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### **Gardner-Webb Grad Teaching at Arizona State and Completing First Book**

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# Gardner-Webb Grad Teaching at Arizona State and Completing First Book

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Office of University  
Communications

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## *Jason Bruner ('05) Follows Example set by GWU Professors*

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Jason Bruner ('05) was near the end of his career at Gardner-Webb University when his future became clear. Influenced by several professors in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy, he vividly remembers the moment teaching became a possibility.

“I took several classes from the late Dr. Dan Goodman in the School of Divinity. It was in his classes that I first thought, ‘If I ever become a professor, I’d want to do it half as well as he does it,’” Bruner shared. “He was demanding and kind, funny and rigorous—all at the same time—and he never seemed to try to be anyone other than who he was. He took what he did seriously, but he didn’t take himself seriously ... He serves as a continual model of a great professor.”

An assistant professor of global Christianity at Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe, Ariz., Bruner strives to have the same influence on his students. It’s an ambitious task at a school that has around 70,000 students on its campuses.

“All of my education was in smaller schools, so I’m still trying to get used to the many differences that exist between a university like Gardner-Webb and a large state school like ASU,” Bruner observed. “Compared to other courses at ASU, my classes aren’t huge, usually around 30-50 students. On coming to ASU, what struck me about the students was how diverse they were. I have had students who were veterans; exchange students from India, Saudi Arabia, and China; and children of parents who were first generation immigrants to the United States. The students come from all sorts of religious, non-religious, political convictions, and socio-economic backgrounds. Teaching about religion in that kind of context is challenging but also very enriching.”

To connect with his students, Bruner relies on the teaching methods of his Gardner-Webb professors, who were engaged in and out of the classroom—serving as mentors in student clubs and activities, leading worship services, and other kinds of extra-curricular activities.

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Dr. Eddie Stepp visits with Jason Bruner

“They were consistently interested in starting constructive conversations, in challenging students to be thoughtful and reflective in their beliefs, and to think critically in the constructive sense of the word,” Bruner assessed. “I took many of these things for granted when I was at Gardner-Webb, but having seen different kinds of universities since leaving, I now appreciate how valuable and significant these fundamental practices are to creating an excellent educational environment.”

Bruner visits his Gardner-Webb professors occasionally, when he and his wife, Keeley Causby Bruner, visit her family in Shelby, N.C. When his schedule allows, Bruner does some trail running and cycling—a pastime he developed at Gardner-Webb while biking the Cleveland County countryside.

He’s had less time for outdoor adventures while working to complete his first book on the cultural history of the East African revival in Uganda, focusing on 1930 to 1950. His interest in the topic was sparked by mission trips he took in high school and as a student at Gardner-Webb.

“I got interested in the history of Christians who went out to convert people in other parts of the world,” he explained. “Looking at this revival movement in Uganda provides an opportunity for me to think about the ways that Christian conversion happens within cultures and societies. It also is an example of the creativity and adaptability of the Christian faith.”

He researched Christian missionaries at Gardner-Webb, where he double majored in religious studies and Spanish, and while completing his master’s in theological studies at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass., and his Ph.D. in Modern Christian History from Princeton (N.J.) Theological Seminary. Bruner’s work has been published in multiple journals, including the “Journal of Religion in Africa” and “Studies in World Christianity and Social Science Missions.” He has also contributed to the book “A Cultural History of Firearms” with a chapter titled, “Fishers of Men and Hunters of Lion.”

His research techniques were also developed under the guidance \_\_\_\_\_ of Gardner-Webb professors, especially mentors in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy. The “Lives of Jesus” seminar taught by Dr. Ron Williams, professor emeritus of religious studies, introduced him to the challenges and benefits of doing careful, focused historical and theological inquiry and research.

“I think of the precision that Dr. Charles Moore demanded in Spanish, the rigor of Dr. Lorin Cranford’s New Testament theology courses and the ways that professors like Dr. Kent Blevins challenged the assumptions that I brought to the study of theology, ethics, or the Bible,” Bruner recalled. “And Dr. Eddie Stepp (Department Chair, Religious Studies) worked with me on my year-long honors thesis project, which gave me my first opportunity

to develop a larger historical project. In all these ways, my coursework at Gardner-Webb gave me the foundational tools for thinking deeply, critically, and thoughtfully, a process which I chose to continue through graduate school.”

Blevins is pleased to hear that his former student is doing well and has taken his Gardner-Webb experiences with him on his scholarly journey. “Now Jason is influencing another generation of students, and eventually some of those students will thank him for the impact he had in their lives,” Blevins affirmed. “I am grateful for the influence Jason is having on his students, and I look forward to seeing where his journey takes him in the future.”