

From Development to Survival to Thriving

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My story begins on March 14, 2012. On that day I learned that I had been chosen as a Van Lunen Fellow. It is also a day that added to the first thing I learned at our venture last July – many of us will be forced out of our position sometime during our career. The day I was accepted as a Van Lunen Fellow, I was asked not to return to my position in Michigan. To this day, I don't really know the reason why; but I know that God had other plans for me. My project through Van Lunen was to form a development plan for a Lutheran grade school with a full-time principal. I called the office and spoke with Yvonne, who suggested I put my fellowship on hold for a year until I was settled into a new position, and that is what I did.

God blessed me by calling me to serve at Trinity Lutheran School in Toledo, Ohio. I replaced a principal who had been there 17 years as a principal and 22 more as a teacher. I also joined a new leadership staff that had only been together for a year; but our church and school were moving in the right direction. My family found the perfect house, the kids adjusted well to Toledo, and I was ready to attend Van Lunen and start a development plan for Trinity.

One month before our first Van Lunen gathering in Grand Rapids, one of our pastors was removed from the church and school for inappropriate actions. This was fresh in my mind as I began a great week of learning at Van Lunen and was introduced to my consultant, Don Distelberg. We met and set up times to talk, getting ready for the school year to begin.

One month after Grand Rapids, our senior pastor collapsed at a parishioner's house; they found he had stage 4 colon rectal cancer, and would more than likely have five years to live at most. He needed surgery after chemotherapy.

The day of my first consultation with Don was a day of necessary endings at Trinity. Over the summer, one of my teachers who had been there for 13 years posted on Facebook (and sent me an email) saying he wasn't going to teach what we had asked him to teach; he had not been in worship since March; and, he had not paid his property taxes on his house co-signed by the church for three years. This was two weeks before school started. Staff, to say the least, was not happy and was very concerned about the timing of it. On that day we also let our receptionist go; she was a good worker, but in the wrong position. She is a task person, but not a people person. The issue here is that her sister, who hired her, is my school secretary. I talked with Don and he sent me some homework to set up our development plan. I began the project still working with the outline Don established, but my focus was finding another teacher and building morale among my staff. Needless to say, the beginning of the year was a downer.

Some of these changes brought me back into the classroom two periods a day teaching seventh grade religion and social studies. These classes were a joy to teach but really cut up my day, and made my workflow very difficult. Then in October as our staff was leaving for a conference in Milwaukee, we learned that one of our parents was missing; she had sent note, and was found the next day in her car dead from a suicide. She was a well-known parent who had issues, but few knew how severe they were. At the conference, I was able to sit down with my staff and a grief counselor I had worked with in Indiana because of the death of a mother and student in a car accident some years earlier. We planned our response as we returned to Toledo for the funeral and had some hard discussions with the students and their families. This event occurred two weeks before our first auction, which was the first piece of my development plan. Our auction was one of many bright spots that occurred this school year. We had set a goal of raising \$15,000, but were able to raise \$25,000. This was significant, and gave me some credibility amongst the congregation - I had a plan and could carry it out.

In late November, our senior pastor had a full colostomy performed and was out of the office until after Christmas. So for the most part we were down two pastors from October until January.

In November, we had another congregational member take his life. He was a medic in Iraq who was not able to deal with what he saw when he returned from the front. Although he was not active in our congregation, it was our second suicide in two months. We also learned that suicides and some of these other changes we have experienced build on each other and can really take a toll on your staff.

In December, our first-grade teacher's mother, who is our senior pastor's wife, died suddenly. So my first grade teacher has a 10-year-old adopted son from Russia, a husband with cancer, her mother dies suddenly, and finds out her daughter is expecting a child in June. More grief for our staff.

After our auction I did not have any more exchanges with Don due to my busyness and shift in priorities. Christmas break and my trip to Arizona for Van Lunen part two was very much a needed distraction from what I had dealt with the past few months.

I came to Arizona a few days early to hike the Grand Canyon and take some time to rejuvenate after a snowy and rough fall. I arrived a day early at the retreat center and was able to share some of my challenges with Bruce Heckman, Jim Marsh, and Christine Metzger. They noticed the change in my demeanor and were concerned about how I was doing. They suggested I shift my project and work with life coach Dave Medema. I was very open to this; since I already had Don's outline for my project, I felt I could accomplish that project and get some help dealing with the many issues from this year and from my time at my previous school. I cannot share enough how much the Van Lunen program and the other fellows play a role in making me a better administrator and supporting one another in the trials we deal with day-to-day.

A week or so after returning from Arizona, I got a call on a Tuesday morning from the wife of the teacher I had hired to replace the one who had the necessary ending. She informed me that her husband had killed himself the night before. Her husband was just an incredible man who came right in and helped heal our staff with his skill and personality. None of us knew when we hired him was that he suffered from depression and was an alcoholic. His tragic death just tore apart our staff, students, and families. Three

suicides in three months. I will tell you, my Van Lunen Fellows were there for me in full force, and their prayers and support mean more than words or feelings can express. Again, we had grief counselors come in; we continue to deal with this loss. This teacher taught computers and PE to all students, and had student-taught in second grade the year before. He also taught Sunday school at our church for ten years. I don't know if Bruce, Jim, and Christine were prophetic or not, but a life coach was exactly what I needed.

My first chat with Dave Medema was just a "get to know you," and an explanation of why Van Lunen thought it would be good for me to talk with him. I then took their personality profile; I came out as a maverick. Dave told me a little bit about himself, and I fit many of the areas he struggles with; I saw myself going down some of these same paths. As we talked every other week, I had homework to do. Some involved some self-analysis, and others included speaking with other people close to me and getting their perspective on how I process items, and when they see me doing a good job at this and a poor job. It led to many conversations with my wife and my associate pastor. The biggest area I have taken from Dave is to slow down my reactions and try and look at the stressors in my life from an outside perspective. Although I still struggle with this greatly, I am doing a better job. I used to be really good at this, but after a series of weird events at my previous school that led to bad endings, it is hard for me to see the actions of others from a normal perspective. Knowing that I would have to report to Dave every other week kept me accountable, which is something I very much needed. Also, knowing I would have to report back to Dave when an issue came up I would think, "How would Dave have me think about this?" I am very thankful that the Van Lunen program allowed me to switch consultants and work with Dave Medema these last six months. It also became clear that I need to have a coach or a counselor to help work through situations as they arise, and deal with some depression/anxiety issues. We also worked hard at setting boundaries; I am doing better with this, but still work with my associate pastor and my wife.

The support that the Van Lunen program has given to me the last eighteen months is just amazing. Their vision for Christian schools and those that lead them has been a huge benefit to me and for Trinity. The learning that has happened because of Van Lunen has translated to positive results at Trinity. Although

my project on development changed, I have learned and gained many resources to accomplish this goal; I have learned to work on personal care for myself to be a more effective leader wherever God places me. As with most areas of my life, my project both in development and self-care will continue to grow; and God willing, improve over time. I am very thankful to Dave and Don for their expertise and guidance in this process, and look forward to working with them and my other Great Whites into the future as we strive to Share Christ in all times and in all places.