

A forum for Christian school educators

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**Serving the Academically-Talented Student**





Bert Witvoet

## What We Can Learn From African Society

In one of my workshops for educators in South Africa last April, I made reference to an article by Stuart Fowler, an Australian educator, who contrasted the dominant Western view of the human person with the dominant African view. Fowler writes, "In the dominant Western view individuality defines the person.... By contrast, traditional Africans think that the social group defines the person; what is central to the human person is not individuality but membership in a community." ("Communities, Organizations and People" in the June 1993 issue of *Pro Rege*.)

I told the South African educators that we Westerners could learn about community from them. We tend to reduce everything to the individual. We live isolated lives. We dare not enter each other's homes without making an appointment or without being invited. Parents are losing connections with their children. Many children have little sense of loyalty to the family and are not willing to submit to the authority of parents and teachers.

### Judicial interference

This became painfully clear again this month when a 12-year-old girl in Quebec took her father to court because he had grounded her from an end-of-year school excursion. Apparently the girl had disobeyed her father about her use of the Internet — she had posted indecent pictures of herself on the Web. The father decided to show his daughter that her disobedience was unacceptable. He grounded her. The girl, supported by her non-custodial mother and a willing lawyer, tried to have her father's decision overturned. The judge who heard her case agreed with the girl that the father's punishment had been too harsh and that he had robbed her of her "right" to attend an important school event.

Here's an extreme example of how the dominant Western view of personhood is reduced to the will of an individual — in this case, a pubescent individual with an overdose of rebellious hormones. The judge in question glibly dismantled the family structure and reduced the issue of disobedience to a human right. The 12-year-old did not take her identity from the community, from her family, but she took it from the absolute authority of her own individual will.

### The force of tradition

I did tell my South African friends that their situation is not perfect either. They could learn something from the West about freedom. I used as example our four married sons. I told them that all of them can, and do, cook meals. They all take part in household duties. They all have taken turns changing the baby's diaper. One of our son's weekly task is to do the laundry. So I

asked the men in the group, "How would you like to change your baby's diaper or do the laundry or even sweep the driveway?" The response was a collective expression of horror and a downright rejection of such a notion. "What would the neighbors say? They would think that we had married a witch who had certain powers over us." They admitted that they took their identity from the community.

Even the women did not necessarily think it was a good idea. The South African women we met are used to preparing the meal, serving the meal, praying a blessing on the meal, and then withdrawing into the kitchen to eat their own serving. "How free are you to do what makes sense?" I asked. "Today both men and women often work out of the home, also in South Africa. Doesn't it make sense to share some of the household duties?" "Yes, but that goes against our tradition!"

My wife, Alice, challenged the principal of a Christian school when she questioned why a husband we saw walking on the side of the road with his wife, allowed her to carry a heavy load of branches while he airily trotted along, holding an axe. My wife suggested that he carry the heavy load. "That's not allowed," the principal responded matter-of-factly. "He cuts the branches; she carries them."

### No communal taboos

But when I read in a North American paper that a bunch of teenaged girls from Gloucester, Massachusetts, agreed to all get pregnant and then raise their kids together, I thought, "Maybe African society is not so bad after all with its traditional mores." I suppose one could say that the pregnancy agreement displays a slight sense of community. The girls, allegedly, hope to raise the kids together. Not that I put much stock in that hope of raising kids together. They are not mature enough to form a true community. Besides, what is their idea of family and fatherhood? Where is the notion that children need to be born out of the committed love relationship of a man and a woman? One of the Gloucester girls apparently got pregnant through a homeless guy in town. Having babies is not the same as going to Disneyland together or throwing a party for grad night.

The two separate incidents named above indicate what's wrong with North American society. It shows the breakdown of authority — the notion of rights without responsibilities, the lack of communal taboos, the breakdown of family, the focus on having fun to the point where babies become toys. William Gairdner in *Oh! Oh! Canada* calls it the breakdown of the "molecule" of the traditional family and the "atomization" of society.



## What can we do?

As Christians we need to sit up and take notice. We need more than ever before to maintain or create an alternative to the dominant popular culture. Not that we will entirely escape the breakdown of community. Statistics about Christians in America say that 40% of their marriages fail. The fact that the rate of divorce is almost as high among Christians as it is in the rest of society tells us that "the world is too much with us." Marriages begun with the best of intentions don't seem to hold together in a society that has removed too many support structures and offers too many distractions and alternatives.

We need to find new ways of being communities. Churches can do it by forming small groups and organizing youth activities. Christian schools can focus on being intentional communities by working with a common vision, creating an atmosphere of love and trust, and developing an ethos of leadership for service (Gloria Stronks and Doug Blomberg in "How Do We Forge a Community for Learning?") Families can focus on activities that bring the family together — activities that minimize such isolating practices as watching TV, escaping into the world of the computer and Internet and listening to I-Pods.

## Take time to be what?

But above all, we have to slow down the pace of life. We can't build community on the run. We need to take time to reflect and to look at each other. We tend to act as if God made a huge mistake when he created a 24-hour day and night. We think we need more time. We don't. We only need to set our priorities right and take the time that God has made available for doing essential and constructive things. According to a Christian orga-

nization called Man in the Mirror, "for every 10 men in your church, 10 are struggling to balance work and family." This, too, says something about the pace of life in North America.

We used to sing the hymn "Take Time to Be Holy," until we decided in our better wisdom that holiness cannot be a part-time job. We are called to be holy all the time, at work and at play. Absolutely! But the intent of the hymn was to say that we need to set aside time for taking stock and nourishing the inner person, because "the world rushes on," says one line in that hymn. So the hymn writer urges us to "speak oft with thy Lord ... feed on his Word ... make friends with God's children ... help those who are weak ... be calm in thy soul ... each thought and each motive beneath his control." That's not such bad advice, is it? If only the hymn writer had begun his composition with "Take time to be centered!" I know ... that still leaves us with the last line: "Thou soon shalt be fitted for service above."

## A time for redemption

This June one of our married sons and his wife adopted a nine-month-old baby boy who had been forsaken by his parents. I'd like to think that our son and daughter-in-law have rescued this little guy from a society that is falling apart and have brought it into a community of accountability and love. According to a letter to the editor in the *National Post*, author Alistair MacLeod once wrote: "We are all better when we are loved." So true, especially if that love comes from a Christian couple who is part of a Christian community. That little boy will soon be fitted for service below and will take his identity from his family and from his Christian community in Vancouver, the Lord willing.

Bert Witvoet

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# Developing Talents in the Christian School

By Joan Stob

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The field of Talent Development in Education is the only one I know of that has its origin in one of Jesus' parables. The concept and word "talent" come directly from the parable of the talents, found in Matthew 25: 14-30. You remember the story — a landowner goes on a journey and leaves talents (money) with his servants to be invested, each according to his ability. The servant who receives five talents earns five more and the servant who receives two talents earns two more. But the servant who receives one talent hides it in a hole because he is afraid of losing it. The master praises and rewards the first two, but is angry with the last servant and punishes him.

## Implications of the Parable for Talent Development

The parable has been interpreted to mean that we must faithfully use what God gives us for his kingdom. But what do the talents represent — what does God give us? Some interpret the talents as referring to the material blessings that we are to invest in kingdom causes. Some say they are spiritual gifts that we are responsible for developing. And others refer to the natural abilities we are blessed with and that we must use to further kingdom work. The answer, of course, is all of the above.

This parable jars adult Christians into self-examination about whether or not they live safe, risk-free lives, or live on the edge and put themselves and whatever God has given them to work for God's kingdom. It also has implications for what we teach our children and the way we teach them. They, too, need to learn how to recognize

what God has given them and how they can learn to use it for His kingdom.

Christian schools ought to be at the forefront in the field of talent development — but talent development for the sake of service rather than for self-realization. The mission statements of most Christian schools usually include the aim to fully develop each child's God-given potential. It is certainly true that God gives all students gifts — musical, academic, athletic, social, spiritual, and artistic gifts. But like the landowner, God gives some students more gifts than others and imparts giftedness in various degrees.

This article will narrow its focus to academic gifts, since that is the school's primary sphere of responsibility. The academic gifts of students "in the middle" are generally developed sufficiently by the regular curriculum, and the gifts of those who struggle, by the special education program. But do students who have the most academic potential also have the opportunity in school to fully develop that potential? Or are highly gifted students given exactly the same instruction as the rest of the students in the interest of "fairness"? In most Christian schools that do not have a talent development program, highly gifted students work only occasionally at their ability level. If they happen to have a highly gifted teacher who understands how to appropriately challenge them, it will be a good year or class, but if they do not, they will likely be bored and unhappy, and they may even misbehave.

## Results of Not Developing Gifts

Too often Christian school leaders consider special education for gifted students an unaffordable luxury, believing that because of their intelligence highly gifted students will do just fine. But the parable of the talents accurately shows us what happens to those who do not develop their

gifts. The first result is a fear of failure. The servant was afraid that he would fail at using the talent and so he hid it. Academically talented students who are not challenged do not learn how to handle failure (or even incomplete success) at something, and so they may become less and less willing to risk. They are perceptive enough to understand the stigma attached to failure, and they may become perfectionists, emotionally driven to never step outside the boxes they and others have drawn around them.

A second result of not developing one's gifts is poor management skills. The servant who hid the talent did not need to plan a course of action for what to do with the talent, or monitor how much it was earning and make necessary adjustments. So, too, students who never need to study for a test, who do their homework on the ten-minute bus ride home, and who can write a paper before breakfast the day it is due are not likely to learn the management skills of planning, budgeting time, and persistence in working at difficult tasks.

A third result is, ironically, low self-esteem. Although they have so much ability, they begin to doubt their own potential because they have never had to withstand a test of it. Success, and the self-esteem that comes along with it, are not achieved by doing well what comes easily but by overcoming obstacles. When their fear of failure, poor management skills, and low self-esteem catch up with them, the "underchallenged" can become the "underachievers," who may try to blame others for having too high expectations, just as the servant blames his master for expecting too much.

Eventually their high potential may wither from lack of nurturing, and even what they had seems to be taken away from them. Reaction to this withering becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy — "I guess he



wasn't as smart as we thought he was." Or, "She was an early bloomer, but then everyone caught up to her." In the worst scenario, clinical depression sets in — perhaps the modern version of darkness and "weeping and gnashing of teeth"? Even with the right amount of challenge and support, the emotional health of highly gifted students can be precarious. Either ignoring or under-serving their needs can be downright dangerous to their mental health, not to mention the wasted potential of God's good gifts.

### **Roles of the family and school**

By God's grace, many talented students in Christian schools survive and even thrive — thanks as much to the strength of their families as the excellence of their schools in meeting their needs. Many times their parents, who are often also highly gifted, understand what their children need. They provide emotional support and discipline and find ways to challenge them through camps, classes, and teams. They provide resources for them to pursue their interests and obsessions. They take interesting family trips, go to concerts and plays, and make weekly trips to the library. But they know they cannot meet their children's needs by themselves. They need the school to be a partner that recognizes their child's academic potential and works with them to make school a place for developing that potential. If that does not happen in their local Christian school, they are tempted to find another school — or resort to home-school — to provide an appropriate education for their child.

What should Christian schools do for highly gifted students? There are no "magic bullet" programs or policies that meet the needs of all gifted students because gifted students are different from each other and have different needs. The field of gifted education has moved beyond using a list

of characteristics to distinguish gifted from non-gifted students and grouping all gifted students together for a special class. The focus now is on assessing what each student's gifts are and on making appropriate adjustments in curriculum, classes, and expectations for the nature and level of the gifts.

### **Differentiating Instruction**

The trend is to ask teachers to differentiate instruction for ability within their classrooms. Instead of relying on whole class instruction followed by identical assignments for each student, the teacher plans instruction with groupings of students and assignments of varying difficulty so that all students are challenged without being overwhelmed. Differentiated instruction can be very effective for meeting the needs of all students, including those with academic gifts. But it takes excellent teachers who have been well trained and who have the time, administrative support, and peer support to develop a differentiated curriculum. This way of teaching is so different from what most of us have experienced ourselves as students and as teachers (unless we learned or taught in a one-room school) that it requires an extensive amount of retraining and summer curricu-

lum development. It also requires non-traditional methods of assessment and good communication with parents about what's going on and how it's different from what they are used to.

One way to ease into differentiation is to adopt a differentiated curriculum in certain subject areas. Many of the latest approaches to language arts build differentiation into the curriculum, for example. Reading programs use assessments, leveled reading groups, literature circles, and leveled independent reading to make sure all students are progressing in their reading development. Language study and spelling curricula structure ways to differentiate language tasks and individualize spelling lists. Writing programs structure students' development in writing ability according to categories of criteria which challenge even the best writers.

It is more difficult to find already differentiated curricula in other subject areas. If the texts and teacher guides include anything to challenge bright students, it is usually an added assignment at the end of the lesson. Although much of the content in subjects such as social studies, science, and Bible is new to students, highly gifted students usually absorb the information quickly. A good teacher will involve them in a challenging project or assignment in an area that intrigues them, one that can be presented to the class later. It is relatively easy to enrich a content-area subject in this way, but the teacher must be careful to avoid the perception (or the reality) that the bright students are being punished with more work because of their abilities. It is better to differentiate ways of learning and tasks throughout, differentiating for interest as well as for aptitude.

