

Mission, Models, and Money

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has been serving theological education since 1918. ATS began accrediting schools in 1936, collecting data in the 1940s, providing resources to support faculty development in the 1960s, offering leadership education programming in the 1970s, and implementing institutional initiatives in the 1980s. Each of these efforts was intended to strengthen the theological education throughout Canada and the United States. As represented within the ATS membership, the collective work has grown from a small conference of schools in 1918 to an association of nearly 280 theological institutions seeking to discern how to best relate to and serve the broader world, academy, and church. Each of these institutions, encompassing a broad range of theological identities, educational approaches, and resource allocations, seeks to fulfill their missions with integrity and durability.

ATS has long been seen as a resource for theological schools serving North America. The institutions acknowledge that their ability to fulfill their callings is appreciably improved because of the interaction with others who are seeking to accomplish God's purposes in similar ways. Collectively, these schools educate many of the theological leaders that will serve communities of faith, nonprofits, and other organizations in Canada, the United States, and the world. In fall 2025, over 80,000 students were engaged in theological education through the ATS member schools. The Missions of these schools have been and continue to be integral to ensuring a trained and qualified leadership for the church and beyond.

Throughout the last century, theological schools have sought to fulfill their Missions using different academic, economic, organizational, governance and ecclesial models (collectively, "Models") and utilizing diverse configurations of human, academic, financial, physical, technological, shared, and other resources (jointly referred to as "Money"). Within this paper, a brief historic perspective and analysis is offered on Mission, Models, and Money as well as the ATS efforts to support theological schools over the last hundred years. This then leads to a particular emphasis as to the necessary efforts and opportunities in the current decade.

Inception and Information: 1918-1940

In 1918, a group of seminary presidents met to address the challenges of the day and consider how their seminaries might play a role in speaking into these issues. According to Glenn Miller, historian who wrote about the first ninety years of the Association in *A Community of Conversation*, "When the presidents of the seminaries got together, they talked, and as they did, they discovered that they had some of the same problems and dilemmas. In many ways, they did not have an agenda or program. Instead, they had common questions...."¹ Over time, their gatherings and shared questions led them to seek additional information in support of their mutual desire to serve better the church, the academy, and the world.

In 1924, the schools took steps to assess the state of theological education. Robert Kelly led a study of 161 schools and found them to be under financed, under enrolled, and poorly equipped. His report concluded that there were too many schools that operated below the standards required for religious leaders in the contemporary church *and* that the schools did not have sufficient resources to accomplish the task. As a result of this report and other collaborations, ATS began accrediting institutions in 1936, with the main emphasis on the resources schools had available to fulfill their missions. Resource assessment centered on faculty, library, economics, campus, and students. From the early stages of ATS, the questions surrounding the Mission, Models, and Money were being raised. Questions were easy to raise but answers were harder to find.

A Growing Awareness: 1940-1970

From the 1940s and forward, ATS has gathered annual data from its member schools and this database has become *the* data source in understanding North American theological education. Beginning in the 1960s, ATS has published either the *Fact Book on Theological Education* or its successor the *ATS Annual Data Tables*, which both offer a broad-ranging understanding of trends regarding admissions, enrollment, completions, student demographics, faculty demographics,

¹ Glenn Miller, "A Community of Conversation", ed. Eliza Brown (Pittsburgh, PA: ATS, 2008), 2-3.

salaries, and so on. Data from ATS has long given schools an opportunity to assess and benchmark themselves against others to gain awareness of how their missions, models, and resources compare. The general public, including news media, judicatories, and funders has found ATS data a compelling resource in understanding trends impacting graduate theological education. It is this data and the surrounding analysis that began to help folks understand the blessings and challenges of theological education in North America.

From its foundation, ATS gatherings and conferences were places for listening and conversation that encouraged peer learning. In *A Community of Conversation*, Miller writes, "The annual meetings were characterized by the presentation of papers and by organized discussions of the ideas presented in them. But, like other professional organizations, the real business may well have been done in the halls as presidents and deans exchanged ideas, shared solutions to problems, bragged about success, and analyzed their failure, and generally became comfortable with each other's presence. ...Although leaders of the Association did not give a name to this process, they were in essence conducting a program of peer education in which professionals provided other professionals with the benefits of their knowledge and experience."² ATS was deepening its roots in support of theological schools and the constituencies they serve through peer learning and best practices. More and more, the topic of mission, models, and money were becoming part of those ATS conversation. Once again, ATS looked for more information and assessment of the resources supporting theological education.

