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Are We Better Together or Apart? An (e)Merging Story of Two Christian Schools

My name is Matthew Beimers and I am currently the Principal at the PreK-7 Cloverdale campus of Surrey Christian School. I want to start by thanking the faculty and the cohort for all the support and encouragement over the past year.

What did you do: To give clarity to this project, I created a learning target that allowed me to focus on the goal of this project and my work: *I can lead and assist a small Christian, parochial, PreK-7 elementary school with a 60-year history rooted in the Lutheran tradition merge with a large Christian, parent-run, PreK-12 school with a 60-year history rooted in the Reformed tradition.*

Without knowing it at the time, my project began many months before I was even accepted into Van Lunen. To understand the project better, I want to create a context so that you understand how this story has evolved.

The school I am currently serving at is in Cloverdale, a suburb of Vancouver, B.C. The school was originally called Zion Lutheran School and opened in the late 1950s. It was started by a group of German immigrants who attended Zion Lutheran church and who had a vision to share the love of Jesus through Christian education. This vision for "sharing the love of Jesus" could be tangibly seen in the school's open enrolment policy, a policy which has remained for the entirety of the school's history. The school took on the same name as the church as the school was the primary mission of the congregation.

Up until the 1980s, there were many Christian elementary schools in the Vancouver area but a limited amount of Christian secondary schools. Over the last 20 years, almost every suburb of Vancouver

has developed at least one PreK-12 Christian school, many of them close to or larger than 1,000 students. Conversely, while many elementary schools evolved, Zion Lutheran School remained a stand-alone Christian elementary school whose enrolment often hovered between 150-175 students. While the smallness of the community, the open enrolment policy and the generous tuition assistance policy drew some families, the school's growth was stagnated for several reasons, including a perceived lack of resources, a desire by some to have their children in a faith-based PreK-12 system, and instability in the principal's office (when I arrived in the fall of 2016, I was the fourth principal in five years).

For others, the "Zion Lutheran" school named caused confusion or misunderstanding about with some people about who was able to attend the school. The school addressed the name issue by changing its name from Zion Lutheran to "Cloverdale Christian School" in the early 2000s, thus reflecting its desire to be a school for members of the community and not just the church. At roughly the same time, the school also began to hire teachers from a variety of denominations, moving away from its mandate of solely hiring teachers who were members in good-standing in the Lutheran church. This change was primarily the result of the lack of local, Lutheran-trained teachers. A number of other factors, such as the school's commitment to running very small classes rather than combining them, lack of a robust international program, discounted tuition and extremely high tuition assistance led to deficit budgets and a model that was clearly unsustainable.

When the Cloverdale school was once again informed by the principal preceding me that he was returning to the United States after only two years, it was late in the school 2105-2016 school year and the school was at a crossroads. Knowing that finding a Lutheran principal would be difficult, the Cloverdale school board approached the Superintendent of Surrey Christian School, Dr. Dave Loewen, and asked for guidance and support. They were unsure what the implications of losing another principal would be on their school community, and they wondered to Dr. Loewen if there was someone on the Surrey staff who might be able to stand in the gap for a year. Dr. Loewen shared this story with our

senior leadership team and, initially, I did not think much of it. That same day, I walked around the school and the Lord continued to put the Cloverdale situation in front of me. I was struck by the humility of the Cloverdale community to approach what some would see as a competing institution to ask for help. I shared with our Superintendent that I believed that we should send someone to Cloverdale for a year, and if he agreed, I was willing to do that. Over the next month, the decision was made for me to move to Cloverdale and offer support for the 2016-2017 school year.

Early in the 2016-2017 school year the Cloverdale board was pleased with how the relationship with Surrey was growing, and another overture was made to Dr. Loewen and the Surrey Christian school board: would Surrey Christian consider exploring the possibility of merging with Cloverdale and taking over operations of the school? Surrey Christian was open to exploring the possibility.

