

# SPACE (MANAGEMENT): THE FINAL FRONTIER

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United Christian School is a remarkable place. Spiritually and academically, it's an oasis in the desert. Desert is what we know here in Camp Verde, and the beauty of the high desert with the mountains all around is our backdrop for school every day. If you were to attend one of our evening programs out on the lawn, you'd enjoy one of the finest sunsets to be seen.

The purpose of this project is to work out solutions for our space problems. Although our difficulties right now are attributable to having too little space for our growing student body, the story begins four years ago with a space-related problem of an opposite sort...too much unneeded space. There's a saying in Iowa, where I grew up. If you don't like the weather, give it a few minutes and it'll change drastically. A drastic change is what happened at UCS.

Camp Verde is a small town of 11,000 people, and the entire county is considered rural. We have a large contingent of retired folks, raising our median resident age by 10 years over Arizona as a whole. What this means for us is that many of our students are parented by grandparents who have either formal or informal custody.

Economically, Camp Verde is depressed when compared to the state overall. The median household income here is only 78% of the Arizona median, and housing values are 81% of the state median. The local economy is just beginning to recover from the serious hit it took in 2008-2009.

Just before the economic downturn began, our school had an enrollment of 82. As the 2010-2011 school year wound down, we began hearing from a family here and there that they'd be unable to return in the Fall. It seemed like there was a new withdrawal every week

through the months of May and June. Finally, at the end of June, my wake-up call came. Actually, I should say “wake-up calls.”

In one day, I received three calls from families to tell me they would be leaving our school. This placed our registered student population at 44 for the coming year. I immediately crunched numbers and called for a board meeting. The news I had to deliver was not pleasant. Projections indicated that we would completely run out of money by the end of September. Should we open the doors for the year? Would it be fair to begin, knowing we might only get through two months of school before closing for good? We decided to gather parents, teachers, and board members for a prayer meeting; we needed desperately to hear from God.

We did hear, and His answer was to move forward in faith. Having already laid-off half the staff just weeks prior, we were at our bare minimum with all expenses cut as much as possible. Every single employee took voluntary pay cuts, ranging from 10% to 50%. We hunkered down and got to the business of education. The last thing on our mind was space shortage. As a matter of fact, we had way more space than we could fill with our meager enrollment numbers.

Let’s zip forward three years. When I was initially accepted to the Van Lunen Fellowship, we were having some trouble on our Board of Directors. Therefore, I looked forward to using the resources offered by Van Lunen to help get my board in shape. My original project proposal centered around all aspects of developing the board.

However, the first gathering for Van Lunen in July in Michigan was so eye-opening for me. I had no idea that such amazing expertise was going to be available to us. We were encouraged to choose a project that was daunting, that we weren’t sure we could accomplish. I realized there was something more intimidating and more pressing on the horizon for United Christian School than the board project I had initially proposed.

At that point, the 2013-2014 year was over and we had begun to experience a growing number of inquiries for the coming year. Although we ended 2013-2014 with a total enrollment of 74, the number for the new year was definitely growing rapidly. By the first of August, 2014, we had 91 students on the roll. We began to pray for 100 by the first day of school. That milestone was hit a few weeks late, but indeed it was hit. We are finishing the year with 112 students and anticipate that number to grow by 10-15% by August, 2015 – our God is amazing!

Needless to say, our overcrowding problem is the best kind of problem to have. Well, I guess too much money would be a better problem, but too many students is a close second. Besides the basic issue of an increase in students, we had another consideration. There is no Christian high school in our valley. One of your fellows from last year’s cohort is a friend of mine; his school is in the next town over. Ben Russel and I have been talking for a couple years

about collaborating to start an autonomous Christian high school that could service our towns and our entire valley.

Unfortunately, we just couldn't seem to make it happen. However, the interest from some families has persisted. Therefore, we have decided to go ahead and begin offering grades nine through twelve at United Christian School in 2015-2016. Now our dilemma involves more than just enrollment growth, more than just the resulting need for two additional classrooms in order to split up the combined 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade classes. It also involves a need for two classrooms dedicated for high school grades.

Again, good problems. In addition to being blessed with enrollment numbers, we've been blessed financially. Upon making the decision in February to proceed with high school plans, we were able to set aside the funds necessary to build two new classrooms onto an existing building. Our campus consists of four buildings. The first three are what we consider "full size," meaning they are forty-eight feet wide. Our last building was added about ten years ago. At that time, the board approved the addition of a "half size" building at twenty-four feet wide, to be built with the anticipation that at some future date, the other twenty-four feet could be built onto the back of it. It looked like that "future date" had finally arrived.

With the idea of adding twenty-four feet onto an existing building, I met with Town representatives to discuss the process. Within a matter of days, I completed the application for the first step, the Building Plan Review. Comments were collected from various agencies, such as fire, water, zoning, etc. A meeting was set so that we could sit down around a table and discuss concerns and potential problems. However, by the time the Plan Review meeting was convened, we had a strong suspicion that it would be irrelevant.

