Community and Diversity

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I grew up at a time and in congregations where anything that resembled sex education was perceived as a Communist plot, likely designed to destabilize the purity of Baptist youth. It was further understood that if that were to happen, the fall of the free world would not be far behind. As best I can recall, the only thing ever said about the subject was that sexual expression was for marriage and that Christians should not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. The text for this second instruction was the holiness code in 2 Corinthians 6, which as best I can tell has little if anything to do with marriage. You biblical scholars, I am sure, will correct me if I am wrong in that interpretation.

The text argues its point with a series of questions: “what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness” or “what fellowship is there between light and darkness” or “what does a believer share with an unbeliever?” These were fundamental questions in a congregation that understood that faithfulness as Christians was defined, at least in part, by whom and what we avoided. Even if the text is not an instruction regarding marriage, it was reasonable in that context to assume that it applied. I memorized the conclusion of the passage: “be ye therefore separate.” Separatism in that congregation did not end with distance from the pagan and evil. It continued with separation from believers with whom we disagreed, which at that church generally meant most other Protestants and all Roman Catholics. We also separated ourselves from potential harmful influences like the RSV and alliances other than with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

All of us have religious histories, and the vast majority of yours do not resemble mine. The piety of separatism might sound a bit weird to some of you, maybe even unChristian. I have been a staff member at ATS for more than two decades, and I think that it is reasonable to conclude that my formation in the piety of separatism, in the end, did not take. If separation from Christians with whom you disagree is important for purity’s sake, then ATS is not really your kind of organization. When Robert Edgar was president of the National Council of Churches, he and I were speaking at the same meeting. He talked about the agenda of the Council, and the ecumenical complexity of his work, and then commented that I was from “the most ecumenical organization in North America.” I am not sure if he was right, but ATS certainly includes as broad a spectrum of North American Christianity as any organization, maybe even the broadest.

This year, because of that breadth and its importance for the life of the Association, I want to address the gifts that it brings and the issues that it raises. Most of my talks at Biennial Meetings have focused on issues in theological education. I have not used these occasions to talk about organizational issues or a “state of the organization.” The reason is that the primary value of this Association is not intrinsic to the organization; it is anchored to the way in which it serves member schools and supports them to better serve their missions. This year, however, I want to deviate from my past practice and address a more organizational issue. It is fundamentally important to the life of this organization, and it also has considerable importance beyond the ATS membership. This afternoon, I want to talk with you about the increasing diversity both within and across ATS schools.
1. Diversity in theological education

ATS schools have considerable consensus affirming the importance of diversity—it is all but orthodoxy. A few years ago, the ATS Board of Directors spent a retreat discerning what it understood to be the core values of the organization, and “diversity” ended at the top of an impressive list. Diversity is identified in numerous places in the accrediting standards, and schools’ self-studies typically describe patterns of diversity that exist on their campuses. Diversity is a value that most member schools affirm as a life-giving, quality-enhancing reality to be embraced. The broad story of theological education in ATS schools across the past half century has been away from homogeneity in almost everything—students, faculty, educational practices, institutional structure, and theological identity. ATS schools have each become more diverse internally, and they have become more diverse from each other.

I want to explore the multiple facets of diversity that can be discerned from the annual reports that schools submit each fall. (Because I will mention a lot of numbers, a sheet has been placed on the chairs. Some of the information is there, and some of it you will have to insert from what I say. Get it all correct, and your school may be excused from completing its next report for the Board of Commissioners.) To set the stage, let’s consider the composite picture of ATS member schools in 1981–82 and 2011–12. In 1981–82, the enrollment totaled 50,559 students, which reflected years of continuing increases. The schools spent an average of $6,242 per FTE student. Thirty years later, 74,193 students were enrolled, which continues several successive years of enrollment decline.¹ This past year, schools spent more than $44,000 per FTE student. (I thought that $6,200 to $44,000 change in FTE expenditures might startle those of you about to begin your afternoon nap, so I just threw it in. For those of you who want to know, $6200 corrected for inflation to this year would be about $16,500.) The most engaging story is not in the change in numbers, however; it is in the diversity the numbers contain.

Diversity of race and gender
The past thirty years have witnessed significant change in the racial and gender composition of the students and faculty.