In the late 1960s, ATS commissioned a group of financial experts led by Warren Deem to analyze the state of graduate theological education. Among other data, the Deem Commission utilized the ATS annual data that was collected. From its work, the four main challenges discovered by the Deem Commission were declining student enrollment, reduction in student to faculty ratio, small average size of seminaries, and increasing costs per student. Because of these financial and operational challenges, Deem stated that if survival was the only goal, "it appears

² Miller, 7-8.

that most seminaries will survive.” He added, “A more serious question is not whether they can survive but whether they have the financial resources to change.” The foundation for evaluating the organizational and educational and economic models and practices most appropriate for attainment of mission within theological schools were being laid.

Informed and Intentional: 1970-2000

As a result of the Deem Commission and other influences, ATS sought to support the professionalization of the roles within seminary administration and, therefore, formalized its leadership programming for presidents in the 1970s. As it became evident that theological schools needed to attend more seriously to issues of resources in support of the mission, ATS expanded programming to development officers in the 1990s, academic and financial officers in the early 2000s, and student personnel and other administrators in the late 2000s. This expansion in training leaders within ATS member schools was built upon the premise that (1) trained leadership in ATS schools increases the potential for thriving missions within those schools and (2) thriving missions of theological schools are consequential to providing strong future leadership to the church and society. Additionally, schools needed to be encouraged to pursue robust assessment and attention to the longer-term resourcing structures undergirding their missions for sustained and lasting impact. The conversations and attention to mission and the resources and structures required to best support the core purposes of theological schools deepened.

In the 1990s, the collaboration between ATS and the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education (Auburn) was forged and research on theological education and the capacities of school and administrators was studied in sustained ways. Through the efforts of Barbara Wheeler and Tony Ruger, Auburn completed a number of [studies](#) on seminary leadership, finances, students, graduates, faculty, and student debt. Almost all of these studies supported a robust assessment of the models and resources utilized in support of the mission. Many included commendations and concerns impacting mission, models, and money. Additionally,

through the same ATS-Auburn collaboration, the ATS *Strategic Information Report* (SIR) and the ATS *Institutional Peer Profile Report* (IPPR) were created. These reports, which are produced from the annual data collected by ATS, are provided to theological school leaders to expand the resources available to be utilized in institutional assessment.

Chris Meinzer, Senior Director & COO, joined the ATS staff in January 1999. With a nonprofit audit and financial background as well as a Master of Divinity, Meinzer was intimately familiar with the economic realities facing theological schools, and he brought internal expertise to ATS in these conversations. Meinzer worked alongside Barbara Wheeler and Tony Ruger to gain deeper understanding of the blessings and challenges facing theological schools in the realm of Mission, Models, and Money. Through Meinzer, ATS began using more broadly the nomenclature of Mission & Money, where Money represented all of the resources – human, academic, financial, physical, technological, shared, and others – that are necessary and required for the achievement of the Mission. Near the end of this period and with the arrival of Meinzer, ATS shifted to be more intentional about raising awareness *and* working directly with schools to engage boards, administration, faculty, and staff around issues of enrollment and economics.

Clarification and Call to Action: 2000-2008

As reflected by Kelly in 1924 and Deem in 1968, many ATS schools have struggled with economics for much of their histories. Within the accreditation process, the Board of Commissioners are often requiring schools to report on and/or take action related to issues of institutional assessment and finances. While these concerns have been with schools for some time, ATS began working to clarify the issues and call schools to broader action, both individually and collectively as schools were encouraged to consider sharing resources. Indirectly but importantly, this laid the groundwork for many of the mergers that followed the challenges of the Great Recession of 2008.

Through the 2000s, ATS made the SIR part of its leadership programming to CEOs, CAOs, and CFOs. Schools became more familiar with the benefits of the SIR and IPPR, which include opportunities for benchmarking and comparison of trends in the areas of admissions, enrollment, graduations, finances, development, salaries, and more. As schools learned the benefit of the reports and the resulting organizational assessment that was possible, greater attention to resource questions developed.

