

## **CCUE Summer Conference 2016: Kingdom and Character for Culture that Lasts**

Late in their life when they were in their 80's my Norwegian immigrant grandparents were given a gift by their children of a trip back to Norway. They knew it was very likely their last chance to return to the land of their origin to visit their relatives and soak up their heritage. On their return to Midway airport—in the days before security screenings and body scans—my entire extended family turned out to welcome them home: aunts, uncles, cousins, grandkids, more Norwegians than you'd find at a midweek meeting at a Lutheran church, even in Minnesota.

My grandmother was first off, and swarmed with hugs and kisses and cheers of welcome. My grandfather, who walked with a limp, ambled onto the concourse and was hugged and kissed at first, but a strange reaction passed through the family. Grandpa had an unusual odor about him. He stank, stunk and generally smelled awful. A skunk would have run from him. I wondered if he had had an accident on the flight, and hoped it happened over Chicago as opposed to Greenland.

You couldn't get near him. It was absolutely disgusting.

It fell to my father, the first born, to take Gramps aside and ask what was going on. I remember getting as close as I could bear just to hear what my Dad was going to say.

He told Gramps that he smelled and asked if he was feeling all right. I'll never forget my grandfather's sheepish yet strangely proud response. He carefully unbuttoned his cardigan sweater, then his shirt, lifted his undershirt, and showed my Dad the fresh—not smoked—Norwegian salmon he had wrapped in newspaper and around his chest. "I'm sorry son, forgive me, but I didn't think customs would let me bring it in, and it was my last chance for fish from home."

I gained a new appreciation that day for my longsuffering grandmother, living as long as she did with a character like that.

But you see where this is going, don't you? The culture of his homeland was so embedded in him, so much a part of who he was, so much of what defined him that this seemed like the natural thing to do. My grandmother, on the other hand, settled for a new Norwegian sweater. She cared about her culture, but also about hygiene.

At its heart, **Christian** education will always be the transmission of a culture: the culture of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. That's not the same as a particular culture of ethnicity or race, and sometimes, admittedly, Christian education has confused the issue on that score. It's the transmission of the culture of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

And, at heart, it's the transmission of the character of Jesus Christ known as the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The Culture of the Kingdom and Character of Jesus Christ. How's that for a school culture? Noticeable in word and deed in your staff and students. Noticeable to the communities you serve. Something that becomes the natural DNA of our students, their instinctive way of acting and viewing the world.

What might that look like? Many of the schools in this room are well on their way, for this is what you'd notice:

The culture of the kingdom radiates a passion for justice, for setting things right, and making right the norm. It makes God's concerns our concerns. It develops in students a heart for justice through empathy, outrage at wrong, and showing kids heroes instead of celebrities.

Does your school do this? Is the culture of the Kingdom something people notice in your school?

The culture of the kingdom gives developmentally appropriate answers to the questions all kids ask in one way or another:

Where did I come from?

Where am I headed?

What does my life matter to those around me?

What do I live for?

For whom would I die?

A Kingdom culture infused with the character of Christ in the fruit of the spirit enables urban kids who live with unusual stress because of neighborhood violence to know something better.

Who among us hasn't worried about the future on behalf of our students?

I do know this. If unemployment, absentee fathers and incarceration are factors that contribute to violent neighborhoods, our schools offer children a different picture and preparation. Pursuing justice, the value of community, loving your neighbor, learning to resolve conflicts as Christ would have us work at it, being educated with a sense of calling and a place in God's world, having the knowledge and wisdom to be employed—these are all character-of-Christ fruit of the Spirit building elements found in the classrooms and missions of our schools.

I believe our schools offer concrete signs of hope because of their Kingdom culture and because kids learn of the character of Christ. I pray that our students and teachers will help turn the tide from neighborhood violence toward peace. And I also pray that they may be safe in the arms of God when random violence prowls their neighborhood.

Some students come to school and simply soak up the safety of a loving, nurturing picture of the Kingdom of God. That's a powerfully transforming kind of school culture.

I remember attending the funeral of a Christian School. How's that for ending a conference on an upbeat note?

After nearly 130 years, Roseland Christian School in one of the most troubled neighborhoods of Chicago closed its doors. Roseland was one of the Bright Promise Fund network schools. The Farewell Celebration—sounds better than a funeral, doesn't it—was a joyous gathering not unlike an African-American home-going, filled with song and prayer and testifying, weeping and laughter, and awash in thanksgiving for God's faithfulness for so many years. It was something like saying goodbye to a loved one after a long period of hospice care.

Along the way someone told the story of Mrs. Murphy, a beloved kindergarten teacher, and one of her students. This student loved her so much that when asked to recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm he would say "Surely goodness and Mrs. Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life."

And that's how school culture becomes part of a kid's DNA.

God bless you if you are that kind of teacher or administrator! And I think that most, if not all of you are.

No one else in these United States of America is better equipped in times like ours –times that call for justice and honest conversations about race and our futures together--than urban Christian education to shape the future in the name of Jesus Christ.

Small in number though we be, numbers don't matter to God.

God works with the small and humble things of this world. Am I right?

No one else does what you do as well as you do it. I can say it because you're humble!

When your schools create a culture with Kingdom values and a culture permeated with the character of Jesus Christ, you bring wholeness and peace into kids' lives, and God smiles down and he blesses them. Through you!

So, thanks for what you do. Glad we could gather together and be encouraged in this good work and great calling. May this be only the beginning of our conversation together.

And as you leave this place, remember this: "Surely goodness and Mrs. Murphy shall follow you all the days of your life."

Please join me in this prayer for the school days ahead:

"Mighty God and gentle Lamb, Lord of all creation.  
How we long for you, how we strive for you; help us now to love you even more.  
Give us humble hearts to praise you and listening ears to hear your voice, willing hands to serve you, thankful spirits to rejoice.  
Lord of all, we adore you and bring this prayer before you:  
Create in us humble hearts. When our thoughts turn proud, remind us of the grace you freely give. When we lose our way, Lord, find us. Draw us close to you again.  
In the name of Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.

Thank you. May God bless you now and always.

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