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2019-20 Van Lunen Fellow
Applied Fellows Project: Stillwater Development Program
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I. What Did I Do?

My Van Lunen project was to review and revamp the development strategy and operation of Stillwater Christian School. Coming into the 2019-20 school year, my second as head of school, I knew that the most impactful project I could work on would be in the development realm. In particular, my project involved the following elements: 1) begin serving as the Chief Development Officer for the school; 2) Rewrite our development message (case for support); 3) Initiate “Step 3, Building for Growth” a new capital campaign with a primary goal of building a four classroom expansion; 4) update our prospect list and divide it by retain, regain, recruit; 5) Decide on strategy and specific goals for face-to-face cultivation and small group events; 6) Work with the Stillwater Board to get their assistance, buy-in, and support. The related Stillwater Strategic Plan goal for development was to “establish and implement a formalized development plan to increase giving to \$400K annually.”

After receiving the training on development that we received during the first week of the Fellows program in July, 2019, I embraced my new role as the “Chief Development Officer” and quickly got to work on these things. By October 1, I rewrote our development message, approached a longtime Stillwater donor to make a lead challenge matching gift of \$300K, and relaunched our “Step 3, Building for Growth” campaign with greater clarity about the projects therein. I then went on the road, meeting with small groups of parents and friends in the homes of Stillwater supporters for “Vision Desserts,” and meeting one-on-one with several couples

during the fall and winter. I also hired and fired (it was actually a very positive “necessary ending”) a Development Assistant, ultimately deciding to rely on existing officer personnel to provide the development assistance needed for an effective program.

II. What Did I Learn?

I learned the following three primary lessons from my focus on this project this year: 1) Zach Clark’s definition of development as “the discipline of growing real relationships with people, helping them see what God is doing and then challenging them to have the impact only they can have” is right on. 2) The Head of School must be in the lead of the development operation especially at a school the size of Stillwater. Also, as the new head of school following a long-serving head, it was especially important for me to establish relationships with longtime Stillwater supporters; 3) God faithfully provides even when we fail. On Wednesday, March 11, two days prior to what ended up being our last day of school on campus, I met with a couple who asked for information on giving a gift of stock. I failed to follow up promptly and on Monday, March 16, received a call that we had received a gift of stock valued at \$500K. God is good.

III. What Difference Did it Make?

I am convinced that there is no more important work that I could have done this year for Stillwater Christian School. I’m simply awestruck by God’s providence this year in the form of gifts totaling \$1.5 million, nearly four times the goal we had set. We had two extraordinary gifts that account for \$1M of that, however, we also had several new and regained donors who account for the remaining \$500K. We made extraordinary progress on the projects listed in our Building for Growth campaign and go into an uncertain 2020-21 school year with a cushion. God is good!