

Phil Lundquist- Principal: Covenant Christian School - Aurora, (City of Lights!) Illinois - USA

Proverbs 16:9 “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes their steps.”

Isaiah 41: 17-18 “When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.”

Historical Context:

Covenant Christian School is a Preschool through 8th grade education and discipleship ministry that has been serving a small and diverse group of children for 40 years in the Aurora community. I was blessed to be hired in June of 2014 as the sole administrator, taking over for Dr. Nina Bissett who was the principal for over 30 years. Unfortunately and surprisingly to me, upon my hiring all but two staff full-time staff members decided to leave the school because they had been through some long and difficult years together and were not ready for the changes that were coming that I was hired to initiate. I knew then that the school needed a miracle and a lot of hard work to survive. What I did not know was how much I needed to learn and change and how completely dependent on God we all are. This was my first job in administration, and I thought I knew what was needed to take the school to new levels. In many ways I was unequipped and unprepared for what was coming, but God had called me there to lead and learn. I began to pray and work with the previous principal to hire a new staff and plan for that first school year.

God blessed our efforts and I hired a new staff with focus and energy to begin that first year which convened with 83 students and a team of 13 committed staff members ready and willing to serve God’s precious children. Over the next five years, we saw many blessings from the Lord and answers to prayer as we grew and changed together in many ways. We faced many trials, challenges and difficulties including school board troubles, more staff losses/changes and ongoing financial difficulties that seemed to always haunt us. It is truly God’s faithfulness that brought us through in spite of the many fits and starts, trials and triumphs of serving in His humble school of faith and love. By His grace we started the 2019-2020 school year with 115 students, 21 total staff members, 11 Board Members and a new and hopeful partnership with Judson University. Things were all looking good and pointing up as we looked to begin writing a Strategic Plan and implement the ideas and principles I was learning at the Van Lunen Center and from other leaders in Christian education.

Dr. Vernard Gant was one of those leaders and he and his wife Cynthia had come along side CCS to help us learn how to better serve ACE students. ACE stands for Academically Disenfranchised, Culturally Diverse and Economically Disadvantaged. Throughout its history CCS always had a heart to include these students and work with families who were not able to afford a Christ-centered education, but needed financial help to access it. Dr. Gant and his wife were scheduled to come to consult with CCS for their third time in late August 2019 to help launch our Strategic Planning process. Everything looked to be lining up quite well.

Sometimes in the life of a leader a rebuke needs to come. A rebuke from the Lord is often a blessing in disguise, but it can be a difficult lesson to learn and how it is handled can make all of the difference for the leader and those the leader is called to care for.

What did you do?

At the beginning of our 2019-2020 school year we convened a group of CCS Board Members, staff members, parents, community members and former employees who were invited to come to participate on a Strategic Planning Task Force. An evening Kick-off meeting occurred in which the concept of developing a strategic plan and areas of need were covered. We all looked forward to more guidance from Dr. Gant the following week. A thank you and follow up email was sent out to the Task Force with an invitation to come the next week for more planning and strategizing with Dr. Gant. The idea was to roll out the planning in stages over six to eight months with the goal of following Dr. Gant with other key areas of developing the strategic plan with Henry Contant, focusing on Board training in September. Later in October another group would emphasize donor relations and development as we got going with Zach Clark's consulting. Planning on curriculum development, integrating subject matter and looking at other curricular needs and opportunities were put off as second semester needs because school was just getting started and teachers were very busy with beginning the year. As the principal, I was quite preoccupied with onboarding and working with two new administrators who were hired to help in development, advancement, enrollment, integrating more with Judson, grant writing, fundraising and event planning. The Task Force kick-off meeting was well attended with 16 people. Others who could not attend were sent in the minutes as we planned for a visit from Dr. Gant the following week.

Dr. Gant came for two days to share with us about the tasks and needs of launching the next phases of strategic planning. His time was fruitful in that we were able to learn much of what needed to be done. We were not able to get much work done as many of us had never done this and time being precious was not allocated to starting on some of the work. Unfortunately, there also were a good number of task force members who could not come and were not as inspired as those who did attend the training. The Task Force had lost some early momentum and that was just the beginning of problems as we tried to refocus our efforts. As we looked ahead to board training it was clear that our board had become large, many were facing other work and life challenges that did not allow them to invest time and talents into the school, and there were a few members that were making most of the decisions without proper checks and balances. There was a growing sense of disunity within the board over our goals for the future and also how our partnership with Judson University should work. It was decided to cancel the board training due to a lack of member availability and vision. This worked against the process of strategic planning as the board needed to set a good example and engage as leaders.

