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Faith, Learning, and Success in Mennonite High Schools: What's Working at Lancaster Mennonite High School?

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by Ginny Birky, PhD

Introduction to Research Project

Background: During the 2014-2015 academic school year, I was on sabbatical leave from my work as a professor of education at George Fox University. The story that follows is a result of the sabbatical project I initiated with Mennonite Education Agency/Mennonite Schools Council and seven Mennonite high schools.

About the research: For this post-doctoral research, I personally visited seven Mennonite high schools in the fall of 2014 to determine the strengths and distinctives of the school related to school atmosphere, academics, and faith development. I visited Lancaster Mennonite High School on September 26, 2014 and interviewed 12 participants: four students, four teachers, three parents, and one administrator. Some of the teachers and parents represented more than one role, but were to speak from the identified role as much as possible. The overarching interview question was: "What are the strengths and successes at Lancaster Mennonite High School?" Participants gave written consent to have their comments shared. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify recurring themes. I used the themes to organize the information into a story, explaining the themes with quotations, explanations, and examples.

Story or report: The story about Lancaster Mennonite High School (LMHS) was written based on the perceptions and representations of what the participants said related to what was working and why. Every effort was made to portray the perspectives of those interviewed to get an accurate picture of what LMHS was doing to help students be successful, engaged in school, and develop a faith.

Emergent themes. There were many similarities between the selected Mennonite high schools. They had similar values, courses, and clientele. The strengths mentioned at one school were often mentioned at other schools. However, as is true for qualitative research, the data analysis was always organic, so the themes emerged as I immersed myself in the story-telling. Because of similarities between schools, it is important to remember the absence of a theme, quality, or characteristic does not necessarily mean it was absent at the school.

Limitations and disclaimers: It is also important to understand a limitation of the study. I interviewed only a representative sampling of persons from each stakeholder group. Participants spoke for themselves, so the narrative is representative of the participants' perspectives, and does not necessarily represent all perspectives at the particular school. Also, each school's story should be read as one that stands alone rather than used as a basis of comparison to other schools. Each story mentions the names of the people I interviewed. The first time they were mentioned I included the group they represented (student, teacher, parent, or administrator). I intentionally did not use the names of other persons at the school who may have been mentioned by the persons interviewed.

I hope you enjoy reading about the excellent Mennonite high schools I visited. Our Mennonite high schools are strong in the areas of community, academic excellence, and faith integration.

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Faith, Learning, and Success in Mennonite High Schools: What's Working at Lancaster Mennonite High School?

"Centered in Christ; Transforming Lives; Changing our World"

Lancaster Mennonite High School was founded in 1942 by the Lancaster Conference of the Mennonite Church in response to a call for Christian education from within the Mennonite church. It is located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and is one of four campuses for Lancaster Mennonite Schools, which together serve PreK-12 students. Lancaster Mennonite Schools draw students from the Lancaster and Atlantic conferences of the Mennonite Church, USA, as well as many other denominations. The school has a diverse student body which includes students from out of state and international students. The goals of social, spiritual, and academic development are met through a variety of components, including academic coursework, the learning environment, athletics, and co-curricular work.



Lancaster Mennonite High School serves 610 students in grades 9-12. 42% of the student body are ethnically diverse or from non-white backgrounds. 20% of the total number of students are international students, coming from countries such as Ethiopia, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, China, South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. 30% of the whole student body are from an Anabaptist background; 21% come from Mennonite Church, USA.

Students at Lancaster Mennonite High School are supported by 40.5 FTE faculty members and three guidance counselors. There are 1.5 administrators with additional support from a superintendent and an assistant superintendent who support the whole Lancaster Mennonite School system of 1500 students. In addition, staff members provide support for both students and other employees in the school.

Mission: Lancaster Mennonite School offers a PreK-12 comprehensive education in a nurturing and diverse environment that prepares students to be lifelong learners. Centered in Christ and committed to educational excellence in a community setting, the school exists to transform students so they can change our world through Christ-like love, peacemaking, and service.

