
PLENARY

An Interview with Dr. Frank Yamada

Atla Annual 2025 Opening Plenary Speaker

Dr. Frank Yamada, the sixth executive director of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), delivered the opening plenary address at Atla Annual 2025. Under his leadership, ATS has fostered and encouraged innovation in member schools while strengthening their diverse missions to address the shifting landscape of communities of faith and the broader public. He has written about and speaks on many topics within theological education.

In preparation for the conference, Atla Product Specialist Todd Aiello and Marketing and Communications Coordinator Katie Thorman interviewed Dr. Yamada about his experiences. The following interview has been edited for clarity and length.¹

Could you tell us about your role as the executive director of The Association of Theological Schools, or ATS?

So, the first thing, as a Christian myself, and a religious person, I tended to view all of my roles in theological education as callings, and this certainly feels like a calling to me. I've experienced it as a calling, but it's been a different kind of calling than when I was a faculty person at McCormick, and before that at Seabury Western, where I think the focus was on intellectual formation of students within the theological school. As a theological educator, it was different from my vocation as a president of one of those schools, McCormick, where I thought the focus was more on aligning the mission of the school with the realities of the church and society, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., and in urban centers of Chicago.

ATS is a 281-member organization of schools that span a variety of Christian traditions, and we have one Jewish school. By charter, we are actually a Judeo-Christian organization. The predominance of ATS schools are Christian, but they come from a variety and a vast spectrum of theological positions and different traditions. In fact, many ATS schools were created as a result of an argument within a denomination. We have schools that are historically mainline Protestant, like Presbyterian, United Methodist, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ, and American Baptist, but we also have a plurality of schools—Evangelical Protestant schools. About 46% of ATS schools are Evangelical Protestant, which range from Pentecostal to more fundamentalist reformed—and all across the theological spectrum and different kinds of traditions. We also have Roman Catholic and Orthodox schools.

One of the things, I think, that makes this a unique calling is it is the one organization that I know of where these traditions actually come together and do shared work with each other. One of our core values is collaboration, and that's certainly what we live out in ATS. It is the one place that I know of in the world where you will get these different theological traditions, that have really been in conflict with each other over the centuries and millennia, together to work on our common mission, which is quality graduate theological education for the church and broader society. It's been amazing. In fact, I think it's a witness to the church and our current society about how theological differences can come together around a common mission and good work.

In your past professional work, you have served on Society of Biblical Literature committees, such as the Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics Group, the Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible Section, and the Committee for Underrepresented Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession. How has your participation in these groups impacted or shaped your views on the future of theological education?

In the roles before my executive work, I found that my ministry wasn't so much tied to the classroom or to my scholarship, but was tied much more to the overall thriving of the school.

I felt like I should play a role in leadership in some way in the academy, and that leadership was focused on lifting up the voices that weren't the most dominant voices in the discourses. I believe

that context matters deeply in biblical scholarship and in scholarship in general, so my participation and leadership over these committees sought to promote the important perspectives of women and of racial and ethnic communities in biblical interpretation. I think these committees align as they point to the future of theological education in a display of diversity. For decades now, demographers have understood that the US population will not have a racial or ethnic majority sometime before the midpoint of the century.

The diverse perspectives that I saw on scholarship are reflections of that diversity that I think are evident in the broader population, and I think they enrich scholarly conversations as well. It suggests that there are multiple ways through which people come to the text and understand the text, and I think it creates a disposition of the desire to listen to differences and to others that are different from you. I think those are tremendous values needed to be a good global citizen. I think it's also the kind of values that we're going to need as we emerge, eventually, into the second half of the 21st century, when we will have a greater diversity of peoples than this country has ever had.

Your talk at Atla Annual will touch on the reality that theological education is in the midst of a series of tectonic shifts at a time that has been called “the great transition” and will ask what roles librarians provide in this age of acceleration in digital technologies. Can you elaborate on this idea?

Sure, and I'll elaborate on them further at Atla Annual, too, of course. I think of these tectonic shifts you refer to in four categories. There are certainly more issues going on within theological education, but these are the four things that I think are markers of this great transition.

