

Learning for Service in the Light of God's Word

Enfold, Engage, Empower

William Groot

Van Lunen Fellows Program, 2013-14

Calvin College

Author Notes

I would like to acknowledge the Van Lunen Foundation and Calvin College for their partnership in creating the Van Lunen Fellows program. It is a testimony to a broad vision of Christian education that recognizes the importance of supporting and equipping Heads of Schools for their work in leading Christian schools throughout North America.

I would like to thank the dedicated staff at Toronto District Christian High School for their contributions in making this project viable and beneficial for the work we do together in helping students learn for service in the light of God's Word.

### Abstract

This paper outlines, summarizes, and comments on the work done at Toronto District Christian High School during the 2013-14 school year in recalibrating the school's focus statement, communicating it (especially to the supporting community), connecting it to how the school operates, and creating seamless ways to ensure that it flows through the entire school and community.

## Learning for Service in the Light of God's Word

### Enfold, Engage, Empower

In June 2014, Toronto District Christian High School (TDChristian) completed its fifty-first year as an educational institution providing Christ-centred education for teenagers of Christian families who live in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). It has a rich history in helping students gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be effective citizens and to equip them with a Christian perspective and worldview to be faithful workers in God's kingdom. At the end of the fiftieth year, the school's administration took on the task of re-examining the school's mission, vision, and focus in light of its identity statement for the purpose of creating an action plan for Year 51 and Beyond. This paper outlines the work done in the 2013-14 school year towards that end.

### **Backdrop to the Project**

In 2011, Ren Siebenga, who had been Principal for 17 years, retired and I was appointed Interim Principal. I became the Principal in 2012-13. During Ren's tenure, the school re-established itself as a viable, relevant, and faithful Christian school. From a low of fewer than 250 students in 1994, with a relatively homogeneous student population, the school has grown to its current stable enrolment of between 420 and 470 students, with a wider ethnic and denominational base. TDChristian's focus statement through this time was, "Educating teens for service in the light of God's Word."

In Ren's last years the school's administration, under his leadership, made deliberate decisions to adapt to the rapidly changing educational landscape (mostly due to the proliferation of computers and the impact of the internet). TDChristian, which already had a focus on learning for service (especially through trips) and learning through the use

of technologies, began emphasizing project-based learning and student presentations. The school's leadership model also evolved into one that centred on a team approach.

Given these changes and my own experience at the school of over 36 years (including four as a student), Vice Principal Tim Bentum and I determined in January 2013 that it was time to re-examine the school's mission, vision, and focus in light of its Identity Statement (2004) for the purpose of creating an action plan for Year 51 and Beyond. The board concurred. Through God's providence, this coincided with my acceptance into the Van Lunen Fellows program in early 2013.

My Van Lunen Fellows project has been to spearhead, what we now call, the recalibration of Toronto District Christian High School's focus statement and then determine ways to help it direct how we operate in all facets of the school. Below are the completed and ongoing outcomes. Where applicable, context and steps taken are provided, insights and comments are shared, and significant learnings are highlighted.

### **Completed Outcomes**

In the summer of 2013, the new Leadership Team (LT), consisting of the two Vice Principals, Tim Bentum and Patty Schuurman, and me, spent considerable time discussing, debating, and thinking about the school's mission, vision, focus, and direction. *Learning for Christ-likeness* was our first iteration. TDChristian education would focus on developing students to be actively serving, intentionally connecting, willingly sacrificing, and wisely discerning – characteristics of Christ as a human.

In September 2013, inspired by a two-page document from Westminster Christian Academy, St. Louis (received at our Van Lunen July 2013 session) I wrote TDChristian's first draft (Appendix A) of a similar kind with *Learning for Christ-likeness* as its focus. Then,

we began sharing it with board and staff members, individually and collectively, informally and formally. It soon became apparent that the process was going to take time, revision, discussion, and significant amounts of critical and reflective thinking.

The first major breakthrough came in late October. The board and the staff firmly and clearly endorsed the recalibrated focus statement, *Learning for Service in the Light of God's Word*. The phrase ensured a strong link to the past with a focus on the current and future. *Learning* replaced *Educating teens* to emphasize the importance of learning, an active, often shared activity by all members of TDChristian rather than something done, *Educating*, to a group of people, *teens*.

