

A Steady Hand

Throughout 14 years as GTU dean, Arthur Holder has led with wisdom and grace

This summer, Dr. Arthur G. Holder will be retiring as the GTU's Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs after 14 years of distinguished service. On the next three pages, you'll find excerpts from reflections written by members of the GTU community in celebration of Arthur's work. Visit www.gtu.edu/honoringArthur to see more—and to share your own words of appreciation.

About fifteen years ago, I sat down to lunch with Arthur Holder, then Dean of Academic Affairs and Professor of Christian Spirituality at Church Divinity School of the Pacific. Over the course of our conversation, I realized Arthur might be open to being recruited for the position of GTU Dean, and encouraged the President to approach him immediately. I take pride in having helped recruit Arthur Holder to serve as Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs at the GTU, as he has been exactly the Dean the GTU needed during these challenging times.

The GTU Deanship is a fascinating but challenging position, with a great deal of responsibility to facilitate consortial academic collaboration and to run a world-class doctoral program, while drawing almost entirely on faculty whose employment and primary teaching responsibilities are in one of the member schools. The responsibilities are great, but the actual structural authority of the Dean is “soft,” based on the power of persuasion to establish and sustain collaborative relationships. It takes a special set of virtues to be effective in this position, and Arthur Holder has been richly endowed with those virtues.

Arthur has led the Core Doctoral Faculty with steady wisdom, gentle humor, and a profound gift for seeing reasonable pathways through complex issues. He listens well, and has a knack for cutting through Gordian knots of miscommunication. His clear thinking and

lucid communication engender trust and confidence. When those around him are digging in and exaggerating their different points of view, Arthur calmly leads the discussion back to the key underlying issues on which there is often substantial agreement. He is articulate, thorough, insightful—and always fair.

Arthur is patient and resilient, taking the long view. Years before the GTU adopted its new doctoral curriculum, Arthur established a task force of young faculty who then presented the bones of the structure now in place. At that time the Core Doctoral Faculty was intrigued, but not ready to make a change. But those seeds, planted well in advance, made the eventual acceptance of the new structure easier, for the ideas had been in the air for some time.

Like many other faculty, I have come to trust Arthur's even-handed judgment on policy and student issues. As a former Dean, I have a



good understanding of GTU policies and procedures, but I have learned again and again that it is wise to consult Arthur to see if I am missing an important perspective or possible implications of an issue. He has more than once clarified my thinking so that I am more even-handed in applying policy and procedures to complex student situations.

I am in awe of Arthur's ability to respond quickly, clearly, and crisply to inquiries. He once emailed me a response to a query while he was standing in line at the hardware store! His efficient responses to faculty and staff keep the institution running smoothly and efficiently,



and help us feel we have access to our Dean.

As a member of the GTU's Rostered Faculty, I have reported to him annually and sought his counsel about professional decisions, sabbaticals, and priorities. He is astonishingly supportive, both personally and professionally, yet he asks discerning and insightful questions that have caused me to think deeply about my work and my life. His generous spirit, his ability to set expectations that help me thrive, and his

astonishing capacity to appreciate the work and gifts of others have modeled for me what leadership—and friendship—are all about.

Arthur Holder has made a deep and lasting mark on this institution. We are all better for his service, his presence, his steady hand on the rudder of the institution as it has navigated rough seas.

Judith Berling is Professor of Chinese and Comparative Religions, and former Dean of the GTU.

By Elizabeth Drescher

Celebrating the Venerable Arthur Holder

As Arthur Holder prepares to retire as GTU Dean, I imagine many of his former students and advisees are struggling, as I have been, to find the right words to express the scope and meaning of Arthur's contributions to our academic and personal lives. This has been frustrating, but the truth is that it's not really my fault. So many of the gifts Arthur shared with me came with few words themselves—rescuing me from an ill-fitting advising situation; standing up for my work behind the scenes with faculty who didn't quite get it or didn't think I could do it; steering me toward research, speaking, publishing, and teaching opportunities; opening the path toward my first academic position and listening patiently when it seemed necessary to leave; and supporting me directly and indirectly as I crafted a new way to do the work I felt called to do. All these things came about with the same calm, kind, pastoral demeanor that attended to my own developing understanding of myself as a scholar, educator, and writer. Sure, there were lots of words in the margins of my papers and the dissertation itself, but these were always framed by the sustained experience of Arthur as a generous and caring educator, a thoughtful mentor, and an accomplished, humble, and profoundly moral academic exemplar.

This last bit—Arthur Holder as an academic exemplar—has been no small thing for me even as I've followed a somewhat less conventional vocational path. As a graduate student, I often referred to Arthur, especially with regard to his steady and substantive work on the spirituality of the early Middle Ages and particularly the writings of the Venerable Bede, as “a meat and potatoes historian.” Arthur's sustained attention to this body of work offered a depth and richness to the developing discipline of Christian spirituality, and to religious studies in general. Arthur's scholarship also showed me that a solid, substantive,

historical grounding in traditional spiritualities earned one a right to venture further afield, to experiment, to play, even, with the dusty tomes, methods, and, importantly, culture of a discipline.

