How Do We Forge a Community for Learning?

Monday, 3:15
As Ken Heard made his way to the staff meeting, his eyes caught a glimpse of the picture of his first graduating class as principal. He could remember the first faculty meeting he had led... what a challenge that had been. Numerous interruptions over petty concerns. One teacher's suggestions had been met by soft but not inaudible comments by others. Even personal put downs were frequent.

Now, almost ten years later, a different atmosphere pervaded most meetings. Teachers listened well, they were courteous and congenial in responding to each other's ideas. Nevertheless, Ken wondered whether the outward politeness hid some crucial differences of views about schooling, differences that hindered the staff from developing a better learning environment. One of today's agenda items, a request by the grade eleven students to be given a day off school to work at the City Foodbank, would certainly test the staff's willingness to work as a community. Ken set his sights on at least leading a well focused and efficient meeting.

Friday, 3:15
At Central Station Christian School, Karla, Emmy, Ted, and Sam get together frequently to exchange ideas about their teaching, propose ways of extending or modifying units for particular classes, and consider the needs of particular students. Their meetings are held in a spirit of mutual trust and support as they encourage and challenge one another in their work. On Fridays they gather briefly to conclude their week of teaching. They share stories of the day's learning experiences. In communal prayer they bring praise to God for the gifts he has shown them in their students during that week and they present personal and student needs for his care. They also commit themselves to take some time away from school work.

Are schools collections of students who come together to be educated by teachers for individual self-fulfillment? Or do schools educate to submerge individual in societal needs? No one takes either extreme in this debate. Nevertheless, Mountain City and Central Station are at different points between these two poles. The way they structure learning, the way their teachers react to "outside" learning experiences, and even the design of their buildings indicate that a sense of community transcending North American individualism is more important for some Christians than for others.

Schools in our society feel the persuasive and pervasive effects of individualism. Students want to choose their own courses, decide their own amount of effort, and develop their own rules. Teachers want to decide their own methods and content, limit their own workloads, and control their own classrooms. Parents want schools to fit their personal purposes, to use their own reading preferences, and to allow them to decide their children's courses.

Although schools often lack an official common purpose, both the curriculum in use and the hidden curriculum show a great deal of commonality in North America. The implicit goals of schools are remarkably similar: to enable students to become productive members of an individualistic, consumeristic, and relativistic society. Frequently Christian schools promote "the Christian good life" more than they encourage the growth of discipleship. In these schools the frequent contradiction between our culture's goal of acquisition and a Christian life of service is not clearly explored.

Schools have developed well-organized ways to teach individual students. By grouping students according to age, ability, and class, and by dividing knowledge into separate subjects, schools process students systematically. To meet special interests and social needs, schools have established breaks from study to provide time for personal interaction, setting up a variety of extracurricular activities and sports programs.

Schools, however, foster isolation. Students most often study alone even if learning the same subject at the same time in the same classroom. They hear one another asking the teacher questions. During class discussions they may address each other. But they typically work about on assignments, especially when doing their "best" work (Goodlad 1984,105-106). By making it a private quest, the curriculum camouflages the true nature of knowledge. Students experience learning in a distorted way when they are required to accumulate content just by themselves with little discussion with classmates.
Knowledge becomes something gained by individual effort and achievement and used for personal self advancement (Bricker 1989,49).

The present crisis in schools and in the lives of their participants is among other things, a consequence of structuring learning primarily as a private, individual matter. Schools also require teachers to work alone. They must be effective individually in maintaining control of their classes. They are expected to come fully equipped with personal expertise in teaching subject matter and managing their classrooms. Such an individualistic conception of the roles of students and teachers frames most learning in our schools.

Christian schools need to examine how such a condition has affected us. We are called to a life of discipleship, personally and communally. Christian schools must become living examples of Christ-confessing communities. They must operate in the ways that enable students and teachers to unfold the gifts that they have been given. They most develop ways of sharing each other’s joys and burdens, looking out for the interests of others. They must give expression to seeking and celebrating shalom. They must be communities for learning rather that individual cells that happen to be together for the sake of efficiency, “a collection of classrooms surrounded by a common parking lot.”

Varying Conceptions of Communities of Learning

Mountain City Christian School is proud of the way in which students and teachers can develop themselves in their own way. Yet in practice the school emphasizes its common rules, standard course requirements, and well-established patterns of knowledge transmission. Students and teachers clearly understand the shared expectations for individual success. On the other hand, Central Station Christian School emphasizes that each student and teacher is called to be part of a community for learning. Both teachers and students are engaged in learning together, often collaboratively. Knowledge and insight grows as they interact with one another and with the curriculum.

In the sense that in both schools groups of people learn, they can be said to be communities for learning, albeit very different ones. We can classify schools, including Christian ones, as contractual, hierarchical, or covenant communities (Kirkpatrick 1986).

In contractual schools, students and teachers are considered to be individuals who come together voluntarily to achieve their own ends. The community is seen as a social bond between independent individuals who subject themselves to each other while still primarily looking out for their own private interests. Students are viewed as rational, potentially autonomous individuals who can best develop their identity by building personal knowledge and values. These schools emphasize the self-actualization of students, constructing their own knowledge and determining their own values. The primary focus of classroom learning is on individual academic achievement. Even though constant negotiation has to occur to find a basis for consensus in classroom atmosphere, there is little sense of caring, compassion, or generosity. Rather, there is an acceptance that teachers and students are free to do what they want and. to follow their own needs and interests.

