

A forum for Christian school educators

# *Christian Educators* Journal

Volume 46 No.1 October 2006



## **Art or Science?**

## Pedagogical Blunders and Redemptive Challenges



When I passed from grade one to grade two in the Netherlands, I moved from the custody of a gentle female teacher, Miss Andela, to a stern male teacher, Mr. Lunstra (not his real name). I did not suffer much under his regime; in fact, I did fairly well, though it was in his classroom through grades two and three that my stuttering became quite pronounced. I don't want to attribute this handicap to him. It may have had something to do with the fact that the Second World War had broken out a year earlier, and then, again, it may not have. But I do think that I could have benefited more in my overall development had this teacher been more knowledgeable in pedagogy.

Some 30 years later I met a Dutch educator in Canada who had known my second- and third-grade teacher while the former was temporarily filling a vacancy at our school. Our principal had been sent to a concentration camp for underground activities, where he died; hence, the vacancy. There were almost 160 applicants for one position in the lower grades, this educator told me. Apparently, during the war many young men chose teaching as a profession to escape being sent to Germany for forced labor. Out of the 160 applicants, our school board chose a man they considered the cream of the crop. They were impressed, among other things, by his classroom management skills. My Dutch friend's account interested me greatly. To find out years later what led to the hiring of a man most of us considered a tyrant made me realize the irony in that situation.

### Cracker-jack teacher

Mr. Lunstra was a forceful person, a disciplinarian who tolerated no frivolity in his classroom. I can still picture him: his hair was cropped shorter than was the style in those days, his eyes were penetrating, and he was impeccably dressed. Apart from his nicotine-stained fingers, he was Mr. Perfect. My classmates and I were going to be the beneficiaries of his "superior qualities" as a teacher. He taught us handwriting, among other disciplines, and I remember vividly that when my cursive letters were leaning backward, as they had a habit of doing, instead of forward, he would strike the knuckles of my offending hand with a thin ruler. It's amazing how a little pain affected the direction in which my letters were leaning from thereon. The schoolboard had been correct in their assumption that Mr. Lunstra could manage us well. However, I never learned to love the craft of handwriting. Even today my cursive writing is nearly illegible. I did learn to dislike my teacher, as did most of my classmates.

I don't think Mr. Lunstra was a wise teacher, either, as the following incident may illustrate. He once called me out of the classroom into the hallway where he grilled me on my

understanding of sexual intercourse. A parent had lodged a complaint against me. His son had overheard a discussion I had had with another classmate on the main street of our town as we went home for lunch. It was about that boy's supposed sexual explorations with his cousins. We were both all of eight years old and had barely moved from the notion that babies were delivered by the stork nesting behind the local kindergarten to the realization that a man and a woman had to kiss a lot to stimulate the birth of an offspring. The boy had asserted with authority that he had never fornicated with anyone. I responded with a fierce declaration: "You're lying. You told me yourself last week that you screwed your cousins" (I use the word "screw" to roughly equate the Dutch slang word we used).

It was this conversation that led my teacher to haul me out of class. After a few repeated questions "What does screwing mean?" and a not-so-veiled threat to report the incident to my parents, I finally let the cat out of the bag: "Screwing means tickling between the legs, Sir." My sophisticated answer brought a sudden halt to the interrogation, and I was told I could return to my seat. Phew! No doubt the teacher and the offended parent slept peacefully that night. I doubt if I did. The incident remains seared in my memory.

### Looking back

I often thought later on in life that the parent and the teacher should have left well enough alone. Surely, eight-year-old boys brought up in a Christian Reformed home in the 1940s, when pornography was not available to them, could not have been well informed on the subject of copulation. And what if they had been? If he thought it necessary to address the matter, why not turn it into a teachable moment? As it was, the encounter left me with nothing but shame and reinforced the idea that sex was dirty.

But I should not be too harsh on Mr. Lunstra (by the way, I use a pseudonym in case he is still alive and hears about this account, although his nicotine-stained fingers make me think he did not reach the age of 90). He was a man of his time. The knuckle incident reminds me of a ditty from the past we all know: "Readin' and writin' and 'rithmetic, taught to the tune of the hickory stick." Mr. Lunstra was in good company.

Pedagogy, which is the theme of this issue, was not well understood or emphasized in those days, and sexuality remained a forbidden subject. In fact, when I started teaching in the 1960s, a teacher was judged more by his character and knowledge than by his understanding of how students learn. If students liked you and respected you and you knew your stuff, you were considered

a good teacher. All of that is important, of course, but it does not address the process of real learning. Our focus was on lesson plans, on covering the material and on proper testing of the assigned work. Teachers lectured a lot. The object of the exercise was to have students pass your subject.

### Different times

Fortunately, times have changed, and schools and teachers are learning about various kinds of intelligence and better ways of presenting study material. Pedagogy — which I define as the art of leading students into growth in knowledge and skills as full persons — has to promote a growth in knowledge that is spiritual, emotional, social, intellectual and physical. Hitting a pupil with a ruler for bad handwriting does not address the full person. Grilling him about the use of sexual slang does not promote emotional growth.

But I wonder, sometimes, whether the greatest crime that schools and educators commit against young persons isn't this, that they allow them to waste precious years and postpone adulthood. Don't we put up with too much passivity and aimlessness? The saying goes that youth is wasted on the young. That seems to place the blame on young persons for not taking life seriously enough. But does our society not prolong wasteful adolescence in the young?

I know from personal experience that much of adolescence is a modern construct. I myself skipped most of it because of the circumstances I found myself in. My father passed away in the Netherlands when I was 11. When I was almost 16, we emigrated to Canada, and I had to work in a factory for five years before returning to school. Helping our widowed mother make it in Canada made my siblings and me realize that we had to accept

full responsibility for life. There was no such thing as postponement of adulthood.

Perhaps as a society we make the biggest mistake by treating education as a right rather than a privilege. Unless we inject more responsibility into the way our children experience schooling, we should not look down on the likes of Mr. Lunstra, who acted out of his own sense of right and wrong and that of his times with considerable dedication and a desire to be faithful. At least, they did not tolerate aimlessness and passivity.

### Introduction to this issue

In this issue you will find articles that do greater justice than I can do in this editorial to encouraging the kind of pedagogy that helps students grow holistically. David Smith provides a helpful image — dentistry or parenting — to get at this complex concept. He demonstrates through examples that growth cannot always be measured. My interview with the principal and staff at Toronto District Christian High School shows an innovative approach to students growing up in a post-modern society. This article points out that good pedagogy is not just a matter of how we teach, but also of how we organize the school and set up the curriculum. David Schelhaas recommends that the classroom become a workplace for reading and writing, and that students be encouraged to write in their own genre and become self-directed. Accountability and the importance of process is writ large in all of these articles.

All of this provides a significant challenge to administrators and teaching staff. It probably will not make your task easier. But it will make it much more rewarding.

BW

#### *Christian Educators Journal*

Published four times a year:  
October, December, February, April

#### Reprint Policy:

We allow free reprinting or photocopying of individual articles that have appeared in our journal, as long as the copied articles are used within the context of schooling and the source is acknowledged.

Managing Editor: Bert Witvoet  
Design Editor: Doug Roorda  
Manuscript Editor: Nelly Westerhoff  
Production Editor: Alice R. Oldejans  
Advertising Manager: Don Oppewal  
Business Manager: James Rauwerda

#### *Board of Trustees:*

*Calvin College*  
Jim Rooks  
Kimerly Gall

*Trinity Christian College*  
Dan Diephouse (secretary)  
William Boerman-Cornell

#### *Christian Educators Association*

Lois De Vries  
Judy Henson (chairperson)  
Al Schut  
Tony VanderArk  
Shirley Van Woerkom  
Dorothy Wassenaar  
*Covenant College*  
James L. Drexler

#### *Dordt College*

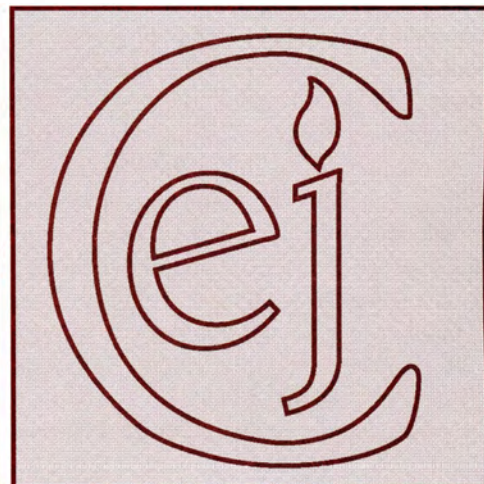
Lorna Van Gilst  
*Institute for Christian Studies*  
Doug Blomberg  
*The King's University College*  
Alyce Oosterhuis

#### *Ontario Christian Teachers Association*

May Drost and Kathy Hoogendam  
*Redeemer University College*  
Dirk Windhorst  
*Christian Teachers Association British Columbia*  
*Denver Christian School Association*  
*Northwest Christian Schools International*  
*SW Christian Teachers Association*  
*SW Minnesota Christian Teachers Association*

#### Regional Editors:

Alyce Oosterhuis - Western Canada  
Agnes Fisher - Eastern US  
Sean Schat - Eastern Canada  
Myrtle Smits - Southwestern US



# The Quest for Educational Excellence: *Not a Simple Matter*



by David I. Smith

*David Smith is Director of the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning ([www.pedagogy.net](http://www.pedagogy.net)) and associate professor of German at Calvin College. He serves as an editor of the Journal of Education and Christian Belief and the Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages. His recent publications include The Bible and the Task of Teaching (with John Shortt, 2000), and he is presently working on an edited volume of essays titled Spirituality, Justice and Pedagogy (forthcoming, November 2006).*

I sometimes ask education students whether teaching is more like dentistry or parenting. If it is more like dentistry, then beliefs and commitments are of tangential relevance. My own dentist happens to be Christian, but that is not why I chose him and is not why I continue to visit him. Naturally, I hope that he has a good basic sense of professional ethics — that he will not start inventing reasons to drill holes for profit, like some dental oil prospector, that he will bill me fairly, and so on. An approachable manner is also relevant — I want to feel reasonably comfortable during my visits. But despite the occasional exceptions, I expect these things of any competent dentist. It may not be the only thing, but the main thing is technical skill — will he read the x-rays correctly, does he have a steady hand, do the fillings stay in? An excellent dentist is for my practical purposes one who does dentistry skillfully, and there is a high level of agreement about what that involves.

With parenting the balance is reversed. There are some technical skills involved — I remember, for instance, the difference it made to my parenting of very young children when someone advised me in discipline situations never to speak without eye contact. Now, some years later, the

ability to manage complex schedules (and drive a car!) has become important. But these matters are hardly the heart of parenting. Who I am, what I believe, how I live, what things I give myself to, where my love is directed, what means I find for expressing these realities — these things are closer to the heart of the matter and will play a profound (if far from exclusive) role in shaping the kind of person my children will become. What one considers an excellent example of parenting depends to a large degree on how one thinks children should turn out, on how one understands wider social conditions, on what one thinks the burning issues of the next twenty years might be, and so on.

These two options do not in any way exhaust the options for thinking about teaching — we could explore further the implications of thinking of teaching as an art or craft, or as a form of performance, or as a form of coaching, and so on. But the two options will serve for the moment to lead us into some further issues.

Which is more like teaching? The answer is complex, particularly in Western educational culture. There have for a long time now been powerful pressures towards thinking of teaching as akin to dentistry — as a form of applied technical rationality leading towards carefully managed outcomes. We talk of teaching techniques, of methods, of standards and objectives and outcomes and content delivery and information transfer, and as we do so we participate in a mental world in which teaching is imagined as a technical activity, like dentistry. The shape of our educational imagination, in turn, helps to shape us as teachers.

One effect of this way of thinking about teaching is to make the notion of educational excellence appear both simple and irrefutable. Simple because technical outcomes are measurable — does the plane

fly, did the filling stay in, are the test scores higher, can the graduates demonstrate increased skill? Irrefutable because it is hard to be against excellence — who could want anything but excellent teaching for our children? Who would argue for mediocrity? And yet....

## Holistic environment

Instead of seeing teaching as method or technique, a technology practiced upon the learner, what if we adopted an image from thirteenth-century France? In his history of the concept of schooling, writer and educator D. Hamilton mentions in passing that the boys who studied at the nascent University of Paris were accommodated in hospices. These monastery-like hospices, in which boys both learned and lived under a communal rule that aimed to shape their behavior and values over time, were known, among other names, as “pedagogies,” and thus provided one staging post in the long and complex history of the word “pedagogy”.<sup>1</sup>

What, then, if we think about a pedagogy as a home, a holistic environment in which learners undergo both intellectual and spiritual formation according to a common rule? Being raised in a different home may (though not with technological efficiency or predictability) lead to developing a different character. Exploring this possibility complicates the idea of excellence considerably. Consider some examples.

## Teacher control

When I began student teaching, I was placed in the foreign language department of a secondary school on the edge of a city in central England. Partly because of the nature of the school, but mostly because of my own level of competence, I found it difficult in several classes to maintain order and keep students on task. Some class

periods felt like a battle from start to finish. At times I envied one colleague in particular, observing how he could walk into any class, including the ones I found most fractious, and have complete silence, immobility and perfect attention fixed upon him within moments. In his classes, students seemed to work hard, and certainly did as they were asked.

