

Celebrating ATS women in leadership— In praise of pioneers . . . and mentors

BY ELIZA SMITH BROWN

The ATS Women in Leadership initiative celebrates 19 years of programming this year. This milestone offers the opportunity to celebrate the women who have pioneered in the top leadership positions at member schools during the past 40 years. These trailblazers were among the first women to be appointed chief executive or chief academic officers at their schools, paving the way and serving as role models for other women in theological education.



40 years of firsts

When Barbara Brown Zikmund (aka BBZ) became dean of Pacific School of Religion in 1981, she was the first woman to be named chief academic officer of an ATS school. She was only the second to serve in one of the top two leadership positions at an ATS member school, following on the heels of Sallie McFague's deanship of Vanderbilt University School of Divinity in the 1970s.

BBZ's career would later take her to the presidency of Hartford Theological Seminary, where she served from 1990 to 2000. She told her story at the fall 2015 Women in Leadership Conference, where she talked to women aspiring to leadership positions about

expectations, ambition, and taking risks. "I remember when I started thinking about becoming a president," she recalls. "Everyone is watching. Can she do it? But just meeting expectations is a trap. Women need to claim their creativity to set new goals and stretch leadership in many directions."

Each decade since the 1980s has seen a marked increase in the number of women serving in the chief executive officer and chief academic officer positions. Every year since 1990, at least one woman has been named to one of the top two positions at an ATS member school.

Selected Women Pioneers in Theological Education



First woman to be dean of a university divinity school—**Sallie McFague**, Vanderbilt University School of Divinity (1975–1979)



First Asian/Asian American woman to serve as academic dean of an ATS school—**Esther Yue Ng**, Christian Witness Theological Seminary (2003–present)



First woman to be named CAO of an ATS member school—**Barbara Brown Zikmund**, Pacific School of Religion (1981–1990), later president of Hartford Seminary 1990–2000)



First Latina American woman CAO of an ATS school—**Daisy Machado**, Lexington Theological Seminary (2005–2009)



First African American woman CEO of an ATS member school and the first woman to serve as president of any historically black theological seminary—**Leah Gaskin Fitchue**, Payne Theological Seminary (2004–2015)



First woman president of a Catholic ATS school—**Patricia Schoelles**, St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry (1993–2014)



First African American woman to serve as dean of an ATS school—**Marsha Foster Boyd**, Payne Theological Seminary (1998–c.1999), later president of Ecumenical Theological Seminary (2006–2013)



First woman principal of a Canadian ATS school—**Faith Rohrbough**, Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon (1996–2004)



First Asian/Asian American female president of an ATS school—**Kathryn Leung**, China Evangelical Seminary, North America (2007–present)



Longest tenure of a woman as CEO of an ATS member school—**Rebecca Parker**, Starr King School for the Ministry (1990–2014)¹

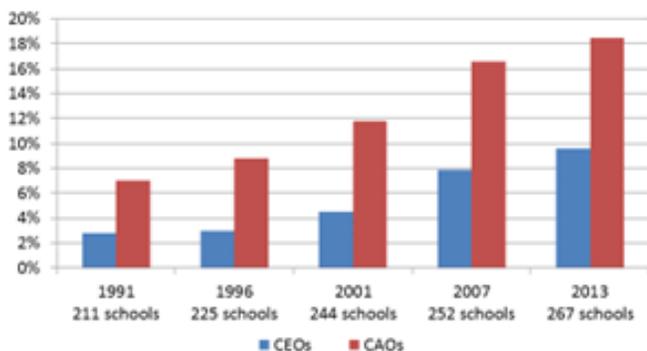
¹ The notable 30-year tenure of Barbara Wheeler as president was at ATS Affiliate Auburn Seminary.

Once broken, the glass ceiling has proven to have many panes, leaving the way for a number of other pioneers in a growing band of women leaders. Leah Gaskin Fitchue, the first African American woman CEO of an ATS member school and the first woman president of any historically black theological seminary, served at Payne Theological Seminary for 12 years. “I think I was called to the presidency because it was clear that I was able to handle the responsibilities but also because I had the blessing of a mentor and friend in the board chair,

Today, the 274 ATS member schools are led by 31 women CEOs and 48 women CAOs.

