

# DO NOT FORSAKE THE ASSEMBLY

*by Ron Gilley, Trinitas Christian School*

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If you could get the attention of your whole school for ten minutes every morning, what would you say? What would you do to make the best use of that time? What would you do during that ten minutes to make an impression on your students that would last all day or all week or even a lifetime?

Every morning students stream into your school from different places, their last exchange with mom or dad sticking as tightly to their faces as the remnants of the jelly-slathered toast they ate on the way to school. How do you turn that page and get them all into the same story? How do you call them into the school community and prepare them for the day ahead?

There is no better way to start a school day than to gather everyone together first thing in the morning and spend a short, purposeful time as a school worshipping and dedicating the day to the Lord. For the past eighteen years every school day at Trinitas Christian School has started with ten minutes of worship that we call, simply, Morning Meeting.

Most classical Christian schools are made up of dozens or even hundreds of students from

different familial, social, experiential, and theological backgrounds. Calling all of these students into a common community—one that forms a unique bond between them and sets them apart as members of something distinct and other—is imperative to a unified school culture. In fact, if we fail to create a unique community and culture within our schools, we run the risk of being no more than a loose collection of factions all inhabiting the same building. Indeed, failure to begin each day together means that each class begins its day in its own way, necessarily making it distinct from every other class from the outset of the day. Beginning each day with a short assembly, however, a time of corporate worship that draws students from diverse backgrounds and experiences together and orients them toward a common purpose and love, is a solid foundation upon which to build a tight community and sweet culture in our schools.

Furthermore, calling students into community by practicing a daily liturgy not unfamiliar to orthodox Christians from a multitude of different denominations, but unique to the school itself, establishes for students

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and teachers, not a community in competition with the ones they belong to in their churches and homes, but one that, rather, shares the language of those communities while still being unique to the school. Beginning the day in an assembly where worship takes place according to a unique liturgy, then, causes students to focus on those things they hold in common as orthodox Christians. This unique liturgy to begin each day can give your students a reference point that draws them closer together. You might liken this idea to your own family worship or family devotions, or even to your family table where you begin and end each day together with a family meal.

Very much the same way your family table reminds members of the family that you all belong to each other, that you are accountable to each other, so a morning assembly at your school will do the same for students and teachers. When we are members of a community and are reminded of that often through the things we say and do together, through the beliefs we profess and act upon, we become accountable to one another; we hold each other to a common standard that we have accepted as our own. One doesn't recite the historical creeds of the faith with his friends each morning and then live like the devil before them the rest of the day. One doesn't answer catechisms and memorize Scripture and sing Psalms and pray prayers together in community without expecting to be reminded of those things throughout the day. Common confession of a common faith in morning assembly, and then common action upon that faith throughout the day at school becomes the standard we hold each other to as we live our days in community with each other.

And so the actual liturgy of a morning assembly, what we recite and pray and sing together, is vital to building, growing, and strengthening the community in a certain direction. At Trinitas, we use a few key components in our Morning Meeting, strung together in a simple order that we maintain with only slight variation, to

set our students' feet on a common path each morning. We have codified these components in their order and compiled them into a book, or Morning Meeting Guide. Actually, there are three Morning Meeting Guides as we maintain a three year rotation through the themes God's Character, Creation and Providence, and Redemption. Each student and teacher is given a Morning Meeting Guide at the beginning of the school year, and parents are able to purchase them as well. All the components of Morning Meeting are laid out in print this way as in an order of worship at a church. Here are the components of Morning Meeting at Trinitas in order and with a brief explanation of each:

## **SCRIPTURE READING**

Each school day has its own reading that follows not only the theme for that year, but also the sub-themes for the month and week. Each reading is accompanied by a short exposition and/or exhortation that is not printed in the Morning Meeting Guide and generally does not extend beyond one minute. The main goals for the exhortation are application and encouragement.

## **CATECHISM (M, W, F)**

Over the years we have put together a catechism based mostly on the Westminster Shorter Catechism but that reflects a non-denominational position for our school where as many as thirty-five different churches are sometimes represented within the student body.

## **CONFESSION OF APOSTLE'S OR NICENE CREED (T, TR)**

We confess both creeds as excellent expressions of the Faith that can be agreed to by anyone who can sign our Statement of Faith. We memorize and recite them unapologetically: one in the first semester and the other in the second. These confessions alternate days of the week with the catechism questions.

## SCRIPTURE RECITATION

Each month the entire student body learns a passage of Scripture together. We work on the passage together during Morning Meeting through repetition in unison, at first, and then recitation in unison by the last week of the month. 1 Corinthians 13 and Exodus 20:1–17 are two of our favorites. Because we use a three-year rotation, students graduate with some foundational passages of Scripture hidden in their hearts.

## SINGING

Each day we sing a Psalm or hymn of the faith together. These, too, are selected for the year and the theme ahead of time and are printed in the Morning Meeting Guide with the music. Our music teacher and choir director uses his couple minutes each morning to teach the parts of each song. It takes a few weeks to get it down because he has only a couple minutes each morning, but we usually are able to learn the parts to each song and sing them beautifully by the end of the year.

## PRAYER

We end the liturgical portion of our Morning Meeting by reciting a prayer in unison. We have a beautiful school prayer, but we also have eight to a dozen additional prayers from various sources that we rotate through during the year.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

Of course, everyone wants to make an announcement when the whole school is gathered together. We end our Morning Meeting with as few announcements possible, mentioning only the two or three most important items and keeping the details to a minimum. We then dismiss with the exhortation to love God and neighbor and to go in peace.

## DOXOLOGY

At the end of each day, the entire student body gathers back in our Grand Hall to sing the Doxology as a way of closing out the school day. We see this way of closing the day as the necessary other book-end for our day at school.

The reasons you can cite for not conducting a morning assembly at your school are probably many and varied. Two of the biggest reasons I have heard for not having a school-wide assembly each morning are (1) the idea of it becoming a worship service in competition with students' churches, and (2) it takes up too much time. To the former, I have already spoken but will add that any liturgy or worship components you put in place must represent first the school's statement of faith and second the constituent families who have signed that statement of faith. Focus on the things Trinitarian Christians agree on, and do it in such a way that you build the appetites of your students for real, full worship at their churches. Complaints about Morning Meeting at Trinitas have been so rare, superficial, and easily resolved that they are hardly worth mentioning. To the latter, I concede that time is an issue—it always is. The answer at Trinitas was to begin the school day ten minutes early: we begin at 7:50 am. We also work very hard to keep the duration of Morning Meeting to ten minutes. This commitment requires planning well, starting on time, not being given to superfluous commentary on the Scripture reading, and keeping the announcements to the bare-bones minimum.

Perhaps the Trinitas Morning Meeting model won't work for every school, but doing nothing together and instead letting each class start the school day on its own is at best an opportunity lost, and at worst the very undermining of community and culture within your school. In other words, a choice to do nothing at all to start each school day is still a choice for a certain type of daily liturgy—you simply will have left the decision to someone else about what kind of liturgy it is.