As time went on I had some opportunities to observe how he maintained this state of affairs, and came to the conclusion that one of the most significant weapons in his arsenal was crushing sarcasm and public humiliation. If a student stepped out of line he could in no time make that student feel about two inches tall in front of their friends, and this made students very wary of stepping out of line. I promised myself at that point that even if it made the struggle longer, I would not buy classroom order at that cost to my beliefs about how I should treat students and the attitudes that I was modeling for them.

What, in this situation, is excellent teaching, and how do we measure it? I am sure that the test scores from his classes were higher than mine. I am sure that there were many teaching skills at which he was better than I was. I also do not think the possible effects of his sarcasm would show up on any regular measure of whole school standards. I do not claim excellence for my own performance at the time. But I am still not sure that what I was observing was excellent teaching.

### Test messaging

More recently, my son came home from junior high with homework from his religion class. From all that I have heard and observed, he was indeed blessed with

an excellent religion teacher, and many of his homework tasks were thoughtful and challenging. On this occasion he had a list of basic theological concepts that had been discussed in class and needed to learn them for a test. They included key terms such as sanctification, justification, redemption,



kingdom of God, and so on — I was glad to see that my son was having to attend to this material.

We sat down together to study the list, and I started to push him to see how well he understood each concept — what's the difference between sanctification and justification? Can you give me an example? Can you think of any New Testament passages that are particularly relevant? And so on. After a few minutes of this he put the sheet down and protested: "but I don't need to understand them that well," (my colleagues have been astute in predicting the next comment:) "...they are only going to make me match the words to the definitions on the test."

I do not know whether this prediction was in fact accurate for this particular class;

the comment reflected a wider pattern of testing strategies across many of his classes, with a common focus on discrete-point recall through multiple choice or matching or single sentence definition tasks. I am sure that my son's religion teacher did not write on the lesson plan for that day, "today students will learn that key New Testament concepts do not have to be understood well," but this was the message that my son picked up that day because of the wider testing regime. He scored highly on the test; again, this kind of issue would not show up in the test scores, would not cause surface ripples in the drive for high academic standards. Does this represent excellent teaching? In what sense?

### Post-war challenges

A few weeks ago, I began for the third time teaching a semester-long college course in twentieth-century German literature. Like the previous two times, I wanted in the first session to establish an understanding of the problems facing any German writer in the years immediately following the Second World War. Practical problems, such as shortages of paper, of publication outlets, of readers with money for books, even of food. Language problems, such as how to write in German, when the language was so distorted by years of Nazi propaganda and so unwelcome in the world at large. Existential problems such as why write at all when people needed life's basic necessities, and a tradition of great literature had had no effect in preventing the holocaust, how to write poetically about the holocaust without trivializing it, how to write about anything else after such shattering events.

The previous time the course was taught,

I had prepared a PowerPoint presentation wherein I quoted German writers of the time and bullet points covering the major issues. I lectured, interspersed with discussion, and we covered the ground; later tests showed that students had learned the material.

This time I wanted to try something different. I created a looping PowerPoint presentation containing only pictures — pictures from the liberated concentration camps and pictures of ruined cities in Germany in 1945, all in black and white. Before the students arrived, I set this looping on the screen at the front of the classroom. I also found some quite disturbing ambient music, and set that to play in the background. Then I darkened the room, removed all the chairs, and deliberately turned up to class several minutes late.

When I entered there was silence. I sat down on the floor in the midst of the students and began: “It’s 1945. We are in Germany. We feel called to be writers. How do we feel, and what are the challenges we will face?” Over the following forty minutes my students volunteered most of the points that had been in my lecture the previous time around. My sense was that sitting at ground level with my students discussing what came to be called “zero hour” changed the quality of the discussion.

### Deeper values

What does excellence mean here, and how would we measure it? It depends on what we might be looking for. Perhaps test scores would tell us that the students in both classes knew an equal amount of information, or perhaps one group knew a little more or less than the other — how much would that tell us about the educational results of the class? Something, to be sure, but not everything, because my concern was with pedagogy rather than

technique, and I was concerned about my students’ ability to empathize, to approach mid-twentieth-century German writers with humility, to feel the force of the obstacles, and not just with covering material or delivering content. The highest possible test scores on tests designed to test information recall would not tell me whether these other goals were being addressed. Was this excellent teaching? I don’t know for sure, because I don’t know exactly what happened in students, but after further conversations I have some grounds to hope that it was fruitful.

### It’s both and

We could go on multiplying such examples. Let me return, however, to the initial question of the nature of excellent teaching. There are certainly reasons for Christian educators to be concerned with excellence; faith can all too easily become a way of telling ourselves that everything we do is worthy (because after all it is “for the glory of God”) when, in fact, much of it could do with some critical scrutiny. Wallowing too much in the feel-good factor of the parenting image can too easily be an excuse for not improving our skills and attending to those outcomes that are indeed measurable; there are technical elements in teaching.

At the same time, though, these are *elements* of a larger whole, shot through with more complex beliefs and commitments. The very measurability of aspects of learning, such as factual recall, coupled with the pressures created by public debate about education and the influence of ways of talking about teaching that picture it as a technology, easily cast other important educational goals into the shade and push matters such as justice, compassion and spiritual growth to the periphery. Then we can all too quickly find ourselves pouring time and resources into

excellence without questioning deeply enough the kind of pedagogy that we want our students to appropriate, and, therefore, which kind of excellence we should be pursuing.

### Amber alert

Let me suggest three cautions, then, in relation to the pursuit of excellence. First, talk of “pursuing excellence” in teaching is in and of itself vacuous. The term “excellent” is parasitic — one can be excellent only at some particular thing or things and measured against some particular (often implicit) standard of worth. Once we are clear about the complex of goals that we are trying to achieve, then we can talk more meaningfully about excellence and mediocrity.

Second, since the goals of education are complex and depend in significant measure on our beliefs and commitments, there may be different kinds of excellence that compete for our attention. A measure of excellence that gives us information about one criterion of success may tell us very little about other goals that may be equally or even more important to us, and if we fix our attention too squarely on that one measure, it is quite likely to blind us to (or encourage us to downplay) ways in which our pedagogies actually undermine other important goals. Third, if we join in the general public game of vying to show our “excellence” without considering the kinds of excellence to which we should be committed, there is a danger that we will run barking after the wrong car and find ourselves several streets away from where we wanted to end up.

### Reference:

<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, D. (1989). *Towards a Theory of Schooling*. Basingstoke, Falmer Press, pp.39-40. ©

# In Search of Passionate Learning:

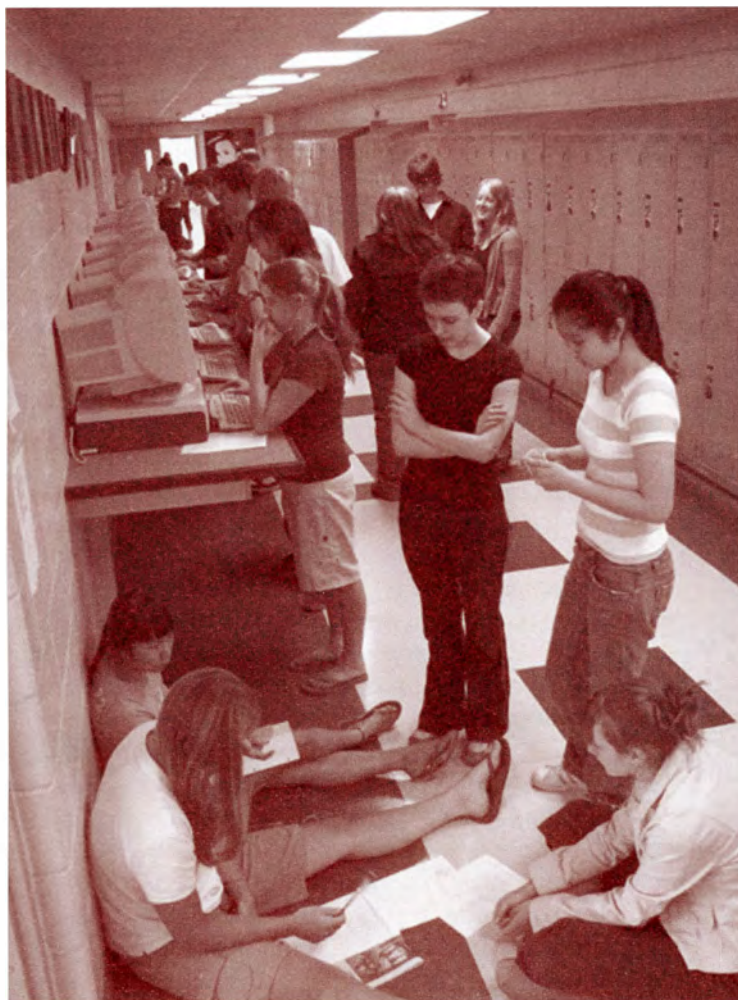
## Toronto District Christian High School Leads in Educational Innovation

by Bert Witvoet

*The editor visited Toronto District Christian High School in May of this year to learn more about what in its promotional literature is described as an innovative approach that seeks to prepare students for an increasingly post-modern culture. The reader can further investigate TD Christian by visiting its website: [www.tdchristian.ca](http://www.tdchristian.ca).*

Last May I walked into what used to be my homeroom when I was an English teacher at Toronto District Christian High School in the 1960s. For the past 18 years, Phil Vriend has been holding forth in this room as an English teacher. The block walls and the ceiling looked the same to me. The view from the window, ditto. Was I in a time warp? But something was amiss. I did not see straight rows of desks, and what are all these computers, a projector and an interactive white board doing in my room? Students were grouped around tables and doing their own thing. They chatted quietly, and I had no idea what was going on. Phil Vriend was talking with me as if the students were of no concern to him. And where were the textbooks? And what is this separate room in the back for? Is it a resource room?

But then Vriend introduced me to the students, mentioned that I had taught in this room many years ago, and asked me a question. I began to answer his question, addressing the students as I did, of course; and before I knew it, I had launched into a mini-lesson about behaviorism. Once a



teacher, always a teacher. The students seemed to be comfortable with this unexpected insertion of a stranger and his story.

I soon found out what the school's brochure meant when it says: "Our innovative program prepares students for an increasingly postmodern culture in which the traditional skills in communication, numeracy and literacy no longer suffice. Students must become competent in synthesis, problem solving and reflection, learn to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty, and develop creativity and personal enterprise." These students were

not waiting for the teacher to begin a lesson. They acted more like a working community that needed to solve a few problems on their own or share a recent discovery.

### Learning in motion

The door to the hallway remained open, and students wandered in and out. Some were standing at a row of computers on counters that lined the hallway. Fifty such computers had been hauled into the most public place in the building. Apparently freedom of movement is guaranteed in the school's human rights' code.

Principal Ren Siebenga expects that kind of fluidity in his school. While I was talking with him a while later near the main-entrance stairway, two students brushed a cotton swab along the railing. They were looking for bacteria that they intended to grow and examine in the science room. Further

down the hall a group of young environmentalists were gathering camping equipment for a four-day stay at a provincial park. They had recently been successful in finding seepage of raw sewage into a local creek and getting the township health department to clean it up. Several history students were painting wooden flowers for the upcoming graduation banquet. This activity had nothing to do with the study of history, but since the school is a community, everyone pitches in when necessary. Relationships and community are highly prized by young people today, says Siebenga.

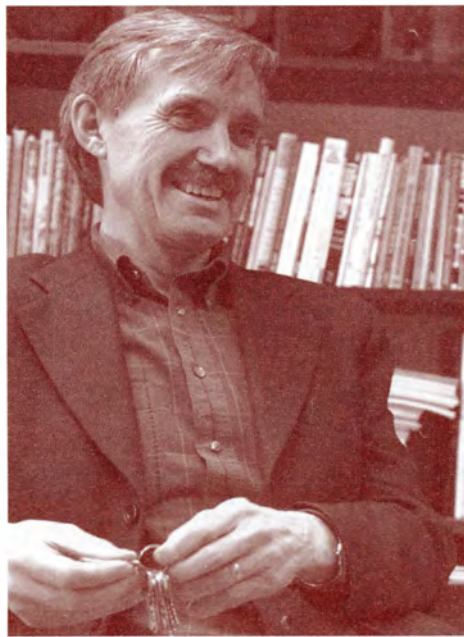
## Realistic appraisal

It does not take long to realize that this principal has set his stamp on the school. It's hard to imagine that TD Christian would be where it is today without the bold visionary leadership given by this former prairie boy from Alberta. He has a down-to-earth way about him that is both disarming and challenging. Seldom impressed with officialdom and high-sounding theories, he insists on dynamic interaction and visible results.

Siebenga is a rare bird among high school principals. First of all, he believes that traditional high schools don't work. Too many students are bored; very few are passionate about what they're doing, he says. This is all the more true today when all students are expected to go through four years of high school, whether they are academically inclined or not. "Half the kids in high school don't want to be there," he says, "but our culture believes in mass education." Within this prescription for failure, Siebenga wants passion from his staff and from his students. He will tell his teachers: you develop a vision for an innovative approach to your subject and I will make sure that the money follows your vision. So the head of English and Communication wants to be able to edit and have students edit written work and publications in class. In fact, he wants an Apple computer in all six English classrooms. At \$1,500 a piece, that comes to \$9,000. Siebenga promises it will be in next year's budget.