Beginning in the late 2000s, ATS administered two institutional initiatives that were centered around theological school missions and their required resources. The projects, known as *Financially-Stressed Schools* and *Economic Equilibrium in Theological Schools*, engaged cohorts of schools around Mission & Money. Each school was asked to commit two years with a team comprised of a board member, their CEO, and their CFO. Through these initiatives, ATS identified underlying issues that resulted in chronic financial stress, patterns of institutional responses that could ameliorate the impact of this stress while schools are seeking remedy, and patterns of institutional effort that could provide for healthier financial futures for these schools. Through the projects, ATS put forth [20 Tips for Achieving Economic Equilibrium](#)³, which remain relevant to this work.

Although subtle, the projects also represented a shift in ATS efforts around Mission, Models, and Money. ATS, Auburn, and the In Trust Center for Theological Schools (In Trust) had a collective accrual of wisdom around these issues, and the projects were designed to put the collective wisdom to practice within the gathered 27 schools. Each cohort met over a two-year period, received coaching, and were called to take action on their perceived challenges. The framework of (1) clarification and collective understanding of issues, (2) coaching through potential options, and (3) a formal call to action came out of these projects. In the years that followed, this framework became indicative of the approaches ATS implemented and refined with schools in shaping efforts around Mission, Models, and Money. It became completely necessary in the decade that would follow.

³ www.ats.edu/files/galleries/20-tips-for-achieving-economic-equilibrium.pdf

Recession and Reaction: 2008-2019

As this brief history indicates, theological schools have often struggled with enrollment and economics, which impact Mission, Models, and Money. For example, ATS schools have done their best to survive macroeconomic issues of Canada and the US, denominational and ecclesial challenges, and changes in educational modalities thrust upon them by the advent of technological possibilities. Within these thirteen years, ATS schools were really put to the test. They would start the decade with the impact of the Great Recession of 2008 and finish the decade with the realities of the Great Pandemic of 2020.

From June 2008 to March 2009, more than half of ATS schools saw their endowments drop by 20%-30% and another 15% of ATS schools had more precipitous drops. Because of the loss in the stock market, giving also took a big hit. As a result, nearly two-thirds of ATS schools made immediate cuts in their budgets, including personnel cuts. The most commonly selected budget-cutting strategies were hiring freezes, salary freezes, reduction in travel, and reductions in administrative and staff positions. Staff were 2-to-1 more likely to be let go in these cuts than faculty. The repercussions of these swift and deep cuts that were deemed necessary impacted ATS schools for more than a decade. Endowments across ATS schools did not return to 2008 levels until 2013. Unrestricted annual giving across ATS schools did not return to 2008 levels until 2015. Cuts in staff and faculty and deferments of salary, benefits, maintenance and other items took more than a decade to recover, and in many ATS schools they were never recovered.

In May 2009, ATS gathered a cohort of chief financial officers from member schools as well as representatives of ATS, Auburn, and In Trust. Participants agreed upon ten fundamental realities facing theological schools that were exacerbated by the Great Recession. These ten fundamentals were published in a volume of

Theological Education journal⁴, and these assessments have become part of the accrued wisdom around Mission, Models, and Money.

1. Having adequately sophisticated financial expertise within the institution is a necessity.
2. It would likely be four to eight years before a recovered market and overall financial stability could be attained.
3. The survey of CFOs had enabled the discussion to be based on data rather than anecdote.
4. The relationship of many schools to a university or college could be a two-edged sword. The larger institution was both a source of resources and ballast to help to weather the financial storm and a structure that could impose discipline that forced the theological school to make significant and difficult reductions.
5. The expectation of many schools that they could increase enrollment to raise revenue was likely not viable given the enrollment declines across the industry in recent years.
6. Likewise, overly aggressive fund-development goals might not be realistic given a particular school's history of fund-raising and future prospects.
7. Financial stresses can prompt asking hard but important questions about the institution's core mission.
8. Given the volatility of financial structures, rigid planning beyond two or three years could be problematic and unrealistic. Long-term planning is crucial, but it must remain sufficiently adaptable and flexible.
9. Schools need basic common language and concepts to discuss and address financial challenges.
10. The financial situation of 2009 might well represent a "new normal" to which schools will have to adapt.

