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Start Up to Sustainable

We've all had this student in our classroom. You know, the one daydreaming as they sit near the back of the room, bright, but completely unmotivated. The one who cares far more about friends and fun than academics. That natural leader who feels no sense of responsibility to accompany their gifts. The student who's developed flexibility and problem-solving skills (mostly due to the fact that they often find themselves in a crisis of their own making), and somehow always manage to land on their feet. From where you are sitting, you realize the lack of ambition, vision, and direction in the life of this student. Exasperated you might wonder aloud, what will become of this kiddo? The answer might surprise you, but not nearly as much as it surprised me. The student who was never interested in school, who couldn't wait for the end of each class, school day, and academic year, woke up 25 years later to find herself the Head of School at Veritas Christian Academy. That student was, and in many ways, still is, me. While I could have just written about a number of "projects" that our school has completed over the last 12 months, by far the most remarkable transformation the Van Lunen Fellowship program has helped to facilitate within Veritas has taken place in my own heart, soul, and mind.

In the spring of 2010, the Christian school my first and fourth grade children were attending announced its closing. Both of my little ones had been thriving in the small, Christ-centered environment where God was most important and excelling in academics was considered glorifying to Him. They had wonderful teachers, rigorous academics, and authentic friendships, but most importantly, they had the privilege of standing on a solid foundation where God's truth was a belief shared by all. Needless to say, we were devastated to learn of the school's closing. As a result, five like-minded families gathered together to begin discussions about what the Lord might have in store for this little flock. We began to pray and trusted wholeheartedly in His faithfulness and plan for our children. Initially, we were discouraged to

find that it would take three years of careful planning and over \$3 million to successfully launch a new private school. We had just over three months and \$30,000, but knew we were being led by a mighty God. Countless miracles occurred over those next few months, and in September 2010, we opened the doors of Veritas Christian Academy with 44 students and seven full-time staff members. While we were completely unprepared, under qualified, and overwhelmed, that allowed us to be wholly reliant on God.

One of the most amazing attributes of our creator is His unique ability to take our deficits and create something truly remarkable. We didn't have time to think about mission statements, strategic 10 year plans, or curriculum maps. So, we kept it simple. We wanted our kids to graduate fully prepared to excel academically and to develop an authentic, impactful faith in Christ. Or, as we began to say in those early days, "Smart kids who loved Jesus." With no superintendants, no supervising organizations, no accreditation, and no affiliations, we had the freedom to critically rethink every component of educational delivery and spiritual formation.

The results have been remarkable. We did, in fact, begin graduating smart kids who loved Jesus. As they've transitioned to high school and become valedictorians, student body presidents, team captains, and leaders of all kinds, they continue to grow and develop their God-given gifts. They are serious about their faith and their intellect, understanding that one should always strengthen the other. However, their success does not guarantee lasting success for Veritas. Our school was built to solve an immediate problem, to answer the personal question of where our kids would go to school next fall. Our mindset was always focused on surviving the day, not preparing for the future. So, ten years later, we'd barely begun an endowment, we had no long term strategic plan, no business strategy for growth, and had not planned for succession. With God's help, we had built a successful little miracle school, but it was incredibly vulnerable. Motivated by the testimonies and success of our graduates, we felt compelled to try to build a sustainable institution that could outlast not only our children, but their children's children.

But, we had no idea where to begin. At just that precise moment, we were introduced to the Van Lunen Fellowship program. In the last 12 months, I have learned how to think like a leader. I've learned to ask the bigger questions, and to lead by offering vision, hope and clarity. Our board is more engaged and responsible, our organizational culture is healthier, our financial

decisions are becoming vision based and we are beginning to take steps toward the exciting future God has prepared for us.

Our leadership team recognized that our first step should be to update our mission and vision statements to better reflect our unique culture and purpose. Our revised mission is to provide an education that develops an authentic faith in Christ, an unconditional love for all mankind, and the ability to reason through the world's most complex problems. More simply stated, our vision is to pursue excellence through faith, love, and reason. Our vision statement is now common language in our classrooms and hallways and is becoming the heartbeat of our school. We have also changed many of our traditions and policies based on the Van Lunen advice, “As your vision statement reads, so should your awards night follow, so should your budget be created.”