Another key development in the process was the realization, in early winter, that we needed something that was simple to remember and true to our focus. Enfold, Engage, Empower were words that accomplished both objectives. They resonated with staff, board, students, and community. With these two developments the final two-page overview of TDChristian's mission, vision, focus, direction, and identity could be completed. What I thought would be completed in two to four revisions by early October took 14 revisions. The final document (Appendix B) completed in March was a great accomplishment by the community for the community. It included reworded mission and vision statements along with a simplified version of the school's identity statement. TDChristian had a short, clear, thorough, useful, and unifying document.

The Spring 2014 edition of the school's community publication, @td, found at [www.tdchristian.ca/news/pdf/@tdChristian/@TDChristian\\_Spring14.pdf](http://www.tdchristian.ca/news/pdf/@tdChristian/@TDChristian_Spring14.pdf), pronounced the school's recalibrated focus statement and highlighted ways in which students were enfolded, engaged and empowered in its centre spread. In April, at a school-wide assembly

and at the Spring Membership meeting, the document was shared and explained to students and members, respectively.

Throughout the process, to ensure buy-in and ownership of the document by all staff members, I intentionally communicated with them through emails and I deliberately kept bringing the newest draft to meetings about once a month. The board was also kept abreast of progress primarily through the vision portion of board meetings. Staff and board members were continually encouraged to contribute and critique; the school's mission, vision, focus, and direction were always on the radar. The process was rich. The essence of who we are, what we do, and how we do it was shared and owned by board, staff and selected community members. As TDChristian moves forward, it has a central document containing the essence of the school's story to direct its planning.

Through this process, I learned that the journey requires steps of faith because the outcome does not belong to me, nor should it. It must be the "school's." As a leader, my task is to keep the ball rolling so that the school's story can be told. I must also care for that story and ensure that everyone knows it. A former board chair shared this African proverb with us, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." How true that was and is!

### **Ongoing Items**

Originally, as part of the 2013-14 school year, the hope was to put together an Action Plan based on the school's final two-page document. To that end, I communicated with consultant Peter Meerveld in the fall. However, in January, I realized the folly of that plan. Thankfully, we were assigned to read Patrick Lencioni's book, *The Advantage* (2012). His concept of a Playbook enticed and excited me. I saw it as a tool that we could use at

TDChristian. I shared the idea with LT members Tim Bentum and Patty Schuurman who endorsed it. Then, with their input, I wrote TDChristian's Playbook for Semester 2, 2013-14 (Appendix C) and shared it with staff in February. We now had a clear plan and focus for the staff – one that everyone was reminded of and could help one another with for the ensuing five months. We decided that, “Ensuring that everyone knows the focus statement and is working at enfolding, engaging and empowering students” was the most important action item for the remainder of the school year.

This task was accomplished by using two of our professional development days. Teachers shared ways in which they enfolded, engaged, and empowered students and then chose new ways to do so in their classes. These were committed to paper and given to me.

In addition, staff members were asked to meet with an alumna or alumnus for a day (on or before October 24, 2014) and write a 150 to 200 word piece on the person they visited for the @td edition of January 2015. The desire is to have them see, hear, and share the effect of TDChristian education, to tell a story through photos and words, and to make or maintain connections with the alumna or alumnus that may benefit their classes – to create an effective learning partnership so as to empower students in their learning.

During the June, end-of-year individual meetings with teachers I was pleased and encouraged by the impact and support of the new document. Teachers had been engaged and empowered in ways that allowed them to identify ways to carry out the recalibrated vision in various aspects of their work. They had implemented and shared with each other ways of enfolding, engaging, and empowering students that were meaningful.

Our next step is to create a “visual” playbook that is clear, concise and memorable. We want our staff, students, and community to know our main directives and tactics on

how we plan to help students learn given our recalibrated vision. In June, on the last day of classes, the staff gathered to give input on how we might do that. Using an exercise that involved Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats, data was collected on what the directives and tactics TDChristian should focus on. The activity was lively and produced many ideas.

The following week, the LT took these ideas, discussed and sorted them and then after further discussion developed the first draft of a visual (Appendix D) that outlines three levels of how we will help students learn for service in the light of God's Word. This visual was shared with the staff and the board executive. Our intention is to develop it further in August and use it as a springboard to 2014-15. Teachers will identify the tactics they will use in and out of their classrooms in each of three areas: Enfold, Engage, and Empower.

