



Alternate Funding: A Thrift Store

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Alliston Community Christian School is a small interdenominational school situated in a beautiful rural setting in central Ontario, Canada. It began in 1983 and currently has 69 students from pre-school to Grade 8.

Declining enrolment over the past few years created some financial hardships. Increasing tuition, cutbacks and decreasing services only compounded the problem. The board sought aggressive positive methods of alternate funding. In September of 2010 we had a dream of starting a thrift store. An empty store building was leased and renovations began. The store opened on March 18, 2011 and within four months had grossed \$32,000 in sales.



History

Alliston Community Christian School is operated by the Alliston Interdenominational Christian School Society. The society is registered as a charitable organization with the federal government. The school was started in 1981, with construction of a new building in 1983. The parents represent a wide variety of churches in Alliston and surrounding community. Its Board of Directors is elected by the membership which is primarily made up of parents.

Our Cornerstone

“Be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding that you might walk worthy of the Lord.” Col. 1:9-10 (NJKV)

Our Mission

Through reliance on God, and with the cooperation of the Christian home and church, Alliston Community Christian School provides an education which develops the whole child to his/her fullest potential through the integration of faith and all aspects of learning, so that they may “Walk Worthy of the Lord.”

Our Vision

A team, which in faithfulness to God’s Word, provides a balanced Christian education for students of all abilities; in facilities most conducive to learning; accessible to the Christian Community; while modeling Christ-likeness to each other and the community at large.

Struggles

ACCS has been a viable part of the Alliston community since its beginning. However, it has gone through a pattern of growth and decline. Its highest enrolment was in 2004 with 120 students. Staff members at that time were paid 100% of the recommended OACS/OCSTA pay grid. Enrolment dropped over the next few years to a low in 2009 of just 61 students. In August of 2009 the board made some drastic changes. They eliminated bussing and the janitorial contract, cut teacher salaries to 84% of the grid, and raised tuition to an all time high of \$10,000 per year. Morale was at an all time low. Several families were upset by the loss of bussing with no notice and so they did not return (with some enrolling at a nearby sister Christian school which did offer bussing). Parents who came to clean that first weekend immediately realized the immensity of that commitment and within two weeks the board renegotiated the janitorial contract but cut the administrative assistant’s hours from 100% to 60% taking away from her job description the promotion and development aspect of her job.

Resolutions

The families that did remain during that low point were very committed. They made the best of driving their children and they began to enjoy the social aspect of drop-off and pick-up. Some of them formed a prayer team to pray in the mornings for the school. The board made a complete 180 degree turn in focus. Rather than slash expenses and raise tuition, they decided to concentrate on increasing enrolment and increasing alternate funding. They developed a three year plan which would involve some years of deficit budgeting, contrary to the usual policy, but necessary for long-term growth.

For the 2010-2011 school year we began by offering a preschool program with the option of five day a week kindergarten. That option is gaining support and we have had to split the junior and senior kindergarten classes for the 2011-2012 school year.

As well, the board re-established bussing. This immediately was met with parental support. Tuition was lowered dramatically to \$7500 per family with the understanding that parents needed to support the school through other financial endeavours. They were encouraged to support our grocery gift card program, invite other families to tour the school and promote school sponsorships. (Grandparents and friends of Christian education are encouraged to sponsor a specific classroom for \$30 per month with regular letters and photos coming from the sponsored class).

We visited all the area churches and let them know our cash flow urgency but also our long term vision for growth. Many of them allowed us to come in to a worship service to share our vision and to allow students to provide special music. A number of churches made fairly large donations.

We began a debt reduction campaign and again donors were generous. A number of parents for whom tuition payment was a little easier, made the decision to add \$2500 to voluntarily keep their tuition at the \$10 000 level. A Gala fundraiser dinner in November raised more than the anticipated \$50 000. Thirteen new families joined for 2010-11 (but a number also graduated students) and interest continues to grow. We have registered 76 students for September, 2011 with a number more anticipated over the summer.

We have added a golf tournament to our fund-raising endeavours, with the first one planned for September 2011. We are planning a child friendly event, with each foursome captained by a student. While we are initially budgeting for a lower profit margin, we hope this event will grow in popularity over the years.

