

# 150 theological educators celebrate 20th anniversary of Women in Leadership

By ELIZA SMITH BROWN



*The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) hosted the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its Women in Leadership program February 28 through March 2, in Pittsburgh. The event brought together 150 women at all stages in their careers as faculty and administrators at theological schools and in the organizations that support those schools. It marked 20 years of generous support from Lilly Endowment Inc. and the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation for the Women in Leadership initiative, a significant component of ATS Leadership Education programming.*

Many of those present represented milestones, the first women to serve in various capacities in theological education or at their respective schools. Plenary speakers and panelists charted the path women have traveled in theological education and offered inspiration for those just starting the journey.

“As early as 1972, women in leadership was a matter of importance in theological education,” said Mary Young, ATS director of leadership education, in her opening remarks. “And since 1997, ATS has designed intentional educational programming to support women faculty and administrators and to assist schools in their efforts to include women in leadership positions.”

The goals of the 20th anniversary event, she explained, were “to celebrate the movement of women into leadership positions at ATS member schools, to create strategies that effectively equip and empower women as leaders in theological education, and to chart a course for future programming in support of women and the variety of vocations and career paths they take in this field.”

Among the pioneers at the conference were Barbara Brown Zikmund (aka BBZ), president of Hartford Seminary in the 1990s and recipient of the 2004 ATS Distinguished Service Award. In her opening plenary, “Celebrating the Path of Progress over the Last 20 Years

for Women in Leadership,” she recounted the history of women’s participation with ATS activities, reminding the group of the earliest effort to formally include women: the “Under Represented Constituencies” Committee.

BBZ noted that ATS data related to gender goes back to 1971 when women represented 10% of students, 3% of faculty, and 12% of full-time administrators. Since 1971, each of these groups has steadily increased, and women now represent 35% of students, 25% of faculty, and 39% of full-time administrators.

She added that, even as ATS enrollments have experienced a net growth from 62,000 students in 1997 to 72,000 students today, female student enrollments have shown slight increases but not as dramatic as female student growth from 1971 to 1997. She also noted change in the presence of women as a percentage of total enrollment in the three ecclesial groups represented in the ATS membership—women now represent 30% of evangelical school enrollments, 49% of mainline school enrollments, and 28% of Roman Catholic/Orthodox school enrollments.

The “Sallie M. McFague Annual WIL Award” was announced at dinner on the opening night of the conference. The award honors McFague, who became the first woman dean of a university divinity school when she was tapped to head Vanderbilt University Divinity School in 1975.

ATS staff directors Deborah H. C. Gin and Jo Ann Deasy presented results from a comprehensive research project on women in theological education on the second day. A forthcoming article will summarize their findings on the career paths of these women, their preparation for leadership, continuing systemic challenges they face, and concrete solutions that can be implemented.

Two interactive panel discussions, “Having Our Say,” brought together eight women at various stages of their careers. Six other theological leaders led discussion groups around resource papers they had written.

Eight seasoned presidents and deans served as “wisdom elders,” mentoring to 23 emerging women leaders throughout the event. They will continue in that capacity for the next year:

*Doris Garcia-Rivera, President,  
Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico*

*Martha J. Horne, President Emerita,  
Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary*

*Carol E. Lytch, President,  
Lancaster Theological Seminary*

*Molly T. Marshall, President,  
Central Baptist Theological Seminary*

*Teresa L. Reeve, Associate Dean  
for Academics, Seventh-day Adventist  
Theological Seminary, Andrews University*

*Robin J. Steinke, President,  
Luther Seminary*

*Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, Professor  
of Theology, Chicago Theological Seminary*

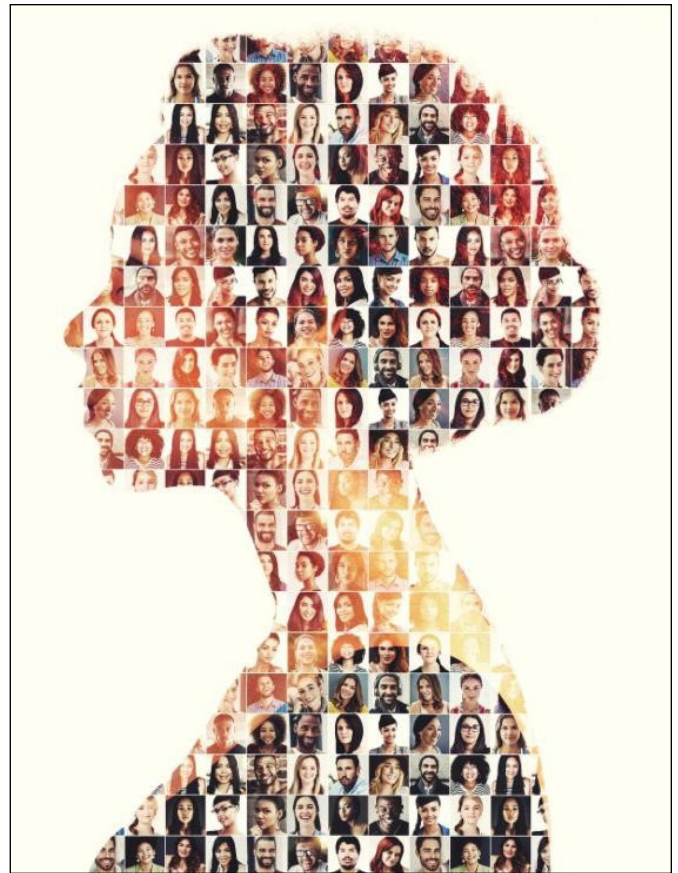
*Emilie M. Townes, Dean,  
Vanderbilt University Divinity School*

Toward the end of the conference, Leanne Van Dyk, president of Columbia Theological Seminary, looked ahead with her “Leaning into the Future: Increasing the Leadership Capacities of Women in Theological Education.” Citing authors from Cheryl Sanders (*Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*) to Claude M. Steele (*Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*) to Brené Brown (*Daring Greatly* and others), she discussed how racial bias and gender bias affect not only perceptions but also performance . . . and what women can do about it.

“Cheryl Sandberg challenges us to face our fears, and she understands the power of mentoring, advocacy, and support systems,” said Van Dyk. “But we have something she does not. We have big and bold mission statements and big and bold callings.” Quoting Interdenominational Theological Seminary President Ed Wheeler, “Our missions aim at nothing less than the transformation of the world,” she added.

Van Dyk also shared a number of resources to help women, including programs of The American Council on Education such as the Inclusive Excellence Workgroup IDEALS rubric and the Moving the Needle Project.

“I have been really struck by the power of encouragement. Watch out for opportunities to encourage others, and do not let them slip away in the mad rush of our crowded agendas,” she said.



ATS Director, Leadership Education  
Mary Young speaks to participants.

In “Charting Our Course,” Mary Young, ATS director of leadership education, lifted up women pioneers in theological education and talked about the future, recounting many concrete strategies gathered from the conference participants during their group conversations, and

finally engaging participants to prioritize those strategies. “We hear you,” Young said. “Our work has just begun.”



*Eliza Smith Brown is director, communications and external relations at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*