Interview with Dr. Harro Van Brummelen

By Kim Franklin

Dr. Harro Van Brummelen, the founding dean of education at Trinity Western University and author of the internationally renowned books *Walking with God in the Classroom: Christian Approaches to Teaching and Learning* and *Steppingstones to Curriculum: A Biblical Path*, was diagnosed with terminal cancer in the fall of 2012. The past year has been a testimony to his perseverance through great suffering, as well as God’s grace and mercy. Although originally given only 10 months to live, he has exceeded a year and he is still making significant contributions to the field of education. The following interview captures Dr. Van Brummelen’s wise insights regarding the past, present, and future of Christian education based on nearly 50 years of experience with K–12 and post-secondary levels.

Kim Franklin (KF): Describe your calling to Christian education.

Harro Van Brummelen (HVB): I taught for two years in a public school and had a good experience, but I was conscious of being “hemmed in.” I had good relationships with students and some good discussions with them about life’s important issues, but these kinds of discussions were discouraged. I was there to teach math. After two years I got a call from a Christian high school just north of Toronto. During my interview I explained that I would want students to understand the role and place of mathematics in society and how it is used, but also misused. I was hired and had much more freedom to teach what I felt to be meaningful. I deliberately kept my contacts with provincial and district-level math educators and was able to have some impact on math curriculum decisions being made for all schools. I believe that it’s important if you’re in a Christian school to continue to work with colleagues in other schools so that you don’t become isolated and insular.

KF: What are some of the most significant changes you’ve seen in Christian education?

HVB: Even though people complain today about a lack of money, things were much worse in the 60s and 70s. Most schools were poor: often no libraries, science labs, gyms, or specialized teachers. My school had a well-rounded curriculum, with lots of room for teacher input. However, I found myself doing jobs I wasn’t really prepared for. For instance, for two years I was choir director even though I knew nothing about conducting! Now there’s much more professionalism in Christian schools: good fine arts, sports, and outreach programs. The curriculum in Christian schools has also improved greatly through a deeper understanding of what it means to teach with a Christian worldview orientation. I have also been encouraged by how much innovation is going on in Christian schools, especially in relation to social justice or service learning programs.

KF: What has been rewarding for you personally as a Christian teacher and professor?

HVB: I have been encouraged by the way North America and the world is seeing a need for Christian education that is not just about ensuring our children are “safe” or will come to believe in Christ, but that they learn to see things in a broader biblical perspective. When students understand God’s kingdom as central rather than themselves, they start to see how they can contribute to making this world more peaceful, more just, more loving, more caring, even if they are able to do so only in their immediate environment. Too often Christian schools in the past have limited Christian faith to converting individuals and moral issues. While important, schools must move beyond these and foster a communal sense where Christian communities emulate the early church in search for holiness and a shared life of service.

KF: If you were speaking to a person just hired to teach in a Christian school for the very first time, what advice or encouragement would you give them?

HVB: Focus on how you can develop meaningful relationships with students and colleagues, and then work out a pedagogy with your colleagues that is based on biblical principles. Ask yourselves what it means to be “images of God.” How does that understanding impact your classroom strategies as well as the curriculum you develop? Help your students see what it means to serve God in today’s world. And set aside time to prepare yourself spiritually for your teaching. Take time for reflection. Right now God has given me the gift of time to think, reflect, read Scripture and other spiritual writings. I didn’t do that enough as a young teacher. Also, try to find or have your school appoint a personal mentor who is a good listener.

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KF: Are there any trends you see happening in Christian schools or with Christian school educators today that you think could be dangerous or negative?
HVB: One disturbing trend is our tendency in North America to think of our culture as superior. We are not critical enough of our own nations. We are among the richest of nations, but there is a tremendous gap between the rich and the poor. We need to be willing to discuss such issues in our classes. We need to ensure our international partnerships are reciprocal and ethical. Another disturbing trend is our tendency to accept government curricula and assessments. Christian schools are now mature enough to refuse to justify their existence by proving they are a replica of the public system. We can take a leadership role in education and dare to do things differently. We need to remember that we exist because we are unique!

KF: What is the advice you would give to a Christian school leader about preparing a faculty to become biblically integrated in their thinking about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment?
HVB: It is important to incorporate new faculty into a team, so you need to do a lot of shared professional development. Encourage your staff to take a university or Christian college course at regular intervals so that ongoing professional development becomes an accepted pattern. There is always room for improvement—even my last course was significantly revised from the year before based on current research, further insights, and student needs.

KF: Is there one aspect of Christian school curriculum that requires additional attention today?
HVB: I’ve really appreciated the work that is being done to implement courses on social justice, particularly when connected to service learning. I appreciate how many schools are integrating classroom learning in chapel programs. They give students opportunities to present their projects and how their learning is leading to a biblical faith commitment. At higher levels students often take charge of the programs. Such moves make chapel programs worthwhile learning experiences. In biblical studies, students do need to be taught basic Bible knowledge. However, we need to move beyond that and have students explore at all levels how Christ came to earth to establish God’s Kingdom—and what that means for our everyday life today.

KF: What would you say to schools that completely utilize a textbook framed curriculum?
HVB: Textbooks are resources. Textbooks are not a curriculum. Period.

KF: What are your thoughts on the uses of technological tools in the classroom, including the use of online courses?
HVB: When it comes to technology in the classroom, I suggest caution. Don’t do things too early; kids get technology at home. In kindergarten and grade one, they need play time, creative activities, and informal development of literacy skills. Generally speaking, there is no evidence that technology improves learning. A lot of educational change is informed by speculation rather than solid research. Our students have to know how to use technology in a responsible way, but at the same time we shouldn’t put our faith in technology. I think online courses are helpful for small schools, but I would hope that where possible it would include close contact with a teacher. In 1963, when I first started teaching, futurists were saying that by 2000 schools would be a thing of the past. How wrong they were! Personal interaction will continue to be crucial in education.

KF: How can Christian schools partner more effectively with each other and with government?
HVB: I hope that we will see more groups of schools work together—schools that are geographically based or are willing to try online collaboration. Even though Christian schools are often denominationally diverse, they can learn from each other—from their pedagogy, from their curricula, and from structuring schools for servant leadership. With regard to government, Christian schools need to appoint people who can keep close contact with departments of education and who can contribute to education beyond their own schools.

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