

Chris J. Nellermoe  
President  
Park Christian School  
Moorhead, MN USA

On January 8, 2020 I submitted my resignation as President of Park Christian School to the Board of Directors because of a lack of shared vision and the impact to the school. After being called by God and serving at this school for the past 16 years, it seemed as though my tenure had come to an end. The incredible irony in my resignation is that my passion for Park Christian School had not waivered and that my Van Lunen applied project was established to directly strengthen my relationship with the BoD. I wrote the following narrative in the application process as I began my year as a Van Lunen Fellow:

*The relationship between the head of school and the board of directors is an area that I would like to focus on during the Fellows year. To develop and foster a dynamic, effective partnership as a leadership team that sets and strives for institutional advancement collectively would be a primary school project.*

*PCS's board of directors serves under Carver's Model of Policy Governance. Historically as a board, very little training or understanding has been allocated to grow in skills of effective governance for our school. This coupled with me being relatively new to the position of president of PCS, has led to an incomplete understanding of a symbiotic*

*relationship or effective leadership model with the board. In addition, the board has just come through a period*

*of time that has required them to be very hands on in serving our school. They recognize that they no longer need to invest in this capacity, yet lack clarity of proper engagement remains as we move forward.*

*Understanding my role as President of PCS in setting vision, strategic planning, promoting institutional advancement, while reporting to and partnering with board initiatives or ENDS monitoring remains an area that I can grow in significantly. How do I lead, embrace, and create a trust relationship with the board of directors in an ongoing basis without feeling oppositional or undervaluing the PCS board of directors.*

My intent and vision was to embrace the dynamic relationship with a governing body, building and desiring to create a trust relationship with Board of Directors. This did not waiver. Yet the path that we walked created a necessary ending in January of 2020.

The following is a very rough outline of the events in my year as a Van Lunen Fellow. At the time of my presidential evaluation on June 26, 2019, the board chair and vice chair stated that they wanted to discuss two things on this day; my annual review and a property that they had identified in south Fargo, about 7 miles from our current location. After spending time on my review, they asked me my opinion of the property and to consider it for Park Christian school. I prayed and processed this request overnight and responded the following day in an email stating, *In light of our current vision and the strategic initiatives in motion, our development messaging, and the capacity of our administrative staff, I strongly believe now is not the right time to invest into the opportunity in south Fargo. However, I do think it is important to establish a task force to fully consider this topic and will do so in the upcoming year.* Following my response to the

request from these two board members, I did not hear anything for the next six weeks. In the meantime, our school was entering a jury trial over the death of two of our students from an automobile accident in the summer of 2015. The trial would take place from July 22-26, 2019 and the parents of the boys requested \$82.9 million in compensation. In addition to the trial in July, our school was also completing a six-million-dollar expansion project, including 11 new classrooms, a 6,000 square foot front entrance/commons area, and renovations to all of our existing facility. We would receive 'Certificate to Occupy' the school on back to school night. The weeks in advance of opening schools included many long days with our parents and students volunteering to vacuum, wipe down, and clean all spaces and places from the construction. To say that we were at capacity administratively is an understatement, but we were also proclaiming that God is so good. The jury verdict in the trial was not guilty or found Park Christian School to be not the cause or negligent in the deaths, our new facility was opened fully funded, and we welcomed our highest enrollment at our current campus of over 440 students. Praise God! The excitement was palpable and the culture at our school was and is unlike any other school in our region. The capital campaign for the second phase of our expansion project was in process and our families were already asking when the next phase of construction would be taking place. The completion of our expansion plans for an additional gym, fine arts, music room, and expanded cardiovascular, locker room space were all in motion.

As all of the events mentioned above were ongoing, a few of the board members continued down the path of pursuing the property in Fargo, 7 miles from our current site, believing it was the key for enrollment and to provide strength to PCS. At our board retreat on governance and planning in August, after two months of quiet, a motion and request of me to view the property and consider purchasing it with funds available. This was a move forward

without buy-in or perspectives from our stakeholders and the understood or perceived vision of our stakeholders. God's word says, 'without counsel plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed' (Proverbs 15:22). Knowing this, I gathered a team with me to view the property and consider the options before us as a Christ-centered academic community. The team consisted of two teachers (1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade), our elementary principal, and our director of marketing and admissions. This choice to bring others with me to view the property, and the unannounced attendance of several board members to site visit, further established a divide in unity and vision for PCS between the board of directors, head of school, and administration. The board was on an undeterred path to buy this property, to establish a second early elementary site at this location, and several members were leading to discontinue any further expansion plans established and in motion at our current site. The board of directors, motioned to purchase the property in October for \$1.651 million dollars.