Perhaps the most difficult subject to differentiate is mathematics, and yet it is one in which gifted students get the most frus-

## **About This Issue**

Not only has Joan Stob, a member of the CEJ Board, written the main theme article for this issue; she has also collected and edited articles from other writers that focus on the theme: "How Do We Meet the Needs of Academically Gifted Students?" Thank you, Joan!

**B.W.**



trated and bored. In mathematics instruction, pacing is everything. The teacher must pace instruction so that students get enough exposure to a concept and practice in a skill so that they are able to go on to the next concept and skill, which often builds upon the one just learned. But some students need 10 exposures and 20 or 30 practices while others in the same grade catch on with one exposure and five practices. Or, maybe, who knows how, they came into class already knowing the concept and being able to do the skill.

In a typical math class of mixed ability students, the mathematically gifted students spend much of the time waiting for the rest of the students to catch on. Providing math enrichment activities as a "sponge" is one way good teachers cope with the early finishers. But there are only so many challenging enrichment activities that do not require further instruction from the teacher. To provide appropriate instruction at so many different ability levels simultaneously is a challenge for even the best

teachers. Some teachers have the gifted math students "work ahead" on their own, but this is not ideal, as it can lead to misunderstanding concepts and insufficient or inaccurate practice.

This is why, if any subject is tracked in a school, it is usually math. Tracking math in high school is quite common, and many middle schools do it as well. Tracking narrows the range of ability that a teacher faces and makes it more likely that the pace of instruction will be relatively close to the needs of each student. Tracking does have social consequences. In our competitive society, students will label the slowest track "dummy math" no matter what its official name is, and some may resist being put in it. But most of them, and their parents, appreciate having a class which slows the pace of teaching math to one which matches their pace of learning it. At the other end, academically talented students appreciate the faster pace which allows them to move ahead by taking more enrichment "side trips" with the teacher into

fascinating mathematical topics.

### Enrichment Outside the Classroom

Differentiation within the classroom is not the only option for meeting the needs of gifted students at school. Enrichment groups focused on an academic area can be one way to differentiate instruction for academically talented students. Ideally these groups should be taught by a talent-development specialist who has training in and passion for teaching gifted students. At least the teacher should be a staff member who has experience with gifted students and empathy for them, perhaps from his or her own experience as a gifted student or as a parent of a gifted student.

During these enrichment groups the teacher can push students to their edge, to where they are not sure whether or not they can solve a problem or answer a question. They learn how to be persistent and how to handle it when others are better than they are at something academic. This pushing to the edge rarely happens in the

### Academic Competitions and Enrichment Programs

#### Creative Problem Solving

Odyssey of the Mind (all levels)  
Destination Imagination (all levels)  
Future Problem Solving (grades 4-12)

#### Mathematical Problem Solving

Math Pentathlon (K-7)  
Online math league (grades 2-8)  
Continental Math League contests (grades 2-high school)  
Math Counts (middle school)  
American Mathematics Competition (middle school and high school)  
Canadian Mathematics Competition (middle school and high school)  
International Mathematics Olympiad (high school)  
Mandelbrot Competition (high school)

#### Language Arts Related

WordMasters (grades 3-12)  
Junior Great Books (K-12)  
Scripps Spelling Bee (grades 5-8)  
Writing contests

National Language Arts League (grades 2-high school)

#### Social Studies Related

National Geographic Bee (grades 4-8)  
We the People (students in a U.S. high school government class)  
Stock Market Game (grades 4-high school)  
Junior Achievement (K-high school)  
National History Day (grades 6-high school)  
National Social Studies League (grades 2-high school)  
National Current Events League (grades

5-high school)

Geography Challenge (grades 2-high school)

#### Science and Engineering Related

FIRST Robotics Competition (high school)  
FIRST Lego League (middle school)  
Science Olympiad (middle school and high school)  
Young Inventors Program (grades 2-8, US)  
ExploraVision Awards (grades K-12, US and Canada)  
National Science League (grades 2-high school)

#### Miscellaneous

Chess Tournaments  
Quiz Bowls

regular classroom because it leaves the rest of the group behind in a heterogeneous or whole-group situation. If the classroom teacher uses homogeneous groups, most of his or her attention will be absorbed by the groups with the least ability. If the highest level group is out of the room with the talent development specialist, the range of ability narrows for the classroom teacher, and he or she is freed to work on information, concepts, or skills that the rest of the class needs.

Enrichment groups should be targeted to an academic subject, and only those students who have talent in that subject area should be part of the group. So a student could be good in math, but not reading, for example, and attend only the math group. Typically, the groups meet about once a week for one half to one hour. Selection of enrichment group members can be done via standardized testing, as Timothy Christian does (see Ann Bakker's article on page 12) or via teacher recommendation. High performance on tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills can also be used as a positive indication of high ability. Since there are many reasons for poor performance on tests, poor or average performance on them is not necessarily a negative indication of ability.

Some schools use independent studies as an option for meeting the needs of highly gifted students. These can work very well for students who are already self-disciplined enough to develop and follow a schedule and who can work on their own without getting distracted or overwhelmed. But many highly gifted students do not have those skills. They need a fair amount of the teacher's time and supervision to accomplish their great ideas, and the "independent" part of the study becomes a misnomer.

Extra-curricular options at school can provide another way to meet students'

needs for challenge and learning something new. Examples of these are exploratories, clubs, and academic competition teams. (See Sue Lesky's article about *Odyssey of the Mind* on page 14). These activities can be open to all interested students, though there may need to be tryouts for teams when space is limited. One of the major benefits to these options is social as well as academic. Talented students find others who are interested in the same things that they are, and they are able to build friendships around common interests. (See the sidebar for a list of typical groups that students can be involved in.) These groups can be led by interested parents or staff who share their passion with students and serve as role models.

### Acceleration

One of the least expensive and most effective ways to meet a highly gifted student's academic needs is acceleration. This can be a whole-grade acceleration, usually done in early elementary school, or acceleration in a single subject. Research on acceleration of all kinds finds few negative effects associated with it, and it finds that it has a higher positive impact on learning than other interventions for gifted students (Colangelo, Assouline, Gross, 2004). If a child is emotionally and socially well adjusted, skipping a grade is often the easiest way to make school more challenging—but it is often not enough. The accelerated student will still likely be at the top of the class and will still need additional enrichment and differentiation. If a student is extremely gifted, radical acceleration (skipping several grades) is also possible, as long as the class the student is entering provides sufficient emotional and social support along with the academic challenge.

Acceleration in a single subject is another way to provide academic challenge. Joining an older class for just one subject

still leaves the student with age peers for most of the day. Some highly gifted students do very well in special fast-paced or highly-enriched classes that they take with their academic peers. Often these students participate in a regional Talent Search program in which they take the ACT or SAT in middle school to see if these classes are appropriate for them. Some regional education centers, colleges, or Intermediate school districts offer programs, usually in Math or English, in which students take a once a week class that replaces their regular class at school.

Online replacement classes are another option for students who work well independently. The Christian Learning Center now offers on-line replacement classes in mathematics and English for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students (See Becci Zwier's article on page 9 and Cindy Kessel's article on page 11). Many colleges and universities also offer summer classes designed for high-ability students to challenge them in their areas of talent and interest.

Because there are so many options for developing talents, each school needs someone whose responsibility it is to lead the staff's efforts in this area. School administrators typically have so much else to do, that talent development will be far down the priority list. One appropriately compensated go-to staff member should be in charge of seeking out in-services in talent development, coordinating and communicating enrichment opportunities, and shepherding parents and teachers through the school's procedures for accelerating students.

### Results of Appropriate Talent Development

Earlier we looked at what can happen if academically talented students are not challenged. What can we expect if they are appropriately challenged? Some fear that



special programs for gifted students will inflate their egos and they will see themselves as elite, as better than the other students. This is a real possibility, and so we must infuse gifted education with teaching humility, knowledge of strengths and weaknesses, and the value of all people as God's image bearers. God expects them to use the gifts they have been given not for selfish gain but to serve others. They can share what they learn in presentations, they can perform for other's entertainment, and they can help others learn through tutoring.

We can expect appropriately educated gifted students to take responsibility for leadership, both now and in the future. As self-sustaining, risk-taking learners they will have the drive and the persistence to solve tough problems and tackle what's

wrong with the world. They will multiply what God has given them through using it for his kingdom and they will receive this comment on God's report card: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness." (Matthew 25:23)

It is interesting that the parable concludes with happiness as the reward, because happiness is the most immediately noticeable consequence of appropriate talent development. The students in my group and the groups of my other talent development specialists are so happy to be there. They delight in being challenged, and they love being pushed. We "get" how their minds work and we give them just enough

support. They become fully engaged problem solvers and risk takers. What a joyful way to prepare his children to be servants of their master.

## Reference:

Colangelo, N.; Assouline, S.; and Gross, M. (2004). *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*. Iowa City: The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development. ©

# Resources for Gifted Education

by Joan Stob

Rather than providing an exhaustive list of resources, I have included a select list of ones I have found to be the most helpful in meeting the needs of gifted students:

## For differentiating Instruction:

*How to Differentiate Instruction in the Mixed-Ability Classroom*. Carol Tomlinson. ASCD (2001) "guru" of differentiation has a new book about the differentiated school coming out soon.

Resources from Corwin Press: *Differentiation in the Brain-Friendly Classroom* catalog CorwinPress.com. These resources take the concepts of differentiation and apply them to different levels and subjects. This also has many brain-based learning resources.

## For understanding the ins and outs of acceleration:

*A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*. Colangelo, Assouline, and Gross, M. University of Iowa (2004). This Templeton report makes a strong research-based case for acceleration and explains its many different forms. Download the file at [www.accelerationinstitute.org/Nation\\_Deceived/Get\\_Report.aspx](http://www.accelerationinstitute.org/Nation_Deceived/Get_Report.aspx).

## For understanding the concept of multiple intelligences:

Many educators have popularized and applied the seven (now eight or even nine) intelligences, but to really understand the theory behind them read the books by the source, Howard Gardner.

*Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Basic (1983)

*Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice*. Basic (1993).

*Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelli-*

*gences for the 21st Century*. Basic (2000). **For understanding gifted students with learning disabilities and visual/spatial orientations:**

The Gifted Development Center Internet site and books by Linda Silverman, [www.gifteddevelopment.com/index.htm](http://www.gifteddevelopment.com/index.htm). This center has great resources for understanding and teaching visual-spatial learners who have trouble in the auditory-sequential classroom.

## For understanding the psychology and emotional needs of gifted students:

SENG (Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted) website: [www.sengifted.org/index.shtml](http://www.sengifted.org/index.shtml).

Great Potential Press, [www.giftedbooks.com](http://www.giftedbooks.com), especially *Guiding the Gifted Child: A Practical Source for Parents and Teachers* by James Webb, Elizabeth Meckstroth and Stephanie Tolan



The SENG authors understand what makes gifted students the way they are and offer parents and teachers gentle, practical advice for raising and teaching them. This is also the publisher of the Iowa Acceleration Scale.

#### **For identifying the areas and extent of giftedness:**

The giftedness of younger students can be somewhat identified with an individual intelligence test, but there are limits. See the article at [www.apa.org/monitor/feb03/intelligent.html](http://www.apa.org/monitor/feb03/intelligent.html).

Older students (grades 3 - 8) can participate in an Academic Talent Search. For details see

\*Rocky Mountain Academic Talent Search, [www.du.edu/city/programs/academic-year-programs/rocky-mountain-talent-search.html](http://www.du.edu/city/programs/academic-year-programs/rocky-mountain-talent-search.html).

\*Center for Talented Youth Talent Search at Johns Hopkins (for east and west coasts), [www.cty.jhu.edu/ts/index.html](http://www.cty.jhu.edu/ts/index.html).

\*Midwest Talent Search at Northwestern University, [www.ctd.northwestern.edu/mats/index.html](http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/mats/index.html).

\*Duke Talent Identification Program (for southern US), [www.tip.duke.edu/talent\\_searches/](http://www.tip.duke.edu/talent_searches/).

\*Belin-Blank Exceptional Student Talent Search (for students in Alberta), [www.education.uiowa.edu/belinblank/talent-search/canqa.asp](http://www.education.uiowa.edu/belinblank/talent-search/canqa.asp).

#### **Best overall Internet site:**

Hoagie's Gifted Education Page, [www.hoagiesgifted.org/](http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/). This valuable, friendly resource will answer your questions about gifted kids or send you to a site which will.

#### **Best catalogs for gifted education resources:**

Bright Ideas, [www.awpeller.com](http://www.awpeller.com). Many resources specific to subject areas.

Free Spirit Publishing, [www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com).

Resources focus on character, service, social skills, emotional growth.

Interact, [www.teachinteract.com](http://www.teachinteract.com). Self-contained simulation units on many typical unit themes.

Prufrock Press, Inc., [www.prufrock.com/](http://www.prufrock.com/). Many general gifted education resources, some subject area resources.

The Zephyr Catalog, [www.zephyrcatalog.com](http://www.zephyrcatalog.com). Subject area resources, including art and cultural studies, multiple intelligence resources, and professional development resources.

#### **Best Journals and Magazines:**

*Gifted Child Quarterly* — academic, scholarly journal published by National Association for Gifted Children — [www.gcq.sagepub.com](http://www.gcq.sagepub.com).

*Gifted Child Today* — published by Prufrock Press, oriented towards ideas for teachers

*Parenting for High Potential* — published by National Association for Gifted Children, [www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1180](http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1180).

*Teaching for High Potential* — published by National Association for Gifted Children, [www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1498](http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1498).