The assessment of these industry leaders was spot on and continues in and through the work of ATS. For example, schools are now seeking to be more data-

⁴ Economic Equilibrium and Theological Schools: A Project Report, *Theological Education*, Vol 50, No.1, ed. Eliza Brown (Pittsburgh, PA: ATS, 2015), 6-7.

driven in their decision-making, analysis of this data requires financial expertise that is either in-house or contracted, and financial stresses are an opportunity to ask hard but important questions about Mission, Models, and Money. Furthermore, increasing enrollment or fundraising indefinitely in light of broader industry trends is not wise, and this reality requires strategic and financial planning that is thoughtfully flexible and adaptable in support of the mission. Because the challenges of the Great Recession of 2008 would take four to eight years to recede (they were right!), the financial challenges would likely require adaptation and not tweaking or overlooking. This final understanding was the impetus for a clarion call to enact real changes in terms of Mission, Models, and Money, and ATS took a more active role in this plea through its staff.

Starting around 2010, with more than a decade of experience at ATS, Chris Meinzer began engaging more deeply and directly with schools around issues of Mission, Models, and Money. With much of the accrued wisdom reflected in this paper, Meinzer began consulting directly with schools. Utilizing the *Strategic Information Report*, other ATS annual data analysis, findings from projects and research, and learnings from a variety of conversations with school leaders, he offered one-day and two-day educational seminars at schools that engaged administrators, faculty, staff, and boards. Through the decade, the process became formalized into the [5-Phase Approach to Discovery](#).⁵ Meinzer has offered this consulting service to more than 100 ATS schools, with a breadth of the membership that includes various budget and enrollment sizes, ecclesial and denominational connections, and freestanding and related schools. In some cases, the gatherings included a few schools or denominational groupings who were interested in having broader cohort conversations.

These 5-Phase efforts have been well received as exhibited by the testimonials on the ATS website. More importantly, these engagements have led to a deeper understanding of broader trends, school realities, leadership assessments, and the necessity of ATS' role in leading industry efforts in developing responses to issues around Mission, Models, and Money. School leaders toil at the thirty foot

⁵ www.ats.edu/files/galleries/five-phases.pdf

level. ATS has the balcony view at the thirty-thousand foot level. Through Meinzer and the 5-Phase Approach, these efforts allow for a such a rich interchange of ideas as ATS is able to provide the balcony view that schools often do not have the privilege to see. The space also offers an opportunity for the entire community to hear broad trends as well as specific institutional trends, which permits a school to see itself within the broad landscape of North American theological education. Having broad and collective understanding has allowed schools to engage where they have been and comprehend the current blessings and challenges so that they can best discern where they should go. In the good Biblical tradition, schools are encouraged to understand what they are *called from* and what they are *called to* as they seek to serve God's current mission in the world.

In 2012, ATS began coordinating the Lilly Endowment initiative to address economic challenges facing future ministers ("ECFFM"), which eventually grew to include 67 schools. Dr. Jo Ann Deasy led the coordination project and the resulting learnings for the benefit of the participating schools and the entire membership. Summary reports and resources can be found on [Virtuous Cycles: Supporting Future Ministers](#), [A 2020 Report on the ECFFM Project](#), [Research on Educational Debt and Institutional Finances](#), [Resources to Teach Financial Literacy and Leadership](#), and [Resources to Address the Cost of Theological Education](#). Across ATS, the project significantly raised awareness of student indebtedness, actually reduced educational debt incurred in seminaries across ATS, and helped schools consider the importance of financial literacy for students and institutions. Many institutions within and outside the project benefitted from theological reflection on institutional decisions around debt and how it influenced a student's ability to fulfill their calling.

