



# Global Faculty Initiative

**The Faculty Initiative  
seeks to promote the integration  
of Christian faith and academic disciplines  
by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars  
across the spectrum of faculties  
in research universities  
worldwide.**

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Disciplinary Note

**CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP**

Michael Spence

President & Provost of University College London

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The two sections that spoke to me, especially reading them together, were: (i) the penultimate paragraph on the prophetic role of the Christian academic through the exercise of the Christian epistemic virtues; and (ii) the section on functional hierarchies marked by a fraternal ethos.

**Prophetic Witness**

The question that these sections raised for me concerns the nature of leadership in a university as a Christian, especially in contexts in which difficult decisions need to be made. Of course, at one level, the answer is obvious: the Christian leader is humble, consultative, open to correction, collaborative, evidence-based in their decision-making, clear in their communication, and so on. But the context in which leadership is exercised frames its capacity for witness that is prophetic. In a culture increasingly fond of dualisms, much institutional discourse in universities is marked by the opposition of 'management' and 'academics', the 'centre' and the 'faculties', the 'corporate' and the 'communal,' and so on, with university leaders, whatever their personal styles, typecast as 'centralising corporate managerialists'. In this context the adjective 'Christian' becomes an additional burden in communities inherently suspicious of religious commitment and prone to identify that commitment with oppressive hierarchy; at the University of Sydney it was only when the staff unions were particularly irritated by me that they would call me the 'Rev.' Dr Michael Spence.

**Epistemic Virtues**

For the Christian leader there are therefore two challenges. The first is the challenge shared with all Christian academics of living authentically the prophetic witness to which they are called. The second is the challenge to construct (and, uncomfortable though it may be, the process is probably as deliberate as that verb implies) a personal brand that projects a commitment to the Christian epistemic virtues in an environment in which everything that they do is likely to be read in ways fundamentally at odds with the Christian witness to which they are called. The risks are enormous, not least the risks associated with inevitable lapses in living the Christian epistemic virtues authentically in the public eye, especially if an

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attempt is made to create a personal brand that claims a personal commitment to those values. The community is always waiting to find the centralising corporate managerialist hiding behind the thoughtful, humble, and consultative academic leader. And the community is allergic to hypocrisy, the great sin in an age that values so-called authenticity above almost all else.

Nigel's piece was, therefore, helpful for me as a reminder both that grappling with those challenges is the task to which a Christian university leader is necessarily called, and of the danger of 'the proud and intimidating assertion of the ego'. While his essay also reminds that the Christian leader will necessarily sometimes, or often, fail in meeting those challenges, the hope must be that in God's grace there is utility in the honest attempt to take them on. It should also give Christian staff the incentive to pray for those Christian members of the university who, by virtue of their leadership role, need to find a prophetic voice under the glare of more public scrutiny.

**For more information**

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