Next, our team took a hard look at our core values and realized the words we had previously chosen were ones that could be applicable to any corporation and not specifically unique to Veritas. We needed principles to help guide our hiring, to use as concrete measuring sticks during evaluations, and to identify and bond us as a community. Veritas was chosen as the name of our school because it means “truth” in Latin, and we are committed to representing God’s unchanging Truth in this ever changing world. After meeting with students, staff, and our leadership team, we identified the TRUTH of our new core values.

Veritas is a community of

- **Truth Seekers**: Seeking discernment and wisdom, understanding God is the source and foundation of all truth.
- **Resilient Souls**: Persevering through difficult trials with the steadfast knowledge of God’s sovereignty
- **Unconditional Love**: Recognizing every person as an image bearer of Christ deserving our respect and the unconditional love of the cross
- **Teachable Hearts**: Desiring to improve through the critical and loving instruction of others in a way that reflects Christlike humility
- **High Expectations**: Pursuing excellence, knowing that we are each uniquely created for an eternally significant kingdom purpose

With our core values now established, our administration, staff, parents, and students have a clear understanding of the attributes that are most important to our community. This helps us prioritize, strategize, and achieve success. We are finally developing cultural alignment thanks to the guidance of the Van Lunen Fellowship program.

The most repeated theme in our newly acquired Van Lunen library of literature is the importance of Organizational Health. The most pivotal shift in my thinking as a leader occurred when I realized that the flock I was to lovingly shepherd was not a flock of students, but of teachers. We have taken four deliberate steps to improve the culture of our community: First, our administrators took an organizational health survey to assess the leadership's strengths and weaknesses. Second, we offered a much needed Crucial Conversations workshop to our entire staff. Third, we sent a 360° survey to our staff and community. Fourth, we completed the process by holding focus group to discuss our results. Through the process we embraced the idea that "healthy conflict is simply the pursuit of truth." With our mission, vision, and core values clearly defined, it has become much easier to nurture and maintain a healthy school culture for both our staff and students.

Thanks to Barry Geller and Zach Clark, Veritas has begun to successfully answer the ultimate question of how to build a school of excellence while paying a livable wage and sustaining affordable tuition. It has not been an easy process, but we are making great strides in achieving financial sustainability. A huge shift in practice occurred when I began to truly understand that budgeting should be strategic, not fair, and must be based entirely on fulfilling our vision. While tuition covering 100% of our operating costs gave us much needed security in those first few years, it isn't sustainable long term. Our financial team was motivated and inspired to build a more sustainable model and to create a long term forecast which will open new possibilities for our future. We've hired our first Director of Development and are motivated by Zach's encouraging words that "Money is the fuel that drives our mission forward." On April 30th of this year, we took a huge step in acquiring eight acres of land a few miles down the road from our current location. Our intention is to build a permanent home on a new campus that will allow us to double in size. In just the last few months alone we have been able to restructure our short term strategic plan, complete the Veritas Playbook, secure 95% property financing with the

lowest interest rate in recorded history, and complete both a campus site plan and structural drawings for Phase 1 and 2. Our new Director of Development has launched the silent phase of our Capital Campaign and we are finally utilizing a much needed donor database. It has been a whirlwind of activity this spring, especially in the midst of delivering an excellent education, COVID style!

God is certainly on the move in our community. The role of Head of School is a responsibility that I never in a million years envisioned for myself, but in moments of doubt, I remind myself of the saying,

“God doesn’t need a lot to do a lot.

All David had was five stones. And all David used was one.”

For the first time in ten years, I am not wondering if this should be my final year. I am not constantly searching for who God might bring to replace me. I am no longer experiencing the tension of thinking, “If I leave, Veritas may fall apart,” or “If I stay, I might be the reason Veritas falls apart.” I will faithfully bring my handful of stones and trust God to accomplish the impossible. Thank you, Van Lunen staff, for giving me both the training and confidence to lead the Veritas community with Hope and Clarity as we approach our campus expansion. We are on our way to creating a permanent home where we will be a Light on the Hill, shining brightly for God’s glory.

“Let it teach us that faith and intellect are not mutually exclusive, rather that faith illuminates intellect as intellect nurtures faith.”