

# A ‘transformational experience’: ATS Women in Leadership concludes second gathering

BY ELIZA SMITH BROWN

*As the Women in Leadership Community of Accompaniment Pilot Program wrapped up its second conference in Toronto March 9–11, with 44 women in attendance, participants were enthusiastic and hungry for more. Using phrases like “game changer” and “huge gift,” they testified to the emergence of something both rare and consequential in theological education: a sustained, relational, and deeply formative space for women’s leadership development. “This was much better than a one-and-done event,” one participant said. “The whole year has been a transformational experience.”*

Again and again, participants returned to three interrelated themes in their evaluations of the event: the power of **community and belonging**, the importance of **mentorship and accompaniment**, and the effectiveness of a **yearlong cohort model that combined virtual and in-person engagement**.

## ***From being included to belonging***

The most frequently named benefit was the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with other women in theological education, including seasoned leaders who are eager to share their wisdom and experience with others. Participants spoke with striking candor about how uncommon such spaces remain. One respondent noted that this was the first opportunity in her “already long life” to be in “intentional relationship with other women in education for the purpose of building each other up.” Another described the experience as helping participants move “from being included in the room, to belonging in the room.”



The Women in Leadership Community of Accompaniment mentors, along with ATS staff, gather for dinner during the program's second conference held March 9–11 in Toronto.

That distinction—between inclusion and belonging—is especially significant in academic and theological contexts, where women, and particularly women in leadership, often continue to navigate isolation, underrepresentation, and institutional ambiguity. Participants’ comments suggest that the initiative offered more than collegiality; it cultivated trust, mutual recognition, and a durable sense of solidarity. More than just a networking opportunity, the pilot program formed a genuine community of peers and companions.

Jeana Visel, dean and adjunct assistant professor at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology, spoke to the fact that the mentoring was a two-way street. “I have been a mentor for younger women leaders in another program, and . . . beyond whatever particular wisdom we have to impart, it is the care and accompaniment that gives the mentee support to go on to do hard things. Through this year, I was blessed to be on the receiving end of this kind of personalized support, and I am so grateful.” Other mentors agreed.

Many participants pointed to the value of accompaniment over time. Attendees were nearly unanimous in affirming the value of a yearlong experience rather than a single conference or workshop. The combination of webinars, small cohorts, and in-person gatherings created

what one respondent called “the perfect blend of the best of online and in-person programming and community.”

This is no small point. Academic communities are increasingly attentive to the limits of episodic programming, particularly when addressing leadership development, equity, and institutional change. Participants’ reflections suggest that the initiative’s design enabled depth, continuity, and trust in ways that short-term formats rarely do. The “bookend” gatherings, in particular, seemed to have provided both momentum and closure, while the cohort structure sustained engagement across the year.

Not surprisingly, many respondents concluded not with closure but with appeal. They urged that the program continue, expand, and become a permanent part of ATS Leadership Development. If the participants’ reflections are any indication, the Women in Leadership Initiative did more than convene a conference. It met a need that is both ongoing and urgent, and it created a model of formation, accompaniment, and community that many believe theological education can no longer afford to treat as optional.

### ***Looking ahead***

The next Women in Leadership gathering is planned for spring 2027 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the initiative. All women who have been connected to the initiative throughout its history will be

invited to participate. Further details will be available later this year.

If you are interested in being part of the next Women in Leadership cohort that will begin in fall 2027, please contact Layne Shaffer, ATS program assistant for culture and community engagement.



Returning program participants greet each other. Attendees affirmed the value of a yearlong experience over a single conference or workshop.



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