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# Presidential Address

to the Atla Board of Directors, June 18, 2020

*Stephen Sweeney, Saint John Vianney Theological Seminary, Atla Board President*

Hello. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. I have served Atla on the Board of Directors for the past four years, and this most recent past year as president of the Board. What a moment for our association; at this point I have heard the opening plenary: what struck me was her slide title “The librarian profession suffers from a persistent lack of racial and ethnic diversity that shows few signs of abating.” I have also participated in many breakout sessions and heard the Association Update a moment ago.

We honor the people who have retired; thank you for your years of service to librarianship, theological librarianship, and the pursuit of education (theological and otherwise). We also honor those memorialized for continuing to pave the path to where we are today, at the beginning of Atla’s 75th year.

In her president’s remarks last year, Jennifer Bartholomew acknowledged the land where we were, and for whom that was traditional territory. Territory: race and space, are issues of such importance today.

Thinking about race, all of you have seen the resolution from the Atla Board on racism and xenophobia. In the light of policy governance, the board chose to develop a resolution because this model gives the statements beginning with the ‘therefore be it resolved’ more teeth, so to speak, for action on the part of the Association. I would call your attention to the statement in the resolution, “opportunities for thoughtful reflection on diversity, inclusion, equity, and antiracism.” This is not lip service or a promise of some future action, but rather a statement that will bear immediate fruit as well as ongoing, long-term initiatives of the Association as they are envisioned in the new organizational ends. The board met Tuesday evening this week, and one of the major issues we will be tackling this coming year is diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as promoting antiracism. In her plenary yesterday, Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe said, “Power is the ability to determine what is normalized as the status quo and

to control what is discussed with respect to alternatives.” Doing the successful work of antiracism as well as keeping the conversation of diversity, equity, and inclusion cannot be seen as alternatives. They are our work. Definitely more to come.

Thinking about space, we are in a different conference space! I wish to convey my thanks to Atla staff, Member Programs, and those involved in the pivot to an online experience for the reimagined conference. It’s difficult to think that in March we experienced such an upheaval requiring reimagining education at every level, including our own world of education in theology and religious studies. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and all the issues that touch it, I wish to convey my (and the board’s) sympathy for those who have lost jobs due to furlough, cuts, position eliminations, and other institutional fiscal trouble.

Recognizing the challenges that this presents, I also recognize what this upheaval looks like across our history. At the Atla conference in 1969, our 23rd year as an association, then-President of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Donald Miller opened his remarks with the comment, “All academic situations are characterized by unrest and confusion;” still true today! Or how about this quote, “At the beginning of the present decade, many educational leaders used the term crisis with increasing alarm to characterize the emerging state and conditions of academic libraries.” That was in a report written by Stephen Peterson for *Theological Education* in 1981!

With those quotes and bits of information in our mind, how do we think about entering Atla’s 75th year? Robert Beach, at the 1971 Atla conference, made the assertion, “ATLA has not just happened! There has been a cause, a need, an exploration, an open-ended task.” There has been an interest in the work of theology and religious studies in North America since the late 19th century, and that continues: we went from approximately 50 seminary librarians at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary in June 1947 to almost 200 attendees at Atla Annual in Vancouver in June 2019 to almost 400 attendees at an online Atla Annual this year!

Atla was created by an act of the American Association of Theological Schools in order to strengthen the standard around library and information resources. At the 24th annual conference hosted by New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, the proposed purpose of Atla was “to bring its members into closer working relations with each other, to support theological and religious librarian-

ship, to improve theological libraries, and to interpret the role of such libraries in theological education. In order to accomplish these objectives,” the statement goes on, “the Association shall develop and implement standards of library service, promote research and experimental projects, encourage cooperative programs that make resources more available, publish and disseminate literature, and cooperate with organizations having similar aims.”

I share these lookbacks on purpose to help frame the future; we need to know where we have been in order to make decisions about the future. Last year, President Bartholomew outlined a multi-year trajectory of Atla from the Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG) to the creation of a new vision, core purpose, core values, rebranding, web presence refresh, through to the adoption of new organizational ends in February 2020.

Reflecting on the proposed purpose of Atla in 1970, consider our core purpose today: “To promote worldwide scholarly communication in religion and theology by advancing the work of libraries and related information providers.” These feed to and from our core values of today:

- Excellence in library collections and services
- Widest possible access to relevant information and ideas
- Hospitality, inclusion, and diversity
- Collegiality and collaboration
- Creativity, innovation, and transformation

Policy governance makes use of organizational ends as a way of strategic thinking. Organizational ends are meant to be a long-term view of the Association, the way that the board assesses the movement of the Association year over year. When you read them, where do you see yourself, your position, your institution fitting within the scope of Atla? Take a look at our current organizational ends:

*Atla exists so that: Librarians and information providers in theology and religion are connected in a sustainable and diverse global community at a cost that demonstrates good stewardship of resources.*

*This is further defined to include, but not be limited to, the following:*

1. *Users have access to quality academic and professional resources.*
  - 1.1 *Open access resources and special collections are available and discoverable by librarians and information professionals.*

*2. Institutional leaders have an awareness of the trends impacting the religion and theology library ecosystem.*

*3. Librarians and information providers are growing in their competencies and skills.*

*3.1 Librarians and information providers demonstrate competencies in diversity, inclusion, equity, and antiracism.*

*3.2 Information professionals are able to successfully navigate the changing landscape.*

*3.3 Librarians and information providers have access to professional development in technical and digital skills.*

*3.4 Information professionals have opportunities to innovate.*

Last year, President Bartholomew remarked, “Transformation is possible—we have the vision! Let’s do all that we can to live our values and bring this vision to life.” Yesterday, we were challenged by Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe—in my summary: how do we define, discover, dream, design, and deliver on the future of Atla? Finally, in a 2017 article by Amelia Gibson, Renate Chancellor, Nicole Cooke, Sarah Park Dahlen, Shari Lee and Yasmeen Shorish, they share that, “Libraries are not, and have never been, socially or politically neutral institutions . . . As community anchors, libraries (and librarians) actively influence their communities . . .” In our work as collectors and connectors, I look forward to the next year of continuing to carry out this important work.

Thank you.