My task as principal is to continually provide positive ways to make that happen because mission, vision, focus, direction, and identity need to be more than words, they need to translate into action. People come to a school usually because of what the school does not what it says.

Throughout this project I have learned that clarity is essential. I need to keep things focused. Additionally, where possible, I should seek ways to help connect the school's focus to each staff member's experience and expertise so they can make that focus a reality in their work and interactions with students and community members.

Finally, when I bring my own passion to the work, the staff sees that it means something – that it energizes me. My desire and prayer is for that type of energy to be contagious and flow through the entire school.



### **The Difference that this Project has Made**

I came into the position of principal somewhat reluctantly (reference: *Moses in Exodus 3*). I believed, in my heart, that I was a teacher and not a principal. This journey, has taught me that in reality, I am neither. Instead, I am a servant of God called to do His work, not mine. When I struggle with whether or not my work is effective or keep working because that is how it becomes a success, I should stop. God is faithful! I need to seek and trust the mighty God who promises to give me, as His child, the ability and power to lead from the inside out.

### References

deBono, E. (2014). Six Thinking Hats. Retrieved from:

[http://www.debonogroup.com/six\\_thinking\\_hats.php](http://www.debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php)

Lencioni, P. M. (2012). *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else In Business*. Toronto: Jossey-Bass.

## Appendix A

# Toronto District Christian High School

## OUR VISION AND MISSION STATEMENT: **Learning for Christ-likeness**

### WHAT DOES **Learning for Christ-likeness** MEAN?

**Learning for Christ-likeness** comes out of Jesus' reiteration of God's commandment: "The most important one [commandment]," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Here are the four aspects to **Learning for Christ-likeness**:

#### ***Intentionally Connecting (HEART)***

Jesus reached out to countless people in diverse places. He was a mentor to the disciples, a preacher to the multitudes, a critic of the haughty, and a friend of sinners. He brought a message of love and hope for those who confessed their sins. He walked alongside others sharing their joys and sorrows. **As God's image bearers, TDChristian students are to intentionally connect with people meaningfully, thoughtfully, and authentically.**

#### ***Willingly Sacrificing (SOUL)***

Christ gave himself up for those he came to save. He freely gave of his goodness so that others might have salvation. Christ made the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. He did so by staying connected to God, the Father, who gave him the strength he needed. **TDChristian students are to willingly give of themselves – stepping in or stepping out as needed – for the betterment of their neighbours and the furtherance of God's kingdom.**

#### ***Wisely Discerning (MIND)***

When confronted by the teachers of the law and the leaders of the land, Jesus showed his brilliance. Through wisdom and knowledge, he masterfully answered questions, dealt with challenges and exposed falsehood. Jesus discerned the spirits of the age and showed people a better way – the way of life eternal. **TDChristian students are to learn and think about how they are to conduct themselves and to exercise discernment in what they do and where they go in an ever-changing world.**

#### ***Actively Serving (STRENGTH)***

Jesus healed the sick of their diseases, he washed the disciples' feet, he provided food for the hungry, forgave sins, and gave direction to the disenfranchised and lost. He criss-crossed the land actively serving others. **TDChristian students are to actively work with others, from getting their hands dirty to contributing ideas on task forces, so that their communities are better places to be.**

### HOW DO WE FOSTER **Learning for Christ-likeness**?

The TDChristian administration and staff are called and committed to:

- guiding, assisting, teaching, directing, urging, and encouraging students to learn for Christ-likeness, as each of us works on the four aspects of learning for Christ-likeness, individually and collectively
- providing a safe, nurturing environment for all students
- providing parent(s)/guardian(s) with clear communication regarding their child's progress in all facets of their learning at school
- showing respect to the students and their families

- providing consistency in values and discipline
- building positive relationships with students by listening
- praying for the students
- using the resources of the school wisely so as to enhance each student's learning

### **WHY DO WE WANT TDCHRISTIAN TO BE A PLACE OF *Learning for Christ-likeness?***

Toronto District Christian High School is founded on a distinctly Christian world view. The first five statements help define it broadly. The last five help define it specifically with respect to education.

#### ***God rules over all creation and all areas of life.***

Christian education at TDChristian points to God in all learning areas, as well as in attitudes and behaviour toward other human beings and the rest of creation.

