

Faith Formation Initiative

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What Did I Do?

While my project is quite incomplete, I will attempt to address this essay as best I can regarding that topic. I will also mention the focus of my efforts with Dave Medema, which have been an immense blessing, but I will try to focus on the goal of my project.

The goal of my project was to assist our school families to be more engaged in the faith formation of their children. I planned to gather best practices from families and share those with our families to provide them with easy-to-use resources. We would also seek guidance from experts in family ministry to determine what training we could provide for families as well as what programs we could implement during the school day to help children grow in faith. I felt the evidence we would see would be hard to measure, but could still be seen in acts of love and service, as well as positive attitudes and relationships.

At the end of the 2014 school year, there were several student discipline problems that took up much of my office time. There was a lack of respect for teachers and for other students. I was convinced that developing a school year that focused on living the love of Jesus was the only way to combat the culture challenges we faced. Much of our school year would focus on telling the children how they are loved and they can share that love with others.

When I saw a fellow Lutheran school principal's intended project was derailed last summer, I was determined to not let that happen to me. It did. My congregation had voted to open a child care ministry in June of 2014. We were set to open in August, which was a Herculean feat. We did it! Our program is terrific. However, any time I might have been able to dedicate to my Faith Formation project looked like it would be taken up with a new area of ministry to oversee. Perhaps I should have changed my project to change leadership, and adding a large piece ministry to a church that has operated for 167 years, but I had a plan to develop our faith formation plan and I was going to stick with it. We hired a director in July, but she needed a lot of support, and I had a school year to prepare for. It was a wild summer!

I knew it would be a bit of a shock to our octogenarians who may walk into the building in September and see things that were startlingly different than they had been in May, so I began to write. I began sharing each step of this process with the congregation...

We moved our classrooms. We ordered furniture. Thank you for your donations! We hired a director who wants to love kids and teach them about how much Jesus loves them. We have built our furniture. We installed a fence around our playground. And in each of those bulletin announcements, I'd include a list of things to pray for. Sometimes that list got rather long, and sometimes it was very specific.

When people would come and visit and just casually mention why they were excited, and what they were praying for, I knew we were on the right track. Oftentimes, I'd just smile when I'd hear people quote my articles as though the thoughts were their own. I didn't want the credit, I wanted our community united in ministry, and I believe they were!

During our week together in July, I didn't feel as though the gifts of the consultants we met didn't really match my particular project, but Bruce Hekman asked questions that challenged me. I thought that kind of perspective would be good for me. We kicked things off in September with a phone call consultation. He provided valuable guidance on the project, but also after I ran into the large challenges that arose. I needed to gather a posse with the help of an existing committee and our PTL. Unfortunately, that plan didn't work. I was discouraged, and didn't know what to do next. I turned my attention to the rest of my duties – teaching and administration – and waited for people to come volunteer. I slowly started to realize they wouldn't volunteer, and did ask a few people to join.

At the start of the school year, we had implemented a Monday Morning Meeting. It provided an opportunity for announcements, but also for a school-wide devotion. You could call it a mini-chapel service. I had observed that fewer children were sent to my office on Wednesday and Thursday last year. We had chapel service on Wednesday mornings. I thought there might be a connection. So, we tried this Monday Morning Meeting idea, and by my observation it worked. Fewer children were sent to my office this year for behavior problems. A little more Gospel as a whole school seems to have had an impact. The climate of our school seemed more caring.

In early December we wrote a survey to poll parents about the things they do to promote faith formation at home, what hasn't worked and why, and ways they think they could grow. A week later, on a Wednesday afternoon, a child told me he had a headache, then couldn't see anything, and then he was throwing up on the side of a trash can. A sheriff's deputy was the first to respond to the 911 call, and he thought he was faking it. I told him he was wrong, as I walked him to the door. Elijah was taken by ambulance to the hospital. The next few days provided an intense test of the faith of our school families. We met at the end of the school day to pray as a whole school. After that, Elijah's parents decided to share as much information as they could with our community. They did this because they didn't want false information to get out. As it turned out, they were incredibly blessed by the community that surrounded them. His parents asked me to share the updates on him with our community. We used our school information system to send messages and texts to parents. We used our phone message system to send out updates. We also used our Facebook group and twitter accounts to get the word out, and request prayers.

Elijah was set to have surgery that Friday afternoon. We invited any parents to come to school a little early and join us to pray in the cafeteria. The kids decided what we should pray for. Their list was inspiring. They wanted him to be healed, for the doctors to do a good job, and for him to not remember the pain. All of those prayers ended up coming true. The heart they showed during Elijah's hospitalization was one that can only come from God. It also didn't take long to hear those prayer requests echoed "in town." People were sharing Elijah's story, and it was amazing to hear the genuine prayers that were offered so much more freely than we typically do. But, little Elijah, the crazy kid with curly hair who wears his kilt every chance he gets brought a community together in prayer.

So, I can't claim too much credit for the organization of these efforts, or even claim that they were organized very much, but they have echoed throughout the year, and the results have been quite positive.