Roeper Review — scholarly journal published by the Roeper Institute, [www.roeper.org/RoeperInstitute/index.aspx](http://www.roeper.org/RoeperInstitute/index.aspx).

#### **Science enrichment for gifted students:**

I haven't yet found any science curriculum exclusively for young gifted students that I like. But most respond well to any hands-on, discovery-oriented science curriculum that includes a lot of higher order questions. For older students (grades 4 and up) I really like the Jason project, which teaches science (and related math skills and concepts) by exploring what actual scientists in the field do. [www.jason.org/public/home.aspx](http://www.jason.org/public/home.aspx).

#### **Mathematics enrichment for gifted students:**

Many problem-solving resources are available in math—for gifted students use ones which are meant for students 2-3 grades older and which emphasize strategies rather than computation. One of my favorite math resources for older students (grade 4 and up) is MegaMath, which explores the kinds of math problems that actual mathematicians do. [www.c3.lanl.gov/mega-math/menu.html](http://www.c3.lanl.gov/mega-math/menu.html).

#### **Language arts enrichment for gifted students:**

To make the most of the limited time I have (one half hour per week), I use a lot of plays. Plays are a language arts multi-task resource. Students use all parts of their brains and bodies simultaneously as they read for content and expression, learn the vocabulary from the context, interpret the punctuation, use an appropriate voice, and act out the play through simple movements. I also use them to discuss literary concepts and genres, help them understand the author's purpose, and connect to what they are learning in the regular classroom. I have quite a few books of plays published by Scholastic that work out well. (Google Scholastic Teacher Resources and then search for plays.)

#### **Social studies enrichment for gifted students:**

If you have time, simulations are great social studies activities for gifted students. Bright Ideas and Interact (see above) have many excellent ones. Webquests are a great activity for gifted students in social studies (and other subject areas). [www.webquest.org/search/index.php](http://www.webquest.org/search/index.php). ☺



# Online Math and English for Talented Middle School Students

by Becci Zwiers

*Becci Zwiers (bzwiers@clcnetwork.org) is a consultant and online teacher for academically talented students for the Christian Learning Center (CLC Network), Grand Rapids, Michigan. In addition, Becci is a media specialist for West Side Christian School in Grand Rapids.*

Why is the Christian Learning Center Network offering online courses for academically talented middle school students? The mission of the Christian Learning Center is defined in the following statement: "Building inclusive and interdependent community, the Christian Learning Center, working in partnership with others, provides Christ-centered educational, psychological, vocational, and advocacy services for people experiencing unique needs and gifts." Thus, the Christian Learning Center (CLC) exists to support individuals who have unique gifts, including those who God has given gifts of great cognition.

## Academically Talented Students

Gifts of great cognition place students in need of a curriculum that is qualitatively different from more conventional material in content, fluency and speed (VanTassel-Baska, 2007). For these students, referred to as academically talented (AT) learners, sometimes the content must be more complex in order to challenge their analytic ability. They are able to make or learn to make fluent connections within content and concepts. The speed with which talented students master concepts suggests that an alternative curriculum is necessary. As an advocate for the AT learner, CLC strives to help schools meet the needs of AT students within its Network schools (CLC Network). One way for these schools to meet the needs of AT students is through online courses.

The numerous experts in gifted educa-

tion (e.g. Renzulli, Van Tassel-Baska, Gardner, Feldhusen, and Sternberg) have different models of best practices for gifted learners. While their models differ, they agree on several critical points:

- \* There are different levels of giftedness.
- \* Educational programming needs to be flexible.
- \* Students need to have time with like learners.
- \* Learners need to be supplied with inquiry based materials and opportunities.

"I loved how I could do advanced English without even leaving my school."

\* Learners need to be able to move at a rapid pace.

\* Materials should be facilitated by trained teachers.

\* Learners need a degree in ownership in their learning.

(Renzulli, 1985; VanTassel-Baska, 2007; Gardner, 1983; Feldhusen, 1986; Sternberg, 1995)

As much as schools in the CLC Network would like to offer classes for high ability learners, it is impractical in this age of declining enrollment and tight budgets. When a school has 15 to 20 students in a class, the number of high ability students is perhaps 2 to 3. It is unlikely that the school would be able financially to offer a separate class that meets the needs of these few students. Offering an online course from a Christian perspective, one that gath-

ers students from many schools, is an effective solution from the perspective of student-appropriate content, effective teaching, and cost efficiency.

## CLC's Online Courses

The CLC Network currently offers five online courses for academically talented middle school students: 8<sup>th</sup>-grade Geometry, 7<sup>th</sup>-grade Honors Math, Enrichment Math for 6<sup>th</sup>- and 7<sup>th</sup>-grade students, 8<sup>th</sup>-grade Honors English, and 7<sup>th</sup>-grade Honors English. The courses were designed by certified teachers to move at a rapid and in-depth pace. The experienced teachers are aware of what is being taught in the typical middle school classroom and can adapt that curriculum appropriately for the AT student.

For example, the 7<sup>th</sup>-grade Honors Math course uses a textbook that many of the network schools are using. While students in a typical math course might take one month to cover a chapter of material, the online class will likely move through the same chapter in two weeks. The time gained allows the students to undertake enrichment work such as problem solving, high ability inquiry, logic, and challenging math games.

The 8<sup>th</sup>-grade Honors English course follows a curriculum similar to that of the network schools. Grammar, writing, and literature are all taught but at a more in-depth and rapid pace. Students will diagram sentences that are more intricate than those faced by a typical 8<sup>th</sup> grade student. Writing units require higher levels of thinking skills, and the literature units use materials that require high-level reading, processing, and reasoning abilities.

Duke University, Northwestern University, and Stanford University offer online courses for academically talented students. Certified teachers also design these courses to move rapidly and to study deeply. These



courses are not taught from a Christian perspective, however, and they cost approximately \$800 dollars per semester. Because of a generous grant, the CLC Network can currently offer online courses taught from a Christian perspective at no cost to schools or students.

### How the Online Classes Work

The CLC Network online courses are taught asynchronously, which means that students do not have to be online at the same time as their teacher or their online classmates. Online students usually take the online course at the same time their classmates are taking their Math or English course. Most online Math and English students go to a computer lab or media center to work on their course during their regularly scheduled class time. This allows AT students to be in their school, not miss out on any middle school activities and yet be taught appropriate material with like learners.

The CLC Network online courses are taught using Moodle, a well-known online course management system. This is a secure system, used by many high schools and universities around the world. Only students enrolled in such a course have access to it. Students are encouraged to show parents their gradebook and print off assignments to share with parents and classroom teachers. Each student has a mentor in his or her school with whom the teacher of the online class is in regular contact. The student's mentor helps the student with problem solving and computer issues, and the mentor receives a grade from the online teacher each quarter.

### Student Response to Online Classes

One reason that online courses are gaining popularity with AT students is that online courses make it possible to arrange classes beyond the school boundaries. Stu-

dents want to take coursework that fit their needs and their schedules. They enjoy working at their own pace. They appreciate having ownership of their classwork. CLC is pleased to be able to offer this unique schooling option from a Christian perspective to AT students.

Students of the 2007/2008 8<sup>th</sup>-grade

**The time gained allows students to undertake enrichment work.**

Honors English class were asked to tell their teacher three things about the class. This is what some of them wrote:

*It's fun to meet new people from different schools that you wouldn't have met if not for this class. It's also a lot of fun to do an online course because for the most part you can work at your own pace during the week and not have to worry about getting one certain paper in on one certain day. It's a lot of fun to get to use the technology that God gave to us while still learning, just like we should. — Alyssa Wychers (Byron Center Christian)*

*Best thing: I loved how I could do advanced English without even leaving my school. I think it worked really well doing it all online.*

*What I learned: I learned many different factual things from each unit, but I also learned one big thing: For this class, since I was working independently at my school, I had to make sure I was keeping myself on track and having self discipline to work. Also as I said before I learned how to take*

*everything one step at a time, because I haven't been challenged ever before as I was this year. — Jayne Kessel (Byron Center Christian)*

*I liked a lot of different things about the class. One thing I liked is that I could work at my own pace. Another thing is that I wasn't bored. I had stuff and work to do. I liked doing the research paper. I can't really think of anything that I didn't like about CLC. I enjoyed all of it. I learned a lot. For instance, I learned a lot about good qualities to use in writing. Also, I learned how to diagram sentences really well. I really don't know anything that I would change about CLC. I really liked it! — Jennifer Post (Dutton Christian)*

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# A Parent's View of Academic Talent Development

by Cindy Kessel

*Cindy Kessel is the parent of Jayne Kessel, who attended Byron Center Christian School.*

Our daughter, Jayne, recently graduated from the eighth grade at Byron Center Christian School. Graduation brings a time of reflection, and in looking back at her nine years at BCCS we recognize how blessed we were that her unique academic talents were identified early on by her teachers and our administrator, even before our school had an official program for the academically talented.

## Elementary School

Over the years her needs have been met in several ways, starting in kindergarten with the Literacy Learning model for reading which allowed her to read at her own level. In first grade, she was placed in a first- and second-grade split classroom where she could easily learn alongside the older students in the room. She was allowed to test out of a full year of math, and beginning in second grade she studied math independently, meeting one-on-one with a teacher twice a week to review her completed assignments, introduce new material, and receive the next assignment. In fourth and fifth grade, a small group of students was "pulled out" of the regular classroom for advanced spelling, which included word study and vocabulary. During this time, a consultant from the Christian Learning Center met with us and the teachers regularly, provided ideas for enrichment, and advocated for differentiated learning in the classroom for Jayne and other academically talented students.

## Middle School

When Jayne entered middle school, we began to look for other alternatives for

math. After taking the Explore test through the Midwest Talent Search, Jayne qualified to take an on-line Honors Pre-Algebra class through the Educational Program for Gifted Youth (EPGY) out of Stanford University as a sixth grader. She was able to do her course work right in the classroom with her peers during their math hour, yet was challenged to think and learn in new ways. However, there was very little interaction with her as-

"She was challenged to use higher level thinking skills."

signed tutor and it was developed by a secular university and not taught from a Christian world view.

After qualifying by taking the ACT, Jayne studied Algebra 1 and Algebra 2 during the seventh grade through the Kent Academically Talented Youth Program (ATYP). This required her to leave school one afternoon each week to go downtown Grand Rapids to the Grand Valley State University campus for her class. Spending time with her academic peers was very beneficial, but socially, she missed some activities at school and being with her friends. Although she did exceptionally well in the class, she insisted that we find something different for eighth grade.

## CLC Online Classes

We were tremendously grateful that the Christian Learning Center was piloting their on-line courses and that Geometry was one of the options. As a bonus, Jayne took an Honors English class as well as Geometry through the CLC in eighth grade. It seemed

that these classes were designed just for her. Academically, she was challenged to use higher level thinking skills and a few times during the school year she even felt "overwhelmed" by her assignments % this was a good thing! It was a new experience for her and she had to learn how to break the assignments down into more manageable pieces.

There was plenty of opportunity for Jayne to interact with her teachers, beginning with an orientation on site at the CLC headquarters and by email and on "Blackboard" throughout the school year. She was also able to form relationships with her academic peers, working on several projects together online and presenting them to the rest of the class at a few meetings. As a motivated, independent learner, the online format of the class allowed her to work at her own pace and on her own schedule. It also allowed her to stay at her school, eliminating the problem of missed work to be made up. Friendships and social activities are very important to her, and she did not feel "out of the loop" because she missed lunchtime conversations or activities like exploratory classes and "pizza hot lunch." And most importantly, unlike EPGY and ATYP, these classes were taught by wonderful, caring Christian teachers from a distinctly Reformed Christian worldview.

The CLC online classes were truly a blessing and an answer to prayer for Jayne and our family. We are thankful that CLC has taken on this initiative to provide real learning for academically talented students in a format that met so many of our needs.



# Making an Impact on Gifted Students

by Ann Bakker

Ann Bakker ([bakker@timothychristian.com](mailto:bakker@timothychristian.com)) is the Impact Coordinator at Timothy Christian School in Elmhurst, Illinois.

What impact can we have on our gifted and talented students? How do we want them to impact this world? Do we need a gifted program at our elementary school for this to happen? Our basic curriculum is already rigorous. The Independent Study program, established 18 years ago, enriches the education of all of our students. The differentiated units of instruction at each grade level challenge students at every level of ability. These were the reflections of the staff and board at Timothy Christian School in Elmhurst, Illinois, when we considered whether or not to begin a program for gifted students.

We looked at our school's mission statement: "Serving God and his people, Timothy Christian School develops academically prepared Christian disciples who embrace Christ's call to transform the world."

We considered the first point in our vision statement: "We reflect God's kingdom by serving Christian families from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds and students who possess a wide range of abilities."

We realized that these two statements require us to teach to the needs of all of our students. We decided that we can best meet the special needs of our gifted and talented students by creating a pull-out program for students in grades K-6 for math and reading.

## Identifying gifted students

The first step in creating the Impact program was determining criteria for student identification. Since pulling students out of classroom instruction for participation in the Impact program is a significant intervention, careful identification is criti-

cal. Participation in Impact Math pull-out classes or in Reading pull-out classes is based on the following:

- Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores
- SAGES-2 scores (Screening Assessment for Gifted Elementary and Middle School Students)
- Teacher Recommendation (Based on a classroom checklist)
- Parent Permission
- Student Interest

Kindergarten and first-grade students do not take standardized tests so identification is based on the SAGES-2 scores and Teacher Recommendation. We sometimes use the SIGS (Scales for Identifying Gifted Students).

