

African American presidents and deans gather for 16th annual meeting

By ELIZA SMITH BROWN

Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville welcomed a gathering of 20 of the 41 African American presidents and deans of ATS member schools (AAPD) last month. The meeting was hosted by Emilie M. Townes, dean of Vanderbilt Divinity, and convened by Deborah Flemister Mullen, recently retired from Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. At this 16th annual gathering of the group, conversation focused around the theme of Transitional Strategies: Ensuring a Legacy for the Next Generation of Theological Executives.



Participants were treated to a presentation and guided tour of the historic Fisk University Galleries during their meeting.

According to Deborah Mullen in her welcome to the AAPD group, "The proverbial 'table' where critical decisions are being made about the future of theological education at ATS schools is being reset, and there are many new faces in place who are ready to discuss whether 'what's being served up' is feeding all students equitably and inclusively."

Specific presentation topics ranged from debt levels among African American students to the composition of the theological industry's executive pipeline. Other conversations addressed issues such as negotiating university structure as an embedded school executive, school mergers, preserving endowments, developing contextually relevant curriculum for the 21st century, mentoring the next generation of scholars and executives, and recruiting, onboarding, and engaging trustees.

In examination of the group's strategic plan moving forward, Stephen Lewis, president of the Forum for

Theological Exploration, facilitated robust conversations over the two-day period about future needs of the group, exploring leadership resources, and leaving a legacy to the next generation of leaders.

Four of the 41 presidents and deans assumed their posts at the beginning of the 2017–2018 academic year and found the gathering to be particularly enlightening.

"It was encouraging and inspiring to dialogue with and glean wisdom from colleagues who are leading some of the country's leading theological institutions," said Johnny Hill, the new dean of Shaw University Divinity School in Raleigh, North Carolina. "I was very humbled by the wealth of expertise, insight, and visionary leadership that was present during the gathering."

"The input of the AAPD participants is particularly timely," said Mary Young, ATS director of leadership education. "As the ATS Commission on Accrediting

approaches a proposed redevelopment of the standards of accreditation, these leaders represent one of the fastest growing demographic constituencies in theological education, and their input needs to be heard.”

The roots of the AAPD gathering date back to 1998, when ATS included a dinner for African American presidents at its Biennial Meeting, convened by M. William Howard Jr. of New York Theological Seminary. As it grew in number, the group met again at the next two Biennial Meetings. By 2002, the 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 budget.

The first annual meeting of the newly constituted group—African American Presidents of ATS Member

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Schools—was held January 21–22, 2003, at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, Georgia. Those in attendance discussed questions of identity and collaboration that continue to have relevance today: How does a predominantly white institution partner with an historically black institution without “taking over”? Are

there ways that historically black institutions can partner with one another?

In 2004, new ITC president Michael A. Battle hosted the second meeting. Beginning in 2005, a different African American president hosted each annual meeting.

Although the meeting locations changed, Edward L. Wheeler, the first African American president/dean of an ATS school, served as convener for the 2003 through 2011 meetings. At the time, he was president of Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana; he now heads ITC.



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