Within the ECFFM project, Deasy and Meinzer initiated a venture called Healthy Schools/Healthy Students, which focused on the interrelationship between the missional and financial health of institutions and the missional and financial health of students. It was a data informed study to look at how the economic decisions of schools influenced the economic decision of students. This approach seemed warranted, for example, because it appeared that many ATS schools were

allowing students to engage in deep levels of student debt so that the school itself could continue to operate. Further, ATS staff investigated graduation and placements rates in relation to admission and enrollment rates to determine if pressures to increase enrollments were impacting students' abilities to graduate and be placed. This Healthy Schools/Healthy Students approach called direct attention to the importance of looking beyond choices for institutional survival and to the strategic assessment of these choices with regard to a student's ability to fulfill the missions to which they believe God was calling them.

In 2015, ATS initiated a project on addressing educational models and practices in theological education ("EMP"). The EMP project was significant in that its primary goals, analysis, learnings, and activities resulted in the redevelopment of the ATS accrediting standards that were ultimately implemented in 2020. In 2019, the initial project was followed by another project on organizational and educational models and practices ("OEM"), with more emphasis placed on the necessary educational, organizational, financial, and governance models that are required to support the missions of theological schools in this new era. Much of the accrued wisdom of ATS around Mission, Models, and Money was brought to bear on the OEM grant proposal and anticipated activities.

In 2019, Meinzer authored an article for In Trust entitled, "[Sustainability and Strategic Thinking in Theological Education](#)." The article was an opportunity to reflect upon what had been learned over the last two decades in working directly with theological schools with a keen emphasis on Mission and Money. At the beginning of the article, Meinzer wrote, "Mission and Money. In theological schools, these two words are often in tension, often out of balance. Some leaders lean more toward mission while other leaders lean more toward money. Within theological institutions, mission and money can even be seen as mutually exclusive. But I would propose that, given the significance of the life-changing purpose of these schools, mission and money must be seen not as mutually exclusive but as complementary. Realistically, perceptions about mission and money are not as clear and simple as I describe. Instead, individuals and schools are somewhere along the spectrum and that 'somewhere' shifts and changes depending on circumstances and

realities of the day or month — or the crisis du jour. Theological schools need leaders who emphasize the importance and interdependence of both.”⁶ More and more, through ATS and its partners, theological school leaders were introduced to the concept of Mission, Models, and Money and, through their experience as a leader, these same folks became aware of the important attention required to each.

Interruption and Interpretation: 2020-2022

Just as the OEM project was underway, the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and many of the initial goals and activities had to be reconsidered in light of some unexpected realities. Like many activities, the work of OEM was paused to allow for a more thorough understanding of the implications of the pandemic. In March 2020, Meinzer became aware of an article entitled, “[Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization is Now a Startup](#).” The article was written at the very beginning of the pandemic and just at the time many theological schools (and ATS itself) was shutting down and shifting to a new way of organizing and operating. The authors were asking leaders to consider the current realities in light of whether we were experiencing a weeks-long blizzard, a months-long winter, or a longer ice age. This framework was and continues to be useful for Meinzer in getting schools to think more deeply and thoughtfully about a proper assessment of realities and the resulting required responses.

Although the article was written about a reflection for nonprofits in light of the pandemic, the image has been instructive and powerful.

If what theological schools are experiencing is like a blizzard, then the best approach is to wait and ride it out. The effort required to dig out of the current challenges would be difficult and likely unsustainable, so the best thing to do is wait until the challenge subsides and return to the way things were. No changes or adaptations are necessary; rather, a simple waiting period is the best approach.

⁶ [Sustainability and strategic thinking.pdf \(intrust.org\)](#)

If what theological schools are experiencing is like a winter, then some effort is required. Like a winter, some actions are required and necessary to make it through the time period, but there is also the promised return of spring. Some changes are required and necessary, but no significant adaptation is required for their core mission and purposes to survive.

If what theological schools are experiencing is like a little ice age, then some serious adaptation is likely required and beneficial. Since there is not necessarily a promised return of spring (or at least spring as we know it), then leaders must adapt their own thinking and the thinking and action of the theological schools they serve for their core mission and purposes to survive.