In 1981–82, African, Asian, and Hispanic descent students accounted for 8 percent of total enrollment. This past academic year, these students constituted 27 percent of total enrollment. Add visa students, who are almost all persons of color, and racial/ethnic students approached 34 percent of total enrollment. Racial/ethnic faculty members have increased from 6 percent of the total thirty years ago to 19 percent this past academic year. Thirty years ago, women comprised 23 percent of the total enrollment, and this past year, they were 34 percent. The story is similar for faculty and administrators, although the percentages are smaller. In 1981–82, women constituted 9 percent of the total full-time faculty, and this past year, 24 percent. Thirty years ago, there were no women presidents of ATS schools and only 6 percent of the chief academic officers were women. This past academic year, women composed 11 percent of all chief executive officers and 19 percent of all chief academic officers.

As those of you who have interpreted your schools’ finances to boards or reported about them to the Board of Commissioners know, there is more than one way to spin most numbers. On the one hand, schools that have been working hard to diversify can claim a sense of accomplishment from these figures. On the other hand, persons who are part of groups who remain underrepresented—who have experienced much of the burden of institutional mistakes and ineptitude—see how much more needs to be done. Whichever hand you prefer, the statistics tell a story of increasing diversity in terms of gender and race/ethnicity that is slowly and irreversibly changing theological schools. ATS schools have learned...
a good bit about building racially diverse communities and educating students for ministry in a racially
diverse world, but there is still much more to be learned. Theological schools related to religious
communities with no restrictions on gender in religious leadership have made significant strides on
gender diversity, and many schools related to faith communities that maintain gender restrictions have
become more gender diverse within the limits of the confessional expectations to which they are
accountable. The students and faculty of ATS member schools are much more diverse now than they
were thirty years ago.

Diversity of educational practices
Educational practices have become far more diverse. In 1981–82, for example, virtually no degree
programs were approved to be offered fully at extension sites. Last year, a total of ninety-nine full degree
programs were offered at extension sites or branch campuses by a total of forty-two different schools.
Thirty years ago, there were no distance learning courses, but then there was no Internet, no high-speed
access to central servers, no wired campuses, no laptops, and no email. (Let us pause and praise the good
old days before I continue—especially the no email part.) This past year, there were seventy-seven
schools approved to offer comprehensive distance learning programs consisting of six or more courses.
Thirty years ago, it would have been difficult to find schools that offered counseling degrees; degrees in
missiology; specialized professional master’s degrees beyond youth, education, and music; or
freestanding seminaries that offered academic master’s degrees. This past year, those kinds of degrees are
common, and virtually every ATS school is offering more degrees now than it did thirty years ago.
Expressions of ministry have been diversifying across these years, and the schools have diversified their
programs to accommodate the changing shape and expressions of ministry in North America. The action
to reaffirm accreditation for one school at the meeting of the Board of Commissioners earlier this month
included the approval of nineteen different degree programs. In 1982, that same school offered four
degree programs.

The diversity of educational offerings constitutes a significant change from the relatively homogenous
educational practices of thirty years ago, and theological educators have educational convictions as well
as theological ones. One set of educational convictions makes people welcome this diversification because
it expands access and makes theological education less expensive. Another set of educational convictions
makes people worry that something essential to theological education may be dissipating.

Diversity of institutional form
Other patterns of diversity become obvious in looking across the membership of the Association.

In 1981–82, there were no schools whose mission was to serve Asian/Asian North American religious
communities. There are currently six member schools who primarily serve Asian students, and this
afternoon, the Association will consider the requests for Associate membership from four other Asian-
serving institutions. If these schools are admitted, the Association will have more Asian institutions than
it has historically black theological school members.

Across these three decades, the percentage of schools related to a college or university has increased from
20 percent to 35 percent, and the indirect costs of smaller freestanding schools likely will contribute to
further increases in the number of college- or university-related theological schools.

Since its first meeting in 1918, the Association has included schools in both Canada and the United States.
While these two countries share many common educational practices, there are substantive differences in
institutional form and affiliations. Theological schools serve the same mission and purpose in both countries, but there simply is not a US parallel to the patterns of affiliations that characterize many Canadian institutions. The mystery of the Holy Trinity pales in comparison to the mystery of institutional connections among the constituent schools of the Toronto School of Theology. These schools have different patterns of public certification and support and different ways by which they are given the authority to grant degrees.