The conflict and divergent thought regarding engaging the stakeholders of our school in this process and the transparency required to build trust grew over the next months in the fall of 2019. My hope was to regain relationship with the chairman of the board and board as a whole. To reconcile and to praise God for His faithfulness for the position of strength we were in as a school. But trust was broken or was eroding at best. The relationship, boundaries, or function of the Head of School and Board of Directors was blurred. A call for me to obey, to submit to them was demanded. I requested bringing in an outside mediator to help us process and bring reconciliation to our relationship. I suggested asking that a pastor from one of our sponsoring churches or the president of a local Christian counseling center be invited in to a special meeting to help us in our relationship. This request for reconciliation, was met with a five-page typed communication, outlining their role as the board of directors, my role as president, and

identifying the ways that they had perceived I had been disobedient to them, lacked submission, and identified the breaches of conduct or in my effectiveness in leading the school. This reprimand came 4 ½ months after my performance review in June 2019, where I received ‘exceeds compliance’ in all aspects of job performance. It was becoming so very evident to me that our alignment and hope for a healthy relationship was fleeting quickly. In one final effort, I reached out to two sponsoring church pastors who are over the board of directors to help us. The pastors met with the executive council of the board and came away with, ‘they understood my concerns, yet the board was within their limits’. Their hands were tied according to the constitution and bylaws of PCS.

During this time, I was given a quote titled ‘Disobedience and its Necessity’ that reads like this:

*A commander in chief (head of school) cannot take as an excuse for his mistakes in warfare (school) an order given by his minister (school board) or his boss's boss, when the person giving the order is absent from the field of operations and is imperfectly aware or wholly unaware of the latest state of affairs. It follows that any commander in chief (head of school) who undertakes to carry out a plan which he considers defective is at fault; he must put forward his reasons, insist on the plan being changed, and finally tender his resignation rather than be the instruments of his army's (school's) downfall. (Napoleon, Military Maxims and Thoughts)*

How incredibly hard to come to the point of understanding the concept of this quote on a personal level. It was clear to me that this decision by the board was not in the best interest of the school at this time and I had no other choice but to tender my resignation. The decision to buy the property had broken trust with many donors who were ready to give to PCS in the next steps of our current vision and expansion plans. One specific donor stepped back from a \$2 million

gift to our school because of this conflicting message, divergent trajectory, and lack of transparency by the BoD. The parents, faculty, and staff were confused and upset. We were in a state of disunity and lacked agreement to move forward in any way.

In processing all of this with one of the pastors during this time, he mentioned that he did not see a way forward with the board in its current make up or vision. He believed in me and shared that he knows the stakeholders of PCS believed and trusted in me as well. He fully understood that I could not go on with integrity in the current working paradigm of the board of directors. The trust that I had built with the teachers, families, donors, and stakeholders change the trajectory of my resignation, the board, and PCS.

When the news of my resignation was communicated to the stakeholders, a feverish response began. Many parents called for the school board to account for why I had my resigned so quickly, if it was directly related to the purchase of the property, and why they had not engaged the parents and teachers in such a significant change of vision by the board. Fast forward, to mid-February, the sponsoring churches of PCS were fully engaged in the turmoil, several board members had resigned, and a parent meeting with the board was requested. Additional board members resigned after this meeting and eventually the remaining three board members were asked to resign. Further meetings were conducted with administration and in early March, and I was asked if I would accept an offer to be re-instated as president of Park Christian School.

What a year. I cannot tell you how many tears were shed, how many sleepless nights were had, and how much anguish was incurred during this year of engagement with the Van Lunen Fellows and my desire to build a cohesive, impacting relationship between the head of school and the board of directors. Grieving continues to happen as a result of this year. There

are not winners or losers in this situation. I have often communicated that this situation was much like a divorce, both sides have a responsibility into the why it happened. Both sides are hurting and both sides need healing.

Wow, what a year. I have grown in my faith and utter dependence on a holy God, who is my refuge and strength. I recognize that He is in control. That God is sovereign and has a plan. I am thankful for the trust of families and stakeholders who believed in me and stood in the gap for me. But with this trust, comes a great responsibility. They are now looking for me to lead, to cast vision, to heal with them, and to follow through on caring for this community we call Park Christian School.

We have a tremendous opportunity before us right now to start over. The entire board is new and the relationships between the president and board of directors can start afresh! My Van Lunen applied project will continue in the upcoming year as I serve as president. My hope will remain the same: to develop and foster a dynamic, effective partnership as a leadership team that sets and strives for institutional advancement collectively. We have been given a great eternal trust in leading this school and with that trust comes great responsibility. May God be pleased in all we do in this regard. For me, I will continue to live in Colossians 3:23, whatever I do, I will work at it with my whole heart and give God all of the glory! Go God...