

# Nurturing visionary leadership for seasons of change

By MARY H. YOUNG

*The annual meeting of ATS African American presidents and deans convened executive leaders serving at both predominately white institutions (PWIs) and historically black theological institutions (HBTIs) for conversation about their work earlier this month in Decatur, Georgia.*

The group's convener—Professor Emerita of Columbia Theological Seminary Deborah Flemister Mullen—spoke to the historic work of this group about leadership from its unique perspective in ATS schools, about last year's strategic conversations regarding the group's mission and purpose, and about the carefully planned plenaries for the current gathering.

“Taken together, the design team believes the shared wisdom will be of great value and critical importance to the future of theological education—whether as an executive leader of a PWI or an HBTI,” said Mullen. “The theme for the conference, *Tilling the Soil: Nurturing Visionary Leadership for Seasons of Change*, continues a multi-year focus identified by participants in this leadership initiative as crucial to explore and assess the impact of change(s) within ATS, within the schools represented, and nationally, since 2016,” she said.

## **Collaborative planning and partnering**

The local host institutions for the meeting were Columbia Theological Seminary (CTS) in Decatur, The Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, and the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) in Decatur.



Participants at the 2019 ATS African American CEO and CAOs' meeting February 11 and 12, in Decatur, Georgia.

The design team for the meeting welcomed the opportunity to model collaboration as a necessary component of visionary leadership. The collaboration included joint planning among the three sponsoring partners, sharing of faculty and executive leadership resources, and intentional time for fellowship around a common meal.

Warm greetings were extended to the group from the presidents of the two ATS partnering schools—Leanne Van Dyke at CTS and Edward Wheeler at ITC. FTE President Stephen Lewis, ITC Provost Maisha Handy, and ITC Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty Love Sechrest all served as members of the design team for the gathering. ATS Executive Director Frank Yamada, ATS Director of Leadership Education Mary Young, and Hood Theological Seminary President Vergel L. Lattimore, III led small group discussions on the redevelopment of the ATS accrediting standards.

## **Affirming and clarifying vision/mission**

Programming for the meeting focused on this group's efforts to reflect on its “being” in response to the changing landscape of Christian and theological education.

“With some wings of the Christian movement in captivity to destructive and self-serving racist, sexist, and homophobic ideologies, the cultivation of prophetic witness and public theology has never been more urgent,” said Sechrest in her welcome to the group.

During the morning of the first day, the group participated in an engaging mission/purpose focusing plenary activity led by Lewis. Resulting from the activity was a well-constructed intentional statement that spoke to the nature of the work the group has done since its inception as well as to the challenge of the work that calls it forward during these seasons of change in theological education. Other plenary and report sessions during the day also contributed to the affirmation of this group’s purpose in the larger arena of theological inquiry.

One plenary focused on the HBTI Peer Group report from the ATS Educational Models Project.

Handy shared this peer group’s response to the question, “What is the distinctive academic anthropology that connects the experiences of the HBTS schools?” She mentioned several key points, including “the availability of faculty and staff to be with the whole person as part of a person-centered pedagogy, in the classroom and beyond.” Handy also expressed the uniqueness of this group’s approach to student formation in indicating the attention to contextualized learning, intentionality with respect to providing a nurturing community, and personhood versus only student-outcomes-centered learning.

The HBTI member schools who participated in an initiative sponsored by Lilly Endowment Inc. through a partnership with the In Trust Center for Theological Schools also shared the significance of their work with their boards and other institutional administrators in building endowment and leadership capacity. The schools involved with the project included Hood Theological Seminary, Howard University School of Divinity,

Interdenominational Theological Center, Payne Theological Seminary, Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology of Virginia Union University, and Shaw University Divinity School. School leaders spoke affirmatively about the ways in which their institutions had benefitted from the project.

### **Attention to cultural rootedness**

The significance of this group’s work in the larger ATS ecology of schools was celebrated and highlighted in several ways during the meeting. ITC faculty colleagues led a discussion about the pedagogical approach of their curriculum, which focuses on “africentric” thought as evidenced in leadership, scholarship, and teaching. Setting the context for the discussion, the team wrote in its discussion guide, “People who

are descendants of Africa all over the world have had to wrestle with our identity markings. The struggle for self-determination is still very real. Identification of our ethnicity, social location,

power, and worth has a direct relationship with what comprises our epistemological agenda.” Using the africentric idea of Sankofa, the team hosted a discussion that focused on leadership, scholarship, teaching, worship, and assessment and evaluation.

On the second day of the gathering, conference participants gathered for chapel on the campus of ITC for the Founder’s Week service of Morehouse School of Religion (one of five schools in the ITC). Joined by alumni/ae, students, guests, faculty, administrators, and staff, Dean Joseph Evans led the gathering in a robust celebration of the school’s founding. Dean of Sisters Chapel at Spellman College, the Reverend Dr. Neichelle Guidry was guest preacher for the event. She brought the audience to their feet with her charismatic style and theologically genius-inspired preaching. The worship experience reflected what the HBTI Peer Group described as language, music, movement, communal energy, and liturgical content of worship all combining to create a space of “sacred

authenticity” that challenges normative, dominant presentations of the gospel.

Attendees ended the meeting committed to the ongoing work of the “tilling” and “nurturing” required to name their own cultural rootedness, to examine its implications

for their work in theological education, and to share it with the larger community of ATS schools. It is noteworthy that the meeting occurred in February and coordinated with the country’s celebration of Black History Month.



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