me (with no instruments nor song sheets . . . a far cry from my usual Roman Catholic Mass with the same predictable prayers that the congregation recites together each week and a booming pipe organ to accompany everything we sing from a worship hymnal).

I sat in a room filled with more than 40 ethnically diverse theology students and recent graduates from every walk of life and listened intently as they eagerly shared their stories of who they were upon first entering this world, the sequence of events that called them to ministry, and how they see themselves now. I observed several small group discussions, hearing individuals’ perceptions of their institutions regarding diversity—some felt so included, and some felt so alone.

I ate lunch between two perfect strangers whose lives could not be more different from mine; and I was asked to look one of them in the eyes for an extended period of time as part of the featured lunch speaker’s exercise.

. . . some felt so included and some felt so alone.

I stepped out of my comfort zone and into the CORE Consultation for Students and Recent Graduates of the Preparing for 2040 Project hosted by The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and CORE (the ATS Committee on Race and Ethnicity in Theological Education), March 12–14, in Pittsburgh.

“Preparing for 2040”—the four-year project

Based upon a peer review in September 2008 on the work of CORE, ATS decided not only to gather racial/ethnic faculty and staff to address their issues, but also to focus more on institutional capacity building. The result was “Preparing for 2040: Enhancing Capacity to Educate and Minister in a Multiracial World.”

The initial meeting of the four-year project included sharing information about shifting demographic realities and effective strategies used in other institutions. Participating schools worked with coaches to analyze each school’s individual institutional context in order to develop a diversity strategic plan. The project ultimately convened 33 ATS member schools into eight small groups that focused on faculty culture, reframing teaching and learning, understanding race and ethnicity, and conflict resolution.



“Preparing for 2040’ was the single most significant programming that CORE has done to date on the issues associated with race and ethnicity,” said ATS Director of Leadership Education Janice Edwards-Armstrong. “Not only did this project give schools the opportunity to lean into the challenges of race and ethnicity, but it also provided them with a designated time for follow-up on their diversity strategic plans.”

The student and recent alumni/ae consultation

This gathering—the first of its kind designed to hear input on issues of race and ethnicity solely from students and recent graduates—explored and expanded findings from the four-year “Preparing for 2040” effort.

In addition to plenary speakers and time devoted to participants sharing their individual stories, this consultation’s agenda included four different round table discussion sessions devoted to climate and intergroup relations, education and scholarship, access and success, and institutional vitality and viability.

“It was very helpful and insightful to increase my own perspective of higher education structural and cultural development and to attach stories to people, denominations, and schools that I had heard of but didn’t know too well,” shared one participant. “It was also helpful to expand my imagination of what the seminary at my school could look like and to think of new questions to ask myself, my school, my community, and my church.”

“I am just beginning to discover how my faith and theology have enriched my ethnic heritage and to recognize the many faces of Christ in the world,” said another.

Willie James Jennings challenged participants to “build” their ideal theological schools. “Think about what you would want for those coming behind you to gain from their experiences in seminary”



Others reflected on their involvement with the project and their time spent at the consultation.

“As students, it can sometimes feel like our influence is limited to making suggestions for change and waiting to see if anyone will listen. I’ve been encouraged to have these sorts of conversations and to dream with other students”

“I think the leadership of my seminary cares about the issues, but there are few voices, so far, from the student body to raise them. One suggestion I will make is that faculty and staff take an assessment for cultural competence and bias awareness.”

“This consultation was an excellent idea, and I hope it was the first of many. I left thoroughly encouraged for the future of ATS schools, knowing the caliber of gifted, insightful, and creative leadership that is present.”

Willie James Jennings, CORE committee chair and associate professor of theology and Black Church Studies at Duke University Divinity School, challenged participants to “build” their ideal theological schools. “Think about what you would want for those coming behind you to gain from their experiences in seminary,” he said, “from the curriculum, from the voices of past and present, from learning the art of caring for others, from experiencing how faculty and staff work and live together, from the way the school guides you in practices of ministry and leadership in the field and community.”

Ten lessons learned

Edwards-Armstrong closed the gathering by listing “lessons learned” from the student consultation and the four-year “Preparing for 2040” project:

1. Diversity is both inclusive and differentiated . . . and ATS is paying attention to both.
2. There’s often a lack of “welcoming conversation” on the topic of diversity, and seminaries are frequently reluctant to start the dialogue out of fear. Schools need to acknowledge that, although difficult, this type of conversation is healthy and will ultimately lead toward the healing of everyone involved.
3. Conflict and difficult dialogues matter and need to happen if we are going to learn from one another.
4. ATS needs to help institutional leadership identify talented men and women by interrupting the usual and making them aware of those resources and programs that are there to serve them.
5. A blueprint that outlines goals and action steps related to diversity issues needs to be developed in addition to developing a network that mentors diverse candidates for leadership positions in ATS schools.
6. Schools protect their brands, and underrepresented faculty who bring different teaching methods to their seminaries are often not taken seriously. Diverse forms of instruction and learning ought to be embraced by all ATS seminaries.
7. Diversity is more complex than many seminaries acknowledge. Training for students, faculty, and staff should be offered on how to address not just black and white issues, but also issues related to populations of Asian and Latino/a descent.

8. Latino/a people are particularly underrepresented on our seminaries’ boards of trustees, faculty, and staff. Moreover, few courses are taught in Spanish, and the requests for that support usually go to the Hispanic Summer Program. Seminaries need to offer bilingual curriculum and focus attention on recruiting and retaining Latino/a faculty and staff to better represent and serve a growing sector of the church.

9. Students from Indigenous communities feel they have to hide their identities to continue to exist in our seminary settings. Schools ought to acknowledge “diverse scholarship” and prepare students for service in a variety of settings.

10. ATS needs to offer this type of consultation for students and alumni on an annual basis.

You first live the narrative, then you perceive it,” suggested CORE consultant Oliver McMahan, vice president for ministry formation and accrediting liaison at Pentecostal Theological Seminary.

I stepped out of my comfort zone, and I’m now starting to learn why . . . the next page of my narrative has just been written.



Lisa Kern is External Relations Coordinator for The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh.