



## *Strengthening the Third Pillar*

Founded in 1903, Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School (RGNS) has a historic motto: *Work Study Worship*. The goal of my Van Lunen project has been to reinvigorate and elevate the *worship* component of our mission. Long a pillar of the school, the spiritual commitment (to a sovereign Christian God) had not been emphasized under previous administrations from 1992–2004. During these twelve years, RGNS strengthened its nascent college-preparatory academic program and arts programs, while losing touch with numerous Presbyterian churches, congregations and individual supporters in the Southeast that had supported the school throughout much of the twentieth century. A renaissance was needed in the School's commitment to its Presbyterian heritage and to seeing this commitment manifest in the daily life of the school community.

The overarching project goal was to create a much more meaningful relationship between RGNS and PC-USA churches across the Southeast. This would seek to benefit RGNS in two specific ways: 1) increase boarding enrollment of mission-appropriate students in a highly competitive Southeastern market; 2) help clarify and strengthen our community's spiritual ethos, programming and curriculum.

The scope of this project is enormous, broader than I realized when I began working on it in the summer of 2007. While only an initial step in a comprehensive initiative that will require years to complete, this project for the Van Lunen Center has elevated the *worship* component of the RGNS mission in the eyes of trustees, Board of Visitor members, administrators, teachers, and Presbyterian supporters. The addition of a Presbyterian pastor to the Board of Trustees, the addition of a religious life department as part of the curriculum, the creation of a Presbyterian Fellows Scholarship Program, and a nascent reconnection to key Presbyterian leaders in Atlanta are tangible signs of progress. This project has laid a foundation. There remains much to be done!

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## **I. Project Overview**

Founded in 1903, **Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School (RGNS)** today is a rigorous college preparatory co-educational boarding and day school of 354 students in grades 6-12. With students from 18 countries and 15 states, RGNS is a microcosm of the world. With more than 80% of American students receiving financial assistance (supported by a \$70 million endowment), RGNS is also a microcosm of the United States. Unapologetically faith-based in its mission, RGNS is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PC-USA).

Initially, my project goal was to create a more meaningful relationship between Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School and PC-USA churches across the Southeast. This would benefit our school in two ways: 1) increase boarding enrollment of mission-appropriate students in a highly competitive Southeastern boarding school marketplace; 2) help to clarify and strengthen our community's spiritual ethos, programming and academic curriculum.

By the summer of 2008, I had hoped to have created a network of PC-USA churches familiar with the RGNS of today (academic rigorously and spiritually serious, but no longer primarily an agricultural school). These churches would refer to us mission-appropriate boarding students. My goal was to enlist the support of these church leaders in the Southeast to spread the message of how RGNS shapes lives and prepares students for lives of Christian purpose and service.

## **II. The Process**

### **Step One: Gathering Information**

During the fall and winter of 2007, I met with and had phone conversations with various individuals and groups about how to proceed to gain a more specific focus for this project to strengthen the School's *third pillar*. The overarching vision and end results were clear but the action steps were not.

The agenda for the School's fall Board of Visitors meeting was devoted to discussing this project. The Board of Visitors (roughly 40 members) broke into small groups, especially focusing on how to get church groups to visit our campus to learn about RGNS. Groups discussed possible programs to appeal to church youth groups, youth pastors, Christian families, and various congregations. There was widespread agreement that the School had to offer programming of substance and value. At the end of this meeting, there was not consensus on the ideal program(s) or target audience(s). However, the Board of Visitors, as a group, overwhelmingly supported the school's initiative to elevate the importance of religious life in the academic curricula as well as to invest in relationship building with church congregations throughout the state and region.

The RGNS director of advancement and chaplain also visited the Synod of the South Atlantic to explore how it might educate member churches about RGNS. I also met with three senior pastors of large PC-USA churches in Atlanta, including two who agreed to

serve on the Board of Visitors. One (Dr. George Wirth of First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta) agreed to host a focus group of Atlanta-area pastors this summer. This focus group is planned for the fall of 2008. I had phone conversations with Dr. Shirley Roels and Van Lunen consultant Dave Medema. They recommended conducting a focus group(s) with pastors as well as potential programs to host on the campus. Dr. Roels emphasized the importance of creating a system that would endure beyond my presence at the school. Mr. Medema provided a list of questions to be tailored for the focus group to be held later this summer. (See addendum one)

Earlier in the year, I invited a dynamic PC-USA pastor to join the Board of Trustees. He had extensive experience with media, as he and his wife host a syndicated Christian cable show called *Good News*. They interview actors and actresses of Christian movies. Pastor Don Barber has been helpful. He serves on our recently formed admission, marketing and public relations committee of the Board, where he will help lead church relations initiatives in the future.

In April of 2008, I attended, for my first time, the annual meeting of the APCU (Association of Presbyterian Colleges and Universities) along with five heads of fellow Presbyterian schools. Attending the conference made it clear that the national PC-USA office is not in position to provide any financial or promotional support, although we convinced the Executive Director of the association to write an article on our schools in its magazine *Presbyterian Today* which is scheduled to appear in the fall of 2008.

### **Step Two: Heightening communication with church friends in the SE**

In the winter of 2008, the school launched an E-newsletter called *Simple Spirit* for everyone and every church in our data base with any religious affiliation. Anecdotal comments indicate that it has been well-received. In April, I delivered, in Atlanta, the annual state-of-school message to 200 leading school trustees and supporters. I reaffirmed the School's commitment to its historic Presbyterian roots and asked the audience to consider how to tell the RGNS story to churches across the state and region. Several pastors in the audience have volunteered to attend the upcoming focus group to be hosted by Pastor George Wirth in Atlanta.

