Part 1

Affirming the Vision
The Vision:

Schooling for Responsive Discipleship

Seeking God and His Kingdom

Annieville Christian Middle School is a new school. It advertises its overall goal as being “to provide a distinctive learning environment where academic, spiritual, social, and emotional needs are met...above all, [where students] come to understand their roles as Christ's servants in all areas of life.” The school set out to integrate the curriculum around humanities and science/mathematics strands, and to use diverse teaching techniques to meet the needs of different learning types. Further, students would be involved in and responsible for their own learning, partly through exploratory electives and community-directed stewardship projects.

Annieville has attracted a multicultural clientele. Pupils with blond hair and fair skin constitute a visible minority. To the school’s credit, students of different backgrounds interact as a homogeneous group. The biblical studies program is designed to meet the school’s avowed aims. In the grade eight journals, for instance, students give personal interpretations and responses to various passages in the Gospel of Mark, with the teacher encouraging further thinking. A discussion of a tape on the roles people play in church leads to thoughtful responses with probing follow-up questions (“How does this relate to our school situation?”). In English, students do a great deal of journal and creative writing, some of it in collaborative settings, as they deepen their insight into what responsive discipleship entails.

Yet, little subject integration takes place, even within the strands, Long time blocks with a particular teacher are still arbitrarily divided into forty-five minute slots. One lesson is dragged out to make it fit the time slot, even though the same teacher teaches the next subject. Subject organization still seems strictly according to traditional subject lines, and subject content prepares students more for future subject content than for life outside the school setting. Nothing is said about an important election held the day before. A Christian perspective is evident mainly in the opening devotions and Bible study. Two months into the school year, the school had done little to bind the student body together into a compassionate learning community where students pray and study and serve and rejoice together. Students sparkle with enthusiasm and creativity in some classes, but display mostly docile compliance in others.

The Annieville Christian Middle School community did many things right when founding its new school. It prayerfully considered what types of school experiences would foster personal and communal discipleship enabling graduates to contribute redemptively to society. It concluded that it wanted its students to come to know God and learn to serve him in all areas of life. It explored the implications of biblical views of learning and of the person for learning-teaching situations for twelve-to-fifteen-year-olds. It developed a mission statement and a set of objectives. It explored how learning could be structured so that all students would feel they had a special role in the community of learning, It gave the principal and staff ample time for painstakingly planning the program prior to the start of the school. Annieville set out with high ideals.

The ideals that Annieville Christian School espouse maybe summed tip in one phrase: schooling for responsive discipleship. We share these ideals. In this introductory chapter, we want to give some substance to “responsive discipleship” by expanding on three of its essential aspects: unwrapping students' gifts, sharing each other's joys and burdens, and seeking shalom, that dynamic harmony of right relationships restored by God’s grace. These dimensions are focused in our commitment to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness and justice. We educate for a life of worshipful kingdom service, for a life of God-imaging love, truth, and justice. Our aim is that our students are made new in their attitudes and
transformed by the renewing of their minds (Eph. 4:23; Rom. 12:2). We want Christian schools to claim and exercise the fruit of the Spirit. Like Christ, we seek to walk in love and make ourselves poor in order to enrich others (2 Cor. 8:9). None of this is possible, of course, without the sanctifying renewal of the Holy Spirit, but that does not detract from our responsibility to be instruments of the Spirit in our educational tasks.

These three dimensions do not encompass all that can be said about discipleship, but the letters of Paul in general and Philippians 2 in particular make their importance clear. In a secular age in which self-centered, individualistic autonomy and materialism prevail, we believe that the focused learning experiences that schools provide ought to contribute to each of these three. Christian schools help students to unfold their gifts so that they "shine like stars in the universe as [they] hold out the word of life" (Phil. 2:15-16). They encourage teachers and students to be willing sharers of joy and bearers of burdens, looking to the interests of others (Phil. 2:4). And schools as learning communities seek and celebrate shalom as the participants are called to continue to work out their salvation with fear and trembling in and through their learning and teaching (Phil. 2:13).

Despite their best intentions, schools (like Annieville) will fall short of these ideals. No matter what schools do, they will not always touch their students in ways that they intend and hope. At Annieville, the school community asked the right questions and the staff planned painstakingly -- yet teachers wrestled with daily failings. Here we have to remember Christ's promises that if we continue to seek his kingdom and righteousness and justice, in and through our educational program, as elsewhere, we need not be anxious. God will grant our students what they need. The power of Christ's Spirit is mightier than the forces of darkness, and his grace is perfected in the shortcomings of teachers and students. God's gift is that every day we again have the possibility of being God's work of art, created in Jesus Christ to do good works.

As responsive disciples of Jesus Christ, Christians live between memory and vision. Our lives in the present occupy that thin slice of time between the past and the future, between the establishment of God's kingdom (with Christ's atoning sacrifice) and its completion (with his imminent return). Through God's grace we may erect signposts for that kingdom. The Christian school does so by seeking to conserve, discern, and reform, and in turn encourages its students to become conservers, disciners, and reformers within the kingdom contours of the Bible.

First, the Christian school community conserves and passes on the story and world view of its tradition: its meaning, purpose, roots, cultural anchorpoints, and accumulated wisdom. In a society driven by change and wild swings in values, the Christian school emphasizes the nonnegotiables for a meaningful life: faith in God, trust in his Word, personal salvation in Christ, reliance on his Spirit, commitment to family and Community, a calling of service and self-sacrifice. It combats the rootlessness and loss of meaning so prevalent in modern life. Telling the Christian story, it conserves the truths of the gospel and uses them to answer questions for the child such as, "Who am I? Why am I here? What is life for?"

