

The mission of The Association of Theological Schools and The Commission on Accrediting: continuity and change

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Early documents

At the time of the initial meeting of the Conference of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada in August 1918, World War I was in its final months, though few could have imagined that its end was so near. That context—and developments in subsequent years—would have a direct impact on the people gathered to discuss theological education in the United States and Canada. Post-war ecumenical efforts, for example, sought to find answers and solutions within the churches, hoping to collaborate more effectively to train leaders for postwar realities.

Participants at the 1918 conference agreed that the gathering was of value and appointed a continuation committee to plan the next meeting for 1920. That meeting received a proposed constitution for the organization and agreed on a preliminary statement on “The Purpose of the Conference” that included the following. Although some items deal with specific practices, all may be seen as reflecting the general purposes named in the current ATS mission statement.¹

For example, the present statement’s naming of “improvement and enhancement of theological schools” can be seen in the purposes named in 1920:

- Adjustment of theological curriculum for present needs: “not only the preparation of an efficient ministry but also the training of religious workers generally;”
- Preparation of a “pre-seminary course of study” like that



for other professional schools in universities and colleges;

- The investigation of various types of theological training in the United States and Canada;
- Cultivation of fellowship and the sense of common purpose among theological teachers, which “will doubtless have profound influence upon the closer relations of the churches themselves.”

The present statement’s declaration of “*For the benefit of communities of faith*” has as its basis the following 1920 purposes as well as some of those named above:

- Recruitment of men for the ministry through various means;
- Guidance for North American and European students and an interchange of professors.

The current statement’s commitment to serving “*the broader public*” is reflected in these 1920 conference purposes:

- Discuss at biennial conferences “religious and theological questions which claim the attention of the Church;”
- Cooperate with other agencies of Christian education.

Leaders such as William Adams Brown, professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, were involved deeply in both the early years of the organization that would become ATS and national and international organizations such as the 1925 Universal Christian Council for Life and Work, and the 1927 World Conference on Faith and Order.² Brown saw the role of the church in democracy as providing “a unifying spiritual influence, springing from a common faith, and issuing in common action.”³

Those sentiments, shared by many involved in the development of the Conference of Theological Schools, were reflected in some of the earliest conference documents. These included statements of the conference’s “object” and “ideals,” which were included in a constitution approved by the membership at the Toronto meeting in June 1944.⁴ The conference aimed to enhance relationships among the schools. It was to “confer on common interests,” to consider any problems in relations with governments or other educational organizations, and to “provide a central source of information for students.” This included opportunities for North American students to study in Europe and European students to study in North America, once again possible with the end of the war. The conference could also address other matters that surfaced.

As the conference entered its fifth year, participants continued to question its purpose and benefits. Its response captures something of the ongoing mystery of God’s providence in the work and the challenges being faced. It also recognizes the ineffable quality that remains at the heart of the work of The Association of Theological Schools and is often sensed by today’s remarkably diverse participants who describe it in various ways. “Questions like these cannot be answered with a fixed formula. The purpose and benefits of a fellowship of men engaged in a common task and coming from sections of territory extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific, representing churches of varied historical traditions, is hard to put into words. Yet we shall always live and act under the power of certain ideals which are common to us all.”⁵

In 1936, the revision to the constitution changed the name of the organization from “The Conference of Theological Seminaries and Colleges in the United States and Canada”



to “The American Association of Theological Schools.” That meeting also established the Commission on Accrediting, naming its duty to “institute and maintain the list of Accredited Theological Schools under standards determined by the Association.”⁶

The constitution’s second article on “Purpose” was modified slightly, but significantly from the original to include the phrase “to one another” within the sentence “to consider any problems that may arise to the relations of these institutions” as well as their relations “with other educational institutions and to the State.”⁷ It is fair to assume that the Association had always attended to the relationships between member schools, but some events or circumstances led to the need for greater emphasis and clarity on that point.