Occasionally, there are students who don't meet the first two criteria (ITBS scores, and SAGES-2 scores), yet the teacher or the parents believe that the student should qualify to participate in the Impact program. When that occurs, parents complete an Appeals form. An Appeals Committee, comprised of three teachers, reviews the appeal and makes a determination.

## Pull-out math and reading classes

The Impact program provides pull-out classes in Reading for students in grades K-6 and in Math for students in grades K-5. The classes meet once each week in Kindergarten and twice each week in grades 1-6. After the second year it became apparent that it is not ideal to pull students out of class for math instruction in sixth grade. So we developed a section of Accelerated Math for sixth-grade students.

Writing curriculum for these groups was the second step in developing the Impact program. Often the Impact curriculum reflects and extends the classroom curriculum. For example, the second-grade unit on Ancient China is studied during and after the second-grade China unit. Third-

grade students study Ancient Egypt, which extends their knowledge about the setting of many of the Old Testament Bible stories that they study. The fourth-grade Impact students participate in a simulation game that introduces problem-solving strategies that go beyond the strategies introduced in the fourth-grade math curriculum.

It isn't always possible or desirable to match the classroom curriculum. In sixth-grade Impact Reading, students select the novels and topics of study. Some of the topics selected by these students include racism and immigration, and some of the novels include *Oliver Twist* and *Montmorency*.

## Materials used

Finding materials and developing units for Impact pullout groups is one of the most rewarding tasks for me. Materials that I have found particularly useful are the following:

- Units of study published by the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary
- Blueprints for Biography units from the Center for Gifted Education at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock
- Simulations published by Interact
- Units from the *Mentoring Mathematical Minds* Series published by Kendall/Hunt
- Critical Thinking Company Books and Software
- *Math Rules!* Books published by Pieces of Learning
- Enrichment Units in Math published by Dandy Lion Publications
- *Challenge Math* published by Hickory Grove Press
- Materials from Prufrock Press

## Math and Reading Enrichment

After the first year of the program, we implemented a second tier to address the



needs of students who need to be challenged, yet aren't identified to be pulled out for Impact Math or Impact Reading. This second tier begins in third grade with a Math and Reading Enrichment Program. Students may choose to take a pretest before beginning a new math unit. Students who exceed the cutoff score on the pretest are eligible to participate in math enrichment. Math enrichment allows students to work independently or in a small group to complete a set of math activities which extend the classroom curriculum. These students meet with the Impact Coordinator twice each week for instruction, support and grading. The math enrichment program will continue to develop by grade each year (fourth grade next year, fifth grade the following year).

The Reading Enrichment program is being fine-tuned to match the curriculum and the needs of the students at each grade level. First-grade Reading Enrichment students study vocabulary, and second- and third-grade students read books from a variety of genres. Fourth-grade students read books from each of the regions that they study, and fifth-grade students will read books from a variety of time periods in American History.

### Challenges encountered

There are huge challenges and hurdles to creating a gifted program in a Christian school. Money is one of the biggest challenges. It is expensive to hire a teacher and develop a program. Yet, we've learned that many Christian families are looking for a school for their gifted and talented children. While it is not the main reason for implementing a gifted program, the Impact program has attracted several families to our school.

Another challenge is determining which areas and subjects we will address. Students are gifted in so many areas and the

reality is that we can't meet every need of every student. We chose to focus on Math and Reading. In order to address the needs of some of our other students, we began an after school science club so that we can participate in the Illinois Science Olympiad.

A third challenge came with the realization that a small number of students are so advanced that their current grade level can't meet their needs. The *Iowa Acceleration Scale, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* is a good tool to deter-

“A program for gifted and talented students should never remain static.”

mine eligibility for full grade acceleration.

Finally, the most exciting challenge is the realization that a program for gifted and talented students should never remain static. The Impact program is still developing. Long-term goals include plans for an effective curriculum to support gifted and talented students, a parent discussion and support group, and continued differentiation in the classrooms. So, the Impact program at Timothy Christian School today will look very different a year from now and into the future as we continue to change and modify in an attempt to best meet the needs of our students.

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DandyLionPublications. [www.dandylionbooks.com](http://www.dandylionbooks.com)

Prufrock Press. [www.prufrock.com](http://www.prufrock.com)

Great Potential Press. [www.lgiftedbooks.com](http://www.lgiftedbooks.com)

a.w. peller & associates. [www.awpeller.com](http://www.awpeller.com)

Simulations. [www.teachinteract.com](http://www.teachinteract.com) ©



# Developing Creativity with Odyssey of the Mind

By Sue Lesky

*Sue Lesky (leskysue@hotmail.com) is the Odyssey of the Mind coordinator at the Holland Christian Schools in Holland, Michigan.*

If someone asked me to explain Odyssey of the Mind with one sentence, I would say that it is a creative problem-solving competition for seven-student teams, who perform an original skit in eight minutes and are scored on the quality of the skit and its "style" and on how well they solve a "spontaneous" problem on the spot. But for Holland Christian School and other Christian schools, it's much more.

Holland Christian's tryouts for OM happen in late fall. Seven-member teams are chosen via short interviews designed to seek out creative students, those who look at things from a different perspective or have artistic and performance gifts. Teams then decide which one of five "long-term problems" they would like to "solve" as they write their skit. Some of the problems in-

volve technical challenges that require making vehicles or balsa wood structures, but Holland Christian teams typically choose problems requiring references to classic literature or art and involving humor. Coaches meet with their teams weekly and encourage team members to investigate many possibilities as they develop their skits.

OM is successful for so many reasons. The team must work within a budget and learn to manage their money by being good stewards. They discover uses for discarded objects, which most people would consider junk. The teams learn cooperation with and respect for each other and through that the participants gain self-confidence. Since there is no one right answer, everyone's ideas can be investigated. They see that there is more than one way to solve a problem and the process is as important as the end result. Above all, students are encouraged to use their gifts to honor God and his creation.

Teams compete at a regional competi-

tion, and the regional winners compete at the state competition. State winners compete at the "World Finals" during Memorial Day weekend at a college or university.

My son has participated in OM for the past five years and has even had the opportunity to "walk the stage" at World Finals one year. When I asked him what was the best thing about OM he quickly replied, "Community." I have watched a shy fourth grader evolve into an affirmed team player. Credit must be given to wonderful coaches he's had along the way. Coaches are parents who volunteer their time performing the difficult task of supporting the kids without input. That's right. OM is for kids only — adults may not help solve the problem! However, they pray with their teams, encourage each child's gift, celebrate each child's individuality, are occasional peacemakers, and just love watching kids use their uniqueness to bring glory to our Maker. ☺

## .....Inside, Outside, Upside Down.....

by Grace Sikma-Pot

*Grace Sikma-Pot lives in Waterdown, Ontario, with her husband and four children. She teaches intermediate students at Trinity Christian School in Burlington, Ontario.*

What is the giant that stomps onto the path of your personal faith journey? What does this colossal beast look like, and how does he act? This question was posed to us recently in our grade 6/7 Bible class as we unwrapped *The Dangerous Journey* curriculum by PACS (Prairie Association of Christian Schools). Student responses ranged from monsters of apathy, boredom, despair and fear. One boy, who worries a lot,

bravely raised his hand and publicly said in front of his peers, "anxiety."

Alongside the students, I confessed that the giant of efficiency often storms my course. The need to complete work, to get things done, to finish off details and move onto the next activity or event hinders my faith walk with God Almighty and deters me from modeling to my students a Father who is never in a hurry. This giant stops me from really listening to my students and to God, whose Spirit often calls things up quietly and in a pondering kind of way. This giant says to my students that they are highly valued, but I am too busy to "meaningfully" interact with them.

### Faith development

Our discussion of giants, connecting with old-time allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, has helped me pause and reflect on faith development and nurture in middle-school students. As a teacher and mom, I have often wondered and been challenged to think about how faith grows and how it flourishes best. How do we make room for kids of faith to practice becoming adults of faith? How can we as broken parents and teachers be signposts of integrity in the midst of faith flux?

I was glad when, in recent months, Syd Hielema, chaplain at Redeemer University College, spoke on this very topic at our



local PD-day workshop. Not long ago my children's Christian high school also held an open panel discussion called *The Voice*. The panel consisted of a teen, a youth pastor, a counselor and a high school teacher. They expressed their thoughts on faith and on the challenges that youth face. At the same time, my home church hosted a youth service that spoke to these issues as well. There appeared to be some common ground as church, home and school communities explored this foggy area called faith nurture.

### Slow growth

What is very clear is that fostering faith in youth is a blurry business; it does not lend itself to a quick formula. Those like myself, who can be task-oriented and want to see results, need to be patient. We need to wait — wait for years sometimes. Faith growth can neither be forced nor easily measured. Grading Biblical *literacy* is simple enough, but assessing a faith life, which is fluid and transforms over time even as times change, is hard.

Christian teachers who teach *about* God are, nevertheless, mainly concerned about how students experience the love and grace of God in the classroom and school. This faith that we so desire for our kids is not simply outward compliance or obedience to a set of rules, it can also be messy and at times lopsided. The shedding of the old self and putting on of the new is an inside, outside and upside-down business, a business that we as teachers are also engaged in as we pursue our own spiritual walks. Students who are learning to speak and live out the language of the Christian faith closely observe and listen to how others articulate and act out their living faith. Modeling plays a huge role in fostering Christian belief. Students expect teachers to be wise, yet “real.”

Recently, when my students were “do-

ing” memory work, I asked them to testify in writing what the Bible passage meant to them and what it might mean to the greater Christian community. One student piped up and said, “Can’t we just write it out? That would be easier.” The question made me ask myself whether I had been sharing enough of the language of faith through my own personal stories and testimonies, modeling the “inside” goods of my own faith walk.

I have also learned that we as teachers need to create climates in which meaningful discussion takes place. In order to do this well, we, of course, need to understand the world of the pre-adolescent student; we need to create a safe place for discussion; we need curriculum, methodology and technology that is life-connected and dynamic.

But that is not enough. We need to pray that God, through his Spirit, will breath into us what is important to say and model at just the right time. He will help us teach what is significant and enduring and meaningful and wise if we call on him. According to Robert Koole, professor at Calvin College, God connects the dots in our students’ lives. What we do in the day as teachers, the Lord quietly works with after the last bell rings.

### Three strands

Syd Hielema pointed out that there are three general trends within Christian culture we need to be aware of which influence the faith walk of North American youth. One of these trends is embodied in school and church cultures — influences that tend to see God primarily as law giver. This God is a legalistic, disappointed, judging, guilt-mongering God who expects “performance” and uses “should” language.

A second trend sees God simply as a Best Friend. He is there to make us feel good about ourselves and to feel accepted. Love

is only an emotion, and the goal of spirituality is to reach for the “highs.” This emphasis is all about the self and Jesus.

The third trend sees God as a gracious covenant God. People are invited to discover the laws of God for life, which give freedom, and to receive God’s grace through Jesus. This God calls people to confess sin, to change, to be set free, to rest in him and to live out a life of gratitude. This trend is about individuals in community and their relationship with God the Father, Son and Spirit.

### Trustworthy adults

Churches and schools alike reflect these trends and influence how middle school children perceive God and faith from the outside. Discrepancies in the Christian culture may also be giants which confuse and bewilder students who find themselves in the middle of their own faith journey. We do well to appreciate the fact that faith nurture is a blurry business and that youth need adults who can be trusted — adults who are “real” and wise. We as teachers are dependent on the Holy Spirit to create a climate that is safe and meaningful. Helping youth navigate the fog inside and around them during the highs and in the middle of their *upside-down* times is an overwhelming job.

When one of my students finds her family in the middle of a divorce and uses her persuasive essay as a springboard for hidden emotions, I thank God. When a boy writes a biography in composition class about his brother who died four years ago, saying, “I don’t know how things can ever be normal again,” I praise God for the Spirit’s quiet work. When a child raises his hand and names the ogre of anxiety out loud, I choke up and marvel at God’s giant ways. ☪



# Why I Teach Evolution

By Richard VanderKloet

*Richard VanderKloet teaches history, philosophy, economics and industrial arts at Toronto District Christian High School in Woodbridge, Ontario.*

Last fall I taught Grade 11 Ancient History. Not surprisingly, the textbook for the course begins with the earliest evidence of human existence on earth. That, of course, involves a discussion of evolutionary theory. And that, of course, led to a parent writing me to ask how I dealt with the conflict between the Genesis 1 and 2 story of the creation of the world and the evolutionary hypothesis that is commonly accepted in our society and in our textbooks. I'm sure many of you have struggled with how to teach this to your students as well. I responded to this parent and carried on an interesting email exchange with him for a while. I'd like to share with CEJ readers what I think about this issue in the hope that it will spark some further dialogue among Christian teachers and parents and school boards.

I believe with all my heart, soul, and mind that God created the universe and all that is in it, and that he created it out of nothing. I believe that God's creative acts are intentional and display the orderliness of his lawgiving Word. I think that this is the core doctrine of creation, revealed in Scripture and proclaimed by orthodox Christianity throughout the past two thousand years. I hope, and I trust, that I make this abundantly clear in my teaching.

## Ongoing creativity

It is not uncommon, even among Christians, to think that God created the world out of some chaotic, pre-existent stuff. I categorically reject any belief in such a pre-existing "matter" to which God merely gave "form". This was actually Plato's view of creation. I believe that such a view com-

promises our belief in the sovereignty of God. I also reject any belief that the creation is the product of some kind of cosmic accident or accidental chain of events. In this regard, I completely reject the idolatry of evolution.

