

Association for Theological Education in South East Asia met in Philippines for General Assembly

BY LESTER EDWIN J. RUIZ

The Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA)—a partner of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) through the Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative—held its *General Assembly at Central Philippine University in Iloilo City, Philippines last month. Fifty-one participants traveled from Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, and the United States, and were joined by 46 Zoom participants from 65 of 94 ATESEA member schools.*



ATESEA approves theological degrees at the baccalaureate, post-baccalaureate, and post-master's levels. Since its founding in 1957, ATESEA has served schools that have graduated students informed by its historic association-wide "Guidelines for Doing Theologies in Asia" that embody the diverse, ecumenical, and multi-religious contexts of Asia. ATESEA also has member schools in Australia, Cambodia, China, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Focused on the theme *Harnessing the Winds of Change in Theological Education*, the event included representatives from other ATESEA partners—the Association for Theological Education in Myanmar, the Association for Theological Education in the Philippines, the Evangeliches Mission Weltweit in Germany, the Foundation for Theological Education in Southeast Asia in the US, and ATS. In addition to taking lots of pictures and shopping,

the group worshipped together, shared meals, conducted business—including the election and installation of new ATESEA Board of Trustees and Office Bearers—and worked on the revision of ATESEA's accreditation standards.

Frank Yamada, executive director of ATS, attended in person to deliver his keynote address on the theme *Winds of Change in North American Theological Education*. Discussing both the challenges and prospects of theological education in North America—in the context of the profound changes in US and Canadian societies (e.g., the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, the changing demographic changes related to racial and ethnic diversity, the loss of confidence in religious institutions), in higher education (e.g., the rising costs of education, the challenges of somewhat volatile enrollment growth or decline), and in graduate theological education itself, (e.g., organizational and financial challenges, resource stability,



ATS Executive Director Frank Yamada delivers his keynote address.

and sustainability)—he both challenged and encouraged participants.

“...these winds of change are blowing in distinct directions in North America and have implications for theological

education and the church in regions where Christianity is growing, even thriving. Over the past several years, ATS has been positioning itself to best meet this moment through resourcing, through leadership development, and through new standards that provide schools with the true north of quality in theological education that is a hallmark of ATS accreditation while also allowing for the flexibility that schools need in this time of significant change,” said Yamada.

“Ultimately, this critical time of change, this *kairos* moment, is a sign of hope that God is at work in the world in and through theological schools as they educate and prepare leaders for the future of church and society,” he said.

Septemmy Lakawa, president of Jakarta Theological Seminary, provided ATESEA’s shared response that focused on four key concerns of ATS described in Yamada’s address: resources, leadership, accreditation standards, and flexibility.

Citing these concerns within the specific contexts of South East Asia, she noted that in focused and collaborative engagement among its member schools and other partners—and not unlike their counterparts in North America or, perhaps, the rest of the world—ATESEA member schools will need to: (1) address the challenges and prospects posed by global Christianity and ecumenicity, especially in the context of a “post-pandemic” era that is reshaping their own historical understandings of themselves; (2) attend to financial sustainability and

leadership, especially the need to rethink the relationship among money, power, and education, including the ongoing dilemma of foreign versus local support for theological institutions; (3) develop relevant and appropriate educational models and practices in light of the digital transformations that COVID-19 forced on the educational landscape (e.g., online education); and (4) address the ecological crisis, including global warming, that is pressing acutely on the member schools in many South East Asian countries.

Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, director of accreditation and global engagement at ATS, led a plenary session—*the futures of theological education and accreditation in a globally shaped world*—that shared the key assumptions that animate the work of the Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative of ATS with its partners. These include: (1) the importance of diversity, contextuality, and collaboration; (2) the importance of languages, cultures, and pedagogies; and (3) the importance of institutional resources, articulated in the ATS Board of Commissioners’ *Reflective Guidelines for Global Awareness and Engagement in International Theological Education*.

Ruiz shared some questions that many ATS member schools are wrestling with as they seek to find their places in the world of globally shaped theological education, hoping that such questions would prompt global partners to share their wisdom and additional kinds of questions ATS schools should be asking. These questions, many of which were also asked during the ATS/COA Biennial Meeting in June 2022, included:

Thinking institutionally

- How has global engagement shaped your school’s work?
- What missionally congruent values does your school espouse that shape (or could shape) global engagement?
- How might global engagement enhance the identity and practices of your school?

- What is required at your school to promote values that encourage global engagement?

Thinking interpersonally

- How might communities of faith and learning engage in relationships of mutuality that support globally shaped intercultural competencies?
- What contributions do you bring (from your contextual starting point) that inform the values and practices of theological education? How do these encourage or render unnecessary global awareness and engagement?
- What bridge building initiatives could be promoted at your school to support global awareness and engagement initiatives?
- What intersectional or intercultural capacities are needed for your school to build stronger global awareness and engagement initiatives?
- How can we, as communities of faith and learning, help each other make our schools more globally shaped?

The responses to the presentation and some of these questions from Assembly participants, shared by Limuel Equiña, executive director of ATESEA, are noteworthy because they provide insights both into the concerns of ATESEA and what ATS might learn from one of its global partners. These responses included:

- We need to give [attention] not only [to the] local aspect of theological education but also [to the] global aspect of it to students. To what extent could theological education match both global and local?
- The presentations give awareness to transform theological education in light of changing global context

- I really [need to] reflect on the impacts of globalization in theological [education in] Indonesia as many thought patterns and logics are dissimilar

- When we speak of standards or specifically about curriculum, there is no such thing as "one size fits all"; This topic [the importance of diversity, contextuality, and collaboration] is helpful in my profession since we need to collaborate with our counterparts, not only within the country but abroad, so that we seminaries/formation centers will survive this fast-changing world

- The importance of languages, methods of teaching, and cultures has reminded us to reevaluate our contexts and the importance of cooperation of the seminaries to work together on the improvement of theological education and, at the same time, our engagement in the world during this critical time

- The discussion about globalization versus de-globalization is a crucial topic, especially in terms of

how theological theses written in the local mother tongue should be evaluated

- Though English is the primary means of communication in advanced academic level [education], we should note the importance of languages, cultures, and pedagogies that can reflect the idea and theological thinking of the students

- We are reminded of the importance of institutional resources for implementing our educational programs. We have to try to [develop] sufficient and stable institutional resources

"The gathering of ATESEA in the Philippines was a great example of how theological schools in North America need to become more globally aware and engaged.



While theological schools in North America are changing dramatically, the challenges that schools in South East Asia are facing are both inspiring and sobering to consider,” said Yamada, upon returning to the US.

“Hearing of schools who are serving in contexts like Myanmar help to keep in perspective what faithful theological education looks like in an environment that is literally life and death for Christian leaders and theological educators.”

According to Yamada, ATS continues to partner with organizations like ATESEA so there can be a mutual

exchange of ideas and practices of quality theological education.

“This mutual exchange provides a way to share information that is beneficial for all parties involved while providing the contextuality that helps to transform all who are in dialogue about critical issues facing theological education globally,” he said.

Please email [Lester Edwin J. Ruiz](mailto:Lester.Edwin.J.Ruiz@ats.edu) or visit the [ATS website](https://www.ats.edu) to learn more about the ATS Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative.



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