

GROWING WHERE YOU'RE PLANTED: LESSONS FROM 20 YEARS

by Diana Meadowcroft, Cedar Tree Classical Christian School

Most young moms have a birthing story. In fact, parents will tell you none of their children's births were the same. The birthing stories of ACCS schools are each unique as well. Nonetheless, as moms identify certain commonalities, so certain truths emerge with the birthing of a school.

As a mom who helped birth a school more than 20 years ago, I hope to highlight certain truths experienced in our school history with the prayer that they encourage others to continue the hard but good labor of discipling generations. As a teacher and administrator working beyond the pioneering stage, I hope to show that core principles never change.

We walk by faith, not by sight. This may sound cliché, especially as different groups of educators talk about the third wave of classical Christian education, but this biblical principle is foundational to any labor in the Lord. Like many schools birthed near the turn of the century, ours came about by young parents reading and sharing Douglas Wilson's *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning* among ourselves and agreeing that we wanted what he described. We secured the guidelines from Logos and started working through the list.

That meant not only reading materials and building a unified vision, but also recruiting other parents who wanted to labor for something they'd never seen or ever done before. And we learned. We had to make different course corrections along the way, including some that

would have kept several of us from ever starting if we had known just how difficult it would be.

Nonetheless, a core group kept at it. We visited sister schools and asked questions from those even just a few years ahead of us in development. I found the ACCS conferences critical to remind me of why our labors mattered and to gain insight to the inevitable challenges of working with people and building an institution—not that I had a clear understanding of what that would look like. But that's why it's a faith walk.

It's also a prayer walk. *Ora et labora*—pray and work—became an early mantra for our community that continues to this day. In our effort to establish a school, we partnered with others who were establishing schools in the Portland area, south of our community in Washington state. Because we shared the same passion but not the same real estate, we could freely support one another by sharing our burdens and praying together once a month on a Saturday for our first couple of years.

As our school of parent laborers started in a church, we soon learned that fire marshals don't appreciate schooling efforts in a building only zoned for church. *Ora et labora* played a key role in our first nine years being housed by six different churches. In fact, we often found the Lord answering our prayers for a building the month before we were to start classes. In our cooperative years, we also voiced much prayer for specific teacher placement, and

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the prayers continue as new hires are made.

When our board found property to purchase, we added a new aspect to prayer and work: Saturday workdays. We invited our community to help us clear the property and pray for all it would take to get buildings on a former horse farm. Today, once-a-month Saturday work days continue as a way for families to work alongside each other and keep maintenance costs down on our 17-acre property.

These Saturday work days and the privilege of having a few years to look back on illustrate the truth that **many united hands make light the work**. As I look back on what God has done, I can name many people who were part of our early years, but not part of our work now. All had some part to play in building the school, and many more continue to do so. It is a *community* effort, and we seek to encourage that mindset even today: *we are partnering with families* and we all contribute to the health of our school.

I emphasize *united* because we did experience a painful split that, from a human standpoint, should have ended our labors. But it didn't. God answered prayers and provided the healing needed through key leadership and faithful people who trusted God to work as we sought to obey his instruction regarding conflict while laboring to provide an excellent Christian classical education.

Among many things I learned during that difficult season, the obvious lesson is **leadership matters. People matter**. Who you invite on your team—whether teachers, board members, or families—shapes your school. They make up our community. So be selective. And cultivate a community of grace.

I am so grateful for the conspiracy of friendship that fueled the school in its early years and continues to impact our learning community today. We prayerfully interview folks coming in, and we are careful not to entrust too much to new teachers or families when they join the school. We schedule events that encourage mixing of families as well as remind us of vision. All of our efforts—and we are always tweaking or considering new ways to educate and encourage our families—are rooted in our biblical

understanding of human beings: we are forgetful, and we always have room to grow.

Don't be afraid to overcommunicate. We ask our teachers and our parents and our students to work hard. We ask our students to wear uniforms and read books and write well and do many other things that they notice their neighbors not doing. We must remind them and their parents why their work is good and why it matters. And as new families join us and older families graduate out of the school, we have to evaluate the best ways to encourage parents to learn and support the hard work of learning their children are doing. In fact, this month a group of veteran moms at our school will meet to consider ways to connect with a new generation of moms.

We know that we are always building. We never truly arrive, even if all our classrooms are full (which they're not, but we're close). We realize we are investing our time, talent, and treasure—and some give all three—for the children that come after ours. We are laboring for a legacy. Remembering that future helps us give.

Two lessons in that investment process come to mind: **quickly learn limits, and value differences**. I didn't always know when to say no to something. Others close to me had to help me learn that a birthing process is always costly. Building effectively means bringing others into the labor that have different skills and perspectives, yet share the mission. I have seen such a mix help move the school forward in many ways, not the least through generous giving and lending early on to secure our property. Generosity of spirit always comes when we remember Who we serve and where we're going.

Preserving that legacy requires that **we begin with the end in mind**. We keep returning to that end so we stay on track and don't lose heart. I confess that I didn't have much of an end in mind when we started more than 20 years ago. All I could see was my three children and my need to educate them well in the fear of the Lord. Others also saw that need and joined together with me and friends and so we began.

Fortunately, through our begging and borrowing we learned that we should have a “Portrait of a Graduate.” Our teachers and headmaster developed one that guides our evaluation of our broad work together, along with our mission statement. We find that we even need to evaluate our ends statement to see if it really helps us evaluate what we do. We realize we would be able to use it more effectively if we simplified it, so our leadership team is in the process of doing so. And because the daily workings of our school often take precedent, our process is slow. But it is certain, because our leadership keeps it in front of us. We keep on building and improving.

Our school’s recent fundraising dinner embodies so much of what I’ve recounted. Unlike many schools, we have not coordinated an auction or fundraising dinner in at least five years because of the work it requires. God has graciously taken care of us through generous donors to our year-end letter appeal. However, a team of committed volunteers organized our November Gala as the public launch to our capital campaign to build an assembly hall. Our first permanent building in the midst of portables, it will open up more classroom space as well as allow our

whole student body to meet together under one roof.

This evening of celebration became the second milestone in my journey with Cedar Tree, a reminder that we’re laboring for legacy, building an institution to serve generations beyond us. The first milestone was my eldest’s participation in our first high school graduating class. Thirteen years walked across the stage, and I had a sense of a dream accomplished. But this milestone—an evening produced by many quiet hands, complete with images of experiences long-forgotten—showed me that we labored for the future. New hands would pick up the baton and run the race after I was done.

I am not done. But I know my years are numbered. In the meantime, I remind those with whom I team that we’re laboring in faith with prayer, treating people well, and preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We labor with the end in mind, always evaluating, seeking to be lifelong learners. We know that we can trust the One who cares more than we do, the One who rewards even a glass of water given in His name. We can trust that He writes the best birth—and *growth*—stories.

