

# ATS membership approves once-in-a-generation new *Standards of Accreditation* during online Biennial Meeting

BY MARISSA DECHANT

*In an unprecedented moment for ATS, a group of about 200 voters convened online June 24 and 25 to attend the Biennial Meeting and approved the new Standards of Accreditation, new policies in the Policies and Procedures, and revised Commission Bylaws. The gathering on Zoom included designated voters from member schools, select members of the ATS Board of Directors and Board of Commissioners, and ATS staff, who conducted the biennial business of The Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting. Fittingly, the meeting theme was "Quality. Clarity. Flexibility. Re-envisioning Theological Education for a New Generation."*

## **Adoption of the new Standards**

As has been described in earlier *Colloquy Online* articles, the two-year redevelopment process (and, the earlier work of the preparatory committee and of the Educational Models and Practices Project) was highly participatory and grounded in significant membership input. Still, it was stunning when the motion to adopt the new *Standards, Policies, and revised Commission Bylaws* was presented and none of the voting members raised any concerns or suggested any changes to the proposed text.



Speaking in favor of the motion on the second morning, members praised the new *Standards* for their clarity, helpfulness, imagination, and innovation, noting that they ask exactly the right kinds of questions to help schools thrive. The vote was called, and the motion passed 198 to 1, a clear sign that the membership believes in and affirms these new *Standards* as their own.

Redevelopment Task Force chair Sarah Drummond and vice chair Oliver McMahan celebrated the nearly unanimous affirmative vote during the second Commission session on June 25, and thanked the task force and Tom Tanner—ATS director of accrediting who served as the ATS Commission staff liaison for the redevelopment process—for their hard work.

In her plenary address on June 24, Drummond said, “Sometimes the most radical change leaders can make is to choose to think differently. The membership spoke to the Redevelopment Task Force plainly, consistently, loudly, and clearly....Instead of obliterating the current standards, and instead of tweaking them, (the task force) elevated them to a higher level of abstraction.”

A [congratulatory video presentation](#) to thank the Redevelopment Task Force and the membership was played to celebrate and mark the moment.

### ***ATS Executive Director Frank Yamada addresses current climate and celebrates new Standards***

In his opening address, ATS executive director Frank Yamada spoke on the current COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism that continues to claim more black lives.

“What is also true...is that theological schools embedded in each of the mission statements of the broad family of ATS schools is the focus on formation and religious and moral leaders who can lead in these times of significant change and crisis. This is a moment,” Yamada said.

Yamada also presented the meeting theme and spoke to the historic occasion of the redevelopment of the *Standards of Accreditation*. The *Standards* had previously been through only two major redevelopments in 1972 and 1996.

“I would emphasize, underline, highlight, that these are very good standards,” said Yamada. “These are excellent standards, and the process that brought us to this point was an exemplary process of engagement of the diverse membership of The Association of Theological Schools and Commission on Accrediting.”

### ***Three schools approved for Associate membership***

One of the first orders of business was to consider three institutions for Associate membership, all of which were approved:

1. Evangelia University Graduate School of Theology (Anaheim, California)
2. Saint Sophia Ukrainian Orthodox Theological Seminary (Somerset, New Jersey)
3. Southern California Seminary Graduate School of Bible and Theology (El Cajon, California)

Associate member schools are members only of ATS and not the ATS Commission on Accrediting. Associate members have met the membership eligibility criteria and are elected to a five-year term of membership by the member schools of the Association. Degree programs are not approved by the Commission until a school has attained accreditation.

### ***Two organizations granted Affiliate status***

In addition, two organizations with a substantial interest in theological education, but not involved in educational programs leading to a degree, were welcomed as Affiliates—a status that does not lead to accreditation:

1. Foundation for Theological Education in Southeast Asia (New York, New York)
2. Association of Asian/North American Theological Educators (Decatur, Georgia)

### ***Tite Tiénou receives Distinguished Service Award***

Since 1988, the ATS Board of Directors has taken time during the Biennial Meeting to honor a “person of exceptional vision, leadership, and influence who advances the causes of our enterprise in very significant ways to the benefit of all.”

Awardees are chosen according to four criteria:

1. exceptional service to the Association and other organizations committed to the improvement of theological education;
2. innovative contribution to the establishment of forms and structures of theological education;
3. significant advancement of scholarship in the theological disciplines; or
4. unique contributions to the understanding and advancement of theological education.



During the second Association session on June 25, the ATS Distinguished Service Award was presented to **Tite Tiénou**, research professor of theology of mission and the Tite Tiénou Chair of Global Theology and World Christianity at

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School of Trinity International University. The award was presented to Tiénou by his friend and colleague, James R. Moore, associate professor of educational ministries at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School of Trinity International University via a [video presentation](#).

### ***Sallie McFague receives Women in Leadership Trailblazer Award posthumously***

Mary Young, ATS director of leadership education, explained the background behind the Women in Leadership (WIL) Trailblazer Award, which honors its first



recipient—**Sallie McFague**, who was the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Theology and dean, emerita at Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

“Sallie McFague broke new ground in how we think about God through metaphors as

feminist theology was just emerging, and the connections of religion with economics and ecology as environmental theology began to find its voice,” said Emilie Townes, dean of the Divinity School and E. Rhodes and Leona B.

Carpenter Professor of Womanist Ethics and Society at Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

“She influenced a generation of creative theologians who knew the tradition well, yet have pushed the boundaries of how we think and feel theologically to address the needs of the world and help us imagine and live into a better future for all.”

Townes accepted the award on McFague's behalf during the ATS Women in Leadership 20th Anniversary Celebration in 2018. The clip from that event was featured in a [video presentation](#) during the Biennial Meeting. The WIL Advisory Committee has decided to honor a woman leader in theological education with this award at each ATS/COA Biennial Meeting moving forward.

Both the Association and the Commission sessions concluded with the election of new leadership. Outgoing ATS president Brian Blount (Union Presbyterian Seminary) welcomed incoming president Mark Young (Denver Seminary). Having served as vice president for the past two years, Young assumes his new role immediately.

Outgoing COA chair Leanne Van Dyk (Columbia Theological Seminary) welcomed incoming chair Todd Lajiness (Sacred Heart Major Seminary). Lajiness served as vice chair and treasurer for the past two years and will also assume his new role immediately. In their respective capacities, Young and Lajiness will lead both boards as they navigate a new and challenging time in theological education.



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