In the hierarchical model of community, on the other hand, the social dimension takes precedence over the individual. Students are primarily social beings whose lives find their fulfillment in the community and therefore become subservient to it (Kirkpatrick 1986,86). They are free when they adhere to the values and rules that the school maintains, giving up freedom for the good of the whole, for organic solidarity. There is a clear hierarchical delineation of function and role for administrators, teachers, and students. Teachers instruct; students obtain knowledge through taking courses and then meeting the requirements for graduation. Active student involvement centers on extracurricular activities and not on the nature and scope of classroom learning or the day-to-day functions of the school.

Neither of these models recognizes that community is at the heart of a person's relationship with God and with other people. A person is born to be cared for, born into a love relationship with other persons. With proper nurturing by parents, children will learn to form their own intentions and to acquire the skill to execute them and develop the knowledge and foresight to act responsibly as members of a community (Kirkpatrick 1986,174). The basic unit of personal existence is not the individual but two persons in personal relation. We are not persons by individual right, but in virtue of our relation to one another. In this relationship, we image God. Only in community does the person appear in the first place, and only in community can the person continue to become (Palmer 1983,57).

This type of community can be called a covenant community. Its members pledge to love and serve each other without conditions. They love others because Jesus first loved them. God affirms persons and thereby frees them to affirm the worth of others. Thus a covenant community is the work of both God and humans. United as one people in Christ, human beings
covenant to support each other in loving interaction, functioning as unique but interdependent members of the body of Christ. Members exercise their gifts in humility, gentleness, and patience, striving for the unity that the Spirit provides.

Schools as Covenant Communities

August 29

Rob Boonstra glanced at his watch as he left the house. 7:15. Just enough time to walk to Central Station and be on time for the interview with a new family. Walking at a steady pace Rob recalled the first years of the new school. The frequent discussions and debates about developing the school as a community of learning had enabled parents, teachers, and students to reexamine their ideas about teaching and learning. Today's interview provided them with another opportunity to share and extend those ideas.

Rob reached the school after a brisk ten minute walk. What a welcoming feeling one experienced upon entering the bright, well-lit foyer! Green plants, student and staff art on the walls, several well-placed chairs, and the sculptured school logo all combined to make a person feel welcome.

"Hello, Rob," Karla said, "all set for a stimulating interview? The Manleys have some definite ideas about what a school should be like. Apparently in their previous Christian school they felt that they were never quite accepted."

When Sonya and Fred Manley arrived Karla greeted them at the door and introduced them to Rob Boonstra, the board representative, and Sam Freeland, the staff representative. Karla began the meeting with a brief overview of the school's goals, emphasizing that Central Station seeks to establish an atmosphere of trust through developing mutually supportive and caring relationships.

"Will our daughter and son be able to feel at home here?" Sonya asked. "In their last school they were given their desks and lockers and soon became just one of twenty-eight individuals in their classes. Little effort was made to help them get to know their classmates and they didn't meet the teacher until the first day of school. They are worried that it won't be any different here."

Sam Freeland welcomed the opportunity to describe the process the staff at Central Station used to build community among the students. "At the beginning of each school year each of us works with a group of students to establish an atmosphere of trust and respect for one another. We emphasize that all students share a common purpose, and they work together in their learning. By sharing their personal stories and encouraging each other individually and as a group, your children should develop a sense of security, a feeling of being 'at home.' In their respective groups, they will be paired with another student to assist them through the first weeks of feeling like a 'stranger.'"

"That sounds like a good process for them," Fred responded. "But how will we be able to become a part of the school community? Although we were in the previous school for four years, we always felt like outsiders. We weren't members of the same denomination and little was done to help us feel welcome; nor were we invited to make worthwhile contributions to the school other than assisting in fundraising activities. We feel that each of us has abilities and time to contribute to the school."

A parent himself, Rob sympathized. "We use a similar process for welcoming new parents and enabling them to feel at home. After this interview we will introduce you to the house parents who lead a group of parents throughout the school year. They meet early in the year to share issues they feel are important to discuss during the year. As a group they affirm their acceptance of the goals of the school and establish their own common purpose by choosing the actions that they can take as they discuss each issue. Our house groups fill a dual purpose. They make it possible for parents in the school community to share in the school's responsibility for student learning and, secondly, through involving parents with one another in problem solving they enrich individual parents and decrease their feelings of isolation. We hope that you would soon feel at home among the parents that send their children to our school."

"What are some of the avenues that are open for direct involvement in the school?" Sonya asked.

"At Central Station, we are parents' partners in encouraging student learning. The roles of parents and teachers are complementary. Throughout the year there are many opportunities for parents to become involved. We have an outline of the themes and units that are addressed with each group of students. Some parents will be able to volunteer their assistance in the development and teaching of units. Students will choose some of the topics and issues they will study, both individually and in groups, They will work with their
teachers and the parents who are resource persons for that unit. When students complete their work during the year we have several special occasions in the afternoons and evenings at which students present what they have learned. The adults that have been a part of that unit, as well as the students' parents, will be invited to share in the celebration."

The concept of the school as a community of learners, a place where all participants engage in learning and teaching, provides a way of thinking about schools that is different from the current framework (Barth 1990, 42). In a community of learners, adults and children learn simultaneously: posing and solving problems important to them, thinking analytically and critically, and so on. Students and teachers see each other learning; they see the principal learning. All members are visibly engaged with one another for the purpose of learning. They support and encourage each other in their tasks because all want to be responsive disciples of Jesus Christ. Their personal commitment to him enables them to develop a community for learning.