These patterns of institutional diversity have a direct influence on the application of accrediting standards, the issues that ATS programs attempt to address over time, how schools are financed and governed, and the way in which the schools articulate and pursue their missions.

2. Ecclesial family: The underlying diversity

There is another pattern of diversity that has exerted increasing influence as it has grown substantively over the past thirty years. In 1981–82, slightly more than 53 percent of all member schools were mainline Protestant, while 28 percent were Roman Catholic/Orthodox and slightly more than 19 percent were evangelical Protestant.2 Thirty years ago, there were more mainline Protestant schools in the Association than Roman Catholic and evangelical combined, and the conventions and perceptions of mainline Protestants were dominant in the work and mores of the Association. As we begin this Biennial Meeting, the ATS membership has an equal percentage of mainline and evangelical Protestant schools (about 40 percent each) and 21 percent Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools. The number of mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic schools has grown slightly across these three decades, but the primary story is the growth of evangelical Protestant schools. There has been an increase of almost seventy evangelical schools in this time period. This past academic year, evangelical schools enrolled about 62 percent of all students in ATS schools, mainline schools about 28 percent, and Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools about 10 percent.

ATS, as an organization, has moved from mainline Protestant dominance to a membership with no dominant ecclesial group of schools; it has become a truly diverse organization. The diversity of ecclesial families is not just an issue for the Association. While most schools are primarily anchored in one or the other of these ecclesial families, the students are bringing the theological leanings of these ecclesial groups to classroom after classroom, regardless of the ecclesial identification of the school. In the Association, the diversity of ecclesial family exerts a powerful influence on all the other patterns of diversity.

Consider race. Mainline Protestant seminaries enroll 50 percent of all African American students in ATS schools, and evangelical Protestant schools enroll 80 percent of all Asian/Asian North American students and 63 percent of all Hispanic/Latino students. While Roman Catholics enroll far fewer racial/ethnic students, they enroll more Hispanic students than either Asian or African descent students. Racial/ethnic enrollment is more than 30 percent of the total enrollment in each of these three groups of schools, but the composition of students of color varies by the ecclesial families of the schools.3

Consider the enrollment of women in Master of Divinity degree programs and women faculty members. This past year, mainline Protestant schools enrolled 60 percent of all women enrolled in MDiv programs. Even though they account for 28 percent of total enrollment, they educate the majority of all women enrolled in MDiv programs. Mainline Protestant schools employ 58 percent of all women faculty
Neither women students nor women faculty are evenly distributed across the ATS schools; their distribution is heavily influenced by ecclesial family.

Or consider educational practices. Of all the complete degree programs offered at extension sites, evangelical schools account for 83 percent of them, with the other 17 percent divided among mainline and Roman Catholic schools. Of all the schools with approved comprehensive distance education programs, 55 percent are evangelical, 38 percent are mainline, and 6 percent are Roman Catholic. Educational practices are not evenly distributed across the schools; they are concentrated in schools related to particular ecclesial families.

My point is simply this: **of the many patterns of diversity that exert growing influence in theological schools, ecclesial family is a powerful, underlying diversity that moderates all the others.** Furthermore, differences in educational practices by ecclesial family reflect differing educational goals and needs of the communities these schools serve. Most mainline Protestant schools are related to connectional denominations that maintain requirements for ordained ministry that include seminary education. These schools have developed educational models on the assumption that it is the candidates’ responsibility to get to the seminary to obtain the required education. Evangelical Protestant schools tend to be related to much more free church and parachurch constituencies in which theological education is often elective. These schools need to “sell” the value of theological education, and they do so, in part, by increasing access in every way possible, and, in part, by advocating its value among some constituencies that have been historically suspicious of theological education. Roman Catholic education for the ministerial priesthood is deeply formational, highly regulated by church authorities, and exclusively residential. The goal of the revision of the educational and degree program standards, as discerned from the process at the conclusion of the last Biennial Meeting, was to develop standards that were robust and flexible. There are good ways to do each of these kinds of theological education, hence robust, and there are many different ways to conduct good theological education, hence flexible. The votes related to the standards, and the articulation of normative expressions of theological education they will embody, are not just votes about educational practices; they are votes about the differing kinds of education needed by differing ecclesial communities.

