

Under construction, making progress: *Pathways* event shows schools forging toward new future in theological education

BY MATT HUFMAN

During the Pathways for Tomorrow gathering held November 6–8 in Indianapolis, 370 people from across the United States and Canada came together to discuss their progress and brainstorm ideas for moving forward. The event kicked off with an advisory committee meeting and included two-and-a-half days of presentations, discussions, and interactive work, providing a snapshot of where the initiative is as it enters its third year.

Since Lilly Endowment Inc.'s *Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative* was unveiled in early 2021, 110 ATS-accredited schools have received grants for Phase 2 and Phase 3, and the Endowment has awarded more than \$200 million to help schools create new pathways for ministers to enter Christian ministry. The initiative has given schools the space and resources to consider how they're training ministers and to experiment with new programs and models.

Jo Ann Deasy, director of institutional initiatives for The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and leader of the coordination effort for ATS, said the November meeting "embodied the best of theological education."



"The gathering brought together a diverse community of schools worshipping and learning together, seeking to rebuild theological education in order to better prepare pastors and lay leaders for congregations in the United States and Canada. They discussed the challenges of change, the hope of partnerships, the desire to expand access, and the reality of the economic challenges they face," she said. "What a privilege to walk with these teams as they seek to faithfully steward the resources they've been given for this good work."

The theme of last month's gathering, *Theological Education under Construction*, demonstrated the point of where grantees are in the initiative. The Endowment began funding schools in 2021, and—depending on the length of the grant—the initiative will run through 2027. Considering that timeframe, most schools are still early in their work.

“I do see this as being early on in construction but far enough along to see what is working well, what is not going as we expected, and where there may be a need to pivot to achieve the purposes of their grants,” Deasy said.

The construction theme was supported by activities that included schools using blocks and toys to build representations of their work and projects. Some of those were elaborate displays



that illustrated the work. The theme was based on 1 Corinthians 3:9: “For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.”

The schools that received grants reflect the wide diversity of ATS institutions by size, location, and denomination, and the types of projects express the range of thought and interest in schools. Projects include working to train lay leaders in churches, reach diverse audiences, and to find cutting-edge ways to prepare students for ministry. The gathering gave grantees a chance to consider their own progress and see what others were doing.

In a report on the grant, Deasy noted that more than 60 schools had made new hires and had spent \$1.4 million on consultants. Schools launched 38 new programs in 2022, and more than \$500,000 was spent on curriculum development and design. Schools spent more than \$400,000 on marketing.

The report also noted that some program launches “were extremely successful with enrolling large numbers

of new students or reaching new audiences. However, others struggled and had to assess” the reason for the struggle. Some schools have had to pivot in their projects as they’ve reconsidered their activities and what students want.

Deasy said one of the positives so far is that schools have spent time and resources to understand what their constituencies want and now “know more about them than they have ever known.”

She also noted that there is a “tension” about the future of theological education as schools wrestle with how to best train students while also creating sustainable and affordable programs. Parts of the conference focused on how people and schools were looking at the future.

“I’m proud of people for hanging together as a community as we’re all considering different paths to the future,” Deasy said.

One of the key areas of the grant has come in schools finding and developing partners who can help them develop the future.

In 2022, more than half of grantees said they had formed new partnerships. Some of those included denominations, other schools, and hospitals. They also came in the form of consultants and advisors. Schools noted that those partnerships have come as they have found new ways to attract students, prepare them, and do ministry.

As well, partners have come into focus for grantees as they look to create new education models. Several schools have seen partnerships flourish, particularly as they work to put students in ministry contexts.

The In Trust Center for Theological Schools is co-coordinating the grant with ATS and has been doing



Jo Ann Deasy, coordinator of the *Pathways for Tomorrow* Initiative, addresses participants at the November gathering.



Amy Kardash, president of the In Trust Center for Theological Schools, introduces the panel discussion titled *Reclaiming Mission by Managing Change Brick by Brick* at the November gathering.

so by sharing news about the grantees and the initiative, creating learning spaces, and resourcing schools. In the opening session of the conference, In Trust Center President Amy Kardash shared that her hope was that grantees would find “stickiness”—that there would be ideas, connections, and moments that would challenge or reinforce what they were doing.

She noted that the conference showed that “we are not called to be silos” and called attendees to consider, “Who needs to be at our table?” Kardash added that “accreditation and the reaccreditation process can be a basis for or accelerator for change.”

Kardash said there were several parts of the gathering that provided ideas that should stick. For example, she mentioned how schools were considering prior learning

assessments, learning in place, and considering partnerships and the future.

She shared that the In Trust Center would continue to consider how to identify and create intersections between projects with similar themes and raise awareness about how some projects are focusing on opportunities that will benefit the field and not just their schools.

“The gathering was an incredibly generative space providing much-needed time for teams to think together, to learn more about one another, to learn about progress and themes via workshops and panels, and to build the learning community,” Kardash said. “I was inspired by the progress and commitment of the teams and deeply grateful for Jo Ann Deasy’s leadership and our partners at ATS.”



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