First, there is a shifting organizational financial model among schools. The best example that I can give is that at ATS we see approximately one merger about every three to four months. I don't see this as schools seeking to do the next best thing to closing, but as an attempt for schools to actively think about how they can extend the mission of the school when the idea of going forward as a freestanding institution, or as a non-partnered institution, is just not viable. So there are certainly some shifts happening in the financial and organizational model.

The second tectonic shift is adapting educational models. We have seen a proliferation of the different kinds of educational models for doing theological education. The one that grabs all the headlines, kind of post-COVID, has been online or distance education. We have data to support this. Several years prior to COVID, approximately two thirds of ATS schools were approved for online distance education. We have two forms of that: comprehensive, which means a school can offer a complete degree online, and partial, which means they can offer a course online, for example. During COVID, of course, every school went to distance learning in some way, shape, or form. Some were not so sophisticated, like those hosting conference calls, but others offered very robust online learning platforms. Currently, close to 93% of schools are approved for some form of distance education, and somewhere in the high 80% of schools are actually able to do a complete degree online, which means that they are approved to do comprehensive distance education. So online education is certainly one of the adapting modalities of educational models, but we have others, like competency-based theological education or education in various different kinds of languages—a growing number of ATS schools do their instruction primarily in Mandarin, Korean, or Spanish. All of these adaptations to the educational model signal a significant tectonic shift as well.

Third, schools are serving more diverse student populations now than they ever have. The number of racial, ethnic, and international students continues to grow. Although, we will see what this immigration crackdown will mean for international students—this has required schools to do some significant shifting again to their tectonic shift number two (educational models).

And fourth, we have seen an unprecedented number of leadership transitions. The top two roles in ATS are the chief executive officer or the president, executive deans and the chief academic officers, or the academic deans or associate deans. In those two roles we have seen over 600 transitions since 2017. That is unprecedented, and it is the largest number of transitions we have seen in the top two positions at ATS.

If I could say what role librarians and information services can play in all of these shifts—and this is just again a little foretaste of what I will expound upon at Atla Annual—I think one of the great

things that librarians have done over time is they have been a very adaptable profession. They have gone from this collections model, where they were the great archivist for the institution, to being really more instructors about how to use digital technologies to access information and knowledge. So, librarians now provide more access to different forms of knowledge and information while balancing the rising costs of IT infrastructure, and this will inform the future organizational and financial models of schools. Second, librarians can continue to be guides for faculty and students who are teaching and learning with an increasing use of digital technologies.

So how can information services support and resource these adaptations? I think there can be some good synergy that can help the institution adapt better, as it has partners, librarians, and information service professionals who help them see the benefits of what digital technologies can do for the classroom and help them adapt their own educational models.

Third, diverse students need more diverse resources. Librarians and information services personnel help to build resource bases that are more contextually relevant—and relevant for the diverse students that they serve and the diverse faculties that teach them. Finally, I think that information service professionals and librarians can work with senior leaders and executives at schools to see the possibilities within emerging technologies, like AI. I think librarians have become advocates for the use of technology and we need to ask how do we help faculty and executive or senior leaders really see the potential that lies in something like AI, as AI is changing the landscape of education. I think there's no question about it.

Looking forward to the future, how do you see ATS and Atla contributing to the future of the study of religion and theology?

Atla and ATS are serving schools and communities in a time of big transition and are another way to shape that transition. Though it has an ominous title, Ted Smith's book, *The End of Theological Education*, uses "end" to ask what is the telos of theological education. In the book, he describes a lot about the changing nature of institutions. I'll leave you to read his book to find out what his conclusion is, but I think he's right that what we're seeing is the changing nature of institutions and the current iteration is that institutions are very fragmented. They're really kind of pieced here and there and all over

the place, and are struggling to stay connected to each other. Where we see this in theological schools is that there is a greater disconnect now between, say, the local church and the seminary and the leaders that serve those churches who may be attending the seminary. Then, there are disconnections from that local church to its large adjudicatory or its sponsoring denomination. There's very little that actually holds that together well, or at least as well as it used to. I think what ATS and Atla provide is some of that connective tissue.

NOTES

- 1 This interview was previously published at <https://www.atla.com/blog/interview-with-atla-annual-plenary-speaker-dr-frank-yamada/>.

