

# DIVERSITY IN THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

"In a year like no other"...Tymarcus Ragland's title from this eBook describes 2020 to at T. The most disruptive calendar year in our profession has come to an end but not before leaving its thick residue on the work we are vocationally called to do. Pedagogically, Covid-19 has resulted in significant changes. Remote learning and hybrid classrooms were suddenly options. Add the additional layer of a political system that appears to reward division over unity, the cultural dust of 2020 may require some time to blow away.

There is residue, however, that I hope lasts. The social unrest that we found ourselves in this year prompted what I believe has been a transformational change in faith-based schools. Led by CACE Fellow Erik Ellefsen and Prestonwood Christian Academy's Director of Diversity, Jenny Brady, CACE was able to tap the expertise of skilled practitioners who shared their insights and offered their "next" (next is used in place of "best" so that we never stop searching or trying for better) practices for Christian schools to consider. Towards an end of equipping our graduates to think critically, speak intelligently, and act Biblically on issues of diversity, CACE offers this eBook, *Diversity in the Christian School*.

**"When diversity is properly harnessed through unity, it benefits an individual believer and a body of believers (through shared experiences and teaching) in several ways: stability in truth, maturing in knowing God more fully and Jesus Christ whom He sent...and the edification of the body."**

*– Dr. Chris Chow, former board member of  
Prestonwood Christian Academy.*

May we be found faithful in this long walk of obedience,

Dr. Timothy Van Soelen  
Executive Director, CACE

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# AN INTRODUCTION

**W**hen I think about sanctification, the term used to signify being set apart or to be made holy, I am equally excited, grateful, and impatient. No one expects me to be perfect, yet it is something that I long for—being free of sin, guilt, shame. I also know that sanctification comes at a cost. The process isn't easy; in fact, it's often painful. But it is necessary.

The standard of sanctification is wrapped up in the "Greatest Commandment." In Matthew 22:37, 38 (ESV), Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment." Whereas this command seems simple enough, it is the most difficult thing. We readily admit that we won't live into this reality until we become like Him, in heaven. But what comes next is equally as difficult: "And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:39, 30).

These verses are foundational to our Christian schools: our mission and vision statements are wrapped in them; they are part of the very DNA of who we are and why we do what we do. These commands also give us a lens for why diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work is so important for Christian schools. I would even argue that DEI is part of the sanctification process as it allows us to love and serve more fully.

Diversity emanates from the creativity of God, and it is His desire that we love one another in our difference.

Working as the Director of Diversity at Prestonwood Christian Academy for nearly two decades, I have needed to justify the need for my position and the work we are doing. I remind skeptics that diversity is biblical, something God affirmed from the beginning (Genesis 1:27) to the end (Revelation 7:9). Let me delve deeper.

First, diversity emanates from the creativity of God, and it is His desire that we love one another in our difference (see John 13:35). As I watch the world mishandle diversity, I remember that God's people are called to be a light in a dark world, a beacon of hope and healing. God's people should be leading the way in this conversation on diversity.

Second, we have the Bible to give us guidance and understanding on God's design. As we at PCA examined the Word of God, we created an acronym to help us identify the areas of diversity that needed to be addressed. GRACE stands for Gender, Race, Age, Ability, Culture, and Economic Status.

Third, we have a community of believers from diverse backgrounds who understand the importance of training the next generation to think critically, speak intelligently, and act Biblically on issues of diversity. Dr. Chris Chow, a former board member at Prestonwood Christian Academy and founding diversity committee member, stated the value of competence in this area:

When diversity is properly harnessed through unity, it benefits an individual believer and a body of believers (through shared experiences and teaching) in several ways: stability in truth, maturity in knowing God more fully and Jesus Christ whom He sent... and edification of the body.

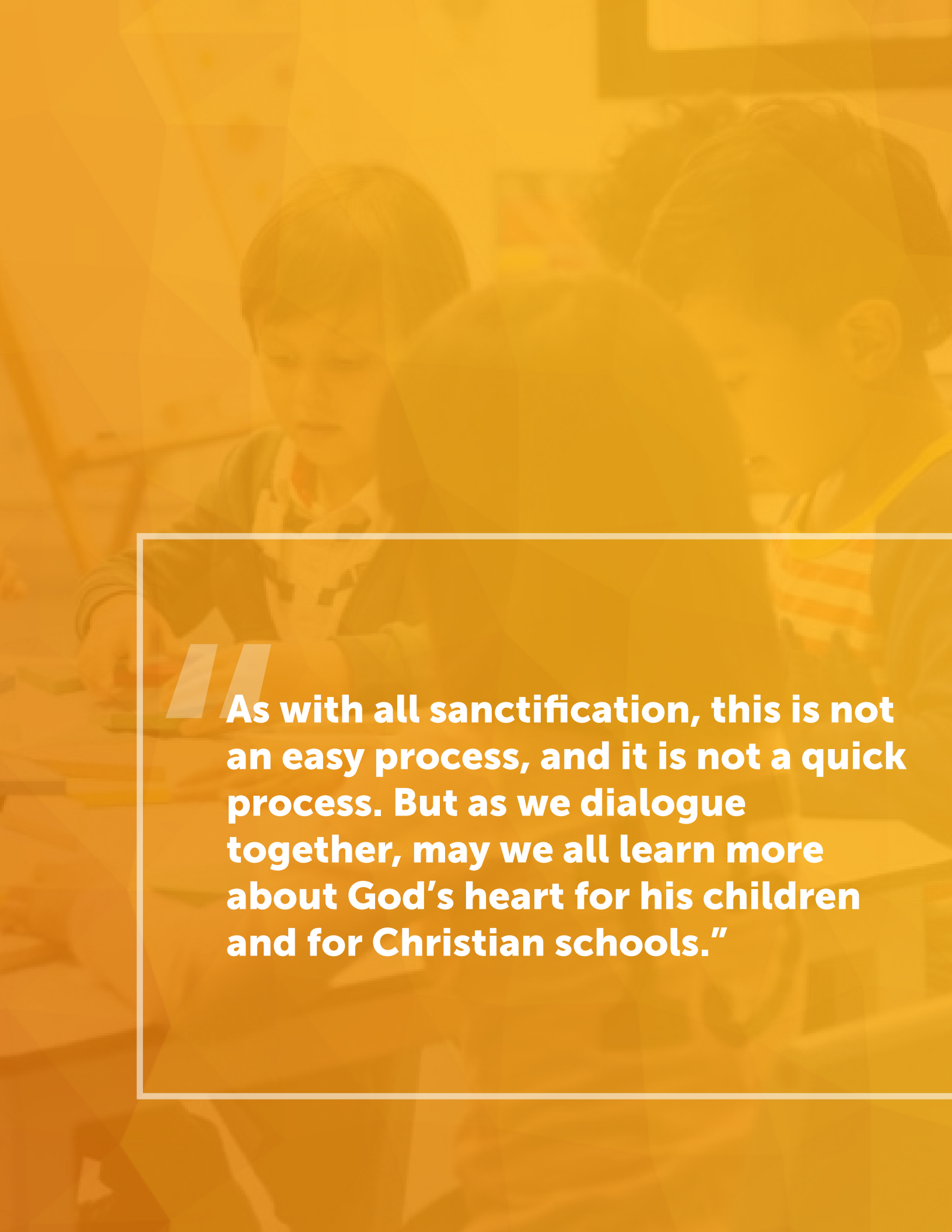
I am thrilled to work at a Christian school where diversity is addressed, celebrated, and expected. There are times when this experiment looks and feels like a Pandora's Box, but I've come to appreciate that the educational process, while messy at times, is essential if we expect our students to reflect the heart of God to communities that are increasingly diverse. Too many of our Christian students are entering the arena under-prepared and under-equipped to address controversial and complex issues. When you look at your alums, I hope that you can say that your school faithfully equipped them for the challenges and opportunities they face. I am grateful to partner with other diversity educators to hopefully equip you for the work needed in Christian schools surrounding DEI from a Biblical perspective. Each of us will showcase different areas of the work. Our desire is that our thoughts will spur you on to advance in your own personal and institutional work in this area. As with all sanctification, this is not an easy process, and it is not a quick process. But as we dialogue together, may we all learn more about God's heart for his children and for Christian schools.

## AUTHOR



### JENNY BRADY

Jenny Brady brings a unique perspective to the diversity discussion. Jenny is currently serving as the Director of Diversity for Prestonwood Christian Academy, a position created to express her passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion while combining her personal experience growing up in Honduras. She holds a M.S. in Sociology and a B.A. in Spanish. In the educational realm, Jenny has worked as a teacher and administrator, and is on the Leadership Team at PCA. She is the co-creator of the Christian Educators Diversity Alliance, co-creator of the podcast GRAACE360, and is a speaker, teacher, author and trainer on diversity, equity and inclusion for schools across the country.

A group of students in a classroom, with a quote overlaid on the image. The students are looking at papers or books, and the overall scene is dimly lit with a warm, yellowish-orange tint. The quote is enclosed in a white rectangular box with a thin border.

