

Dear member colleagues in The Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting:

A Statement from the Executive Director

Much has happened since my last update on [May 8, 2020](#). Major protests have emerged all over the United States and in cities across the globe in response to the killing of George Floyd, a black man, by a white police officer in Minneapolis, MN.

I shared the following on social media, and I, now, share a version of those words with you:

George Floyd, a black man, was killed by a white police officer while in custody. He should be alive today. It is an affront to humanity when a life is taken at the hands of another. As people of faith, we believe that all human beings are made in the image of God, and when we kill another human being, we violate the sanctity of that image. George Floyd did not have to die. He should be alive today. I pray for [#JusticeForGeorge](#)

Racism is an evil, one of the great evils of our time. George Floyd's killing is wrapped up in a system that was meant to deny the humanity of people of color. For too long, black and brown bodies have been objects of racist hatred and murder. This long legacy of injustice is at the root of the frustration, anger, and sorrow that is spilling into the streets of, first, Minneapolis, and now to cities across the globe. Because of this long legacy, there is great distrust of the system. Racial oppression is a constitutive part of our broken humanity, and it affects all of us. All. Of. Us. Moreover, it is all too common for there to be no accountability for those who commit the wrongs. This is why there can be no peace without justice. [#NoJusticeNoPeace](#)

Communities and individuals are grieving. People of color are angry, sad, and fatigued with the lack of justice, which has lasted generation upon generation and is pervasive. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." I have been paying attention to posts from colleagues and friends of color on social media. I have been listening, empathizing with their pain, and I have been praying—praying for their well-being, praying for my own, praying for how I can act (which is a form of prayer). The theme of fatigue is strong—fatigue for having to bear yet another killing of a black person at the hands of police, fatigue at the lack of justice, fatigue at having to be "teachers" of anti-racism to their white colleagues, fatigue in fighting a system that doesn't change, fatigue at this latest round of killings during a pandemic that has disproportionately affected communities of color. And yet, the commitment to action remains strong, in hopes that the prophet Amos' words would become reality to "let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24).

*Frank M. Yamada • Executive Director*

As an Asian American theological educator and a Christian who is committed to racial justice I will, from my place, work to dismantle racial oppression. We all have something to do. This burden is not only for people of color to bear. We must figure out how we can all contribute to the systematic dismantling of racism and to the healing of our lands. Yes, we must pray for God to heal our lands; but we must be agents in God's transformation.

For now, in this troubled spring of 2020, I say these names, knowing that there are many more... George Floyd. Breonna Taylor. Ahmaud Arbery. Regis Korchinski-Paquet.

[#saytheirnames](#) [#blacklivesmatter](#)

I share these words with you as the executive director of ATS. These words are my own and do not represent the hundreds of statements that have emerged from ATS schools and religious bodies that schools serve. ATS is a member organization with schools from a diverse set of backgrounds, history, and ecclesial and religious commitments. Moreover, ATS is a bi-national organization, representing schools from the US and Canada. Our countries think of race in very different ways. With these differences comes a variety of responses to the same evil. No single statement can adequately capture the different ways that schools seek to respond to the atrocity of the killing of black people.

In spite of these diverse traditions, some themes emerge in public statements that are available from ATS schools.

- First, there are statements about the horror, outrage, or grief expressed at the unjust killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, and the many more that preceded them; and there is a call for justice. This call is an urgent imperative to address the injustices and violence that Black people have experienced for centuries.
- Second, there is the recognition that George Floyd's death was not simply the result of one bad individual police officer, but it is tied within a system of privileges for whites at the expense of people of color or systemic racism. Therefore, many of the statements include the imperative to address the ways in which systemic racism harms and kills people of color and inflicts violence on communities of color.
- Third, the imperative for justice requires more than words, it necessitates action and commitment to do the hard work of dismantling systemic racism and the oppression of people of color.