3. **Theological diversity**

The diversity reflected by identification with an ecclesial family identification is a function of different theological convictions. Theological schools are value-laden communities of faith and intellectual inquiry, and they are all advocates for the doctrinal commitments that they understand to be “good.” In this way, the diversity of ecclesial family, based on theological convictions, is of a different order than diversity of race or gender. None of us would assert that one race or gender is better than the other, even if our actions at times might lead some to think otherwise. All of us, however, are convinced that some theological construals are better, smarter, or more faithful than others. The ecclesial families to which ATS schools are related disagree theologically on issues like gender roles and moral expressions of human sexuality. They also disagree on the fundamental nature of the Triune God, of human begins, of sin and salvation, and of creation and the physical world, not to mention the Christian meaning of life here and hereafter. The schools differ from their denominations in that they also tend to disagree with the denominations on one point or another! Theological diversity has significant effects on the work of the Association. Consider two examples.
The first is the 2010 Montreal ATS Biennial Meeting, when member schools were considering revised institutional accrediting standards. You may remember the discussion, as it became a debate of sorts, about the wording of a proposed change to the accrediting standards related to the leadership of women in theological education. Since 1978, the Commission standards have included a statement regarding women and theological education. That statement was revised in the 1980s and again in the 1990s, and a further revision was presented to the schools in 2010. The most recent proposal differed from prior statements in that, while it acknowledged that there are different missions and theological commitments among schools, “each school shall seek to increase the participation and leadership of women in theological education.” This syntactic construction precluded a school’s confessional position—or the confessional commitment of the religious body to which the school was related—from modifying the application of the accrediting standard. The debate that followed resulted in the reinstitution of the theological modifier. In the process, however, many thought that an important theological understanding of gender had been violated. Representatives of schools related to religious communities that maintain gender restrictions felt threatened that their school’s theological commitments could put the accreditation of their schools at risk if the proposed standard were rigidly applied. Still others worried that, if the standards could threaten schools on this perceived theological issue, future sets of standards could threaten schools on the basis of other theological commitments, such as human sexuality. In the context of the debate, some women felt wounded, and a statement of concern was read into the minutes of the meeting during the final business session.5

The second example was a result of that discussion at the Biennial Meeting and a comment that had been made at a meeting of African American presidents a few months earlier. The ATS staff decided that it would undertake its own reflection on diversity. We spent part of each staff meeting for the next six months discussing our perceptions of diversity and reflecting on our reactions to the issues that diversity raises in our work with one another as a staff and in our work with member schools. The conversations were difficult at times and always enlightening, as these conversations often are. We talked about how we understand and deal with race and gender issues, and we talked about diversity of theological commitments as we encounter it both in the schools and in one another as staff members. Several of us concluded that theological diversity is of a different and more difficult order to negotiate. The staff is deeply committed to serving the wide range of theological perspectives present in the Association, to working carefully not to privilege one position over another, and to disciplining our own theological commitments so that they do not impair the judgments we make as staff about the schools. To the extent possible, the composition of the staff seeks to embody the range of religious histories and voices present in the Association. Even with all that, our six months of discussion led to the conclusion that diversity of theological position raises issues of a different order than diversity of race or gender.

What do we do with theological diversity, which results in perceptions that one position is more true, or right, or faithful than another? There are some options and lessons to be learned.

One option is to follow that holiness code in 2 Corinthians and separate from those who are perceived to be wrong in their theology or religious practices. The Modernist-Fundamentalist struggles of the early twentieth century spun off a good bit of conservative Protestant separatism, but the separatist response is not a conservative religious impulse. It occurs as much on the left as it does on the right. It is a function of taking theological convictions seriously, arriving at convictions judged to be intellectually credible and faithful, and rejecting other convictions that have been deemed less faithful or intellectually defensible. Separatism is a function of the importance with which religious convictions are held and the intrinsic valuing that convictions attract. This is a room full of representatives of theological schools related to religious communities who have separated themselves from others. (A few of you or your forebears were
thrown out, but most of them separated.) Separation is a tried and tested way to exercise holiness, to be set apart to a particular vision or particular theological understanding.