Second, as discerner, the Christian school discerns the spirits of our time. It encourages critical analysis of the world and human experience. It never fears inquiry; it promotes different ways of knowing and new insights. It tests all things and holds fast to the good. It combats the anti-intellectualism and fuzzy thinking of the day.

Third, the Christian school inquires how the tradition it is conserving leads to reforming society. It is guided by a vision of a new and better world: the kingdom of God. It models and teaches a life of reforming discipleship that is responsive to God as it works in creation and in the structures of society. It seeks to reform injustice and unrighteousness and strife.

In the Christian school, the roles of conserver, discerner, and reformer -- practiced institutionally and individually -- come together in a full-orbed life or responsive discipleship, characterized by unwrapping God's gifts, sharing each others' burdens, and working for shalom.
Unwrapping Gifts

What is it like to be part of a grade nine high school class? Julie puts down some sheets of paper but pays no attention as the teacher opens with prayer to start the day. She looks bored as the class discusses, with animation, the trade of a hockey player and, with less animation, an upcoming election. Her teacher has the class use the first period to complete a social studies research report.

Julie plays with her hair and talks to a friend. After a few minutes, she starts working on a science assignment. When the teacher approaches her desk, she quickly takes the draft of her social studies project and asks him a question, successfully diverting his attention from her unauthorized science assignment. Five minutes later, after discussing the merits of various perfumes with her friends, she distracts her teacher once again.

Julie finishes her science assignment, due the next period, and then counts and discovers that she doesn't have enough words in her social studies project. She immediately waves her hand to attract the teacher's attention, maneuvering him into giving her ideas so she won't have to do more research. The teacher, in the meantime, first tells one friend and two minutes later another to move away from Julie: their chatter distracts the rest of the class. Julie smirks as she randomly finishes highlighting the "main points" of an article of a student in the desk behind her who went to the washroom.

Ten minutes of banter and scrutiny of a neighbor's physical education equipment ends with the defense, "But I don't understand any of this!" to her teacher. But fifteen minutes later, after more chatter and a quick glance at a relevant article, Julie is able to give her teacher an astute albeit black-and-white analysis of her topic: she knows far more about her topic than she wants to let on. At the end of the period, when the teacher tells the class that next period he expects much more effort, Julie and her two friends apologize as they line up with the others near the door, waiting for the bell.

During the next period Julie reacts very differently to the science teacher, whose objectives are clearly stated and carried out. Julie volunteers and answers a question right away, and works well in a collaborative small group setting, When stuck for an answer however, she again tries to get the teacher to do her work for her. A few minutes later her group becomes dysfunctional because of a disagreement. The teacher points them to one of the group rules: "everyone contributes equally; all cooperate," and appoints person B in each group as a noise monitor. Julie chews gum, looks out the window once in a while, but remains on-task and interested in the activity.

After a ten-minute break, Julie enters her French class. She looks bored but pays attention throughout. The class is fast-paced and the teacher calls on her fairly frequently. When working for a few minutes with a classmate, she cooperates quietly even if not energetically. In her Bible class, she again listens passively and unenthusiastically, but participates when required to do so. Is this the same student who relished manipulating her teacher and disturbing the class during the first period? Do different teachers affect her attitude and work that differently? Or did she run out of steam?

After lunch, Julie goes to art, I ask her whether she likes school. "I don't like art. " "But do you like school?" "Yeah, I do, really." Four minutes into the class, she smuggles the bare beginnings of her drawing to someone she considers a good artist. The teacher is oblivious. "I can't draw," she says to me inconspicuously, hoping I'll be a silent partner in her crime. "I'm just getting him to fix it up...honestly.

A little later, the teacher notices Julie with another friend: "What's going on here? I'm just getting some help. " Julie works intermittently on her drawing, talking frequently to her friend. Twenty minutes into the period, the teacher talks to Julie and her friend about their lack of progress, and they settle down for a while. During the last quarter hour, however, Julie once again alternates her work with talking with friends and looking at her school photographs distributed at noon. During the last period, physical education, Julie is initially more interested in
her shoe than in warming up, but then becomes fully involved in volleyball skill development and practice.

What does Julie's day add up to? For Julie it was first of all a social event, a time to be with friends. Interruptions for learning are tolerated when teachers set and enforce high expectations. Julie enjoys school because she is with her friends. But she is too wrapped up in herself and her friends to be at all concerned about responsive discipleship in general or about unwrapping her own gifts in particular. Nevertheless, although the only overtly Christian aspects of her day were devotions and a Bible class, the school does, as we shall see, make concerted efforts to promote the development of students' talents within a positive Christian framework. While the school needs to ask how it can better reach Julie, it does have a number of integral units in place that touch the minds and hearts of its students.

The first essential ingredient of responsive discipleship is that students unwrap their gifts as they learn. Think of a boy who finds it difficult to unwrap a long-expected birthday parcel received in the mail from his grandparents. The package has lots of knotted string and tough strapping tape. But he tries his best and opens it full of anticipation even when he finds it hard. And once he has opened the package and pushed aside the inside wrapping papers, he experiences the tingling of surprise and wonder and thankfulness. He then sets about to make what he has uncovered a meaningful part of his life, using it to enrich not only himself but also others around him in his family.

Whether easy or difficult, learning leads to responsive discipleship when students use their unique God-given talents to increase their gifts (Matt. 25:14-30). There is a spectrum of gifts that students use and extend through learning, including imagination and creativity, language competence, mathematical and spatial reasoning and ability, social perception and interaction, spiritual and moral discernment, and physical proficiency. In the process, students experience the awe and wonder of God and his world. They see the power of sin in their lives and in the world but also marvel at the potential and actuality of God's grace in Jesus Christ. This learning enriches their lives and those around them as they respond with deepened insight and commitment.