However, I do not believe in a static creation either: God did not finalize his work of creation on Day Six and then go on vacation. (That's the deist heresy.) Whatever is implied by the Genesis 1 account of God resting on the seventh day, I do not think that it means that God's creative acts were finished. The ongoing movement of the earth's tectonic plates is evidence that God is not done shaping this world yet. The obvious evolutionary connection between the various creatures that are related within any given species also points to God's ongoing creative work: new varieties of plants and new sub-species of animals are continually coming along even as old ones are going extinct. I believe that creation and providence are the dynamic, ongoing activity of God in his world.

An example I often use to describe to my students the relation between God's work in the world and natural processes is this. When a Christian couple has a child, they usually send out a birth announcement card to their friends and relatives. Typically, they say something like "Rejoice with us. God has given us a child!" Now, such an announcement does not in any way deny the very real mechanics of human reproduction. Insemination, fertilization, conception, implantation, gestation, and birth are scientifically demonstrable phases in the production of a child. And yet, a profound miracle has also taken place: the miracle of a gift from God. These facts do not contradict each other. (The example is not originally mine: I remember ICS professor Jim Olthuis using this example already 30 years ago.)

It seems to me that if God wants to use

sperm and eggs and hormones and whatever else to produce a new person, that's entirely within his right. And if he uses some of the things he made earlier to produce something else later (continents as well as children), that's entirely within his right to do. God even formed Adam "out of the dust of the ground", according to Scripture.

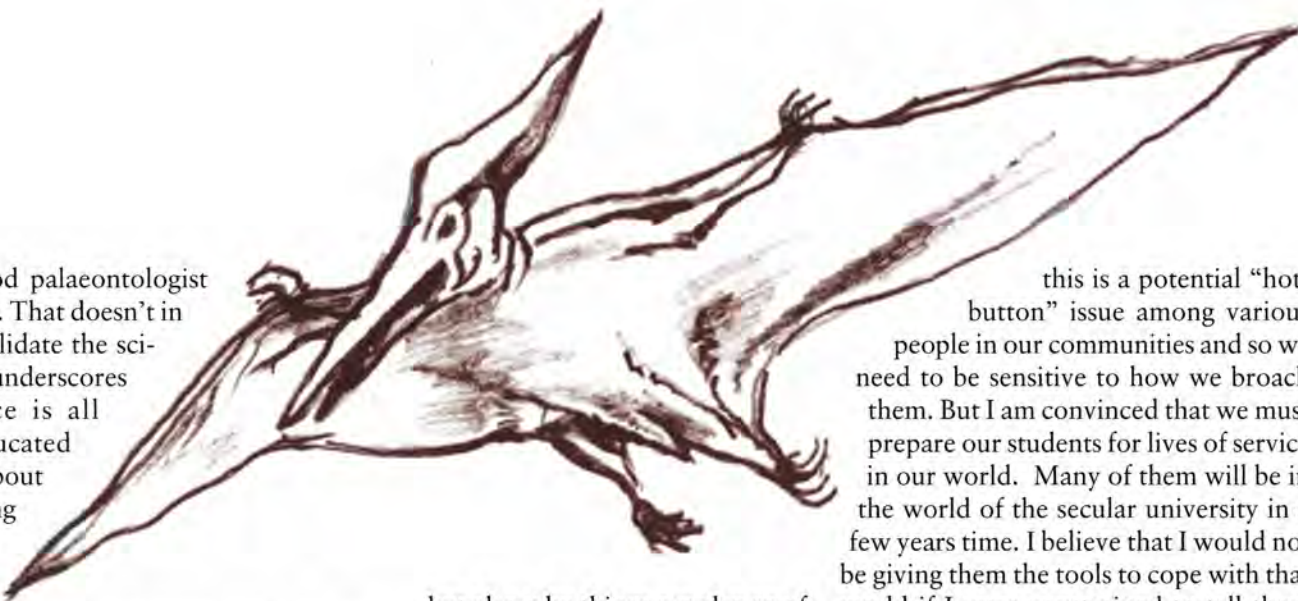
## Legitimate scientific task

Science has the task of discerning the order-liness, the law-fulness of God's creative products. So, science can legitimately examine and hypothesize about the relationship between things such as hydrogen and helium as well as between things such as red pines and white pines, or between lions and tigers, or even between monkeys and men. Science does so by examining the things and phenomena we encounter in the creation, postulating hypotheses about these relationships and testing these hypotheses under rigorous and clinical conditions. I believe it pleases God when scientists praise him for his marvellous handiwork; I believe it pains him when an idol is given the credit for it.

Christian faith should not restrain science from its legitimate pursuit. Christians should not turn a blind eye to the marvellous realities of the creation. It seems apparent from the numerous very ancient bones that we have discovered all over the world that a variety of non-human creatures lived on the earth well before human beings were created. Dinosaur bones as well as Neanderthal bones were not, I suppose, planted by God (or the devil) to deceive us: they are the remaining tissues of real creatures that seem to have lived many years before human beings were created. Much of the science of palaeontology is, of necessity, speculative and tendentious. (Of course, this is also true of sciences such as psychology or jurisprudence, or econom-



ics.) Any good palaeontologist concedes this. That doesn't in the least invalidate the science: it only underscores what science is all about — educated guesswork about the underlying laws by which



God keeps order in his creation. To the extent that any science does this, we need not fear nor shun it, but applaud it. A scientist doing science is simply a case of Adam fulfilling his cultural mandate. To the extent that any science goes beyond its legitimate bounds and begins to advocate false answers to the ultimate questions about the origin and destination of all things, it reflects the fallen tendency of our race to confuse the creature for the creator (Romans 1).

### No contradiction

So, in my worldview, there is room for the likelihood of biological evolution. There is room for the probability that the earth is millions, even billions of years old. There is room for the possibility that the big bang theory is substantially correct. I know that these things give some Christians serious problems. They fear that, if they allow such possibilities, they are denying the authority of the Scriptures. I think that pitting the scriptural account of creation against legitimate scientific investigation is a doomed endeavour. In my opinion, the phrase "creation science" is an oxymoron. The first chapters of the Bible do not presume to give a scientific account of the origin of the world. They give us a definitive description of the relationship between humans, the world and God. They tell us why things are so often messed up,

but also why things are also so often lovely, delightful, awesome, engaging, and wonderful. God is easily powerful enough to use whatever means he chose to bring the world into being and to direct its development toward the end he always intended.

I did stress to my Grade 11 students that, while I am no scientist, I have heard little convincing evidence in favour of a theory of evolution across species. Even our secular history textbook honestly acknowledges that the human race seems to have spread out and populated the earth from a single location, probably in Africa. I suspect that "micro-evolution" (evolution within a species or between closely related species) is strongly supported by the evidence; while "macro-evolution" (evolution across species) is largely an inference from the former, an inference that supports the secular belief that we are not answerable to God for what we do but only to ourselves. That, of course, was the original temptation that Satan offered to Adam and Eve. For this reason I am rather sceptical of macro-evolution. However, I think we should be reluctant to categorically disqualify it as a means whereby God could have created the world.

### Necessary preparation

I believe that we should exercise pedagogic prudence in deciding when it's appropriate to challenge our students with some of these issues. I also recognize that

this is a potential "hot-button" issue among various people in our communities and so we need to be sensitive to how we broach them. But I am convinced that we must prepare our students for lives of service in our world. Many of them will be in the world of the secular university in a few years time. I believe that I would not be giving them the tools to cope with that world if I were constrained to tell them that they must ignore the artefacts and phenomena that are found all over the world. Nor do I think that I would help them stand firm in the Christian faith if I didn't try to alert them to the spiritual apostasy and heresy that lurks behind so much of what is passed off as "scientific knowledge."

Have I spent enough time on this subject? Perhaps not. Have I done an adequate job of it? Probably not. Have I confused my students? I hope not. I do hope that I have modelled for my students a Christian attempt to be faithful to the God of the Scriptures, to recognize and endorse humanity's quest to fulfill the cultural mandate, and to be open to the grandeur and wonder of the world. ©



# Slouching Toward Bedlam

## The Giftedness of the Magi or A Glaze That Will Live in Infamy

by Jan Kaarsvlam

*Jan Kaarsvlam has taken a position as director of advancement with Farsouth Chicago Christian Schools where he is helping to launch, in New Lenox, Illinois, the first ergonomically designed Christian elementary school in the nation. The improved design promises to lessen student fatigue during the school day, thus helping the athletic programs to reach their full potential.*

"...And I just know I am going to get stuck talking to that Cooper woman for half an hour," said Bedlam Christian's art teacher, Gregg Mortiss. He was one of six or seven Bedlam teachers who had been spending half an hour before school started in Bedlam's staff room nearly every day.

"Are you talking about Arthur and Emily's mom? Why? What's the matter with her?" asked visiting Bible teacher John Cloudmaker. Parent-teacher conferences began that night, and he was looking for any information that might prepare him.

Jane VanderAsch cut in to the conversation from the counter where she was pouring herself a cup of coffee. "Well, John, the problem is, she thinks that her precious twins are gifted, and so she always wants to know what we are doing to challenge them further."

Cloudmaker chuckled. "That doesn't sound like that big of a problem — a parent who wants her kids to work harder."

"Yeah, you'd think so." Gregg Mortiss had sat forward in his chair and was focusing on Cloudmaker with an intensity Cloudmaker could not recall ever having seen in him before. "But you'd be wrong. Here, let me give you an example. So last year, when Arthur and Emily were sophomores, they were taking my introduction to ceramics class. I started out the year with a couple of weeks of watching Bill Freshler's "You Gotta Be The Clay" series, you know, so they would kind of have an orientation to the field and techniques. Then I have them work on their first assignment. All they had to do was make a pinch pot. Arthur told me that he had already done pinch pots and thrown pots, and that what he wanted to do was take his pots from home and work on some advanced glazing techniques." Mortiss nodded as if that had explained his problem entirely, but Cloudmaker seemed confused.

"So, what's the problem?" Cloudmaker asked. "Why not let him work on his glazing skills if he already knows how to do the pots?"

"Because the Bill Freshler video series doesn't cover glazing until video four," Mortiss replied. "You have to do things in the right order. And besides, we don't learn about more sophisticated glazing techniques until Advanced Ceramics class."

"Why didn't you move Arthur into your Advanced Ceramics

class then?"

"No can do," Mortiss said. "Intro. to Ceramics is a pre-requisite."

Cloudmaker chuckled. As a visiting teacher on a one-year contract, he had more freedom to say the truth. "So he had to take the class he didn't need to finally get a chance to learn something new in a different class, and you wonder why Mrs. Cooper was upset?"

Mortiss turned red. "Well sure, when you put it like that, I sound unreasonable, but that's not fair because ... because...."

Jane VanderAsch came to his defense. "I can see where you're going with all of this, Cloudmaker, but come down from your ivory tower to the real world. I had Emily Cooper in Honors Algebra II last year, and that girl's mother was impossible. I was pushing that whole class as hard as I could. I had kids, smart kids, struggling to keep up, but no matter what I did, how fast we went or how much I covered, it was never enough for Mrs. Cooper. How many times did I have to hear, "Emily's bored. Emily's not challenged in your class. Can't you do something more for Emily? I'll tell you what, I did everything I could for that girl."

"Except challenge her," Cloudmaker said.

Jane pursed her lips and stared daggers at the Bible teacher. Finally she spoke: "And what do you suggest I should have done differently?"

"To be gifted, if Emily and Arthur really are, is almost tantamount to a disability in a way. Think about it. A student with a learning disability is one who learns differently from everyone else, and so we have to make changes in our teaching (which we usually call accommodations or concessions) so that they can learn. If we don't make those changes, hyperactive kids have trouble focusing, kids with mild autism cannot understand what we are trying to say and so on. A truly gifted kid thinks differently, approaches problems from fresh new angles. If we don't modify our teaching, the kids don't learn as much as they should because they don't develop their God-given abilities. They may still get straight A's in class, but they never realize their full potential. Does that make sense?"

Mortiss looked somehow both offended and perplexed. He spoke through clenched teeth. "So you want me to start with the third video? Then answer me this. When am I supposed to show the first one? Or should I just pick an order at random and keep everyone on their toes?"

Cloudmaker smiled good-naturedly. "Gregg, I wouldn't presume to tell you how to teach art. You seem to have quite a, um, system worked out already. But what if you just let Arthur try to figure it out on his own, then have him rejoin the class when you





intent is to make me appear hypocritical. The label 'gifted' is unfortunate, because it does suggest that other students are not gifted. That, of course, is patently untrue from any Christian's point of view. Having said that, we must recognize that some students have exceptional abilities that, if they go unrecognized and undevel-

reach the video that contains new content for him."

VanderAsch jumped back into the conversation. "You know what? If I only had one gifted kid in my class, and somehow that kid would wear a label or something, so I could tell who was genuinely gifted from who just has pushy parents, then maybe what you suggest would work. But I teach in the real world, buster! It is complicated in my class. I can't have thirty kids all at different points in their studies. Maybe you can do that in Bible class, since everyone seems to get A's in Bible anyway, but I have a responsibility to my curriculum."

Mortiss looked expectant, thinking that now he would see Cloudmaker show some teeth. But the older teacher just smiled again. It was infuriating. Cloudmaker spoke. "Actually, Jane, I think you make a good point. We test kids for learning disabilities, but we don't have a testing program for gifted kids."