In his 2010 Presidential Address to the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality (SSCS), Arthur laid out a bold and provocative challenge. Of course, he did it with tremendous grace, with deep respect for the culture of the discipline, and with great enthusiasm for the possibilities that a reconsideration of the sources, methods, and motivations in the discipline might yield in terms of a Christian value he has long championed and modeled: Justice. Thus, he insisted, “Future scholars in a truly pluralistic field of Christian spirituality will learn to ask, ‘How can this text help us serve the cause of justice?’”

I cannot say how much I have answered that question, but I can say that Arthur's influence on me as a scholar, an educator, and a wobbly sort of disciple myself keeps it alive in my work. It is a question that points us toward the benefits pressing beyond the “classic” boundaries of any discipline and of attending to even what appear to be the most marginal of approaches and perspectives so we can open new ways of seeing and understanding a rapidly changing world. It is a question, furthermore, that carries with it a gracious acceptance of both the solidly traditional and the often uncertain frameworks of the new. It is a venerable question from among the most venerable of scholars and educators I have known, Arthur G. Holder. I feel incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to keep trying to put it into practice.

Elizabeth Drescher (PhD, '08) is Adjunct Associate Professor of Religion and Pastoral Ministry at Santa Clara University and author of Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones (Oxford, 2015).



The GTU Honors Arthur Holder

Throughout my six years serving with Arthur Holder on the GTU Council of Deans, I was continually impressed by his competence and graciousness. Arthur was always fully informed of the varied and complex administrative developments at the GTU, and his even-tempered personality was a perfect fit for dealing with its varied constituencies. I always found him to be a strong advocate for faculty and students.

—**Bruce Lescher** (PhD, '91), Senior Lecturer in Christian Spirituality and former Associate Academic Dean, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University

Words cannot express how deeply grateful I am for Arthur Holder's extraordinary leadership, mentorship, and friendship. I am thankful for his generosity of spirit, and for the care and kindness he has shown me and the Center for Islamic Studies. Arthur is exemplary in that Christian Spirituality is not just his academic commitment but something he practices in all that he does. I am a better director, scholar, teacher, and Muslim because of his dedication. Alhamdulillah (Praise God) and congratulations to Arthur Holder for his many years of exceptional and selfless service as GTU Dean.

—**Munir Jiwa**, Director, Center for Islamic Studies

Arthur Holder has been an excellent friend to New College Berkeley and me during his years as Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs at the GTU. Although NCB is one of the smaller organizations within the GTU, Arthur has never given me the sense that he regards me or New College Berkeley as inconsequential. My NCB colleagues and I often comment that we don't know when we've met a person who so graciously blends the gifts of scholar, pastor, and leader. Arthur's scholarship is significant, and he is a ready mentor to other scholars. His pastoral care is evident in the way he listens to colleagues, even in the context of agenda-driven meetings. As a leader, he empowers others and helps us grow in the work we do. During Arthur's years as Dean, there have been transitions for the GTU and many of the schools and institutes within it. Education—and theological education in particular—has been weathering storms. I can't think of a better person to have offered navigational guidance to the GTU through all kinds of weather than Dean Arthur Holder.

—**Susan S. Phillips**, Executive Director and Professor of Christianity and Sociology, New College Berkeley



I must have performed many good deeds over the course of several lifetimes, because in this life I've had the blessing of working closely with Arthur G. Holder. From our earliest days of negotiating with faculty over admissions decisions to our recent work together on accreditation and the new doctoral program curriculum, I have had a profound appreciation for Arthur's genuine spirit, intellect, eloquence, deep commitment, faith, good humor, and, especially, his respect and support. He is a steadfast comrade, a respectful associate, a creative thinker, a co-teacher who works in full partnership, a mentor with an elegant diplomacy, an executive administrator who bridges imagination and reality, and a cherished friend.

—**Kathleen Kook**, GTU Dean of Students

Arthur has been a trusted friend, a wise Dean, and a committed member of the Board of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences for many years. As my Dean, Arthur has listened to my joys and challenges in teaching MDiv and doctoral courses, and I have grown wonderfully through our annual faculty review. On the CTNS Board, Arthur has represented both the GTU's perspective and CTNS's vision in gentle yet clear ways, and offered sage advice that helped CTNS negotiate the complicated transition from GTU Affiliate to Program Unit. Arthur truly embodies Christian discipleship in the wonderful GTU ethos of ecumenical and inter-religious communities. I am deeply grateful that he has been my academic Dean, my colleague in scholarship, my trusted voice of wisdom and prudence for CTNS, and most of all my dear friend.

—**Robert J. Russell**, Director, Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences

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