Julie's school works hard at unwrapping the gifts of its students in such a way. Recently, for instance, all grade eight, nine, and ten students explored in an integrated, week-long unit, what it is like to live as a First Nations Canadian or Native American today. Some preliminary activities resulted in the students indicating what questions they had about native people. Their questions were categorized into social problems, arts and culture, education, land claims, prejudice, family life, and native spirituality. Groups of about sixteen students each focused on one of these categories and then met to set their own agendas, which included field trips, speakers, projects, and reports back to the whole student body. Despite some inevitable logistical glitches (and exhausted teachers!) the students unwrapped many gifts. They became more aware of and sensitive to the moral and cultural ideals of other peoples. They learned to take initiatives and develop social contacts with people outside of their usual community groups. They extended their oral and written language skills, and applied their creative gifts in their presentations. They learned, above all, that they could successfully take hold of their own learning, and that their decisions determined to what extent they would respond as disciples during and beyond this unit.

Still, despite these promising efforts, we ask questions. Julie was part of the native peoples unit and yet seemed little changed a few months later. Even if during the unit she used her abilities responsibly and responsibly, how much long-term effect did it have? Did she understand the implications of the content and process of learning? Does the influence of our individualistic, materialistic, and hedonistic society, also evident within the school, undo what the school tried to accomplish, especially during the difficult adolescent years? Does Seventeen magazine tell Julie each month that her looks are much more important than developing her gifts? Does the lifestyle of her peers -- and perhaps her own family -- negate the discipleship focus of what she learns in school? Does her preoccupation with herself as well as her conviction that only "our" way is right inhibit her from analyzing the motives of others and prevent her from unwrapping her learning gifts? Does the school itself minimize the impact of such a unit by so often emphasizing regurgitation of information or narrowly focused academic abilities?
Or do we perhaps sometimes expect too much of the school? Do teachers forget that some students, after a discussion of Hopkins' "Pied Beauty," may still answer in all seriousness that in this poem Hopkins "praises God for the ingredients of a pie"? Do we forget that despite our best efforts, some students learn -- and suffer -- a great deal more by being ostracized by the rest of the class than they gain from all our teaching? Or that the discussions the students arrange with a band of native people are much less glamorous -- and therefore less significant to them -- than being on the school basketball team? Or that the constant emphasis on good grades weighs as a heavy burden on those whose gifts are in areas that do not receive the same recognition?

Contradictions as well as constraints appear to be an unavoidable part of school life. A school drops students from an oversubscribed Spanish class or its student council solely on the basis of poor marks, even though these opportunities might be the best way for those students to unwrap their gifts and respond as disciples. A high school that talks about meaningful learning nonetheless tells a professor of Old Testament taking his son on a three-week trip of the Holy Land that it will lower his son's grades for the days absent. Some schools still indicate nothing more than grades on report cards, even though such an approach inhibits the growth of all but the top quartile. At the same time, the often difficult societal milieu underscores that teachers frequently lack the resources or supportive context for helping students optimize their gifts. Adolescents like Julie may find their search for identity so consuming that no matter what teachers do, their response is limited. Abused children or ones who are emotionally unstable may sap a teacher's time or energy. The chemistry among the class leaders may undermine a teacher's best efforts.

Nevertheless, we believe that often schools can do more to unwrap their students' gifts, and part 2 of this book provides many examples. The school, like the sower in the parable, scatters seed that will take root only when the ground is ready to receive it. But that, of course, still leaves the question of what quality seed we use and how we help prepare the soil.

Though some seed will fall on rocky ground and other seed will sprout but be crushed by weeds, Christian schools can do a great deal to cultivate students' gifts. We help them experience and explore and ponder the awe and wonder and mystery of God's great creation. We nourish them in becoming life-long playful and thoughtful learners. We help them sense how we all are products of a culture that is burdened by the results of sin, but in which, by God's grace, we may work at recreating small corners into more God-glorifying ones. We help students tell stories: in their journals, in their creative writing, in their presentations, in their art, in their music. These stories, when taken together, unravel and reweave their inner beings, deepen and enrich their identities, uncover and recover the meaning of their lives. We encourage students to appropriate the biblical story and vision as their own, deepening and extending their responsive discipleship day by day, week by week, year by year.

We help students analyze moral and religious norms and develop commitments, enabling and encouraging them to act on the basis of what they profess. Socially, we assist them to learn to interact respectfully and trustworthily with others. We give them historical, political, and social insights that help them to understand our culture and that impel them to responsible action. We teach them the basics thoroughly so that they understand and can cope with their environment. We help them become critical thinkers who can detect the idols of our times and ask questions that enable the Christian community to be light and salt in our culture. We help them exercise and improve their physical skills to enrich and fulfill their lives. School learning is not limited to unwrapping intellectual gifts alone!

Students' gifts are not unwrapped unless we tap into their creativity and imagination. God has put these qualities close to the root of our being, made as we are in his image, yet schools often stifle rather than nourish them. Students' playfulness and power of expression are intended to lead to joyful response to God's call. In the face of the powerful cultural images that would divert us to sinful ends, schools that are Christian help students to critique these images and to develop their gifts for the re-creation of their own lives and the redirection of our culture back to God.

It is inspiring when a small Christian high school encourages its grade twelve students to publish a pamphlet, "Aspects of a Worldview," which is worthwhile reading for all Christians (Gesch 1991). The same class has also written publishable essays about the place of science in our world from a Christian perspective. The school's grade nines vigorously discuss Christian responsibility with respect to social
inequality, and, within the perspective of Romans 12:2, analyze current events in the school newsletter. At another small school, a multigrade high school class creates a museum with "artifacts" showing what the Middle Ages were like religiously, politically, culturally, and physically. Clearly, students unwrap their gifts responsively. As part of their discipleship of the mind they critique and identify basic values and beliefs, beginning also to articulate their own and to communicate them to others.

