

Summary of Findings from the AST Appreciative Inquiry Process

AST Presidential Search Committee

November 28, 2022

Introduction

In May of 2022, the Atlantic School of Theology Board of Governors appointed a Presidential Search Committee to search for a Long-Term President. Whereas a search had last been done in 2015, the Search Committee acknowledged much had changed in theological university education. The requirements for a President may have changed to meet the opportunities and challenges. The Committee decided to embark on a process of consulting the various constituent groups of ASTS using a process of Appreciative Inquiry.

The questions that formed the foundation of the Inquiry were:

What is the core purpose of Atlantic School of Theology within the mission of the church?

What is it that gives life, energy and meaning to the Atlantic School of Theology?

How does the role of President contribute to those elements?

The process unfolded in 3 modalities: a) interviews with senior administrators in various universities, particularly theological universities, b) focus groups with alumni, students, faculty, staff, librarians, sessional instructors, c) an online survey sent to individuals from the various focus groups.

It should be noted that this took place during a period of some collective anxiety as the school is between permanent presidents, a collective agreement between Faculty and the Board was being negotiated, the provincial government is seeking to form new relationships with the university sector and the number of churches within the three founding denominations continues to diminish. Yet, what was found from the consultations was an abiding positive regard toward the Atlantic School of Theology and a continued passionate commitment to its mission. There were also, of course, some areas of suggested improvement.

The survey formed the core basis of the Presidential Position Description and Duties subsequently produced by the Presidential Search Committee.

Respondents expressed universal gratitude for the opportunity to provide input in the process of choosing a President and affect the future of AST. To respect the confidentiality of respondents, the full survey results will not be distributed. However, respondents offered their time, energy, and prayers in the hopes their comments and ideas will be collected into created a healthy path forward, therefore, the Search Committee offers the following synopsis.

Synopsis of Appreciative Inquiry Consultation Findings

What is the core purpose of Atlantic School of Theology within the mission of the church?

Theological Education

- Educate clergy and laypeople and leaders who can understand, respond to, and evoke change in the church and the world. This education needs to help people encounter Jesus and grow in wisdom and tend their faith throughout their lives.
- To prepare students for pastoral ministry and for Christian witness in changing contexts.

Creative and Resourceful Scholarship

- AST generates research and scholarship that contributes to the mission of the church.

The challenge of diversity

- AST is a place where the difficulty of diversity – especially ecumenical diversity is forged and suffered together in Christian love.
- AST, because of its ecumenical founding and focus is also placed well to participate in inter-faith dialogue.

What is it that gives life, energy and meaning to the Atlantic School of Theology?

- People. The relationship between faculty/staff and students brings life, joy, and hope.
- The academic community which is informed by continuous contact with theological education in the world of academia.
- Ecumenical worship and fellowship centered on Christ and the gospel.
- The setting of the campus situated on the water and within the Eastern region of Canada. Respondents often named the setting as having a “sacred” quality.
- Creativity. There is some freedom to respond to challenges with some creativity because of being a smaller institution. There is a capacity for nimbleness and collaboration.
- Faculty were consistently named in focus groups and survey respondents as providing high quality and innovative teaching.
- Increased access to flexible, distance learning.

How does the role of President contribute to those elements?

- The President must be a person of faith and a deep spiritual life.
- He/she/they is a good listener, with an ability to discern and collaborate.
- The President has a passion for theological education and an understanding of the world of academia.

- The President works to ensure that AST has the resources it needs to fulfill its mission. He/she/they must have fund-raising and income-generating experience.
- The President can connect to the internal AST community and the communities that support AST's mission. He/she/they is required to represent AST in multiple spheres including churches, denominations, provincial government, donors and among other faith groups.
- The President will be a person who contribute to the AST community and participates in its worship life. He/she/they will be visibly and spiritually present.
- The President has the skill sets to mediate, reconcile, moderate and work through conflict. These are stressful days for theological schools. The President must be comfortable with disagreement and diversity and able to understand and respect different denominations.
- The President is capacious in the sense he/she/they are able to have an internal expansiveness and also create space for and with community.

Comments that identified challenges facing AST include:

- A recognition that AST is not very diverse in terms of student body or faculty.
- Alumni feel they are not connected to AST because AST does not seem to reach out. They would really like more communication.
- Concern about the state of diminishing church resources and how students may best equip to meet that challenge (i.e., Part-time ministry).
- An awareness of a state of higher anxiety as AST is in this "in-between" phase.
- A concern for the financial resources available to AST.
- An increasing need to train clergy to develop effective management and administrative skills.