

ATS participates in national summit on economics of ministry

By ELIZA SMITH BROWN

The Center for Congregations, in partnership with In Trust and ATS, hosted Gathering First Fruits: National Summit on the Economics of Ministry, January 16 through 18 in Indianapolis. Programming at the event focused on projects and practices that offer the potential to reshape a system that currently challenges the flourishing of Christian congregations and ministers.

The gathering drew some 700 participants—theological educators, denominational and judicatory leaders, pastors, financial experts, and others interested in the health of religion and religious practice in the public sphere. Programming showcased the work of 110 projects funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and designed to transform how current and future clergy are trained, compensated, and supported throughout their careers.

In his opening remarks to the conference, Lilly Endowment's vice president for religion, Chris Coble, pointed out that those in the room collectively touch two-thirds of the 300,000 Christian congregations in the United States. He noted that the educational system that supports pastors has shifted under our feet and the prevailing culture has come to be characterized by economic challenges that range from educational debt and financial illiteracy to inadequate clergy compensation and retirement planning. Through these initiatives, Coble explained, "leaders have been empowered to solve these problems collectively to reshape the economies that



support clergy and congregations. The problems are too large for any of us alone."

Indeed, Lilly Endowment has a big vision for this work. According to John Wimmer, program director of the Endowment's Religion Division, "Nothing less than a movement is needed to tackle these systemic issues."

Coble and Wimmer expanded on the notion of a movement in their introduction to the conference program book: "If we take full advantage of the opportunities this gathering offers, we will move much closer toward creating a national movement that brings together the best thinking and resources of an interconnected network of leaders and organizations . . . and it will

create and foster church-wide cultures where pastoral economic sufficiency will be realized through the abundance of God's own unfailing generosity."

Certainly the Summit supplied sufficient resources to fuel a movement. During the course of two and a half very full days, in plenaries and more than 40 workshops, presenters shared their visions and wisdom around the potential to reshape the economic and financial realities surrounding the education and compensation of clergy.

ATS schools were well represented in the leadership of the event, serving on the steering committee and presenting almost half of the workshops. Plenary panels included John Kinney and Molly Marshall sharing about

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—John Wimmer, Lilly Endowment Inc.

the value of this work; Jim Hudnut-Beumler, Mark Markuly, and Angela Reed thinking theologically about the economics of ministry; and Mark Labberton, Emilie

Townes, and Frank Yamada setting the stage for next steps in this important work.

In addition, the event highlighted best practices and tools that are making a difference. The conference organizers produced an Annotated Directory of Grant Projects summarizing the 110 funded projects in three areas:

- 67 as part of the Theological School Initiative to Address Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers (ECFFM), coordinated by The Association of Theological Schools;
- 37 as part of the National Initiative to Address Economic Challenges Facing Pastoral Leaders (ECFPL), coordinated by The Center for Congregations; and
- 6 as part of the Initiative to Build Capacity in Historically Black Theological Schools, coordinated by the In Trust Center for Theological Schools.

The theological school initiative is now in its seventh year, working with 67 participating schools and sharing the fruits of their labors with the rest of the Association

membership. Together they have generated valuable research results, tools for teaching financial literacy, and models of mentoring students and forging partnerships designed to make seminary education both more affordable and more effective. The findings, practical tools, and other resources are available on the new Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers web-pages. Included among the resources is a summary of facts surrounding educational debt and the impact of this project.

For the Summit, ATS also produced a handout created specifically for denominational and judicatory leaders and pastors: 5 Things Religious Leaders Should Know.

Central to the culture of change that the ECFFM initiative is designed to foster is what Jo Ann Deasy, ATS director of institutional initiatives and student research, calls “the virtuous cycle.” She maintains that “by training seminarians to be wise financial leaders, developing their skills in business, entrepreneurship, and fundraising, theological schools are creating

a virtuous cycle—where financially equipped students create financially stronger congregations who are then able to financially support future ministers.”¹

1 Jo Ann Deasy, “Virtuous Cycles: Supporting Future Ministers,” in *Seeds of Hope: Pre-Summit Readings for the National Summit on the Economics of Ministry*, January 16–18, 2019. First published in *Yale University Reflections, God and Money: Turning the Tables* (2017).

The Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers (ECFFM)

5 Things Religious Leaders Should Know

- 1 Educational debt keeps mounting.** 43% of students bring undergraduate debt with them (an average of \$32,600), and 49% borrow more to fund their graduate theological education (an average of \$35,700).
- 2 It's difficult to shake the burden of debt.** While 59% of students graduate with a debt burden averaging \$44,500, the average salary they can expect in their first five years is just \$47,500.
- 3 The consequences of debt follow students well into their careers.** In the first five years after graduation, for instance, 38% of alums take an extra job, 19% postpone healthcare, and 50% have little to no retirement savings.
- 4 The ECFFM initiative is having a positive impact.** During the first three years alone, 77% of participating schools saw a decrease in the number of borrowers or the amount of educational debt.
- 5 Schools that partner with denominations are more apt to succeed in lowering debt.** 45% of the ECFFM schools that have partnered with denominations have seen average debt incurred decrease by \$2,500 or more in the first three years.

Visit the ECFFM pages on the ats website, www.ats.edu, or email Jo Ann Deasy at deasy@ats.edu to learn more.

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The Commission on Accrediting



Eliza Smith Brown is Director of Communications and External Relations at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.