



The City School
LIGHT TO THE CITY

When God Says, "I Want Your Heart": Leadership Starting From The Inside

Jake Becker, 2012-13 Van Lunen Fellow
Head of School, The City School, Philadelphia, PA
www.cityschool.org
Consultant: Dave Medema, Pondera Advisors

Introduction - It is now late-June 2013. I am a few days away from completing my second year as Head of School among a beautiful school community that is now known as The City School. I have lived in Philadelphia since I was nine years old. Prior to joining the school, I served the Finance Director for a Christian community health center that practically tripled in size during my five years there. For nearly ten years I have studied and cared very much about organizational leadership. These past two years, however, have been my first opportunity to serve as the executive leader. These two years have been very intense. A lot has changed at our school. I have learned a great deal about myself that I did not previously know existed. I feel somewhat like the way I felt after my first two years of marriage, "Man, I've been looking forward to this for a long time. It is an amazing blessing. But in spite of my best efforts I still wasn't ready for it." I applied to the Van Lunen program hoping for technical assistance with a specific project and for a broader professional network. I leave instead permanently, personally, transformed.

Choosing A Project - I ran into Jim Marsh when he came to Philadelphia a few months back for the annual NAIS conference. Jim asked me to describe my experience with the Van Lunen fellowship to another school leader sitting nearby. I was happy to and described what I was doing in my project as "miraculous." I would have never chosen a project like this on my own. It was Bruce Hekman who gave me an amazing chance to undertake this deep change experience.

I originally applied to the program hoping to receive some in depth, longitudinal technical assistance for, what I believed at the time, the most mission-critical, complex strategic initiative in the coming year -- significantly increasing our tuition. From my perspective implementing something close to "cost-based" tuition would be the thing to break our perpetually increasing dependence on fundraising, and in the process be a vote of confidence in the heart of our school--the quality of the classroom experience. In my mind we were worth \$8,300, not \$6,175, but were too afraid to ask for it. A thirty percent increase in tuition, with a corresponding increase in financial aid for those who needed it, could either break our current cycle of slow death and launch us to new heights if done well or accelerate the dying process and crush us if executed poorly. While these changes were indeed implemented in the past school year and we are still around to tell the tale, the Van Lunen program did not support this work directly as I had originally wanted. God had something deeper in mind.

While I asked for help with the tuition project, I was assigned to work on fundraising. Even though it didn't align with my hopes for cost-based tuition TA, this project still made logical sense. We raise over \$750,000 annually to keep the budget balanced and I had zero direct fundraising experience prior to joining the school. We have a strong fundraising team, however, and we already had some very positive momentum going built off of our first year together with me as the new guy. I was not able to get traction for the sort of significant involvement my Van Lunen consultant would have ably provided. We simply needed time to gel as a team without the intervention of an outside consultant. Conversely, when Bruce Hekman gave me a call a week or so after our first residency asking me if I would consider getting additional support in an

area of need identified by the Strengths-Finders assessment, I was on board immediately. Three of my top five strengths were in the strategic planning domain, while the other two were very non-relational strengths in the executing and influencing domains. The Strengths-Finders assessment was calling out loudly to a personal deficit in my ability and interest in building relationships. Bruce didn't reassign my project, but he gave me the chance to think about it. Between our positive team growth in fundraising and talking with Dave Medema about an executive coaching project on relationship-building, I knew the direction I had to pursue.

What I Did - I looked inward. As someone who is ambitious and motivated to do "hard things" for the Lord, I have been very outward focused on my career and the advancement of the organizations I have worked for. So, when Dave and I started talking about executive coaching in the area of relationship building, I was still thinking about externally-focused milestones and achievements. After working together for about two months Dave trashed my first attempt at filling out an Individual Development Plan. It was full of external and career goals, nothing about personal development in terms of the heart and my relationship with others. "Jake, this is garbage and doesn't even touch how you will begin to be more transparent and build stronger relationships with your team." (Or something like that.)

Dave was willing to be so bold with me because he is good at what he does and held to the courage of his own convictions. My very first assignment with Dave was to fill out the 300+ question Pondera® Virtual Advisor, which is like the Strengths-Finder survey on performance-enhancing drugs without all the nasty side effects. The tool was able to provide an analysis of my tendencies and strengths across 30 different categories, such as "team-orientation" and "drive for relationship." The assessment tool then provides a more categorical description of my overall personality profile. After more than 300 questions, I was an analyst. I was not just an analyst, I was an introverted analysis who was hard to read with a low drive for relationships. Speaking of side effects, my assessment results sounded like something a pharmaceutical company might have on warning label for a heavy dose of pain-killers.

