

# Fall ATS Women in Leadership event reaches more participants with virtual offering

By MARY H. YOUNG

Navigating Seasons of Change: A Women in Leadership Fall Gathering was the theme that drew more than 100 ATS women leaders together this month for a series of webinars and virtual mini workshops. ATS Women in Leadership (WIL) programming for the fall normally includes a small group of 35 to 40 women advancing or emerging in their professional careers, but this year's virtual design made it possible to invite all women who work at ATS member schools.






The gathering included a broad array of women from across the ATS membership—senior academic leaders, student services personnel, faculty members, librarians, and others—to participate in discussions, address leadership concerns through Q&A, and learn from shared experiences of leadership. Interactive webinars and virtual workshops sessions over a two-day period provided opportunities for women to engage the facilitators around topics related to demonstrating visionary and adaptive leadership, ensuring community building amid social distancing,

caring for students in the midst of COVID-19 realities, and pivoting to virtual teaching and learning.

Deborah H. C. Gin, ATS director of research and faculty development, led an interactive webinar session titled "Considering the Landscape: Women in Leadership in Theological Education" in which she shared information and data from recent ATS WIL research. Gin's presentation identified key findings from the research including (1) making sure women have advocates—both female, but particularly male, (2) making sure women have ample opportunities to lead, (3) helping organizations and individuals understand how sexism (and racism) operates, and (4) finding ways for women to develop critical leadership skills in selected areas

"I acted on strategic opportunities to get to where I am now, but I was also shaped by mentors and advocates who awakened me to the 'isms' in higher education and theological education," said Gin, reflecting on her journey in theological leadership. "Those were the people who helped to change the system for me and for others coming after me."

## Fall WIL Event Participation

- Opening Plenary  
106 attendees 
- Panel Discussion  
120 attendees 
- Workshops  
102 attendees 

In closing, she assured the participants that getting to the change they want to see in theological education matters—personally, because we are “practicing faithfulness” and “answering a divine call” and structurally, because “the system needs us” and “women coming behind us, need us.”

The next day began with four seasoned organizational and institutional leaders representing partnering groups and organizations in the ecology of shared work around theological education: Amy L. Kardash, president, In Trust Center for Theological Schools; Daisy L. Machado, professor of American religious history, Union Theological Seminary and director, Hispanic Summer Program; Mai-Anh Le Tran, vice president for academic affairs and academic dean, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and past steering committee chair, Association of Asian/North American Theological Educators, and Nancy Lynne Westfield, director, Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion.

Their session—“Visionary Leadership amid Seasons of Change”—spoke not only to the nature of leadership amid the twin pandemics of COVID and racial unrest, but to the historical and ongoing realities for women leaders. They spoke transparently about leading with hope and optimism in the midst of personal, structural, and institutional challenges. The conversation included reflections on the following questions about visionary leadership and seasons of change:

- From your view as an organizational leader, what is the greatest challenge facing women leaders in theological education today?
- How has your passion shaped your leadership?
- What guidance would you offer women leaders in theological education?
- How has COVID-19 affected your organization and in what ways has it changed your leadership?

Wisdom shared from the panel included:

- Remember that “No” is a complete sentence.
- Grow into the work you love and feel called to do.
- Learn to practice Jubilee.
- Value and seek out networking partners.
- Attend to your mental health.
- Find spaces of renewal and rejuvenation for exploring your passions.
- Change who is in the decision-making space.
- Seek ways to “re-design” theological education.
- Remember the wisdom of your supporting community—“the old sisters.”



Mai-Anh Le Tran, vice president for academic affairs and academic dean at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, responds to a question during the panel discussion.

The afternoon followed with a series of mini workshop sessions that provided a variety of “just-in-time” content help for leaders who are navigating the realities of COVID-19. Members of the WIL Advisory Committee served as moderators for the Q&A sessions following each 30-minute workshop presentation, providing an

opportunity for a bit of deep diving with particular concepts or perspectives articulated by workshop leaders.

Workshop Session I links to the recording of the following two workshops: “Demonstrating Adaptive Leadership during Uncertain Times” led by Pamela Lightsey, vice president for academic and student affairs and associate professor of constructive theology at Meadville Lombard Theological School and “Managing COVID-19 Realities in Student Personnel Administration” led by Claretta McDaniel, assistant dean for student affairs at Howard University School of Divinity.

Workshop Session II links to the recording of the following two workshops: “Discerning Strategies for

Community Building in A Season of Social Distancing" led by Laura Rodgers Levens, assistant professor of Christian mission at Baptist Seminary of Kentucky and "Revisiting Course Design and Delivery: Virtual Teaching and Learning" led by Mary E. Hess, professor of educational leadership at Luther Seminary.

Some attendees suggested the following on their event evaluations for future leadership development training needs:

- More success stories about leadership paths taken
- Creating a women of color space
- Focus on skill-building for leadership
  - o negotiating salaries
  - o publishing
  - o strategic planning
  - o decision-making
- Collaborations between women faculty and administrators
- Navigating male-dominated spaces

- Credentialing for leadership positions
- Work vs. title/pay

Evaluation responses also suggested that the webinars and workshop sessions were beneficial for them personally and professionally. Citing the personal benefits of not feeling alone in their journeys, feeling empowered and affirmed, and wanting to share this learning with other women at their institutions gave women a renewed sense of agency in their work. Event participants noted an increased awareness of how “isms” and “microaggressions” manifest themselves in the workplace and felt they had been provided with knowledge that equips them to better understand and navigate such dynamics. Particular leadership strategies and scenarios expounded upon by workshop leaders provided a window of understanding and suggested practices for women facing similar decision-making challenges.

Attendees were encouraged to continue conversations about their learnings from this event in the WIL community on [Engage ATS](#). Registered Engage ATS users who weren't able to attend can access the event recordings located in the library of that community.



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