Another option is to try to find a way to be a community even though there are deep differences. Sometimes those efforts can be very strained. The small Baptist church my family attended during my preschool and early elementary years averaged about forty people on a good Sunday. These folks got into a theological struggle about paying the bills. One group thought the congregation should be supported exclusively by tithes and offerings, and the other thought it acceptable to supplement that income with bake sales and revenue from other fundraising efforts. The part-time, nonseminary-trained, used-car-salesman pastor (I hope that you got the picture) proposed that the church begin two Sunday morning services, one for each side. It would have sustained congregational community but only in the most strained sort of way. (For those who worry about my religious history, my parents were on the tithes-and-offerings-only side.) There are better ways to sustain communities with diversity, and over the years, ATS has discerned and demonstrated several practices that are worth noting.

4. Practices that contribute to theologically diverse communities

The first practice is a commitment to know persons and to relate to them as individuals. David Hubbard and Vincent Cushing were two very effective and influential theological educators, both in their seminaries and in the Association, in an earlier era. David was president at Fuller and Vince at Washington Theological Union. An evangelical Protestant and a Roman Catholic discovered each other through the Association, found wisdom in one another, and for many years took a weekend together to discuss their lives and schools. Just last week, I received a note from a president who was in the middle of a serious career decision. That president mentioned that another president had become an important conversation partner as the decision was being finalized. One was mainline, maybe even liberal Protestant; the other was Pentecostal. To the extent that this Association is a community, it provides space for people to come to know others and to discover people completely outside the tribal enclaves of North American Christianity.

A second practice is creating space for persons or schools to be who they are religiously. Creating this kind of space requires the discipline not to privilege one tradition or perspective over another. A school should be able to be truly conservative, truly liberal, truly Orthodox, truly middle of the road, or whatever it truly is and be able to be a full participant in the life of this organization. If an organizational culture does not provide for a radical nonprivileging, it will require some schools to “pass”—to be other than what they truly are in order to be part of the organization. One of the widely affirmed conclusions from the ATS project on Christian Hospitality and Pastoral Practices in a Multifaith World is that authentic interaction is possible only when theological convictions are firmly held and honored. This goes for conversations across faith groups and, just as importantly, for conversations across different perspectives within one faith tradition.

A third practice is civility. The ATS president this biennium has written a lot about civility and, like most of us, has been treated uncivilly often enough to know what he is writing about. Civility, as Rich has noted, is a bit out of style in the United States these days. It seems as if firm commitments have been confused with militancy and rudeness. Christianity has been tempted to a crusader mentality from time to time, and each time it has regretted what it did at some later point.\(^6\)
A fourth practice is to make sure that the diverse voices are present at all levels of the organization. The nominating committees for the Association and Commission have worked hard to prepare slates of board and committee members so that new and continuing members reflect the diversities most present in member schools: race, gender, United States/Canada, and ecclesial family. If voices are not present, then a primary contribution of diversity to the good of the whole is absent and the justice of inclusion is threatened.

A fifth is the value of a neutral space in the midst of competing advocacies. I heard Margaret Mead give a lecture near the end of her career, long after she had ceased being a researching anthropologist and had emerged as a public intellectual. It was a meeting of religious professionals in the mid-1970s, and she was talking about her worry that religious institutions had taken on strong advocacy positions in the 1960s and 1970s. I think that we would call what she was referencing “prophetic witness” and be quick to claim that it is part of the job of being faithful Christians, whether it benefits or hurts a community. She went on to say that communities must have places where people of diverse views can gather, and she wanted houses of worship to fill this kind of role. That’s arguable for houses of worship, but I have thought a lot about her comment in light of the work of this Association. I think that communities of advocacy, like theological schools, need a neutral place to gather. ATS will advocate for quality theological education, for all the research and study that communities of faith need, for leaders with all the knowledge and skills that are necessary to guide communities of faith—but on other matters, it needs to be the space where schools with competing theological visions can encounter one another, engage one another, even support one another.