ATS schools were interrupted during the pandemic for sure. Normal models of educating women and men for God's mission in God's world paused. Out of necessity, more than 95% of ATS schools shifted to online education in March 2020. The economics of theological education were also disrupted as spending was curtailed, governmental resources were expanded, and the disorder of markets and donors returned to patterns seen in the Great Recession of 2008. As these realities were impacting theological schools, they were also coming to bear on churches, nonprofits, students, donors, administrators, staff, and faculty through immediate health, economic, and other challenges. Each school needed (and continues to need to) assess its current realities in light of the framework of blizzard, winter, or ice age. Theological education as a whole, as reflected by the ATS member schools, needs to discern whether it is experiencing a blizzard, winter, or ice age. Leaders within theological schools need to understand how the current realities are impacting students and the places they will be serving and take appropriate action to adjust. ATS schools need to properly interpret the interruption and then take appropriate actions commensurate with that interpretation.

ATS, through the work of its staff, has been calling schools to account in this regard. While many ATS schools blame their economic and enrollment challenges on either the Great Recession of 2008 or the Great Pandemic of 2020, the truth is that many of the negative trends occurred well before 2008 and 2020. The

challenges were certainly exacerbated by these two macroeconomic realities, but theological schools must understand that developments in enrollment and economics began well before the current perceived blizzards. If theological schools are going to continue to be effective and relevant in training theological leaders for the church, society, and God's world, then theological reflection, honest assessment, and strategic action is required in the decade to come in light of all that has been learned through ATS in terms of Mission, Models, and Money.

Necessity and Opportunity: 2023-2030

ATS work with theological school leadership in the realm of Mission, Models, and Money is now understood to be a necessity. Schools are seeking opportunities to engage ATS and other ATS member schools in discussion about collaboration. With the advent of the Lilly Endowment *Pathways for Tomorrow* initiative ("Pathways") that ATS is coordinating, roughly 120 ATS schools have been incentivized to consider new approaches to fulfilling their missions by considering new models and new economic paradigms. The need for cooperative efforts is the result of a deeper understanding of trends, further reflection on the core purposes of theological schools and their ecosystems, Lilly Endowment investment, and programming opportunities provided by ATS.

In 2023, through the support of the OEM grant, Chris Meinzer wrote, revised, and unveiled a 50-page Mission & Money Guide, which includes narrative, individual reflections, and group activities to get schools to think more deeply about their core purposes (Mission), the appropriate approaches to accomplish those core purposes (Models), and the utilization of available resources to fulfill the core purposes (Money). The concepts within the guide were shared within leadership development programming (chief executive officers, chief academic officers, and chief financial officers), at a gathering of schools as part of the In Trust Wise Stewards project, as ongoing work with schools in as part of the 5-Phase Approach to Discover, and other venues. The guide has lots of potential to be used among schools to advocate and encourage deeper discussions around mission and the necessary models and resources required.

In August 2023, 22 ATS schools and more than 70 persons joined together in two cohorts to explore the concept of sustainability for the work of their *Pathways for Tomorrow* grants. The schools sent teams of 3-4 people who were guided through a process intended to consider their project goals, ideals, and learnings of their projects and to explore how each would be sustained well after the grant has concluded. The concept of sustainability is critical for ATS schools. Whether a school is trying to find ways to sustain its mission, a degree program, a class, or a grant project, there are many facets to consider. And the most important question to start with is “what are we actually trying to sustain?” What is the core purpose, the core mission, the Core WHY that we are trying to sustain or, more importantly, have thrive?

In order to support these conversations around sustainability, Chris Meinzer has devised a framework for theological schools utilizing the work of Simon Sinek and, in particular, the concepts that he develops in his book, *Start with Why*. Sinek uses the structure of a Golden Circle to talk about WHAT, HOW, and WHY. WHAT represents the product or services an organization offers. HOW represents the things that make an organization special and sets them apart from others. WHY is a purpose, cause, or belief for the very existence of the organization. According to Sinek, most organizations can say WHAT they do and HOW they do it, but very few organizations can say WHY they do what they do. And it is this Core WHY that will inspire and compel others to participate.

In Meinzer’s observation, theological schools spend much of their time considering the WHAT and HOW but not enough time developing and supporting the Core WHY of what they are doing.