## Hands-on management

According to one staff member, nothing escapes Siebenga's purview. Yet, he does not think of him as controlling. Siebenga gives his people lots of room to make decisions. I noticed that he seems to spend more time in the hallways talking to students and staff than he does working



Ren Siebenga

away in his office. One of my daughters-in-law tells me that in industry his kind of leadership is known as quality management. Quality management, as opposed to traditional management (which is leadership from the top) is characterized, among other things, by empowerment of workers, passionate involvement of all participants in the enterprise, and a relational approach to tasks. Managers are expected to walk about and seek input from others. Siebenga fits this mould, although he prefers the term "leader" to "manager." One could say that he is a kind of purpose-driven sleuth. He wants to know what people are doing and why. Does it serve a good purpose? First place in sports, for example, doesn't impress him unless students learn such life skills as encouraging one another, bringing out the best in each other, and growing in emotional and spiritual maturity.

Another staff member says what he appreciates about Ren is that he is willing to take risks. Apparently, school inspectors, representing the Ontario Ministry of Education, have learned to appreciate this principal's innovative approach to learning. At first they questioned what he and his staff were doing. But once they saw what was taking place in the school, how students were purposefully engaged and learning not

only subject content but also life skills, and how what had seemed chaotic and unconventional at first blush turned out to be a responsible and well-thought-through process, they approved of what they saw. In their description of the school in this year's report they wrote: "The administration and faculty at TD Christian work hard to keep the school at the leading edge of most educational innovation."

## Lots of possibilities

One such innovation was the creation of eight "school-at-home days." During these days, students are supposed to work at a project they cannot do at school. The staff uses these days for professional development. "You can't count these 'school-at-home days' as regular school days," said the Ministry. "You have to fulfil the ministry guidelines that call for the required number of hours per year." Siebenga explained how the days were planned and how accountability was built into the system. The ministry approved. "Why don't you change the name?" they suggested. "Call them 'project days.'" "No problem," said Siebenga. "That's what we will do."

Siebenga has discovered that there is plenty of room for creative approaches to learning within the Ministry guidelines. He points to a booklet entitled *Interdisciplinary Studies* that provides some 36 suggestions for alternative courses, among them one called "Faith and Culture." What a Christian school cannot do with that! Others, referred to as samples, are called "Community Environmental Leadership," "Information and Citizenship," and "Aging and Society." Siebenga advises other educators not to develop their own courses from scratch. They will likely not get them approved. Instead, he suggests that they search for a course in the Ministry booklet that they can adapt to their own purposes.

As for hiring new teachers, Siebenga



takes full charge of that. He may pull in some parents or staff or students for the interviews, but he makes the decision. He knows what he wants. He makes sure all staff members share the school's vision and are comfortable with a pedagogical approach that fits students growing up in a postmodern society. Right now, because TD Christian has a large number of Asian students, he is scouring the Asian Christian community in Toronto to fill a staff position. He is very concerned about integration of non-Caucasian students into the student life of the school, and, by all accounts, the school is succeeding. A group of four TD Christian Asian students produced a comedy video in which they poke fun at a Caucasian student who is desperately trying to fit into the Asian peer group. It's hilarious and it shows the confidence these students have in dealing with interracial integration.

### Interdisciplinary studies

But the most important form of innovative learning can be found in the "Block" program at TD Christian. It is when I heard about this program that I decided to visit the school and find out for myself what Siebenga and his crew are up to. The program is seemingly without much structure. Students who decide to enroll in a Block program spend one half of every school day for the entire year on projects that will develop real life skills. Most of the Block programs are student-organized, with teachers helping out and providing resources and guidance. Various programs focus on video production, art, music, speaking in public, environment, fitness, running the school's store. Students have

to prepare, set goals, provide purpose statements, look at financing, do research, develop projects, assign tasks and leadership roles. All of them have to learn to present, especially towards the end of the year. Assemblies at TD Christian are never dull. They are bursting with student presentations that make use of the latest technology and lots of music.

Block programs have been introduced in the first three years of high school. So far, Grade 12 is focusing more on meeting final



*Three male offenders in a virtual crime scene*

Ministry requirements, but Siebenga hopes that the school will be able to integrate Blocks into the final year as well. Not all students enroll in these Blocks. In fact, a little less than a third of the students do. If parents and students prefer a more structured way of learning, they can choose to take more subject-oriented courses. But even these courses are expected to integrate faith and technology and focus on communal tasks and creativity. With 450 students enrolled in the school, there is enough flexibility for allowing different choices.

Richard VanderKloet, who has taught shop and history at TD Christian for 20 some years, speaks highly of the Block program. Being a classically trained teacher, he was at first somewhat skeptical of the less orderly approach. Wouldn't students waste a lot of time in this unstructured

approach to learning? But then he realized that teachers, too, will waste a lot of the students' time as they spout out brilliant lectures, assign uniform tasks, follow a standard curriculum, and "teach from the front." Nothing is more detrimental to learning than boredom, VanderKloet finds, and students in Blocks are seldom bored. "How do we get kids interested and passionate about what they are learning? If they are visibly engaged while you lecture, fine, go ahead and lecture. But most students don't learn that way," says VanderKloet. "Today's kids have moved from the auditory to the sensory. They thrive on high tech. He thinks of Christian educators who consider it a virtue to avoid high tech as Luddites.

### Protecting nature

But I wanted to see for myself what a Block program is like. So I spent some time with the environmentalists and their mentors, Lisa Verveda and Ben Freeman. I asked the students what they liked about the Block. They mentioned that it's hands-on, lasts for two and a half hours, which allows for in-depth study and research, it's team-oriented, it brings them out into nature. "It gets you away from technology," said one student. "You learn to be better stewards of the creation," said another. In preparation for their four-day camping trip, they have organized cooking, sports, experiments, and a canoe trip. The park they are going to is one of the few places in Ontario that have rattlesnakes. They want to know more about what it is that threatens this species.

And, of course, I heard about their successful attempt to get various levels of government involved in a local clean-up of

raw sewage. A sewage conduit had been blocked, and the sewage had seeped out through a manhole into the surrounding landscape as well as into the creek running through the back of the school's property. Even the federal Minister of Health contacted the school and showed interest. All of the students felt that they had learned what to do in the future whenever they learn about environmental damage.

### Promoting causes

The next Block was the one that focused on video productions. Some 17 students had enrolled in this program, and students proudly showed me several of their latest productions. At the moment three students from nearby Bradford are working on a promotional video for Mercy House, a half-way home for women in their area. When it's done it will include a video suitable for showing in churches, an instructional pamphlet, a jewel case cover, a DVD containing a 10 minute slide show. All of this will be done free of charge so that Mercy House can distribute these to the supporting churches in the area. Besides these types of projects, all of them having to do with social services or social issues, students have developed a personal website with their portfolio, a video yearbook, and a few short funny clips.

### Technology and the arts

It's evident from all I see and hear at TD Christian that the school has decided to strongly emphasize the arts. The budget for the music program, which earlier ranked far below the budget for the sports program, is now on par with sports. Much attention is paid to the fine arts both through displays and oral presentations. Most of the senior art students this year have been accepted in art programs at Canadian universities and art schools. Richard Peters, a professional actor, teaches drama, especially improvisation,

in an eight-week compulsory course for grade nine students, in addition to teaching drama to grade 10 and 11 students. Karen Burke, a professional musician and Juno Award winner, leads the music program. The strong focus on the arts and technology is perhaps the most outstanding feature of



*Community work*

the school's approach to learning. It's all part of Siebenga's vision for schooling that addresses kids where they are, gets them involved and humanizes them. "Understanding kids as a gift from God, we have to fit school to kids," he says, "rather than the other way around."

### Not alone

Since he read John J. Mitchell's *The*

*Adolescent Predicament* in the 1970s, Siebenga has never looked back. Other books, like *The Vanishing Adolescent* by Edgar Zodiag Friedenber, *A Time to Learn* by George H. Wood, and *Building Community in Schools* by Thomas J. Sergiovanni, further encouraged him. "About the 1980s I quit talking educational philosophy," he said. "What good is a worldview if there is no heart and life in it. Teens create their own world, and if you leave them there, they go to hell. All you have to do is recall a few good learning situations in your teaching, and then produce more of them."

His practical no-nonsense approach pops up everywhere, it seems. At the last staff meeting he led, he asked staff to name the person they would go to for advice in several different situations. He intends to use the result of that questionnaire in his search for members for staff council. Some call him a Lone Ranger. That is not quite accurate. He makes a lot of decisions, but he is primarily a community builder. It's the community that stands out, not the visionary behind it. ☺



### New Location Same Mission

Building inclusive and interdependent community, CLC Network, in partnership with others, provides Christ-centered educational, psychological, vocational, and advocacy services for people experiencing unique needs and gifts.

**CLC Network**  
Christian Learning Center

4340 Burlingame SW  
Wyoming, MI 49509-3770  
616-245-8388  
[www.clnetwork.org](http://www.clnetwork.org)

# The Steep and Rocky Road

by Bill Bell

*Bill Bell, a parent at Toronto District Christian High School, is the president of Bell Financial Inc., which has offices in Aurora and Toronto. We reprint a part of an article he wrote about his daughter studying at TD Christian for a pamphlet called Possibilities: Unleash Your Imagination.*

I watched this year with a mixture of pain and pleasure as our middle daughter, Deandra, struggled with a unique and entirely captivating new idea for a school program known as “Block.” This class comprised half of her day for the entire grade 11 year and, for the most part, appeared almost completely without structure — certainly not in the traditional school sense at least. The class divided into groups at the start of the year, each group taking on a variety of assignments — more like commitments really — to complete projects that would develop some “real life skills,” such as photography, video, filmmaking, speaking in public, leadership and more. Deandra found herself taking on the role of project leader in the newly formed Video Yearbook.

Since all of the projects had year-end deadlines, as I would have expected, for much of the first half of the year, Block was “fun.” They were, after all, playing with cool toys like video cameras, movie making equipment and the latest in digital photography. The completion dates were too far away to exert any real pressure. The teachers had put checkpoints in place, things like journaling progress, but these were optional, according to Deandra, and the zeros on her progress report could be ignored. As parents, Ellen and I wondered what we were witnessing, and hoped that the two teachers responsible for this group knew what they were doing. It turns out, they did.

As the final month of school approached, the reality of the work not yet completed began to take a toll on Deandra, and, by all accounts, on the rest of the class as well. As the days ticked by, Deandra spent more and more time on her Block work, and the stress she was experiencing was growing more visible. Relationships grew tense. I wanted to help, but a voice in the back of my head kept saying, “This is how real growth occurs.”

During the year, students had to complete a portfolio of their work, showing the good and the bad, describing how they had grown and what they had learned. And as a grand finale, each student had to present their year in a 5-minute presentation to their peers and family.

Each student in turn spoke of the struggles and challenges they had faced in completing the various tasks. Not one had

found this “easy,” and, yet, almost without exception, they all spoke of something remarkable that had happened to them during Block — they had grown. To borrow the analogy of one of the teachers, they had hit the wall and climbed the wall, and on the other side was a new person. The thrill of achievement filled the air during the presentations, and the students hugged, thanked each other and thanked the teachers for what they were sure would be a significant highlight of their high school lives.

Much can be gleaned from this story. But as I sat there bursting with pride as my daughter revealed the personality traits she had discovered and the growth she had experienced, I realized that the most significant lesson learned by this class is that the road we want isn’t the road that’s smooth and straight. It’s the road that’s rocky with hills that sometimes appears too steep to climb.

## How TD Presents Itself

*We offer a liberal arts program exposing teens to a wide variety of experiences, people, subject material, and teaching techniques in a cohesive plan that integrates faith, learning, and technology. TD exceeds Ontario Ministry of Education requirements while maintaining its distinctive features, including interdisciplinary courses and service trips.*

*We are especially proud of our vibrant music program, involving about half the student body, and our lively, community-building Friday assemblies. Also unique are TD’s multifaceted approach to guidance and our family-type homerooms that bring together students from each grade.*

*Our innovative program — arranged around a unifying theme for each grade level — prepares students for an increasingly postmodern culture in which the traditional skills in communication, numeracy, and literacy no longer suffice. Students must become competent in synthesis, problem-solving, and reflection, learn to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty, and develop creativity and personal enterprise. This in turn calls for a different kind of classroom, where the old preoccupation with right answers, achievement, the individual, and textbooks gives way to a focus on thinking, cooperation, integration, and learning from one’s mistakes. Learning is more active and less orderly, and makes use of the whole world as its classroom.*

# Grandma De Vries Visits School, Again

by Robert L. Otte

*Robert Otte (botte@schs.org) teaches at South Christian High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He wrote an article about Grandma DeVries visiting school in 1995 for CEJ. However, he decided to have Grandma DeVries visit again, because of the changes that have occurred since that time.*

Until last week, Grandma DeVries hadn't been inside a high school for about ten years, not since she had brought her granddaughter Lucy's lunch to school. It happened again, but this time her granddaughter Emily had forgotten her lunch, and, knowing that her mother was working all day at the Bunsen Burner factory, Emily called her grandmother. Grandma DeVries, who still drives during daylight hours, was, of course, happy to bring her some lunch. Emily had told her that her locker #644 was near the library. What Grandma DeVries didn't know was how much high school had changed since the last time she had visited.