Schools that are covenant communities do not consist of individuals who work together because then they will each achieve more individual learning. Neither do they swallow up individuals into a corporate whole, losing all sense and experience of the riches of individuality. Instead, they foster an environment where students and teachers take delight in being with each other and build relationships based on a genuine desire to be with and for others. They cannot do so, of course, solely through their own efforts. Jean Vanier (1979,73) points out that we must become conscious of "the limitations and weaknesses of human energy, and the forces of egoism, fear, aggression and self-assertion which govern human life, and make up all the barriers which exist between people. We can only emerge from behind these barriers if the Spirit of God touches us, opens the barriers and heals and saves us."

Schools therefore should not seek to create independent learners but to increase the ways in which students develop their abilities and ways of interacting with and for one another. Schools should develop mutual interdependence among parents, teachers, and students. Each member should respond to others on the basis of common commitment, values, and purpose.

Leadership in a covenant community school is based on differentiation of tasks and responsibilities and not on hierarchical position. All members of the educational community have intrinsic worth as image bearers of God. Students, teachers, parents, principals, and board members are called to different meaningful offices. Each office calls for a particular kind of service, with authority and responsibility that is appropriate to it (Fowler 1990,114). Parents are called to nurture their children so that they are able to live freely and responsibly in service to God. Students are responsible for their learning and to discover the depth and the breadth of God's creation. Teachers provide opportunities for student learning in ways that empower students to exercise their tasks. Principals give direction and encouragement for teachers and students to fulfill their respective callings. Board members exercise communal oversight helping all members of the school community take on their responsibilities effectively (Fowler 1990,118). All members of the school community are involved in building mutually helpful relationships as well as value orientations, perceptions, abilities, and knowledge that enable the members to function more fully in attaining both personal and communal goals (Benne 1990,87).

Working in a covenant community is not without its tensions. Tensions arise from conflicts within each person and between different persons. Such tensions reveal flaws that require reevaluation, greater humility, and stronger support. As teachers and students work together to resolve the tensions that arise they need to develop a great deal of sensitivity, understanding, and patience. Growth begins when persons begin to accept their own weakness. Love makes us weak and vulnerable because it breaks down barriers that we have built up around ourselves. It lets others reach us and makes us sensitive enough to reach them (Vanier 1979,18). A Christian school community will be one that accepts human weakness and honors the humility that Christ's life exemplifies.

Three Essential Ingredients of a Covenant Learning Community

Mountain City Christian School
Staff Meeting, January 15

The Staff Relations Committee was ready to present its report. At the end of June, Dennis, Linda, Greg, and Margie had volunteered to do some reading during the fall and to meet at the end of November and once more in December, in order to prepare a report that would initiate staff discussion in January. The committee's mandate had been developed during the staff's end-of-year reflections. Many staff members felt
that personal relationships were fairly good, almost as good as could be expected. However, many also felt that professional relationships could be improved.

Ken Heard called the meeting to order, briefly reviewed the committee's task, and asked the committee to begin its report.

Linda made a few opening remarks. "We've had a number of meetings and discussions. We've talked with many of you individually, and read a number of articles and several books about staff relations. We placed a copy of our report in your mailbox last Friday. Today we want to highlight its major points and then begin a discussion about how we might improve our professional relationships with one another."

"Our report has four parts. Dennis will describe our current situation, Margie will comment on the hindrances to good staff relations, Greg will describe ways in which our staff could develop more collegial relationships, and I will conclude our report by introducing for discussion the actions we could take. Over to you, Dennis."

"Many of us have enjoyed numerous years together. We have shared moments of joy and celebration in graduations, school plays, and sport championships. We have shared moments of deep grief in the loss of loved ones among students and staff. Although we attend churches of different denominations we have been able to develop a unity of faith through prayer and common devotions in our staff room and in our classrooms.

"Yet when we talked as a committee and with you as colleagues, some problems came to the surface. It seems that there are disagreements on fundamental issues of schooling. As a further working out of our vision we need to come to grips with those disagreements, to own up to them, to find ways of talking about them, and to develop ways of accepting each other in a deeper sense than we do now."

Next it was Margie's turn. "We hinder the development of better relations with one another when we want our own ideas to be the one and only right way, the solution. We hinder the development of better relations because we operate on the basis of our established notions about fellow staff members. Unconsciously and consciously we relate with one another on the basis of opinions we formed the first day we came to this school. These preconceptions color the ways we perceive each other and block the development of better professional relationships.

"A crucial problem among us is our need to convert our colleagues to our own way of thinking. Many of us expressed feelings that suggested that if only so-and-so would be convinced that our idea or way of thinking was correct then everything would be all right. When we focus on converting others to our own view we block ourselves from seeing and understanding our colleagues as they really are.

"Finally, many of us reveal a tremendous need for control. We want someone to be in charge, to be responsible for what happens in our school and among the staff. In wanting someone else to be in control we hesitate to accept our own responsibility for the health of staff relationships."

Greg continued: "The committee wants to suggest that one way in which we avoid making staff relations stronger is when we flee from issues and problems when they appear. Remember last year when the issue of report card format arose? Many of us were quick to argue that we continue to use the present format because we were worried that discussing it would lead to a lengthy debate about evaluation.

"We know that differences exist among us but we pretend that they don't by continuing to use the present format. We hurt staff relations when we continue to battle over issues such as achievement tests, extracurricular duties, student attendance, and others. Instead of listening to each other and developing genuine understanding we press our views harder, hoping that we will convince others that we are right and they are wrong. At other times we develop alliances with colleagues who agree with us and form a subgroup that, sometimes quietly, sometimes overtly, hinders the development of community.

"In times of crisis, like the Smithson tragedy two years ago, we have experienced a rich sense of unity. However, that sense of community gradually disappeared as our lives returned to normal. Sometimes we experience moments of oneness as we work together on the school play, graduation ceremony, or school team.