**Sharing Each Other's Joys and Burdens**

Craigsville Christian High is, by almost any measure, a good school. It maintains an accepting, caring, responsive atmosphere that engenders positive self-awareness. The student lounge, directly in front of the school office, is a place of informal camaraderie and good humor, a place where even an adult visitor is readily included in the relaxed discussion and banter. Craigsville's students and teachers go out of their way to make classmates with disabilities feel part of the learning community, whether these disabilities be physical, mental, or emotional. Participation in community service projects is an integral part of the senior biblical studies courses. Many students are involved in a valuable peer counseling program. Staff members model what they preach, whether that be picking up litter in the hall or making decisions on the basis of biblical norms. An ethos of caring permeates the school. Each person entering Craigsville's doors is made to feel special.

"The reality of school is not the reality of life in society, but let's make it as life-like as possible and then use our Christian principles to guide us," the principal says. "While our school community is too diverse -- religiously and educationally -- for radical change," he continues, "there are lots of things we can do in our current system."

The school assesses prospective teachers especially on their personal relationship with Jesus Christ, their eagerness to share this with their students, and their ability to foster a mutually respectful and compassionate learning environment. The school emphasizes that these characteristics are the foundation that the school uses to deepen everyone's insight into how the lordship of Jesus Christ affects all of life. What excites the principal is the growth in both personal faith and in world view perspectives among students, teachers, and parents from diverse evangelical backgrounds.

Craigsville Christian High, in other words, tries to make responsive discipleship part of its ambience. And yet Craigsville also exemplifies that, perhaps inevitably, schools are contradictory institutions. In an effort to provide meaningful learning experiences for all students, for example, the grade nines are divided into four separate levels in mathematics. In the honors section, taught by an experienced specialist, the students work in groups, use a range of sources, learn through a variety of creative large and small group teaching methods, and successfully tackle higher-order questions. In the third level, the "modified" section, on the other hand, while the teacher is just as caring, though not a math specialist, students work individually on drill sheets that reinforce basic skills, Little teaching takes place except during individual explanations. The students look at mathematics as a necessary chore that might as well be gotten out of the way as quickly as possible. While both math programs are quite traditional, the honors section deals with interpretations (and misinterpretations) of statistics in everyday life, with all students using scientific calculators. The modified section, on the other hand, is practicing pencil-and-paper grade-six-level fraction calculations, something of little relevance in an age of calculators.

The teachers mention that they feel this grouping has proven so successful that next year the English classes may be similarly divided. Apparently they are not aware that research shows that such grouping is self-fulfilling, harms learners of average and below-average abilities, and undermines the unity of the community of Christ that the school deliberately nurtures. While grouping may have made teaching the higher levels more enjoyable, the modified section showed some disturbing characteristics. Their work was not very relevant or
interesting. They learned routines and algorithms but were not challenged to do any higher-order thinking. Because of the nature of the class, the teacher had to enforce strict discipline, with students having no opportunity for interaction or group work. In short, responsive discipleship was fostered much more in the honors than in the modified section.

That consequence is not Craigsville's intent. The school offers, for instance, a grade eleven activity-based science and technology course for students who are not college-bound. The course evaluates the use of technology from the standpoints of Christian lifestyle and stewardship. Students are faced with the question, "Does our use of technology reflect our desire to be imitators of God?" They investigate technology and leisure time, energy and environmental trade-offs, and military and defense technology. Teachers recognize the importance of this type of course and would like to offer it to a much larger, heterogeneous group of students. The school, however, feels it cannot deviate from the much less meaningful and abstract "official" courses for university bound students.

In sum, Craigsville Christian High is a school whose graduates will have experienced what it means to have lived in a caring, empathic Christian community. And yet, it also is a school that needs to consider how its class and course structures in some ways detract from this goal.

Schools help students unwrap their God-given gifts not primarily for their personal growth and advantage. Rather, they develop their individuality in order that they may offer their unique gifts to the body of Christ and to society (Rom. 12:3-8). Our culture has lamentably and dangerously privatized most of life and lost sight of its communal nature. We have lost the sense that people must mutually care for each other and commit themselves to being responsible for the effects of their actions on others (Benne 1990,88). Instead, people seek individual gratification and self-fulfillment. Arrogant autonomy has displaced daily self denial and compassion. The high incidence of dishonesty, violence, divorce, and poverty in North America speaks poignantly of self-centeredness and a lack of commitment to love others as ourselves.

God calls us to live in and contribute to community. Our gifts have been apportioned to us by God's grace for building the body of Christ and doing works of service (Eph. 4:7,12-13). God asks us to live interdependently, in schools and classrooms as well, as covenant communities that promote the common enterprise of responsive discipleship. In such communities, teachers and students pledge to respond voluntarily and lovingly to the needs of each other on the basis of common vision and values. Teachers accept students as having intrinsic worth as images of God who are able to fulfill meaningful roles in the classroom community. That implies that teachers search out and, when necessary, allocate mutually helpful tasks and responsibilities to all their students.

Within schools that are covenant communities, teachers and students show heartfelt respect, compassion, and support for each other. They are receptive and open to dialogue fresh insights, and innovative experiences, avoiding cliquishness. They include all members in both formal and informal class activities, downplaying exclusivistic competition. They foster cohesiveness, implementing peer support systems and collaborative learning. They appreciate and value others and their work, sharing tasks and products. They contribute to the learning success of others. They reach out to others in the community, especially those who are disadvantaged. In this way an ethos of caring and an atmosphere of encouragement and trust pervade the school.

Classrooms and schools will, of course, experience strains in the attempt to foster such an atmosphere. Students and teachers and organizational behavior are always contaminated by sin. One principal said that his diligent faculty teamwork to provide a caring community with Christ-centered learning seemed to be thwarted daily by the blatant disrespect of a minority of students. A teacher described the heartache of a Christian school student who told her, "I hate high school. I'm not a jock, I can't sing, and...I'm a Christian." In such cases we must not only pray that the school will accept the student's grief as its own, but also as a community take steps to work at turning around its own plight.

