

Dreams and strategies: Cultivating institutions in service to the gospel

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [October 17, 2006](#) issue

"What keeps you up at night?" I asked the African cardinal at the end of a leisurely lunch near his home. Our conversation had ranged across a variety of topics: the scourge of AIDS in Africa, ineffective leadership within the churches, the character of theological education in our respective contexts, and our own calls to ministry. The cardinal has a reputation as a highly effective leader, and I admire his insights as well as the grace and character he embodies. He has big dreams, yet very few resources with which to work. I wondered which of these challenges he struggled with most.

His answer: trying to discern how best to deploy resources in service of the church's mission. "When do we take our financial resources and try to strengthen the schools we have established, and when should we start new schools in areas that desperately need them? How can we raise up people who can lead these institutions as Christians, and equip them to lead faithfully and effectively?"

The cardinal wants to create institutions that are in service of the church's mission and equip religious leaders to lead them. He was thinking strategically about religious education in an entire country, and about institutions that will enhance the spread of the gospel and strengthen the education of people entrusted to his care.

The task of cultivating institutions in service to the gospel seems obvious in the cardinal's context. The same challenge often remains obscure or at best poorly framed among U.S. mainline Protestants. Why is that so? After all, pastoral ministry and congregational life depend for their nurture and excellence on a wide range of religious institutions that are steadfast, imaginative and effective.

Yet too often mainline Protestants in the United States take such institutions for granted. In a context of relative affluence and some religious establishment, it's easy to presume that our churches, colleges, seminaries, publishing houses, judicatories and large-scale social service agencies have been around forever. This

is particularly true when institutions have a history that goes back several centuries, but even relatively young institutions can take on an air of permanence.

I remember being shocked when one of our oldest Duke Divinity School alumni, a man who graduated in 1932, described to me the time before Duke Chapel was built and what it was like to watch it being built in the early 1930s. I remember thinking to myself, “But Duke Chapel has always been there.”

In recent decades, we have tended to see institutions as necessary evils. We equate them with bureaucracy and red tape, describing them as the primary obstacles to creativity, change and community. We criticize them, are frustrated by them and try to evade them.

To be sure, institutions often need to be criticized—they can degenerate into bloated bureaucracies that become obstacles to the gospel and sometimes even to basic effectiveness and humane practice. Institutions need renovation and creativity if they are to keep their purposes aligned with their mission. But because of a combination of inattentiveness (born of taking institutions for granted) and cynicism (born of presuming them to be necessary evils), we have failed to notice the fragility of institutions, their importance for sustaining creativity and change and community, and their strategic capacity for enabling and effecting a powerful witness in service of the gospel.

Two networks of institutions that we take for granted were unknown a half-century ago: hospice and Habitat for Humanity. Even the terms *hospice* and *habitat for humanity* were unknown to people in the United States in 1950, let alone the practices, convictions and institutional movements they represent. Key leaders in both organizations once asked the same questions that the cardinal asked: When should we devote resources to strengthening efforts already established? When should we start new efforts? These leaders have cultivated institutions that address care for the dying and housing for the poor on a tremendous scale and with remarkable scope.

Mainline Protestants can no longer afford to take our institutions for granted. They are undergoing rapid and dramatic changes and are facing critically important challenges about their mission and purpose. Some institutions are fragile because of declining resources or resistance to change, others because they are just beginning to take root and grow. Many need to cultivate connections to other agencies to

accomplish their larger purposes.

The landscape for religious institutions is fraught with both danger and potential. This could be a time of great creativity and promise, but only if we pay more careful attention to cultivating institutions: to attending to and caring for their mission and to identifying when resources need to be given to help existing institutions do their work better, when new ones need to be created or others need a new sense of identity, and when some institutions need to be allowed to die. We also need to raise up leaders who are equipped to lead religious institutions of diverse scale and scope in creative, faithful and effective ways.

Are we ready to engage in institutional creativity at the level that my African friend is already displaying? Sometimes that question keeps me up at night.