"Our challenge is this: How can we expand those experiences of unity so that all of our teaching and learning is strengthened? Our committee would like to propose that we begin this process by developing a stronger sense of community among ourselves."
"Thank you, Greg," Linda said, "After this brief overview of our report, we want to pause before we begin our discussion so that each of us has a moment to reflect on our own experiences...."

The issues facing the staff of Mountain City exist in many Christian schools today. Christian schools are called to be communities for learning, but frequently they are not the communities they could be. Some Christian schools have difficulties with personality differences among staff members. Some have problems with contrasting views of the relationship between Christianity and culture. Some have significant differences between older and younger teachers. Other schools may face a breakdown of communication between board and staff, or between the principal and the student body. In still others the structures discourage the meaningful participation of all members of the school community. When situations of brokenness exist, healing must occur by building trust so that mutually supportive and caring relationships can develop, and cooperative and creative action is fostered (Tucker 1987,91).

Three essential ingredients for a school to be a covenant community are the need for a common vision, an atmosphere of love and trust, and an ethos of leadership for service.

First, a school covenant community needs to develop and experience its vision of shared values regarding teaching and learning. This covenant bond becomes the compass that charts the direction and inspires commitment and enthusiasm, with all participants being free to carry out responsively their aspect of the mission (Sergiovanni 1991,179). The common vision is the catalyst that nurtures the quality of interpersonal relationships and the conditions that promote and sustain meaningful learning (Barth 1990,45). School leaders should frequently and openly talk about the shared mission and commitment and encourage continued dialogue about what the school stands for and where it should be headed.

A Christian school community must regularly provide ways in which its members can reaffirm their shared commitments. Through story, ceremony, and celebrations of learning, its members can renew their commitments and strengthen their experience of working toward common goals. Each school has its own story of the people who launched it and their vision. The experiences of ex-students, teachers, and parents provide a rich source of memories. Accomplishments and failures alike stimulate thoughtful reflection about ongoing issues in schooling. The shared vision of today's school can be seen as part of the longer history of the Christians in a particular community. Indeed, the vision should be understood as part of the whole history of the people of God. Joyful celebrations such as graduations, assemblies, anniversaries, and reunions can all reinforce shared purpose, recognize diverse individual and group accomplishments and contributions as members have worked and learned together.

A second necessary component of a covenant community is mutual love and compassion. Members must accept each other as they are and encourage each other to fulfill their calling. In this way they are bound together in trust and service, using their gifts for the benefit of others. Such loving interaction also demands honest communication and conflict resolution. Members engage each other in dialogue in ways that express care and support and heartfelt respect for differences of views. Through careful listening, genuine consultation, and honest expression of views, members develop appreciation for each other's gifts and accept each other's limitations. Members offer support to one another through recognizing differences in ways that reconcile and strengthen common goals. The atmosphere of mutual concern and trust developed by communicating openly, sensitively, and with integrity is a necessary component in the continuous nourishment of the Christian identity of the school (Andersen 1989,27).

Third, a covenant community is a community of servant leaders. Board and committee members, parents, principals, teachers, and students share opportunities and responsibilities for making decisions that affect learning. Decisions are made in a way that transcends individual differences and roles. Participants feel free to express themselves by offering their individual gifts at various moments in the decision making process. All members of the body share opportunities and responsibilities for making decisions that affect the learning environment. Rather than a hierarchy of position there is differentiation of tasks. Whatever their capabilities or gifts or position, all members are respected as valued members of the community.

Persons in specific leadership positions lead in a spirit of love and nurture, enabling all members of the body to exercise their responsibilities. Leaders are spiritual models for other members, manifesting love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. A school community finds its unity in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. Its members recognize that the unity that they experience is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit enables each person to submit to the Lord and to each other. This unity does not mean uniformity. Each member has been given different gifts, each to be used in special, interdependent ways.
Love and respect undergirding the implementation of a common vision by persons who recognize that their special authority is given for serving the other members: here is the basis of the school as a covenant community. When the members of a community have established their common ground they can focus their attention on becoming that community, by caring, sharing, and working together. Through participation in setting group standards, discovering gifts and skills and clarifying roles, all members will feel that they have a voice and belong, and will experience the presence of other members. Members of the group are consulted and share in decisions that affect their work. Through shared leadership and participation members are involved in problem solving and in developing plans and activities for learning that are grounded in a common vision and yet allow the diversity of gifts to blossom.

Teacher-Teacher Relationships in the Christian School

The January 15 discussion about staff relations at Mountain City Christian School resulted in a proposal to hold a staff retreat. Margie had suggested that Pastor Mills of Hillside Community Church be invited to lead them in a community building workshop. Dennis contacted Stephanie Porter, the public school district's professional development consultant, to lead them in a workshop exploring ways of developing collegiality. The all-staff retreat was planned for February 21 and 22 at Elm Valley Retreat Center, a two-hour drive away. The retreat would provide time for personal and communal reflection, and build stronger community and closer collegiality.

At 6 a.m. on February 21, Pearl anxiously waited for a ride to the retreat. The staff had decided to car pool and she would be riding with Jim, Lynn, and Cal. Pearl wasn't so sure that this retreat was a good idea: what could be gained from sitting around talking for two days? She had lots of marking to complete, and a two-hour drive and sleeping in a strange bed could only mean trouble for her back. But, at least she was riding with people with whom she got along. As Jim's car pulled up she picked up her suitcase and headed out the door.

"Good morning, Pearl, " Jim cheerfully said as he opened the trunk. "Good morning, Jim, " Pearl replied, hesitantly. She had decided that her anxiety should not spoil the ride for the others, however, and as she entered the car she wished Lynn and Cal a more cheery "Good morning."

