

Rebranding Chapel Creating a Platform for Leadership and Community

By Keven G. Fletcher

Any success we enjoy with our chapel programme at St. Michaels University School is directly connected to the work of the student team, a loose affiliation of food-driven deep thinkers.

Nine years ago, chapel was different. Though attendance was mandatory, students and staff expressed their feelings as much by their absence as with their comments. Gatherings lacked continuity and staff grew tired of taking their turn in the pulpit. There were four student wardens, who focused on important but menial chapel tasks like turning on the lights, testing the microphones, and lighting the candles.

The transformation began with a shift in the warden's responsibilities. I took on those roles and asked the wardens to instead become advisors to the programme with our meetings moving from matters of "how and when" to "what and why." By the following year, baked goods and discussion became the norm, and the term "Warden" fell out of use, replaced by a group concept—the Chapel Team.

The changes initiated under the guidance of the Chapel Team were at first subtle, but significant. What was relevant and meaningful to students quietly took precedence over some patterns that were comfortable for adults. It's not that traditions were tossed aside in an iconoclastic frenzy. Rather, traditions were explored so that their core could be maintained. For example, we had a tradition of sharing the Lord's Prayer. Because the faith backgrounds of the students were diverse, we started rotating four prayers: Christian, Buddhist, Jewish and Islamic. Next, because most of our students didn't participate in a particular religious tradition, we constantly reminded ourselves publically that we were of diverse faith *and philosophical* systems. Eventually, the prayer format was set aside, making room for "Words of Wisdom" (WoW) that reflect the moral underpinnings of religious and philosophical systems through the thoughts of spiritual, political and literary figures.



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Experiencing the changes in chapel not only encouraged the existing Chapel Team, but also garnered the notice of other students. Some who were key motivators began to attend meetings, pushing the programme further. These students were deeply involved in scores of leadership initiatives, which they felt could find voice in chapel.

It was at this point that chapel at the senior school began to take its place as a platform for the regular, communal expression of our leadership programme. Students who arrived back from Africa or South America shared not only what they did, but how the trip changed them and why they hoped it would inspire us all.



I started my countdown 172 days before departure and please don't ask how I remember that number, but I do...I knew the main purpose of the trip was to volunteer at this community centre in Buenos Aires, but I felt distant to that purpose...Why do I continue to support this centre? What is the motif behind my passion for this centre 7,000 miles away from me?...The members of Centro Conviven and I are from polar opposite ends when it comes to our background, but learning their values, traditions, and culture opened a whole new view of volunteer work...I returned to Victoria [B.C.] with a couple Argentine acquaintances, 15 mosquito bites, a changed global perspective and an everlasting impact.

Selections from a talk by Sunmin Oh, Grade 12, June 2014



Members of our Amnesty International group led wordless services as part of their Day of Silence. Scenes from the school's musical and from our Theatre Society were performed within the context of exploring the values at play. The International Council created services to express not only the facts of their cultures, but the challenges and joys that were a part of their life at the school. In other words, chapel became a crossroads where various groups could share their journeys. What was happening in terms of leadership development in separate

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classrooms, clubs and the quad found a common platform for expression.

In essence, chapel became a space within busy schedules to pause, catch one's breath and remember what it's all about and who we want to be... or, at least, to recognize the need to ponder such questions.

Since these initial shifts, a group of up to 40 students has been part of an ongoing conversation, fueled by homemade cookies and squares, offering feedback on form, content, and tone at every step of the journey. From details around the length of silence and the scheduling of groups to the setting of themes and the testing of new delivery modes, the Chapel Team offers input on every aspect of the programme. I'm told that this degree of behind-the-scenes student leadership is unusual for chapel programmes. Frankly, I couldn't imagine my professional life without this team.

Our weekly meetings are loose in format with students being encouraged to come when they can, but not when they have too many other things on their plates. It leads to a relaxed atmosphere with a given day's attendance of around 15-20. When I ask them what they appreciate about their work, they consistently reply that it's the way they see their ideas reflected every time we gather for chapel.

That, and the baked goods. I did mention food, didn't I? ●

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