While the faculty was continuing on in earnest with teaching the children, the administrative team was getting more bogged down with all of the systems needed to be learned and new job responsibilities. We added consulting with intent to establish a better plan to raise support and develop donors. All of these pressing initiatives caused a sense of burden, overload and discontinuity that we as a small school and I as an educational leader had never experienced before. In addition, we began getting indications that expected funding from a few major sources was not going to come through. Also, two generous board members who had financially backed the CCS for years were unable to provide help due to an urgent business situation.

It seemed as if we hit a "perfect storm" and we had not done a good job in planning or methodically staging our staff and board growth and strategic planning needs.

What did you learn?

The issues discussed above led to December where things hit a head. The strategic planning process had hit a standstill as we faced a financial crisis that threatened the school. The board, which was already divided with many disengaged members, were forced to rally together to decide if the school could make it, and if so how. After a few long emergency meetings, much prayer and very difficult decisions to cut programs, staff and salaries, it was decided we would do all we could to keep the school going. Two days before Christmas I had to sit through a day that can only be described as a worst case situation, and the hardest thing I have ever done professionally. The Board President and I met independently with every employee. Nine colleagues were laid off and twelve were given the option to take a 30% pay cut.

- We learned that people are the most important aspect of our school and life. Knowing this as an idea is much different than learning it through the difficulties of the first five months of school. We had allowed the desire for growth and advancement to cloud our vision on what is most important and that is the souls and lives of people. This is a lesson that we will never forget.
- We learned that schools can't take on too many initiatives at one time. Planning, prayer and wise counsel and discernment are critical when deciding to change and grow. Sometimes less is more and being small and flexible can be an advantage when needing to adapt to new and trying situations. Unfettered growth is not good as things can get out of control very quickly without the proper resources, critical thinking and checks and balances.
- We learned that decision making is best done in consensus after difficult and even dissenting dialogue and debate. Making decisions to preserve the mission of the school were not easy and there were differences of opinion on many things, even how we should be structured going forward. In the end we decided that 40 years of ministry to children needed to continue and the sacrifices are worth it because it is all about the kids and serving God's interests.
- We learned that sacrifice is worth it. The staff and board members who stayed on saw some amazing things as parents, students, board members and staff members all pulled together. Donors gave and new donors were raised and even staff members that were cut gave financially or volunteered for the school free of charge. Yes, there were a few people that were hurt and upset. We did all we could to help them heal and began focusing more on helping people.
- We learned as Winston Churchill advised, "Do not waste a good crisis". People had to work more for less, board members who were disengaged had to engage, parents had to step up and volunteer, students had to learn to get by without certain staff and many hard changes. We all grew as a community in ways that we would have never imagined. The financial crisis also prepared us for the health crisis and campus closure that was to come in the March. We learned how to make lemonade from lemons, how to sacrifice more and make good come out of bad.
- We learned that the greatest of these is love. We can bring about lasting change only with humble hearts and God's supernatural and unconditional love spread through us by the Holy Spirit. This best happens in a community of Christ followers who are committed to give generously, hope eternally and faithfully trust God, sacrificially laboring together. We learned more how to have the mind of Christ our Head; to be sanctified in truth with knowledge and wisdom to applying God's word. Being Spirit inspired and empowered allowed the social dimensions with our gifts, hands, and strength effecting real change for eternal purposes.
- I learned that God is always loving, merciful and forgiving. I learned that we make our plans, but He orders our steps. I learned that His ways are holy and much better than my ways.
- I learned that Christ faithfully serves us more than we can ever think of serving Him.

What do you still want to do?

We still are working to do a strategic plan, only this time we are taking it methodically and a step at a time. We have put together a committee to begin the process of discussing our ongoing partnership with Judson University. Ideas and vision are being discussed now as we have set some preliminary goals and are thinking how we can pragmatically work toward writing and initiating a living and working strategic plan that will present a compelling vision for our future and amazing value proposition for our families. Here are a few ideas that we will be working on in the next few months and beyond...

