

Learning curve: International engagement

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [May 18, 2010](#) issue

Abraham haunts me. When I wrote my first Faith Matters column in 1997, I began with those three words. At that time I was in transition—moving from Maryland to North Carolina, and from a faculty position teaching undergraduates at Loyola College in Maryland to a position as dean of Duke Divinity School.

In that column I reflected on Abraham's faith and trust. I was particularly troubled by all of our family's stuff; it's difficult to follow God's leading if we are weighed down by possessions. In the 13 years since, I have acquired more possessions, especially books. But I have been able to stay put—until now. I will step down as dean at the end of June in order to assume a new position: vice-president and vice-provost for International Strategy and Programs. As I end my time as dean (and as a writer of Faith Matters columns), I am still haunted by Abraham.

I am haunted by Abraham's trust in God to lead him. Abraham has no full-fledged plan for the future in hand. I have often thought that he, as well as the disciples in Mark's Gospel, is far too ready to follow God at the drop of a fisherman's net. I would have wanted more details before I signed up. I am a planner by temperament; I don't like risky business. I don't even take fun trips without guaranteed reservations and clear itineraries.

Yet my new position is anything but guaranteed or clear. I will be working on Duke's strategy for global engagement. Some aspects are clear enough in outline, such as our partnership with the City of Kunshan, outside of Shanghai, China, and with Shanghai Jiao Tong University to build a campus in Kunshan that includes joint programs with SJTU. Yet there are significant challenges and opportunities in the details, and it is far from clear what that campus should or will look like in five to ten years. Nor is it clear what it will mean for us to be in deep relationship with our Chinese partners. There are risks on all sides.

We intend to develop a stronger presence in India as well as deepen and develop partnerships on other continents. The sheer scale and geographical scope of my responsibilities keep me awake at night in front of Google searches; when I find myself drifting off, I am reawakened by the challenge of how to articulate global engagement so that strategy and our relationships with others are embedded partnerships rather than neocolonialist enterprises or academic tourism. My learning curve seems less a curve than a sheer cliff to scale. I'm trying not to look down.

Yet it seems clear to me that this work is a calling. I feel significant continuity between the ways my vocation has developed in my work as dean and this new invitation. I've become convinced that the strongest leaders of the 21st century will be internationally engaged. That's why universities pursue international strategies and develop international programs. I have glimpsed this in our international partnerships, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

Further, I have come to care deeply about what Hugh Heclo calls "thinking institutionally": attending to what it means to establish, preserve, reform and renew institutions as a part of our commitment to their importance for human flourishing. In my new position I will continue to oversee leadership education at Duke Divinity and will be involved in strengthening the work of Christian institutional leadership and management.

I have learned, through conversations and work in South Africa, Côte d'Ivoire and southern Sudan, some fresh ways to think about what faithful and effective theological education is in their contexts. My favorite example is that the first four subjects being taught in a new Episcopal seminary in southern Sudan are Hebrew, Greek, agriculture and public health.

I am excited to be working on new models of teaching and learning and to be wrestling with what it means to cultivate learning cultures instead of lecturing cultures. I am drawn to doing this by listening to the needs and aspirations of others, with the goal of cultivating strength in their own settings. I aim to help students and faculty from diverse cultures connect with one another in formative ways.

I expect to be stretched to think and act in fresh ways about the importance of institutions and the development of learning cultures. There is a great deal at stake in developing education globally in ways that nurture life rather than replicate or intensify brokenness. It's a challenge and opportunity to which I am committed. I only wish I could do it without having to set forth to a far country, unsure of where I

am going or what I am doing. As I go, Abraham will continue to haunt me, and I will continue to pray that the call I am discerning is from God.