

Deans gather in Newport Beach to explore *New Practices for Changing Times*

BY MARY H. YOUNG

Academic officers serving ATS member schools gathered earlier this month in Newport Beach, California, to connect with professional colleagues and to receive tools, information, wisdom, and insights to make their work more fruitful and fulfilling.



Deans participate in roundtable talks within affinity groups to discuss personnel and program issues being addressed by the task force leading the redevelopment of the ATS accrediting standards and procedures.

Opening plenary speaker Leah Gunning Francis, vice president of academic affairs and dean of the faculty at Christian Theological Seminary, challenged the 33 participants to take “one step beyond caution” at the Women in Leadership (WIL) deans’ consultation on the morning of April 9.

“Academic deans are often adept at carefully assessing and documenting the meaningful steps we take toward institutional change,” said Gunning Francis. “However, when the political, social, and economic winds of change swirl around us, we may find ourselves less certain and overly cautious about what feels like an adequate response.”

She engaged the women to locate their work through their institutional mission statements and to reflect on what has been learned or can be learned from events that inspire action in theological education. She also spoke of movements for justice, like Ferguson, that should inspire theological educators to be a “radical presence,” igniting change in ways that suggest

we “are the right people, in the right place at the right time.”

Gabriella Lettini, dean of the faculty and chief academic officer at Starr King School for the Ministry, led a workshop titled *Embodying Community-Sustaining, Counter-Oppressive Theologies: Academic Leadership in Times of Resistance and Transformation*. Valerie Rempel, dean of the seminary and interim vice president of Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary, led a second workshop titled *Learning to Navigate the “Thick Darkness.”*

When asked what they found most valuable about the gathering, one woman shared that “the presentations really helped me to clarify some aspects of my own leadership in my context.”

Plenary sessions and networking opportunities enabled a “communities of practice” learning environment where 83 attendees shared expertise and best practices, learned from other colleagues, and sharpened their leadership capacities for the vocation of academic



Leah Gunning Francis delivers the opening plenary at the Women in Leadership Deans' Consultation.

dean at the annual chief academic officers' conference, which began later that day. The gathering started with a new deans' lunch, fervorino, and conversation. Designed as a time of fellowship, the fervorino provides an opportunity for collegial and vocational onboarding of persons new in their role as deans.

ATS Executive Director Frank Yamada opened the conference, identifying the theme for his conversation as *This Strategic Moment in Theological Education*. He spoke of it as a moment of both challenge and opportunity in the current environment of change within theological education and spoke specifically about what ATS and the Commission on Accrediting are doing strategically to address this moment in order to equip the schools to lean into these changes faithfully. Among his list of "big picture" trends and current realities in theological education were: changing organizational/financial models, changes in academic program delivery and audiences, serving the twenty-first-century student, the changing nature of faculty work, student formation, and the ATS redevelopment of the Standards. Yamada set the context for the rich conversations that would ensue among the deans through their engagements in workshops and other plenary presentations.

Joretta L. Marshall, executive vice president and academic dean, and professor of pastoral theology, care, and counseling at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University, led a second plenary session titled *Teaching Matters: One Dean's Dilemma*. In creative and engaging ways, Marshall challenged participants to reflect upon their own passions for teaching, their roles in stewarding the teaching/learning vocations at their institutions, and what it means to nurture the teaching life of faculty

members who come with varying levels of interest and expertise in pedagogy and the art of teaching and learning.

Workshop sessions covered a wide range of topics, including examining formation in a postmodern seminary, leading innovation, building ecumenical and ethnic diversity, and transitioning to competency-based theological education. One participant said the workshops provided "discovery of technical or concrete practices to assist with the demands of the CAO role."

Anthony Lilles, academic dean at St. John's Seminary, moderated a final conversation titled *Christianity and Global Theological Education*.

In the same way that other ATS administrator groups have provided feedback for the redevelopment of the Standards, this event included a focus group session with invited deans. In addition to the focus group itself, significant and generous conversations were also held in small groups as a part of the conference design. Participants in roundtable affinity groups had sessions on both days of the conference to engage members of the Task Force for the Redevelopment of the Standards. The first day consisted of discussions about institutional structure, governance, planning and evaluation/assessment, and procedures. The second day was dedicated to conversations about diversity, degree programs, faculty, and formation.

"This year, the presentations and discussion around the revision of the Standards was particularly important. I'm glad they received a lot of attention," said one attendee.



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