

Jeffrey Johnson  
Van Lunen Great Whites  
Project Summary  
July 17, 2014

My project to write this book, and to collaborate in the writing came as a response to something that didn't work. Carrie Sanders is the musician for prayer and liturgy at St. Vincent Pallotti Catholic School. It was July of 2012, and I had asked to meet with Carrie to tell her we were going to have to cut her stipend by 70% due to a serious financial set back. I had to relay how this problem was already being rectified by the new parish Director of Development and Administrative Services, and that for about fifteen to eighteen months every aspect of our programming would feel the effects of this problem.

At first Carrie thought, "Why would I even consider staying with this place?" Having watched the development of our retreat program, daily prayer, weekly Mass and assembly, Carrie frequently commented at the impact she observed in the children at Mass over time from her place on the concert grand piano bench. She only sees the students once, sometimes twice a week, and on special days for retreat, yet she felt that she was part of something that was a rare gem. She relayed that, "There is gold to mine here." She commented frequently on what she saw as distinctly unique: a palpable community presence with students who come from many backgrounds, and who come to us from all over the city.

Carrie expressed to me that she had been talking about what she sees going on at Pallotti, and from her liturgical music work in other sectors of the city's parishes and schools, she often affirmed that something different in essence happens at Pallotti. Carrie Sanders is a member of a Milwaukee group which sponsors various workshops to support ministerial work in parishes,

organizations, and schools. The question came, “Would you work with me to put together a workshop on children’s spirituality and tell ‘how’ we build community to foster distinct and experienced spiritual awareness with students.” I thought it was a great idea. We met a few times and took a series of pages of notes attempting to define what we have that could be shared with other communities, and then maybe even implemented.

We submitted an abstract of what our workshop would offer. The sponsoring city group for planning such workshops was disappointed that we were not presenting information from a program we were using, and, that a program was bringing us great success.

Upon further discussion with Carrie I began to observe, for the first time, that we actually have an approach that emanates from ourselves, and becomes more explicit as it is experienced within the school community’s students, faculty, staff, and parents. The inspiration popped! Let’s write a book that articulates the way we arrive at the rich community life we experience. Let’s write a book that can reach a broader audience. Why does our topic have to be developed for one local organization to fulfill their purpose?

In February of 2013, I was accepted as a Van Lunen Fellow and the following July the first Prince Conference Center summer came to a close; but, the flow of thought and inspiration from that amazing *Great Whites* experience, coupled with the opportunity to design a project to benefit each of our own schools, connected even more concretely to the initial speculations for Carrie’s and my book.

A related aside: in February of 2013 St. Vincent Pallotti, having been selected along with 25 other urban schools to be studied by the Notre Dame University ACE (Alliance for Catholic

Education) Task Force, hosted a visiting ACE team of seven members who studied our school in all of the core domains that constitute a school. Carrie Sanders was one of the interviewees for the team's focus on spirituality and school culture. Unbeknownst to me, these interviewers asked both Carrie and I separately 'how' we create this rare spirit they were witnessing in being around the campus. Some of the questions were more than introspective and appeared to be prying as well. Upon sharing later with Carrie about the interview experience, a team member very briefly referenced interest in unique experiences for a book! That was the confirming fire. Our book must happen. It would be 5 ½ months later that I would ask Carrie if our work on the book could become the Van Lunen Project.

The Book. With more defined intentionality we began to meet to write. Finding time to write unfettered by the necessary interruptions of running a school, and Carrie's from running her own music business, was an immediate priority. Some allotted writing hours were at the Sanders' house or mine. But, sustained time became more and more essential. A monastery.

We began to schedule two day writing appointments every few weeks at Holy Wisdom Monastery in Madison, Wisconsin. The quiet, contemplative, and artistically beautiful environment served our needs. We generally began writing at 9:30 A.M. and worked until 8:30 P.M., pausing only to eat and sometimes to join the Sisters for morning or evening prayer.

At school assembly one day I shared for a couple of minutes with the students that Mrs. Sanders and I are working on a book about them. I told them that little stories that show the care and the love in our school will be in the book. This resulted in periodic inquiries about, 'how the book is going', from children and adults. Rare moments of 'Spirit' and stories of remarkable

care between community members began to come to us, sometimes on a penciled note, and sometimes by a brief, “Hey, here’s a great moment for your book.”

One of the changes that I have witnessed in the faculty is a more attuned sense that we are not simply lucky, and that we should not take for granted gifts of grace. In the spirit of the book’s focus on ‘how’ we build community with children, I interviewed the students for *Teacher Appreciation Week*. I met with each grade level and simply asked, “This is a secret. Tell me your favorite things about Mr. / Ms. \_\_\_\_.” The stories and characteristic naming flowed. I wrote a meditative piece to be read after Mass. Each reflection named the faculty member, followed by the colorful, humorous, and lively language of students. This simple gesture in writing further emphasized that paying attention to moments of goodness, and then telling, makes us a very special place to live and learn. This is a building block of making a felt community experience in school every day, all day with students and faculty.

I find that I pay attention and listen better to everything. This has a surprise effect for me in that I see others around me also trying.

One difference that I see ‘writing the book’ making is that in my eighth year in this school, I experience the need for the focus on our vision and mission to remain breathing, and it must be able to be witnessed in *our* words and actions around school. This takes time, due diligence, as well as prayer and reflection. Again, as I also say in the video clip, and the book, the next step which cannot be missed is: to tell. Tell who we are all the time. Tell stories of daily transactions among us that show who we are. I find that I am more and more aware of how real the Old Testament adage is: without vision the people perish.

Even parents come with stories of the impact of school community. On a gorgeous sunny morning in spring of 2014, a mother came to me after Morning Prayer and said, “I don’t know what this school does, but, you’re not going to believe what I heard driving in the car this morning bringing the kids to school.” She told, “Nina, my 10 year old looks out the window of the car to the beautiful sky and suddenly I hear her GASP, ‘I see God. He is standing right by the sun!’ Rocco, my six year old looked out the window and said, ‘It’s either God or an Angel; I can’t tell. The sun is too bright, but either way they are watching us.’ The next morning on our way to school on another sunny morning, Rocco randomly says, ‘Let’s look and see if God is in the sky again.’ ”

So, the book is a telling of stories of active faith, love, inspiration, which are the direct fruits of life lived in the school community, day to day, season to season. Pragmatically, the book will provide some of the forms we have designed for prayer, retreat, and other community building spiritual practices. Spiritually, the book will link real stories of what comes from participating in the various community gatherings throughout the year, and what comes from consciously practicing living as brothers and sisters loved and created by God.

Of the 100 some work pages of writing, remembering, defining, delineating, we have arrived at a model for the book which will comprise seven sections. They are:

- Pay attention
- Tell
- Weekly Community Times
- Time away – Retreats
- Elements of a Monastic Model for School
- Show us the face of Christ...in each other’s eyes...courage to look deeply.

We are currently revising the three sections of *Weekly Community Times*. We have yet to write *Time away* and *Elements of a Monastic Model for School*. The last section is additional stories to inspire and teach what authentic community building can evoke. Three are written, and we have outlining and core content for over ten other stories; some will appear in the book.