After putting the lunch in the locker, Emily's grandmother walked into the library, wondering if Emily was there. A tall, attractive blonde named Kelsey made her feel welcome. She noticed a lot of kids working in groups and others on computers. Some students were looking up magazine articles and other information about various social issues, many of them using something the friendly librarian told her were Internet databases. Grandma had heard of the Internet because her son had given her a laptop for Christmas. She had tried to use it but had managed only to play Solitaire occasionally. The rest of the computer stuff confused her. Databases, she figured, might go with baseball somehow, but what they were or how students used them she wasn't sure.

Grandma noticed, too, that several

students with colorful markers in their hands were huddled around large posters. A number of books were spread open on their tables. The students had also printed many information sheets and had cut out lots of pictures of various fish. They explained that they were making posters to use in their presentations in their science class about the various fish in Lake Michigan.

Grandma DeVries remembered libraries as quiet places where students studied alone. This room seemed far from quiet, yet the creative chatter she heard made her think that most of the students seemed to really be involved in projects of various kinds.

## Laptop physics

After leaving the library, Grandma



peeked into Room 36 just across the hall. In this room, she noticed that all the students were sitting at their desks with laptops. The tall lanky physics teacher, upon noticing her, explained that the students were using the laptops from what he called a COW or Computer of Wheels. He explained that he had found an Internet site that demonstrated really well a scientific process they were studying. Grandma had to admit that the students seemed interested, maybe even excited, about what they were doing. She also had to admire the ease with which these teenagers used the laptops that she found so baffling.

In Room 32 Grandma saw a gray-haired but relatively young looking teacher writing numbers on a paper on her counter space. But the numbers somehow were projected on a large screen in the front of the room. This seemed almost like a magical process until Grandma noticed a small camera mounted on the counter. The students were busy writing the numbers in the various columns of their notebooks. It seemed to be some kind of accounting class, Grandma concluded.

## Video production

Just down the hall a bit, Grandma saw a couple of rooms with rows of computers, maybe two dozen or more in each room. She remembered only one such room the last time she had visited. In one of the two rooms, students were walking around with small cameras. In fact, just then a group of students approached Grandma and asked if she would like to be in the video they were producing. They explained to her that they were in a video production course and their assignment for the day was to produce a story lasting at least three minutes. They would be happy to redo their story to include a grandmother. One student, a cute girl with the most amazing smile, who said her name was Amanda, chimed in brightly,

“Let’s, like, do the story about Little Red Riding Hood. It has a grandmother in it.” Grandma politely declined, saying she really had to be on her way, thinking that being eaten by a big bad wolf was, like, not on her agenda.

In another room, Grandma noticed a young, handsome teacher holding up a shiny, silver disk he was about to insert into his computer. The computer was attached to a silver projector that filled the screen in front of the room. The screen was blue with a “No Signal” note on it. The teacher was explaining that he had downloaded some video clips from the school’s video-streaming service. The clips, he explained, would nicely illustrate what they were studying about the use of the Atomic Bomb at the end of World War II. Grandma wished she could stay because she remembered the lively discussions about that very topic that had occurred when she was a girl. The kind of videos this teacher was talking about she did not understand. But Grandma was familiar with the projector because her church used one.

#### Luther on screen

Down the hall and to the right, Grandma heard a teacher talking about Martin Luther. This soft-spoken gentleman explained that he was going to show them part of a recent movie about Luther. He referred to the blue sheet of paper he had handed out as they walked in, pointing out three things they should notice in the video clip. After viewing the clip he expected them to answer the questions on the paper. Then he, too, turned on the silver projector. A lot of teachers seemed to use that kind of projector.

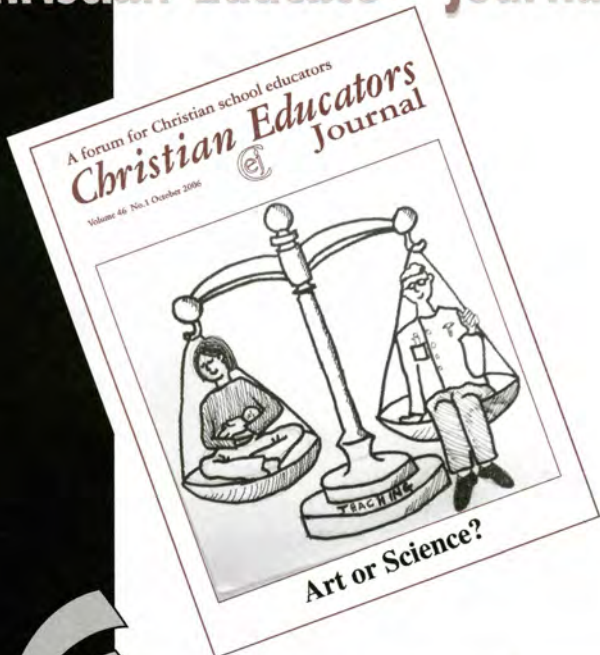
Grandma remembered that when she went to school, so long ago now, students had sat mostly in their seats in neat rows in relatively quiet classrooms listening to their teachers. Sometimes, they answered

questions and occasionally had some kind of discussion. She wondered if that kind of classroom existed at all anymore. But then she peeked into another classroom where the teacher, an older man, dark-haired, with some distinguished gray — more hair than someone his age should have — was indeed sitting in a chair discussing history with his class. He and his students were having a relaxed back-and-forth conversation. She noticed that he had a radio in his room. Now that was something she was familiar with.

As she headed toward the parking lot

and her maroon Buick, Grandma DeVries had the distinct impression that a lot of learning was occurring in the rooms she had seen. The way students learned had changed, no doubt about that. Learning today seemed to involve a lot of computers, projectors, and even cameras. It was a lot noisier than it used to be, involved more groups, but still required skilled and knowledgeable teachers. While some of the equipment seemed a bit foreign to her, she thought that she would enjoy going to the kind of Christian schools her grandchildren were attending. ☺

**Proud to be part of the  
Christian Educators Journal.**



**CUSTOM PRINTERS**

2801 Oak Industrial Dr. NE ■ Grand Rapids MI 49505  
616-454-9224 ■ 800-315-9224 ■ Fax 616-454-1410  
E-mail [info@customprinters.com](mailto:info@customprinters.com)  
[www.customprinters.com](http://www.customprinters.com)

# Slouching Toward Bedlam

## The Joy of Rex: A Gourmet Guide to Playmaking

*Jan Kaarsulam just completed a twelve-step program for people addicted to reality TV. This followed an incident in which, after attempting to be a contestant on Survivor, Fear Factor, The Apprentice, and The Bachelor, all within the same week, Jan became disoriented and mistakenly proposed marriage to Donald Trump's grandmother. Following his successful rehabilitation, Jan now teaches media discernment at the Tinley Park campus of Southwest Chicago Christian Schools.*

His gray eyes bugging out, the small vein in his right temple throbbing, Bedlam principal Bentley VanderHaar burst through the door to the faculty lounge midway through morning break. He stopped just inside as his eyes scanned the tired and bemused faces of his faculty. His gaze lingered for one moment on Phys Ed teacher Rex Kane, who stood in the far corner dressed in hip waders and holding a fly rod, before he spotted Christina Lopez. She was Bedlam's finest English teacher, the drama director, and currently the object of his ire. He stormed across the room to where she sat at a table, sipping her morning coffee and talking with counselor Maxwell Prentiss-Hall.

VanderHaar thrust one finger just inches from Lopez's nose. "What were you thinking?" he demanded. "How could you put that on stage?"

Christina calmly reached up to brush his hand aside and said, "I have no idea what you are talking about. And don't point; it's rude."

Her touch seemed to anger normally placid and befuddled VanderHaar even more. "Don't mess with me, Lopez! I'm not in the mood." The principal pulled out the chair next to hers and sat down. "I've been fielding phone calls all morning because of you and that silly play of yours."

"Silly play?" Now Lopez looked angry. "Thanks for your support."

"Um, yeah, I, um, went to opening night yesterday," Maxwell ventured, trying to restore calm to the storm. His eyes bounced back and forth between the two, unable to find a comfortable resting place in either face. "It was really good."

VanderHaar snorted. "Especially all the sex talk, right? Nice production for students from Bedlam Christian High School. I was planning to bring my grandchildren to tonight's performance, but there's no way that's happening after what I've heard on the phone this morning. Did you know we have people demanding their money back?"

"What do you mean by sex talk?" Christina said. "There's no dirty talk."

Maxwell cleared his throat. "The play was really good,

Christina, but I did feel a bit uncomfortable at some points. I was sitting next to a family with two younger children, maybe third- or fourth-grade. The parents kept shooting me dirty looks. They left about ten minutes before intermission."

"Probably one of the many phone calls I received this morning," VanderHaar said. He blew out a deep sigh. He seemed too tired to maintain his anger. Instead, he turned to Christina and said more calmly, more sincerely, "Why? Why this show? Last year you did *Pilgrim's Progress* and the year before that you did *The Hobbit*. Why not stick to shows like that? Why do something dirty?"

"It's not dirty," Christina said. She leaned toward her principal earnestly. "The play has no smutty talk, no swear words, no double entendres. Frankly, I can't believe people are walking out of the show or calling the office."

"But what about the main character?" Maxwell said. "She has a child out of wedlock, and she carries on with several different men. That is certainly sexual content."

"I agree," said Christina. "It is also a reflection of life. We are sexual beings. Of course that will be explored on stage."

"By fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds?" VanderHaar said in disbelief.

"You think they don't already know about the birds and the bees?" Lopez retorted. "Get your head out of the sand, Bentley. These kids live in a culture that's saturated in sex."

"Which is why I'd like to offer them an alternative!" VanderHaar said. Before he could say another word, however, a fishing fly landed with a light splash in Christina's coffee mug.

"Sorry about that!" Rex shouted from across the room. He began to reel his line back in. The fly flipped over the side of the cup, trailing a line of coffee across the table behind it.

VanderHaar and Christina sighed in unison at the antics of Bedlam's personal three-ring circus. Christina took up the conversation again, more filled with sadness now than real anger.

"I am offering them an alternative. You want to complain about the media, excellent. I'll join you. But let's be clear about what the problem is. It isn't that the media is showing premarital sex, or nudity, or profanity for that matter. All those things are part of life, and we shouldn't pretend they don't exist. The problem is *how* the media shows these things. Often premarital sex is glorified and shown as having no physical or emotional consequences. Movies don't use nudity to reveal the beauty of the human body as some of our finest artists have, but rather to cheapen the human body, turning it into an object of lust. And profanity is shown as thoughtless punctuation used casually and without regret. We should be giving our community an alternative to all that — but that alternative doesn't mean pretending that



Christians live in a happy, sinless world.”

“In a general way, I don’t disagree with what you are saying,” admitted VanderHaar, “but,” — and his eyes grew sharp again — “are you saying my eight-year-old granddaughter ought to be carrying all the weight of the world on her shoulders?”

“No, I’m not saying that.”

“Well, then, what am I supposed to do? Cover her ears when things start getting nasty?”

“Actually, I’d suggest you don’t bring her to the play.”

VanderHaar harrumphed. “But she’s come to every play we have put on here. She came to *The Sound of Music*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Hobbit*.”

“Do you let her go to every movie she wants to?”

There was a crash from the far side of the room. Rex and shop teacher Gord Winkle had collapsed into a big pile of tangled fish line. Somehow Rex seemed to have hooked Gordon’s chair, but in reeling it in, had snared a large potted plant. Now they sprawled on the ground. Gord looked more bewildered than usual, and was wearing a bit of fern as a hairpiece. Rex, grunting, was struggling to free his hands, which were pinned tight against his chest by the fish line. Meanwhile Gord began thrashing like a walrus trapped in a fisherman’s net. Every move Gord made pulled the line more tightly around Rex’s chest. Every move Rex made cut off circulation to Gord’s left foot.

Maxwell nodded in their direction. “Sometimes,” he said,

“being a Christian is a bit like fly fishing. In the river of culture, our lives ought to be graceful and fluent as an expert angler’s fly rod, but sin gets in the way and we find ourselves in a snarled mess. When we try to get untangled, we sometimes work against each other, pulling in different directions even though we have the same goal.”

Lopez and VanderHaar looked from Maxwell to each other, both struck by the aptness of the metaphor, though it had arisen from the most ridiculous of circumstances. The bell had rung, and Bedlam’s teachers began filtering out the door.

“I guess we both need to work together,” Christina said. “Maybe I could have better publicized the type of play we were performing this year so that no families would feel ambushed.”

“And I suppose the play isn’t really inappropriate,” VanderHaar replied as he rose from his chair. He walked to the door, then added, “Still, I hope you do something safe next year—like *Carousel*.” VanderHaar disappeared into the hallway.