"So, what do you think, Pearl?" Cal said. "Will we be able to come to some agreement as we discuss community and collegiality?"

Pearl wished he hadn't jumped in with that question so soon. As she thought about how she should respond, Lynn joined in. "Well, I think we are in for two interesting days. Look at who's all going to be there. Can you imagine Greg, Willis, Glenn, Jacqui, and Valerie talking together about the same topic, let alone agreeing about something? At staff meetings they always argue vehemently about whatever comes up."

Pearl decided to be positive. "I believe it will be good to be away from school and home for two days. I can't remember when I last did that, February has always been a gloomy month for me. Just being away will make the whole retreat worthwhile. As for discussing community and collegiality, I hope that we can get beyond the griping about the administration and the school board or the endless talk about basketball or hockey games that so often dominate our staff room conversations, I hope each of us would think more carefully about our own students. What about you, Jim? What do you think this retreat will be like?"

"I'm really looking forward to listening to Pastor Mills. He's an inspirational pastor, very capable at leading group discussions. My neighbors really appreciate what he has done to enable their church to live as a community. And while Stephanie Porter is new in this area apparently she has led many successful professional development seminars on the East Coast."

"Hey, " Cal interjected, "there's the Elm Valley turnoff! That seemed like a short trip."

Teachers in Christian schools have often been able to develop and maintain good working relationships. Their common commitments and respect for each other's abilities have enabled them to become a team whose focus is on providing a caring and warm learning environment. As a staff they meet regularly for devotions and prayer, encourage a cordial and friendly atmosphere in their interpersonal relations, and occasionally take time for mutual reflection and discussion of various teaching methods.
Yet Christian schools also face a number of problems in teacher-teacher relationships. In the present school structure, teachers are valued for being able to teach their own students in their own classroom. They are expected to know their subject areas well and, from their first day of teaching, to be competent in classroom instruction. They are expected to know what to do and to deny or hide failures since showing them would admit incompetence. Risking new approaches and failing is viewed more negatively than not trying at all.

If teachers do not provide each other with mutual support through pedagogical interaction, or if they do not have a safe place to air their uncertainties about particular teaching experiences, they will not receive the kind of feedback they need both to feel and to become good teachers (Lieberman and Miller 1984,13-14). Yet in some schools teachers even agree to avoid sharing their experiences about teaching, classes, and students. By biding their perceptions about teaching, teachers do not recognize their achievements, but neither do they lose face. Staff room discussions avoid pedagogical interaction and focus on news, sports, and personal concerns. In even more negative settings, staff rooms deteriorate into places where the dominant mode of staff conversation involves griping about the administration, particular students, or the school board (Lieberman and Miller 1984,48). Observing each other’s classes would be the equivalent of risky evaluation and is therefore not done. Teaching in such a school is a lonely experience. There is an urgent need for examination of present practices and for a process of renewal.

The experience of personal community that is God’s gift to us in Christ needs to be expanded into an experience of professional community. Our spiritual unity is a solid foundation, but we need to build on it responsibly. Teachers need opportunities to interact with one another about teaching and learning. If the school is going to become a professional community the quality of interactions between teachers and between teachers and principals needs to be improved. This requires establishing a climate of collegiality, a high level of collaboration characterized by mutual respect, shared work values, cooperation, and specific conversation about teaching and learning (Barth 1990).

By breaking out of the isolation of the classroom, teachers find that working together on matters of curriculum and on learning activities makes them better prepared for leading students in learning. Through collegial work they find ways of recognizing their own strengths and the capabilities of others, as well as deepening their understanding of the school's mission. Through mutual effort teachers find support in their calling to be responsive disciples: unwrapping their different gifts, sharing each others joys and burdens (including resolving conflicts), and fostering a shalom-filled atmosphere in their school.

The mutual respect and support that foster collegiality require that teachers engage in frequent conversation about learning and teaching. Teachers observe each other’s classes and provide each other with specific, edifying critiques. They also regularly plan and design, reflect and evaluate, and prepare teaching materials together (Little 1982; 1990). In a helpful, trusting, and supportive atmosphere, teachers and principals in Christian schools can thus extend personal community into professional community, with collegiality breaking isolation and leading to teachers working together and becoming truly interdependent.

Developing such community takes time and effort, however. Holding a retreat provides a setting away from the day-to-day exigencies of home and school and enables the group to grow together in ways that often do not occur during the routines of school. Peer-associates, mentors, and coordinators can become catalysts in fostering a professional community. Schools can provide substitutes to give teachers some time to visit each other's classes, and professional days for joint planning.

Even then, as Scott Peck (1987) points out, the growth of community usually occurs in stages. At first, a group of teachers may be extremely pleasant with one another and avoid disagreement. Often unconsciously, teachers (especially Christian ones!) who want to care for each other do so by holding back some of the truth about themselves and their feelings in order to avoid conflict. The school is a “pretend community” that functions smoothly, but individuality, intimacy, and integrity suffer.

This is often followed by a stage where individual differences come into the open but the teaching staff tries to obliterate them. The dominant group of teachers works hard to convert other members to its view in well-intentioned but misguided ways, creating strife and bad feelings. The principal or another staff leader needs to point the way out when staff sense that they are going nowhere.

In the third stage teachers begin to see each other as unique and worthwhile, each with contributions to bring to the common mission. Up to this point people have not been communicating openly; instead, they have set up barriers. Therefore, teachers need to empty themselves, to give up things that stand in the way so that they can truly hear and experience each other. They must deny themselves and submit to the healing that Jesus provides. Becoming a community of
teachers involves a recognition that together they have been called by God to teach together, to love each other, and to pray and work together in response to the needs of students.