A task force was put in place with stakeholders from both communities and with the goal of meeting once a month to answer this question “are we better together or apart?” The answer to the question would determine if the committee’s recommendation to the SCS school board and Zion Lutheran church board would be to merge or simply continue as supportive but independent school communities. A month-by-month timeline was put in place that outlined specific tasks and the people who were responsible to carry those out. This became a fluid document that we would report out on at our monthly meetings, and it would also be used to keep both school boards updated on the project.

One key aspect of the merge that we identified early was the importance of building trust with Zion Lutheran Church. One way we did this was by finding a few key Sunday church services and membership meetings to attend. When possible, we tried sharing a little bit about the school’s mission and vision and our deep hopes for the learning community. Rarely, if ever, did we speak of the merge in these settings. These opportunities to address the church community allowed me to become known by the church community and to know them. I found myself coming to a deep appreciation for the pastor and the church community, an appreciation that continues to grow today.

Additionally, we knew that giving people opportunity to have their voice heard was integral. We organized multiple townhall meetings that were specifically tailored for church members. We invited Ed Noot, the Executive Director of the Society of Christian Schools (SCSBC), to one of those meetings. We wanted Ed so there so that community members were aware that if we joined Surrey Christian, we would also be joining SCSBC, an even larger umbrella organization that could provide us with multiple resources in curriculum, pedagogy, special education, finances and stewardship. At those meetings, we gathered first as a large group to share a little about the history of SCS, the mission and vision, and the deep hope for a potential merge. In a very poignant moment, one passionate person asked Dr. Loewen “why are you doing this?”, perhaps implying that perhaps that SCS not being completely forward with their intentions. Speaking very humbly, Dr. Loewen simply stated that Surrey Christian School was pursuing this merge for the sake of the kingdom. His authenticity in that moment was a pivotal turning point for some.

After sharing about the mission and history of Surrey Christian, there was opportunity for general question-answer period. Following that, we then gave opportunity for church members to gather around tables and list what they believed were the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats and questions they had about the merge and place that on large poster paper. People could then walk around the room and place sticky notes that indicated what ideas and questions resonated with them. A separate townhall meeting with the same format was conducted for school parents. The responses from these meetings were integral to future merge committee meetings and gave us insights into what issues needed to be addressed.

Overtime, it became clear to the committee and many that the schools would both be stronger together than apart. Part of the SCS strategic plan specifically stated they would like to start a satellite campus, and the commonalities in mission and vision were apparent. A recommendation was brought to both school boards as well as the Zion Church board to pursue a formal agreement. This was worked out

with legal counsel through the fall of 2017, and in December of that same year, the church held a vote to approve Surrey Christian School taking over operations of the school. While nervous about the vote, the value of a good process and strong relationships was validated by a near unanimous vote by the Zion Lutheran community. While I did not attend the meeting due to wanting people to feel completely free to express any final concerns, when I received a text that the vote was so strongly in favor of merging, I wept. I felt like we poured so much energy into preparing everyone for that moment. I also remember thinking “now what do we do?” It did not take long to see that the hard work was just beginning.

What difference has it made in our school: One of the primary tasks we needed to address even before the merge was about the financial realities at Cloverdale. The school’s tuition rates were significantly lower than any in the region. Before the 2017-2018 school year began and before the merge was formalized, the Cloverdale board made an important decision to raise tuition between 10-20% per family. In addition, they set a goal of decreasing tuition assistance to approximately 20% of the total tuition revenue (down from the traditional current 30-40%). Finally, they decided to raise the low staff salaries approximately 5%. Although a step in the right direction, the tuition increase and tuition assistance decrease would still not allow the school to be sustainable, and the merge only accentuated the importance of improving some of the business practices. Although not easy, more hard decisions were needed.

One initial recommendation was to align teacher and staff salaries along with tuition over a minimum two-year period. In the spring of 2018, through long discussions and the seeking of wise counsel while bathing everything in prayer, it was decided to merge tuition grids for the 2018-2019 school year and move Cloverdale teachers onto the Surrey grid immediately. We believed that moving teachers onto the same grid and pension plan as all other Surrey Christian employees would only accelerate our deep hope for teachers to see themselves as one school, and demonstrate to the community that we wanted to care for the Cloverdale staff. A second significant increase in tuition has

meant some parents have had their tuition increase almost 40% in two years. We knew the tuition increase would be difficult for some to absorb. The Zion Lutheran Church community, although no longer officially affiliated with the school, believed they could be part of supporting those families.