S. Brian O'Braihgnar, one of Bedlam's science teachers, came in halfway through Cloudmaker's remark. He set down the pile of papers he was carrying and said, "The last thing we need is more tests!"

"And besides," said VanderAsch, "I thought that all of the children God created were gifted." She crossed her arms as a cold smile of triumph spread across her wan and wrinkled face. "I'm surprised that you, a Bible teacher, would want to single some out with that moniker. I for one believe all children are gifted by God."

O'Braihgnar, who had missed the earlier conversation, whistled in surprise at her tone. "Easy there, slugger. We're all on the same team."

Cloudmaker smiled sadly. "It's all right, Brian. Actually, I think Jane is highlighting a problem with gifted education, even if her

oped, can hinder their learning and keep them from developing their full potential. Could Mozart have become who he did without the skilled training provided at a very young age by his father and other professional musicians?"

"Not all gifts are academic, though," put in O'Braihgnar. "Some kids are really good at car repair or woodworking or, you know, like skateboarding or something."

"Good point," said Cloudmaker. "And remember that Albert Einstein struggled to learn to read, write, and talk. When he was four years old, many of his teachers thought he was mentally retarded. Here was one of the greatest minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but such an unconventional mind demanded more unconventional teaching methods. May I suggest you read the book *My Name is Asher Lev* to try to get an insider's view of what it is like to be gifted?"

VanderAsch snorted. "So the Coopers are Einsteins now? I'm sure you'll get along fine with Mrs. Cooper in your conference, John, but I teach in the real world. Besides, Einstein turned out all right in the end despite not having gifted education. So I guess the Coopers will too, despite sloughs like Mortiss and me."

Jane pushed back from the table and huffed out of the room. Feeling defeated, Cloudmaker sighed heavily and got up to leave. He had just reached the door when Mortiss's voice rose from the table behind him.

The art teacher sat pen in hand with a small notebook. He smiled what he hoped was a reassuring look at Cloudmaker. "What was the name of that book, John?" ©





# How to Include Challenging Children

*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 email her at tvalstar@telus.net.*

## Two Too Many?

### Question #1:

What can a teacher do if she doesn't feel capable of working with inclusion, and she found that she will have two children with learning disorders. What can she do?

### Response:

I can offer a few suggestions, but you probably just have to ask a lot of questions. I gather from the tone of your letter that this is a done deal, and you will be getting these two children in your class. Talk to your administrator and get as much information as you can. Read the documentation that might be found in the child's file and, as questions arise, consider contacting people who may have been involved with the child previously. Meet with the parents and each child, if possible, and learn from the parents their expectations and best ways of working with the child.

Once I had found out about the child and learned the name of the disability or syndrome, I would read about or view as much information as I could to prepare myself in some ways for what might lie ahead. I remember reading books like *Lovey*, *City Kid* and *Circle of Children* by Mary McCracken which, although they gave a picture of the frustration a teacher may have in working with challenging children, showed that the relationship with the children was of ultimate importance.

You might also want to talk with other teachers who have faced the same situation that you are facing and find out what made the task easier for them. In addition to equipping yourself with the practical tools, remember to seek God's blessing for yourself and the children.

## Inappropriate social interaction

### Question # 2:

How can we encourage students to befriend and help borderline students who have social problems?

### Response:

Students watch their teachers and take their cue from them. The way a teacher reacts to and treats a student who has social problems serves as a model for the classroom interaction. You might have to talk to the students in your classroom about appropriate and inappropriate social interaction, the reasons for these actions, and how one learns that they are appropriate and inappropriate. You probably have to talk about ways of reacting to these behaviors at a time when the child is not present.

I suggest you start with a reference to 1 Peter 4: 8-10, which states that "love covers a multitude of sins" and issues the call that we are to be hospitable to one another without complaining. Have the students in your classroom voice their concerns and together decide what would be the most loving and kind way in which to respond. In each class you will find students who have different levels of tolerance for these behaviors. This may occur because they have had some previous experience with family or friends. Allow those most comfortable to take the lead and have other students learn from them.

If the child exhibiting these behaviors is able to comprehend that these actions are inappropriate, you might have to talk one on one with the child, explaining that the actions are such that others students may not like and they will not help him to make or maintain friends. You may want to develop a secret nonverbal signal which you will use with the child to let him know that you have noticed him displaying the inappropriate behavior.

If the child exhibiting the behavior is not able to comprehend that it is inappropriate, you may have to train the child by repeated verbal and non-verbal response to refrain from doing the action or provide an alternate appropriate action. For example, a child constantly picking his nose is repeatedly handed a Kleenex.

I believe that the tone the teacher sets in the class regarding students' differences is the one which will prevail. Your reaction to the student as well as your handling of inappropriate reactions by others will reinforce the positive trend you wish to set. You will likely have the not-so-positive reactions from some students, but those will have to be dealt with individually and privately.

## Lack of home enforcement

### Question #3

What do you do when you have a child exhibiting behavior problems in the classroom, and the parents are not reinforcing proper behavior at home?

### Response:

Our staff raised a similar question at a recent meeting, and the





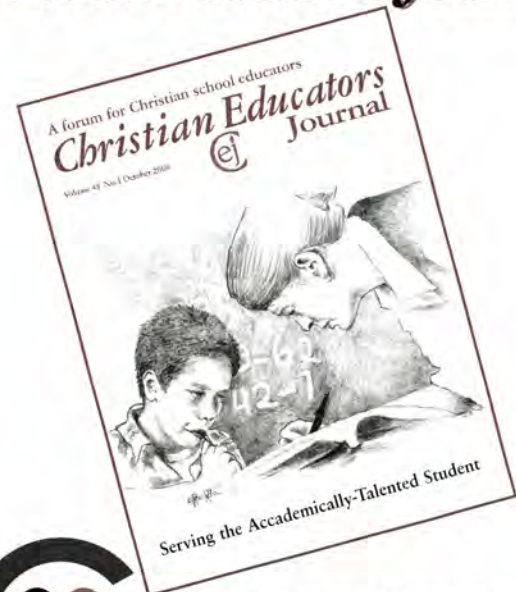
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teacher involved gave specific examples. Although parents, upon entering the school may agree to certain standards and support, there is little a teacher, administration or school board can do to enforce this agreement aside from refusing to enroll the child the following year. That, however, does not solve the present situation. The only thing our staff concluded we could do was to deal with the behavior of the child while she is in the classroom during school time. When an incident occurs, deal with it and give the consequences you would give to any student who exhibits that behavior.

Because the behavior is sometimes learned in the home environment, the suggestion was made to give a biblical basis for why the behavior is wrong, and then provide the consequences to the student. Corrective measures may have to increase in intensity with repeated offences. Throughout the process show the child that she is loved, but the behavior may not continue in the classroom or on the school grounds. Indicate specific examples of how the behavior breaks the sense of classroom community. A word of advice from myself, a principal — the teacher should deal with the situation as long as possible before turning it over to the principal. The reason for this is that the student may think that the classroom teacher no longer has authority once the principal starts handling the situation.

Also it is important to inform the parent, according to school policy, that the behavior is intensifying. Communication with the principal will help determine when administration will have to take up the matter with the parents. It is a difficult situation when the brokenness of sin manifests itself in this way and when children are placed at a disadvantage because of it. Always keep in mind Colossians 3:16 and 17: "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom ... and whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." ©

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# Kids of the KGB Versus Kids of the Kingdom

by Paul Theule

*Paul Theule (ptheule@rochesterchristian.school.org) is the principal of Rochester Christian School in Rochester, New York. He often teaches summer school in Lithuania.*

As much as we've written each other every week over the past year, my Lithuanian daughter Svetlana has consistently evaded questions about her history. This summer, she revealed some of her story, thus explaining her evasiveness.

In 1991, when she was 12 years old, the Soviet Union crumbled. As a result, her family fled Lithuania to Moscow for a few years, because her father had held the position of second secretary of the Communist Party. Having been upper crust KGB officials, her grandparents on both sides abandoned their comforts in Lithuania as well, never to return. Her one grandmother still insists that the KGB did nothing wrong in Lithuania. (Oh, by the way, did you know that in this tiny country in the 1940s, 60,000 Lithuanians died from Soviet subjugation and another 350,000 were deported or perished in Soviet labor camps? Brutal stories didn't end with Stalin's death, either.)

What Svetlana did express often in her writings revealed her "despair with humanity." Actually, over the time I've known her, this cry of despair finally made her collapse before Christ, resulting in her baptism.

I marvel at the road she has traveled. Her entire worldview was based upon atheistic Communism, but extremely harsh treatment by family members, pillars of the Communist world, developed in her a bitter assessment of life, void of love, compassion, and meaning. Consequently, she hasn't made herself easy to love either.

We studied *Hamlet* in class this summer. I had assigned my class to write a paragraph about advice they had received from Polonius-like people in their own lives, perhaps their parents as they left for this summer college program. Svetlana opened her paragraph quite clearly and accurately: "I listen to the advice of no one!" In other words, she has never trusted anyone.

So when she was baptized a few years ago, she finally gave up, not only on others but also on herself, trusting that God can be trusted and opening herself to let him reconstruct her entire worldview.

Christian families may cling to the covenantal promises of God and do all they can to develop a solid Christian worldview in their children. Such prayerful work begins with parents even before the child is born and is joined by the Christian community in church and in the Christian school. To be sure, some children of our covenantal families have rejected this worldview, just as Svetlana has rejected the atheist Communist worldview. Nevertheless, as children of the Covenant make their decisions in life, their decisional framework offers a much shorter path, in contrast to that of Svetlana.

Our covenantal wealth stands in amazing contrast to Svetlana's empty spiritual heritage. This contrast tells us to value this treasure, while at the same time humbling ourselves before God, who through his amazing grace draws people from both heritages into his Kingdom. ☪





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*Al Boerema (ajb37@calvin.edu), associate professor of education at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, asked the Dot Edu panel to discuss the following: "One of the important roles that Christian schools play is in the spiritual formation of our students. Yet, this is often not part of the curricular program of the school. How do you see teachers carrying out the task of spiritual formation?"*

June 16, 2008

Christian Altena starts off:

Hello, all. We in Christian education continually ask ourselves what it is, exactly, that makes us different from the public school down the street. Other than the size, likely, one could not tell merely by looking at the building, until a sign is spotted, or one notices a preponderance of "telling" bumper-stickers on the vehicles in the parking lot. Moving from the outside in, one might spot a few Bible verses painted on the walls, a Bible class in session, or the student praise band rehearsing. In any classroom, at the very least, one could witness first-period devotions, or overhear a teacher say, "Welcome class, let's take a walk through God's garden of mathematics!" Although these are unique and valuable aspects of a Christian school education, none of them, by themselves, can carry an individual very far down the road of spiritual formation by themselves.

What I think does promote spiritual formation is relationships: sustained, empathetic, and grace-filled relationships among and between teachers and students. Through these relationships we teach each other what it means to be in communion with Christ and his will. And while this communion is often strained throughout the course of a school year, our hourly words and actions towards each other, especially in times of stress, go further towards the teaching of a "spiritual curriculum" than merely any chapel or Bible class.

Teachers play a critical role in this process. The students perhaps study us more than any other subject. Do we consistently model the truths we seek to instill in our students? When they look at us, what do they see? Do they see individuals living in the sunshine of God's grace, or in the fog of doubt and apathy? I think we can do considerable damage when we are perceived as having "bought into" the very things we frequently rail against: materialism, selfishness, the culture of complaint and negativity.



It is important that the relationships we build throughout our brief years together are based on the understanding that we are responsible to each other through Christ.

It is in these relationships that we instruct each other repeatedly that the spiritual life is not confined to Sunday morning or spiritual emphasis week, or the opening 5-10 minutes of first period. We remind each other that the use of our minds in our academic classes can and should be understood as an act worship; that the use of our bodies on the field of play is to his glory; that the words we say to a friend's actual face, or to her virtual face(book) should be those of Christ (mention this last part to a class, as I did recently, and watch the cringefest). In every hour of every school day, regardless of subject, regardless of location within the school, we strive to teach these spiritual lessons. (Read: every square inch of this world belongs to God — Abraham Kuyper.)

We don't often formally evaluate these relationships (though my children's report cards do have a "Life Skills" section evaluating, among other items, "Christian character through speech and behavior"), but we are sometimes blessed with seeing profound changes within students over the course of their time in our classes. More often, we hear about such changes from students years later, and sometimes through their own children.

Ultimately, it is not for the academics, athletics, and atmosphere that we believe in Christian education and sacrifice for it, it is for the raising up of a generation who will continue to testify, bravely, in the face of myriad voices to the contrary, that "our world belongs to God."

Christian

June 18, 2008

New panel member Bruce Wergeland adds another approach:

Spiritual formation is an ambiguous expression because this concept echoes an ideology of Christian modernity: an empirical formula for spiritual growth that can be measured separately



from other forms of personal growth.

The spiritual essence of our humanness is not a quality that can be separated from the whole person who has been created in the image of Elohim, for eternity. Genesis 2:7 is a powerful reminder that the breath of God is our spiritual marker — a gift which forever binds us to himself. Each person is spiritual by conception, not by choice. Without becoming entangled in the depths of a worldview debate, one must establish some notion of spiritual formation so that there is a possibility of identifying providential situations or even intentional activities that focus on the spiritual soul — the essence of an individual — when teachers and students are actually engaging each other in their Christian faith, together.