Finally, the staff becomes a full community when members begin to talk about themselves, deeply and personally, with truthfulness and integrity becoming dominant. When members begin to express laughter and joy as well as sadness and grief about what is happening to them, then an extraordinary amount of healing begins to occur. Becoming a teaching community involves accepting being carried and loved by one another in a covenant relationship of interdependence (Vanier 1979, 27).

Christian schools reveal evidence of all four of these stages at different points and about different issues. A school may have developed a strong sense of spiritual community as staff devotions become a time of personal testimony of faith and sharing of burdens. Devotions may provide mutually edifying experiences and help develop a strong sense of unity centered around the gospel. Yet, simultaneously, the same staff may not have achieved the same sense of unity regarding their task for student learning. For example, discussions about the direction a school should take regarding student service projects or implementing learning activities that take students and teachers away from school property often reveal clear differences about the goals for learning. If a staff has not developed a shared vision and members have not made a commitment to work on that common vision, they will have a difficult time reaching agreement on issues that arise in day-to-day schooling.

Student-Teacher Relationships

The bell rang to indicate the end of English class and the start of the morning break. As the other students left, Janine lingered, hoping to talk with Mr. Holbrook about the journal assignment that would soon be due. Having completed back-to-back concluding lectures on Lord of the Flies, Cal Holbrook was anxious to get to the staff room for some coffee. Heading toward the door he saw that Janine was waiting for him.

"Mr. Holbrook, do you have a few minutes?" Janine had wanted to talk with him about the journal assignment for two weeks but hadn't been able to get up the nerve.

"Sure, Janine, what's on your mind?" he replied, "Are you having some trouble in one of your classes?" Students frequently confided in Cal about personal and school matters.

"Well, I'm not sure how to put this. But I'm having a lot of trouble completing the journal assignment. And now that it is due next week I don't know what to do."

"That really surprises me," Cal said. "You write so well. Your essays and reports are among the best in the class. Why would a response journal give you trouble?"

"I know that writing essays and reports are not a problem for me. But journals are different. I am having trouble writing about myself, about my own thoughts. Each time I get about half-way down a page I rip it up and throw it away. What am I going to do? I'll never be able to complete this assignment."

What should Mr. Holbrook do? How should teachers and students relate with one another?

Teachers and students are called to work together for the purpose of learning. The relationship between student and teacher is a pedagogical relationship, not a parental or customer one. A pedagogical relationship involves teachers, students, and subject matter in an umbrella of learning experiences. The teacher intends students to learn and grow; and students must be willing to learn and must be able to do so in a particular way suited for them (Van Manen 1991, 76-77).

Pedagogical relationships between teachers and students thrive in caring classroom structured as a Christian learning community. Such classroom becomes a place where "children learn to accept and use their abilities in relation to themselves and others and to experience the joys and difficulties of working unitedly towards common goals" (Van Brummelen 1988, 65). Teachers help their classes to become communities of faith, hope, and love that encourage diverse gifts and abilities to be used interdependently. Working at being responsive disciples, students and teachers are involved in developing group unity, learning collaboratively, sharing joys and burdens, appreciating diversity of gifts, and celebrating shalom.

In a community of learning each member has special tasks. Each contributes to the learning success of other members. Expressions of individuality are encouraged in ways that affirm gifts and stimulate the learning of other members in the class. All activities, classroom devotions, communal prayer, sharing time, working together on learning tasks, and interacting about discoveries and products are developed in ways that contribute to building the classroom into a community of learning.

Many elementary and some middle schools have successfully developed such communities. However, studies of high schools paint a bleak picture. One reason may be that adult/youth relationships in school often involve serious
misperception: "Whenever [students] consulted any of the adults that were supposed to help them the adult's assumption was that something must be very wrong. All they wanted was to talk to a caring adult, but the price of a conversation was that they would be considered a problem case" (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen 1985, 47). It is not easy to build community on the basis of differences rather than similarities. Schools too often settle for the absence of conflict as the definition of community. Frequently, this means "to live and let live." A community of shalom, however, is one in which the members actively work together and support one another in dynamic interaction.

Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985,67) go on to argue that in many high school classrooms teachers and students have subtle ways of accommodating either differences or similarities: they arrange deals or treaties that promote mutual goals or that keep the peace. The focus for teachers and students then becomes the avoidance of learning. In its most negative sense teaching becomes limited to covering the content and maintaining control for the duration of the class. For students, learning becomes reduced to meeting the minimum requirements of a course and putting in the appropriate amount of time. Teachers and students, caught in their own webs, develop treaties by which students regard subjects as materials to be endured and teachers fail to require students to engage seriously with the subject material (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen 1985,105-6).

Research and student experiences clearly reveal the brokenness that pervades learning at the high school level. Yet renewal is possible if teachers and students take time to develop classroom communities of learning. Classrooms should be places where teachers and students are present for each other, hearing and responding to one another, establishing an atmosphere of trust, support, cooperation, and mutual concern about learning.

As presently organized, many teachers continue to have a domineering role in classrooms in Christian schools. Many teachers maintain complete power over the entire learning process of students. Teachers make so many of the decisions about learning activities, assignments, and evaluation that there is little room for students to make decisions in matters that directly affect their learning. Students' learning, in fact, is reduced to following instructions and completing assignments as designed, leaving little room for them to be involved in creating and directing their own learning. Such teaching takes away from students the authority they should have over their own learning.