Decade	New CEOs	New CAOs
1980s	1	1
1990s	13	18
2000s	23	65
2010s (first half)	13	34

Relative Proportion of Women Administrators in ATS Schools



Bishop Vinton R. Anderson. Surely I felt some pressure, but underneath all the challenges and the pressure was the assurance that God had not made God’s first mistake by making me the first woman president. If that decision worked for God, it worked for me.” She recalls praying to God, “I need you to work with me to make certain that

I do not fail. I am now responsible for making the statement that a woman can run this institution and establish that model, opening the door for all women.” Confident in her calling and in the guidance to know “how to stay the course,” Fitchue became a change agent, taking risks and moving into new territory with such innovations as a fully online MDiv that opened Payne’s sphere of influence to the entire AME Church.

Pathways to leadership

The CAO’s office is not a certain pathway to the CEO’s office, but the transition from CAO to CEO can be a helpful one. ATS records reflect just 14 women who have made that leap, six of them while remaining at the same school. Six of those 14 are still serving as CEOs today: Barbara Holmes (United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities); Alice Hunt (Chicago Theological Seminary); Gail O’Day (Wake Forest University School of Divinity); Lallene Rector (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary); Robin Steinke (Luther Seminary); and Emilie Townes (Vanderbilt University Divinity School).

Robin Steinke notes, “I am surprised at how few of us came via the CAO office.” She adds, “For me, I did not plan this pathway. I just tried to be a very good student of the work of the CAO, the faculty, administration, accreditation, and all the complexities of this holy calling. I also had the benefit of serving with a president who created the institutional space for me to step into another dimension of service and who supported me during a 12-year tenure as a dean.”

Gail O’Day agrees that an administrative position like that of the CAO “places you into partnership with the CEO and provides a critical glimpse into the full breadth of that job.” Transition into both jobs, she adds, “changes people’s perceptions of you and changes your relationships with your colleagues. Those changes can be particularly difficult if you are the first woman in your position.”

And Emilie Townes, who transitioned from a CAO position to become the first female African American dean of a university divinity school says, “I did not see it. I did not

seek it. I tried to avoid it. It found me and I found I had some aptitude for it. One of the things that I learned on the journey was that it was vital that I pay attention to the various leadership models all around me—both strong and problematic. I also learned that mentoring, which was priceless, came from both likely and unlikely folks and colleagues.”

Where do pioneering women in theological education get their start? “It is from the ranks of faculty that most women advance to top administrative leadership positions,” says Debbie Gin, ATS director of research and faculty development. According to Barbara Holmes, who transitioned from faculty to dean at Memphis Theological Seminary and then to the presidency at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, “Becoming dean of a school where I had served as faculty and understood the culture allowed me to focus on the elements of organizational leadership required.”

Gin points to the growing potential of the pipeline but notes that the pipeline needs to be filled . . . and expanded. Among faculty, women have achieved a growing representation over the past 25 years, from 15% in 1990 to 24% today, but still less than the one-third representation of women among students. “Numeric representation, however, is only the first piece of the puzzle,” says Gin, whose research has revealed that women faculty most likely to pursue higher level administration are those who have had opportunities to use leadership training they have received along the way. “But anecdotally,” she adds, “women don’t often have those opportunities to use what they’re learned. They aren’t the ones seen as having leadership potential and aren’t invited to fill upper-level leadership roles. The pipeline is definitely important, but so is the need to examine perceptions of who would make a good leader.”

BBZ advises any woman thinking about the path to top administrative positions, “Theological leadership is not an accomplishment. It’s a gift. Think about how you can receive that gift.” Alice Hunt adds, “both as a CAO and a CEO, I had wonderful mentors from among my colleagues. That’s a “pay it forward” scenario that I continue to this day.”

Continued support from ATS

The Women in Leadership programming hosted by ATS provides an opportunity for women to network, to build mentoring relationships, and to examine their vocations as theological educators. As we continue to celebrate the work of these pioneers and build the archives, we welcome any corrections or clarifications to our records, and we invite you to share your stories by emailing [Eliza Smith Brown](#).



*Eliza Smith Brown is Director, Communications and External Relations for The Association of Theological Schools. Special thanks are due to **Nadine Banks**, Daniel Aleshire’s executive assistant, who compiled the timeline that formed the basis for this article.*

Save the Date!

The next Presidential Leadership Intensive Conference will be January 22–25, 2017, in San Antonio, with a preconference January 21–22 for women presidents.