We entered into a contract with Ontario Solar Provider. They will be leasing our roof for the next 20 years and installing solar panels. There will be no capital cost to us and we will realize \$6500 rent per year.

Finally, we were able to inspire Christian Stewardship Services with our renewed vision and were so thankful they were willing to refinance our mortgage with an increased \$125 000 to cover our short-term cash flow problem.

Staff salaries remain low (now at 86% of the grid) but morale has increased as the teachers see some long term stability and job security. We look forward to wage increases in a few years.

Thrift Store

Our final and most exciting initiative to increase outside funding was the creation of a thrift store. It was just a pipe dream in August of 2010; I had had some experience with a thrift store in Clinton Ontario, the community my family grew up in. We began investigating it and a similar store in London, Ontario.

In November of 2010, a committee was set up to bring the dream to reality. Instrumental in helping the committee was a grandfather in our school community who had been heavily involved in a Bible for Missions store in nearby Barrie, Ontario. This store had a well-documented manual on how to begin and run a thrift store. Several other committee members run successful retail businesses and were very willing to lend their expertise. Finally, the chairperson of our school board, a successful businessman, spearheaded the entire operation.

By December they had found a vacant store in the heart of Alliston's retail district. A crew of volunteers gathered to help with the renovations. Because it had been vacant for some time, a thorough overhaul was needed to eliminate some mold problems. A wall and a change room were added and fresh coat of paint brightened up the store.

The committee spent some time discussing branding and wanted to ensure that our store had a name that would reflect the idea of quality items – hence ***Alliston's Attic: a fine thrift store.***

The basement of the store became a picker's delight as previous owners had left behind a number of items with resale potential. The grade seven and eight students were engaged for one day to sort through and wash items found in the basement.

It has been heartwarming to see the response of area churches. Even those not involved in the school in other ways, (such as the local Catholic church) were open to making donations or having volunteers work in the store. We made a plea for donations of clothing, household items and furniture. Response was overwhelming and volunteers were kept busy making pickups of furniture and sorting through dropped off items.

Over forty volunteers have come forward from five area churches. The decision was made right from the start to hire a full-time manager to oversee the volunteers. We realize that some thrift stores have successfully been run totally

by volunteers but the board and principal are both too involved in other areas to oversee the daily running of a store. We hired a very capable parent in our school society and she was very grateful to have an income to assist with tuition.

We opened March 18, 2011 and sales were brisk right from the start. We had our grand opening on April 30. Even with forty volunteers, staff was still overwhelmed with keeping up with the sorting of donations. They added a sorting night one day a week. Someone suggested applying to Service Canada - Canada Summer Jobs for a grant to fund the hiring of a summer student. It was quite a lengthy process to apply and at first it looked quite promising that we would receive the grant. The position was posted and applications began to roll in. However, the disappointing news came in the middle of May, 2011 that we had been denied the grant, not because of any error in application but because our region had reached their grant limit.

A generous grandparent heard of our disappointment and came through with a donation to fund this student. The committee is currently interviewing applicants.

What we have learned:

The board recognized a number of items that needed to be looked after.

- It took some time to get all the permits in place. We needed to increase our liability coverage on our insurance policy.
- Volunteers were needed for more than just running cash. We needed people for behind the scenes work such as laundry, cleaning furniture, picking up and delivering furniture.
- We spent some time on policies; e.g. did we want all of our volunteers to be Christians?
- There were some initial hard feelings from a thrift store run by another charity group. However, these were talked through and we realized that there is a great need in the Alliston community for this type of service.

Conclusion

All in all, the Lord has blessed this project beyond our initial expectations. The store manager and some staff meet Tuesday mornings at 6:30 a.m. to pray through the needs of the week and just spend time in worship and devotions. We have been able to bless those unable to pay even the basic cost of used goods and have made donations to them. We have also been able to share the love of Jesus with them. The start-up costs have been paid and the store has already generated over \$3800 in profit. Conservatively estimating, we expect the store to generate \$70 000 net revenue every year.

(See the attached addendum of our financial accounting details for the ATTIC)