Before the merge took place, one concern that was echoed by many was what would happen to the relationship between the church and school. While those concerns were valid when we began this journey, one incredible blessing of all of this merge has been the strengthened relationship between the church and school. Although both institutions have shared the building for many years, the feedback we have received is that there has been new life breathed into the partnership. The church and school no longer take each other for granted and there is a new intentionality in fostering a healthy relationship. The church has remained committed to helping the school maintain its vision to share the love of Jesus with students in the community, no matter what their background. One tangible example of this is the church's commitment to support families in the school who need tuition assistance. Although there is no expectation from the school for the church to offer this, the church has committed almost \$80,000 in tuition support for families for the 201-2019 school year. The church's commitment along with additional resources from SCS that have helped Cloverdale to focus on promotion have led to a projected enrolment growth for the upcoming school year, with the hope to add at least one additional class as our grade K, 1, 2 and 5 classes are now full. We give thanks to God for this provision.

The merge has also made a difference in providing additional resources for our school. The Cloverdale campus has leveraged the experience at Surrey to make some changes to our special education program. The Cloverdale Educational Support Services coordinator is no longer on her own but is part of a larger team that can assist in developing new IEP's, reviewing files, and providing a network of outside resources that we previously did not have access to. The merge has strengthened our technology infrastructure as Surrey now provides us with on-site expertise that keeps our network

updated and running efficiently. Next year our grade 7s will join the grade 7-12 one-to-one computer program that has been in place at Surrey campus for a number of years.

With the merge, we now have a Director of Learning who provides us with leadership at staff meetings as we adjust to new government curriculum that requires creative thinking about pedagogy and learning. For the upcoming year, we will have weekly professional development as we move to a later start-time on Fridays, so teachers can come in early and work collaboratively. As Cloverdale is a single-track school, the merge allows our teachers to collaborate with a larger grade-level team from the other campus, which provides an opportunity to share ideas and participate in rich conversation about teaching and learning. Our entire K-7 team will be joining the Surrey Christian cohort next year as we implement Teaching for Transformation at the Cloverdale campus.

These are but a few examples of what the merge has provided the Cloverdale campus. The merge is already having a direct and positive impact on professional development and student learning.

What did you learn: Over the past year I have learned that merging two schools is a complex but rewarding exercise. People have strong ties to their institution and these feelings, when projected in a healthy way, is something for which we should be thankful. Early in the process, I remember wondering how many people might be upset about a merge. Over time though, I became thankful that people felt so strongly about Cloverdale. It was inspiring to know that people felt so passionate about the school's mission and vision. Conversely, I also realized that some community members had little if any vested interest in the school. In fact, the apathy was more discouraging for me than some of the anger, frustration and disappointment about an impending merge. In dealing with both responses, I learned that having a transparent process that invites as many people to have their voice heard is essential to building trust. I also learned that space must be given for people to both grieve and celebrate change, and that both voices must be honored.

In providing space for people to understand the potential new normal, I also learned that merging schools take time. When we began this process, our hope was to be merged within one year. It became clear that if we wanted to implement a solid process, it would need more time. I can even recall being very discouraged when I realized it would take more than a year. In retrospect, I am so glad we decided that a good process was more important than efficiency. In addition, I would say although the merge is technically complete, our institutions will be merging for several years. We are just beginning to build relationship and trust. I also have learned that when you are part of the school whose operations are being taken over by a larger school, there is a level of insecurity that can come with that. For example, many of us wondered if we would “be good enough” or if we would have anything to offer the merge. It has been a blessing for the Cloverdale staff to realize that the merge would not only be a blessing to them, but that they would be a blessing to the merge. There are good and wonderful things happening at the Cloverdale campus, and the merge has given us a chance to share those things with a larger community.

