

Naming the Stakes
Determining our Core Values
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The Groundwork

Timothy Christian School is located in Williamsburg, Ontario, a rural area located about an hour south of Ottawa. The school society was started in 1955 and then 8 years later the school started with 42 students and 2 teachers. Throughout the years, the school has seen times of plenty and of want. In 1999 the enrollment was 150 students and then it slowly decreased until 2008, when it was only 45 students. Over the last 5 years enrollment has seen an average of a 10% increase each year with the projected enrollment for the upcoming school year at 86 students.

The school has deep roots as there are a number of second and third generation families part of the school community. The founding families had a strong desire to provide Christ-centered education for their children and although it took a while to get the school started, there has been a very strong sense of commitment to the school community.

I came to the school in 2012 as a teacher. When our principal became ill and had to go on medical leave in 2016, I took on the role of Principal Designate and eventually was hired as Principal in 2018. I walked into the role with fear and trembling, not completely sure of what I was doing. However, I knew that there was a very strong supporting community around the school and that most families were at the school because of their commitment to Christ-centered education. In addition, I know that Timothy Christian School is God's school and that he is faithful!

Enter Van Lunen

Having the opportunity to participate in the Van Lunen fellowship program is giving me the tools to think as a principal. In making this shift, I began to realize that although there are a lot of great things going on at the school, it has not been strategically planned. The school had a mission statement that gave the purpose of the school, but didn't capture the true vision. It gave the what, but not the why. I recognized that for the school to grow strategically, we had to rework the mission and to name the stakes. Collectively, we needed to name the core values that were present from the very beginning of the school's history.

The Doing

Part 1: Mission Statement

The first thing we did was to rework the mission statement. It had previously been a statement of purpose, rather than the mission. It stated: *Timothy Christian School is an independent elementary school that educates children through Christ-centred quality programs that combine faith and learning.* The school's tag line was: *Building Knowledge. Building Faith. Building Community.*

We decided to not open up the process of reworking the mission statement to the entire community, but rather work with a small group. The groups' mandate was to come up with a mission statement that honoured what the school was doing, to create a mission that reflected the reality of the school and use language that was already familiar to the community. We wanted to be sure to include the language of knowledge, faith and community as we had been activity promoting those aspects of the school in recent years. After a couple of meetings, the group came up with the following mission statement: *Timothy Christian School exists to give students a firm foundation in knowledge and faith, equipping them to impact their community.* This mission statement was then used and presented in a number of different contexts, including blog posts on the school website, social media, school newsletters and a membership meeting. We took every opportunity to ensure that the community heard and embraced the new mission statement.

Part 2: Core Values

The larger part of the project was to determine our core values, to name the stakes that had been placed back in 1955. We did this by taking time to listen to the voices of all the major stakeholders.

- **Staff:** During a staff meeting we spent time considering 2 questions: what is important at TCS? and what is unique about TCS? Staff members quietly reflected on those 2 questions and then wrote down their thoughts on sticky notes. After a time of discussion, we collectively sorted the sticky notes, noticing commonalities and patterns. It was encouraging to see so much repetition and an agreement of ideas.
- **Students**
 - Grade 5-8 students: We introduced 3 questions to the older students. What is important at TCS? What is unique about TCS? What do you like about TCS? The students were asked to think about these questions and then create a lego build for their answer. We often use lego kits with our students as a way for them to respond to questions and ideas. They create a lego build and then explain how their build demonstrates their thinking. After students finished their lego build, we spent time as a class discussing their builds and the different ideas they had. The students were instructed that we would have a Community Circle with the entire school to answer the questions. Doing pre-work with the older students helped them be able to lead the younger students through the process.
 - Kindergarten - Grade 8 students: With the entire student body we held a Community Circle. A Community Circle is where we gather in a gym in a giant

circle to talk about issues or ideas together. In the circle all the students sit with their Kingdom Building Groups, which are cross-grade groups that they are placed in for the entire school year. Each group has a staff member to lead it. We asked the students to consider the 3 questions: What is important at TCS? What is unique about TCS? What do you like about TCS? They were given sticky notes and asked to write or draw their thoughts. They then needed to organize their sticky notes onto chart paper that was divided into 3 categories - Building Knowledge. Building Faith. Building Community. We closed our circle by looking at some of the things the students said. The chart papers were hung in the hallway where all the students could see and read it. The students were often seen stopping in the hallway on their way out to recess to read the ideas on the chart paper. Displaying their ideas validated their thoughts and helped create community.