#### ***Jesus is the Redeemer of all that is broken, not only the Saviour of individuals.***

The whole world has fallen, and so the whole world needs to be redeemed and restored: every person, place, organization, and program.

#### ***The Bible is God's Word and serves as the "spectacles" through which we view reality.***

We attempt to examine all of life and creation through a biblical worldview. In doing so, we read the Bible as a continuous whole, contextually rather than in a proof-texting way.

#### ***Creation is the other "book" in which God shows us who he is.***

We see God's fingerprints all over creation. The visible universe is like a beautiful book in which all creatures are like letters making us ponder the love, wisdom, and power of the invisible God.

#### ***Our responsibility for the care of our world is a fundamental part of God's plan for creation.***

God created humankind to be caretakers of this world. He wired this purpose into our very beings and into the plan of creation itself.

#### ***Christian education is not just about absorbing information; God requires us to respond.***

We are "Learning for Christ-likeness," not merely passing on information; we hope to nurture in our students a love and awe for God and all he has created throughout their life's journey.

#### ***Our world belongs to God, not the evil one.***

We aim to engage culture, not shy away from it, confident that God is in control. Students are being prepared "on the job" to take up their place as shapers of God's world in a wide range of endeavours.

#### ***The line dividing good and evil runs through people and organizations rather than around them.***

All human beings fall short of God's glory, and all reflect something of his image. Students are encouraged to critically examine aspects of culture for their worth and underlying values.

#### ***We believe in and foster community.***

We seek to reflect a commitment to community in all our relationships. We work together to carry out the shared task of educating children through trust, cooperation, and service.

#### ***We celebrate the unique giftedness of each person by God for his purposes.***

Students come with diverse gifts and learning styles and are called to different tasks in God's world. We strive to help students develop their talents and abilities so they can serve and glorify God.

## Appendix B

# Toronto District Christian High School

**Our mission is to be an intentional and God-honouring learning community.**

**Our vision is to be a community of learners who serve God and others through authentic and relevant Christ-centred education.**

**TDChristian High School's focus statement: Learning for Service in the Light of God's Word.**

Learning at TDChristian takes place by **enfolding**, **engaging**, and **empowering** students.

## **Enfolding**

**Why?** As God's image bearers, students matter. To live a life of service, students need to know themselves and be known. When students are accepted and accepting, and their talents, passions and gifts are recognized, they become important members of the school community. Such enfolding provides a firm foundation for learning.

**How?** From the initial family interview until graduation, we work diligently with students in uncovering and developing their God-given talents for service. We welcome them into multi-grade "family" homerooms in which they contribute, celebrate and grow. During the first week of Grade 9, students are brought into the TDChristian community while learning and serving on a two-day trip. During their time at TDChristian, students learn through rich experiences in diverse areas: academics, video, art, drama, music, athletics and wood shop. Throughout the school year, we challenge our students to cultivate their passions and develop their abilities while sharing their learning, especially through presentations.

## **Engaging**

**Why?** Learning at TDChristian is for today, with an eye to tomorrow. A love of learning is fostered by piquing students' interests and taking into account their gifts. Creating room for students to have voice and choice in their learning produces determination, allows for healthy risk-taking, and brings about a rigorous depth of understanding. Additionally, engaged students develop grit, perseverance, and a strong work ethic.

**How?** Learning is stimulated and nurtured in our inviting and up-to-date physical and virtual learning spaces. However, it flourishes through the student-teacher relationship which we emphasize and foster. Our teachers are engaged in, passionate about and dedicated to their craft. In each learning opportunity, they assist students in sharing their findings in significant and relevant ways. Projects that emphasize skills such as creativity, collaboration, initiative, adaptability, information analysis, entrepreneurship, and effective oral and written communication are essential to learning at TDChristian. Students are pushed to become wisely discerning, to think and learn about how to conduct themselves and how to serve effectively in an ever-changing world.

## **Empowering**

**Why?** For learning to be relevant and service-driven, TDChristian's walls must be permeable. Our desire is to connect our students authentically to life outside the institution by partnering with groups and organizations to grow the kingdom of God. We want our students to work actively with others, from getting their hands dirty to giving leadership willingly, so that they are a blessing to their communities and they are blessed in the process.

