

Inter-group conversations introduced at Educational Models and Practices Peer Group Forum

By LISA KERN

Participants involved in the Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education project gathered Wednesday, April 19, and Thursday, April 20, in Pittsburgh to continue their work on The Association of Theological Schools' (ATS) largest initiative to date.

Funded by a major grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., the project was created to assess current and developing practices among ATS member schools, identify their most promising aspects, assist member schools in implementing new and innovative models, and eventually integrate promising models into the work of the redevelopment of the ATS standards of accreditation.

Forum attendees met in 18 individual peer groups to review their preliminary reports of work to this point, discuss financial viability and the implications of the work on the broader institution, and identify any outstanding items.

Those in attendance were also given the opportunity to have conversations among their fellow peer groups for the first time.

“Over the past few months of work, each peer group has focused its attention on only one particular model or practice, but there is also widespread interest in the work of other peer groups and the desire to explore a variety of questions,” said Stephen Graham, ATS senior director of programs and services, who is serving as director of



the project. “So, we built several different sessions into the forum’s agenda to provide an opportunity for those inter-group conversations.”

The first session of assigned inter-group conversations was designed to be between groups that have strong similarities—Formation in Online Contexts and Educational Values of Online Education; DMin Admission and DMin Identity; and Asian Schools, Historically Black Schools, and Programs for Latino/a Students—for example. These pairings discussed key issues emerging from their work, next steps, and how they might collaborate to strengthen the understanding and presentation of common issues.

The second session of assigned inter-group conversations was designed to accentuate the differences between groups—Competency-Based Education and Permanent Diaconate Programs; Duration (Reduced Credit MDiv) and DMin Identity; and RC Formation of Laity and Programs for Latino/a Students—to name a few.

These groups identified key differences and had an opportunity to challenge one another in addition to identifying values they still held in common.

Sessions were also created for participants to choose other peer groups with whom they most wanted to converse.

“I am energized by listening to how other institutions have creatively engaged theological education and have adapted it to the many different contexts represented here,” said one attendee when asked about the chance to meet with other peer groups.

“We all sensed a strong purpose in what we were trying to accomplish together,” shared another.

“Reflections on the Core of Theological Education: Continuity and Change—Three Views” was the plenary topic Wednesday afternoon. Three experienced theological educators—[Donald Senior](#), president emeritus of Catholic Theological Union, [Emilie M. Townes](#), dean of Vanderbilt University Divinity School, and [Mark Young](#), president of Denver Seminary—were asked to share thoughts on their work over the years and what they believe must remain at the center of theological education in the midst of dramatic and necessary changes that are occurring.

“The active focus on a school’s mission by its key stakeholders is, in my mind and my experience, its lifeblood,” said Senior. “This type of reflection may not take place in a single dramatic setting; it may happen in a more diffuse and ongoing manner and take place over time in a variety of modalities. But, when all is said and done, nothing substitutes for it.”

Townes spoke about what religion and spirituality looked like in the past and how they have evolved in today’s world.

“What’s changing, in addition to the proportion of the population each religion represents, is how people experience and practice religion,” she said. “What will endure, I truly believe, is the human need to find meaning in our lives, to have something beyond ourselves that calls us to some form of higher moral values. For many, the fulfillment of this need is, and will continue to be, the practice of religion and/or spirituality.”

“Gospel. Redemption. Hope. These theological convictions ground me and give me a sense of mission and meaning as an educator, and that must not change,” said Young. “My heart sings and my soul is lifted when I dare to believe that the educational endeavor is one of good news, rescue, and hope.”

“I thought it was interesting that each was so representative of their ecclesial traditions,” said one participant. “Senior focused on the church working from church documents, Townes focused on relevance considering wider trends in society, and Young on the gospel especially defining hope, yet the messages were complementary.”

Also included in the forum’s agenda were four “student stories” from Jay Akkerman, of Northwest Nazarene University School of Theology and Christian Ministries (Graduate), Joyce Chan of Carey Theological College, Todd Cioffi of Calvin Theological Seminary, Ralph Korner of Taylor College and Seminary, and [Robert Wright](#) of Oblate School of Theology. Each spoke about how their students were well served by a particular educational model or practice.

Peer groups will submit final reports of their findings in October to benefit the Association’s membership.



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