Students must be able to make decisions and judgments that rightfully belong to their office and calling as students. Fowler (1990,116) argues that teachers must empower students to be able to experience for themselves the ordering authority of God's rule in creation. In order to be able to do this, students must be free to explore the boundaries that God has set in the creation by investigation and experiment. Teachers empower students by providing them with the means for a responsible exercise of the authority of their calling as students. Courses and units should provide opportunities for students to explore topics and problems that arise in day-to-day teaching and learning. Opening up the typically closed content requirements will enable students to deepen personal insights and challenge them to develop their own learning beyond completing minimal requirements.

Noddings (1984,179) states that teachers must establish a caring relationship with students through modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. In modeling teachers must show themselves as caring, not by "talking" caring but by living it, being there personally for the student. This does not require a deep and lasting personal relationship with each student. Rather, it means that a teacher must be totally and nonselectively present in each interaction with a student.

Teachers establish a caring relationship through dialogue. In order to engage in true dialogue with our students, we will also have to engage in true dialogue with their parents. Noddings (1984, 184) argues that teachers need to take up their common humanity and give up a narrow professionalism that establishes distance between teacher and parent. Through talking, listening, and sharing we are able to establish caring relationships that enhance understanding and build common goals. Parent-teacher-student interviews, for example, need to be set up in ways that encourage people to share their ideas and feelings about learning; this will require teachers especially to be vulnerable, refusing to hide behind their professional roles. In open dialogue, each person should gain a deeper understanding of each other and work toward the common goal of learning.

A third way to establish a caring relationship is through practice, providing opportunities for students and teachers to care for each other. Students might be expected to participate in regular service activities with an emphasis on developing skills that contribute to competence in caring. Such opportunities would involve adults in all kinds of occupations with students, with each adult functioning as teacher in his or her own area, taking special responsibility for nurturing a sense of caring (Noddings 1984,188).

In classrooms, students will be encouraged to learn from each other as well as from teachers and books. Teachers will provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate that they have learned the material. Class presentations, group research and discussion, individual writing, designing and completing projects, and demonstrations are rich alternatives to
the standard textbook and worksheet practices that prevail in many classrooms. If students have difficulty the first time around, we need to try again with renewed support, perhaps in more imaginative ways. If learning really is our goal, there has to be a mutual effort by teacher and student.

Finally, a caring relationship needs to include affirmation. Teachers have to reveal to students that they can become more than they are. As they evaluate student progress in learning, teachers can encourage and show students how they have grown. To achieve this, teachers will need to reexamine many traditional grading practices. To affirm students, teachers must see and receive them: they must see clearly what they have actually done and receive the feelings with which it was done.

A teacher should lead in establishing a caring environment in which each student feels invited personally, is encouraged to be actively involved, is recognized for making valuable contributions, and experiences the benefits of learning individually and collaboratively.

**Principal-Teacher Relationships**

The Christian school must be a community of learning where students, teachers, and principals have different and complementary responsibilities for making decisions regarding learning. Leadership by the principal is crucial for developing such a community. Principals in Christian schools are called to lead in ways that empower teachers and students to fulfill their respective offices. The primary task of the principal is to keep the vision of the school at the forefront of the daily work of all members of the school community. The vision helps members in the school community "to regularly define and clarify what they are seeking to accomplish; it helps them envision how each can contribute to the purpose of the whole school; it is a vision which encourages and assists in personal and communal growth and renewal" (Mulder 1990, 99-100).

The principal should encourage teachers to discover, develop, and use their gifts in teaching and learning. As head learner a principal is engaged in "experiencing, displaying, modeling, and celebrating what it is hoped and expected that teachers and students will do" (Barth 1990,46). Principals carry out specific practices if the school is to become a community of leaders. They articulate the school’s goals in staff meetings, conversations, newsletters, and community meetings. They involve teachers in making decisions and entrust them with authority according to their responsibilities. Principals also set in place a way of sharing the responsibility for failure. The important issue is not who should be blamed for failure but to consider how we can learn from it. By being willing to say “I don’t know," a principal makes a powerful invitation to teachers to participate in leading and at the same time gives them room to risk saying “I don’t know” themselves. Finally, principals provide teachers with opportunities to share responsibility for success and enjoy recognition from the school community. Sharing school-wide success replenishes teachers personally and professionally as they experience being members of a community of leaders (Barth 1988).

A principal who lives out the vision of a Christian community for learning evokes authentic community that makes space for other people to act: "[W]hen a leader is willing to trust the abundance that people have and can generate together, willing to take the risk of inviting people to share from that abundance, then and only then may true community emerge" (Palmer 1990,138).

**School-Parent Relationships**

Lynn Reese is having coffee with board member Barbara Travers after a Mountain City board meeting. "Barbara," she asks, "what do you think we could do to make parents feel more welcome at school?"

Barbara thought back to the first year she had sent her children to Mountain City after teaching them at home through third grade. She had hoped to maintain her interest in their learning as they progressed, but somehow she had not felt free enough to tell her children’s teachers that she wanted to be involved.

"Well, Lynn, we do need to break down some of the barriers that presently exist. As parents many of us feel that relations between parents and teachers are set up too formally. Our teachers adopt too professional a manner in conversations about our children's learning. We each seem to say what we are supposed to say as parents and teachers but I don't feel we communicate as well as we should. I believe we should take a careful look at what we could do to improve parent-teacher relationships at school. How do the teachers feel about parents? "
"To be honest, Barbara, many teachers really appreciate the support they receive from parents. They are obviously thankful that most children have stable homes. But teachers are sometimes frustrated by lack of parent response to the papers and newsletters that children take home. They wish that once in a while parents would phone with a comment or question about what their child is learning. Maybe it's time for a parent-teacher evening that focuses on how we could improve communication between home and school. Let's see, as a parent, what do you need to know?"