Present statements

Discussion of adopting a formal mission statement for ATS began in the late 1990s, reflecting greater emphasis on such statements in business, other organizations, and the academy. While discussion of its mission had been normal practice for many years, ATS adopted its first formal mission statement in 2000.⁸

The 2000 Biennial Meeting *Bulletin* looks back to the organization's founding years, makes connections to that founding, and offers explanations of the use of key terms to address questions of "what effect" the work of ATS should have and "to what end" the work should be oriented. "The language of improvement has its roots in the founding of the Association. At that time, schools needed improvement to function at a post-baccalaureate level, to order the curriculum, and to establish definitions of the nature and purposes of theological education." ATS schools have improved in these and other areas. Yet, "their work . . . can be better; current practices can be enhanced; their contributions to religious communities and the broader public enriched. In 1920, the schools formed an organization of peer institutions and vested it with the task of being the means through which they attended to their improvement. ATS still seeks to be a means through [which] the schools attend to their mutual desire for improvement and enhancement."⁹

The "end" toward which the work should be oriented is "the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public." The improvement in the schools should be "related to their missions," that include "the education of students for the multiple forms of religious leadership and ministry, the advancement of theological scholarship, service to the church, and advancing the proper contribution of religion to the broader public." ATS should promote the kinds of improvement in theological schools that "maximize the potential" of those schools to "enhance the work and witness of the communities of faith to which they are related, and to make the intellectual insights and contributions of the theological disciplines available to the broader public."¹⁰

In 2004, a reorganization of ATS included a number of significant changes. The constitution was replaced by separate bylaws for the two new corporations, The Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting. Over the next few years, adjustments continued adaptation to the new reality.

Prior to 2005, the ATS "Plan of Work" that had guided the Association since the early 2000s listed accreditation as the first of its "core functions." The plan stated, "Accreditation is, in many ways, the central function of the Associ-

ation for several reasons." It listed three qualities of accrediting in relation to the schools that made it central:

- It is "normative," requiring the schools to identify perceptions of quality and adopt the standards that have "power over all the schools."
- Accrediting is "ubiquitous." It is "the only activity of the Association in which every school must be involved."
- And it is "ongoing," with periodic requirements for submission of data and reaccreditation.¹¹

Accreditation was removed as of 2005 from the "Plan for the Work of ATS, 2004–10," thereafter appearing as the distinctive focus of the work of the Commission.¹²

Over time, language has been changed to more accurately fit changing circumstances and emphases in communities of faith, educational institutions, and the broader public. Yet, there is remarkable continuity between the current statements of ATS mission and COA purpose and the earlier statements of purposes, the constitution, and the various version of bylaws. The present statements are more concise and name overarching concepts into which an ever-expanding range of activities fit, but the consistency of emphasis is striking. A common core of purpose endures even as the scope of ATS work has grown and adapted to particular needs within the schools and those they serve.

¹Bulletin 2, 1921, p. 4.

²See: Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion, Volume 2, The Noise of Conflict: 1919–1941*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 37, and Thomas M. Tanner, *Taking the Longer View: A History of the ATS Commission on Accrediting (1934–2024)*, p. 5.

³Quoted in Marty, *The Noise of Conflict*, p. 40.

⁴See: "Proposed Constitution" of "The Conference of Theological Seminaries and Colleges in the United States and Canada," (Bulletin 2, December 1921, p. 2). Approval is recorded in Bulletin 3, March 1923, p. 1.

⁵Bulletin 3, 1923, p. 4.

⁶Bulletin 11, July 1936, p. 36. This name was maintained from 1936 to 1972 when the name was changed to the current "The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada." Biennial bulletins had used the title "American Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada" beginning in 1958 and that name was printed in the constitution beginning in Bulletin 26, 1964.

⁷Ibid.

⁸*The Standards of Accreditation* in 1984 for the first time required schools to have

mission statements. See: Bulletin 36, Part 6, 1984, pp. 123–58.

9 Bulletin, Part 3, 2000, p. 64. The bracketed word is a correction of the word “with” in the original text that is obviously a misprint.

10 Ibid.

11 Bulletin 44, part 3, 2000, p. 68.

12 After the 2004 reorganization, the mission statement of The Association of Theological Schools continued to serve the Association, while the Commission

adopted a separate mission statement in 2008. The Board of Commissioners appointed a task force of commissioners in 2007 to develop a mission statement for the work of the Board of Commissioners. Minutes, January 2007, p. 48. The full Board approved the proposed mission statement at its meeting in June 2007. While the author could find no action rescinding the Board’s action to approve the Mission Statement, neither was there evidence that it has been used in that form since. Board of Commissioners, Minutes of Meeting of January 29–31, 2007; Board of Commissioners, Minutes of Meeting of June 11–13, 2007, p. 1671.



Then vs. now: Pictured above is the initial meeting of the Conference of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada held in August 1918. Pictured below is the most recent ATS/COA Biennial Meeting held in June 2024.



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