Caring covenant communities are not soft. They are forceful and demanding when necessary, yet resilient. They provide settings where personal feelings and fears as well as shortcomings are addressed forthrightly (Palmer 1989,15). Teachers as authoritative servant-leaders and intercessors try to resolve the
underlying causes of unacceptable behavior in ways that place the responsibility to restore the learning community on the persons concerned. Personal failures, while endured, are used as new learning opportunities.

Structures imposed by logistical considerations, such as rigid timetables or streaming and tracking, may also detract from community. With God's help, teachers, students, and parents face community fractures caused by individual failings or systemic deficiencies squarely, dealing openly with the resulting brokenness and pledging themselves anew each day to communal discipleship.

A grade ten biblical studies teacher who wanted to forge his class into much more of a covenant community began a voluntary community service group, "Shining Our Lights." The group found that the desire to serve God in service projects was implemented most effectively communally, with team members supporting each other. The students reached out to urban street kids and inmates of a detention center, reporting their experiences to the whole class. A subgroup became involved with church-planting efforts during the summer.

The next year, in grade eleven, the class reached a consensus that everyone would participate. The students who admitted uncertainty about their faith chose activities in which they would not need to proclaim their beliefs openly. The learning taking place inside the class was now complemented for everyone by outside response. The students were exposed to diverse service possibilities and were encouraged to become long-term participants. Meanwhile, they learned to appreciate each other in new ways as they worked together on projects they could or would not do alone. In-class response also improved, with the classroom climate becoming more mutually supportive.

Forging a learning community does not require "outside" service work at some grade levels. What is most important in any case is what takes place within the school walls. In one school, a great amount of collaborative work takes place on days when integrated themes are studied. Many projects become class projects, with each student contributing something that enhances the whole. Each person in the school is assigned a special task that is needed for the school to function well. Also, a "buddy" system allows older and younger students to do things together and learn from each other through planned activities. Better students help weaker ones with their math as a matter of course. Students in the higher grades volunteer and are assigned to tutor students in lower grades. Within an atmosphere of supportive informality, the students appreciate that the teachers have high expectations and maintain a high level of learning.

In short, we need to address how our classroom structures can help foster care and concern, justice and mercy, understanding and mutual support. Individual competition, such as that engendered by posting only the work of the best students on the bulletin board, does not lead to a sharing of the joy of learning nor to the bearing of each other's burdens. A true learning community is not characterized, however, by romantic indulgence. It is caring and sustaining but also challenging and rigorous. It is rooted in the knowledge that God, our faithful Father, is our ultimate burden bearer to whom we respond in gratitude by giving of our all.

**Seeking Shalom**

A thematic unit on ecosystems in Paulton Christian Elementary School provides students with opportunities to marvel at God's faithful handiwork in his creation. As they investigate, discuss, and write about forest, meadow, swamp, and pond ecosystems, they also begin to grasp how humans have distorted God's perfect and beautiful patterns, often for selfish short-term economic gain and with devastating long-term implications.

In the unit, teacher Christine Parker helps and propels her students to plan concrete ways of being informed healers of our broken environment in just, responsible, and self-sacrificing ways, both individually and as a group. The students invite experts to discuss with them environmental disasters such as oil spills, drift netting, and clear-cutting. They explore how governments deal with environmental issues. Christ-centeredness is emphasized not only through caring and forgiving relationships within the class, but also through community involvement outside of school.
Christine Parker's structure provides her students with ongoing opportunities to share their insights, understandings, and experiences. They write and share what they already know about ecosystems. Their own questions provide a large part of the unit's agenda. Christine allows her students certain choices about which topics to explore, what activities to complete, how to represent the knowledge they gain in products, and whether to work alone or in small groups. They become part of the decision-making process, taking ownership of their own learning and how their learning community functions. Moreover, the students regularly evaluate themselves, sometimes on the basis of criteria established by the class. She gives students many responsibilities within a framework of mutual respect and high expectations, holding them fully accountable for their learning decisions, their implementation, and the resulting products.

Throughout the unit, Christine invites and re-invites the students to look through the window of faith. She plans devotions that point her students to biblical norms and mandates, and asks them to discuss particular issues from a biblical perspective of stewardship. She directs her students to resources, shares personal experiences and thoughts, and reads stories aloud. All of these activities become avenues for further discussion, exploration, and response. She knows that ecological issues challenge our whole society as well as each of her students to live with more integrity, seeking to reestablish biblical shalom. She therefore keeps the glasses of faith perched steadily on her nose in order to help her students claim a biblical vision of what it means to be responsive disciples.

Christian schools seek shalom, the biblical peace and justice that heals brokenness and restores creation to what God intended it to be. Shalom rests in and brings about restored relationships between humans and God, among persons in community, and between humans and their world. Shalom brings freedom from the self-centered excesses of North American society. It embraces religious and moral harmony as well as true piety. A shalom-filled classroom is one where pedagogy reflects tactfulness and trust, where curriculum fosters justice and harmony, where discipline redirects to discipleship, and where evaluation sensitively fosters self-reflective growth. In such a classroom we celebrate God's majesty and goodness and lament the power of sin within and beyond the learning community (Wolterstorff 1985).

Our planet faces the possibility of extinction because of our unstewardly use of God's gifts. The prevalent (if weakening) pride that we can solve our problems through economic growth flies in the face of increasing ecological decay, indiscriminate violence and crime, disabling poverty and unemployment, and excruciating personal abuse. All of us are touched to some extent by these tragedies; some of our students' lives have been devastated by one or more of them.