"First of all, for me it's important to know what's happening in school and how my son and daughter are doing. When I taught our children at home I knew what they were learning, I know that now I won't be able to stay as involved in their learning. However, I believe that as a school community we need to build stronger connections between home and school as far as learning is concerned. Also, parents want and need to know how the school 'works' and how they can be involved, directly and indirectly, in their children's learning. Parents want to know what they can do at home to help their children with their learning. I feel that this becomes more important in the higher grades. Sometimes it seems that teachers hide behind their specialized knowledge in order to avoid addressing what could be done at home."

"It's interesting to hear you express parent interest in that manner. It would be good for teachers to hear parents talk about that. Teachers often argue that parents would rather not hear from school because it might lead to one more difficult issue to talk about with their teenage children. Let's keep in touch, we need to pursue this further."

Christian schools have a well-established record of parent involvement in school. Annual membership meetings for budget approval and election of board members provide an avenue for parents to participate in decision making and governance. Regular parent-teacher meetings offer parents opportunities for direct interaction with teachers about student achievement. School newsletters provide regular communication to parents regarding school events and noteworthy activities. Many Christian schools invite parents to volunteer for a variety of needs in libraries, for playground supervision, and for numerous fundraising activities.

Although these avenues of involvement are often available, many Christian schools increasingly suffer from the same serious problem faced by public education: there is often a strong separation between the professional world of principals and teachers and the personal world of parents.

In such a situation, principals and teachers see themselves as offering a service to the parent customers who pay for it. Parents see themselves as buying a service for a fee and hold the school responsible for their children's education. Sometimes they want to avoid the problems of teaching their children, especially as they become teenagers.

This separation between the professional world of the school and the familial world of the home results in discontinuities in children's learning. School learning becomes disengaged from the life experiences that for most children are centered in the home. Teachers grumble about apathetic parents and, are relieved in part by the presence of the committed ones who faithfully attend school meetings. Parents complain about principals and teachers who appear distant and seem to do little to help their children's personal problems.

The separation between school and home is exacerbated by the increasing costs of Christian education. As tuition increases parents ask more questions about the 'services' that are being provided. If a Christian school has not developed a strong sense of community and has little basis or motivation for building community, parents begin to look elsewhere. They look for schools that appear to have more caring principals and teachers and provide better facilities.

As costs increase, pressure builds for maintaining or sometimes reducing teacher salaries. Teachers begin to ask questions about the value of their work and their dedication to student learning. They wonder whether it continues to be worth their effort to teach in Christian schools for salaries that are lower than those in public schools.

Christian schools need to reexamine the relationships between parents and teachers. Family-school relationships are a dominant influence in the lives of parents and teachers and a major factor affecting learning (Lightfoot 1978). Christian schools, therefore, need to be designed and developed as Christian communities of learning. Teachers and parents are called to be joint members in a community that has a common mission and responsibility for children's learning, a community that builds meaningful relationships between teachers and parents for the purpose of fostering learning.

What can Christian schools do to improve parent-teacher relationships? Berger (1991) lists a number of aspects that have to be addressed. Parents must be seen as partners and supporters of the educational goals of the school. They need to be involved in making decisions about the direction and purpose of the school and in maintaining a liaison between home
and school to support their children's learning. Parents should be encouraged to participate as volunteers or paid employees at school. Finally, they must be involved as active partners in promoting children's learning at home and at school.

With such involvement, schools can help parents more effectively in nurturing their children. Schools can host orientation meetings in the spring at key points in a student's learning, before kindergarten, before middle school, before high school. These meetings should provide an opportunity for parents to visit the school and meet the staff, and a way for teachers and parents to share their vision for the school.

Throughout the year Christian schools must have avenues for parents and teachers to communicate with each other regarding student learning. Regular newsletters, timely parent-teacher interviews, meaningful report cards, and student-parent-teacher conferences must be used to reinforce the common vision that has been established and is constantly being renewed. Not all teachers must be involved with parents to the same degree, nor should all parents be expected to be involved in schools to the same degree. But each school community should see to it that feelings of trust continue to grow between teachers and parents and that there are ways for parents and teachers to work together in enhancing children's learning. There must be avenues for working out problems and difficulties as they occur and processes for confirming and renewing mutual goals.

Forging a covenant community for learning requires that teachers, principal, students, and parents continually renew their common vision for Christian schooling. They must maintain an atmosphere of mutual love and compassion. They must share opportunities and responsibilities for making decisions about learning.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Examine your own school in terms of the three essential ingredients of a covenant community: a common vision, an atmosphere of love and trust, and leadership for service. Are the conversations in halls and classrooms evidence that your school is a community for learning that lives and works toward responsive discipleship?

2. Initiate a discussion and develop guidelines that enable all of the relationships in your school to be grounded in the principles and practices of a community of learning. Address each of the following:
   a. teacher-teacher
   b. student-teacher
   c. teacher-principal
   d. parent-teacher

3. As a teacher, do you feel isolated in your classroom? Do you experience the support of colleagues? As a staff, become involved in discussions that work toward strengthening community among teachers. You may find it helpful to engage an outside resource person to lead a number of workshops that help to build a collegial community in your school.

4. Set up a forum for examining the role parents presently have in your school. Gather resource articles, phone other schools, involve parents and teachers in a review of what those roles might be in a community for learning.

**Recommended Reading**

   Contains valuable ideas and practices about parent involvement in school.
   Includes sections describing the meaning of community, the stages of community building, as well as the dynamics of community.
   A personal account of experiences in building and maintaining community.
   Particularly helpful for looking at schools in terms of adults as learners,
   A valuable resource for school leaders involved in examining the mission of schooling, teaching and supervision, and school leadership.