

The ATS/COA Biennial Meeting: traditions and values

By STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

What is it?

Beyond the obvious, a meeting that occurs every two years, what exactly is the ATS/COA Biennial Meeting? One could argue that in its early days, the organization that would become known as The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada simply was a biennial meeting. Until it began its accreditation work in the late 1930s, the Association's primary function was to gather biennially to hear presentations and discuss issues of common concern to the member schools. As Glenn T. Miller put it, "And in fact, the early AATS [then known as The American Association of Theological Schools] was, like the earlier Conference of Theological Schools, preeminently a place for conversation. The annual meetings were characterized by the presentation of papers and by organized discussion of the ideas presented in them."¹

Once the accrediting function began with the formal establishment of the Commission on Accrediting in 1936, the Biennial Meetings included conversations about the development of standards and procedures for that work. By the time of the Biennial Meeting in 1956, which former ATS Director of Accreditation Tom Tanner called "a pivotal point in ATS history," ATS had hired its first executive director, adopted a new constitution and the first bylaws, and approved its first Articles of Incorporation. That was also the year that the Commission on Accrediting mandated that all schools "shall be reevaluated every ten years."²



For a number of Biennial Meetings, discussions and decisions about accrediting took center stage. In fact, only three Biennial Meetings between 1950 and 1988 did not discuss proposed new or revised standards.

Also, in the 1950s and 1960s, Biennial Meetings regularly included, either in the meetings themselves or in connection with them, a range of leadership education sessions, workshops, and discussions. That work grew to include conferences apart from the Biennial Meetings as well as workshops during the meetings. After 2000, a robust program of leadership education programming with generous funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. has provided content for the Biennial Meetings up to the present.

While in recent years the primary participants in Biennial Meetings have been CEOs and CAOs of member schools, in its earlier days, the meetings were dominated by faculty. At the initial meeting in 1918, for example, of the 101 "delegates" from 53 different schools, only 17 were presidents and another 12 deans. Most of the rest were teaching faculty of theological schools. Some were leading scholars of the day.³ In recent years, the range of participants in Biennial Meetings has been expanded somewhat to include personnel serving in a wide variety of roles and involved in various initiatives, such as the [Educational Models and Practice](#) project in 2016 and 2018, and the [Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative](#) in 2022 and 2024.

What happens?

ATS has been and remains a "community of conversation." Expertise about theological education resides in the membership, and some of the primary goals of ATS staff are to facilitate conversations that draw on that expertise, to help personnel from the schools learn from one another, and to nurture adaptations and improvement. As Miller put it, the work of ATS, both in accreditation and its pro-

grams and initiatives, highlights “peer education in which professionals provided other professionals with the benefits of their knowledge and experience.”⁴

The Biennial Meetings have provided opportunities for various affinity groups representing particular denominations, racial/ethnic groups, women leaders, Canadian schools, consortia of schools, and schools with other distinctive characteristics to meet and discuss issues particular to their contexts.

Alongside the conversations and connected to them are the regular activities of the Biennial Meetings. Representatives from member schools discuss, debate, occasionally argue, and then vote on budgets and reports from the Board of Directors and the Board of Commissioners, nominees to serve on boards, accrediting standards and policies, and applicants for associate membership or affiliate status. Traditionally, those votes have taken place by one delegate from each member school raising a red voting card for Association business and a blue card for Commission business. During the pandemic in 2020, members submitted votes via Zoom polling. Plans for 2026 anticipate use of electronic voting devices.⁵

Mealtimes, breaks, and receptions have become important parts of the meeting, offering additional opportunities for conversation. The Biennial Meeting banquet includes recognition of persons who have given exemplary service to the community of theological educators. Since 1988, the ATS Distinguished Service Award has recognized a wonderfully diverse group of individuals who have served as presidents of the Association, chairs of the Commission, and others who have served ATS and the broader theological education community in extraordinary ways. This award and others provide an important public opportunity to express appreciation. The Biennial Meeting materials include lists of literally hundreds of volunteers from member schools who have served during the previous biennium and those who have been nominated to serve in the coming biennium.

In addition to formal and informal conversations, the Biennial Meetings include an educational component through plenary sessions, workshops, and keynote ad-

resses. Over the years, the educational component has drawn heavily on the leadership education programs, initiatives and special projects, and experts on trends in North American religion and issues facing theological schools. The Biennial Meetings have normally included open forums for gathering membership feedback and forums for input on particular topics, such as the *Standards of Accreditation* and accrediting *Policies and Procedures*, global awareness and engagement, and other issues.