Yet God promises his shalom: ‘God lifts up the humble and fills the hungry with good things (Luke 1:51-53). If we are to promote shalom in and through our schools, then, can we do any less? In our schools, do we feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and visit the sick and those in prison? Do we reach out to the needy, the elderly, the emotionally wounded, the disadvantaged minorities? Do our students become alert to the needs of others, and disposed to do something about those needs? Are our graduates socially aware and concerned and active in issues ranging from the sanctity of life to the preservation of God's earth to opposition to discrimination against minority groups in society? Since discipleship involves justice and holiness (Eph. 4:24), do we address issues of personal and social justice in every course, at every level? Where there is no vision of biblical shalom, meaningful learning will perish.

Paulo Freire accuses Christians in the Western world of speaking and writing about Easter, but not doing Easter in our educational institutions (Evans et al. 1987, 229). Doing Easter, for Freire, means becoming completely committed to the power of Christ's gospel to cut through the injustice of this world. He means that the industrialized nations, with only a minor proportion of the world's population, would take steps to ensure that they no longer consume the major part of the world's resources. He argues that our renewal in Christ's resurrection would spur us to genuinely improve the lot of those living below the poverty line, of the homeless and famished, and of those who cannot afford or have no access to proper medical care.
Do our schools merely celebrate Easter or do we do Easter? Do we question the dominant underlying values of our culture? the way in which our governments use power? how labor unions often consider only their own self-interest? that we Christians also get caught in materialism? Do we analyze the roots of the evils embedded in our social systems? Do we help our students consider issues from a global perspective, so that they can contribute locally to justice and responsible stewardship?

Some Christian schools, to be sure, do a great deal to promote such Christian understanding and dispositions. One teacher told us enthusiastically about a unit called "Choices" in his grade ten English class. He used a mixture of short stories, poems, news articles, teenage-oriented comics, and rock music to discuss how people make choices about what to do with their lives. He dealt head-on with decisions teenagers make about such issues as sexuality, drugs, suicide, how to spend time and money. The video The Man Who Planted Trees was followed by a discussion on what it means that each of us is called by God to bring about shalom in our own lives and those of others through “planting trees.”

After the in-class activities, the students chose a "tree planting" organization such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Hope International Development, the Mennonite Central Committee, or Citizens for Public Justice. They made contact and took a school day to visit its offices and interview key personnel. They made reports to the class as well as posters promoting the organization. The unit helped the students, according to the teacher, to become respectful of the people involved. They began to appreciate how these individuals had made choices about their lives. They considered how they themselves can and must make choices that would affect their lives but also those of others. They experienced how it is possible to bring about biblical shalom, even if in only a limited way, in situations crying out for justice and compassion.

We strive to make our classrooms into communities characterized by mutual service and renunciation of power and prestige (Segovia 1985,7). This is often difficult in classrooms where, today, some students are unwanted at home, some have been abused, some are caught up in their parents' materialistic lifestyle, and some are part of the drug scene. Yet even in such circumstances -- particularly in such circumstances -- teachers and students together must strive to learn together, to look not only to their own interests, but also to the interests of others. Like Christ, we keep before us the need to humble ourselves to serve others (Phil. 2:4-8). To the extent that we do, our schools will be places where, despite recurring shortcomings, we can celebrate God's shalom.

**Schooling for Responsive Discipleship**

At 12:30 on a sunny afternoon early in October, nineteen children come into the colorful, learning-inviting kindergarten room. Teacher Susan Wright sings a song that acknowledges them all by name as they leave the coat area near the outside door. They find their places in a circle on the floor behind laminated placemats on which they had printed their names and painted a picture during the first week of school.

Ken, on Susan's right, sits on a tree stump: he is the special person of the day. Michael, on her left, waits with an expectant smile: it's his sixth birthday today. Susan takes her guitar and everyone joins in singing "Happy Birthday." "Use your hands to show me six," Susan says. She reads a poem on her chart about turning six and asks some "thinking questions" about it. She discusses how our lungs function as she blows up a balloon. She is careful to explain that all children have a special place in kindergarten, whether they're four, five, or six. Ken had decided, the week before, that being four made him too young to do any of the "work."

After only four weeks of school, the children anticipate and already cherish the well-established routines. They clap along as they sing five or six songs, several with signings and body movements. They act out three choral poems, each teaching them something about fall, the theme they are studying, or about counting. Four children participate in communal prayer and a dozen in "show-and-tell." Susan uses these as opportunities for imaging God through building confidence, instilling community, and developing language skills. Susan works hard at her students being and becoming responsive disciples of Jesus Christ. They blossom
as she helps them nurture their gifts. They learn to reach out to and help each other, and to take delight in celebrating God's goodness and faithfulness.

Susan encourages all children to volunteer their involvement. She checks off their participation on an evaluation sheet on her knee. The students "write" and "erase" numbers with their fingers in the air, and playfully learn some basic phonics as they discuss the calendar and the weather. They proudly "read" a big book without Susan's help. "You're just too smart! " Susan exclaims. The children excitedly identify author Robert Munsch and join Susan in telling the story and chanting the repetitive patterns. Susan asks many open-ended questions as she uses the story of Abraham to emphasize God's challenging call and faithfulness. When some children's attention wanders, a quick double clap refocuses their attention.

Susan emphasizes personal responsibility. The children choose their own learning center during activity time. They know that for some centers such as the water table, they must set the timer if there are more than four of them so that others will get a chance, too. After completing a painting at one of the easels, they put their painting in the drying rack and then allow others their turn. Susan deliberately asks a shy but bright child to help another one having difficulty with a task. Ken, the "special person," uses a small rechargeable vacuum cleaner as the children routinely clean up before going out for recess. Susan asks two arguing children to decide how they can resolve their problems peacefully. When, as happens occasionally, she sends children to the "time-out chair," they themselves decide when they are ready to rejoin the class.

