

Respectfully diverse

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue

What is it about theological educators that allows them to get along with civility and respect in spite of wide theological diversity? I attended the recent biennial meeting of the Association of Theological Schools and was impressed with the spirit of friendship there. Maybe it's because ATS doesn't attempt to come to consensus about divisive issues. ATS has even negotiated the choppy waters of gender diversity among member ecclesial bodies.

The ATS's executive director, Daniel O. Aleshire, noted that of the more than 250 schools in ATS, about 40 percent are mainline Protestant, about 40 percent are evangelical and about 20 percent are Roman Catholic, with representation from Unitarian Universalists and Pentecostals as well. He explained that ATS maintains community by emphasizing practices that enhance community: "Get to know persons and relate to them as individuals." He told about David Hubbard, former president of the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary, and Vincent Cushing, head of the Washington Theological Union (Roman Catholic), who used to spend a weekend together annually to discuss their institutions' challenges, and in the process became great friends.

ATS president Richard Mouw, head of Fuller Theological Seminary, has respect and credibility with both mainline and evangelical folks and has initiated conversations with Mormon leaders. Mouw presented the 2012 Award for Distinguished Service to Barbara Wheeler, director of the Center for Theological Education, who knows more about theological education across the theological and ecclesiastical spectrum than anyone I know. Wheeler has done important comparative research in mainline and evangelical seminaries. She is an unapologetic liberal Presbyterian and has built a friendship with Mouw, an eloquent, unapologetic evangelical. As I observed the laughter and lively conversation between these two and their spouses at the banquet table, I wished liberals and evangelicals in my denomination could experience something similar.

Fr. Shawn McKnight (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops) reported on the increase in the number of Catholic seminary students, but added that it does not compensate for losses through retirement and death. Leith Anderson (National Association of Evangelicals) reported on the energy and vitality among evangelical schools and the steady growth in the evangelical community at large. Evangelicals, he said, were adjusting to a move from the periphery of American religion to the center.

I reported that the 12 schools related to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are robust, healthy and led by some of the brightest and most faithful Presbyterians I know. But the traditional model of theological education—three or four years of study in a residential graduate school setting—is encountering new challenges. Student debt makes vocational choices difficult, and second-career students cannot pick up their families and move to a campus. We need creative thinking about how to provide mainline Protestant leaders for the future.

I added that my greatest fear is that we mainline churches seem to be mirroring the deep ideological divide in our nation. We all would benefit from the respect, civility and Christian charity modeled by the ATS family.