Christina sighed, and decided she needed to think long and hard before she agreed to direct another play at Bedlam. As she left the lounge, she was too preoccupied to notice her colleagues still struggling in the corner. She turned off the lights behind her.

Now in the dark, Rex and Gord grunted and wailed in the corner, their every move injuring each other as they struggled to free themselves from the bonds of their own making. ©

# Interview With a Flower



by Peter Rhebergen

*Peter Rhebergen (peternelly@bulkley.net) is a teacher at Bulkley Valley Christian School in Smithers, B.C.*

Our first assignment in a curriculum workshop I attended was to present to the group our personal platform for curriculum, using an image or artifact as a metaphor. As I was riding my bicycle home after that class, I saw daisies in the ditch. My mind left the road, and my thoughts began to wander. I began to realize that I have much in common with these flowers. And so I got off my bike, sat down in the tall grass along the road and asked one flower the same ten questions that our instructor, Dr. Robert Koole, had assigned us. I received some interesting answers, which I would like to relate to my fellow teachers. The human question appears in bold type, befitting a ruler of this earth, and the botanical answer appears in modest type.

## **What are you?**

I am a flower, a daisy, an adorable, despicable daisy, depending on your point of view.

## **Where do you come from?**

The short answer is: the ditch. I lived in the ditch until you came and snapped off my head. But, really, I and my kind were created long ago, by God. We once lived in a beautiful garden called Eden.

## **Why do you exist?**

Each morning I unfold my white petals and I show forth the beauty of my heart. I praise and glorify God.

## **What is your relationship to the environment?**

Well, like I said, I live in a ditch, along Highway 16. I try to make people happy as they drive to work. I nourish bees and bugs. Sometimes children pick me and put me on the dinner table, or make necklaces from me. That makes me feel appreciated.

Some humans, however, don't like me much. They slaughter me with weed whackers and dump herbicides on me and my family.

## **What is knowledge?**

Knowledge is experiencing the care and love of God, knowing that he made me and sustains me. It is quite simply having a relationship with God. I'm just so grateful to God for all he is and has done. He's awesome.



## **How do you know this?**

I know about God pretty much just by looking around and thinking about creation — I just know there must be a God who made all that stuff and runs the world. I can't read; so revelation through creation is mostly all I've got.

## **How is learning for you different from the way humans learn?**

Humans can move, read, think, and interact a whole lot better than I can. I guess that's why they think they're so smart. But God's Spirit is real for me, and I probably know more about God through his Creation than most humans do.

## **What is truth?**

Like I said, it's knowing God. For example, do you know that I thrive in sheep pastures? Sheep think daisies have a bitter taste, so they carefully avoid us. God did that. He made those sheep think only our good looks count. That's pretty cool, eh!

## **What is worth knowing?**

Boy, you keep asking the same thing. The answer is simple. I told you: it is knowing God! You humans seem to make things so complicated that you end up losing the truth. Then you do stupid things like spray poisons on me and my wild flower friends in the ditches and fields.

## **What should students learn, and schools teach?**

Truth — the truth about God, our Creator and Redeemer. I teach my flower offspring and neighbors to marvel at the wonderful Creation, to wake up to the horrors of human sin, and to understand what redemption truly means for us. And we invite you humans to join us in praising God as we work to fulfill his plan of making Creation new and beautiful. Maybe the next generation of humans will learn to appreciate daisies and dandelions.

Jesus said: "look at the lilies of the field..., for so also shall you know God."

Thank you for the interview. ☺



# Does the Writing Workshop Work in the Middle School?

by Dave Schelhaas

*Dave Schelhaas (Dschel@dordt.edu) is professor of education at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa.*

Most middle school teachers have heard of Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* and know it as a book which lays out a workshop approach for teaching reading and writing. Atwell's workshop approach has been widely praised for its effectiveness in developing eager readers and confident, competent writers. Yet, as far as I know, few Christian school teachers use the workshop approach. Why is that?

Perhaps some teachers tried Atwell out after she published the first edition (1987) of *In the Middle* and got burned because it was so student-centered and student-directed that they could not make it work. These teachers might like to know that the second edition (1998) represents a significant shift in Atwell's thinking, a shift indicated by the fact that 70 percent of the 1998 edition is new material. She says of this shift: "This does not mean I've reverted to playing God.... But it does mean I'm no longer willing to withhold suggestions and directions from my kids when I can help them solve a problem" (21).

Or, perhaps, Christian schoolteachers do not use this method because, as Dr. Pam Adams observes in her article "Reading Instruction in Christian Elementary Schools — Does One's View of Scripture Influence Pedagogy?" (1997), Christian school teachers are traditional and tend to avoid non-traditional approaches.

## Low success rate

These teachers ought to know that Atwell herself was once a traditional teacher who worked very hard at teaching writing in a traditional manner. But no matter what she did, she found that in a typical class, "six 'gifted' writers ... did something

wonderful," fifteen more or less fulfilled the assignment, and a few did virtually nothing. Eventually she became dissatisfied with her low success ratio and developed her workshop approach, drawing on the work of lots of other teachers as well as her own observation and the input of her students.

Until this past year, I had never tried the workshop approach in the classroom and, in fact, had never taught middle school children. But I have been using Atwell's book as a major text in my "Methods of

*Belief about capabilities is a better predictor of success than IQ.*

Teaching Middle and High School English" class for the last four years. I wanted to know if it worked as well as she claimed it did. So in September of 2005, I went to Sioux Center (Iowa) Christian School to spend 90 minutes each day teaching with sixth-grade teachers Al Bandstra and Linda Visser. For the entire semester we taught writing and reading, following the gospel according to Atwell.

I realized that one semester or even one year of workshop would not yield any kind of definitive statistical information, so I developed a qualitative research plan in which I sought to answer two questions:

1. What are the students' positive and negative experiences of the workshop approach to teaching language arts?\*
2. What are the teachers' positive and negative experiences of the workshop approach?

## The approach

Atwell's workshop approach is nothing especially radical. The classroom simply becomes a workshop, that is, a workplace where the challenging work of reading and writing is done. The tools of readers and writers — books, paper, pencils, research materials, dictionaries, thesauruses — are readily available. And the class has these characteristics:

- It is organized in such a way that the students spend most of their class time writing and reading.

- It is (partially) an individualized approach. As each student reads at their interest and ability level and writes on topics they know and care about, the teacher has one-on-one conferences with them, helping, guiding and motivating.

- It makes use of lots of mini-lessons — short, teacher-led lessons on various aspects of reading, writing, and grammatical conventions.

- It requires that each student read for 30 minutes at home, every day.

A typical writing workshop day goes something like this: We begin by putting a short poem on the overhead, reading it aloud a couple of times and talking about it briefly with the students. Sometimes, instead of a poem, we may teach a mini-lesson — on punctuating dialogue or developing strong leads or combining sentences. Then we go through what Atwell calls the Status of the Class, during which students quickly tell the teacher what they will be working on, and the teacher notes it on the Status of the Class chart. Most of the time, each student chooses what to write about, but on certain occasions all students are required to do the same basic assignment. Students spend the remaining class time writing, and the teacher moves about the room conducting whispered conferences with individual writers.

Atwell's method requires significant organization on the part of teachers and students. There are numerous forms to use, a variety of folders and a number of specific terms for students and teachers to know. What is probably most significant is that the workshop approach requires students to be self-directed. Initially some students could hardly write a sentence without raising their hands to ask if it was what the teacher wanted. But gradually most of them learned to get started and keep going throughout the period.

### Students' response

For most of the semester I focused my 45 minutes in each classroom on the writing workshop. At the end of the semester, I conducted oral interviews with each of the 34 students in the two classes, asking each one the same seven questions. Here's what they had to say.

1. *How do you feel when your teacher says, "It's time for writing workshop?"*

All but two of the 34 students responded very positively, many saying, "I like it," "better than last year," "I like it a lot," and "kind of happy to work on my story." One student said, "I feel overjoyed — I don't know why I used that word, I never use that word."

2. *What's the best thing about writing workshop?*

Most of the answers to this question express delight in individual choice about what to write. Nine students said explicitly that they best liked the fact that they got to choose what to write about. Almost everyone else gave an answer that implies that idea but states it less directly, saying, "I get to write stories," or "I can write poems." A couple of students found delight in the sense of accomplishment a good story or poem gave them, and one liked the praise she got from fellow students. (The response to this question seems most

significant to me, suggesting that most students highly value the freedom to choose what to write about. Since this is one of the central tenets of the writing workshop, it is, at the least, a ringing endorsement of that aspect of the approach.)

3. *What's the worst thing about writing workshop?*

Ten students could not think of anything to answer to this question. Others gave these answers:

- Sitting there stuck with nothing to say
- Mini-lessons
- If we don't get to write on a day
- Notebooks, notes on mini-lessons

4. *Have you improved as a writer since September?*

One person said, "I'm not sure," but everyone else said, "yes."

5. *In what ways have you improved?*

Some students could not answer this question with specifics, but those that could gave a wide variety of answers: "Better at showing rather than telling," "Better at description," "Better at getting ideas," "Better at poetry," "Better at punctuation," "I work harder because I can write what I want to."

6. *Do you hope you have writing workshop next semester also?*

With two exceptions, the answer to this question from every student was a resounding "yes."

7. *Have you improved in conventions, that is, spelling, punctuation, grammatical usage, etc.?*

The answers to this question were evenly divided between "yes" and "a little bit." Only one person said "no."

### Freedom of choice

Clearly the students' attitude toward the workshop was overwhelmingly positive. They liked to write. They liked having

choices as writers. They believed they had improved as writers. They felt positive about reading, about writing, about improving their skills as writers, about the writing workshop. My personal observation of them in the classroom day after day told me that also. They seemed happy to be in school, reading and writing and discussing. And what seemed most important to them as writers was that most of the time they could choose to write about whatever subject they wanted to write about in whatever genre they wished.

A short anecdote will illustrate this: At one point we required all students to enter a poetry contest sponsored by the local orchestra, a contest that asked them to write a poem about one of the movements of Gustav Holst's *The Planets*. Students could choose to write about Jupiter, Mars, or Saturn — the names of the three movements that the orchestra would be performing. One young man, who chose to write about Mars, god of war, fired off five or six quick lines, and went immediately back to the story he was writing — the task he really wanted to do. As I conferred with him about his poem, I suggested that since he had devoted only one line to the battle, he should perhaps flesh that out more fully. He grinned and said, "It was a very short battle," and went back to his story. (Still, in the actual contest, our students' poetry won five of the six prizes awarded.)

### The teachers' responses

But what of the teachers' experience of the workshop approach? Did sixth-grade teachers Al Bandstra and Linda Visser find it effective in teaching reading and writing?

Concerning the workshop's effectiveness in teaching writing skills (both conventions, style and content aspects), Al Bandstra says,

*My students seem to have gained a better*

*cognitive knowledge of what makes good writing, but they don't always transfer the skills without reminders. They tend to need constant reminding to proofread as well. On the flip side of the coin, it's fun to see students develop their skills at revising once a few things in their pieces have been pointed out.*

Both Al and Linda believe that students' attitudes toward reading and writing, after one semester and especially after two semesters of the workshop approach, were very positive. Linda notes at the end of the first semester that she saw "positive reactions" in student attitudes toward writing, though she notes in the same sentence that she saw "great variance in the amount of true effort (and product) made by individuals." But she also concludes that students completed more writing than in previous years. She notes further that Andy telling stories of life on the farm, Sarah conferencing with Kari about her story *outside* of school, and Caleb writing several fine poems — "these are real accomplishments."

The question of teacher workload was the one that I felt most concerned about as we conducted this project. The responses of both Linda and Al to this question is somewhat mixed.

Linda writes, "As for my work load — I found myself taking drafts home with me to read and jot notes in margins. But then I would still want to have the face to face conference with them to "explain" my notes. This was making for a good amount of extra work. Also, I am still learning how to conduct short but effective conferences."

Al concludes that while writing workshop consumed more of his time than a traditional teaching method, it was *not much more*.

Both Al and Linda have decided to use the workshop approach next year again, but they have some reservations. They are

concerned with meeting the requirements of the traditional school curriculum and grading requirements. Linda says, "We need to recognize that we never did serious assessing of their work in terms of applying grades or scores or rubrics." Al plans to do a three-week grammar unit in each quarter "to do more justice to that part of the curriculum."

### My response

These responses, it seems to me, get to the heart of the issue. The traditional school requires "grades and scores and rubrics" and if instead you do an overall evaluation of a nine-week writing portfolio, it might

*Students liked  
having choices as  
writers.*

seem as if you are not quite doing your job. The traditional school says you have to teach grammar as a separate discipline, and when you "merely" integrate it into writing with mini-lessons, you are not going to cover it all. No matter that 75 years of research show that grammar taught in isolation from writing has very little carry-over into writing or speaking, schools continue to make formal instruction in traditional grammar a vitally important — perhaps the most important — task of the language arts teacher.

But having dealt with those minor notes of concern about the workshop approach, I must hasten to note that by far the majority of the comments made by Linda and Al are positive. They both acknowledge that the very fact that the writing workshop is "in place" guarantees that more writing gets taught. So much has to be taught in middle

school, and writing — the most demanding of subjects — will easily get pushed into the background if it is not made central. The writing workshop makes writing central, but the traditional middle school classroom seldom makes writing central. More often grammar and spelling are central, and writing is optional or peripheral.


