

New year brings leadership moment

By FRANK M. YAMADA

As we turn the calendar forward to another new year, we are in a leadership moment. I have often used the well-known phrase, “for such a time as this,” when addressing ATS school leaders. It comes from the book of Esther (4:14), in which Mordecai presses Esther that, perhaps, she had come into royal power in Persia for “such a time as this” to advocate on behalf of the Jewish people. We are in such a moment of leadership among ATS member schools—leaders and schools are being called into positions to face this dynamic and changing landscape with creativity and hope.

There have been more than 400 appointments into the chief executive and chief academic officer positions since 2017 that have affected 216 of the 280 member schools—the largest wave of new senior leaders in the Association’s 105-year history. Leaders and schools are moving into these transitions with renewed energy and hope as they join the Association in living out our mission “to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.”

It has been a challenging season for theological schools and these new leaders, but it has also been an exciting time of intense innovation and adaptation. ATS schools have made significant changes during the global pandemic—93% of schools are now approved for either



limited or comprehensive distance education. Schools are also seeking to engage and serve increasingly diverse students with programs designed to meet the needs of those communities. This is not a time of change for change’s sake. The changes are grounded in the hope that undergirds our many Jewish and Christian traditions within the Association, and the hope is rooted in the missions of the diverse theological schools as they emerge into post-pandemic realities during this critical time of change.

Changes have also occurred among ATS staff and in how we accomplish our work. We welcomed eight new members (working locally in Pittsburgh and remotely) to our team in the past year, and several long-time staff members transitioned into new roles with additional responsibilities. ATS accreditation directors have enjoyed a full return to in-person member school visits and events, hosting the Self-Study Workshop in September and the School for Peer Reviewers and the Board of Commissioners’ meeting earlier this month—all at the Pittsburgh office.

In this leadership moment, ATS and the ATS Commission on Accrediting (COA) are well-positioned to support leaders and schools to make the changes necessary to pursue their multiple futures.

The COA was recently renewed in its recognition as a quality accrediting agency for the maximum years with both the United States Department of Education and with the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. As you already know, the 2020 ATS *Standards of Accreditation* capture the educational principles of **quality** that are a hallmark of ATS accredited schools—providing the **flexibility** for which schools asked in this dynamically shifting environment and elegantly crafted within the **clarity** of only 18 pages. These standards provide the road map for how to do quality theological education while also providing the flexibility and accountability that this current moment demands.

On the Association side, initiatives, programs, research, and leadership development continue to provide schools and leaders with the resources and projects they need to fulfill their missions more effectively and sustainably. This past fall, Lilly Endowment Inc. awarded the Association three large grants to support schools and leaders through leadership development and initiatives that will further their work as they build capacities to serve new and more diverse student populations. Study and resource group meetings focused on (1) competency-based theological education, (2) assessment of prior learning, (3) student human formation, and (4) multiple modalities of teaching and learning, and they were held via Zoom and in person last fall as part of the ATS Organizational and Educational Models project.

Participants gathered in Orlando for the popular ATS School for New Deans event in November, which was immediately followed by the ATS Financial Officers' Conference. The ATS Board of Directors was introduced to a new rhythm of orientation and agenda activities at

its Pittsburgh meeting in early December, and member school presidents very recently gathered in Orlando to attend the newly-designed ATS Executive Leadership Intensive—their first in-person event since 2019. Additional ATS activities have included Women in Leadership mentoring group meetings, global awareness and engagement partnership events, ATS affinity group meetings and diversity webinars, online peer group discussions for specific areas of work, and a comprehensive revision of the Association's Annual Report Form.

Since early 2021, the Lilly Endowment has granted \$209 million to ATS accredited theological schools and sup-

porting organizations through the Pathways for Tomorrow initiative. If the *Standards* were a

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once-in-a-generation vote by the membership, *Pathways* is an unprecedented initiative with the goal of assisting theological schools as they explore ways to create future pathways for pastoral leaders in communities of faith. Jointly coordinated by ATS and the In Trust Center for Theological Schools, ongoing resources for the initiative include a project directory and on-demand documents housed in Canvas (the Association's LMS), webinars to connect project directors and team members, and in-person events among others.

Perhaps we have all been appointed to provide leadership in theological education “for such a time as this”—one of profound and accelerated change. Thank you for your commitment as you seek to live out your schools' diverse missions. Your important work contributes to a membership organization that is willing and able to confidently meet this leadership moment.



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