



## A Tale of Two Schools

By Sandy M. Outlar

Charles Dickens' apt phrase in the opening statements of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) might describe the Christian school movement today—"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."<sup>1</sup>

Many Christian schools in America are just surviving, and yet others are flourishing. But sad to say, still others are closing. Thankfully, some Christian schools have considered the wonderful opportunity of merging.

Through the years, I have heard Christian businessmen, who have been solicited by several Christian schools in their community, ask, "Why don't Christian schools pool their resources and efforts by doing more for less and consider merging?" Their question merits serious consideration, from both the standpoints of wise stewardship of donor monies and the quality and quantity of kingdom education that might be offered.

Many reasons exist for Christian schools to consider partnering, such as economic realities, a church's decision not to continue sponsoring a school as a part of the church's ministry, or the realization that the curriculum being offered is providing students with a less-than-excellent Christian education. The Lord may use any number of ways to maneuver His schools out of independent status and into an integrated venue with other Christian schools. Organizational and ownership paradigm shifts may be what God will use to keep Christian education healthy and viable throughout America and around the world.

The tale of the merger of Lancaster Christian School (LCS) and Living Word Academy (LWA) began more than 5 years ago, before the current economic slump. As with most beginnings, it all started with a dream. It wasn't long before one could quickly assess that God was the Dream Maker for this potential partnership.

The earthly backdrop to the considerations of a merger was my returning to LCS after serving there as headmaster some 25 years earlier. Because Lancaster County is blessed with a number of Christian schools, I began to contemplate collaborating and cooperating with other area Christian schools. And so began a fellowship of principals that met periodically at a local

Bible college. Our goal was to consider how to engender a greater spirit of cooperation instead of allowing isolation and undue competition to separate us.

As ongoing administrative meetings evolved, it became apparent that two schools were becoming more intrigued by the idea of working closely together. One was LWA, headed by Mark Coté, and the other was LCS, of which I was headmaster. Both had a rich heritage of Christian education, and both were well established in its philosophy and practice.

It wasn't long before a few board members from each school tested the waters to see if there was sufficient interest at the board level in such a significant move. At one point, discussions were respectfully tabled because of issues such as ownership and governance style. About a year later, with great intent and enthusiasm, dialogue about merging started to gain momentum.

A major obstacle to navigate around was the contrast in the two schools' governance structures. One was traditional in board design, and the other was policy-governance based. Another issue was ownership. One school was association owned, and the other church owned. Added to the mix were slight differences in peripheral doctrinal positions, curriculum offerings, and leadership roles.

Some of the biblical verification behind the ongoing negotiating was the profound truth found in Ecclesiastes 4:9: "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work."

Timing, trust, and a desire for togetherness were the motivating factors on our journey to merging. Therefore, selfish motives had to decrease, and a God-honoring spirit had to pervade all conversations. By God's grace, a brotherly spirit was evidenced in conversations and at major decision-making times. Tentative merger planning began under the title Project Together. The purpose was to provide a primer for initial discussion by the boards of both schools.

The absolutely critical and top priority was the formation of the new board of directors. They would serve as owners of the school in partnership with parents and churches. There was a unanimous desire to use the policy-governance structure for this new board. Ultimately, the board for the new school consisted of selected members from each of the

# Lancaster County Christian School, Lancaster PA

---

former school boards. Mark Coté was appointed as the headmaster. My role became that of an advisor, a mentor, a cheerleader, and a community liaison.

In fall 2010, Lancaster County Christian School (LCCS) opened its doors to nearly 500 students. To be sure, the merger was not without its challenges; but the Lord went ahead of us and rolled out the royal carpet of His will. The two big challenges of hiring staff and determining what the new curriculum would look like were handled through leadership collaboration at all levels.

Psalm 37:23 says, “If the Lord delights in a man’s way, he makes his steps firm.” Both Mark and I were assured, over and over, that God was affirming this merger. We both were amazed by and appreciative of watching God go before us in Project Together.

These were some of the considerations and convictions that were a part of the LCS and LWA merger:

- The vision for a merger must be God-manuevered, not man-manipulated.
- Be careful to not merely react to desperate times, but rather to deliberately respond to divine direction.
- Both boards, both (or all) administrators, and all staff members must be convinced and convicted of the vision and must approach the merger with open hands.
- Board members must be treated with respect, because their hearts and energies have been faithful to the school they have been governing.
- All “stockholders” must participate in the process.
- Somewhere along the decision-making timeline, one of the two lead administrators must become the “designated hitter.”
- A cross section of former board members from each school should serve on the new board.
- Anticipate that not all personnel from each school will be hired.
- Approach the merger as the birthing of a new school. One cannot underestimate the enthusiasm created by the anticipation of a new beginning.
- Keep short and regular communications with all the special-interest groups.
- The governance design must be agreed on early.
- Creating opportunities for student interaction before the new school opens is essential.
- Provide many occasions for both staffs to visit and fellowship with each other.

- Clarify roles and responsibilities for each staff member as soon as possible.
- Use (and benefit from) media coverage of the merger.
- Have a culminating event that brings both schools together to celebrate the formation of the new school.
- Budget conservatively for the opening of the new school.
- Evaluate present curricula and use the opportunity to develop new and exciting curriculum and programs.
- Secure legal advice for any significant changes that could affect personnel, bylaws, property, etc.
- Sometimes an outside facilitator is helpful.
- Most important, bathe everything in prayer!

There can be a downside to pursuing a merger; it may involve attitudes and responses such as these:

- Resistance to change by any given group of people
- Divided loyalties based on support for one’s school and uncertainty about the future of the new school
- Concern over what the cultural shift may look like
- Blurred roles and responsibilities of administrators
- Communication shortfalls that leave staff with misgivings and misinterpretations
- Feelings of job uncertainties that cultivate insecurity
- Diminished support and enthusiasm by those who will not be a part of the merger
- The attempt to balance trade-offs to reduce conflicts

Needless to say, everyone needs to get behind the merger once it has transpired and be deputized, so to speak, by the Spirit to take their roles seriously, demonstrating enthusiasm, so that a merger becomes “the best of times” for the Kingdom and for Kingdom education.

Editor’s note: For more information about “A Tale of Two Schools” and the associated procedural details, please feel free to contact Dr. Outlar at [soutlar@lccs.cc](mailto:soutlar@lccs.cc).

#### Note

1. Classic Literature Library. *A tale of two cities* by Charles Dickens. <http://www.charles-dickens.org/a-tale-of-two-cities>.

---

Sandy M. Outlar, EdD, has worked in Christian school administration for more than 35 years. Currently, he is the community liaison for Lancaster County Christian School, and he recently was appointed as a liaison to Christian schools by Lancaster Bible College. He has also been an administrative and board consultant for more than two decades.