### **Step Three: Strengthening the School's spiritual core**

This spring we formed, after much discussion among the faculty and staff +about the role of faith in our academic curriculum, a new academic department chaired by the chaplain. The new Religious Life department will expand our core religious curriculum and lead an ongoing effort to shape the spiritual life of the entire community. The chaplain has created a group of adult volunteers (I am one) to assist with 2008-09 chapel programming as well as to form a support group for bible study and for sharing our Christian walk.

Last, I have read two resources recommended by Dr. Shirley Roels: Chris Smith's book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Life of American Teenagers*, and *Hardwired to Connect*, a report from the Institute for American Values. Both resources will help me have meaningful conversations with churches about how RGNS can support their youth ministries. And these resources will help me shape the curriculum in our new religious studies department.

### III. Project Results

This project, while only an initial step in a complex, multifaceted initiative that will require several years to achieve a Gladwellian *tipping point*, has elevated the *worship* component of the RGNS mission in the eyes of our trustees, Board of Visitor members, administrators, teachers, and Presbyterian supporters. I no longer feel I am advancing this agenda all alone. That is a wonderful accomplishment by itself!

There remains much to be accomplished, but the following are clear successes:

- A growing understanding of Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School today among Presbyterian pastors in the local and Atlanta areas. A pastor, Don Barber, now serves as a RGNS trustee. Pastor George Wirth will host a focus group later this summer of key pastors in Atlanta.
- Expansion of the **Presbyterian Fellows Scholarship program** as a marketing vehicle to identify and encourage mission-appropriate admission candidates who value their Christian faith.
- The E-Letter *Simple Spirit* is proving to be an effective vehicle.
- The formation of a marketing committee of the Board of Trustees this spring is a vital step forward. The church relations component will be an important part of the work of this committee.
- The creation of a new Religious Life department and the nascent formation of a small group of faculty eager to strengthen the Christian fabric in this community.
- My involvement in this project has helped the Board of Trustees understand the mission and work of the Van Lunen Center.

Challenges and Setbacks:

- As usual, an ambitious vision overwhelmed my time available to devote to the project. The scope of this project was enormous, broader than I realized when I began working on it in the summer of 2007. I created a project that requires an enormous time commitment. Fortunately, others (e.g. a new board committee;

chaplain) are now willing to help me to carry the load. Trustee and Pastor Don Barber will be a strong partner with me in this initiative.

- I had hoped to survey pastors and current parents on many of the issues and goals in the project. I have not had the time to do so.

#### **IV. Key Learning**

The scope of this project was enormous, so much broader than I realized when I began working on it with enthusiasm in the summer of 2007. There have been some disappointments, mostly due to my lack of time for a project where my ambition exceeded my reach. I have not had the time to carry out a focus group with Presbyterian pastors, which, at one time in the project's evolution, was to be its backbone of research gathering. But the model for a focus group is in place, and I am prepared to help lead and facilitate the discussion. This first focus group will take place this fall at First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, and I am optimistic this event will create new relationships and ideas that will lead to further networking activities.

Overall, this project was successful because it has raised awareness. While only an initial step in a comprehensive initiative that will require years to complete, this project for the Van Lunen Center has elevated the *worship* component of the RGNS mission in the eyes of trustees, Board of Visitor members, administrators, teachers, and Presbyterian supporters. The addition of a Presbyterian pastor to the Board of Trustees, the addition of a religious life department as part of the curriculum, the creation of a Presbyterian Fellows Scholarship Program, and a nascent reconnection to key Presbyterian leaders in Atlanta are tangible signs of real progress. This project has laid an important foundation. There remains much to be done!

In conclusion, this project for the Van Lunen Center was successful engaging numerous key constituencies of our school, especially trustees, to advance the Christian outreach efforts of RGNS.

Addendum One  
**COMMON FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**  
Dave Medema

What do you perceive to be Rabun Gap's core mission?

How well do you think RGNS is known in your church or geographic area?  
(define your area)

What values do you associate with RGNS?

What geographic area do you believe RGNS now serves? Could serve in the future?

What adjectives would you use to describe RGNS?

What are RGNS's core competencies or strengths?

What are its core weaknesses?

How could RGNS leverage its success in the future into new markets?

What resources must RGNS develop in its future work that it does not now have or have access to?

What are some major factors, influences, or trends that would help or hinder RGNS in the future?

What educational opportunities can you see that RGNS could or should address?

# Focus Group Facilitation Skills



1. **Equalizing participation**
  - Try to keep one person or a small group of people from dominating
  - Provide opportunities for silent members to contribute
2. **Keeping on the subject**
  - Reminding the group of the question “on the table”
  - Intervene if the discussion fragments into multiple conversations
3. **Clarifying and interpreting**
  - Repeat what you thought you heard to ensure you heard what is means
4. **Test the degree to which the group agrees / disagrees with an opinion or statement**
5. **“Processing”**
  - Ask neutral and open-ended questions
  - Do not ask leading questions that suggest what you want to hear. Participants are attentive to your cues. They may want to tell you what they think you want to hear.
  - Tactfully bringing discussions to a close; move on to next question