**How?** Students are empowered when they contribute to our vibrant community through student leadership opportunities and assemblies. Service trips, Focus Days, Project Days, and Internships immerse students in learning outside the building – integrating learning with life is paramount. Daily, we stretch students creatively, intellectually, and practically to impact all of God's creation including in athletics, the arts, drama, and robotics. Courses in Communications Technology and Entrepreneurship along with interdisciplinary blocks of learning in French & History, the environment, social justice and engineering complement a full range of courses. Our aim is to link students to outside organizations or places in which they can serve with their hearts and minds.

**WHY SHOULD TDCHRISTIAN BE A PLACE OF *Learning for Service in the Light of God's Word*?*****God rules over all creation and all areas of life.***

Christian education points to God in all learning areas, as well as in attitudes and behaviour toward other human beings and the rest of creation. It is not confined to Bible class, assemblies, and daily homeroom devotions.

***Jesus is the Redeemer of all that is broken, not only the Saviour of individuals.***

The whole world has fallen, and so the whole world needs to be redeemed and restored: every person, place, organization, and program.

***The Bible is God's Word and serves as the "spectacles" through which we view reality.***

We attempt to examine all of life and creation through a biblical worldview. In doing so, we read the Bible as a continuous whole, contextually rather than in a proof-texting way.

***Creation is the other "book" in which God shows us who he is.***

We see God's fingerprints all over creation; its fundamental goodness shines through in spite of sin. The visible universe is like a beautiful book in which all creatures are like letters making us ponder the love, wisdom, and power of the invisible God.

***Our responsibility for the care of our world is a fundamental part of God's plan for creation.***

God created humankind to be caretakers of this world. He wired this purpose into our very beings and into the plan of creation itself. God will renew this world rather than destroy it; hence all actions to improve life on earth are worthwhile and God-honouring.

***Christian education is not just about absorbing information; God requires us to respond.***

We are "Learning for Service in the Light of God's Word," not merely passing on information; we hope to nurture in our students a love and awe for God and all he has created and a desire to express this in action. We recognize that students are on a lifelong journey; we look for authenticity and growth, not mere conformity to rules.

***Our world belongs to God, not the evil one.***

We aim to engage culture, not shy away from it, confident that God is in control. Students are being prepared "on the job" to develop discernment and take up their place as aware, informed shapers of God's world in a wide range of endeavours.

***The line dividing good and evil runs through people and organizations rather than around them.***

All human beings fall short of God's glory, and all reflect something of his image; good and bad, truth and falsehood, are found in the work of both Christians and non-Christians. Students are encouraged to critically examine books, media, political systems, scientific theories, and other aspects of culture for their worth and underlying values.

***We believe in and foster community.***

We seek to reflect a commitment to community in all our relationships. We work together to carry out the shared task of educating children through trust, dialogue, cooperation, giving, and service. In our sports, music, and other programs we aim to maximize participation rather than showcase only the most talented.

***We celebrate the unique giftedness of each person by God for his purposes.***

Students come with diverse gifts and learning styles and are called to different tasks in God's world. In designing our teaching and learning activities, as well as in all our interaction with students, we strive to help all of them develop their talents and abilities so they can serve and glorify God.

*This document contains the mission, vision, focus and identity statements of*

## **Toronto District Christian High School**

*To really know about the school, and the learning that takes place, we invite you to come and visit*

**377 Woodbridge Avenue, Woodbridge, Ontario, L4L 2V7**

## Appendix C

### **TDChristian High School Playbook for Semester 2, 2013-14**

#### #1. Why do we exist?

Our school exists to be an intentional and God-honouring learning community

#### #2. How do we behave?

We enfold. We engage. We empower.

#### #3. What do we do?

We are a community of learners who serve God and others through authentic and relevant Christ-centred education.

Our focus is: “Learning for Service in the Light of God's Word.”

#### #4. How will we succeed in carrying out our mission and vision?

- Uncovering and developing students’ God-given talents for service
- Growing and celebrating community
- Emphasizing and fostering the student-teacher relationship
- Having up-to-date learning tools and spaces (physical and virtual)
- Connect authentically to life outside the institution by partnering (“permeable walls”)

#### #5. What is most important, right now?

- Ensuring that everyone knows the focus statement and is working at enfolding, engaging and empowering students.

#### #6. Who must do what? (a work in progress)

William –human resources, time table, curriculum, reporting, school climate, organizational health

Tim – finance, admissions, development, transportation

Patty – student discipleship, student leadership, service learning, family relations

Shared – vision and strategy, events

Appendix D

