

Towards a Focused, Shared, Missional Purpose:
Renewing Our Commitment to Christian Education at Calvin Christian School

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Project Description and Outcomes

My project was to look with fresh eyes at our mission and vision, to create core values and a graduate profile. The original intent for the project was to simply focus on core values and a graduate profile, but it became increasingly clear that these needed to be built on the mission and vision – both of which had not been re-examined in over 15 years.

It excited me that this project would lead us to greater clarity as a parents, faculty and board as to why we exist and where we were going. With our graduates completing a Capstone Project each year as a culminating summary of their experiences and a reflection on the fulfillment of our mission in their learning experiences at Calvin Christian School, it was compelling for me to consider how this applied school project would further enrich and deepen our commitment to who we are and what we want to see in our students.

I began my position as principal at Calvin in the summer of 2011. I quickly learned that we were about to celebrate our 100th anniversary – Calvin’s first graduates were honored in the spring of 1912 from a school then known as South Holland Christian School. The tagline for Calvin was “Nurturing covenant youth in the spirit of truth”.

In my first year as principal, we focused on shoring up our enrollment, better telling our story and being intentional about how and who was telling it. We changed our tagline to better reflect who we were to the curious, to those who were not familiar with Reformed theology: “Faith. Learning. For *life*.”

Programmatic changes followed – we lengthened our school day, added PK3 and a hot lunch program, and added new math textbooks. Our website was updated, we added a parent portal that included access to grades and more robust standardized testing (NWEA’s Measures of Academic Progress). We made facility improvements, added chromebooks for middle school and tablets for the elementary grades. Programs like NaNoWriMo, Peacemakers were

introduced and our students support services program (Pathways) was strengthened with the support of the Christian Learning Center (CLC). Responding to parent requests in our annual survey we added a summer program (Camp iMPACT) which has its largest enrollment with over 70 students coming/day this summer.

All these things though were important, needed and well-received. Calvin's enrollment increased and we now consistently have waiting lists in most grades by the summer. This year is no exception – we have room in just 3 grades. But what continued to weigh on me was that we had made all these welcome improvements while never really investing the necessary time as a board time to recommit ourselves to our core mission. While we have not strayed from our focus to provide a Christ-centered education in South Holland over the past 100 years, making our purpose more accessible and clear needed to be made a priority.

The board minutes from the first 16 years of Calvin's existence were written in Dutch. The school was populated by immigrants, mostly farmers. But as white flight from the city and suburbs occurred, demographics significantly shifted in South Holland along racial lines. As these changes have occurred, however, the Board of Directors were proactive and recognized the need to amend some of Calvin Christian School's limiting policies. Calvin's Board of Directors making this significant statement: "Christians are moving out of South Holland. But, Christians are also moving into South Holland. They just look different than we do." Currently, over ninety Christian churches are represented by Calvin Christian School's students.

In 1948, as South Holland Christian School because Calvin Christian School, the board declared the following:

What must become of our Christian School and is its future secure? It must remain what the name implies, a Christian school founded upon Christian principles, built up on a Calvinistic interpretation of these principles. Our eyes are focused upon God as we

labor with covenant children, who are the “salt of the earth and the light of the world.”
*To realize this exalted purpose more effectively **the entire education of the child must assist him to become a better and more influential Christian in all spheres of his life.***
Not only in the sphere of religion but also in the fields of economics, politics and social life as well. This is the ultimate end of all Christian education. May it also be the ideal of our Calvin Christian School now and in the future.

It was a strong statement made 70 years ago that we needed to similarly declare for our time. We needed to work towards a focused, shared, missional purpose for our time. After reading his book, “Canoeing the Mountains”, I was convicted by Tod Bolsinger that our mission statement needed to play a much more prominent role in our work. He writes:

The mission is the grid by which we evaluate every other element in our school. It is criterion for determining how we will spend our money, who we will hire and fire, which programs we will start and which ones we will shut down. It’s the tiebreaker in every argument and the principle by which we evaluate every decision we make. The mission trumps all.

Our mission needed to regain relevance in our organization. It needed to be something that better guided who we were and how we operated.

To the end that we would have a focused, shared, missional purpose statement that was born out of our history but accessible and relevant for our time, we set out to engage with four distinct groups of people: our board, our faculty, our students, our parents and donors. Mychal Thom visited us in the fall and worked with our board and faculty as we reflected on why we existed and what was compelling about our work together.

This was followed up with a time spent with focus groups of students and then parents and donors together. Mychal reconnected with our board for a Spring evening retreat and led us through a process where we began to build our new mission statement.

What I Learned During the Process

I learned four things during this process. First, that God's goodness and faithfulness have a distinct expression at Calvin. He is not finished here – and that provision over 106 years has pushed us to be a school that better reflects his kingdom.

Second, we have passionate parents. We had a group of parents whose youngest children were graduating this year request a meeting where they helped identify areas for us to further develop and improve. The feedback from parents in our mission meeting was some of the most helpful, specific and moving words we received from any focus group.

Third, this has been a re-energizing work. Getting clarity on our mission has given me a fresh perspective on why God has us here and a much brighter hope for our future. I am completing my seventh year as principal of Calvin – and statistically this is the average tenure of a principal in one school. There is a weariness that can set in, and effectiveness that can wane over time – and I was beginning to feel that. This mission work this year has grown my capacity to embrace the challenges ahead, to indeed be excited about what is next.

Fourth and finally, this work is a much longer process that I initially anticipated. While we were not able to work on a vision or a graduate profile, these will be pursued in the next year with the board and faculty. It is exciting for me to know that what began this year will compel us to complete the journey towards being much more intentional as a Christian school in leading and guiding the children God has entrusted to us and families that are partnering with us.

The Difference this Project is Making at Calvin

We are in an accreditation year with Christian Schools International. This process has involved a self-study which is resulting in a School Improvement Plan (SIP). This SIP is taking shape and it is clear that our mission focus group work that worked through the following 5 questions has galvanized our work:

- 1. What are the non-negotiables of our school's mission? What will not change next year, in twenty years, or forever?*
- 2. Why are parents willing to make the financial commitment to send their kids to CCS? What do we have the potential to do better than anyone else?*
- 3. What do (and should) we celebrate?*
- 4. What are the most compelling messages in our story? How do we present our school to our community and the world?*
- 5. How will we know we are accomplishing our mission?*

We began the quiet phase of a \$1.1 million Campaign for Calvin, in the fall of 2017 that some on our board wondered if we could get the support for. By the time we publically launched in the Spring of 2018, we have received \$675,000 in donations and commitments. I firmly believe that our work in getting clarity on our mission inspired our donors to give to a kingdom cause that was clearly re-establishing its stride.

A ribbon will be tied around this project when our vision statement and graduate profile is completed by the Spring of 2019.

And while our faculty and families have invested deeply in a mission renewal process, it is for our students that we do this. We want others to echo a recent graduate sharing in his capstone project: “Calvin is not a place where we learn to fit in, but a place where we grow to stand out.” To God be the glory.