

Leading amid change—women leaders gather for strategic conversations

BY MARY H. YOUNG

Attended by a diverse group of nearly 50 women from ATS member schools, the 2019 Women Advancing in Leadership Development Institute was held this month in Pittsburgh. The theme for the gathering, Leading amid Change: Celebrations, Opportunities, and Challenges, provided a springboard for the women to explore the varied dimensions of their leadership, examining it through both personal and professional lenses.



ATS Executive Director Frank M. Yamada joined ATS Director of Leadership Education Mary H. Young in welcoming the group and highlighting the importance of the Association's work with Women in Leadership (WIL). Yamada expressed appreciation to the Carpenter Foundation and to Lilly Endowment Inc. for their support of WIL programming throughout the years.

The opening plenary set the tone for the gathering as Lallene Rector, president of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, spoke about the joyful challenges of being a leader. Rector stressed the importance of “forming and claiming” within ourselves the identity of being a leader, even beyond the title and responsibilities we hold. She also spoke of leadership as an “embodied” presence, characterized by different leadership styles.

Deborah H. C. Gin, director of research and faculty development at ATS, provided insights from the data gathered through the 2017 WIL research project and challenged participants to think about and name the goal—or the

“where”—they envisioned leadership for women heading as an industry. She referred to a list of the 19 leadership skills used in a survey she conducted of ATS women faculty/administrators. The survey question, “How well prepared are you with the following leadership skills?” included a long list of “soft” and “concrete” options. The findings from the survey suggested that, generally, women feel prepared in all of the skills but more prepared in the “soft skills” and skills known to be required of senior leaders (e.g., vision, decision-making, etc.). Gin's full presentation can be found in the WIL community on [Engage ATS](#).

Patricia Dutcher-Walls, dean and professor of Hebrew Scripture at Vancouver School of Theology, invited participants to engage in deep self-reflection about their leadership during her talk titled “Surviving and Thriving in a Web of Relationships.” She indicated that in order to thrive in a context of change, you must “recognize that you are a part of an embedded web of relationships” and know who you are in that web. Dutcher-Walls led the women in reflective exercises about how to thrive in the midst of change, focusing on three distinct areas—their values, their skills, and their strengths.



Event participants pose for a picture with a statue of Mr. Rogers during their bus tour of downtown Pittsburgh. *Photo courtesy of Ora Horn Prouser*

The closing session, titled “Reflections on Women in Leadership: Thinking Strategically about One’s Leadership” was designed to lead the women in visualizing in which stage of leadership they find themselves. Charisse L. Gillett, president of Lexington Theological Seminary,

reflected on her personal narrative of leadership preparation and training. She spoke of what sustains her in her work, what propels her forward as a theological school leader, and what she hopes to give back to other women in leadership. Using three visual images, the participants identified which image best resonated with or described their current leadership statuses.

Throughout Thursday, women attended workshops and leadership topic small discussion groups. Alison Benders, interim dean at Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, led a workshop titled "Understanding Race, Class, and Gender in Institutions." A second workshop, "Maintaining a Healthy Family and Work-Life Balance" was led by Stephanie B. Crowder, vice president of academic affairs and academic dean at Chicago Theological Seminary. Sharon M. Tan, acting dean at Eden Theological Seminary, engaged participants by inviting them to think of their leadership as stories in a third workshop titled "Leading with Your Story."

In addition to attending workshops and discussion groups, the women identified lessons learned and strategies to pursue as a result of participating in the event (see table below).

Lessons Learned	Strategies to Pursue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We can reshape our relationships by rewriting our stories • I am not alone! I have agency—agency to grow, agency to build my skillset, agency to use my voice in service to the institution • How important it is to share who we are with trusted peers/support people • Doing the internal work is as important as gaining skills and partnerships • Gender, race, and other discriminations are real and they do affect how I work • Leadership is not about being “nice,” but about being respected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring some of this leadership development back to my staff • Find ways to make the work sustainable • Join or become a member of a colleague group; find trusted partners • Be an effective administrator • Commit to racial and ethnic diversity • Create space for intentional reflection in order to determine decision making



Mary H. Young is Director of Leadership Education at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.