**“As with all sanctification, this is not an easy process, and it is not a quick process. But as we dialogue together, may we all learn more about God’s heart for his children and for Christian schools.”**

# NURTURING STUDENTS IN A YEAR LIKE NONE OTHER

**F**or us educators, the summer is coming to a close. As usual, teachers are preparing classrooms (either face-to-face or online spaces) for student arrival. However, we all know that this next term will be different: COVID-19 and this year's civil rights movement have planted seeds in all of our students, and God has given us an opportunity to nurture the seedlings that they may bear good fruit. With such a momentous occasion at hand, it behooves us to prepare our hearts and minds to respond well from day one.

Each student will walk into your school with a unique story, one that has been impacted by recent events to varying degrees. Some students may have gone on vacations as usual, while others were cooped inside their homes week after week. Some may have stayed perfectly healthy, while others may have lost loved ones. Some may have been on the streets fighting for change, while others may have been watching the news wondering why people were being so destructive. The spectrum is wide and the angst is high, yet Christ has given us the blueprint for how to navigate this upcoming year.

Matthew 9 reads like a singular set of occurrences. Jesus is seen going from place to place confronting Pharisees, healing the sick, rebuking naysayers, and teaching truth. I encourage you to read this passage yourself, but here are three lessons we can learn from Jesus' ministry.



## Spiritual and Physical Needs

Not only did Jesus speak words of wisdom and forgive sins, he met physical needs. In verse 35, we are told that Jesus continued to “preach the good news of the kingdom and heal every disease.” Though we may not be able to miraculously fix everyone’s infirmities, we can aid with their physical needs. Keeping snacks in our classroom, being a safe person with whom to express needs, advocating for counseling when needed, and insisting on appropriate behavior and speech is all part of meeting physical needs. Your students cannot and will not learn from you if they don’t feel healthy and safe.

## Interruptions as Opportunities

In this chapter, every time Jesus was met with an opportunity to minister to people, he was on his way somewhere else. As teachers we are the planners of all planners, but we have to be ready for interruptions. I’ve made it a practice before each school day to ask God to prepare me for divine interruptions: it’s not a matter of if they will happen but when. Embrace those situations by being there for your students and your colleagues!

## Feelings Matter

The last practice to emulate comes from one of my favorite Jesus moments described in the gospels. After a long day of ministering, Jesus looked out at the city, saw the crowds, and “had compassion on them” (v.36). After reading that verse, go back and read the chapter from the beginning. Jesus invited Matthew the tax collector to dinner, evoking the wrath of the Pharisees. Why their ire? Because they saw Matthew and judged, but Jesus saw the people and felt compassion. Whereas the Pharisees saw brokenness, Jesus saw Himself—the image of God imprinted on every person who walks this earth. I urge you to see your students as Jesus does and to feel compassion.

Of course, there are many things we can do to serve our students well in this unusual season. Through books, documentaries, and podcasts, we can equip ourselves for important conversations about race, healthcare, and even politics. However, our posture is so much more important than our answers. You may say “I honestly don’t know” a million times this year, and that’s fine (be sure to do your research afterwards), but love and care extended to students will nourish seeds in their hearts and allow them to see Jesus in you.

# AUTHOR



## TYMARCUS RAGLAND

Tymarcus Ragland and his bride Chrissy have been married for five years. Tymarcus earned a B.A. in Youth Ministry & Biblical Studies from Moody Bible Institute and a masters in humanities from the University of Dallas. He currently teaches middle and upper school Bible at Prestonwood Christian Academy in Prosper, Texas and owns his own coffee roasting business. You can follow Tymarcus on Instagram at @ty.rashad.

# THE NEED FOR EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL LEARNING

**F**or 14 years, I attended Christian schools. This Kingdom education laid a foundation for my identity in Jesus Christ. After a school mission trip to Martha Brae, Jamaica, where I helped lead Vacation Bible School and construct a cement wall for the church, I created the life goal of Making A Difference Everyday (MADE). On my first trip abroad, I experienced what it meant to be an ambassador for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). Since then, I have yearned to learn about cultures and perspectives different from my own.

Teaching in South Korea as a Fulbright English Teacher in 2015 nurtured this desire for cross-cultural engagement and helped me recognize how central this value is to K-12 education. Since 2016, I have served at my alma mater Eagle's Landing Christian Academy, now in my third year as Director of Diversity.

One of the greatest blessings of being a Christian educator, especially in the diversity field, is that I am not alone. Since I began this role, Jenny Brady from Prestonwood Christian Academy and other colleagues like Joel Hazard and David Robinson from the Christian Educators Diversity Alliance have been an amazing support system. They have helped me to understand and celebrate Biblical diversity.

One thing I've learned is that this diversity work often demands hard conversations. It means forming relationships outside our normal circles and often being uncomfortable. It necessitates the capacity to listen well, to feel and express compassion, to speak with authenticity, to confess and forgive, to imagine ways forward. In other words, diversity work depends on social and emotional skills.

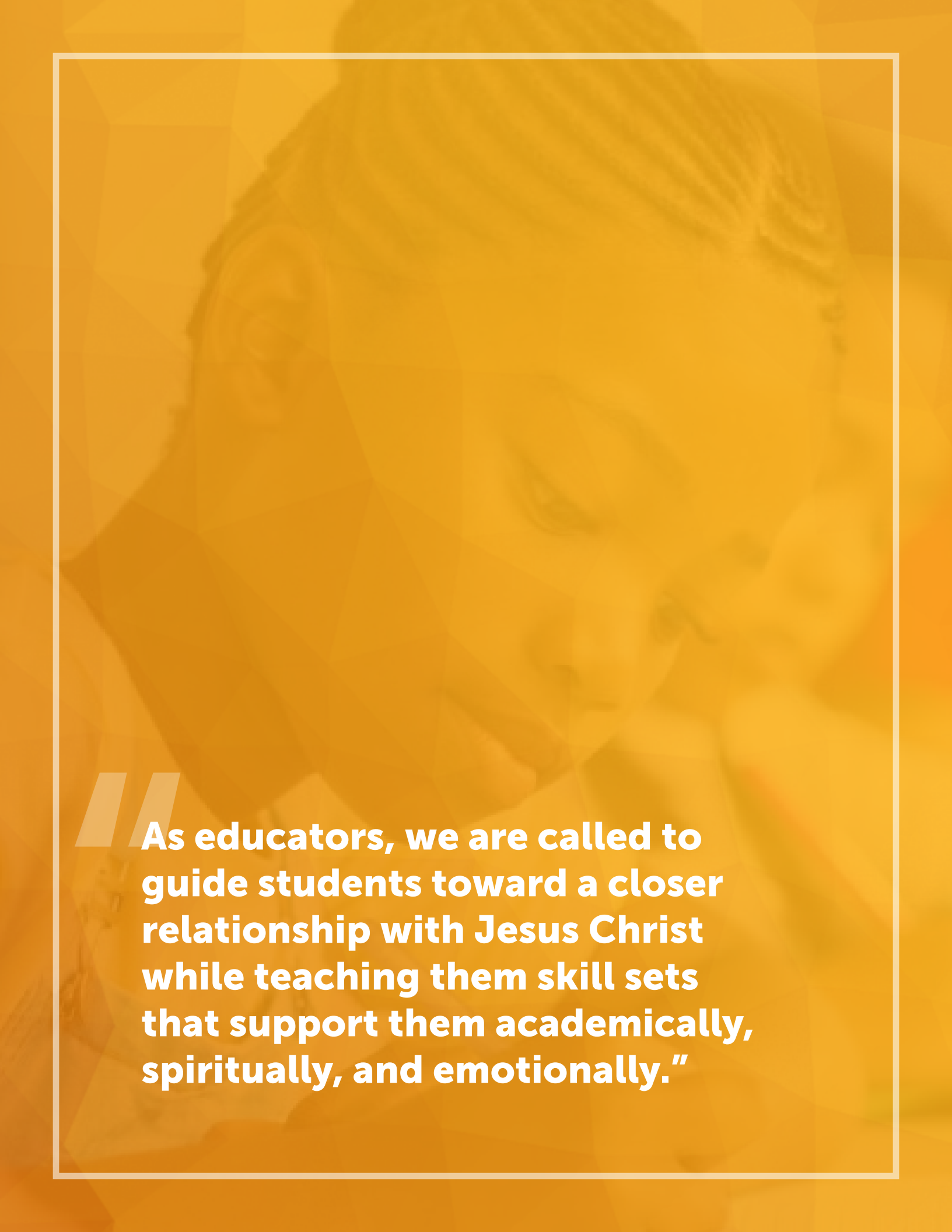
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Social and emotional skills are not always a deliberate part of our curricula. Currently, our education system focuses on children's cognitive development and ensuring the memorization of content. As educators, we have to find creative ways to grow each student emotionally and socially, improving their overall well-being.

Studies show that social and emotional learning (SEL) is critically important to success in school and in life. 87% of educators believe that social and emotional learning will help students become good citizens. This learning transfers to soft skills that can be used in the workplace.

At Eagle's Landing, I am privileged to work with the Diversity Council, a group of high school students who meet on a monthly basis to discuss, learn, share different perspectives, and build cultural competency. During the past school year, Council members took the ACT Tessera, an online assessment that measures five social and emotional learning skills: grit, resilience, curiosity, leadership, and teamwork.

Among the 20 students who took the assessment, the highest skill was teamwork. They clearly have the ability to interact and work with an increasingly diverse student population. The next top skills were curiosity, leadership, and grit, with their lowest score being resilience.