And then came January. I knew my burnout in July when I arrived on campus, but I didn't know how bad things had gotten in January. I needed that week in the desert to rest, recharge, and reconnect with my

new friends. I also needed to reconnect with God. I would need that connection very soon. The week I returned, I was informed that some of our boys had been making inappropriate jokes for quite some time. I consulted several advisors before I determined their consequences. It seemed as though things had gone as well as they could have, but the complaints came the next week. We worked through those, but it was taxing. When the boys returned to school, I sat with them and each of their classmates to facilitate confession and forgiveness among them. After that week, I was once again hoping to regroup my faith formation project, but my health struggles became a major factor in my productivity. Shockingly, two bouts of flu and pneumonia in two months didn't result in many absences from school, but my body was very weak.

It was then that my board of education decided that my job performance was poor, despite never having any formal complaints before February, nor have they ever made any formal request for me to make corrective action. The attacks were personal, professional, and spiritual. In a good year, I might have been able to push through such a challenge, but in a perpetual state of burnout, with no noticeable immune system, and with too many responsibilities, I was very lost.

I truly thank God for the Van Lunen community that has surrounded me all year. Just visiting and emailing you, and the support of Dave Medema has been immeasurably impactful. I can't say that anything with my board is solved, but we are in a much better place. I can report that I am in a much better place physically and spiritually. I'm continuing in ministry at Immanuel, and I am optimistic. The team I have assembled for my faculty and staff over the past few years is about to do some amazing things in our community.

Our students also participated in several activities with their chapel families. Each year, we divide students into groups with children from every class. They pray together before each chapel service and they sit together during services so the older students can help the younger students follow along. By my observation, the students were more enthusiastic about being in these groups than they have been in past years. During our community service projects, they were very good at working together and supporting each other in these groups.

What Did I Learn?

While I already knew I shouldn't try to do things alone, I often do. The attention paid to Jethro and Moses (Ex. 18) during last summer's residency really hit me hard. I have a tendency to choose what I believe to be the "right" way, and run ahead screaming, "Follow me! This is the way to go!" Though, I was not able to fully utilize the Faith Formation team that I gathered at school this year, they are a good group. I also found another posse. The Van Lunen faculty, staff, fellows, and consultants have provided prayer, support, counsel, and guidance throughout this year. I believe I've also learned better how to bring my team, and my church and school along through changes.

I feel I did well to bring my congregation along during the transition to opening our child care. I believe focusing on that mission was good for everyone who read those updates. I believe that set the framework for the messages that went out about Elijah in December. The messages that went out giving updates and asking for prayers were easily integrated into the daily life of many families, according to the feedback I've received and the messages that were sent on social media. I also receive many thanks whenever I send out those updates. I think people appreciate having specific things to pray for about a ministry they care so much about.

I knew they would come, but the spiritual attacks and discouragement that came my way were intense. I very seriously considered leaving ministry this year. To fight for spiritual health and to share the Gospel requires us ministers to have a strong support system. The Lord put us in communities of faith,

because He knew we'd need them. The harder we fight for Truth, the more vicious the attacks will be. Cling to the Word and to the people whom the Lord puts in your life to walk with you in the darkness.

I have certainly faced challenges in many ways this year. My main goal moving forward will be to write as much as I can in order for people to be informed in whatever way they need to be. From bulletin announcements to Board reports, I hope to continue to narrate the mission of our school. I think the training on marketing and development that I've learned through Van Lunen has helped provide more of a focus to those messages. We're meeting our giving goals, our enrollment is increasing, and people are enthusiastic about the direction we're going.

What Difference Is It Making in Your School?

While this was a difficult year for me, personally, I feel there is evidence of positive impacts on our school. One large change in our school ministry has been the addition of a child care program. Our students have shown great care and enthusiasm when the younger children are around. We had fewer student discipline problems this year. I feel intentional conversations of forgiveness have been positively affecting relationships.

Though it can't be solely attributed to this process, I feel the greatest evidence of the impact our ministry efforts have had in our community is the response to Elijah's series of brain surgeries. The community that surrounded his family, and the thoughts and prayers that were shared on social media, show that the Spirit is alive and well in the greater Frankentrost region.

I think the overt message of "be nice" and "obey your teachers" that I share with kids who step out of line is starting to sink in, because we've made an effort this year to put it in the context of responding to God's love. I have often told my students that I love them. I have made a point to say it when kids are sent to my office, and conversations seem to go better. Being in a place for longer periods of time make those conversations a little better, too.

I think that we will be able to move forward with better organizing our faith formation plans in the future. I wanted a neat package to deliver to the world right now, but we didn't get to that point. I do feel there has been positive progress. I am also, in some ways, glad that we didn't "finish" this project in one year. It forces us to continue to focus on faith formation in our school moving forward.

I believe I would have spent a lot of time fighting in the last few months, if it hadn't had the support of Van Lunen and Dave Medema. I think there was a very good probability I would have walked away from ministry. In the end, I had some disagreements, but I was much better prepared to defend myself, and I was much more balanced than I would have been without all of you. It was also curious that one of my board members decided to go on a tirade about me at the end of our meeting last week. The two members who were most upset with me in February stayed after the meeting to let me know they supported me. The next step is to have them say that in the meeting rather than after, but we're making progress. I'm planning to have my board attend two trainings in the coming months about board of education best practices and caring for church workers. We're slowly getting there, but we're moving forward. I wasn't sure I'd feel this way at this point, but once again, I'm optimistic about the potential at Immanuel.