Honestly this assessment was initially very frustrating for me. If one were to map my strengths across Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, I am fairly certain my "multiple intelligences" profile is what Gardner describes as a spotlight profile, which is a set of strengths that are fairly evenly distributed as opposed to a laser profile of one or two intelligences of significantly greater strength than the other five or six. (*Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons in Theory and Practice*) My Virtual Advisor assessment actually did point to a fairly evenly distributed profile, but it also revealed a distinctive weakness in interpersonal areas. So, I fought it at first. How could this be? I was the out-going finance cheerleader getting others to see outside of themselves and their departmental silos at my previous employer. I was the first-born son of a preacherman, born to be at ease as a public speaker. I was the guy who struggled and got bored with details after sitting in front of the spreadsheets for too long. I was the one who needed to engage with people to figure out my ideas. I was the visionary and brave future-oriented leader. Dave and I had a few hard conversations about the tool's validity and how to interpret the data. But in light of the relational struggles I experienced during my first year at the school and following the wise advice of my wife, I began to soften to the results. After Dave's strong rebuke of my Individual Development Plan, the message was only reinforced and I realized I had to come to grips with this clarified reality that I was truly weak in my relationships.

I believe Robert Quinn (*Deep Change; Building the Bridge as You Walk on It*) when he writes that we are all faced with the following personal and organizational decision -- do we pursue deep change or settle for slow death? According to Quinn if we choose deep change for our organizations, then we have to choose deep change for ourselves first. Choosing deep change was not going to be what I thought it was. As a

school, we would make the wrenching decisions that signaled our willingness to pursue deep change. We asked lots of questions my first year, and I experienced some initial and fairly significant rejection at different times with administration, faculty and the board. A simple example was this sequence of questions I was asking by October of my first year: "Are we a school for the poor, or are we an integrated school that is accessible to the poor and an option for those with other choices for their kids?" or "Are we an expensive cheap school, or a cheap expensive school?" While I did my best to ask these questions in grace with an inquisitive spirit, the board was humble enough to have their young, new, upstart head of school ask these blunt, insensitive questions. I heard some harrumphs, but also some genuinely inquiring "I don't know's." When I challenged our two-week Christmas vacation schedule as not being parent-friendly, I got protest letters from multiple long-time teachers who said they'd never written a protest letter to an administrator before.

During my second year, however things started rolling. After establishing a temporary sustainability committee that established stronger financial infrastructure and did indeed raise tuition for the coming school year. This decision increased tuition 30 percent over three years for current families, with increased financial aid for those who needed it. We changed our school's name and branding (formerly Spruce Hill Christian School/City Center Academy), established four core commitments (to Jesus, the city, excellence and accessibility) that guide us in the implementation of our mission, started an AP program and raised nearly \$1 million. By the start of school in September we will have also added a third campus for our middle school and overhauled our school management software. This is profound change on the symbolic, political, interpersonal and structural levels. By choosing deep change for myself through Dave's executive coaching first, change at our school became much deeper than a single project reorganizing our tuition scale.

What I Learned - Instead of technical assistance on a specific project, I received significant, in-depth executive coaching in the area of relationship-building. The most overt result of this project has been beginning marriage counseling early in 2013. Two to three times a month my wife, Jess, and I have visited with a professor of counseling at Palmer Seminary who has a particular interest in biracial families. We have talked about our families of origin (my family in particular), patterns of responsibility we take in relationships, and how to communicate with greater clarity. Early on our counselor declared, "Well it's obvious the intellectual aspect of your situation is not in doubt, so the key here will be developing your emotional competence." Blunt for sure, but that distinction was actually very helpful for me. I need support emotionally to read and react to others in the best way possible. Previously as a senior manager, I could still selectively engage those around me on terms I felt comfortable with. Now, as the executive leader of this organization undergoing deep change at my behest, I had to engage with all manner of people in all manner of ways that I hadn't ever experienced before - fundraising, board-level decision-making, change-adverse faculty, questions of faith commitment for our school, and certainly financial commitment to some abstract notion of our community foundations. The root of this pain at work was also the root of pain at home, and the pain of this work experience manifested itself among my family.