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Their low score in resilience coincides with research stating that 30% percent of college freshmen drop out of college after their first year. A key struggle is their inability to balance work life, school, and their personal lives. Young adults are often afraid to fail, so it is more difficult for them to handle setbacks or failures. With this spring's transition to online learning and a new normal, I imagine that my students' resilience increased exponentially since taking the test in February.

After receiving the results, the Council and I talked about resilience, grit, and communication amidst conflict. Discussing emotional and social skills with our students prepares them to be effective leaders in the real world. The top soft skills companies look for are creativity, collaboration, adaptability, and time management. Helping students develop and understand social and emotional learning gives them better opportunities in their future careers to bring glory to God and to engage in diversity work.

As educators, we are called to guide students toward a closer relationship with Jesus Christ while teaching them skill sets that support them academically, spiritually, and emotionally. During this time of diversity discussions and activism, social and emotional skills are needed more than ever—in our students and in ourselves. May God empower you to teach with empathy, integrity, and humility.

## AUTHOR



### GRACE LEE

Grace Lee has served in education for seven years since graduating from Georgia State University with a B.S. in Public Policy/Non-Profit Leadership. After teaching English in South Korea as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant, she returned to her high school alma mater to teach preschool and middle school English. She now serves as the first Director of Diversity at Eagle's Landing Christian Academy. Grace is also the Chief Administrator for Korean Kids and Orphanage Outreach Mission (KKOOM). KKOOM means "Dream" in Korean, and the organization improves the lives of at-risk youth in Korean children's homes through scholarships and outreach. In her spare time, she loves hiking in the North Georgia mountains and capturing nature shots through photography.

# CREATING INCLUSIVE CHAPELS

**F**or years, diversity has been a buzzword in many areas of American culture, including education. At Southwest Christian School (SCS), we feel called to teach our students about diversity through the lens of Christ. Based on scripture, we know that God created diversity for a purpose, specifically that of getting to know him and serve him deeper. Therefore, we want to be a school that is Biblically diverse with a Kingdom approach to differences. We want to be a community that glorifies God at our school and beyond by the way we interact with diverse people and ideas. Our school has made Biblical Diversity a priority, and we are making moves to become a more diverse school.

To enact this priority, SCS established a Kingdom Diversity Committee. This committee impacts various areas of the school; one area of opportunity that was identified early on (and one area that will hopefully be beneficial for you to assess at your institution) was that of chapel. The chapel suggestions mentioned below are things we are currently doing and things we are planning to do as a school.

At SCS we have an all-school chapel once a week, led by our Spiritual Life Director and our student-led praise band. Typically, our chapel format includes prayer, the pledge of allegiance, praise and worship, and a message. Normally, teachers in our Bible department, other school staff, or local youth pastors speak at our chapels. While it is oftentimes easy to continue doing what has always been done, the Kingdom Diversity Committee has discussed new ways for our chapels to showcase the beautiful diversity that God has created.

Going forward, we are committed to intentionally seeking out and inviting Christian leaders of color and from diverse ethnic backgrounds to speak in our chapels. Studies show that not only do students of color learn best in environments that include teachers and leaders who look like them, but we know it is also important for all our students to hear from people bringing a range of perspectives and experiences to the table.

Another way we can celebrate diversity is in our understanding that worship styles are oftentimes created by culture. In order to diversify worship while staying true to the heart behind our praise, we plan to incorporate different genres of music. This new plan will be led by our current praise band or by guest groups.

Chapel is also a great time to celebrate as a corporate body the contributions that varied cultures have made to our country and community. Currently, we have a chapel recognizing the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. During Black History Month, adult speakers, along with students who volunteer to speak, share not only on MLK, but also on other Black individuals who have been inspirational. In the beginning, only our black students spoke, but there is now a diversity of students presenting on the importance of Black History to them. Our next step in chapel is to recognize the celebrations of cultures represented at our school, such as Hispanic Heritage month (September 15th-October 15th in 2020) and Chinese New Year (Friday, February 12th, 2021).

Chapel is a great opportunity to celebrate the mosaic of human culture. Although we are all different in many ways, we are all created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). My goal for our chapels is to replicate the beautiful picture described in Revelation 7:9-10:

*After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'*

My hope is that what we have been doing at SCS will inspire you to look at your programs and events to imagine how diversity can become part of the fabric of your school.

## AUTHOR



### **JEROMY FLOWERS**

Mr. Flowers has worn several hats at Southwest Christian School in Ft. Worth, Texas. With a master's in educational leadership and administrative experience in public and private schools, Mr. Flowers serves as the Director of Diversity and sits on the Senior Leadership Team. He also leads the Barnabas Program (supporting new families and students) and is the SCS head football coach. Mr. Flowers played for the University of Arkansas, earning numerous awards for achievements on and off the field. He and his wife Kristina are the proud parents of five children and attend Crossroads Christian Church.

# A CULTURAL EXAMEN OF THE SCHOOL HANDBOOK

The function of a school's student handbook is to guide both parent and student through the school's policies and procedures. Common material found in student handbooks include the school's mission, values, academic expectations, and dress code, just to name a few. The goal is to present this information in a clear and detailed fashion so that it can be executed in an objective manner. Unfortunately, handbook policies may unintentionally privilege one culture over another.

One area of the student handbook that can raise constituent concerns and prove challenging for leadership to enforce is the school's appearance code. The appearance code often rests on the philosophical understanding that dress is an expression of both personality and attitude. By exhibiting personal responsibility in this area, students show respect for themselves and their school community by being appropriately dressed. Maintaining an atmosphere that expects a student's quality of appearance can positively impact school climate.

A school's appearance standards can be used to demonstrate how students are developing their ability to make wise choices. Within this context, students are taught that extremes are to be avoided and that all dress should exhibit modesty. It is important to note that in the establishment of specific appearance standards, students can be taught discipline by abiding to a standard of dress and at the same time dressing appropriately for each occasion. While students are expected to follow the appearance standards every day, parents are encouraged to assist in making sure their child(ren) are properly dressed prior to arriving at school.



Whereas a school's appearance code can somewhat monitor and regulate the torso, legs, and sometimes shoes of students, it can prove more difficult to articulate expectations for the hair of its students, primarily the African American students. Vague language is often used to describe the type of care and style allowed for students' hair. Words such as "traditional," "conservative," and "clean cut" are used to evoke a visual of how hair should be presented (while words such as "extreme" or "unkempt" are used to describe hair that is not up to code). The problem with this policy language is twofold.

First, the vague language makes monitoring subjective at best. What does "clean cut" actually mean? Clean-cut can refer to an individual's grooming habits—a presentation that is clean, neat, and trim. If this is the expectation, why do some schools deny dreadlocks, cornrows, and faux hawks? Are these hairstyles unable to be clean, neat, and trimmed? I don't think that anyone would make this claim; however, our handbooks may specifically list these styles as unacceptable. If you type "professional hairstyles for men" into Google then click images, what visuals do you see? Is this the picture we have in our heads when we say "clean-cut"? If you repeat these steps using the phrase "unprofessional hairstyles," what images are presented? Do these visuals match our handbook account of what is unacceptable?

When we use vague, subjective policy language, we put school leaders in a position to interpret these words and then make judgments. Moreover, these judgments often penalize African American students at disproportional rates and put them in positions to deny hairstyles that are normative for them and connect deeply to their culture.

The second problem with appearance codes about hair is that students of color, mainly African Americans, are forced to alter and/or adjust their hair to fit the language and style of the school's white population. These hair codes can send a message that black hair is inherently inferior, unprofessional, and limiting while white hair is the desired norm. School leaders need to have frank conversations about why students hair needs to be regulated in the handbook. We understand that dress codes are supposed to inspire uniformity. But for black students, uniformity too often translates to conformity, to whiteness.

Our schools must welcome the diversity that our students bring to the table. This diversity must be seen as a strength as well as a manifestation of how God made us each distinct and special. Our schools must also remember that students learn values from the policies we articulate and execute, just as much as they do from our classroom instruction. As you continually update your school handbook, ensure that your policies convey the biblical value of inclusion.

## AUTHOR

### JOEL HAZARD

Joel Hazard is in his fifteenth year as a Christian school educator. He currently serves as the Head of Upper School at Fort Bend Christian Academy in Sugar Land, Texas. Joel is a member of the Profound Gentlemen organization, a community of male educators of color providing a profound impact for boys of color. Joel has a master's degree in educational leadership, as well as a specialist degree in educational leadership for learning from Kennesaw State University. Joel has a passion for school leadership and is a champion of diversity within the private school sector. His efforts focus on curriculum development and the creation of a learning environment that is inclusive, racially literate, and socially and emotionally proficient in preparing students to thrive in the 21st century. Joel is married to his bride of fifteen years and has four children.





**“Our schools must welcome the diversity that our students bring to the table. This diversity must be seen as a strength as well as a manifestation of how God made us each distinct and special.”**

# ARE ALL YOUR STUDENTS FEELING SEEN?

**S**he had never really been invisible, but He went out of His way to acknowledge her. The woman at the well was shocked when Jesus asked her for water (John 4). She was both a stranger and a Samaritan, so why would this Jewish man stoop to interact with her?

One wonders how often a student who sits in our classroom feels like the Samaritan woman—sitting on the outskirts, walking our halls unobserved, or saying nothing in class. Maybe one reason these students fly under the radar is because they don't see people like them in the curriculum. The authors read, the stories covered, the individuals featured in our current texts are all important, but how often do they reflect the culture of our students or the diversity God created in students of our respective countries?