- Stabilize, optimize and transform as we pray for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done.
- Ensure a fiscally sound budget with planned and proven giving and fundraising allocations and tuition and fee income clearly defined in the 2020-2021 and future budgets.
- Set the development and fundraising goals for this year by school start and expand in the future.
- Prayerfully and strategically engage our donor database as we plan future projects (See Below).
- Get all CCS teachers Google certified this summer to be prepared for more E-Learning opportunities. Plan to teach more student led and with more E-learning integration.
- Continue to integrate with Judson University. JU professors will provide professional development, coaching and curriculum integration changes this year and into the future.
- Finalize the CCS/Judson integration committee and begin meeting monthly in July.
- Begin to plan for parent and community open houses and informational sessions on our partnership with plans to expand CCS to 9th grade in 2021 and 10th grade in 2022.
- Target and work towards enrolling 30 to 40 students in 9th grade for 2021 school year.
- Make plans with Judson to be their primary lab school for elementary through 10th grade with integration of student teachers and Judson faculty involvement and innovations.
- Continue to work with Judson on major donor opportunities and locating a new campus for CCS.
- Develop scholarship programs for CCS and CCS students who will attend Judson.
- Work with Judson to have CCS students begin exploring career choices early in their education and plan to possibly attend Judson as a dual credit high school and college student during their junior and senior years. Students could work toward an Associate's degree by graduation.
- Expand our enrollment through outreach to homeschool families for partial credit and in the future potentially produce video content that can be purchased for Preschool through High School instruction.
- Expand our ability to serve more students with exceptionalities and continue to strive to serve underserved children in our community and beyond to provide a Christ-centered education to those who would never aspire to it or be able to afford it.
- Future building and campus needs are TBD, but the plans outlined above will require changes.

What difference did it make?

While the strategic planning process is ongoing and yet to be finalized as far as goals, objectives and steps to achieve the goals; we have learned that it takes a committed team that has prayerfully planned and decided on leadership rolls and chair people in different areas to oversee the entire process of developing the strategic plan and seeing it through to the implementation phase. We also understand better that the strategic plan is a living and working document, meant to be a guide to help us adjust and change as we evaluate progress on the goals and objectives. Through this past year we have come to realize more that we need each other working in unity, hearing God's voice and obediently following the Holy Spirit as we are inspired and equipped to fulfill our individual calling and role with a focus on collectively moving as the Body of Christ to the benefit of our students and families. We also learned that times of difficulty help define us as far as our character, faith and courage to press in and press on.

The Lord is not as interested in our successes and failures as He is our hearts. God sovereignly orchestrates and orders our steps to help align us to His will and ways, which are so different and better than our sinful and broken wills and ways. When we respond to His firm and loving discipline with humility, honesty and repentance, we allow His rod and staff to comfort, lead and protect us from our own self-destructive tendencies and stubborn habits and ways. The process of beginning strategic planning in fits and starts, followed with many trails and triumphs has brought us to a new commitment to see this through under Christ's Lordship. Much has changed in our school with the loss of employees, board members and families through the difficult year and the Covid-19 crisis, but more importantly, we have all changed as God's children. We have grown up a bit and understood better the responsibility of stewardship, love and repentance. God's holy and perfect nature demands that we change and this process has changed us and will continue to as we take up our crosses and follow Him. He is worthy!

What are you still learning?

After the financial crisis in late December and decision to keep the school going as we looked to finish the year, there were more challenges and obstacles to face with courage and faith. We learned and continue to learn that with God's strength and help, we are capable of so much more than we think we are. Our Mission to be a Christ-centered, loving, educational community committed to inspiring children to excellence in character, scholarship, and leadership did not change. In fact we had to learn together to grow and flourish in God's kingdom school in new and better ways, depending on each other, sharing the sacrifice and planning for the future of the precious children God has called us to serve. Long term strategic planning took a back seat to short term planning and survival as we met over the next six months more frequently and intentionally to collaborate on fiscal responsibility and budgeting strategies with the Finance Team. We set new priorities on the Development Team to help us find new donors, lift current donors and ask all constituents to pray, volunteer and give to CCS. The staff members and I learned how to do new things and old things differently as we all took on new roles, gave more time and pruned back those unnecessary things to do more with less help. We all used our time more wisely and focused more specifically on the priorities of caring for the children, families and the school's mission.

What difference do you think it will make?

The words "unless the Lord builds the house, we labor in vain", reminds us that we are completely dependent on God. He has seen Covenant through 40 full years now, and He has a plan to prosper us and carry us forward. Planning strategically together, with Christ our Head and us His sovereignly chosen laborers and body members, will make a difference in the children's lives for now, in their future and for eternity. It is all worth it! It is His calling and for His glory. Our commitment is to disciple His worshippers and warriors. We are passing the torch of Christ's light and love to the next generation who will pass it on as well. As we set the course for the next year, 3 years, five years and however long God gives us, we know that God will fulfill His covenant promises and His word will not return void. Our students will shine like stars as they hold out His word of life, and that is the difference that the living gospel makes in His people as we all reflect His light and reproduce disciples through the love of God.

A city on a hill!!! Matthew 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Repairer of the breach!!! Isaiah 58:12 "And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in."