No teaching strategy is perfect, and no teacher is going to succeed 100 percent of the time. But my semester of teaching with Linda and Al has convinced me that a Workshop Approach will be a more successful method of teaching writing and reading than traditional approaches. When students read books they have selected or books recommended to them by classmates, when they write about subjects and in genres they care about, and when they are guided by a teacher who knows something about writing, significant learning will take place. When students are given time to write in class and are excited about writing, then writing improvement will almost certainly occur.

According to A. Bandura (1986), peoples' beliefs about their capabilities are often better predictors of their success in an endeavor than things like IQ, for self perceptions play a vital role in determining what individuals do with their knowledge.

### Works Cited:

Adams, Pamela E. (1997). "Reading Instruction in Christian Elementary Schools: Does One's View of Scripture Influence Pedagogy?" *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 6, 233-251.

Atwell, Nancie. (1998) *In the Middle*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Bandura, A. (1986) *Social Foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. 

# SEMPER REFORMATATA: ALWAYS REFORMING

by Jack Fennema

*Jack Fennema is professor of education at Covenant College. He writes: "Many of our traditionally Reformed Christian schools — those founded before 1970 — appear to be struggling to maintain their original vision and passion, indicating a need for self-examination and reform toward renewal." This is the first in a series of four articles that provide suggestions for reforming schools that desire such renewal.*

Christian education should be all about God, yet it seems that a number of our schools have inadvertently taken their eyes off the sovereign God and have begun looking elsewhere for direction and answers. This article seeks to reverse that trend by suggesting three ways in which schools should institute a renewed FOCUS ON GOD.

## God as the Alpha: Begin with God.

Do not *begin* with state standards, the curriculum of public schools, or secular textbooks. Rather, begin with standards for education derived from Scripture.

Too much education that is called "Christian" is, in essence, actually secular. One primary reason for this is failure to heed the first four words of the Bible: "In the beginning God...." Education that begins with a secular source easily falls into the trap of dualism or syncretism. A secular educational "cake," if you will, is covered with Christian "frosting." God's way of seeing things becomes, at best, a token afterthought rather than the driving force.

It has been my observation that, within teacher education programs of Christian colleges, hundreds of hours are devoted to meeting state standards, but little time is spent seeking out biblical standards that

God would have for education. The result tends to be a "secular tail" wagging the "sacred dog." Tomorrow's teachers too seldom see much difference between education in the public sector and education that professes to proceed from the mind of Christ. Curriculum committees of K-12 Christian schools also tend to begin



their deliberations by examining state standards for education and courses-of-study approved for state schools. A biblical studies program may be added, but the very essence of the curriculum is founded on a secular note. That starting point for curriculum development is wrong; consequently, the resultant product too often is "wrong" as well. Finally, teachers themselves typically look first to their (secular) textbooks to determine what they will be teaching. That, too, is the wrong place to begin. Instead, textbooks need to remain unopened until the teacher has thoroughly thought through what it means to teach the subject from a biblically faithful perspective.

Yes, because Reformed Christian education accepts common grace insights as a valid component of the educational

process, all of the aforementioned secular resources can be examined at some point to determine their usability in the light of biblical norms. Yes, it is true that much that is taught within the secular realm can also be taught within the Christian school, for general revelation is available to all. But the starting point and the evaluative criteria for education must be the Word of God.

Begin, then, by asking certain questions. What would *God* have us teach his children? What does *the Bible* say about education in general and the various disciplines in particular? What *biblical* goals should be in place before developing a course-of-study? What, as best can be determined, is *God's* perspective on a topic of study? How can one "know" *God* through the curriculum? How can one glorify *God* through a particular course, unit, or lesson? Yes, we must always begin with *God*.

## God as the Great "I AM": Make certain "it is all about God."

Christian education is not all about students, finances, academics, athletics, SAT scores, being like other schools, getting into college, or the like. And, at the college level, it's not about rankings in *U.S. News & World Report*. Christian education is and must be all about God — knowing him in all ways and glorifying him in all things.

Christian education is uniquely equipped to lead students toward knowing God in all ways — through the mediating Word. To know the Father, students must first know the Son — the Word Incarnate — personally, for Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. Students must also know and obey the Inscripturated Word of God. They need to don the eyeglasses of Scripture to see more clearly God's world and their place within it. But they must also hear



the Word for creation — the divine *Logos* — if they are to know the Father in the fullness of his being. God's general revelation is the heart of the curriculum and the unique contribution of Christian education. The Great "I AM" — the covenantally faithful God who is, was, and forever will be — desires to be known in all ways.

Romans 1:20 provides a clue to the manner in which God can be known through creation: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...." Each subject in the curriculum mirrors a facet of God's created reality; thus, the educational task is to see and to cite evidences of God's eternal power and his divine nature. Mathematics evidences the integrity of God, art his beauty, music his integral harmony, political science his justice, and the like.

This revelation of God through "what has been made" calls for an obedient response, for "the chief end of man is to glorify God." Psalm 19:1 describes how creation shows the way:

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."

Since God cannot be made more glorious through our praise, the process of glorification is one of reflection — mirroring his "divine nature" and "eternal power" back to him, just as creation does. Students can reflect God's glory back to him on two levels. First, they can image God by being conformed to Christ Jesus, the very likeness of the Father. God is glorified through students who reflect his "divine nature" in their natures and his "eternal power" through their actions. But there is more. As scholars, they are to look for evidences of God in their studies. They are to listen for the speech of God revealed

through his creation; they are to seek out the knowledge displayed through the works of his hands. Since truth is alive, dynamic, and interactive, students are to actively engage God's speech and knowledge. Since truth always demands an obedient response, students must submit to God's Word of truth through transformed thought and active obedience.

Every lesson must point to God, the Creator and Author of "all things." Questions to ask, then, could include: "How is God being revealed and what is God saying through this lesson?" and "In what ways can we obediently respond to the truth revealed in this lesson so that Christ may be glorified?"

### God as the *Omega* : Teach with the end in mind.

This is the mission of the Christian school: "That the next generation may know the Father in all ways through the Son in the power of the Spirit, glorify God in all things, and, thereby, have life abundantly." But that is not the end; it is only the preparation. For the mission of life follows: "That the world may know that *Yahweh* is the one, true God and that Jesus Christ is Lord — of all. Ray Vander Laan has it right as he declares through his film series: "That the world may know."

The Bible has two central themes: creation and salvation. They find their meaning in Christ Jesus, the mediating Word for both creation and salvation. John 1:3-4 captures this truth: "Through him (the Word) all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men."

Each of these two biblical themes includes a mandate or commission that points toward the mission of life. The Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1:26-28 calls

for the development of a civilization that acknowledges God as Sovereign and Christ as Lord over "all things." The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 calls for telling the world that Jesus Christ is Redeemer of "all things." That is the good news of the Gospel, news that is to be proclaimed — so that the world may know.

The psalmist states:

*"Be still, and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations'  
I will be exalted in the earth."* (46:10)

The Great "I AM" has declared "I *am* God" and "I *will be* exalted." Further on in Scripture, the Apostle Paul states:

"...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:10-11)

Every knee *should* bow, right now. God the Father and God the Son demand total allegiance from all people in all ways and over all things all of the time. That speaks volumes for education. And it speaks volumes for the mission of life following education: That the world may know.

A question to ask, then, is: "In which ways does this curricular or extra-curricular activity equip students to carry out God's mission for their lives?" Teach with the end in mind: That the world may know!

*This series will continue in the next issue of CEJ with the injunction to "Fully Appropriate the Mediating Word." ©*

## Classroom management: Control or Enablement?

With this first issue of volume 46, we continue the “Panel Dot Edu” column with a new moderator. Professor Clarence Joldersma of Calvin College has led this panel for a few years, and we thank him for his leadership. Professor Al Boerema, also a member of the Calvin College education department, has agreed to take over from him. Boerema writes, “This year I am back in the classroom watching student teachers developing their craft. One of the aspects of teaching that we spend time on is classroom management. The question that comes to mind as I watch the lesson unfold is how do we balance managing for control/compliance and enabling students to develop their gifts?”

### September 6, 2006

One of the main and most efficient ways to manage the classroom is to have lots of preparation (plans) ready for more than one possible scenario. Know the level of interest and intellect of the students and prepare lessons which will meet their needs. Be creative and daring. Be prepared to switch to plan B or even C if there is the slightest indication that all may soon be lost. Keep them engaged. Keep them engaged!



*Agnes Fisher*

**Agnes Fisher**

### September 8, 2006

Agnes, what you say is very important. Being prepared with creative lessons and having alternative plans or ways of doing things in mind are important. Flexibility is an important trait for teachers. However, I do sympathize with student teachers who have not developed this ability yet. There are times when things get out of control because the children are clearly not cooperating and the student teacher (or veteran teacher) feels threatened and takes what is happening personally. It is hard not to. I guess the best we can do as mentors to these new teachers is to let them know that this happens to everyone and that we will help them. Discuss the things Agnes mentioned. Ask if they thought ahead to the possibility that the students might rebel or not find what she so carefully prepared might not be engaging to all students.



*Pam Adams*

**Pam Adams**

### September 9, 2006

It was good to read your comments, Agnes and Pam. I agree with the need to be flexible and to keep the students engaged. Yesterday our son (an almost full-fledged teacher) came home from subbing in a middle school. One thirteen-year-old in a grade eight class had been very taunting, prideful and totally disrespectful. It was a music class, and the teacher had left no instructions, other than: let them work on their projects. A situation set up to let a teacher fail in classroom management. Our son came home and said: “I could have beaten the snot out of that kid!” In the end, he spoke with him after school, and the student apologized.

It is true, beginner teachers must not take these classroom management issues personally, must learn not to be discouraged when their well-prepared lessons fail because the students are not engaged, and be flexible enough to handle all kinds of student scenarios. We need to train our teachers to respond to these episodes with the right attitudes. They need to learn to build community within the classroom, so that teacher and student are learning together for the glory of God; they need to rely on the dynamite power of the Holy Spirit to give them great endurance and patience, so that they joyfully give thanks to the Father as they are teaching and learning (Col. 1:1-14). There is so much we need to teach our beginning teachers; amidst the tyranny of the urgent, we often fail to mentor them in some of the most important issues. Take the matter of being a role model who shows and demands respect. If the teacher is not taught to love and respect his students as image bearers, his students will surely not learn how to live respectfully in community with their neighbors.

Coupled with the matter of respect is the necessity to give



*Johanna Campbell*



Albert Boerema  
ajb37@calvin.edu

students the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning decisions. This is crucial. Our classrooms should not be a place where teachers lord it over their students. Teachers are there as servants of God; they need to train their students to serve one another in love and respect as well. Also, students and teachers need to come to a consensus by establishing rules together that make for a smoothly running classroom. Finally, I would teach and model before our teachers that they walk in grace, they need to extend grace and that their entire lives are to be lived in grace. And grace is not grace if it is not grace in every respect. In Christian school classrooms we are called upon to remind our students of this every day.

Biblical learning takes place within the community, where each member of the body is able to hone her talents to the glory of God and the benefit of the neighbor, where each member lives for the other and all live for God. Yes, sin does enter, but God's pattern of repentance, forgiveness and restoration is the healthy way of restoring a community of shalom in the classroom. Our pre-service teachers need to learn that they are walking in the power of God's Spirit, that they live in relationships of love, even as the Trinity is in a relationship of love and that they are to incarnate the Truth before the very eyes of their students, even as Jesus did. This is a tall order, but it can be done, by the grace of God.

Johanna Campbell

value them (and this happens more over time than immediately), if they know you want to see them succeed, and that you care about them too much to let them act stupid, they will give you enough credit to occasionally screw up on the discipline side of things by coming on too strong, perhaps, or by letting something slide that you shouldn't have.

Finally, we need to remember that while it does hurt personally when students don't act appropriately (after all teachers tend to have high affiliation needs and they want to be liked), there are many more things going on in their lives that may be coming to the surface during history class. Family challenges, social pressures, physical issues ... education is a pretty complex weave of human interaction!

Tony Kamphuis

**The panel consists of:**

**Pam Adams** (padams@dordt.edu, professor of education and director of graduate education at Dordt College.

**Johanna Campbell** (ctabc@twu.ca), executive director of the Christian Teachers Association of British Columbia.

**Agnes Fisher** (agnesfisher@easternchristian.org), teacher at Eastern Christian High, North Haledon, New Jersey.

**Tony Kamphuis** (TonyKamp@aol.com), executive director of the Niagara Association for Christian Education.

**Tim Leugs** (tleugs@cutlervillecs.org), a fifth-grade teacher at Cutlerville Christian School, Grand Rapids, Michigan, did not participate in this issue's discussion. ☺

## September 14, 2006



Tony Kamphuis

Does all this mean that the occasional use of a little sarcasm to remind the students that the teacher is "with it" enough to survive the sometimes rough-and-tumble-give-and-take of human interaction isn't really the right approach? Rats!

I remember removing a student from the class once, and a parent later saying that their daughter really regretted that because she genuinely enjoyed the class, she was just acting out for the benefit of her friends.