American poet Adrienne Rich expressed how disorienting and damaging it must be when a person with moral authority (such as a teacher) develops curriculum but your gender, your race, your culture is nowhere to be seen:

*When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you . . . when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.*

One wonders how often a student who sits in our classroom feels like the Samaritan woman—sitting on the outskirts, walking our halls unobserved, or saying nothing in class.

When discussing this article with my little sister, she simply responded, “No one should feel like an outcast or weirdo or atypical in a classroom.” Quite simply, this goal of inclusivity is why our curriculums should seek to be diverse. Remember, Jesus went out of His way to ensure that the Samaritan woman realized she was not invisible—to ensure that when she looked in the mirror, she saw a reflection of herself.

We know how the story ends. Her encounter with the Creator of the universe so revolutionized her life that John goes on to say, “From that city many Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified. . . .”

Yes, you should examine your entire curriculum to see if both the authors and content reflect the beautiful diversity sitting in your classroom and sharing your nation. This evaluation is an investment of time and money, but it is incredibly worth it. There are also other ways to ensure that your students see themselves and the diversity God created in your classroom. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

1. Does the non-verbal communication in my classroom reflect the beautiful diversity of God’s people? For instance, do the figures (scientists, mathematicians, theologians, etc.) on my walls reflect diversity?
2. Can I incorporate diversity via a bell ringer? For example, project a photo of African American Dr. Charles Drew then say, “Has anyone here ever donated blood, received blood, or known someone who has? Dr. Charles Drew saved millions of lives by figuring out how to stabilize and preserve blood in blood banks to be used later in transfusions. He also found a way to separate plasma from blood cells—a technique that saved millions of lives during World War II.” Think about what one little exercise might do for the student who never imagined that African American men can be scientists and researchers.

Some of my favorite moments in teaching are when students recognize their own worth and potential, like the girl who saw herself for the first time in a book written by Maya Angelou. This girl was 15 and had fallen through the cracks at school. But the teacher whom everyone feared took notice of her. One day this eleventh-grade English teacher commanded (more than requested) that the girl stop by her classroom after school. The girl wondered what she had done wrong. As she walked in and approached the teacher's desk, her teacher handed her *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and with a slight smile on her face simply said, "Read it."

That evening after the dinner dishes were done, the girl began to read Maya Angelou's story. For the first time that she could recall, she saw herself reflected in the pages of a book. Its message of hope filled her lungs with fresh air. Six years later, over cups of coffee and two slices of chocolate cake, the 21-year-old, then in her second year of teaching, told her former English teacher how that book had saved her life—it had made her feel less alone. The English teacher walked alongside that young woman for years to come as she found her way back to her faith and to Truth. Still teaching, the young woman is passionate about history, but even more passionate about students. The English teacher was changed too. She incorporated *Caged Bird* into her whole-class curriculum, and she never hesitates to invest in students who are less likely to be seen. Both teachers understand that curriculum needs to reflect students.

Then there is the ninth-grade student who was athletically gifted but loved science and math even more. However, she had never learned that a woman who loves those two subjects can do things other than teach. But one day during a history discussion, this young African-American student learns about the beautiful actress Hedy Lamarr. A decade before her death, Lamarr said, "The brains of people are more interesting than the looks." Lamarr, too, loved math and science, so during World War II, she along with her intellectual partner endeavored to figure out how to make Allied torpedoes invisible to the enemy. What they landed on was how to "hop" radio frequencies. At the time, the U.S. Navy dismissed her idea, but today we understand that this woman who was valued only for her beautiful face laid the groundwork for Global Positioning Systems (GPS), secure Wi-Fi, and Bluetooth technology.

So what does this have to do with the African American student who had been mostly valued for her athleticism? When her teacher was done telling the Lamarr story, this girl sat stock-still in amazement. She was no longer invisible. Thankfully, this young lady will have the opportunity to pursue her love of math and science in ways that Hedy Lamarr was never afforded. She knows that it is more than acceptable to be smart and beautiful and athletic. As a teacher, we must go out of our way to make sure that all our students are able to see themselves in God's plan for our society and His work. Through a curriculum designed to reflect the beauty of God's diverse creation and through other intentional acts, we may help a student see themselves for the first time in the mirror of our classrooms. By God's grace, may our schools be known to follow Jesus' inclusive example.

## AUTHOR



### CYNTHIA A. DE LEÓN

As a child, Cynthia discovered that books and music provided a means to learn about her Mexican and Cuban heritage, to travel the world, to explore history, to experience different cultures, and to learn about the beautiful diversity God exercised in creating humanity. Cynthia's hobbies include listening to music, hanging out with family and friends, laughing as often as possible, reading, and searching for gems having to do with Mexico or HM Queen Elizabeth II. A native Floridian, Cynthia loves Disney World, snorkeling, and anything else having to do with the ocean. As a student of history, she especially enjoys learning about the ordinary men and women who quietly contributed to great events and of the men and women who exhibited moral courage when most chose to remain silent such as during the Shoah. Along with traditional history classes, Cynthia has taught electives on the Holocaust and an elective emphasizing the various cultures and ethnicities that contributed to the making of the United States. In addition to teaching, Cynthia has led mission trips to Cuba. She has a Bachelor of Science in secondary education and a graduate degree in Liberal Studies with an emphasis on music, history, and Shakespeare.

# CULTIVATE A DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

**A**s I consider how concepts like attraction and accessibility apply to Christian schools, I cannot help but think of my favorite NBA basketball team, the San Antonio Spurs. My mind recalls the 2013-14 NBA Finals when they triumphed by dismantling the LeBron James-led Miami Heat. Although I was impressed with the Spurs' defense, superior ball movement, and teamwork, it was and is their culture that blows me away. What can we learn from the culture of the San Antonio Spurs?

Culture isn't always easily explained, but it is always understood and generally acknowledged simply by walking in the door of an institution. With the Spurs, the first thing we see is their culture of inclusion. Back in 2013, that team was arguably the most diverse team in the league. There were players representing cities, suburbs, and rural parts of the United States. There were players from Italy, France, the Virgin Islands, Argentina, Brazil, and Australia. With this level of diversity (not despite this diversity), no one's culture had to "take a back seat," and each player felt comfortable expressing their respective cultures as evident by all of the flags present during the trophy celebration.

As Christian schools, we should strive for both diversity and inclusion. Unfortunately, all too often we just work for assimilation, which can lead to suppression of culture. This struggle is nothing new for the people of God as evidenced in the book of Galatians. Paul addresses the Judaizers who were trying to elevate Jewish culture above the others by forcing new converts to follow the Law of Moses. Christ's work on the cross was a unifying work that should bring us together.



It is important to understand two things about this “bringing together.” First, this unifying work is not meant to downplay cultural differences; on the contrary, our unity makes celebrating them possible. Secondly, inclusion does not mean honoring one culture over another. All cultures are to be respected, celebrated, and appreciated. No one person is being asked, whether verbally or nonverbally, to leave their culture behind. One way this inclusion can be evidenced is through a deeper level of intentionality when it comes to curriculum and student experience. For more specifics on this, I encourage you to read the previous article by Cynthia A. De León.

In order to assess your culture, take a walk throughout the various hallways in your school, putting yourself in the shoes of a prospective parent. What is the culture your school is portraying through its nonverbal cues? Reread your application form and examine your application process. What do these documents and procedures tell an applicant about what is important to your school community?

Inclusion can be messy and difficult at times because it forces us to step out of our comfort zone as well as address some of our own biases. So here’s the second thing we can learn from the Spurs culture: commonality. Spurs head coach Gregg Popovich has often been quoted as saying that he coaches a group of guys who have “gotten over themselves.” A certain level of humility develops when players share a common bond. The common bond for them is to win basketball games and championships. This goal permeates the entire organization as everything from the front office to the court reflects the culture. In a Christian school setting, a common cause can be fostered when people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives have a voice at all levels of the organization. Does your school board, leadership team, faculty, and staff reflect your desired goal in representation and influence?

Inclusion can be messy and difficult at times because it forces us to step out of our comfort zone as well as address some of our own biases.



**“As disciples of Christ, our commonality is our redemption through the cross and a desire to reflect the heart of Jesus.”**

As disciples of Christ, our commonality is our redemption through the cross and a desire to reflect the heart of Jesus. Like the Spurs, this thread should permeate our schools and circles, helping us to embrace and appreciate the beautiful things that make us unique. This approach is easier said than done as it forces us, at times, to “get over ourselves” in terms of our preferences, biases, opinions, and even subconscious prejudices. So what do these qualities of culture have to do with attraction and accessibility? Like the Spurs, inclusion and commonality need to be at the core of who we are as a school, not just something advertised for the sake of marketing or something we talk about now while diversity is trendy. We need to genuinely believe that being an inclusive organization reflects God’s intention and provides the best education for our students. As we express the desire to attract potential employees from different backgrounds or become accessible to families who are currently underrepresented in our schools, our motivation needs to be clear. My prayer is that your school will proactively cultivate a culture of inclusion grounded in the unifying work of Christ so that all of your families and employees can thrive.