As a result of executive coaching I became much more aware of my base of strengths out of which I tended to operate. In keeping with my sense of a broadly distributed set up "intelligences," I had never been quite sure of what I was best at. Working through my Pondera profile, I became much more comfortable operating out of my core strengths as an introverted analyst. This did not mean that I could not be motivating, visionary, relational, decisive. Instead I can feel comfortable in my own skin as I engage the world around me with a sense of personal awareness and confidence about who I am and where my blind spots are most likely going to be. At a recent meeting with our high school principal and new board president, all of us under 40, I made sure to be clear that my proposal to move more quickly on a major

initiative, which they were initially uncomfortable with, might trample on relationships in a way that I would not be particularly sensitive to. "The impact of this proposal could fall right into my blind spot." I was able to be explicit that I was weak in an area, which encouraged them to probe further into their concerns. After talking it through we remained open to a faster timeframe if other circumstances allowed.

It was a profound insight to me that by being "hard to read" I am consequently hard to follow. As a leader, this cuts to a very deep potential weakness. Not that this quality eliminates me entirely from leadership, but if left ignored, I would eventually fall and fall hard. There would be no one there to catch me. And not only am I hard to follow, the implications of this struggle create a challenge for me to know if I am being followed (not in a creepy way) by the people around me or if they are just going through the motions. If I cannot gauge the level of investment by those around me, no amount of managerial competence is going to make up for that. By realizing this weakness, I am asking explicit follow up questions and trying to listen to tones as well as words.

I was also given the opportunity to understand the effects of my less-relational tendencies on myself and my family in a deeper way that I had previously. I am really hard on myself, and by extension really hard on my wife and on my two children. Sometimes this comes out in rough speech or a course encounter, but more often my expectations are too high and my grace is too low. There is not enough grace to go around, and it wears on me and those closest to me. These are difficult things to write about. I feel the need to qualify statements like these, but I want to own them and not excuse them. My heavenly father is honored when my kindness and gentleness are evident to all, especially for those closest to me.

While the list of things I have learned could go on at much greater length, I will close this section with the following: recognizing my disposition as an introverted analyst not only clarifies aspects of my less-relational nature, it also reinforces and encourages my particular strengths. One of these strengths allows me to think very deeply about an issue in such a way that I am usually able to sort through a lot of conflicting information to forge a clear path forward. This is where my initial questions to the board of directors came into play. I need to trust my instincts as I am clarifying and aligning all manner of semi-intelligible messages into one cohesive and forward-looking direction. I can walk toward challenges of this sort, not certain of any particular outcome, but by God's grace he has given me a gifting in this important realm. I recently received one of the greatest compliments of my life as a result of our board's work to clarify our school's core commitments. After writing a two-page document elaborating on our recently approved four core commitments, I sent the approved version to several Christian school leaders, including Dr. Vernard Gant, ACSI's Director of Urban School Services. Within the day, Dr. Gant, a significant and experienced figure in urban Christian schooling, stated, "These documents capture the essence of urban Christian schooling in a way that I have never seen before." After only two years on the job, we had created a commitments document of such clarity in its reflection that a man of Dr. Gant's stature had never seen anything like it before. If this is what it is like after only two years, what does God have in store for the next twenty?

What Is Different - This project was relational, not efficiently linear. My emotions do not run chronologically or consecutively. We have been discussing "doings" and "learnings" and "differences" throughout this paper. At a minimum, Jesus is followed by a little child who is more aware of his meekness and how he is honored in my relationships in all aspects of my life. I have invested heavily in my relationships with my board, and will be investing further with faculty. My wife and I are asking questions that we had not thought to ask before in our parenting, with each other, and about our own family histories. I am much more aware of the healthy tensions in leadership, such as Quinn's notion of adaptive confidence and grounded vision. I am working hard to discern what in my life is driven by a need to

achieve as opposed to the needs and opportunities in a given situation. I am more self-aware and becoming more attentive to self-care and self-gentleness that extends to those you love. Hopefully all of this means that I am becoming a more balanced person who is better equipped to create and sustain a healthy balance of loving myself and my love of work and service.

When I finally figure out what I am going to be when I grow up, probably somewhere around the age of 85, all I want to show for all of this life will be story after story of God's faithfulness to me and to his people. I want to collect stories like I used to collect baseball cards. This Van Lunen Fellowship project will be one of those stories. It is a story of a life transformed. This story may be somewhat hard for me to tell, but it will be a story of a life rescued from ambition and into relationship; a father reaffirmed; a husband renewed to deep change. This will be a story of pursuing deep change instead of succumbing to slow death, by God's grace and mercy through Bruce's intervention and Dave's confrontation and support.

By God's grace.

