

# ATS presidents gather to share wisdom and resources

By LISA KERN

Nearly 60 presidents traveled to Newport Beach, California, earlier this month to attend the annual Seminar for New Presidents in ATS Institutions and the Presidential Leadership Intensive Conference.



ATS CFO Chris Meinzer talks to presidents about financial challenges in a time of institutional and educational change.

The gathering for new presidents dates back to 1991, when the Advisory Committee on Theological Education Management—ACTEM, formed in 1980—sponsored a three-day consultation for new chief executive officers.

“One of the main goals of the seminar is to share with new presidents the Leadership that Works study of theological schools and presidents,” said Stephen Graham, ATS senior director of programs and services. The five essential functions of presidential leadership included in the study are team building, faculty relations, financial management, institutional advancement, and vision for the institution.

Three seasoned ATS presidents—J. Dorcas Gordon from the Toronto School of Theology, Julius Mendenblik from Calvin Theological Seminary, and Javier Viera from Drew University Theological Schools—offered unique perspectives in their joint presentations on some of those functions, including developing a vision for a school and sustaining it, building an effective administrative team, and relating to faculty.

Chris Meinzer, senior director of administration and CFO for ATS, presented a talk on “the new CEO” and financial realities in theological schools.

“... discussions of demographics and degree trends provided solid data for developments that I had known about but not fully clarified,” said one attendee.

“Chris Meinzer’s session helped me wrap my head around the SIR (Strategic Information Report),” said another.

Laura Mendenhall, president emerita of Columbia Theological Seminary, spoke about the president’s role regarding institutional advancement and development. She shared the importance of the president working closely with the development department to create effective “friend-raising” as well as fundraising.

“[I gained] a better understanding of fundraising and how to go about it authentically,” shared one participant after the event.

Gordon, Mendenblik, and Viera moderated table conversations with the group regarding two case studies of presidents’ work with faculty. New presidents were then invited to join attendees of the Intensive for a reception and dinner.

The very first version of what is now known as the *Presidential Leadership Intensive Conference* began as the

formation of the Warren Deem Institute for Theological Education Management proposed to ATS and Lilly Endowment Inc. by ACTEM in 1980. Deem was a Presbyterian layman and businessman who served as a public member of the ATS Executive Committee—now the ATS Board of Directors. The Institute that started as a three-week residential program resulting in a certificate of completion was offered from 1981 through 1992, and eventually evolved into a week-long retreat style event held in Santa Fe each December.

Today's Intensive now lasts for three days and includes workshops, keynote speakers, and ample time for peer interaction and networking. ATS Executive Director Frank Yamada opened this year's event with his talk on defining moments in theological education.

"The Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting recognize that we are at a defining moment," said Yamada, "and because of this, both the Association and the Commission are responding in two critical areas of strategic work—two strategic moments—strategic prioritization and the redevelopment of the ATS Standards of Accreditation."

Yamada, Graham, and redevelopment task force members gave an update regarding the redevelopment process. Seeking input from the presidents, they posed some questions for the group to discuss with one another such as "How have the current Standards (or Procedures)

helped your school in better achieving its mission?" and "What are some things in the current Standards (or Procedures) that you hope will change?"

Carol Taylor, president of Evangel University, and Corey D. B. Walker, vice president and dean of Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology of Virginia Union University, were invited to be this year's keynote speakers. Taylor shared 12 reflections on leadership in challenging times for presidents to note. Some of those included facing reality, embracing change, finding your inspiration, and keeping perspective. Walker spoke about the decolonization of seminary leadership, focusing on "the politics of piety and profession."

When participants were asked how attending this event might influence their work at their own schools, one president said "Encouragement that there are multiple resources at hand and some yet to be uncovered to address challenges in my situation . . . returning with a personal sense of renewal and energy."

"It has encouraged me to further engage in ATS beyond simply the role that brings me to the event," offered another.

Visit the chief executive officers' page on the ATS website for upcoming presidents' events and to view some of the presentations delivered at this year's Intensive.



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