Character development seems like a natural starting point for this discussion because character traits (even though they are completely assimilated with the spiritual) are attributes that can be recognized and perhaps measured through the spontaneous responses to a personal crisis or through vulnerability that is fostered in a genuine relationship. For educators, character development is really a paradox, because they rarely organize curriculum and learning activities that intentionally focus on this aspect of personal growth. But everything they teach, dismiss or emphasize in the classroom reveals their own character and shapes the character of their students. Ultimately, the primary outcome (another modern formula) of Christian education should be character development; really, it is unavoidable in the transmission of our own personal story via the knowledge and skills that our society so highly values. But when do we deliberately pursue moments of character development that reflect a propensity for the spiritual, or the eternal priorities of life?

There is nothing more memorable, engaging and influential than the personal narrative; the parables of Jesus, throughout the gospels, attest to this relational tool. Humorous stories from the lips of any teacher are great connecting points for students, but it is the stories about loss, brokenness and vulnerability — which allow students to understand better the life journey of the human creature that they see at the front of the classroom — that provoke the mind to reconsider, stimulate an unfamiliar emotion or strengthen personal integrity. The narrative never disappoints because the reality that everyone shares through nature is embodied by the spiritual: Yahweh, the God of the present.

Spiritual formation is not something to be assigned, completed or measured, rather, it is a consequence of one's faith in the spiritual attributes that connect each person to their Creator.



This elusive concept takes sanctuary in the messy interaction of daily relationships and presents extraordinary glimpses of realization during the learning activities of classroom curriculum.

Bruce

## June 20, 2008

Jolene responds:

So if teacher-student relationships and personal narratives are so important in the spiritual formation of each student, how are we examining ourselves as teachers in order to be strong models of spiritual maturity? How are we keeping ourselves on God's path, avoiding traps such as "materialism, selfishness, the culture of complaint and negativity" so that our students are also learning to avoid these things?



My ideas for promoting our spiritual maturity include, among others, individual and communal prayer, worship, and conferences. If these things move us towards God, then the question is, do we engage in daily personal prayer? And do we set up times for communal prayer with our colleagues?

I've often felt an inner nudge to challenge our Christian school staff to put stronger emphasis on attending to this need in their lives to foster a culture of spiritual maturity. We need to give ourselves to God. We need to remember that this work we do is not for our benefit but for God's kingdom. If it really is the spiritual maturity of the teaching staff that ministers most to our students, then we need to carefully deepen that maturity. Do Christian schools around the country acknowledge this goal and schedule it on to their calendars?

And a further question: how do teachers bring their stories about communal prayer, worship, and other experiences into their classroom? How can we better portray the positive effects of spirituality in an adult life to our students?

All this said, I don't want to write off those planned, structured and even assessed activities designed to aid students in their spiritual formation. Though at times students can blow off these activities and assignments as meaningless, I still believe that they can create inner change in some students. I think particularly of those students who do not have habits in their home or their church lives which help develop a deep Christian spirituality. I believe that Bible stories, service learning projects, classroom reflections, and ethical talks with youth and similar activities do foster reflection in students that can spark spiritual growth.



## June 30, 2008

Tony jumps in:

Good day, everyone. I would like to throw in a few comments. I may be “spiritually challenged” in that I am not always sure what our “spirit” is or how to direct its formation. When we teach students something about proper nutrition or responsible consumer behavior (e.g. what they should consider when they buy shoes or a car) — this is spiritual formation. If we were to graduate a group of students who wondered at how their relationships to God, others and the creation are influenced by the things they do and don’t do, I’d say we’ve done something significant in regards to their spiritual formation.

Fret not if your students haven’t had a warm fuzzy feeling for a week or two in your class — that may not be because you have neglected something essential. It may be that you’ve helped them understand their spiritual walk as something less influenced by Romanticism and more influenced by a book that talks about this being part of your “getting up and your lying down” — the regular activities of life.

Maybe this line of approach would mean that some of our students wouldn’t get so nervous about the lack of emotional intensity in their Christian walk, either, and they can come to



appreciate different expressions of human relationship with God without the implied judgment that some of us are missing something essential.

When it comes to the spiritual formation of our students, intentional and regular consideration of what our relationship with God, with others and with creation means for our daily walk is good; overheated focus on the emotional nature of our relationships is bad.

Tony

### The panel consists of:

**Pam Adams** (padams@dordt.edu), professor of education at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa.

**Christian Altena** (caltena@swchristian.org) teaches history at Chicago Christian High School in Palos Heights, Illiana.

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

**Tim Leugs** (tleugs@legacys.org) a fifth-grade teacher at Legacy Christian School, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

**Jolene Velthuisen** (jvelthuisen@rcsnm.org) a second-grade teacher at Rehoboth Christian School in Northwest New Mexico.

**Bruce Wergeland** (bcwerg@shaw.ca) teaches Grade 8 at Langley Christian Middle School in Langley, British Columbia

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## Free Internet Book

*Families Living in the Fabric of Faithfulness*, by Gloria Goris Stronks, Ed.D. and Julia Kaye Stronks, Ph.D., can be downloaded from the Internet free of charge.

This book is written for Christians who believe that while we live on this earth we are responsible to live in ways that reflect God’s love and God’s concern for justice. It presents ideas and suggestions from committed Christian parents and children, all of whom are struggling to connect the way they live with the deepest commitments of their hearts.

Over the course of the last seven years the authors interviewed many young adults about their attempts to live with intentionality in the fabric of God’s faithfulness, to use the phrase from Steven Garber’s fine book. They also interviewed the parents of these young people in an attempt to understand the kind of parenting that was part of what led their adult children to their decisions for just living. They interviewed seventh- and eighth-grade students from Christian families to determine their con-

cerns and fears.

Drawing from these interviews and the scholarly works of others, the authors present ideas about how to live with gratitude, how to develop critical thinking and intelligence in children, and how to encourage ourselves and others to work for justice in a world that is broken but redeemed.

Julia Stronks is an attorney and a professor of political science at Whitworth University in Spokane, WA. Gloria was a professor of education at Calvin College and at Dordt College and since her retirement serves Worldwide Christian Schools as the director of continuing education for teachers. Both of these authors have worked with prestigious publishing houses in the past, but they wanted to make this book available to parents and teachers in Africa, India, and other countries around the world who might not be able to afford the book and the shipping prices.

*Families Living in the Fabric of Faithfulness* may be downloaded free of charge from the following website: [www.whitworth.edu/livinginthefabric](http://www.whitworth.edu/livinginthefabric)



# The 10 Habits of Highly Effective Teachers

By Mark A. Olander

Mark Olander and his wife, Jan, have been serving with Africa Inland Mission in Kenya since 1984. Mark was academic dean at Moffat College of Bible in Kijabe, Kenya. The Olanders are now on an extended home assignment in the US. They live in Columbia, South Carolina.

In 1990 Stephen Covey wrote a book entitled *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* in which he discussed seven habits that are characteristic of people who are successful and effective. As a student and as a teacher I have observed several habits that are characteristic of teachers who are highly effective in their profession. I would like to highlight ten of these habits.

## 1. Love your students.

Students are very perceptive. They know when a teacher really cares about them. There is a lot of truth in the statement, *"they don't really care how much you know unless they know how much you care."* In reading the Gospels, one is made aware of how much Jesus loved his disciples. In fact, he loved them so much that he was willing to die for them.

One of the ways to get to know and to love your students is to spend time with them outside the classroom. For example, having a meal together in the school cafeteria provides a good opportunity to show your interest in students. Also, making a conscientious effort to learn the names of students communicates a love for them.

## 2. Be passionate about your subject.

The best teachers I know have a passion for what they teach. Their passion for the subject is contagious. Students pick it up from their teachers. If teachers aren't passionate about their subjects, the students will be affected in a negative way.

When doing a course evaluation at the

end of a semester one student wrote, *"It would help if it was more obvious that you really cared about [the subject being taught]...it would have been nice to hear some emotion and passion in your teaching."* That student was de-motivated because of the teacher's lack of passion for the subject being taught.

## 3. Have clear learning objectives.

Effective teachers start with clear objectives. These objectives will enable the teachers to select which instructional methods would be the most appropriate to use. Student learning can be assessed in light of the desired objectives. This cycle (objectives, methods, assessment) can be repeated throughout the course.

For example, let's say that one of the objectives in a course on evangelism is for students to learn how to use the "Bridge Illustration" when sharing the Gospel. In light of that objective, the teacher could choose to use the method of demonstration by drawing the illustration on the white board while students copy the illustration step by step. Then students can take turns drawing the illustration without using their notes. This would enable the teacher to assess how well they have achieved the desired objective.

## 4. Use a variety of teaching methods.

It is said that, *"variety is the spice of life"*. Students are more highly motivated when teachers use a variety of teaching methods instead of relying on one method they are most comfortable with. Effective teachers are even willing to try new methods.

Jesus used a wide variety of teaching methods (e.g. lecture, question & answer, parables, group discussion, problem-solving, demonstration). He used different methods depending upon the setting, the subject, the time available, and whom he

was teaching. One college student said, *"If the teacher uses only one method the students will lose interest because the teacher becomes too predictable."* Predictability leads to boredom and decreased motivation.

## 5. Promote interactive learning.

The most effective learning takes place when a teacher is able to engage his or her students in the learning process. An effective teacher is always looking for ways to help his or her students to become personally involved in interactive learning. Students need to be actively participating in the learning experience rather than passively receiving input from the teacher.

Recently I was teaching a course on Acts and the Pauline Epistles. I remember the day we were to study about Paul's disagreement with Barnabas regarding whether or not they should take John Mark with them on Paul's Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:36-41). Initially I was planning on lecturing to my students about the incident. But then it occurred to me that it might be better to involve my students in some way. I decided to have volunteers from the class play the roles of Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark. This activity showed some of the issues that may have led to the disagreement about John Mark. It was a very lively class session and one that I'm sure communicated well with the students.

## 6. Continual learning and growing.

Luke 2:42 tells us that Jesus *"grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men"*. Effective teachers are characterized by a desire to keep learning and growing in their knowledge of the subjects they are teaching. Teachers need to keep reading and studying so they become more and more competent in their subjects — as well in areas that will broaden their horizons quite outside their fields.



One goal that a teacher can set is to read a new book on the subject every time he or she teaches it. Also, teachers can participate in teacher training workshops and seminars to help them become more effective in the classroom.

### 7. Be well-prepared.

Students definitely desire to have teachers who are academically competent in the subjects they teach. And they tend to be even more motivated when their teachers also come to class fully prepared to teach. Since we as teachers tend to get busy with administrative responsibilities in addition to our classroom teaching, we sometimes may come to class unprepared. This should never happen. Effective teachers are always prepared for the classes they teach.

I well remember the time when I was a seminary student and at the beginning of a class period our professor discovered that he had brought the wrong set of lecture notes! The notes he brought for a different course! Although he had written books and journal articles on the subject we were studying, it was obvious to us that he was not ready to teach that day. Consequently our motivation as students was diminished because the professor was not well-prepared.

### 8. Model what you teach.

It has been said that "*actions speak louder than words.*" Whatever you teach should be modeled by your life. Verbal exposition can be confusing and hard to comprehend, but one's example is always clear and understandable. The Apostle Paul exhorted Timothy to "*set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.*" (I Timothy 4:12)

Let's say that one of the things a teacher wants to communicate is the importance and value of Scripture memorization. Unless the students can see that the teacher

himself or herself is one who memorizes Scripture, they will probably not be motivated to be involved with Scripture memory. If we don't practice what we teach, we are hypocrites.

### 9. Help students see the future utility.

A major component of student motivation is whether or not they can see how what they are studying will be helpful to them in the future. A wise teacher can help them see the value of what they are learning. This should be conveyed to the students on the very first class session as well as frequently throughout the course.

An example of this habit could be a course in Church History in which the topic for the day is the origin and use of the Apostles' Creed. The teacher can help motivate his or her students by telling them about a former student who, after taking the Church History course, did a series of messages in his local church on several Sunday mornings in which he taught about the Apostles' Creed and its meaning. The messages were well received, and this really encouraged the student pastor. Hearing about how a former student used the information about the Apostles' Creed in his church could help the Church History students see the future usefulness of things

they were learning in their course at the Bible College.

### 10. Get feedback from your students.

The best teachers are those who want to improve their teaching. One of the main ways to improve how they teach is to have periodic course evaluations given by their students. This constructive criticism, if taken seriously, can greatly help teachers improve their effectiveness in the classroom.

If teachers genuinely want to improve their teaching, they will be willing to listen to what their students are saying. It is easy to become defensive when constructive criticism is given, but it is definitely one of the best ways to improve. Effective teachers take seriously what their students say and modify accordingly the way they teach in the future.