## AUTHOR



### DAVID ROBINSON

David Robinson serves as the Director of Diversity and Inclusion for Grace Community School in Tyler, Texas. David has a B.S. in Bible from Clarks Summit University and has spent his entire professional career working in Christian education. This has helped shape his passion for cultivating an environment in which all students have access to a Christ-centered education, while feeling appreciated and celebrated. David helped found the Christian Educators Diversity Alliance. The organization’s work centers around helping Christian schools develop a more diverse and inclusive environment. David is also a member of Profound Gentleman, a community that provides support to male educators of color around the country. Along with David’s diversity and inclusion work, he continues to invest in young people through the world of athletics as a basketball and football coach.

# RETENTION IS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT YOU CREATE

**W**ith the amplified focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion within Christian schools, there is much to consider when building a sustainable, biblically based program. The old adage “if you build it, they will come” is often used to justify the creation of new and exciting diversity programs. However, in an environment where Christian families of color often have options when it comes to private education, the question to ask is not only “will they come?” but “will they stay?”.

Let’s start with this point: Christian school diversity programs are important, and they are needed. If done right, they can honor God because as we see in I Corinthians 12:4-11, God loves diversity. But one misconception is that having a diversity program is the end-all and be-all, yet just having a program means simply that—you have a program. What really matters is the breadth and depth of the work that will help us achieve true gospel-centered equity in our schools, an environment where all kids can thrive. Environment is often left out of the conversation because as schools begin the work, they get stuck on diversifying numerically and programmatically—the recruitment piece. Sure, simply building a diversity program often means that students will come (DEI in numbers), but we should ensure that the students stay because of their positive experiences once at our school (DEI in practice).

In the world of private Christian education, retention can be complicated because there are many internal and external factors that can influence a student’s (and their family’s) decision to continuing attending.

Christian school diversity programs are important, and they are needed... But one misconception is that having a diversity program is the end-all and be-all, yet just having a program means simply that—you have a program.

Retention is usually connected to relationship, and if minority students do not have a connection point to anyone or anything within the school, they may not feel as if they belong, a critical factor affecting retention. Much worse than students leaving a Christian school are students who stay and exist in isolation at a school that proclaims kingdom diversity and the gospel of Jesus Christ but does not live it out. The environment we create for our minority Christian students can impact not only retention but also their associations with Christianity

Environment fit is something that can make or break the Christian school experience. The school culture, school practices, and school interactions make up the school environment. Minority students who have been recruited and/or invited in due to diversity efforts may not slip easily into their new setting. Academic, social, and spiritual success may be compromised by the energy the student must devote to combatting loneliness, alienation, and a challenging “fit.” As a result, a well-intentioned diversity program may miss the opportunity to serve one of God’s precious children.

As we continue to focus on diversity work in the Christian schools, we should be mindful of the environment existing for our students. Administrators may assume that because racial issues have not come to their attention, that these issues do not exist at their school. School leaders may assume that they already have an inclusive, equitable, gospel-focused environment. Never assume. Instead, take these steps to build a welcoming and nurturing environment for your students of color.

To start with, schools should seek to understand where their students come from and how that environment compares to their own school. For example, are they coming from a public or private school, a well-funded or financially struggling school, a white majority or majority-minority school? Where students come from will affect how they experience the Christian school environment. Knowing these similarities and differences can help Christian school educators anticipate areas of adjustment.

Another way to address environment is to guide new students of color through the process of acclimation. Entering a new school environment is stressful for all students, but entering one where the norms and practices are not aligned with their past cultural experience adds additional stress. Take school chapel, for instance. Some students of color may not be used to how worship works in a predominately white Christian school. In other settings in and out of the classroom, students of color may hear perspectives from students or even teachers that sound naïve, incomplete, or even racist. New students may need mentors within the school to help understand and process these experiences. They need safe places to express themselves or to possibly report hurtful words or actions. Easing students through the transition will have a direct effect on retention. In the process, schools should listen well to these students, who may have insight on how Christian school environments may need to reform. Christian schools exist to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ and to execute the great commission (Matthew 28:19-20). These principles should guide us as we create an environment where all students can grow academically, socially, and spiritually. If we build a diversity program for the cause of Christ, the students will come, but let us ensure that the love, grace, and peace of Christ is so embracing that they stay.

## AUTHOR



### **KENNETH CHAPMAN**

Dr. Kenneth M. Chapman, Jr., currently serves as Executive Dean of the liberal arts division at the North Lake Campus of Dallas County Community College. He oversees curriculum development, student success initiatives, and faculty in seven different disciplines. Previously, he served as Director of Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Oklahoma. In that role, Chapman oversaw minority recruitment and retention initiatives, diversity and multicultural affairs, and minority faculty and staff training and development. Chapman also directed outreach that engaged and developed partnerships between the university and the community. Chapman earned a bachelor's degree in public relations: mass communication from the University of Central Oklahoma, a master's degree in education from the University of Oklahoma, and a doctorate of philosophy from the University of Oklahoma. Chapman's research interests are in school equity, diversity, and inclusiveness. He has conducted research studies on Christianity and race, and he focuses on helping organizations embrace, employ, and engage in kingdom diversity practices. Chapman currently serves as Associate Pastor at Life-Changing Faith Christian Fellowship in Frisco, Texas and has been blessed to preach at churches and conferences at the local, state, and national levels. Chapman resides in Frisco, Texas with his wife Kimberley and their sons.



**If we build a diversity program for the cause of Christ, the students will come, but let us ensure that the love, grace, and peace of Christ is so embracing that they stay.**

In 2008, I started my education career as an English teacher at a Christian school in Texas. In addition to my classroom responsibilities, I coached cross country and track. At that time, I spent a lot of time running myself. Three kids and 12 years later, that personal pursuit doesn't get as much attention. At a glance, though, I still look fit. But if you checked with my doctor, the picture on the inside may not look as healthy as the outside. I may look fit but not really be fit.

As I've assumed a new leadership role in recent months, I've thought a lot about this disconnect in terms of diversity. Our K3-12 campus is incredibly diverse and fairly representative of our greater metropolitan area. Seventy-six percent of our student body are students of color, made up largely of Black, Hispanic, and Asian American students, as well as international students from Southeast Asia. On the outside, we look diverse.

Lately, though, I've been asking myself if we have become diverse without truly being diverse. Diversity in demographics isn't enough if all the students in the school don't have the same opportunities. Do we possess the superficial markers of diversity without actually embracing and honoring that diversity? Have we built authentic community with all our students and families? Do all the people in the building have the same opportunities to share their voice, perspective, and experiences?



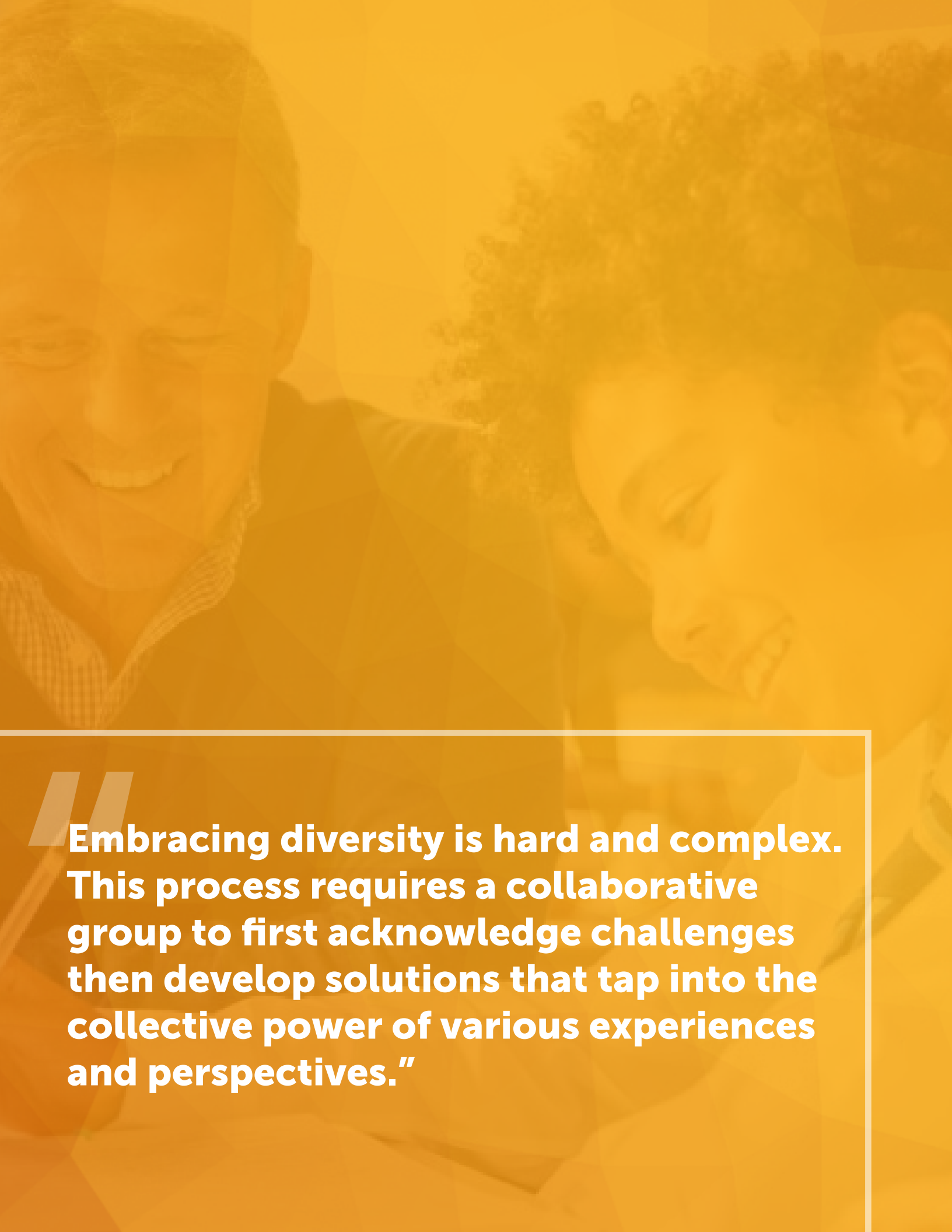
Though far from achieving our vision, we at Westbury have begun asking these challenging questions. We strive to collaboratively uncover answers and build solutions within our community. As one person involved with this process, I am definitely growing. Here are a few of my learnings so far:

- **As leaders—not to mention brothers and sisters in Christ—it’s important to ask questions without making assumptions.** One of my most startling revelations this past summer was the response of some of my Black colleagues when I asked them about their experiences at our school. Some had never been asked that question before. Their responses gave me the opportunity to learn firsthand about microaggressions and painful experiences. Reading books, listening to podcasts, and watching documentaries are all helpful, but nothing replaces listening to real people share their experiences in your organization.

Embracing diversity is hard and complex. This process requires a collaborative group to first acknowledge challenges then develop solutions that tap into the collective power of various experiences and perspectives. As leaders, it’s too tempting to come to conclusions and decisions on our own, but that’s not healthy for an organization. Are we listening to the right people? Are we seeking insight from families, alumni, students, and faculty, especially those coming from diverse backgrounds?

- **We have to be okay with discomfort and humility.** Most of the questions and initial conversations I’ve had this summer were not comfortable; they required a hard look at myself, my actions, my own thoughts, and a school that I love. Taking a critical look at our organizational intents, decisions, rules, and reasons is disconcerting, but it’s the starting point for genuine growth and progress. Our faith should compel us to dig into these issues, and our kindness can’t excuse us from honesty and action.

- **Ultimately, we have to move beyond the cultural overlays.** As a school, we have definitely underperformed in this area, largely due to our own lack of intentionality. Black History, Hispanic Heritage, Asian American History and Women’s History Month are great opportunities to share facts and information that often go unnoted in standard curriculums. These observances serve an important purpose in education, but they also risk embedding the in-out dichotomy of our history and appearing to project these experiences as somehow outside the “normal” American experience. At Westbury, we want to do better at honoring and recognizing the contributions of all backgrounds, but we also want to adjust and enrich our day-to-day curriculum to reflect the full tapestry of American experience and give an authentic voice to all groups throughout the year.



**“Embracing diversity is hard and complex. This process requires a collaborative group to first acknowledge challenges then develop solutions that tap into the collective power of various experiences and perspectives.”**

- **Leadership development of the next generation is a matter of organizational survival.**

Organizations develop their own culture, behaviors, and methods of progress. Many times, biased systems have developed unintentionally. Not only do Christian schools need to work on recruiting a diverse faculty and staff that represents the student body they serve, but we must also work to develop the leadership potential already there. People of color are often underrepresented in leadership roles in our schools, and we have to intentionally address that problem. As our student body becomes increasingly diverse, a mosaic of leadership will help us build the best organization to deliver an essential mission.

As we at Westbury have prepared to launch our school year virtually and phase in a return to campus, it's been easy to spend most of my time focused on educating in a pandemic. It's the most immediate, pressing situation, but it's ultimately a terminal problem. Addressing the challenges and benefits of diversity are far more long-lasting and significant. My campus is far from perfect in this endeavor and has a long way to go, but this priority is one of the most exciting and promising aspects to school leadership. We are creating a glimpse of the throne room of God—what could be better than that?

## AUTHOR



### **NATHAN WAGNER**

Nathan Wagner has served 13 years in Christian education, currently as the Interim Head of School at Westbury Christian School in Houston, Texas. Prior to this role, he has been an English teacher, high school principal, and associate head of school. He enjoys helping others discover and honor God with their talents, as well as equipping students with the ability to navigate and lead in the world around them. The product of a Midwestern upbringing, Wagner doesn't quite consider himself a Texan (no cowboy hat or boots yet), but he has enjoyed living in one of the most diverse cities in America. He likes asking questions, working on solutions, and processing the discomfort that comes with challenges. Wagner has a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from Houston Baptist University as well as an instructional leadership certification from Lamar University. Wagner lives in Houston with his wife and three children.

# WHY DIVERSITY MATTERS TO A WHITE PERSON PART 1

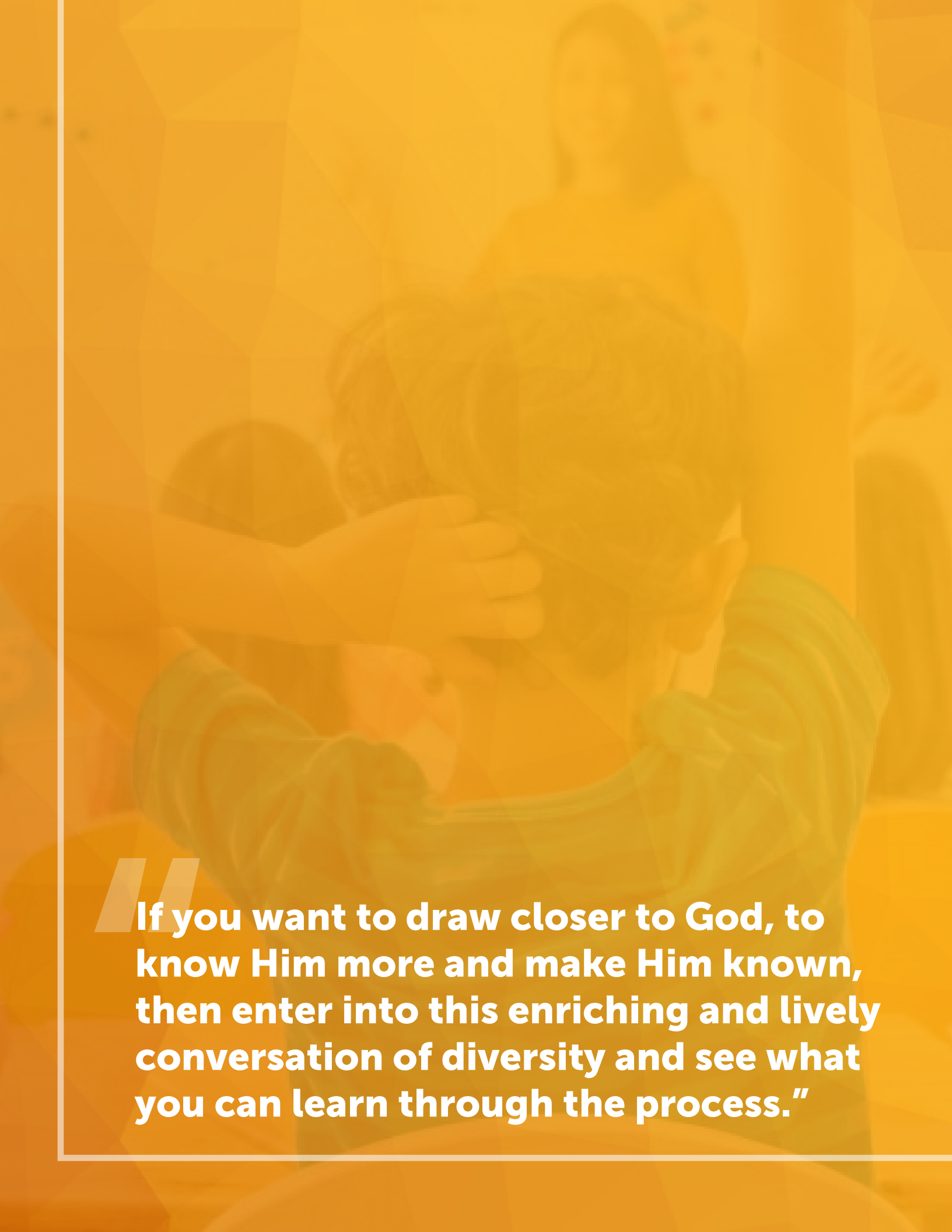
**M**ost people would consider me a white guy. Dig a little deeper and you'll find mostly Italian heritage, probably with some other European ancestry mixed in. But yes, I check "White" on the census. So why would issues of diversity, ethnicity, and race be of importance to me?

Let's be honest: I could easily choose to ignore these difficult conversations. But I am compelled to enter into this dialogue, this journey of greater awareness, understanding, and appreciation, and I would encourage everyone to do the same.

Before we discuss why you should enter diversity conversations, let me address the reasons I suspect many do not enter.

First, these engagements can portray the perspective of a white person, especially a white male, as irrelevant (at best) or outright racist. Entering the dialogue to even listen and learn is sometimes met with ridicule, shame and outright defiance. Sometimes the criticism comes from other white Christians who don't see social justice as central to the Gospel.

