

A Home for Cambridge: Our First Capital Campaign

Van Lunen Project/Class of 2016

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Act I: The Need

Every organization has both a body and soul. In our case, the soul of our school is the academy—an educational philosophy encompassing ends and means, teachers, students, parents, curriculum, pedagogy, culture, conversations, assessments, learning, and growth. But because we are not Gnostics and because we recognize that we are embodied souls, we recognize the importance of having a “body,” an actual physical place that embodies the soul of our school and serves as its home in a way that reflects and integrates what the soul values.

This longing for home—and a home that embodies and integrates our vision for God’s goodness, truth AND beauty--has been part of our mission and vision since our inception. But practically, as a young, new school without a lot of financial resources and a great many challenges to overcome while trying to start a school in coastal-close San Diego, we’ve been at the mercy of the various landlords from whom we’ve rented over the years and our own circumstances. As such, we had to move the school four times in the first six years of our existence. Thankfully, God was faithful and led us to good options that were close to one another at the 11th hour each and every time, but after our 4th move, we knew the school was growing to a size where this would be harder and harder to do. Additionally, we had just about exhausted every possible option that was geographically desirable (i.e. wouldn’t displace too many families) and had the right permits. While we continued to praise God for the silver lining in all our moves, which was to be grateful for our growth and the gift of not confusing our very humble campus homes for the soul and quality of the education we were providing, we prayed earnestly for an opportunity to purchase a school home that would allow us to settle down someplace for a longer season, if not for good.

In the Fall of 2014, we knew that we would need to launch a capital campaign sometime in the next year or two even though we did not yet have any concrete idea where we could possibly go (our current building in its current state is too small to hold us at full capacity). But we knew that wherever we went, we would need to have money for a down payment in hand should an opportunity arise suddenly so that we could act quickly when the time came. So we took our next step of faith and hired a consultant to conduct a feasibility study. The results were encouraging and suggested that we were ripe for a capital campaign in terms of general support for the school, enthusiasm for the potential project of a long-term home for Cambridge, and the potential money we could raise. Our plan was to make slow and deliberate preparations to launch our first capital campaign well, especially since it was our first time doing this as a new school.

But apparently, that was not God’s plan.

In late February 2015, we got a call from our landlord, asking us to give a tour to someone who was planning to buy our building and kick us out either that summer or the following summer. Knowing that we had done an exhaustive search over the past 10 years (even before the school began) and that there was absolutely nowhere to move to in the area (other than possibly some land that wasn’t even for sale yet), we quickly came to the conclusion that we had to do something to purchase the building we were currently leasing immediately or face the possibility of the school closing for lack of a home. This was the catalyst for our unexpected and very sudden capital campaign in March/April of 2015 to purchase

our building. But at nearly \$7m for barely 4 acres of land (most of which was the parking lot) and a relatively small building and no real money in the bank to move quickly on the opportunity, we knew we were facing a giant we certainly could not tackle alone.

ACT II: The Purchase

And God was certainly with us and went before us in all of this. We sensed His leading at every turn and it was really the following six miracles in a period of just weeks that made it possible for us to complete the purchase of our building in record time. Here are the highlights of our miraculous, unplanned, unexpected Capital Campaign as living proof that God is indeed able to do more than we think, ask or imagine!

Six Miracles:

- 1) **The CEO**—Our landlord (a huge hospital in San Diego) had an all-cash offer in hand that was set to close escrow in 48 hours when they asked us to give the potential buyer a tour in late February. The CEO was shocked when we asked if we could still submit an offer as he knew we didn't have much money as a young school. But in God's providence, we had found favor with the CEO over the years of leasing from the hospital. He let us know that he personally liked us very much and wanted to give us at least a little time to submit an offer, but that we had a lot going against us and that he couldn't give us very long to pull together a viable one. But we had his favor and small open door through which to walk by faith and definitely not by sight!
- 2) **The Banker**—With the CEO's blessing, we knew we needed to get a loan as soon as possible, but again, as a small school without much of a relationship with bankers, this was going to be challenge. In God's providence, we had met with a banker from Cass Bank the year before just to ask questions about what we might need in terms of financials in order to get a loan should the opportunity arise. As the only banker we knew, we called and asked if we could meet with him ASAP in order to discuss a possible loan. He just happened to have a meeting the next day in San Diego and said he'd be there at 9am the next morning. And when he came, he SO loved our mission/vision and the work that God was doing here that he told us he was excited to do his best to get us a loan that would close in time to make this happen! That was sign #2 to us that God was really with us in this!
- 3) **The Long Lost Donor**—The third miracle in this process was finding a long lost donor who had given us our first large, multi-year gift in the first year of the school, but who had been MIA and completely out of touch for nearly five years in spite of calls, cards, emails etc. I was absolutely convinced that she must hate me and the school for some reason to have completely ignored me for all those years, but I knew I needed to talk to her again if there was any possibility of raising the kind of money I needed for a down payment all of a sudden. With some trepidation, I contacted her one weekend, expecting silence once again and was utterly shocked when she replied almost immediately that she would be coming to visit the school with the director of her foundation that very Monday! She came, we reconnected, and she fell in love with the mission

