

ATS receives \$5.57 million grant to coordinate Pathways initiative

By *MARISSA DECHANT*

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has received a five-year \$5.57 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to coordinate its Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative.

The purpose of the Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative is to support graduate theological schools as they assess the effectiveness of current educational and financial practices in theological education; explore the challenges and opportunities facing pastors and lay leaders in congregations; clarify and/or realign their missions to meet these challenges and opportunities; design and implement projects to respond to these challenges and opportunities that are educationally effective and financially sustainable; and build or strengthen collaborations that will strengthen the broader educational and financial ecology of ministry.

Lilly Endowment launched the three-phase initiative in January 2021, and recently approved 84 grants to ATS member schools as part of the second phase of the initiative. Grants in the second phase ranged from \$500,000 to \$1 million and totaled more than \$82 million. A full list of the grantees can be found on [Lilly Endowment's website](#).

“The initiative is the most significant investment in the future of theological schools in the history of the Association, and it comes at a time when theological schools are in the midst of rapid and significant change,” said ATS Executive Director Frank Yamada. “The initiative creates a substantial opportunity for theological schools to plan for and implement changes needed to better position themselves to carry out their missions to prepare women and men for ministry in communities of faith.”

Primarily focused on the second phase of the initiative, the Association's coordination program is designed to enhance the learnings that will take place through the initiative, both among the grantees and throughout ATS. The coordination program builds upon the Association's strategic priorities

to equip leaders for effective change; explore innovative business and organizational models; enhance adaptive work in schools' educational missions; and engage the membership in its broad diversity. Through the coordination program, ATS will provide resources, research, support, and a learning community for the grantees focused on innovation, collaboration, and adaptive learning. Activities will include:

- webinars and team gatherings aimed at strengthening grantees' projects,
- peer learning communities centered on various challenges and opportunities being addressed by the grantees,
- annual research projects to support the work of the grantees,



- mentors and coaches for cohorts of senior leaders as they lead their organizations through adaptive change,
- support for project leaders—including the onboarding of new personnel,
- an advisory committee to aid in the design of peer groups and research projects, and
- a virtual resource center to make learning and research available among the ATS staff, member schools, collaborating organizations, and theological education researchers.

While ATS will serve as the primary coordinator for the Pathways initiative, it will be joined by the In Trust Center for Theological Schools, which received its own grant to help support this work. ATS is excited about this partnership that will draw upon the unique strengths of both organizations for the benefit of the grantees.

During the first phase of the Pathways for Tomorrow initiative, Lilly Endowment Inc. invited all 263 schools

accredited by ATS to apply for planning grants of up to \$50,000 to help them explore challenges and opportunities they wished to pursue. All of the 234 schools that applied received planning grants.

In the competitive third and final phase of the Pathways initiative, Lilly Endowment will fund large-scale, collaborative projects. Theological schools will collaborate to strengthen their capacities to prepare and support pastors and lay ministers, and work toward offering sustainable models or strategies that—if effective—could be adopted by other schools. Lilly Endowment anticipates announcing these grants in July 2022.

The coordination grant is being directed by Jo Ann Deasy, ATS director of institutional initiatives and student research, and will be supported by various ATS staff.

ATS is grateful for the continued support of Lilly Endowment as both organizations seek to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.



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