

In-person conference unites Pathways grantees in Pittsburgh to discuss projects

BY MATT HUFMAN

More than 200 people representing 81 ATS member schools met to discuss their projects at the first in-person gathering for the Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative in June. The gathering, held as a preconference event at the 2022 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting Onsite Conference in Pittsburgh, allowed participants a chance to connect with other grantees.

ATS is coordinating the Pathways initiative, and Jo Ann Deasy, ATS director of institutional initiatives and student research, is overseeing the coordination program. She said the hope was to give schools the opportunities to meet people with whom they could “share resources and develop partnerships” and to find people they “can turn to for mutual support and encouragement.”

“This will be particularly important for those leading their institutions through major change and also for those who come from smaller institutions and may not have



Jo Ann Deasy welcomes participants.

large teams supporting the work of the initiative,” she told the gathering.

The Pathways initiative, generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., is helping ATS-accredited schools find new ways to bring people



Participants gather at the first in-person meeting of the ATS Coordination Program for the Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative in Pittsburgh.

into theological education and church ministry. The initiative, announced in 2021, has provided grants to an overwhelming majority of ATS schools to help them consider new ways forward.

ATS Executive Director Frank Yamada noted that theological schools had been changing before the pandemic, but the pandemic “acted as a catalyst for schools to accelerate their own journeys toward more sustainable futures as they continue to prepare pastoral leaders for communities of faith.”

“In this defining moment for theological schools, the Lilly Endowment has demonstrated its commitment to theological schools and the key role that they play toward the revitalization of Christian congregations and the leaders that serve those congregations,” he said.

Lilly Endowment Inc. is providing three rounds of grant funding to ATS accredited schools. In the first round, which was not competitive, 235 schools received \$50,000 to study issues in preparation to prepare grant

proposals. In the second round, which was announced late last year, 84 schools received up to \$1 million each to pursue ways to implement projects at their schools. A third round of funding of up to \$5 million for collaborative projects is due to be announced later this year.

The Pittsburgh meeting brought second-round grantees together to discuss their projects, which include projects designed to examine how to do spiritual formation online, partnerships with Bible institutes for non-degree seeking students, and outreaches to nontraditional students.

While grantees had met via Zoom and had several online learning opportunities, the Pittsburgh meeting allowed them to break into face-to-face discussion groups based on role, such as CEOs and project directors, and based on project type. ATS broke the projects down into two broad groupings based on who the schools plan to serve and how they plan to serve.

In the discussion about who they plan to serve, groups included those focused on diverse communities, current pastors, Hispanic and/or Latinx/Latino/a communities, lay ecclesial ministers, students without bachelor's degrees, and under-resourced communities.

Regarding how they plan to serve, groups included those considering certificates, contextual education, formation, institutional sustainability, intercultural capacity, lifelong learning, and online/hybrid education.

One participant mentioned that the school's denomination needed to focus on new ways of learning and on new students.

"The demographic realities of our churches mean that lay leadership is more important than it ever has been," the participant said.

Another participant felt the need to expand learning to a wider audience, saying "we are all challenged by the work of building learning communities across diversity."

In a pre-session questionnaire, participants described their feelings about their projects as "hopeful," "excited," "energized," and "grateful," with several participants acknowledging feeling "overwhelmed."

Schools are taking on big tasks in a time of disruption, and earlier this year—addressing grantees via Zoom—Yamada said the Pathways grant "turns the time of disruption into a time of opportunity and creativity." An Old Testament scholar, he pointed to the story of creation in Genesis.

"God's creative action happens not in spite of, but in the middle of chaos," said Yamada.

After the conference, participants expressed gratitude, as several people shared that it was helpful to see what other people were experiencing.

"Others deal with similar issues," a participant said. "What I am feeling is not unique."

The sense of finding kindred spirits—the 2022 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting theme was *A Better Future Together*—was helpful for those participants who expressed a desire to connect and learn. Several appreciated the importance of collaborating among peers and stakeholders and knowing that they were not competitors.

ATS and the In Trust Center for Theological Schools were awarded coordinating grants for the project, which will continue for the next five years. ATS is providing oversight, learning space, and research, among other efforts.

Amy Kardash, president of the In Trust Center, said her organization would "not duplicate efforts, but



PATHWAYS for TOMORROW *Coordination Program*



Amy Kardash speaks to the group.

support and balance them,” adding that the center’s work would focus on “Resource Consulting, learning community space, publications, and supporting conversation space.”

She said the collaboration between ATS and the In Trust Center would “leverage our organizational programs and our teams’ strengths to collectively support theological schools” and enhance the participants’ experiences so they are “encouraged and sustained” in the work. She also suggested that the work between ATS and the In Trust Center would model good collaboration.

The grantees in the second round of funding provide a cross-section of ATS schools that mirrors ATS membership as a whole. Among 74 schools in the United States and 10 in Canada, there are 28 states and the District

of Columbia represented, along with seven Canadian provinces. There is also a diversity of size (from less than 50 full-time enrollment to more than 2,000) and a variety of faith traditions, including 32 Mainline schools, 32 Evangelical schools, 18 Roman Catholic schools, and two Peace Church schools.

The projects include those seeking to increase diversity, try alternative pedagogies, develop best practices, and examine business models for sustainability. Several participants noted that while the issues they face are big and have been long-lasting, there is a great opportunity for theological schools now that will last into the future.

“The best time to plant a tree is 50 years ago,” one participant said, “the second-best time is today.”



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