

Lilly Endowment Inc. expands Pathways for Tomorrow with large-scale collaboration grants

Total funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. through the Pathways initiative now exceeds \$700 million

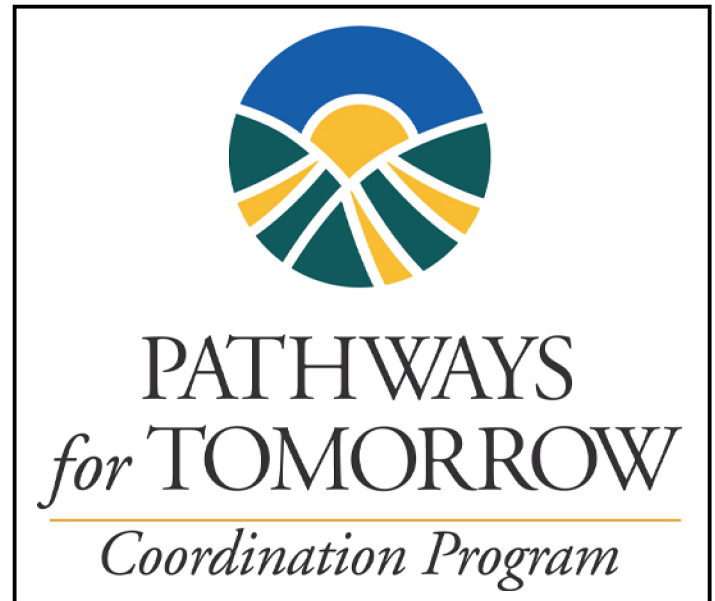
By FAITH JACKSON

Lilly Endowment Inc. has approved a new round of large-scale collaboration grants through its Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative, continuing its sustained investment in strengthening theological education across the United States and Canada.

Launched in 2021, Pathways for Tomorrow was designed to help theological schools in the United States and Canada strengthen both their educational work and their financial foundations as they prepare pastors and lay leaders for Christian congregations and the communities they serve. With this latest round of awards, total funding from the Endowment through the initiative now exceeds \$700 million, supporting the work of 174 schools and multiple collaborative efforts across North America.

Collaborations address shared challenges

While earlier Pathways grants focused on strengthening individual institutions, this round significantly expands the number of grants designed to support partnerships among theological schools, colleges and universities, denominational bodies, and other church and community organizations. Together, these collaborations will address shared challenges such as leadership formation, access and affordability, financial sustainability, institutional capacity, and more. Through these grants, Lilly Endowment Inc. addresses the growing understanding that preparing pastors and lay leaders for the future requires innovative new models.



“Theological education is being shaped by rapid changes in the church and in society,” said Frank M. Yamada, executive director of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS). “What has made Pathways so important is its long view. These grants help schools respond to today’s realities while also building the capacity and confidence they will need to serve communities for years to come.”

ATS coordinates the *Pathways for Tomorrow* Initiative in partnership with the In Trust Center for Theological Schools. Together, the organizations support grantees through convenings, cohort-based learning, research, evaluation, and shared resources. That coordination role expands significantly with the addition of new large-scale collaborative projects, many of which involve institutions and partners beyond the Association’s accredited membership. This allows them to navigate significant organizational, cultural, and financial complexity while remaining grounded in their educational and formational mission and strengthening their relationships with the broader ecology of theological education.

“These grants are paired with intentional coordination,” said Jo Ann Deasy, director of institutional initiatives at ATS, who leads the Pathways coordination work. “We support grantees through the creation of a collaborative, generative community of learning by using a range of approaches to foster shared learning. These include individual consultations, webinars, in-person gatherings, and the development of emerging cohort models.”

As Pathways has grown, its influence has extended beyond individual grants. Heather Campain Hartung, senior director of programs and initiatives at ATS, points to Pathway’s role in shaping how ATS staff engages the membership. “The projects are teaching us alongside the schools,” she said. “They inform how ATS convenes conversations, frames questions, and supports schools so the learning from Pathways strengthens the whole field, not just the funded work.”

Attention to long-term viability, shared learning

Since its launch, the coordination program has advanced a wide range of efforts, from helping schools expand non-degree, lifelong learning programs, and contextual educa-

tion to developing shared administrative services, collaborative financial models, and new pathways into ministry. As the initiative has evolved, increasing attention has been given to long-term viability and shared learning across institutions. “One of the most critical conversations we’re having with schools is about the interrelationship between mission, models, and money,” said Chris Meinzer, ATS senior director and COO. “Financial sustainability isn’t just about balancing budgets. It’s about aligning resources with mission and exploring models that make theological education accessible and affordable for future generations.”

“Our hope is not simply that these projects succeed individually,” Yamada said. “It’s that the learning generated through Pathways strengthens theological education as a whole so schools are better equipped to serve congregations and communities in faithful and sustainable ways.”

ATS and the In Trust Center will continue coordinating Pathways grants through 2030, convening grantees and disseminating findings as projects unfold. As this new round of large-scale collaborations begins, the initiative marks another step in a long-term partnership committed to the future of theological education.



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