- **Parents/Supporters:** At the Fall Membership meeting we invited parents and school supporters to share their thoughts about 2 questions: What is important at TCS? What is unique about TCS? Displayed around the room were the answers from staff and students. The parents/supporters sat together in groups around a table. They were given time to think individually about the questions and then write their answers on sticky notes. After, they discussed and organized their answers. We then discussed as a whole group things that they noticed and wondered about. All their answers were displayed for people to look at after the meeting. It was noteworthy that there were so many common answers and ideas shared, demonstrating that the community truly understands what the core values of the school are.

Once all the data from the major stakeholders was gathered, we created an ad-hoc committee with the mandate to sift through all the information and determine what our core values are. Core Values are the things that make us who we are, the things that we are committed to, the things that we will never let go of. They are things that have been true for the school since the very beginning. It is important to realize that Core Values don't define who we hope to be or who we wish we were. They define who we are.

With much discussion, prayer and consideration the committee courageously named the core values. They claimed that we are committed to Christ, Scripture, Fellowship and Excellence. They completed their task by writing a brief description of each core value. These core values were then used and presented in a number of different contexts, including blog posts on the school website, social media, school newsletters and a membership meeting.

The Learning

Throughout this process I realized that we weren't coming up with anything new or different. The core values that we named weren't a surprise to anyone. In fact, I believe that the core values we named are the stakes that were put in the ground way back in 1955, when 22 members joined together to organize a Christian School Society.

When the school celebrated its 25th anniversary one member wrote: "Many have been the problems and hardships and ill feelings towards one another in those early years, quite often created by inexperience. Yet through all our shortcomings and frustrations our Heavenly Father remained faithful. He always supplied us again with all that we needed to continue. By his grace together we prayed and worked. Because of his faithfulness we are now celebrating 25 years of Christian Education in this area." The school started because of a common goal to provide Christ-centered education. They put the stakes in the ground, and although there were a lot of difficulties along the way, the stakes held firm by God's faithfulness.

Even though this process didn't create something new or grandiose, even though it named what we already knew to be true, it was an important process to go through. It allowed us to hear everyone's voice and be able to courageously and confidently name the stakes. It gave confirmation and reminded us again of God's faithfulness.

The Difference

Now that we have spent some time considering the foundation and naming the stakes that hold us grounded, we have an opportunity to build on it. We can continue with all the great things that the school has been doing, but now be able to do so strategically. We won't be blown by every idea that comes along. We have honoured the school's history and foundation. We have listened to all the many voices. We have named the stakes. We are encouraged that the core values we named remain true to the original stakes laid down by the founding members. This speaks to God's faithfulness and also to the faithfulness of the community.

I look forward to the next step in this journey as principal, the process of developing a strategic plan and having a clear vision for the future. Going through the communal process of determining our core values has helped to unify the community and give us common language. As we develop a strategic plan, having our core values firmly in place will give us the confidence to make bold and decisive decisions. We are building knowledge, faith and community on the firm foundation of Christ, Scripture, Fellowship and Excellence in Christian Education.

Since 1955 the school has been committed to Christ, Scripture, Fellowship and Excellence. The stakes were placed in 1955, lived out during the years since, named in 2020 and with God's grace will continue to sustain the school in the future.

Thank you

Thank you to the Van Lunen Center for your work in developing strong Christian School leaders. In giving us the tools to see what needs to be done and then supporting us in getting the work done, I feel much more equipped for the task that lays before me.