One of our teacher-training professors used to talk about the benefit of setting an early example, and while that may sound a little Machiavellian, boy it does work! And after all, the students want the teacher to be in charge. They don't want to see classmates get away with stuff anymore than the teacher does. They instinctively know that the balance of power lies somewhere, and they much prefer it be in the hands of the adult.

Any action does have to be predicated on the sense the students have that the teacher really does like them. If they know that you

## Note to Our Advertisers

Please make sure that all camera-ready ads are e-mailed as PDF files to the editor before the following due dates:

October Issue - August 15

December Issue - October 15

February Issue - December 15

April Issue - February 15

# Minds and Hearts in the Making

by Barbara Carvill

Barbara Carvill ([carv@calvin.edu](mailto:carv@calvin.edu)) is professor of German emeritus at Calvin College, Grand Rapids. She gave this talk at the Calvin College Fall Faculty Conference on August 31, 2005. She received the Presidential Award for Exemplary Teaching in 2004.

**Romans 12:1-2** *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.*"

I always liked in life and fiction those scenes where people receive directions and a blessing before they embark on a major voyage. It always meant so much to me, for instance, when at the beginning of the Interim, before boarding the plane to Germany, I stood with my students and their parents in a circle at the airport, and we prayed together for a safe and delightful journey. In a few minutes, we will do something like this as a college community.

Naturally, before any such final blessing occurs, words of admonition, encouragement and last directives have to be spoken. Remember Lord Polonius in *Hamlet* giving good advice to his son Laertes, who is very antsy to sail away to grad school? His paternal wisdom, you will remember, consists of a string of well-meant cliché-ish admonitions delivered with considerable long-windedness. Well, I am not Polonius and you are not Laertes, (although some of you can't wait to get back to your offices). I promise I won't be long-winded, yet I cannot promise that my speech will be free of clichés.

I have been asking myself what I would like to hear if I were sitting where you all sit right now. What would give me encouragement, inspiration and eagerness for the journey through the roughly 32 weeks of teaching, administration and scholarly work ahead of me? What would be helpful for me as a teacher, mentor, scholar, administrator and staff member of the so-called Calvin family?

## Calvin's seal

I want to suggest today that by looking at Calvin's seal or emblem and by reflecting on the Calvin tagline we may receive some insights for the journey. Let's start with the tagline, "Minds in the Making."

To identify the deeper meaning in "Minds in the Making" one must return to its elements — to its origins. "Minds in the Making" emerged out of a collaboration between Calvin and Crane Metamarketing, the firm hired by Calvin to help Calvin represent itself. After conducting more than a hundred interviews, spending many hours on Calvin's campus, and delving deep into the literature and research that tells the story of Calvin College, Crane reflected to Calvin its own image — those characteristics that have identified Calvin College for the last 125 years and will bring it into the next. In this reflection, Crane highlighted those qualities that set Calvin apart from its peers and led to Calvin's new campaign "Minds in the Making" — a three-part message leading to a deliberate whole.

## The Promise

Crane began by unearthing Calvin's "promise," that is, the simple statement of what a Calvin education reliably delivers. It is this: "Calvin is the distinctively Christian, academically excellent liberal arts college that shapes minds for intentional participation in the renewal of

all things." However, this "promise," while succinct, is not conducive to quick communication.

## The Tagline

A tagline, in contrast, delivers the promise in short form without compromising its depth, honesty, or accuracy — a tall order for a few words. Crane chose each word of the tagline carefully, reflecting Calvin in a simple, alliterative, memorable form — "Minds in the Making."

First of all: *Minds*. *Mind*, in fact, is a remarkably flexible word. Although it certainly denotes the intellect or reason, it also connotes a person's entire consciousness: thought, intention, desire, wishes, memory, philosophy. Through the nuances of this key word, "Minds in the Making" marks Calvin as a place where *minds* (i.e. thoughts, intentions, abilities, beliefs, feelings) undergo intellectual and spiritual formation; and also where people are consciously applying their *minds* (i.e. their whole selves) to the lifelong task of working through the Holy Spirit to accomplish world renewal. The shaping of such *minds* is the business that Calvin is about.

Secondly: *in the Making*. This phrase captures Calvin's stimulating academic environment and the exciting prospect of working as an agent of renewal in today's world. Inherent in this phrase is "the perpetual present participle" (Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, quoted by President Gaylen Byker in his inaugural address) of Reformed thinking and learning. We are never at rest. We are always reforming. We are, at our best, *in the making*.

## The All Things Concept

The promise and the tagline are part of the message completed by the neatly titled





Nancy Knol  
Column Editor  
njkno@aol.com

## Respecting Mrs. Malaprop

Nancy Knol teaches English and Religion at Grand Rapids Christian High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is co-author of the book *Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents*. Most days you can find her in Room 219.

My daughter is a poet, among other things, and recently she shared a poem with me. It was a poem about words. Some words, she writes, “rhyme but shouldn’t.” These are words like “vomit and comet, dragon and station wagon.” She continues to explore words that “should rhyme and will: for Houdini, magical and tragical,” for example. And at the very end of this delightful poem, she concludes that there are many more words that “should rhyme and don’t.” I will leave you to decide what those might be. At any rate, her poem’s ending made me think about *malapropisms*, words which are misused because they are so close in sound to the word that was actually intended. The term comes from an English play written by Richard Brinsley Sheridan in the 1770s. Mrs. Malaprop is an amusing character in the play who continually uses the wrong word. For example, she says: “I have since laid Sir Anthony’s *preposition* before her....” You get the idea. Sheridan no doubt constructed her name by using the familiar French phrase *a propos*, meaning out of place.

I remember Dr. Tiemersma, the professor from my Shakespeare class, telling us a story about malapropisms. I don’t recall all the details of his story, but apparently one of his students wrote of a woman who “tripped on the threshold and fell prostitute to the floor.” His clever note in the margin of the student’s paper was: “By now you should be able to tell the difference between a woman who falls and a fallen woman.”

But just as there are words that “should rhyme and don’t,” there are misused words that, in my opinion, really ought to

replace the correct sound-alike word. Over the years I have kept a small section in one of my journals with some of my favorite

malapropisms. They have come mostly from my students, who are especially adept at such errors. A few of them are better than what was intended, and these are the ones I would like to share:

“I have so many papers to organize ... I think I need a filling cabinet.”

“He’s serving a life sentence without pay roll.”

“That author gets so overloaded with description that you almost forget what he is writhing about.”

“Your reputation exceeds you.”

“I think he was a pigment of her imagination.”

“That night, I felt God’s presents....”

“Throw out this assignment I will be talking about Kant.”

“We are getting all this computer stuff in place in the library—it is state of the ark equipment.”

“In middle school I got some anti-depressant pills, so I can take them now every mourning.”

(and my personal favorite) “Heaven is the grand finally.”

All of this is meant primarily to amuse you. At the same time, as a new school year begins, my hope is that we are also sensitive to all the “ought to be” situations and moments we will inevitably find ourselves in as we once again return to the astonishing world of teaching. Even when gone array, our students are pretty amazing. ☺

---

“All Things” concept — a new iteration of the Reformed theology so central to Calvin. Not only are we about the making of minds, we are Reformed in our approach to this task. Crane urged Calvin to boldly identify its Reformed theology, to explain it eagerly, and to display it proudly. This would be Calvin’s acceptance of and enthusiasm for its true uniqueness. How, then, to communicate this Reformed uniqueness in an easily accessible way —

in a way that resonates with the promise and the tagline and brings the true nature of Calvin to an ever-broadening constituency?

God has created all things, and they were good. All things have fallen from their original goodness. Christ, who has redeemed all things, eventually will restore them. We aid the Spirit’s work of restoration by seeking to make all things better.

Calvin’s minds in the making are minds that, within a robust faith and a deep commitment to world renewal, remain open to the spectrum of ideas and people and experiences. Minds that engage all things and a calling that demands perpetual engagement. Reflecting, researching, responding, renewing, reforming. *In the making* indeed. ☺



## Discriminate? Age, No. Excellence, Yes.

*Tena Siebenga-Valstar serves as Education Administrator at Fort McMurray Christian School, Alberta. We encourage teachers and principals to submit questions for this column, even if they think they know the answer. Send your questions to Dr. Tena Siebenga-Valstar, 168 Windsor Dr., Fort McMurray, Alta., T9H 4R2, or e-mail her at tvalstar@telus.net.*

### Young versus older teachers

#### Question # 1:

When I was in elementary school, I always had very elderly teachers (at least from kindergarten through 4th grade). Now in my teacher aiding experiences, all of the elementary teachers who have been my cooperating teachers are very young. Do you think that it makes a difference as to the age of a teacher beginning a career, or is one more effective and suitable than another? Do kids respond better to younger teachers or do they have more respect for older teachers? (Questions from a student in a teacher education program.)

#### Response:

I am thankful to receive a question from someone at the beginning stage of her teaching career. I don't believe age has a lot to do with how students respond to their teacher. Some appreciate the "grandmotherly" characteristics of a teacher, while others enjoy the vitality of youth. I have seen a teacher of many years of experience be quite youthful in her approach and, on the other hand, have seen a teacher beginning a career exhibit perceptive, loving care, often associated with the grandmotherly type. I believe an essential factor is one's own discipline of an exemplary Christian life and a willingness to readily serve the Lord. That means a teacher can't just say, "I love children"; there has to be action behind those words. During one's training to become a teacher, I would expect the practicum student to learn about child development and how to handle children in various circumstances. Your practicum experiences and opportunities to volunteer will give hands-on experience in working with children from various home backgrounds who exhibit all types of behaviors, thus giving you the opportunity to act out, "I love this child." Practicum students are wise to become as knowledgeable as possible in learning how to respond to potential classroom situations. The advantage experienced teachers have is more, life experiences inside and outside the classroom experiences which may equip them to handle a challenge. I have also seen beginning

teachers operate with calmness and confidence.

As Christian teachers we acknowledge that all children are image bearers of God, uniquely created with their own gifts and talents. Another way of expressing that is, "You never look into the eyes of anyone who does not matter to God." It is your love of God, your respect for that which he has made, and your willingness to serve both God and each student which will make you a teacher whom your students would be able to love and respect. That means you have to grow as a teacher. It means you have to be willing to learn from others — both from your colleagues and those in authority over you as well as the parents of your students. The way in which a teacher responds or reacts to a child immediately sets the tone for the child. Children will feel that they can trust the teacher, and the teacher will have to work at creating a trusting environment for the students. Teachers' confidence in their own preparation or expertise in teaching also is a factor in students' receptivity to a teacher.

### Is excellence always measurable?

#### Question # 2:

Many parents choose a school for their children based on their demand for excellence in education. What they usually mean is that students will be held to high standards. They may look at class size, at variety of choice in the curriculum or at strict discipline to determine what is the best school for their child. As a principal I think that Christian schools should and do provide excellent education, but I don't think that everyone agrees on what constitutes excellence. How do I best explain that some things that make for excellence are not measurable?

#### Response:

I believe that all of our actions are measurable as being either for or against God. Many parents who wish to have their children enrolled in a Christian school indicate that the primary reason is that they want their children to receive a Christ-centered education. God's word tells us what Christ-centered entails. Just before his ascension to heaven, Jesus not only instructed us to make disciples, but also to teach "them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28: 20). Jesus also said in John 14, "If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you



Tena Siebenga-Valstar  
tvalstar@telus.net

forever — the Spirit of truth.” The Holy Spirit was sent, as Jesus had promised, to guide us in all truth. Our goal in education is to follow Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life, and to acknowledge him as Lord of creation and of our lives. Keeping this as our focus, we must not lose sight of the fact that Christian schools are educational institutions and therefore accountability is required.

Some aspects of schooling, such as the extent to which a student grasps math concepts or the level at which one is able to read, are measurable. We are more reluctant to measure a student’s faith — their belief in God and how their faith affects their life. The writings of Stronks & Blomberg (1993) indicate that we teach our students to live with wisdom and insight as responsive followers of Christ. “To be wise means to know how to *act* rightly in specific situations. To act *rightly* means to respond obediently, to act in conformity with God’s will.... If we are truly wise, we have the insight to see things in terms of their relation to Christ and his service.” Stronks & Blomberg continue: “Wisdom is thus rooted in faith and leads to a walk of faithfulness. With wisdom comes a passion to know more, to understand more, and to be able to do more, in a world we recognize as an abundantly rich home for God’s people”(p. 130 -131).

When Paul was writing to the Macedonians (2 Corinthians: 8), he referred to them as first giving themselves to the Lord, then keeping God’s will and excelling “in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us....” This is a statement in which Paul has measured their actions. I believe the Bible clearly indicates that it is through our actions that we show that we love Jesus and want to obey him.

Many of our student report cards evaluate the ways in which students live up to the school’s mission statement. This is done by determining if the student respects those with whom she works, cooperates with others in their learning group, exhibits a servant attitude, desires to go beyond what is expected, or uses discernment in analyzing current situations.