Appendix 1 - De-identified Major Funder Update Letter (May 2013)

RE: Progress at Spruce Hill/CCA (to be known as The City School)

Dear,

I am writing this letter to give you an update about the developments at our school these past two years since Seth moved to the Dominican Republic and I transitioned from the role of Spruce Hill parent to parent and Head of School. I have been very appreciative of your continued support of our school, and so informing you of how we are making progress was personally important to me. I hope the news herein is a blessing to you.

New Name & Lasting Commitments - In February, our board of directors, lead administrators and several long-time teachers met at a daylong retreat. The board unanimously approved a new name to publicly merge our two schools. While we had officially merged in 2006, our separate campus names continued to foster regular confusion among parents and the wider community. After much prayer and consideration our new name, The City School, was selected specifically because it is unifying, not location-specific and speaks directly to our mission. At this same meeting, the board unanimously recognized four core commitments that have been true for us since our founding and will continue to guide us as we move forward as The City School. We are first committed to Jesus, and then to city. Because we are committed to honoring Jesus in the city, we also acknowledge we are committed to being excellent and financially, religiously and academically accessible. This was a very encouraging time for the 20 members of our school community who were at this daylong retreat.

Adding a Third Campus - We have outgrown the church where our middle school has met every day for the past twenty years. While we are very supportive of their church ministry, our 60 middle school students have had to cram into the small space we previously used with combined classes and half the number of students. By God's grace, we have entered into an agreement with the University City Chinese Christian Church to provide a larger, newly renovated space for our middle school students. Half a dozen of our early elementary students come from this church and our relationship with them continues to grow. We are in the beginning stages of looking for recreational facilities for our pre-teens at this new location, but we are very encouraged by our expanding mission to the wider city. Our new campus will be across the street from a local masjid and Islamic school, as well as several Muslim restaurants, which may also provide us the opportunity to build relationships across faiths and testify to the power of the gospel.

Increased International Perspectives - As you know, people from all over the world live in Philadelphia. As a school it is incumbent on us to expand our children's horizons. That we live at the convergence of these two realities means that we are compelled to increase the international perspective of our students. In the coming year, we will be sending some of our high school students to Santiago, Dominican Republic in partnership with Annapolis Area Christian School and Seth's school, Santiago Christian School. This urban, suburban, international partnership will establish a new Institute for Leadership and Justice to encourage a heart for servant leadership across our three campuses.

Over two-thirds of our students receive financial aid based on their needs. This aid touches children from a wide swath of cultures from across the city - African-American, African, Caribbean, Chinese, Korean, Cambodian, Latino, white, and others. We are very blessed to have this beautiful community and it has been my tremendous honor to invest more deeply in this area as we build bridges and expand horizons within our school, around the city and across our shores.

Growing Investment in Salaries and Scholarships - Over the past two years we have made significant investments in our teacher compensation packages. Since 2011 our average teacher salaries have increased \$2,500 (nearly 8 percent). Even more substantially, we have improved and restructured our health insurance plan such that the number of families who receive coverage through our school plan has doubled. These families could not have afforded their health insurance coverage through the school previously because the cost had been absolutely prohibitive. Similarly our scholarships have increased substantially and in proportion to the need in our community. Two-thirds of our students receive need-based financial aid, which has increased year over year, from \$350,000 distributed in 2011 to over \$500,000 projected for next school year.

Establishing one name for one school, recognizing our commitments, growing our footprint, expanding horizons, and deepening investments are all the outgrowth of a school community totally dedicated to a beautiful mission to train students' minds, disciple their hearts, and bring light to the city - one child at a time. We do this in Jesus' name, walking in faith that He will lead us as we serve in His kingdom.

I pray this letter finds you well and that its contents are a blessing to your spirits. Your sustained care for our school has made a tremendous difference in the lives of hundreds of people. Your continued prayer and support have been transformative for our school.

In His Service,

Jake Becker
Head of School

Appendix 2 - Board-Approved Core Commitments (May 2013)

Four Core Commitments – Jesus, The City, Excellence and Accessibility

Considered by the Board of Directors May 9, 2013

Context – On Saturday, February 2, 2013, the board of directors of Spruce Hill/CCA made two significant and unanimous decisions. The more prominent of these decisions was to officially change the school's name from Spruce Hill Christian School/City Center Academy to The City School, effective July 1, 2013. Prior to changing the name, an equally important decision was made to approve four core commitments. These four core commitments clarify how we fulfill our mission to train students' minds, disciple their hearts and bring light to the city—one child at a time. These commitments honor our founding purpose, direct our current efforts, and establish our vision forward.