I have also learned the importance of a strong relationship between the pastor and principal in a parochial school, and this relationship has taken on increased importance now that we have merged. With thanks to God, the pastor at the church has become one of my dearest friends. He is involved heavily in the life of the school and essentially functions as our school chaplain. People see our deep respect and love for each other and I believe it instills a level of confidence in the relationship between the school and the church.

I have also learned that schools do not flourish as institutions when they operate in an educational silo. Cloverdale Christian was supported by the local Lutheran church, and this is something for which I give thanks to God. That said, when a school is not tied to a larger organization such as Christian School International or the Society of Christian Schools of B.C., it is hard to hold oneself accountable to best practices or even know what that could look like. In addition, merges might allow

schools that traditionally compete with each other to pool their resources, become more efficient and work together for good of the kingdom.

I also think I have learned that it is important to celebrate institutional feast days, whether that means spending time having a party to honor the new life that Cloverdale has inserted into the Surrey Christian story, or by having a special service that signifies a formal end to the Zion Lutheran Christian School legacy. We decided to do both. Earlier this spring we had a special evening at the secondary campus where we formally welcomed Cloverdale to the family. A few short weeks ago Zion Lutheran Church had a celebration that honored the history of the school and gave community members a sense of closure. While both events had different learning targets; both were equally important in the merge process.

I also learned that schools can merge together while still maintaining some of their uniqueness. People come to Cloverdale because they are looking for something smaller and more intimate. When we began this journey, some people in the Cloverdale community were nervous that we were going to get “taken over” and forgotten by the larger school. What people have realized is that we can still do things that are unique because we are a smaller school while still having access to resources that a larger school can provide. For example, we have people who chose to come here this year because we are now part of a K-12 system. They appreciate that their children can start in our school and they already know where the story will finish in grade 12. It makes me wonder if one reason schools do not merge with other schools is because they focus on what they may lose rather than what they may gain. One of the things that drew me to Cloverdale was the very fact that the school board was humble enough to come and ask for help, and I wonder if more Christian schools with a similar vision might be stronger together than apart, even if they are rooted in different denominational stories.

open enrolment
christian studies look like? FAQ

1) Doctrine - OWBTG (provide link)
- not parochial but reformed perspective

2) Teachers - Christian
- if not trained at Xian U, must take courses

3) Vision/Name - would change
→ brief explanation

4) Building → would still go through Cindy/Susanne
→ Keenapers/sewing → we need to maximize space