My response: welcome to the club. When real work needs to be done (and racial reconciliation is real work that needs to be done), it isn't for the faint of heart. This work calls for people ready and willing to roll up their proverbial sleeves and get their hands dirty. Think of how the Old Testament prophets were treated by their own for speaking uncomfortable truth. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18).

A group of people, including a man and a woman, are shown in a circle with their hands clasped together. The background is a warm, orange-toned image, possibly of a church service or a community gathering. The overall mood is one of unity and shared experience.

**“If you want to draw closer to God, to know Him more and make Him known, then enter into this enriching and lively conversation of diversity and see what you can learn through the process.”**

Many men and women faced extreme criticism for doing what now appears to be the right thing. Winston Churchill was branded a warmonger and forced out of office after he helped saved his country from the devastation of Hitler's Third Reich. Martin Luther King, Jr. was viewed by some as an instigator of racial unrest and violence. Rosa Parks was charged with a crime for refusing to give up her seat on the bus. And don't get me started about the Hebrews 12 "of whom the world was not worthy" group—all heroes of the faith!

Yes, you may face opposition in standing for justice, you might experience discomfort in speaking out for truth, you might be misunderstood by friends and family for seeking to learn about things that don't directly concern you. As the Italians would say, "Forget about it." Or in the famous words of Theodore Roosevelt, "It is not the critic who counts. . . . The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena . . . because there is no effort without error and shortcoming."

Secondly, there are others who are hesitant to enter this dialogue because they simply feel awkward, undereducated, or out of place. They are afraid of being uncomfortable. Let me encourage you to lean into the learning. By showing up and showing interest, you demonstrate that the concerns of those who are marginalized are important and need to be understood. In Isaiah 59:14-16, the prophet calls on God's people to "intercede":

*Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede.*

We know that Christ was and is our intercessory and substitution: He laid down His life for us, paying the price that we owed. Whatever you have been given in terms of your time, your treasures, and your talents has been given to you for His glory and to be a blessing to others. And "to whom much is given, much more is required" (Luke 12:48). Don't hold back by looking at what you don't have or don't understand. Consider what you have been given and move forward to be more informed, more involved, and more influential in moving toward reconciliation.

In Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," he wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." That concept reminds me of my Biblical obligation to fight against injustice not because it affects me personally, but because it breaks the heart of my loving and just Father. As a Christian, I am compelled by the Gospel to be an ambassador of God's redemptive grace, His restorative justice, and His reconciling Spirit. I cannot choose to ignore what God hates just because I am uncomfortable navigating the waters of racial reconciliation. Like Peter, I believe we must step out of the boat, keep our eyes on Jesus, and trust that He will be the solid foundation upon which we journey in this endeavor.

Why does diversity matter to a white person? For the same reason it matters to God. He designed a fabulously diverse world, He created it, and He reveals Himself through it. If you want to draw closer to God, to know Him more and make Him known, then enter into this enriching and lively conversation of diversity and see what you can learn through the process. Stop complaining about what others are doing wrong, stop contemplating what you ought to do, and start doing it.

## AUTHOR



### **DAN PANETTI**

As Worldview Director for Prestonwood Christian Academy (PCA) in Plano, TX, Dan Panetti seeks to train students to think critically and Christianly about the world around them. After years of legal and public policy work battling the sexualized culture, Dan brought his passion for the Lord and legal training to a position training students, parents, and faculty in a Biblical worldview. Both Dan and his wife Tricia work at PCA and they have four children—two in college and two at PCA.

# WHY DIVERSITY MATTERS TO A WHITE PERSON PART 2

**M**y previous piece, “Why Diversity Matters to a White Person,” was about why I, as a white person, feel compelled to engage in meaningful discussions and actions related to diversity, equity and inclusion issues. The post received several appreciative, thoughtful, and challenging responses, for which I am grateful. There were some concerns raised that I want to address in this additional post.

First, some readers assumed that by using the term “race,” I was buying into Critical Race Theory (CRT), which sees the world in terms of a power struggle between oppressor and oppressed. A critical examination of CRT will have to wait for another article. Suffice it to say, that I do hold to the Biblical concept that there is only one race—the human race—and that the term “ethnicity” is a better description for the diversity in God’s created order. Whereas “race” is a social construct, it is also a term used to describe our current reality. While the Bible teaches that God has created only one race, it clearly acknowledges that racial/ethnic division exists and must be addressed through reconciliation. Whether you’re looking at the Parable of the Good Samaritan or the opposition from Miriam and Aaron to Moses’ Cushite wife, the Bible examines the social constructs, opinions, and prejudices in human society and instructs us to do so as well.

Secondly, in my entry I used the term “social justice.” Because of the brevity of the article, I was unable to define what has become a loaded term. Some assumed that by using this term, I was negating the heart of the Gospel: salvation through Christ alone. This is a common misunderstanding. In no way was I choosing social justice over the atoning work of Jesus. Instead, like for many Christians advocating for social justice engagement, my point is that those saved cannot sit on the sidelines when they see injustice. Complacency in this arena is not an option.

God’s command in Micah 6:8 is well known: “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” That action is lived out in society, not in isolation. Changed lives change laws.



Trust me: I understand that good works do not save a person. But the Bible clearly assumes that saved people exhibit the fruit of their salvation. In the short 46 verses of Titus, the writer uses the phrase “good works” five times as a challenge to believers to live out their faith.

In supporting Biblically-sound social justice activism, I am inspired by one of my favorite authors, Francis Schaeffer. In his day, he battled against the philosophical shift from one Truth to many truths (relativism) and the separation of God’s truth from all other facets of life. As I read and digested Schaeffer over the years, I saw how quick he was to point out where the truth was under attack. He called on Christians to stand boldly on the truth of God’s Word. In his book *The God Who Is There*, he attributes the following quote to Martin Luther:

*If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.*

I see a similar battle over the issue of race, ethnicity, and diversity today. We attack opinions we don’t like from others but leave untouched unjust power structures or individual prejudice. We question whether racism even exists, ignoring and silencing the testimonies of our brothers and sisters of color. We toss out selected statistics in cases where understanding and empathy are needed. We glorify national history, ignoring the chapters that are not only uncomfortable but call for repentance.

My challenge from Part 1 remains: the call to engage in a meaningful and thoughtful conversation about an important issue of our day. When you enter this conversation, there will be those who misunderstand or even seek to malign you. Do not be dissuaded in your journey and pursuit of justice, truth, and mercy. You may take a misstep; graciously correct it. You may say something offensive; ask for forgiveness. You may support a concept only to find out that it wasn’t what you thought; learn and move on. But don’t stay on the sidelines. To paraphrase Martin Luther King, an injustice anywhere is an offense to our Father in Heaven!

## AUTHOR



### DAN PANETTI

As Worldview Director for Prestonwood Christian Academy (PCA) in Plano, TX, Dan Panetti seeks to train students to think critically and Christianly about the world around them. After years of legal and public policy work battling the sexualized culture, Dan brought his passion for the Lord and legal training to a position training students, parents, and faculty in a Biblical worldview. Both Dan and his wife Tricia work at PCA and they have four children—two in college and two at PCA.

# WHAT G.R.A.C.E. MEANT TO A STUDENT OF COLOR

**A**s if middle school isn't hard enough, as a student of color I started attending a predominantly white Christian school in sixth grade. All of a sudden I was inundated with Bible stories. And you know how kids read themselves into Biblical stories? They see themselves as a young David slinging a rock at Goliath and taking down the giant, or they imagine themselves as Peter getting out of the boat and walking on water to Jesus. Well, as a female, black student in this new environment, I struggled to see myself in the biblical narrative or, frankly, in any narrative at all.

For one thing, I felt as if I moved in two different worlds. At school and at church, the only references to "justice" were about justice for the unborn and God's sense of justice for sin being satisfied through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. But in my neighborhood and in the news, I heard calls for justice for women, for the poor, and yes, for people of color. Was there any overlap between these worlds?

As I grew older, I began to notice the efforts my school made to address these societal concerns. Their efforts weren't perfect, but they were trying. As a freshman in the upper school, I started attending our diversity club called the G.R.A.C.E. Council. (G.R.A.C.E. stands for Gender, Race, Age & Ability, Culture, Economic Status.) The goals of G.R.A.C.E. were to better educate ourselves and the student body in regard to these five topics, cultivating an environment that allows for dialogue within the student body that is glorifying to God.

The conversations in G.R.A.C.E. helped me wrestle with these important issues from a biblical perspective. The world was screaming about these same issues but without God's Word as their guide. Outside of G.R.A.C.E., I didn't hear many conversations about justice, equality, or love that connected God's Word to the world in which we lived, so I was hungry to learn. Through this program I came to recognize Jesus' cry for holistic justice and how as a follower of Christ I was called to advocate for the oppressed. These lessons gave me a renewed faith in the totality of the Scriptures. To be honest, this opportunity pulled me out of a disillusionment with a Christianity that seemed irrelevant until I realized that it wasn't.

The G.R.A.C.E. Council not only gave me clarity, it provided community as well. I learned how important it was for me, as a young black woman, to listen to the views and opinions of others if I expected others to listen and appreciate my own story. G.R.A.C.E. gave me connection—a way to take what I was feeling and learning and connect it to real people and real problems in the world.