Susan keeps close track of which children visit each learning center. She attracts some to those where she wants more participation by sitting there for a few minutes. Each day, she closes and opens some centers as specific learning needs become clear. Each center, Susan asserts, teaches the student; at least three different educationally worthwhile things in the six developmental areas that she uses to design and evaluate her program: the spiritual and moral, social and emotional, social responsibility, intellectual, aesthetic, and physical dimensions. Susan organizes her program so that children learn to express and exercise their faith, to joyfully help and support each other, to take responsibility for their own learning and behavior, to take risks as they expand their learning horizons, to delight in the beauty of God's creation, and to marvel in newly uncovered motor skills.

But, Susan wonders, what is going to happen to each of her students as they move on through school? Will they advance in their understanding and practice of responsive discipleship -- or will their child-like wonder and faith and joy in learning gradually fade? What about Ken, whose culturally limiting home background and slow development already make it painfully clear that he will be frustrated in any "standard" classroom situation? What about Teresa, whose aggressiveness has already made her "boss" in classroom and playground situations -- and who loudly insists she will "do Ken's work for him: he can't do it anyway"? What about Peter, whose lurid imagination makes him fantasize cutting off limbs from dolls with make-believe knives? What about Esther, who constantly craves attention because her overwhelmed single mother can't find any time for her? What about Quentin, an emotionally withdrawn child who seldom wants to join in with the others? What about perfectionistic Michelle, who is already sounding out words but is afraid to take risks as she begins to write words and stories? To what extent can the school continue to foster responsive discipleship in each of these children, especially when they often encounter many conflicting influences?

Susan tries to lay a sound foundation. The structure of her classroom, with its unobtrusive but well-established routines, allows for a great deal of freedom, encouraging responsiveness and responsibility. Her themes -- such as creation, God made me special, transportation, and Japan -- all embed the beginnings of a Christian world view in simple but not simplistic ways. Above all, she helps each child feel special and nurtures their attitudes and abilities at their level of development:
I can tell a lot of work went into that. Tell me more about it.
It's okay to make mistakes. What do you think you have learned about...
I have confidence in you. You'll make the right choice.
Since you don't seem to be happy with that, what will you do differently next time?
I like the way you handled that.
What do you think you can do now?

In describing Susan's class one volunteer mother paraphrases what God said to Joshua: "Very soon the children realize that the Lord their God has given them the land for a possession, and that therefore they don't have to be afraid but can be strong and courageous."

Indeed, encouraging children to take possession of God's marvelous creation in perceptive and creative, sensitive and warmhearted, trusting and trustworthy ways: that is not only what Susan's classroom but what all Christian schooling tries to attain.

God calls each believer to a life of discipleship. The church summons us to such discipleship by proclaiming the redemptive and enabling work of Jesus Christ. It points us to the Way, the Truth, and the Light, setting forth the guidelines and norms of God's Word. The Christian family nurtures children in everyday discipleship, providing an environment where the bond of faith and love with God and with other family members may be experienced and extended.

Like the church and the family, the Christian school has a responsibility to foster discipleship. Its way of encouraging discipleship as well as the scope and depth of topics it considers differ, however, from those of the other settings. In school, students distance themselves from situations and phenomena in order to focus on particular aspects in structured ways. The school's educational setting enables children and young people to respond to God's call in all aspects of life, by broadening and deepening their experience of his creation in more formal ways.

School experiences reinforce, extend, remake, and apply students' gifts. Those gifts are not limited to intellectual ones but also include spiritual, ethical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, aesthetic, spatial, and physical gifts. Christian schools reinforce that living as a Christ-confessing community means sharing such gifts as well as sharing each others' joys and burdens. Further, Christian schools help students become committed to seeking and proclaiming God's shalom -- his mercy, peace, and justice -- throughout our society. The school's task lies in promoting understandings, abilities, tendencies, and practices that enable students to be discerning participants in our culture and that help them take on a strategic discipleship role in society. Christian schools endow the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 and the Great Commission of Matthew 28 with special significance as they help students respond to God's call everywhere in life. All this is what Susan tries to do in her kindergarten class in simple but not simplistic ways.

Disciples of Jesus Christ follow him in obedience. They acknowledge and trust Christ's trailblazing, using his power and directives to nurture the potential in themselves, in others, and in the rest of God's creation. Discipleship, as often pointed out, includes responsibility or accountability.

What has been noted less often is that discipleship also encompasses responsiveness. In their school encounters with the dynamics of life in God's creation, students are called to respond with wisdom and knowledge, with discernment and creativity, with playfulness and perseverance, and, above all, with love and compassion. We want such student response to be freely given and authentic, but, at the same true, we wish the response to reflect the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5; Eph. 4-5). Teachers encourage honest response, thus discouraging hypocrisy. At the same time, they cannot tolerate response that, while genuine, undermines shalom in the classroom learning community.

The personal, freely-given response that schools foster goes much beyond memorization or slavish imitation. All truth is God's truth, and knowledge of truth is an essential ingredient of discipleship. But knowledge is never something static: it always demands obedient response. A lack of knowledge, God indicates in Hosea 4, does not mean not understanding concepts or not recognizing truth; rather, it means not acting faithfully on our "head knowledge." This has important implications for the way we structure learning situations and the methods we use to evaluate student progress, for instance. Students (and teachers) who are responsive disciples respond personally and wholeheartedly to the learning and teaching
situation they face as they develop their gifts in God-glorifying ways. They learn to believe fervently, care compassionately, love unconditionally, discover breathlessly, evaluate discerningly, create imaginatively -- and also grieve profoundly when the power of sin prevents Christ’s shalom from breaking through.

