

# Collaboration, context, and change: Pathways continues to grow

BY MATT HUFMAN

*Facing a critical moment in theological education, nearly 350 leaders from more than 100 institutions attended the annual Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative gathering in Indianapolis. Held at the end of June, the two-day event came as many schools are at least halfway through their grants, providing an opportunity for reflection, collaboration, and shared learning.*

The event was organized by the coordination program, led by The Association of Theological Schools in conjunction with the In Trust Center for Theological Schools, which supports collaboration and learning across the initiative.

## **Grant's maturity evident at the event**

ATS Director of Institutional Initiatives Jo Ann Deasy led the coordination effort and said the event demonstrated the maturity of the grant. She noted that the schools had started in different places—some building on existing projects, others starting from scratch—but all clearly seeking to “expand their capacity to serve pastoral and lay leaders for congregations.”

“At this conference, it was clear that most projects were hitting their stride and shifting toward the next phases of their work: how to sustain what was working well beyond the life of the grant,” said Deasy.

She stressed that the initiative has allowed schools to explore a “wide variety of projects” to help prepare and support leaders for congregations. She pointed to some of the major themes that emerged.

“Schools are responding to the changing demographics of



From left to right: Matt Huffman, Jo Ann Deasy, Amy Kardash, and Christopher The participate in a panel discussion during the Closing Plenary at the 2025 Pathways Coordination Program Gathering.

the churches they serve by offering programs in multiple languages, creating contextual models including competency-based theological education, and increasing partnerships with denominations, churches, and other ministry organizations,” she said. “Schools are also making progress in the area of institutional sustainability as they explore scalable models through shared resources and, together with ATS, develop tools and frameworks to assess and adjust financial models.”

## **Expanded capacity for education and sustainability**

Considering many well-known challenges in the field, including long-standing enrollment declines, Lilly Endowment Inc.'s Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative has helped ATS-accredited schools experiment with expanding their capacity to train congregational leaders for the church and provide institutional sustainability.

The Indianapolis event provided significant opportunity for peer learning—from structured conversations to facilitated sessions—designed to provide collaboration among the schools. Other conversations and workshops focused on a variety of subjects, including student formation, non-degree programs, and board engagement.

Amy Kardash, president of the In Trust Center, said the conference demonstrated how engaged schools were, even amid leadership turnover. She said several schools had top leadership and boards of trustees involved in their projects, indicating that such projects were mission-centric and not peripheral or siloed.

Kardash pointed out that schools are deeply engaged in addressing some of the underlying tensions in theological education, such as supply and demand, and tracking data that goes toward mission vitality. She called it a complicated time, adding that the Pathways initiative was helping schools find ways to move ahead.

“This is the ocean that we’re all swimming in, and there are very real issues facing theological education,” she said. “Schools are grappling with these issues, and it’s really important to get projects aligned with institutional priorities.”

Schools also discussed obstacles and strengths. One session focused on navigating the obstacles in projects, and participants shared how they either had faced obstacles or what they were facing and how they were addressing the issues. They also shared strengths of their institutions and how those could be leveraged as part of their projects.

Kardash noted that sustainability is a theme that runs throughout the initiative. Pathways projects are meant to aid in mission sustainability, and schools were working through what that will look like in terms of how the mission is being sustained, including the future of institutional facilities, programs, and projects.

### ***Participants note collaboration, sense of community***

Other key themes throughout the event included the number of transitions, both in institutional and project leadership, responding to cultural and institutional shifts in priorities, and repeated need for relationship building both inside and out of institutions.

Participant feedback underscored the spirit of collaboration and shared purpose in the Pathways initiative. One participant was “deeply struck and grateful for the genu-

ine desire of the coordinating team ... to support and see the success of the participating schools and organizations.”

“Knowing that we are not in competition but seeking to do what is good and God’s will, was a richly fulfilling insight—irrespective of the final outcome,” the participant wrote.

Another participant wrote of making several connections with institutions, including one outside their denomination, in which there could be potential collaboration.

“It was wonderful to gain a sense of the diversity of the projects and to realize that we’re not alone in the areas of challenge and excitement that the process entails.”

The Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative was announced in 2021 by Lilly Endowment Inc., offering three rounds of funding. The first offered up to \$50,000 for a planning grant, with 234 schools receiving money. The second offered up to \$1 million, and 105 schools received awards. The final round offered up to \$5 million for collaborative projects, and the Endowment gave 16 awards.

Earlier this year, Lilly Endowment proposed new rounds of funding, including a round of up to \$10 million for collaborative grants. A one-day, pre-conference event brought 120 people from 44 invited schools to Indianapolis to apply for a collaborative grant. Those schools learned about the expectations for the grant and focused on strengthening key areas of their proposals.



Matt Huffman is vice president for communication at the In Trust Center for Theological Schools in Wilmington, Delaware.