As my head knowledge began to match my heart's passion on these issues, I began to find my voice as well. Hope arose that I fit into the story of our Christian past and the story of our future—that I have a place and a purpose in our world, even when I am in situations where I am a minority. Eventually I became president of G.R.A.C.E. I realized the important role I can play in shaping the narrative for my generation on justice issues. If I want to see change, I need to be the change that I desire.

My experience with G.R.A.C.E. taught me that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs are beneficial to students and educators of all colors. Such programs fit the purpose of Christian schools: to provide a gospel-focused environment where students can deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ. I would argue that one of the best ways to provide the space for this transformational process is through DEI student councils. Through such programs, schools can hear the experiences of students of colors and reevaluate certain practices to create a more inclusive and equitable environment. These conversations can be uncomfortable for all parties involved, but they will prove beneficial and worthy of your time, energy, and investment. I am a better student and a better person because of my experience with our G.R.A.C.E. Council. My desire is to take what I learned and live it out for the benefit of others around me.

## AUTHOR



### MYIA SIMS

Myia Sims graduated from Prestonwood Christian Academy in 2019. She is currently a sophomore at Drake University studying political science. In her free time, Myia likes to play tennis, talk politics, and love on her adopted younger brother Joshua. Myia is praying about God's will for her future, which she hopes will include a role in the political arena.

**B**urdened by headlines of racial unrest, Christian schools across the country are seeking answers and want to know more about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). They desire to create a place for learning and growth in this arena for students, faculty, and parents. Others pressured by their communities to grapple with their school's past want to learn how to work towards a more equitable future for all.

One action taken was to create this series of articles called "Diversity in the Christian School." We asked leaders in Christian education to educate our community on DEI issues and programming. These leaders have shared valuable insights from different perspectives that can guide DEI initiatives in our schools. As I read through the wisdom of my friends and colleagues, I was encouraged and thankful for the DEI work currently taking place in Christian education. I was also left with a desire to provide some practical tips for anyone wishing to implement a DEI program at their own school.

## **Determining Motivation**

When a school considers creating a DEI program, it is important to first determine the motivation. Is the intention to create a temporary measure in response to a fire? Reactionary, short-term responses typically focus on race and/or ethnicity. They inevitably zero in on a particular situation or incident that prompts introspection and action. A reactionary response, by nature, can't begin to address all the issues of racial and cultural inequality impacting our society. Instead, the programming acts as a temporary bandage to a larger issue. The initial response may feel successful, but after a few months, reactionary DEI efforts steadily decline. However, reactionary motives do not have to lead to short-lived DEI initiatives. DEI at Prestonwood Christian Academy began almost 20 years ago because it was a conviction and part of our overall focus on discipleship. I strongly believe that it has been and is the intentionality, mission, and passion of the administration, faculty, staff and parents and their commitment to discipleship that has led to growth and success at PCA.

## **Creating a DEI Team**

If a school feels called to create DEI programs, what steps should they take? First, create a diverse team of parents, faculty/staff, and leadership to take an in-depth look at DEI for your school. The group must consist of people who love the LORD and the school—people who are willing to respectfully wrestle with tough topics from a Christ-centered perspective. What is the current reality of DEI at your school (including not only statistics but also lived realities)? Does your school need to focus only on race and ethnicity, or should issues pertaining to gender, ability, and economic status be part of the programming as well? Consider hiring a diversity consultant to guide you through this time of exploration and focus.

With your areas of focus determined, it is important to articulate a DEI vision and how this vision aligns with the mission of the school. Work to create buy-in and endorsement from key constituents in various corners of the community, possibly revising your vision as you receive feedback. It is imperative that the executive leadership of your school be the ones to present this plan in order to demonstrate unity and the expectation of integrating this vision throughout the system. This approach worked well in the PCA community. Communicate the vision broadly and through different forums so that everyone understand your desires and how DEI programming will affect your school.



**“If a goal of Christian education is to encourage students to lead in the world like Jesus, biblically-sound diversity efforts must be a priority.”**

## Finding a Skilled Leader

From there, a strategic plan should be created. How are you going to transform your vision into a reality? What are your practical steps? One of the most important aspects of a successful strategic plan is appointing a dedicated leader to head up the program. This must be someone who is fully committed to the program's vision and success. This leader will need eyes for all areas of the school and how they are impacted by DEI. It is also critical that this person is a skilled listener. Note that this responsibility cannot be piled on to a long list of others. Without committed time, training, and compensation, this leader cannot lead well.

Whatever your motive for exploring Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts, I hope that the blog series of the past few months has helped you understand the need for and value of DEI work in our Christian school communities. Christian schools can take the lead in training our students, who can go on to make a real difference in the world. Yes, legitimate DEI efforts mean diving deep and wrestling with ideas that are uncomfortable, but it is in the difficulties that we come to a deeper knowledge of God. We have the only answer for the world's chaos. If a goal of Christian education is to encourage students to lead in the world like Jesus, biblically-sound diversity efforts must be a priority. In his welcoming of religious and ethnic minorities, the poor, women, and children, Jesus modeled the inclusivity we must all embrace.

# AUTHOR



## JENNY BRADY

Jenny Brady brings a unique perspective to the diversity discussion. Jenny is currently serving as the Director of Diversity for Prestonwood Christian Academy, a position created to express her passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion while combining her personal experience growing up in Honduras. She holds a M.S. in Sociology and a B.A. in Spanish. In the educational realm, Jenny has worked as a teacher and administrator, and is on the Leadership Team at PCA. She is the co-creator of the Christian Educators Diversity Alliance, co-creator of the podcast GRAACE360, and is a speaker, teacher, author and trainer on diversity, equity and inclusion for schools across the country.

# WORDS AND WALLS

**L**anguage and choice of words matter. We realize this truth with painstaking awareness. Words motivate or deflate. They have the power to comfort, frighten, inspire, anger, open gates, or construct walls.

The word diversity is one of those loaded words. If we allow it to be socially constructed, we allow it to divide. As followers of Christ, saved by His death and life, seated, and now sent (Ephesians 2), we have the capacity to think higher and to transcend such division.



## Learning from the Writers

I have deeply appreciated this series of writings on Diversity in the Christian School for how these authors have helped me transcend my own thinking. This powerful sequence of articles has caused me, and hopefully you also, to ask hard questions and to prompt deep conversations with colleagues at all levels of leadership. Hopefully, these conversations have occurred within the spirit of The Words Matter Movement, which encourages us to be practitioners of “careful, thoughtful, and deliberate positive communication.”

Each author’s contribution has prompted me to stop and think—to mentally test the expressions of diversity and inclusivity at my school and the schools CACE has the privilege to walk alongside. I will share a couple personal promptings from the series, but please read the entire series on the blog at CACE.org or in this ebook.

Nathan Wagner’s thoughts on the dangers of “in-out” learning that focuses simply on information versus formative learning experiences and David Robinson’s encouragement to “embrace and appreciate the beautiful things that make us unique” made me ask, “Are we providing those formative experiences that allow our students to embrace the uniqueness that is all around us?”

I also heard Cynthia DeLeon’s call to examine my curriculum to see if “both the authors and the content reflect the beautiful diversity sitting in your classroom.” Do we ask questions and make observations about our nonverbal communication (e.g. the walls of our classroom) and our practices (e.g. bell-ringers) to ensure students see themselves as people of God’s story? And did you hear Myia Sims’s story about how life-changing programs like G.R.A.C.E. can be?

Do we want diverse and inclusive schools? Absolutely. All of us who teach, lead, or chose faith-based schools for our children have good work to do in this space. Getting there is going to be a process, or as described by Eugene Peterson’s book title, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. It is challenging to do difficult work in a society obsessed with the immediate. Let us not grow weary.

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## Biblical Unity

And let us allow the word unity, the biblical concept of this word, to be part of these conversations. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) unifies our work, embraces diversity, and mandates inclusivity. As Kenneth Chapman reminded us in his blog post, this call connects directly to the mission of Christian schools: "Christian schools exist to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ and to execute the great commission."

We do not engage in this work of diversity for diversity's sake; we engage because inclusivity is part of the gospel we proclaim: "For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall" (Ephesians 2:14). This city wall, which divided those who lived in the city (citizens) from those outside (foreigners), has been broken down through the work of Christ. There should be, in the words of Cheryl Webb, a centered set versus a bounded set to our schools. What brings us together is where we find that unity—in peace with God, through the person and work of Christ, His Word, and our shared love for one another. Our schools need to continually engage in expressions that demonstrate this unity.

These efforts toward diversity, inclusivity, and unity will always involve some give and take. Taking this long obedience in the right direction will require examination and probable changes to our admissions and hiring processes and our governance models. Faculty will need to take a deep dive into what we teach, who we teach, and how we teach. This series of blogs, by a group of unified Christian educators, has demonstrated that it can and is being done in schools around the nation. May our schools, made up of every tongue, tribe, and nation, be places where words build up and walls come down.

# AUTHOR



## TIM VAN SOELEN

Dr. Tim Van Soelen serves as the Director of CACE. Tim is also a professor of education at Dordt University. He has served as a principal, assistant principal, and middle school math and computer teacher at schools in South Dakota and California. Tim has his undergraduate degree from Dordt and advanced degrees from Azusa Pacific University and the University of South Dakota.

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**“As disciples of Christ, our commonality is our redemption through the cross and a desire to reflect the heart of Jesus.”**

