

ATS executive director reflects on first year

By FRANK M. YAMADA

One would expect that working as staff for The Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting (ATS/COA) entails living out of a suitcase, spending a lot of late nights and early mornings in local hotels or seminary guest housing, and eating more airport meals than a doctor would recommend for any human being. Now that I have completed my first year as executive director of ATS/COA, I wanted to share some reflections, things I have learned as I visited schools and leaders within those schools. During my “road trip,” as we called it in the office, which covered about 38,000 miles, more than 30 cities, 18 states, and 20 airports, I shared the emerging vision of ATS and recent trends within theological education. It was also a listening tour, where I could hear first-hand experiences of the significant changes facing the majority of the schools.

Travel is a big part of my job description, as it is for many of the ATS director staff, including those who serve as accrediting liaisons to the now 279 member schools. My appreciation for those who have committed their professional lives to this work has deepened when I see the professionalism and excellence they demonstrate every day under a demanding schedule. There are also just as many staff members in Pittsburgh who commit themselves to those same standards of excellence in order to provide support

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for important initiatives, to do quality research, to communicate regularly to the membership, and to provide data analysis in support of theological education. One of the most significant things I have taken away from my first year is the power of collective wisdom—the wisdom of a staff who are able to see the schools from a unique perspective, which comes from working regularly with a broad representation of the membership.

On the theme of the wisdom that staff bring to the Association’s work, I am very pleased to announce that Debbie Creamer, who has recently completed five years with ATS/COA, is, as of July 1, 2018, senior director of accreditation. Debbie brings a wealth of administrative experience to this role, having served as an academic dean at Iliff School of Theology before coming to ATS. Lester Ruiz will take on the role of



director of accreditation and global engagement. Lester has been a leader in global theological education for several years, and we are excited that he will be focusing his expertise on this important and emerging area of the Association's work. You can read more about these two appointments in our [recent press release](#).

Collective wisdom also exists among the schools. In my first year, I was able to engage personnel from 86% of the membership. There is power in the notion that we are better together than we are on our own. I was able to witness this wisdom in practice while observing and participating in the gatherings of the Association through initiatives like the [Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education](#) and [Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers](#) projects or the leadership education events, where administrators and faculty share best practices and experiences from their work in the trenches. Our schools are learning deeply about how to adapt their historical missions within this current environment of change, both in communities of faith and in higher education. Perhaps one of the most surprising things about this year of engagement was the consistent message of hope that I heard from schools. We are certainly a membership that is aware of the significant challenges that are in front of us. However, in the face of those challenges there is a holy and realistic optimism that is grounded in the fact that theological education has always figured out ways to change and stay relevant in the middle of periods of both thriving and crisis.

The mission of ATS is "to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public." In my visits, I saw this mission in action. The emphasis on quality and improvement is at the core of what we do best as an association. It is what holds us together. At the spring meeting of the Board of Commissioners, it was inspiring to hear testimonies from outgoing commissioners as they shared how much they had learned about accreditation and assessment while building bonds of community with colleagues who are very different from them. It is one of the few places in this world where one can see different ecclesial families—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical

Protestant, and mainline Protestant—from two different countries working together on a common endeavor, focusing on one thing—the improvement and enhancement of theological schools.

This singular commitment among a diverse community is what we do best. It is the legacy that we have inherited and that we live out every year at our individual schools and collectively as the Association. This is the first part of the vision. The second aspect is innovation. A dominant theme that we hear repeatedly from administrators and faculty is that each school is changing in rapid and profound ways. In order to support schools as they seek to adapt to these shifting realities, ATS will seek to foster and support innovation among the member schools. This bifocal vision—a sightline with two complimentary and necessary foci—helps us to see our collective future. One without the other will leave us dizzy and out of balance. Legacy without change quickly becomes irrelevant. Innovation for innovation's sake creates harmful and not generative disruption. We need both.

At most of the gatherings I attended, I shared recent trends in theological education. I will cover the trends in more depth in future posts on the Association's [blog](#). In summary, institutions are changing (from freestanding to embedded), the educational models and practices are shifting, and the student bodies of theological schools are increasingly diverse, regionally local, and part-time. There are certainly schools that continue to deliver theological education in what was the dominant form for most of the twentieth century—to a denominationally specific student body, the majority being three-year, MDiv, residential students. Increasingly, however, schools are serving increasingly diverse student populations through a variety of degrees and modes of delivery.

Legacy and Innovation was the theme of the 2018 Biennial Meeting in Denver. This meeting was also a centennial celebration, as ATS looked back on 100 years of excellence in theological education. Interwoven throughout the meeting, one could witness the dynamic tension between legacy and innovation. In the Innovation Expo, schools that participated in the Educational Models and

Practices projects shared what they have learned through the changes that they have implemented. The creativity on display was impressive. The membership also made important decisions. Two highlights were that the institutional delegates received into membership one of the most diverse slates of associate member schools in recent memory; and they voted unanimously to begin the process of redeveloping the Standards of Accreditation. The business meeting ended appropriately with testimonies from recent graduates of the difference that theological education, in its various forms, made in their lives and ministries. The festivities concluded with the awarding of the distinguished service award to three leaders in theological education—Anne Anderson, John Kinney, and Richard Mouw—who represent the three historical ecclesial families: Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical Protestant.

So what is in store for year two? The listening tour continues. We are at a strategic moment as an Association. This year begins the listening phase for the redevelopment of the Standards. ATS staff will be hosting several listening sessions in order to hear what is needed from the Standards for schools to continue to improve in

this environment of change in theological education. The Board of Directors will also be identifying strategic priorities for the Association, as ATS seeks to live into its mission in its second century. What research, support, initiatives, and data are needed for schools to not only survive but also thrive in the upcoming years? These are the things that we hope to learn as we once again engage schools and their leaders in the upcoming academic year.

This month, the road trip begins again. I leave for Puerto Rico next week to visit two ATS schools in order to witness firsthand the difficult road to recovery for the island one year after Hurricane Maria. Seeing schools like Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico and Inter-American Adventist Theological Seminary continue to provide theological education—even as the seminaries offer support for those who are still recovering from the devastating effects of last year’s hurricanes—helps put into perspective the importance and meaning of our work. In this context, improvement and enhancement is directly related to the well-being of communities that are seeking to overcome the challenges they face daily. May God be with us as we seek to live out faithfully the missions of our schools into this second century for ATS.



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