Prayer Spaces

Experiri is a quarterly newsletter presenting stories of innovation in school ministry from Australia and beyond. Each edition provides single page profiles of innovative strategies that have been developed in response to challenges or emerging issues for chaplains or others in the school, including Heads and Religious Educators. If you are interested in contributing to Experiri see our contact information below.

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In the last week of the school year the year six cohort spends two days of orientation at the secondary school, the purpose of which is to assist them transition to secondary more smoothly. As part of that process we use a time of reflection and prayer. For some students the idea of prayer can be ‘off putting’. We wanted to reveal to the students that prayer can be done in many different ways, rather than the usual way of closing eyes, kneeling and holding hands in a certain way.

What was the response to the need?

Inspired by a website called “Prayer Spaces in Schools” I contacted creators Phil Togwell and his team in England. They supported me with ideas and prayer. There were four prayer stations.

**Sorry Station:** Students washed dirty rocks and laid them at the foot of the cross. This represented leaving behind those things they may have regretted doing.

**Thank You Station:** Students created pipe cleaner people. This represented the people they wish to thank for their time in primary school.

**Please Station:** Students wrote on paper hands expressing their concerns about moving into secondary school.

**Wow Station:** Students expressed their “Wow” moments in primary school and hopes for secondary school using paper flags.

**What was the impact?**

Our first prayer space was fantastic! From the moment we opened the doors of the Chapel, the look on the students’ faces and the “wow” on their lips said it all. There was this amazing peace that seemed to descend upon the whole space. Students appeared to collectively sigh as they let go of the past few busy days of the school year. We will be holding more prayer space events in 2015.

**What were the greatest challenges?**

Sharing this new and strange idea to staff was the first step. Gathering the equipment needed to create the Prayer Spaces was the second. As the Prayer Spaces are like a wonderland, gathering the, although everyday, equipment also required work. Many resources were needed.
What was the need or challenge being addressed?

Despite being an Anglican School, St Mark’s Anglican Community School on the northern beaches of Perth, Western Australia, has few students who self identify as Christians. Most come from families where Christianity has little impact. Anglicanism especially, and Christianity generally, can be seen as something that older people do. If I’m honest with myself, as Chaplain, I’m no longer a cool young twenty-something teacher. Instead I’m a greying forty something daggy dad who represents a religion that is for a different generation. I don’t think the answer is to get a hip young twenty something instead of me (although I have one on my staff).

What was the response to the need?

One possible answer is to show the students that Christianity is something for students, taught by students to students. My role? Grow the Christian student’s ability to teach the Bible and trust in God’s saving plan, the gospel. We now have Year 12 students teaching the Bible in Chapel to the rest of the High School and Year 9 students teaching the Bible to Primary students in Chapel. I help the students choose what might work and what they feel comfortable teaching and I help them refine their presentations and give them feedback.

What was the impact?

The impact is twofold. Firstly, there is a marked growth in the students who do the teaching. Those who prepare the talks and presentations certainly grow in their confidence in their ability to explain the material and in their confidence in the gospel to change lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, the students enjoy hearing the same message from different messengers. To hear from one of their own is to see that Christianity is not just something used by an older generation to control or shape younger people. But instead, being Christian is living life, responding to God’s love shown through Jesus.

What were the greatest challenges?

Any challenges come from the student’s hesitations in standing up in front of their peers and putting their hand up to say they are a Christian. It can be difficult to stand out and be different when you are a student. However, by and large, each student who has taken part has been thankful for what they have done. Through the difficulty of stepping out, the students have grown and matured in their faith.
What was the need or challenge being addressed?

Our School needed a teaching and learning framework that provided a rich and holistic Christian education and that utilised cutting-edge teaching practice based on current peer-reviewed research. We desired a framework that united all aspects of a student’s learning; both inside and outside the classroom, that would not only develop our students academically but develop their character as well.

What was the response to the need?

A number of other frameworks were considered. However they did not tick all the boxes for us. So the School’s leadership team began the task of developing a framework that met our requirements. A model was agreed upon that had 5 dimensions. These dimensions are: 1) Christian Foundations: Building Strong Faith. 2) Knowledge and Understanding: Inspiring young minds. 3) Learning Practices: Equipping Life-Long Learners. 4) Capabilities: Developing Global Citizens. 5) Attitudes and Values: Nurturing Spirited Hearts.

Each dimension of what became known as the Fidelis Model requires the implementation of specific strategies and practices. A vital feature of the model is the ongoing evaluation and refinement of these practices, for example a review is currently underway in light of the Australian curriculum.

What was the impact?

The development and implementation of the model gave our school community an opportunity to take a step back and think about our teaching and learning from a big picture perspective and decide what was best educational practice. It also enabled us to think deeply about a Biblical perspective of education and how that enriches our curriculum and school culture.

What were the greatest challenges?

Finding the precise goals and integrating these with the state curriculum and our Christian ethos in a way that has practical application in all classrooms PK-12 was a significant challenge as is the continued induction and training of staff in the model as the school grows.
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