Often, the meeting features schools from the host city and surrounding area. These schools have offered words of welcome, frequently led prayers and worship, and occasionally facilitated tours of their schools or attractions related to theological education and communities of faith. This regular “up front” presence of members representing the different ecclesial families and faith communities has been a significant symbol of the unity within the wide diversity of ATS. The times of prayer and worship have been an important feature of the Biennial Meetings, enabling a breadth of styles and modeling the rich ecclesial diversity present within the membership, while reflecting the organization’s mission to support “theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.”⁶ ATS has been described as the most effective ecumenical community in North America, and that ecumenical spirit is manifest in the times of prayer and worship.

Why is it important?

Miller states it well. “If nothing else, these conversations broke down the parochialism of seminaries that were often embedded in the narrowness of their local denominational politics.”⁷ The overall work of ATS as a community of conversation takes physical form at the Biennial Meetings. While, thankfully, the Association and Commission were able to do their necessary business online in 2020 when the in-person gathering was not possible, there was something missing that is crucial to the relationship-building character of being together in person.

There are a number of benefits that happen when a large portion of the membership is gathered in one place. I have found the visual impact of seeing 300 to 450 members

present in the meeting room both encouraging and moving. I am encouraged to be in the presence of so many people from a remarkable variety of traditions, personal histories, and contexts gathered in one place to do the good work of theological education. At the 2008 Biennial Meeting, Lilly Endowment Inc. Vice President for Religion Craig Dykstra called “a good theological education one of the greatest gifts a human being can receive.”⁸ I am also deeply moved by this presence that affirms the value of our common work and the dedication of those who do it.

Being present also allows for the unplanned and sometimes most valuable connections and conversations, with those from schools similar to one’s own and those from schools that are quite different. According to a statement from the 1958 Biennial Meeting relating to the implementation of decennial comprehensive visits, “There will be a realization on the part of the visitors that in each school they are likely to discover contributions to our common life that no other is making, and awareness on the part of the school that it has much to learn from the experience of others.”⁹

At the Biennial Meeting, there is ample opportunity for networking, regularly the highest value participants name when evaluating ATS events. Attendees are able to connect with other participants, as well as with ATS staff and the staffs of partner organizations that regularly send representatives. In turn, ATS staff meet persons who might be invited to serve the Association or Commission on leadership or project committees, boards, or evaluation committees.

The activities of the Biennial Meeting reinforce the reality that ATS is the membership, not the professional staff whose role it is to serve the membership. A highlight is the vote and welcoming of new member schools. The membership is enriched by these new colleagues, and those joining the Association are affirmed in their work and encouraged to contribute to the body from their distinctive charisms.

Conflicts at Biennial Meetings have been relatively rare, but even those occasions have been instructive as times

of discerning what ATS is and is not and clarifying its distinctive role.

In many ways, the in-person Biennial Meeting exemplifies the core values of the Association and Commission. The **diversity** of the membership is obvious by “the multiple forms of diversity that exist among the member schools” and that is visible and physically present. Conversations reveal the **quality** that is present across the schools and the desire for **improvement** through learning about issues, other schools, best practices, and accreditation standards and processes. The atmosphere of cooperation, sharing, and mutual respect is a vivid example of the **collegiality** that is on display at the biennial. And **leadership** is emphasized through the resources provided for leaders who serve in many different roles in the schools and who share and learn together for the benefit of all.

The ATS/COA Biennial Meeting is an extraordinary event that brings together a truly extraordinary membership. We hope to see you in Chicago in June 2026!

¹ Glenn T. Miller, *A Community of Conversation: A Retrospective of The Association of Theological Schools and Ninety Years of North American Theological Education*, The Association of Theological Schools, 2008, p. 7.

² Tom Tanner, *Taking the Longer View: A History of the ATS Commission on Accrediting (1934-2024)*, The Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, p. 38.

³ Tanner, *Taking the Longer View*, endnote 2, p. 137.

⁴ Miller, *A Community of Conversation*, p. 8.

⁵ While obviously inefficient and time consuming, I have to admit that I’ll miss the voting cards! I found that process and tradition of voting to have a certain charm with each member publicly raising the cards and, in cases of division of the house, ATS staff counting votes in sections of the room and reporting the numbers.

⁶ From the ATS mission statement, emphasis mine.

⁷ Miller, *A Community of Conversation*, p. 8.

⁸ Personal notes from my first Biennial Meeting as a member of the ATS staff.

⁹ 1958 Biennial Meeting, *Bulletin* 23, pp. 129-30.



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