These four core commitments are not the only way we describe ourselves or understand the world around us, but they are essential to understanding our school. As we acknowledged at our meeting, each word is limited in and of itself. These specific words have important meaning in our specific setting, but are less essential than the fundamental commitments they represent. It is possible that we may find alternative words to officially recognize the meaning of our commitments in more effective, compelling ways.

This document serves as a brief explanation of each commitment and, importantly, their inter-relationship. While brief, this document is the primary point of reference for either more condensed descriptions or greater elaborations of our core commitments. This document roots each commitment in our specific context. This document is not intended to be comprehensive or exclusive.

Jesus – Our first commitment, to Jesus, acknowledges Jesus Christ as the Son of God, Messiah, Lord and Savior. As it is stated in Acts 4:12 (ESV), "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." We honor this commitment to Jesus by requiring every staff member and board member acknowledge Jesus as central to their personal and corporate life. This acknowledgement includes a wider statement of faith, which affirms the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We are committed to honoring Jesus in all we do, and are particularly intentional about this in our school curriculum, personal conduct, corporate decision-making and efforts at loving each other. As Jesus states in John 13: 34-35 (ESV), "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another."

The City – Our commitment to the city acknowledges the unique role of the city in current affairs, history and theology. In each of these respects the city has existed at the convergence of great destruction and great joy. In the midst of this convergence, a heart for redemption and restoration are typically central to one's call to the city. As a matter of geography, the city is a locus for human relationships, tending towards greater density and complexity. In current affairs, this convergence has created great disparities of quality education, which has also been a critical fissure in historic terms within and among cultures. The city, in theological terms, plays a central role in a nation's redemption and fall.

We embrace our call to the city both in its unique opportunities and in its unique challenges. This commitment begins in our home of Philadelphia and in the specific neighborhoods where we live. It is our hope to follow Jesus in His prayer to his Father, that "your kingdom come and your will be done on earth

as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). It is a practical commitment in the day-to-day life in our city, Philadelphia, and wherever the Lord takes us, here on earth as it is in heaven.

Excellence – Our first understanding of this commitment is as the prelude to Paul's famous chapter on love in 1st Corinthians 13 (1st Corinthians 12:31 ESV), "and now I will show you a still more excellent way." This excellent way is a love that supersedes speaking in the tongues of men and angels, prophesy, understanding all mysteries, the faith to move mountains, even giving away all we have or sacrificing our lives to the flame (1st Cor 13:1-3). Excellence is service in love, neither mere service nor kind-hearted intentions. Excellence means loving the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength (Luke 10:27).

It is essential that our commitment to excellence includes great care for the character, both mind and heart, of our children in partnership with their families. We train minds and disciple hearts by challenging students where they excel and meeting them where they struggle. We seek school-wide alignment of vision, mission, goals, expectations and instructional approaches to create a consistent expectation for our students. This alignment includes continuous professional development and a redemptive approach to student discipline, so that the habits of heart and mind are trained over time throughout our school community.

By desiring God's kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven, and in particular in our role as a school, we very intentionally follow Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:2, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Our commitment to excellence as an act of love expresses itself very well through our desire to impart this discernment to our children through the renewal of their minds.

Accessibility – We are fundamentally committed to accessibility in three areas. 1) Through financial aid, we are committed to being accessible to families who could not afford to send their children to our school otherwise. This commitment to financial accessibility includes a desire to see families attend our school from across the financial spectrum. 2) We are committed to being accessible to students of various academic abilities. Just as with finances, we can only realize this commitment in as much as we have the resources to be accessible in this manner. 3) We are committed to students regardless of their faith or the faith of their family. Each family is expected to support our commitment to Jesus as it informs our care for their child. Our commitment to Jesus means we will not shy away from the truth of the gospel. We honor each family by ensuring our care is not determined by the individual faith of the student or their family.

Inter-Relationship – These commitments work together to form a cohesive whole. They balance each other through healthy tension within their inter-relationships. We acknowledge we are an imperfect school with imperfect commitments. Our imperfections do not preclude us from striving for greater fulfillment of each to the glory of God. Our first commitment is to Jesus. Our second commitment is to the city. Our third and fourth commitments are to excellence and accessibility. We hope that the meaning behind and practical manifestation of our commitments will grow more richly as the Lord provides and as we follow in faith. Through these commitments it is our desire to more deeply realize our mission to train students' minds, disciple their hearts and bring light to the city—one child at a time.