There are also many aspects of a Christian school that can be evaluated. Does the staff exhibit Christ-like character in the way they relate to the students? Are they loving, respectful and understanding? Do they show the fruit of the Spirit? Do teachers consistently grow in their understanding of what it means to be a Christian and how they can present their curricular material from a Christian perspective? Do teachers present students with curricular questions or social situations that encourage students to use Biblical principles? Are students encouraged to use discernment in the daily challenges of life? Are students daily confronted with the challenge that all of our life actions point

either toward Christ or away from him and students, therefore, have to use wisdom (in the biblical sense) in every challenge they face? Do we as a school accept the world’s standard or do we confront it? Do we transform culture or do we avoid it? Are students given opportunities to grow in their faith? Are students showing the fruit of the spirit? Do students honor others more highly than themselves? Are students growing in their faith? Do they encourage one another to grow in the knowledge of their Lord and Savior?

Recently I was working on an educational document in which each statement had to be written so that the action flowing from the statement could be monitored. In another project the staff and I were creating rubrics to monitor our students’ writing. This rubric defined the acceptable standard, the standard of excellence, and the characteristics which indicated the student was approaching the standard of excellence. Are we willing to define the standard of excellence for our schools as consistently obeying what Jesus commanded? What, then, would be the acceptable standard? Yes, I realize we are all tainted by sin, but God’s word consistently reminds us to strive for the goal. We are reminded in Colossians 3:17: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father through him.” I challenge all of us to consider seriously how we can define excellence in Christian education in terms of how Jesus calls us to live.

#### Reference:

Stronks, G. G. & Blomberg, D. (1993) *A Vision with a Task. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.* ©

# Book Reviews

Norman De Jong and Jack Van der Slik, *Separation of Church and State: The Myth Revisited*. Ontario, Canada: P aideia Press, 1985. 208 Pages. \$11.95. Now available at Dr. Norman De Jong, 957 Amber View Drive, Byron Center, Michigan, 49315. See also: [www.redeemerbooks.com](http://www.redeemerbooks.com). Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele, Calvin College (Emeritus)

I must say at the outset that anyone wishing to inform himself about how significantly the Christian faith defined the ideology of the new country and shaped its political documents should procure this book. With painstaking thoroughness the authors examined not only the background to the First Amendment, respecting established religion, but also ecclesiastical statements from past centuries, the constitutions of the states, and such documents as the Northwestern Ordinance, designating lot 29 in each township to be used for the promotion of religion. They bring their study up to the year 1947, when Justice Blackwell, speaking for the majority in *Everson vs. Board of Education*, launched the term “wall of separation of church and state” — a term he borrowed from a letter Jefferson wrote to a friend — and by doing so altered forever — and mistakenly, they contend — the terms of the debate about the relationship between these two entities. Their promotional materials remind us of Black’s anti-Catholic bias and Ku Klux Klan connections. The book is a reprint of their thinking first published in 1985.

The authors are to be commended for this far-ranging presentation. It took courage for them to undertake this study in a climate not altogether hospitable to their point of view. They plead that we recognize that the doctrine of the separation of church and state is a myth that has been foisted on us — “an immovable plank but an annoyance which we wish were not there.”

And what could be more relevant than their study? Think of the problems that have risen since they wrote the book: the debate at the Air Force Academy about chaplains allegedly proselytizing for the Christian faith; the proper pedagogy to deal with the Intelligent Design movement; the growing demand that religious social agencies be more inclusive in their adoption policies; and, very recently, the attempt by an atheist to have the motto “In God we trust” removed from our coins. And the implications for education continue to be enormous.

## State endorsed

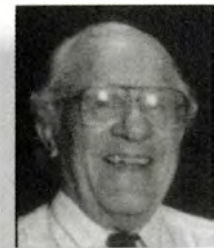
What the authors do, of course, is affirm the Constantinian legacy, which began in A.D. 313, with the Edict of Toleration. That edict (also known as the Edict of Milan) declared the Christian religion to be *religio licita* (a permitted cult), the effect of which was to cease defining Christianity as sacrilege and treason and to end persecution. A further Edict was enacted that made Christianity the one and only legitimate faith; it became the “right” religion and made all the other religions “wrong.” Constantine used his powers to promote Christianity and to place all other religions on the defensive. He had precursors of the medieval

cathedrals built at public expense and paid functionaries of the church out of the public treasury. Clerics were freed from the burden of taxes. Eventually penalties were imposed on the opposition. Christianity, with its favored status, became an institution of great power.

It is in this context that we must view what the authors of the book tell us about subsequent church history, as various denominations wrote into their creeds that the reigning authorities were obliged not only to preserve the general welfare but also to promulgate the Christian faith. The Belgic Confession put it this way: “Their office (kings, princes, magistrates) is not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship, that the kingdom of antichrist may be thus destroyed and the kingdom of Christ promoted.” Established churches — Anglican and Lutheran, for example — likewise closely linked the cause of church and state in their creed.

What the authors ought to have done is to report that this statement was removed from the Belgic Confession in 1910, along with explanatory notes to the effect that this position was no longer regarded as biblical. But it would have been inconvenient for them to do so.

The position that church and state are discrete entities and need — with appropriate qualifications — to be kept separate has been stoutly defended by Leonard Verduin in his book *The Anatomy of a Hybrid* (Eerdmans, 1976). Verduin defines a pattern that is common to nations and civilizations at their beginning. It was common to Israel as well — though in a very unique sense. Such nations adopt what he calls a sacral posture towards religion. State and religion are intertwined; the state defines the proper religious practices and attitudes, and all must fall in line. But (so Verduin says) this begins to change with the New Testament. A new spirit, a new leaven, comes into being. For the next several centuries Christians were variously persecuted, then tolerated, all depending on changing rulers and circumstances. A letter known as The Epistle to Diognetus, dated toward the end of the second century, describes what seems to be a typical lifestyle for Christians — they live among their pagan neighbors, not advertising their beliefs in inappropriate ways, but living as sojourners and pilgrims. The tract says, “They reside on earth but their citizenship is in heaven.” (Verduin, 92) Verduin contends that history is not flat, but progresses, and that this new state of affairs — based on a separation of spiritual and temporal forces — is a natural culmination of lessons derived from human



Steve J. Van Der Weele  
svweele@calvin.edu

experience and the new dispensation that Christianity introduced.

### Competing spheres

Verduin goes on to say that Constantine had no sense of such progression, and that in his edicts he turned the clock back to a sacral way of ordering society — a person was born into the religion of the state and was expected to observe its rituals and traditions. Constantine did the Church a service in many ways, of course, by ending persecution and freeing believers to propagate the faith freely. And the influence of his edicts continued well into American colonial history, where nine of fourteen states required, in their Constitution, that office holders take oaths of their fealty to the Christian faith. They were to be found in their offices during the week, and in church on Sunday. De Jong and Van der Slik rejoice in that arrangement and regret that the

combination of Jefferson, the Baptists, and Justice Black, with their insistence on “a wall of separation” between church and state, have done the cause of the faith much harm.

Verduin sees things otherwise. He regards state and church as two competing entities, with the church as a “rival” religion. He would have it that we ought not to seek favors from the state (he might include the Ten Commandments on the wall, prayer in public schools, and the rest) that would make us too complacent about our witness. I hope the authors will accept the challenge to do some further reflecting on whether it would be a good thing for us to get what we sometimes seem to be asking for — a state controlled by religious folk, which will entail a Church at some level beholden to the State. ☺

*Back by Public Demand* Three anthologies published by Christian Schools International, Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2006. Reviewed by Steve Van Der Weele, emeritus professor of English at Calvin College, Grand Rapids.

Christian Schools International has recently (2006) released revisions of its three anthologies of selected readings for high school students, on the subject of the Christian faith. The titles are as follows: *Exploring Ethics*, *Exploring Apologetics*, and *Exploring Faith and Discipleship*.

This valuable resource has served teachers and students well over, roughly, the past decade when the collections were first published. The project was launched at the request of teachers themselves. Some essays have been dropped, others added in this revision. The selections in these anthologies have served to structure courses in Bible and theology programs. They can also serve as a source of supplementary readings for other courses, such as government, social studies, the sciences, and literature. And discerning students who see the wisdom of acquiring these books for their personal libraries (do high school students consider building a library?) will find them useful well beyond their high school days and will find more than a few selections useful for college courses.

### Making choices

*Exploring Ethics* consists of 50 essays, organized as follows: A definition of ethics, making choices, exploring such issues as work, sexuality, earthkeeping, wealth and poverty, racism, medical ethics, war and peace. As is true of the other two collections, the selections represent some of the best contemporary thinking on these topics appropriate to the academic level for which the series

was designed. There is a range from simpler to more difficult — from the narration by Akihiro Takahashi, “The Day the Bomb Hit: A Hiroshima Bomb Survivor Remembers,” to Nicholas Wolterstorff’s call to reflection about war and the imperative of abolishing nuclear weapons.

### Building defences

One will not find in *Exploring Apologetics* Anselm’s arguments for the existence of God (or, for that matter, Al Plantinga’s scholarly refinements on Anselm and other philosophers), but he or she will find a selection of helpful essays defending the Christian faith against its detractors, and a final section consisting of robust affirmations of the faith — including John Updike’s poem “Seven Stanzas at Easter.” The 35 essays consist of responses to the following objections held by various folk: the possibility of miracles, the claim to exclusivity, the authority of Scripture, the hypocrisy of many church members, the relevance of biblical wisdom to daily living, along with Christianity as a source of oppression and as a crutch for weak people. Obviously, in any confrontation between belief and unbelief, there comes a point where contrasting mindsets are acknowledged and arguments end. But these essays will fortify students against the common fallacies people often attribute to the Christian faith.

### Growing in faith

*Exploring Faith and Discipleship* (41 essays) is the correct title for the third anthology. The first section on faith, entitled

“Believing,” alone consists of ten essays, from St. Augustine to writings by authors known to many of us — Cornelius Plantinga and Frederick Buechner among them. The sections under discipleship are organized under the titles “Counting the Cost,” “Living the Christian Life,” “Growing in Faith,” “Sharing our Faith,” “Serving/Relating to Others,” and “Worship.” Three essays in this last group speak wisely about the importance for the believer of harboring a passion for the church, including regular attendance and willing participation in the life of the church.

#### Enriching authors

Adult readers will recognize many of the writers who have been a part of their formation — C. S. Lewis, Lewis Smedes, Philip Yancey, Richard Mouw, and Walter Wangerin among them.

Teachers will continue to find delight in introducing these writers — along with some less familiar ones — to their students. The essays are accessible but challenging, employ narrative and metaphor with artistry, and display essential commitment to the Christian faith. A range of approaches to the issues discussed make for both depth and breadth. Carefully formulated questions at the end of each essay will guide the student in his reading.

The Director and staff of CSI are to be congratulated on the reissue of what was a good resource to begin with. The books can be purchased for \$20.00 per copy. They must be ordered from Christian Schools International, 3350 East Paris, SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 49512 - 3054. ©

### Six Quick and Easy Christmas Plays by Laura and Robert Keeley

*The following notes contain information about six brief Christmas plays for children, written by Laura and Robert Keeley between 2000 and 2006. The Keeleys are co-directors of children's ministries at Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan. Robert Keeley is Chairman of the Education Department at Calvin College.*

The authors describe the plays as “quick and easy”; the plays require little preparation. The authors provide helpful suggestions about casting, costumes, props, and music. The first one, *Just the Facts* (2000) was published by In Celebration: A Division of Instructional Fair Group, Inc., Grand Rapids, 49544. The other five have been published by Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave., SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 49560. Arrangements for use are very generous. For the purchase of one copy (about \$20.00) the users may make as many copies as needed for the production

*Just the Facts* — The peace keepers of Bethlehem, responding to uneasiness in the village, try to sort out a series of episodes that had been reported the last several weeks. But they fail to connect the dots. The arrival of Simeon on the scene lets everything fall into place. The mantra “Just the Facts” lacks explanatory power.

*Not Forgotten* — The Sunday School children are wondering whether, in view of the world's pathology, it is fitting to do a Christmas play this year. But six mini-dramas dealing with six Old Testament stories (Exodus, Elijah, etc.,) convince the children

that God is indeed active in history, and they agree to make themselves available for the annual Christmas play.

*Promises, Promises* — Are God's promises still reliable? Well, we have the story of Noah, Sarah and Abraham, the capture of Jericho, and the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. Ben and Julie come to understand that Christmas is exactly that — the fulfillment of promises.

*I've Got Mail* — Because God is with us always, Christmas is all year long. It makes some sense, therefore, to send Christmas cards any month of the year — January, December, May, September, July. The name Immanuel undergoes careful exegesis.

*The Very Best Gift of All* — Children are placed in one of three groups and given the assignment to discuss the roles of the various characters in the Christmas narrative. They must answer the question, What did these characters give to the Christmas event? Each group comes to the conclusion that the characters gave little but received the very best gift of all — the God who became man for our sake.

*Manger King* — Three children living at the time of Jesus' birth discuss how they will recognize the Messiah when he comes. They agree, more or less, that the Messiah will approximate the ideal of King David. The Messiah will be a shepherd who cares, a protector of his people, a warrior who will defeat our enemies, and an obedient king. But then the shepherds come and announce that the Messiah has been born — of all places — in a manger. Now they need to adjust their expectations about what the Messiah will be like as the baby becomes, indeed, a king. ©