

ATS African American leaders gather for annual meeting

BY MARY H. YOUNG

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 predominately 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.

- Focusing on connection with the church and the Global South
- Welcoming leadership opportunities at institutions where there are large concentrations of racial/ethnic students

Financial forecasting, economic modeling, and strategic planning

Kenneth Harris, president and dean of Ecumenical Theological Seminary, Micah McCreary, president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and LaKeesha Walrond, president of New York Theological Seminary, shared challenges, strategies, and good practices about how their institutions are currently navigating matters related to mission and money. The three engaged attendees in a panel discussion, reflecting on and responding to content prepared by Chris Meinzer—senior director of administration and COO at ATS who was unable to attend. Harris spoke of “sustainability, education, and engagement as the three pillars” guiding mission at Ecumenical. Both McCreary and Walrond affirmed the need to connect programs with a strategic plan that can move the institution along in terms of mission and money.

Redeveloped ATS Standards

On the last day of the gathering, Yamada and Vergel Lattimore, president of Hood Theological Seminary, led a

generative conversation about both the redevelopment process in general and the content of the current second draft of the *ATS Standards*. They identified the process by which feedback could be provided, indicated the location on the ATS website to review documents, shared prevalent questions and concerns that have arisen from the membership, and provided numbers for the array of responses/involvement of the ATS membership in the redevelopment process. Yamada and Lattimore answered questions regarding managing site visits, training of visitors, and providing assessment documents for the self-study. Particular appreciation for the transparency of the process was offered by Pierce and affirmed by others.

Opportunities for broader leadership

During the business session on the final day, Yamada shared ideas outlining eight ways members of this group could be involved in the work and initiatives of ATS. They included (1) participating in leadership education advisory committees, (2) continuing involvement in ATS initiatives, (3) serving on boards, (4) contributing to ATS research, (5) providing feedback through surveys and focus groups, (6) contributing wisdom at biennial business and programmatic meetings, (7) engaging peers through Engage ATS, and (8) inviting ATS staff for consulting needs.



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