

Luce Fellows in Theology Program ends on a high note

By LISA KERN

Established in 1993, the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology Program of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) was a sabbatical program that supported the research of full-time faculty at accredited and candidate member institutions of ATS. With the 2017–18 class of Fellows and the 2018 conference held November 2–3, in Pittsburgh, the program came to a conclusion—naming a total of 160 faculty members from 55 different ATS schools as Luce Fellows since the first grants were awarded in 1994.

The program was designed to “foster excellence in theological scholarship, and to strengthen the links among theological research, churches, and wider publics” according to the Henry Luce Foundation’s website. As many as six Fellows were selected in specific categories of research each year. The grants afforded Fellows the opportunity to devote a 12-month leave to researching and writing, and the opportunity to present their conclusions and engage in discussion about their findings at the annual conference in Pittsburgh. Guidelines for the selection committees were to seek projects that (1) offered significant and innovative contributions to theological studies, meeting high scholarly standards, (2) enhanced the theological understanding of people of faith and enrich the experience of church life in North America, and (3) developed ways for scholarship to inform contemporary culture.



“The selection committees consist of representatives from a variety of member schools, including many former Luce Fellows. They choose projects that help shape the agenda for theological scholarship to ultimately have an impact on the larger field,” said Stephen Graham, ATS senior director of programs and services, who served as director of the program.

The first day of the conference included sessions for Fellows to share their work and engage in facilitated conversations about their research, an open conversation led by Graham about ATS and theological scholarship, and a reception and dinner where staff from the Henry Luce Foundation—President Michael F. Gilligan, Chair Margaret Boles Fitzgerald, and Program Director for Theology

Jonathan VanAntwerpen—greeted attendees, spoke about the foundation, and offered their thanks for the work of the scholars.



(l-r) Margaret Boles Fitzgerald, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Cheryl Bridges Johns (selection committee chair), and Michael Gilligan pose for a picture.



Current Luce Fellow Emmanuel Katongole prays over Stephen Graham, Frank Yamada, and Leah Wright during the blessing ceremony.

“ . . . the prayers, the meditations, and the exchanges have been so aligned with the spirit of the Luce Foundation Theology Program, which has steadfast roots but also limbs shooting out from the trunk that bear witness to our shifting times and human/community needs,” said Fitzgerald about her participation in the conferences over the years.

One distinctive of the annual Luce conference was the use of a chaplain to lead those present in morning prayer each day and to lead a blessing ceremony where the current Fellows were blessed by Fellows from the

previous year and were given the opportunity to bless the recently named future Fellows who would begin their work. Being that this was the final conference, completing Fellows chose to bless ATS staff who were present—Graham, Executive Director Frank Yamada, and Faculty Development and Initiatives Coordinator Leah Wright—as well as Gilligan, Fitzgerald, and VanAntwerpen in thankfulness for their work over the years and with hopefulness for future collaborations. Former ATS Executive Director Daniel Aleshire served as the chaplain for the final conference.

“Over the years, the program has developed a corps of scholars who provide theological studies with fresh insights and strong leadership, and who make significant contributions to the church and the wider audience of the general public. As this quarter-century tradition draws to a close, ATS extends its gratitude to the Henry Luce Foundation for its extraordinary contribution to theological scholarship and discourse,” said Graham.

With future funding from the Luce Foundation, ATS will host a variety of events that will both celebrate the extraordinary contributions of the Luce Fellows program and explore future directions for theological scholarship.



Lisa Kern is Communications Coordinator at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.