and vision of the school all over again, saying that what she gave in those early years was the best philanthropic investment she'd ever made, considering how far we had come since she last saw us! She wanted to help again and saw this as a strategic opportunity!

- 4) **The Lead Gift**—In spite of all the ways God was leading us, we still did not have the kind of cash we needed for a sizeable down payment. That is, until a foundation decided that enough doors were opening for this strategic and timely purchase that they would put forth a \$1 million lead gift towards the down payment to help catalyze other gifts and others' confidence. What a miracle indeed! With this gift, we were roughly half way to our down payment goal! Praise God!
- 5) **Other Donors**—With that lead gift in place, we were able to go to others, explain our situation and our need and give them enough confidence that we were going to make this happen that other people began to give—and give generously towards this unexpected capital campaign. People who hadn't given us a single cent over the ten years they'd known us suddenly gave six figure gifts “for such a time as this” and we were humbled and awed at the ways we saw God alive and in action!
- 6) **11 and a ½ Hour Miracle**—We were thrilled to watch God at work as we had conversation after conversation with every major donor we knew and managed to raise nearly another \$1 million in two weeks' time to match the lead gift for our down payment. But just as we were nearing our goal, we received a call that shattered all our hopes. The CEO called to say that he was under pressure from his board to accept the all-cash offer that would close in 48 hours as the prudent business decision and that while he was very sorry, he could no longer wait for us to get our loan approved and raise the rest of our down payment.

We were heartbroken. Surely God had not brought us so far only to leave us high and dry at the end. Surely, this wasn't how this story was going to end. After some initial weeping and gnashing of teeth in the office, we prayed and then called the CEO back to see if there was anything—ANYTHING—we could do that would change his mind and the board's.

He said there was only one thing—and that was to come up with an all-cash offer with a quick close by the following morning at 8am. We were flabbergasted; it was already 5:30pm, which left us with only 14 ½ hours to raise an additional \$4+ million dollars. It seems impossible in spite of what God has shown us over the past few weeks, but we prayed, took a deep breath and stepped out in faith to call everyone all over again to explain the situation to see if we could raise/borrow enough cash to close quickly and then repay people with our loan when it funded. And by 11:30pm that night, by God's amazing grace, we had an all-cash offer to give the CEO the next morning! He was shocked at the “little school that could” the next morning when we called to say we were able to pull together an all cash offer that could close quickly and he called us back later that morning, right in the middle of our school's Easter program, to let us know that our offer had been accepted! Soli Deo Gloria (our school motto, meaning To God Alone Be the Glory) indeed!

The miraculous, unexpected purchase of our building in roughly 6 weeks' time from beginning to end was a testimony to God's amazing faithfulness and His ability to work through a variety of different means to accomplish something so big that ALL the glory HAD to go to him as it simply could not be anything or anyone else! By God's grace, our building has already grown in equity as commercial real estate is doing well in San Diego. And it's given us a home for now and bought us the time to figure out our next steps on our own timeline instead of someone else's. In short, it was the best capital campaign we never planned!! And while we are incredibly grateful for this miracle, we also knew that we had our work cut out for us to raise the rest of the money we needed for renovation and expansion in order to make this space work for us going forward. And so with thanksgiving in our hearts but utterly exhausted and spent from the effort of purchasing the building, we looked immediately to the next steps of launching a proper capital campaign for the improvements we needed, which we had to make over the summer to be ready in time for the Fall.