WHAT is the product or service provided. In reviewing mission statements of most ATS schools, they center around preparing and educating students for some aspect of God’s mission in the world. These are certainly worthy commitments but are not necessarily unique. ATS schools often claim a certain exceptionality, but it is not likely found in the WHAT. What schools are trying to sustain must be beyond the WHAT.

HOW represents the things that make an organization special or sets them apart from others. In theological schools, there are often conversations around offering unique programs, taught by respected faculty, in a variety of modalities. These elements alone do not set an institution apart. For example, if one asks any ATS school, they would say they are blessed with a world class faculty. But if every ATS school has a world class faculty, then that is no longer the differentiator. In addition, most modalities offered by ATS school are ubiquitous. There must be something more that will inspire beyond the HOW. What schools are trying to sustain must be more than the HOW.

Theological schools must know (or perhaps regain) their core purpose or Core WHY. This will require concerted effort to identify, develop, and put forth an institutional Core WHY. In the absence of an institutional Core WHY, there will likely be multiple and perhaps competing core purposes within an institution, and those competing interests will keep a school focused on the WHAT and the HOW.

The 22 participating schools and their attendees were asked to consider the Core WHY of their institution and the Core WHY of their Pathways grant. The full day exercise included activities for school teams to consider how congruent the Core WHY of the institution and the Pathways grant were. The participants found these exercises to be engaging and fruitful in helping them determine what they were seeking to sustain. It shifted focus from the WHAT and HOW of the project and even the WHAT and HOW of the institution to the Core WHY, which then opens up the possibility of reimagining the project work. This framework creates the potential for schools thinking differently about Mission, Models, and Money. In total, more than 250 administrators, faculty, staff, and board members representing as many as 100 ATS schools reflected on this important topic of Core WHY.

Through the fall of 2023, Chris Meinzer and Michael Hemenway designed an ATS pilot project called Building Alternative Futures ("BAF"). Through support of the ATS New Century Fund and OEM grant, BAF will engage five specifically chosen ATS schools over a three-year period. Each school has identified two

administrators, two faculty, and two board members to journey together and reflect on their current mission, models, and money and to determine in what ways they need to build an alternative future. This project will be co-designed by the schools themselves to accomplish their intended goals, provide for team activities within the school and across schools, offer opportunities for schools to thoroughly assess their realities within the ecosystem they operate, and encourage action to build and design a future mission, model, and/or use of money that best supports their core purposes going forward.

In early 2024, Meinzer worked with a group of denominational schools who were interested in cooperating more and asked him to lead a 2-day intensive with board chairs, presidents, and academic deans to facilitate a reflection on future possibilities. This event was deemed to be very successful by those gathered and led to the development of a variety of action items by the schools who are seeking to collaborate in Mission, Models, and Money. This pilot event, called and funded by the schools themselves, represents another example of the role that ATS plays in encouraging these new mutually beneficial opportunities.

In 2026, ATS inaugurated Missional and Financial Vitality Cohort Intensives that were designed as 2-day intensives for a 4-member school team to join with nine other schools to review and assess the institutional missional and financial vitality. The teams included a combination of CEOs, CFOs, CAOs, student personnel, development officers, board members, faculty, and other administrators, who could pair knowledge of the institution with the ability and credibility to engage a broad constituency at the school in conversations about missional and financial vitality. The Intensives included 29 ATS member schools and more than 120 participants across two weeks, and each team received a broad industry overview, an in-depth analysis of the school's ATS Strategic Information Report (SIR), and an introduction to the newly designed ATS Financial Viability Tool (FVT). At the end of the Intensive, each school team was required to schedule a meeting and design a presentation to take the learning of the two days back to the school community. As a result of the Intensives, 100% of those that participated felt that the Intensive helped them and their team assess their school's missional and financial vitality, 90% felt that the

Intensive and the FVT helped them and their team assess their current and future economics, 93% felt that the Intensive helped them and their team raise questions about the financial vitality of the institution in service to the mission and Core WHY. These Intensives incorporate (1) learning on missional and financial vitality (Mission, Models, and Money) gathered over the last three decades, (2) the importance of engaging a school team to assess and discern ways forward regarding institutional realities, and (3) the requirement to take what is learned in these intense spaces back to the community to expand learning and ensure strategic action.

Chris Meinzer

ATS Senior Director & COO

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