

Veteran administrators offer perspectives for new deans

By ELIZA SMITH BROWN

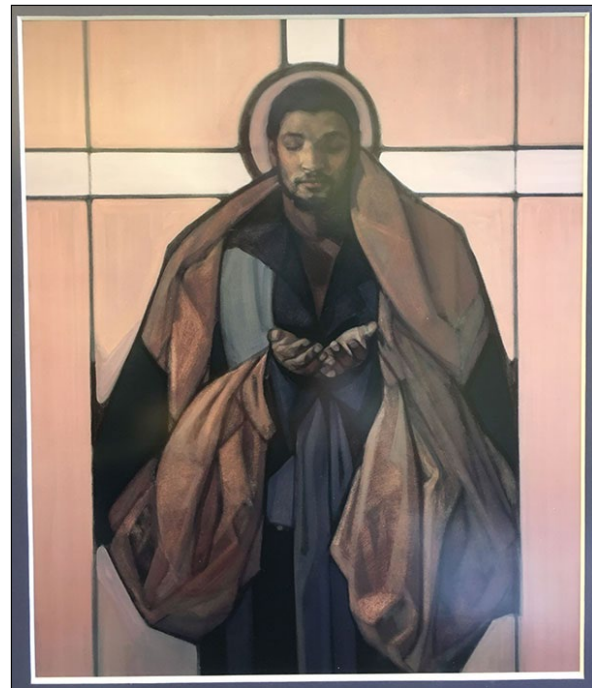
The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) convened its seventh annual School for New Deans on December 10–12, at the ATS office in Pittsburgh. With 25 to 30 new chief academic officers at ATS member schools attending each year, the event has become a vital resource for equipping school leaders as they step into a challenging and multi-faceted role.

A highlight of the three-day school was “The Vocation of the Academic Dean,” presented by three ATS staff members who shared the wisdom of their nearly 30 collective years of experience as former deans at member schools. They are among six ATS staff members who have served as academic deans. Each brought a different perspective on the job of the chief academic officer.



Mary Young, ATS director of leadership education, opened with an overview of her 23 years at Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University, four of them as associate dean. Among her responsibilities was to shepherd a major renovation project of the current building where the seminary is housed.

“While I never expected my vocation as a dean to include onsite construction management,” she recalled, “in retrospect, it was a great metaphor for how I understood my role serving at a small private, embedded, historically black theological school with a 75% nontraditional student body, a dynamic group of committed faculty members, and a charismatic dean/president whose commitment to the seminary took him all over the place for preaching, public relations, and fundraising. There were



Artist: Janet McKenzie, <https://www.janetmckenzie.com/>

many times when I felt like the work the seminary had committed itself to in fulfillment of its mission was indeed a work ‘under construction.’”

Building on the metaphor, she added, “My role as building construction manager extended beyond the physical renovations to an old building—it included the willingness to put my hard hat on and go to work in *building* philosophical, theological, pedagogical, and spiritual spaces where the seminary and its partners could continue to thrive and blossom.”

Young then offered six points of advice:

- You will never know all that you need to know in order to fulfill the multifaceted and complex responsibilities associated with your vocation—but know that the work you do is distinctive and can be extremely rewarding.
- You may discover an increased amount of administrative details and paperwork to attend to in your new

role—but don't get swallowed up in it—stay connected to and energized by your guild-related professional development and scholarship opportunities.

- Create a climate of genuine support and encouragement among faculty, staff, and administrators that helps them understand the significance of their work for the larger vision of the institution. Celebrate them and their work!
- Cultivate a positive relationship with the president/CEO in the execution of your tasks to ensure a unified approach to the accomplishment of the school's mission.
- Stay connected to the "community of practice" made up of theological deans who will serve as a community of learning and support for you in your work.
- Take advantage of the ATS resources (people and material) available to help you navigate your new role.



Tom Tanner, ATS director of accreditation, followed with three lessons he learned from worshipping with his mother at her nursing home in Lincoln, Illinois, where he also served for nearly 20 years as dean of Lincoln Christian University:

- "Some habits are holy. I learned, early on, the wisdom of the Lebanese-American poet/theologian Khalil Gibran: *'Let there be spaces in your togetherness.'* One of my holy habits I called 'Good Friday.' Whenever possible, I tried to avoid the office on Friday afternoon, to get away and do something different—reading or writing or just relaxing. It was a welcomed "space in my togetherness" with the faculty and staff, my holy habit."
- "Some songs are sacred. In the midst of the daily-ness and sometimes dreariness of being a dean, I learned to find my sacred places, and I had sacred songs to take me there. One of those songs is *Gabriel's Oboe*. I needed only to hear it. Difficulty faculty meeting?

Gabriel's Oboe. Angry student? *Gabriel's Oboe*. Cranky CFO? *Gabriel's Oboe*. It's a sacred song to me."

- "Some facts are hard to forget. And perhaps the most important fact is this: *mission matters*. I learned that lesson during my first big controversy as dean, when a faculty member—someone I viewed as great teacher/thinker/mentor/mind, a slam dunk—was denied tenure and then quit mid-semester. Angry and frustrated, I was reminded by a friend that the faculty who opposed his promotion did so out of profound love of the school's mission. In my nearly two decades as dean, I lived through several more controversies, but that one fact I never forgot: *mission matters*."



Barbara Mutch, ATS director of accreditation, closed the session in her characteristic poetic style. "Academic deans might certainly conclude that there is not enough to go around," she said, "particularly in relation to all that is required of you, standing where you stand at the center of so many expectations in your theological school."

"A great deal rests on your shoulders," she continued. "The anxiety of the system knocks on the door of your office more than on any other door in your shop, or at least as frequently as the president's door. While the buck doesn't stop with you in terms of fundraising, it seems to stop with you in more than a few other dimensions of the school."

Mutch referenced a work of art, created for a liturgical calendar, that hangs in her office. It depicts an African Christ, hands cupped, ready and waiting to receive. She recounted her daily practice as dean of arriving early to sit and "pray a little before the community arrived."

"It had also become my practice to pray mostly without words. . . . I would simply hold my hands open before God and place in them, one at a time, everyone who was dear to me, all the needs of which I was aware, and the

many gifts for which I was grateful, and say, essentially, 'Here.' It was the best thing I could think of to do," she said.

She continued: "As the fall unfolded with its mounting pressures and predicaments, my calendar Jesus and I were praying quietly together one morning, and I realized what I had somehow never seen before—that I could take all that I been accustomed to placing in my hands and holding before God, and put them in those hands instead."

"And then, several weeks later, after many other mornings of quiet wordless communion, I realized that all those beloved persons and deeply-held burdens that I had

been placing one at a time into those divine hands each morning—every single one of them was already there.

In those hands. And that was the only place they had ever been."

Mutch's concluding words left the deans with the ultimate comfort:

"A great deal rests on your shoulders as academic deans. All of it is in those hands. Every bit of it. That is the only place they have ever been. Your vocation calls you to remember that. The life and health of you and your school requires that you live it."



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