ACT III: Renovation and Expansion

It was just months after the purchase of the building and with flurry of summer renovations already under way that I began my Van Lunen experience last July. There, I met Zach Clark and I knew from what he shared and how he shared it that he would be a great consultant and partner to help plan and execute a proper capital campaign for our next need to renovate and expand the building to make it better suit our needs.

What did we do?

With the initial frenzy of raising money to purchase the building behind us, we shifted gears and worked with Zach Clark to relaunch our capital campaign with a total goal of \$4 million over the next 3 years which included the roughly \$2 million raised for the down payment, and another \$2 million to renovate the existing building footprint as well as expand the campus. This we sought to do with more intentionality and better systems that would serve us well in the long term than the crazy miracle of our down payment story.

What did we learn?

Zach is an excellent coach and teacher and he was very intentional and methodical about teaching my Director of Advancement and me the disciplines needed to do this well—not just now for this first capital campaign but for the future.

We spent a lot of our time clarifying our development message and distilling it down to some clear giving-driven steps. In spite of having a clear mission and vision for the school, clarifying our development message took longer than we anticipated, but it was a worthwhile endeavor when complete. It created a fundamental change in the way we look at fundraising by giving us a simpler message that was NOT about selling a building project, but rather about fulfilling the vision of the school. The concept of “giving-driven steps” and the idea of building relationships slowly and intentionally in order to guide people thoughtfully and prayerfully through the decision-making process for slower, hopefully bigger gifts instead of making a quick ask in order to raise less money faster was a critical shift

in strategy for us and helped us make our fundraising efforts even more donor-centered than they have been in the past.

Also, creating and maintaining the back-end systems and disciplines needed to execute our first real capital campaign well and set us up for future success was very important. From creating 6x6 goals to creating a good weekly scorecard for the capital campaign, to creating spreadsheets of donors by momentum rather than by perceived capacity, to teaching us what disciplined, excellent follow up looks like, Zach taught us how to use good tools each week and gave us strategic perspective, as well as the encouragement and accountability we needed in the midst of wearing many different hats and having many different priorities and tasks to tackle each week. We also learned that California is a different kind of fundraising environment in that people simply don't seem to like making pledges, but would rather give what they can now and be asked three years in a row instead of make a pledge they may not be able to fulfill in a year or two.

Additionally, I'm particularly grateful for some of his coaching that went beyond development help to leadership/executive coaching, as I had a particularly difficult year fighting burn-out and depletion after more than ten years of building something from nothing, working crazy hours, and carrying too much stress from school while also being a mother to 3 young children, supporting my husband, running my household and caring for my aging parents, especially in recent years as they battled cancer and Alzheimer's.

What difference is it making at our school?

Everything that we've learned with Zach and through the Van Lunen Fellowship has helped us launch a more thoughtful capital campaign with excellent systems to support it. So as we near the end of our first year out of three of our first capital campaign, we have raised roughly \$600,000 beyond the \$2 million down payment, which means we are \$2.6 million dollars into our \$4 million dollar campaign.

The money we've raised for renovations and expansion has allowed us to turn our carpeted auditorium into a gym with a stage for real multi-purpose use of this critical space. Having a gym means that we no longer have to ask parents to drive their kids from school to an off-site gym for practice and then pick them up after practice (we don't have a bus either), which reduced stress levels for already harried parents and kids. And it proved to be much more than a gym, but also a community and culture building hub of the school as we could see from our first experiences of home games and all the cheering and support that went with that. We also retrofitted an existing stage in that room by building walls to create a real backstage and adding theater curtains (which were donated) and by painting the walls black to create a real theater space where we held our very first musical and Shakespeare play there this year in our brand new drama program as a result of finally having a stage.

With the money we raised, we were also able to take two larger classrooms and create three smaller classrooms out of them to help us solve the problem of needing an additional classroom this year. We also put up some extra walls here and there to creatively use our existing space. We were also able to renovate the student bathrooms, which were very old and decrepit and in need of some attention.

Best of all, through all our efforts, we are thoughtfully and deliberately cultivating a culture of giving at the school and continually helping people get connected to the mission and vision of the school in a way that they can see God at work here and their role in it. Thank you so much for this opportunity to learn and apply some wonderful things from the Van Lunen program. We are very grateful for the way you are strategically strengthening many schools and communities across the country! It's been a blessing to be a part of this. May God continue to bless the work He's doing in and through you all!