

Trauma and spirituality conference breaks ground on ongoing work

BY ELSIE M. MIRANDA

The ATS Committee on Race and Ethnicity (CORE), in collaboration with Fuller Theological Seminary, hosted a significant and timely conference on trauma and spirituality in Pasadena, CA, November 19–21, 2024. The conference was the culmination of an ATS trauma and spirituality webinar series, conceived several years earlier by the late Oliver McMahan, former vice president for institutional effectiveness and accreditation at Pentecostal Theological Seminary, and a stalwart leader in all things ATS.

In the wake of the redevelopment of the 2020 ATS *Standards of Accreditation* and the two years of listening that preceded it, McMahan had become convinced that theological schools needed to provide students and faculty with more opportunities and resources to discern the underlying mental health issues prevalent among individuals preparing to enter helping professions. It was McMahan's vision that led to the understanding that Standard 1.1 on Institutional Integrity required schools to increase their "attention to the intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational dimensions of student learning and formation, in a manner consistent with the school's mission and religious identity" as fundamental to a school's missional integrity (see Standard 1.5).



Participants at the CORE Conference on Trauma and Spirituality gather for a group photo in Pasadena last month.

In a post-COVID context, many ATS accreditation directors were listening to concern expressed by deans, rectors, formation directors, and students who witnessed an increase of PTSD and burn out rates among ministers six years after serving in the field. ATS, however, does not provide a concerted plan of action to schools beyond encouraging that they tend to these issues in a matter consistent with their missional identities.

The ATS diversities staff worked to corroborate these concerns with the research of David Wang, of Fuller Theological Seminary; Steven Sandage, of Boston University; Micah McCreary, of New Brunswick Theological Seminary; Jessica Young Brown, of Virginia Union University; and Bo Karen Lee, of Princeton Theological Seminary. Together, along with McMahan, the group formed the planning committee that developed the *Trauma and Spirituality* series (the two webinars had a registration rate of more than 300 individuals each).



Conference attendees chat during a break.

The November conference had 80 participants in attendance: 55 percent faculty, 10 percent deans, 10 percent student services, 3 percent presidents, and 22 percent were a combination of mental health professionals, formation directors, students, and pastors. The conference was dedicated to our brother in Christ, Oliver McMahan, who passed away on March 26, 2024.

Reflections on the conference

There are two words from John's gospel that capture an emotion fundamental to the human experience: "Jesus wept." It is not a secret that all human beings have emotions, and that feelings often reveal the gamut of affective realities that people experience throughout the course of a lifetime. However, through the course of our lived experiences, many human beings learn to dismiss, suppress, repress, and/or diminish certain types of feelings. This lack of appropriate tending to the emotional life often develops into what is called "adverse childhood experiences" or ACEs.

Much of the research conducted by members of the CORE committee point to the acknowledged presence of trauma among 33 percent of students enrolled in graduate theology programs. Anecdotally, in what was learned from many conference participants, this data reveals the proverbial "tip of the iceberg."

Case studies presented by Ribbons Harris, founder and director of the [Parsonage Project](#), revealed that unacknowledged trauma is often triggered in the context of pastoral practice, and lack of appropriate coping skills often leads to a variety of addictions, depression, suicidal ideation, and other destructive behaviors that have created a mental health crisis among pastoral leaders that remains largely unacknowledged.

The words "Jesus wept" are a reminder that quality theological education requires a formation that engages intellect alongside heart, body, and mind. The November conference was intentionally paced so partici-

pants could listen and learn from experts in the field and from one another about the impact that trauma-informed theological education can have on institutions willing to destigmatize matters of loss, shame, sexuality, race, gender, institutional sin, violence, depression, and other realities that may manifest as diminished personal dignity or worth. When students graduate with the capacity to be empathic, supportive, and faithful to the traditions that frame their spiritual identities and when they can empower others and facilitate the building of communities that serve the whole person, the possibility of constructive transformation is released.

The conference was not a course in miracles, nor did it make any promises that the answers to the many questions that emerged were at anyone's immediate disposal. It did, however, raise awareness of the ongoing desire that ATS member schools need to work at becoming trauma-informed centers for teaching and learning. This idea was confirmed by the fact that 85 percent of participants surveyed post-conference voiced the need for "strategies to equip administrators and faculty of the need to attend to trauma-related matters in the formation of students preparing for ministry." Seventy-five

percent desired similar strategies for engaging with trauma-related issues in the academic community.

Eighty percent of those surveyed desired more data that highlights the impact of trauma on students and practitioners in parishes or mission fields, as well as pedagogical tools to properly undertake these issues, and access to appropriate resources for healing and professional therapeutic relationships. Seventy-one percent of those surveyed desired to develop ongoing networking opportunities among colleagues in theological schools that are advancing trauma-informed education; among those, 40 percent wanted denominationally focused resources

and networking opportunities related to trauma and spirituality.

If theological education is to thrive, it must build communities of teaching and learning that enhance the value and dignity of all people, in a manner consistent with the school's missional integrity. The future of religious congregations will rest on the capacity of ministers, teachers, and pastors to lead and inspire their communities to think, feel, pray, love, and delight in the wonder and awe of creation, in all its complexity, brokenness, resilience and capacity for transformation. Clearly, there is much work to be done—but together, we broke ground.



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