Not every statement has these ideas embedded within them, nor do schools' statements necessarily use the wording I chose above. Moreover, there are some theological schools whose response is guided by ecclesial bodies or a religious superior rather than statements from the schools themselves. These themes, however, are strong and consistent. We are living

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in racial crisis. We have been for a long time. We are at a tipping point where the demand for justice must not only be heard but acted upon. I am convinced that we will do this work of healing racial injustices and transforming structures that do violence to people of color together. We will do it differently, but we will do it together.

### Update on the Biennial Meeting

The Biennial Meeting is in less than two weeks. Registration closed earlier in the week. Links to the Biennial Meeting Zoom sessions have gone out today. I also wanted to provide you with an update about how ATS staff have sought to respond to the events of the past couple of weeks.

Mary Young, director of Leadership Education, and I reached out to the African American presidents and deans to see how we as staff could support them. After we had scheduled the Zoom meeting, one day before the meeting, a group of Black presidents and deans wrote an open letter with several calls to action directed to governing officials, local governments, the American Academy of Religion, and The Association of Theological Schools. There was one specific call to action for ATS: "Include on its agenda for its upcoming Biennial Meeting a time for the presidents of ATS schools to discuss what is both the impact and theological work needed to address the consistent killings of Black people." You can read the full text of the letter here: <https://action.groundswell-mvmt.org/petitions/black-presidents-and-deans-committed-to-black-people-and-beloved-community>. Subsequent statements of solidarity have come from the [Latino/a presidents and deans](#) (video) and the Asian descent president and deans (attached) in ATS schools.

Mary Young and I met with the African American presidents and deans for one hour on Thursday, June 4, 2020. The group adopted the open statement as their own. In the meeting, as well, we discussed how to handle the call to action in the open letter. I shared with the group the possibilities given the short amount of time left before the Biennial Meeting. I proposed that we could pull together a "just-in-time" webinar to address the substance of the call to action, namely, the theological work to be done to address the killing of Black people, and the impact of that work on schools. The webinar would be followed with an open forum on the Biennial Meeting schedule in which schools could discuss the implications of the webinar on the work within their schools. The group saw this as a reasonable interpretation of the call with the letter to put this item on the Biennial Meeting agenda. In summary, ATS will be hosting the following:

- *A topical webinar* will address the theological work needed to address the killing of Black people will be hosted next week. We have gathered a panel with prominent Black theologians. There will be responses from allies in the church and academy. Information



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about the [Black Lives Matter: Where Do We Go from Here?](#) webinar is located at the ATS website. It is scheduled for **Wednesday, June 17 from 3:00–4:30 PM EDT**.

- An open forum is now on the schedule of the [Biennial Meeting](#) events, on Tuesday, **June 23, 2020 from 11:00 AM–12:30 PM EDT**. Content from the webinar will be used as a starting place for discussion to focus on the kinds of work that schools, who are seeking to address systemic racism, might take on to better equip leaders in communities of faith to do the work of racial justice from their own faith traditions. Time will be reserved in this open forum, as well, to suggest ways that ATS can create programming, initiatives, and research to resource schools that are committed to dismantling systemic racism. Invitations to register for this “just-in-time” open forum will be sent out this week.

These are just first steps in a much longer march for ATS schools that seek to dismantle systemic racism.

## Update on ATS Fall Events

Finally, we have made a decision to not host on-site programs for fall 2020. Some of these programs will be designed for online engagement. This decision was made in the interest of safety for participants and the ATS staff, given the uncertainty of fall travel and accommodations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Events include:

- Fall 2020 Commission on Accrediting Self-Study Workshop
- 2020 Roundtable Seminar for New Faculty
- 2020 Student Personnel Administrators’ Conference
- Women in Leadership Mentoring Program Launching Conference
- Cultivating Educational Capacity Dissemination Conference

ATS staff will be in contact with the various groups in order to share plans for the fall for the specific meetings that staff oversee.

Sincerely,  
Frank M. Yamada