These practices have value beyond the work of the Association. They would be good practices for recent seminary graduates to take to congregations where they will discover that most of the people in the congregation have different religious perspectives than the ones they encountered as students in seminary. These practices would be helpful as graduates work in a North American context in which religion has a smaller place in the public square and persons of theological difference cooperate to speak with a voice of common concerns. Maybe, on a continent where the presence of other world religions is growing, these practices might be helpful as Christian leaders engage other religious leaders. Maybe the practices that make diverse communities thrive are the very ones that are most needed in a culture all too inclined to respond to diversity with divisiveness.

A concluding word

We begin this 48th Biennial Meeting as the most diverse community of theological schools ever assembled. The Association has matured across the past thirty years as a community of mainline and evangelical Protestant schools and Roman Catholic and Orthodox schools, as well as a few schools that elude any classification, much to their delight. We gather as one of the few spaces where the broad spectrum of North American Christianity is present—with all its differing theological construals, with its varying patterns of piety, and we gather with the common problems that accrue to running schools for the education of religious leaders. We begin the meeting with the gift of diversity.

I was preaching several years ago at a congregation in the Washington DC area. The early service on Sunday had a sanctuary about a third full, primarily older persons and parents of younger children. They were almost all white. At the second service I sat in the first pew until it was time to preach. I was introduced, walked to the pulpit, and looked out on a sanctuary that was full of Asian, black, Latino, and white worshippers. It was the most diverse congregation I had ever seen. I was so embraced by the
wholeness of the human family assembled in front of me that a tear came to my eye. For a moment, it was as if the realm of God, yet one more time, had broken into the present moment.

My mother died this spring, five weeks shy of her ninetieth birthday. My father died when I was fourteen and still trying to figure out who I was as a person, and my mother died fifty years later, no longer able to remember who she was as a person. She grew up in the Depression in a family that lost everything, and for a time, her family lived next to the rectory of a Roman Catholic parish. To the extent that her family had any religious affiliation, it was conservative Protestant—which meant that a Catholic rectory was a place of mystery and suspicion. She remembered seeing the priests at the supper table eating and that they would pour some beer in a bowl for their dog. There were several reasons this story stuck in my mother’s mind until her memories had all vanished. Her family was very poor, and it must have seemed like an extravagance. Just about every Protestant of that era harbored some anti-Catholic prejudice, and for a conservative Protestant fresh from prohibition, the consumption of alcohol was proof positive that Catholics couldn’t be Christians. I don’t know what she thought about the dog, but I am sure that, if what she thought she saw was indeed true, it was a happy and perhaps slightly overweight creature.

Following my mother’s death, many of you wrote me notes and sent cards that meant a great deal and for which I am deeply grateful. Three priest friends told me that they had remembered her in their daily masses. Given my mother’s story, I found their gifts especially tender. They were a means of grace to me, and grace—both the grace of God and the grace that we give one another—nurture the gifts of diversity into full bloom.

1. All the data referenced in this text have been taken from the 1981–82 Fact Book on Theological Education (www.ats.edu/Resources/PublicationsPresentations/Documents/FactBook/1981-82.pdf) and the ATS Annual Data Tables (www.ats.edu/Resources/PublicationsPresentations/Documents/AnnualDataTables/2011-12AnnualDataTables.pdf).

2. ATS does not request that schools identify themselves by these three broad categories. ATS classifies schools this way modifying a classification structure first devised in a study conducted by the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education. Mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic/Orthodox affiliations are relatively straight forward. Evangelical Protestant schools are more difficult to identify. ATS uses the membership of the Fellowship of Evangelical Seminary Presidents as a primary indicator of evangelical self-identification. Evangelical also includes conservative Protestant schools that relate to denominations that are members of the National Association of Evangelicals in the United States or the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.


4. Evangelical Protestants enrolled 38 percent of women enrolled in MDiv programs, and Roman Catholics, 2 percent. Of the 872 women teaching in ATS member schools last academic year, 25 percent were employed by evangelical Protestant schools and 18 percent in Roman Catholic schools.

5. I have attempted to explicate at greater length this issue in “Deconstructing the Gender Issue in the 2010 Standards of Accreditation,” Theological Education 46 no. 2 (2011): 16.