I had learned that we had an unfavorable lease agreement. We've been so very blessed to have use of our campus, free of charge for many years. However, when facing a large capital investment, two concerns surfaced: 1)our lease may be terminated for any reason with only thirty days' notice, and 2)any improvements made on the property become part of it permanently. This meant that we could spend \$70,000-\$100,000 to add our classrooms, and then be asked to leave within thirty days, at which point our equity would be completely absorbed by the landowner.

Our first attempt at a solution was to seek better terms for our lease. Over the course of months, and after many conversations and meetings, we reached a dead-end. The landowner was completely unwilling to change our terms, even though he could understand our reasoning. Therefore, we decided to research the idea of bringing on a factory built building that we could take with us at a later date, should we purchase land of our own. This option really made the best sense, but only if our landlord would agree to allow us an exception to our contract so that we could later move the building if desired.

Thankfully, he eventually agreed to let us retain rights to a new building. As I shopped for a building, I realized that this would not be a quick, easy process. But I knew God would provide His wisdom for us. He has done just that! I looked at so many buildings, and in the end we found exactly what we need only two hours away from us. Thus began the process of approvals and permits.

In the State of Arizona, there is an agency called the Office of Manufactured Housing. The first step for us was to get all the materials together to apply to the OMH, which included site plans and engineered drawings. This was definitely the most time-consuming part of the whole process, as it took us about two months to get the drawings completed, everything submitted, and receive our approval.

Next, we went to our local Building and Zoning Department to obtain a building permit, so that we may begin excavating. Since the State had already approved our plan, there were only a couple things for the Town of Camp Verde to verify. Namely, that we're not in a flood plain and that our plan meets fire codes and zoning regulations. Exactly a week after applying for our building permit, I picked it up from the Town offices.

In just a few days, excavation will begin. We had originally planned to leave the building above-ground, with the idea that it would be easier to move in the event that we relocate eventually. However, since being assured that the moving process will be similar either way, we've decided to sink the building. This will also give us some uniformity of appearance with our other four buildings, as well as eliminate the need for ramps.

On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, our new building will arrive! We anticipate about two weeks of work, inspections, more work, and more inspections. Once we've received a Certificate of Occupancy, we'll be able to complete some fencing and landscaping. The final steps will be filling our new building with furnishings and children. We expect God to do great things through these new high school students who desire to study to show themselves approved by God for the good works He has planned for them.

Will this complete our Space Management project? It's only the beginning. We desperately need a multi-purpose building for lunches, meetings, programs, gym space, etc. However, with our lease terms as they are, we can't justify spending several hundred thousand dollars to construct on our present location. We'll be looking for land to purchase.

Perhaps we will purchase the land, build a multi-purpose building on it, move the new high school classrooms over, and get started that way. The current campus would be perfect to retain as a preschool and elementary site. Although our lease is not ideal, we really have no reason to believe the Foundation that owns the land will ask us to leave. We could then have a middle school and high school site separate from the current campus, and available should we need to consolidate again at some future date.

I have learned so much through this building project, and through the Van Lunen program. Once again, and for the thousandth time in my life, I've come to trust that God will lead. I can trust Him to bring potential problems to light. I can trust Him to give us favor with those in authority. I can trust Him to provide the wisdom and finances we need. I can trust Him with timing and details, from the first to the last.

A major influence and nugget of wisdom gained from working with Van Lunen's consulting partner, John Cissel, came in January when we met together with one of my board members and my principal. John was kind enough to arrive early at the retreat center in Scottsdale to spend time with us prior to the start of our Van Lunen sessions. He asked us some key questions about our current needs and future vision for United Christian School. I'll never forget his admonition to think beyond what is currently practical – to dream big and trust God. What *would* we do, if we *could*?

Not only were the on-site Van Lunen sessions packed to the brim with invaluable information, but the reading assignments as well. It would be impossible to list here all the information stored in my brain. I know from here on out, I'll be able to reach into my brain's bank of others' shared experiences and teachings when need arises.

Of course, on a completely practical level I've learned that everything takes longer and costs more than expected. 😊

The benefits to United Christian School of my participation in the Van Lunen Fellowship are huge. The most apparent being this: more usable space in the coming year. Also, our board has come to function better and more in-line with how it ought to be working, because of the reading recommended to me by Van Lunen and the advice offered by Christine Metzger and others in my small group.

I'd like to see the benefits continue to grow and expand through our principal, who will be stepping in as Administrator in just a few weeks. According to the qualifications for application to Van Lunen, she will wait to apply until the 2016-2017 school year. It's very exciting to think where she will take UCS, and especially with the support and training she could gain through Van Lunen, if she is so blessed to be accepted.

Thank you all so so much for what you've done for me and for so many! May God continue to bless and use you in the Christian school community.