Such responsive discipleship is much more encompassing than what we evangelicals have, often assigned to the "spiritual" dimension of life. It embraces any situation where we use our learning encounters to find joy in God's creation and to seek God's kingdom of justice. A kindergartner excitedly discovers that 3+2 always equals 2+3 and begins to apply that in everyday situations. A student festively paints the stunning beauty of an alpine meadow, or draws the anguish of a person whose life is racked by years of pain and suffering. A boy finds satisfaction in reading a story to a younger student, and the younger one delights in listening. A group of students together complete a science project that illustrates God's laws for gravity. A girl ponders in her journal about coping with her broken home situation. A class researches and debates how to respond to today's popular music. A high school class organizes weekly social events in a home for juvenile delinquents. A school basketball team plays in a caring, honest, and truly playful way. A student finds a creative way to solve an algebra problem, while another is pleased to have mastered a basic algorithm.

All these situations exemplify responsive discipleship if the participants use God's gifts to celebrate the lordship of Christ over every nook and cranny of life. Even horse bells and cooking pots can be holy to the Lord (Zech.14: 20) and therefore instruments of our discipleship, but this depends on how we use them, in what context, and to what end.

Telling others the Good News of Christ is one crucial aspect of responsive discipleship. But we also proclaim the Good News by bursting into bloom like a crocus (Isa.35: 1), proffering Christ the gifts he first gave us with the added vibrancy and color realized through responsive learning and teaching. The numbers we multiply, the chemicals we mix, the volleyballs we spike, the poems we write, the maps we draw, the textbooks we read, the critical analyses we develop, the procedures we learn, the attitudes and dispositions we develop -- all these are gifts of God to be used as offerings to him. Everything we do in school can be part of responsive discipleship if we light candles within our own and each other's lives and within our cultural darkness. God through his grace then uses our learning activities in service of his kingdom and accepts both students and teachers as co-workers who strive for excellence in whatever they do (I Cor.3:9).

In Christian school classrooms, teachers both model and foster responsive discipleship. They lead their students as they themselves follow their Lord and Savior. To do so, they search Scripture for the significance of its teachings, building on the richness of our tradition while allowing the Holy Spirit to lead them into new insights. Today, that often is not an easy task. It involves overcoming the religious and moral numbness that characterizes our culture. It means reclaiming those largely inoperative virtues that form part of the fruit of the Spirit: love, self-sacrifice, integrity, humility, righteousness, and justice. It cannot happen without countering the prevailing attitudes of autonomous individualism, self-centered consumerism, and moral relativism. Yet, by God's grace and through the power of Christ's Spirit, we may work at developing structures and programs in which responsive discipleship becomes a way of life.

Christian teachers, then, are called to empower students to follow Jesus in a school setting. Schools set out deliberately to nurture personal, nonprogrammed response by broadening and deepening students’ experiences and insights. Schools help their students respond to carefully chosen, significant aspects of human life, respond normatively and authentically, reflectively and actively. In the Gospels, Jesus required his disciples to respond by driving out evil spirits and curing illness very soon after he called them, despite their glaringly incomplete understanding. In school, teachers similarly foster purposive knowing and doing in order to encourage response, right from the day students enter kindergarten. At the same time, they celebrate the diversity of responses that God's spectrum of gifts in the students make possible, always emphasizing that God calls us to respond within his norms of love, truth, and justice.

Teachers stimulate students to be reflective, to consider the meaning and implications of their actions and products. They help them be compassionate, creative, and responsible agents of change within and without the school. They help them experience that in God's kingdom the wolf and the lamb can feed together, that swords can be beaten into plowshares, that nations can blossom like lilies. Righteousness and justice, love and compassion, peace and joy -- those are the foundations for the pedagogy, curriculum, and administration of a Christian school that models and nurtures responsive discipleship.
On the one hand, students and teachers can never exhaust these dimensions of responsive discipleship. Christ's mission and direction evoke unceasing and ever-deepening response. On the other hand, no school ever attains these aims completely. The consequences of human sinfulness touch all teachers and students each day. They face disappointments and frustrations and stresses. But they can always rest in God's promise that he will sustain them when in the classroom they respond obediently as committed disciples. Unwrapping our gifts in a supportive community in order to seek and celebrate shalom is something that gives purpose and meaning to the learning and teaching in Christian schools.

Do not grieve what talents God did not give you, but recognize and rejoice in the worth of others. Discover your particular gifts and develop your unique potential.... When you find joy and laughter in your life, give others your joy. 'The gift you have received give as a gift.' (Dunn 1985,14-15)

Questions for Discussion

1. The chapter develops these dimensions of responsive discipleship in a school setting: unwrapping gifts, sharing joys and bearing burdens, and seeking shalom. Think of examples of how each of these aspects of responsive discipleship is developed in your classroom. Can you think of other dimensions of responsive discipleship that are not developed in the chapter? Are there any that you would consider at least as important as these three? If so, what would be the classroom implications?

2. The chapter claims that responsive discipleship is an important aim in nurturing children in the home, in church, and in school. Can you distinguish the different emphasis that would be present in each case? In what ways can the home, church, and school complement rather than duplicate each other?

3. The emphasis on sharing each other's joys and bearing each other's burdens is not intended to deemphasize academic rigor or the striving for excellence in learning. Can you give examples where sharing joys and bearing burdens within a classroom enhances the quality of learning? On the other hand, are there ways in which academic rigor can undermine a sense of Christian community? How can Christian schools promote both as they help all students unwrap their gifts?

4. Seeking shalom is a demand of God that is not often related to the aims of schooling. If this is an important aspect of fostering responsive discipleship, what implications does teaching shalom have for the content and structure, of learning at various grade levels?

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1 The school situations described in this chapter were observed by the authors, except for the one on ecology, which was described by a teacher during the conference with which our study began. All names in this chapter are fictitious.