Nearly 20 African American presidents and deans (AAPDs) from ATS member schools convened at Howard University School of Divinity (HUSD) for their annual meeting on February 10–11—a timely event for Black History Month. The leaders represent both historically black and predominantly white theological schools, and they are part of a larger group of 36 African American presidents and deans currently serving ATS schools. The group was joined by Frank M. Yamada, executive director at ATS and Mary H. Young, director of leadership education at ATS. Yolanda Pierce, dean of HUSD, and her staff hosted the group, which focused on the theme of Mentoring Gen-Next: Cultivating Executive Leadership for 2030.

History
Including dinner gatherings of African American presidents at the 1998, 2000, and 2002 ATS Biennial Meetings, this year marks 22 years for the gatherings of these leaders. Beginning in 2002, the then small group of only presidents felt it was important that they meet more frequently to discuss areas of common interest and concern. Consequently, ATS included an annual meeting of African American presidents in its leadership education programming budget. Because three of the CEOs led university divinity schools and had the title of "dean" rather than "president," the meeting's name was changed to the African American Presidents and Deans' Meeting in 2009. The group has convened its annual gathering of both presidents and deans at an institution served by one of its leaders since then.

Highlights of the gathering
Co-convened by Michael Joseph Brown, president of Payne Theological Seminary, and Deborah Flemister Mullen, professor emerita of Columbia Theological Seminary, the group committed to a time of both honoring legacy and planning for the future. The co-conveners stated "the theme suggests the urgency of our roles to cultivate African American leaders who are not only prepared to navigate the changing landscape of theological education, but to also make an impact on shaping theological education for a sustainable future." This year, participants prioritized conversations around professional development, faculty formation, self-care, and thriving in their work. In addition to plenaries, workshops, a lunch dialogue with The Conversation, and a peer-led panel discussion, the group had a significant conversation regarding the second draft of the new ATS standards.

Those in attendance also formally adopted a mission statement that had garnered planning time and attention.
during the last two annual gatherings. To provide context for the group’s mission statement, Mullen shared an open letter to presidents and deans of theological schools in the United States composed in 2015 by African American presidents and deans at its annual meeting at Shaw University Divinity School in Raleigh, North Carolina. At that meeting, African American presidents and deans of theological schools in the United States issued a call for action in light of the current state of social justice in the United States. Mullen referred to this as a Sankofa (i.e., expressing the importance of reaching back to knowledge gained in the past and bringing it into the present in order to make positive progress) moment, considering the current political climate in our country and the leadership tasks that are before the group. She spoke about the group’s need to live into its mission statement—having African American students and faculty as their foci, whether they serve at an historically black theological school or a predominately white institution. The group formally adopted this mission statement:

We are theological educators and scholar activists of African descent committed to the liberation of people, cultures, ideas, and theological institutions in the United States and across the diaspora.

Our objectives are . . . (What we do)

- Be a community of peer support and accountability;
- Be unapologetic advocates and activists in ATS on behalf of HBTI concerns, educators, and peoples of African descent; and
- Be mentors of the next generation of theological executives and scholars.

Leadership and change

Pierce set the tone for the gathering on the first day by offering a reflection upon the life and work of Pauli Murray, a personal role model and inspirational female leader who was an American civil rights advocate, lawyer, women’s rights activist, and author. Murray was the first African American woman to be ordained as an Episcopal priest and was eventually elevated to be an Episcopal Saint. Pierce provided the perfect context for the ensuing conversation by Yamada, who spoke about the landscape of African American leadership in ATS schools.

Referring to “change” as the new normal for leadership in theological education, Yamada mentioned that we lead in the midst of changing demographic trends, changing indications of diminishing hope, and changing needs to innovate. After sharing some data points related to racial/ethnic faculty, administrative leaders, and students, he mentioned that these data should be seen in the larger view of change and innovation, and he spoke of the need for innovative practices that would allow schools to reach new markets and determine new economic models. He identified the following opportunities for African American leaders amid this “season of change in theological education”:

- Working collaboratively to increase the faculty base for African American and for faculty of color
- Intentionally developing leaders for CEO and CAO roles
- Helping faculty to think more institutionally than guild-based on how to lead in a time of change

Angela Sims and Stephen Ray share a meal together during the meeting.
Mary H. Young is Director of Leadership Education at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.