Becoming an effective teacher is not something that just naturally happens. It takes time and effort to become effective as an educator. The ten habits we've looked at in this article are only a few of the many habits that highly effective teachers have. Choose one that you desire to work on and practice it until it becomes a habit of yours. With the Lord's help we can become highly effective teachers! ☺

## Interactive CEJ website

*The Christian Educators Journal has a new web presence, even though our global address on the World Wide Web is still [cejonline.com](http://cejonline.com). We are working in partnership with \*culture is not optional, an organization that wants to equip Christians to redeem all of culture. Our new web presence means that the CEJ site has become an interactive site. Visit [cejonline](http://cejonline) and drop us a line or an article.*



# Book Reviews

Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint, 2007. 203 pp. plus 34 pages endnotes and index. \$24.95. Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele, Calvin College (Retired)

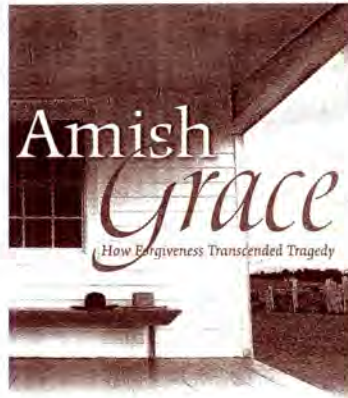


Steve J. Van Der Weele  
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*Amish Grace*, an account of the tragedy that occurred October 2, 2006, in the Amish community near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, provides us, first of all, with a detailed account of the few minutes in which a deranged gunman shot ten young girls in their schoolhouse — five of whom died, five recovered. But it does so much more. It gives us, initially, a leisurely account of the idyllic setting of the landscape in October, describes the way of Amish life, and provides us with some background to the deranged killer, Charles Roberts. And then the gruesome account of the action itself, as Roberts proceeded to wreak his anger and frustrations on innocent lives.

But the narrative does not stop there. In the wake of the horror of this event, the Amish community acted in a way that set the whole world astir — that got everyone informed about the tragedy to debate the appropriateness of the Amish response. The community declared to the world, within a day of the event, that they had forgiven Roberts for this atrocity. And the debate about this action took on a life of its own. The sub-title of the book — chosen with great care, the authors inform us — *How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*, points us to the heart of this very fine study of grace in action and challenges the rest of us to reflect on the meaning of forgiveness and on such collateral matters as the culture we have appropriated in sharp contrast to the Amish way of life.

The book is, in fact, a primer for the history, the traditions, the indoctrination, the fears, the sometimes amusing compromises the Amish make with continuity and change. In preparation for this book, these authors spent a great deal of time consulting the Amish as they sought to understand their mindset and deeply rooted attitudes. They have done us a great favor by presenting the results of their studies and reflection. There must be some school somewhere where a course could be offered in what this book accomplishes. What better pedagogy than to contrast the known with an alternate perspective? The book could actually serve in a religion course, for the authors are theologically aware of all the questions raised by such a tragedy and the surprising response — surprising to those who were not aware of the role forgiveness plays in the life of the Amish community. The authors report that forgiveness is central to the Amish faith. No other practice can compare with the reservoir of attitudes which prompt forgiveness. The Amish take Biblical texts about forgiveness very seriously — Jesus' words on the cross, for ex-



DONALD B. KRAYBILL  
STEVEN M. NOLT  
DAVID L. WEAVER-ZERCHER

ample, and Stephen's, the martyr, who asked that the sin of those who were stoning him would not be laid to their charge. And there are the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, and the Lord's Prayer itself. Whereas in other Christian traditions believers are prompted to forgive because Christ has forgiven us, in the Amish hermeneutics, forgiving others has a meritorious value; it is the condition for receiving forgiveness for the believer.

The Amish were perplexed when their action drew reactions of surprise from all corners. They asked, Is our belief about forgiveness so at odds with the Christian tradition everywhere and always? The question raises many complex issues. One needs to understand the cultures in which forgiveness is exercised. For the Amish, the attitude is nurtured by a number of streams. It is nurtured by the history of the martyrdoms which their cause triggered during the Reformation, as recorded in a thousand-page book, *Martyrs' Mirror*. It is nurtured by their deeply ingrained habits of *uffgevva* — the practice of self-denial, of suppressing emotions of revenge, of non-violence, of non-resistance. And it is nourished by their theology of the two kingdoms — the kingdom of this world, and the kingdom of our Lord. A great chasm exists between the two for the Amish. Yes, the secular powers have their role to play, and they are obliged to play it. But the church has its own role to play. And that role is to remain detached from the secular world. The Amish do pay taxes, but not to social security; that would be a denial of their responsibility to care for their own with dignity and compassion. They refuse military service, they refuse to take oaths, they refuse to avail themselves of the technology which will weaken the family and community structure. (The authors do report that the Amish were quite overwhelmed at the prompt and caring response of the police and ambulance crews and found ways to express their gratitude.)

A myriad of questions came to the fore. Can you forgive someone who is dead? The beneficiaries, of course, were Roberts' family. The Amish realized that the wife and children of Roberts were also victims, and reached out to them in compassion, even sharing some of the funds (four million dollars) that were collected for the community. Would one wish to live in a country where rage at such atrocities was not permitted? Should President Bush have forgiven the perpetrators of 9/11? At what point does one's self-renunciation become emotionally dangerous? Can "pressed forgiveness" have adverse effects on one's personality?



Was their response to evil a proper one? Well, what the casual questioner overlooks is, again, the counter-cultural force of the Amish movement.

For mainstream Americans, the important values are individualism, creativity, concern for personal achievement and identity. For the Amish, the values are the community — people acting in selfless ways, doing good anonymously, blending in with the woodwork. Such folk have a head-start when it comes to reaching out in selfless ways. It is of a piece, say, with raising a barn for a neighbor whose barn has been destroyed. In the context of all these attitudes, taught by osmosis, and daily practice, and song, and the regulations embodied in the *Ordnung*, the generous spirit of forgiveness and compassion to the killer's family should not be all that surprising.

The authors have not yet done with the Amish response. The Amish raise many of the questions that arise naturally as people try to come to terms with disasters: Did God will this event, or only permit it? Can any good come from it? (The world-wide attention given to this tragedy and the response made it easier for some of the parents to accept their loss). Other theological matters come up — and in the context of the Amish community

itself. They are very human, as they themselves admit. Marriages turn sour, abuses occur, disputes over inheritance arise. It seems almost as if they are harder on their fellow believers than on the outsiders — the English, as they call them. For these situations, they summon the word *pardon* rather than *forgiveness*. The offender must repent or face excommunication. Interestingly, the Amish have adopted the *Canons of Dordt* as their creedal confession and follow the rules about discipline and re-admission on condition of repentance. They exercise this discipline, they claim, out of love — and that, of course, requires further definition. But they believe very firmly that improper deeds and attitudes have eternal consequences, and that coming down hard on some recalcitrant member is, indeed, a way of reclaiming him or her for eternity. They carry this out in the spirit of compassionate care.

The authors correctly point out the challenge with which the Amish confront us. Our culture eschews grace, preferring “getting even,” plotting revenge, sanctioning grudges, and affording the tort lawyers a busy profession. Is such a condition really that much healthier than the disposition to forgive — even at the risk of doing so prematurely? ☺

John Van Dyk, *The Maplewood Story: Fostering a Reflective Culture in the Christian School*. Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press, 498 Fourth Ave., NE, 51250. 2007, 246 pages plus 42 pages of notes and index.  
Reviewed by Steve Van Der Wee (Calvin College, Emeritus)

During the time I was reading *The Maplewood Story*, Scott McClellan's book on President Bush's presidency appeared, and McClellan was in great demand by the media. In one of the interviews I heard he said something to this effect: The problem with the present administration is that it lacked the capacity for reflection. It was incapable of, or refused, to stand back and reflect on where their decisions and policies were taking the country. These decisions were made on an ad hoc basis, and no one called for a high-level conference or retreat in which all parties could participate in a process which would provide perspective on their actions and set forth a set of unified goals.

John Van Dyk understands this mindset as it relates to our Christian schools. The words *reflection* and *reflective* appear several times on every page. He summons all teachers, administrators, school boards, and parents to be intentional about what their schools are doing. He calls on all parties — including the students themselves — to initiate and maintain a culture of reflection — a mindset in which reflection becomes habitual, second nature.

One might ask initially, Is it not enough that the Christian community consists of people who are baptized, who forgive and are forgiven, and about whom we can assume that, with these givens, a Christian pedagogy will emerge? Can't we assume that the pedagogical dance and dancer are one and the same? What can come from reflection on reflection? Isn't that a logical formality, like thinking about thinking? Can reflection be

more than sensitivity, or a set of reminders? And can't we assume that those who teach have absorbed the reflections of many educators during their own years of schooling? And how can we measure the intangible dimensions of reflective thought?

Educator Van Dyk insists that far more effort must go into reflection than presently takes place. He sets forth the many obstacles which keep the Christian community from doing the thorough reflection and taking the appropriate action that will truly build the Kingdom of God, to which we are committed. We are confronted by a world of pragmatism, dualism, postmodernism, self-gratification. We are confronted by a Western mentality of materialism, consumerism, competition, idolatries such as sports and worship of celebrities. Teachers and administrators must deal with the “tyranny of the urgent” — with schedules, demands of accrediting agencies, standardized testing, and the format of the textbook. School boards have little time to do more than to keep the school afloat, financially and physically. Teachers expend tremendous energy dealing with students of all sorts — each student with her own method and pace of learning and character traits. Where does a teacher find the time to engage in systematic reflection? Moreover, not all teachers are intellectually equipped to carry out such a demanding regimen of self-evaluation.

Prof. Van Dyk does not pose reflection as an option. It is not to be a mere add-on. It is to be systematic, and ongoing. The alternative is unreflective attitudes, methods, priorities — and these

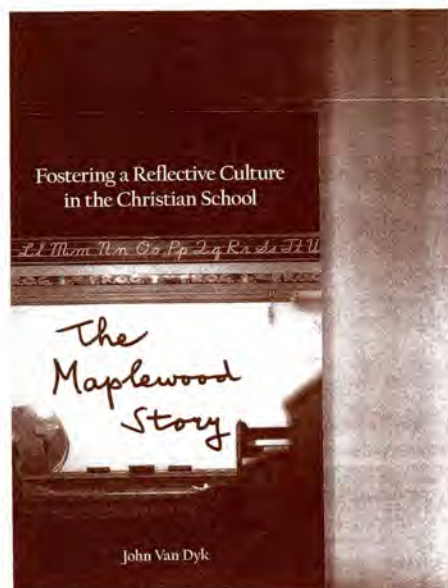


can grievously hamper the work of equipping students for service in God's Kingdom. Van Dyk's program consists of three parts: (1) foundational reflection, (2) reflection applied, reflection in action, and (3) reflective review.

To make his case, Van Dyk becomes a dramatist, a maker of fiction. He imagines a generic Christian school — Maplewood School he will call it — which has invited him to spend a year on the campus launching a program of reflective activities. He will have us undergo “a willing suspension of disbelief” as he guides the Christian school community through a school year. Thus, he relies heavily on narrative to bewitch us into supposing that this is a real school and that he is directly involved in its ongoing life. He controls the whole drama, from start to finish. He devises many strategies. He has his daughter, Lisa, serve as a liaison between him and the teachers. Sometimes she warns him: don't get too rigid, Dad; be more flexible, keep things a bit fuzzy. He contrives many tea parties and conferences, and he is not averse to taking the last cookie. He gives his impressions about how things are going. Sometimes “the buzz” in the faculty room is all about reflection, then, again, to his chagrin, interest languishes. He questions himself keenly.

Sometimes he confesses to uncertainty about this or that solution to a problem. Sometimes he says, “This may be a stupid question, but I will ask it anyway.” He asks himself, Can there be a variety of reflective styles? He supposes there can be. And he creates discord between himself and at least one teacher, Alex, who becomes his devil's advocate, a burr under the saddle. He has Alex confess to him, as mentor, that he finds all this process of reflection too cumbersome, and not particularly relevant — and warns him that he may not sign next year's contract. Thus, if at times discursive passages strain the fictional illusion, it must be said that Van Dyk has thought long and hard about his proposal and has looked at various problems from every possible angle. (His list of research studies at the end of the book is solid and impressive).

And in his forty chapters Van Dyk engages, in this creative way, the highlights of an academic year. What highlights? They range from teachers' retreats and orientation to a meeting with the board; from parent teachers' conferences to dealing with winter doldrums; from extra-curricular activities to proms and graduation; from contract time to “senioritis”; from grading to the curriculum. He creates a teaching moment when he has one



of the problem students killed in an accident. How should a school respond to such an event?

In all of these situations he posits the question, Why are you doing this, and what do you hope to achieve? Have you thought about this activity, and viewed it in terms of deep foundational principles as well as in the more immediate context of this event?

He does more than leave the reader with questions. Understandably, he has an agenda. His recommendations are provocative. School boards should become involved

in educational philosophy. Evaluation should be carried out — but grades? Probably not. He disapproves of competition, and the gold tassel on the mortar board of stellar students. How about the sports mania?

Well, let's set up a panel of students, and ask them whether they really would like to extend their basketball season to the very end — winning the tournament championship. Is it worth the cost? Are our proms secularized versions of what occurs in other schools? Can't we do better than that? How about, at graduation time, having several students provide a statement of their beliefs and how the school has deepened their faith? And is this what you really want a visitor to see when he enters your school — a case of trophies and a rock star poster? As for “senioritis” and “the doldrums” — channel these phases into more productive attitudes, such as service assignments for the first, and some playful metaphors for the second. And maybe children should accompany the parents to parent-teachers' conferences. Get to know your students well, and teach them in the matrix of the greatest virtue — the gift of love.

To reinforce what he has done during his tour at Maplewood School, Van Dyk offers extensive notes by way of reinforcement of his thesis — that a school community which fails to incorporate the discipline of systematic and ongoing reflection is not living up to its high privilege of being an agent commissioned to advance the Kingdom of God in our time.

Did you ask about Maplewood? Reflection is alive and well, we are told. The school is on a roll.