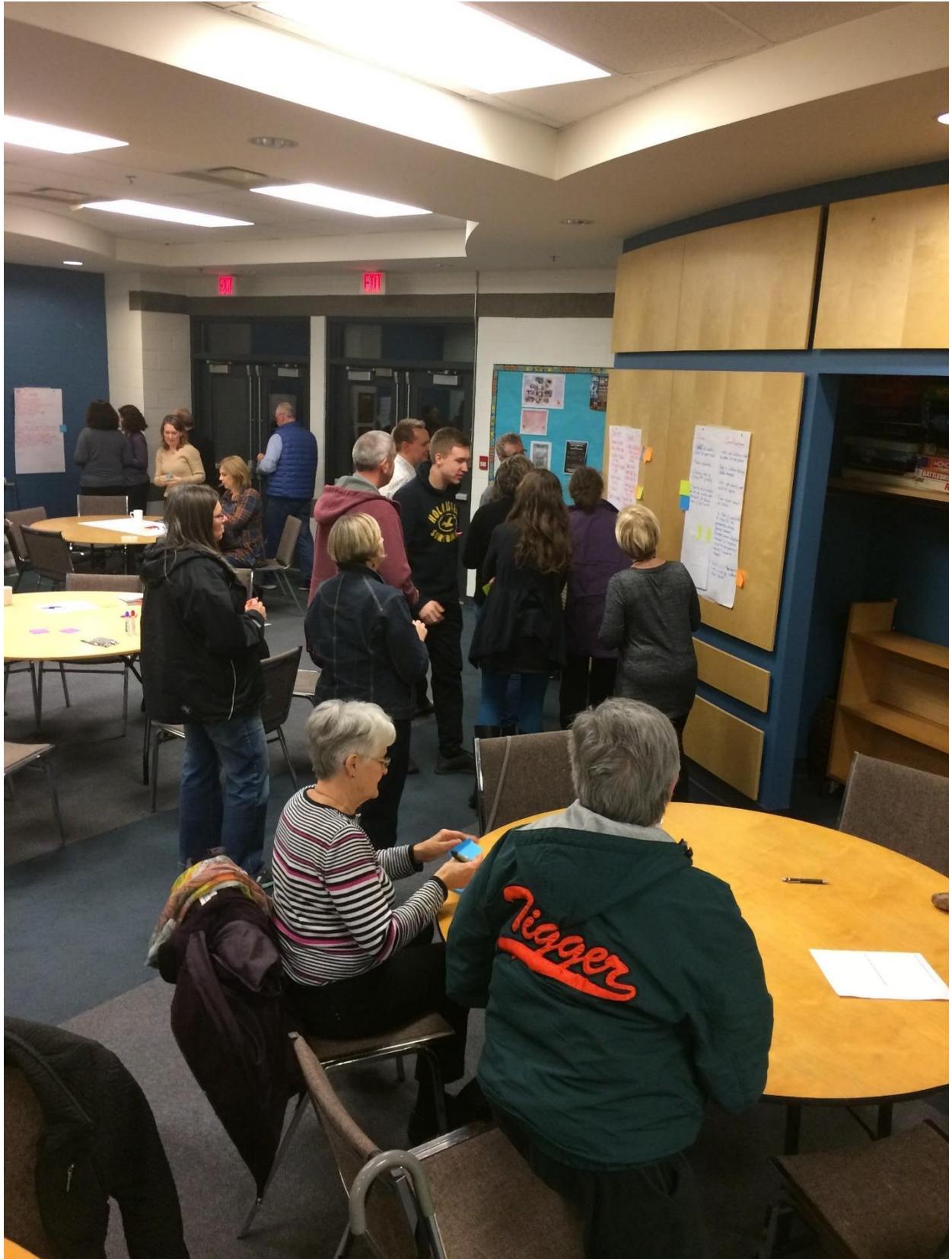
5) Lutheran heritage → Not sure

a) Future relationship → both church/school need to be more intentional,
→ sent on board → hiring future principal/posn who value the
→ don't want to be a center

Tuition Salaries → would
be on grid → 20%
difference in salary
for same 10 years
already getting change
TAP → 4% of total
budget, tangible way

→ we hope to move forward w/ staff / some may be good for church to be involved
of opportunity to move
→ when would work begin → July 1, 2017

→ what happens if No?



*1) Why not?

2) Growth -
Jesus is

Meeting the needs of Christian Community in Charlotte
& extended community thru sharing of resources to
fill the school with students

5) Financial Stability

6) Journey in Faith.

Concerns

*1) Possible conflicts with existing user groups (scheduling)

Availability of ^{sharing} Operating & Capital requirements.

church be represented in

*4) How will our church evaluate this
relationship

POSITIVES

- ① Financial stability
- ② K-12
- ③ Increased enrollment
- ④ Sharing of resources
- ⑤ Administrative leadership (christian)
- ⑥ ~~Exp~~ Community outreach
- ⑦ Paying staff ~~pr~~ correctly
- ⑧ Giving staff more opportunities
- ⑨ Value for money

NEGATIVES

- ① Plan in place to keep the church & school connected (School body not just board of directors)
- ② Job security for existing staff
- ③ Responsibility of the facility/maintenance
- ④ Financial details negotiated ex: utilities/custodian
- ⑤ ~~The pr~~ Long process to merge and what is the plan for CCS in the interim







Rooted in Christ
Col 2:7

Zion Lutheran School 1959
Cloverdale Christian School 2011
Surrey Christian School 2018