Lancaster Mennonite High School
2176 Lincoln Highway East
Lancaster, PA 17602
Principal: Elvin Kennel
Superintendent: Richard Thomas
<http://www.lancastermennonite.org/index.php>



Elvin Kennel, Principal

The following pages describe the themes that emerged from interviews with students, teachers, parents, and administrators and from an analysis of the recorded and transcribed interviews.

Key Strengths: What's Working at LMHS?

The most significant strengths of LMHS highlighted by the participants of this study were related to *acceptance, diversity, connections to learning, and connections to faith*. This report is organized around the description of these themes.

Experiences related to the discovered themes all take place in a unique physical setting. Students and faculty expressed pride and appreciation for Lancaster Mennonite High School's "beautiful campus" which includes a creek running through it, a woods area, and new turf and track facilities. The buildings are laid out to represent an open campus and necessitate that students move between buildings, which they prefer because it reminds them of a college campus. The Rutt Academic Center is the newest building on campus and houses "state-of-the-art classrooms for mathematics, science, business education, and family and consumer science" (website). Other large buildings provide opportunities for numerous options in fine arts and career and technical programs, as well as core classes for the remainder of the 150 course offerings at Lancaster Mennonite. A senior student, Devin said, "LMHS is its own little community in and of itself."



Devin was referring to the physical facility of Lancaster Mennonite High School (LMHS) as community, but at the other end of the spectrum, people referred to the strength of another kind of community, often described as a nurturing environment. In fact, an unidentified student in the hallway during passing time was overheard saying to his classmates, "I really like this school because we're like a community. We all like each other."

As a parent of two children and board member, Andy said he and his wife think of what LMHS can do for their family as "sort of a three-legged stool or a triad – home, church, and education." He said it is important to them that all three of those stool legs stand for the same values and influence the child similarly. Andy said he realizes it doesn't mean they are totally homogeneous, but for their children, if all three legs of the stool are speaking the same language, then the same themes are coming through to them and the messages are consistent. Andy said LMHS has always been a partner with them "in terms of how we've raised our kids."

Andy had another way to think about the effect of outside influences on a child's life. He said no matter whether they send their kids to public school or to Lancaster Mennonite, there would be a certain amount of "unteaching" they would do in their home because not everything would be in alignment. "But," he said, "at Lancaster Mennonite, there are a lot fewer things that we need to unteach than we would have to in [other] schools."

Acceptance: A place for each person

“Welcoming and warm” was the way Carol, the mother of six children, described the atmosphere at LMHS when they visited for the first time. She said, “I just felt as though everything about it was a better fit. The facility was better, the classroom sizes were better, and I just felt it would help [my son] be more successful.” Another parent said, “The kids here are great – they’re always welcoming.” And yet another parent expressed that to her family, a “welcome” was the result of receiving financial aid.

Mrs. Moyer, a former student and now in her 25th year of teaching English at Lancaster Mennonite, said, “I think some of the best things about LMHS are still what I experienced as a student. Many students find a place for themselves and can be successful here in a way that they weren’t wherever they came from. In the last number of years, I’ve had students who came from negative experiences elsewhere, but they had a chance to really bloom here.”

One example of Mrs. Moyer’s comments is when Bernadette, a single mom of two high school students, said LMHS had been like an additional parent for her two children. She brought them to Lancaster because she was afraid they were going to become like some of the people in their lives instead of who she wanted them to be. Her son had a lot of anger in eighth grade and she was worried the administrators would ask him to leave, even though her son said he didn’t want to leave. Bernadette added, “I just appreciated the gentle and respectful guidance related to behavioral issues. And then, I don’t know what happened, but in ninth grade he started to do a 360! Now I refer other families to come here.”

Andy indicated the nurturing environment was probably LMHS’s main strength for his household. “Teachers are completely invested in the kids’ academic lives as well as their social and spiritual lives,” said Andy. He talked about how each one of his children needed something different from school, so “the nurturing environment is just a focus on the multiple facets of a kid’s development.”

Students articulated appreciation for the environment in additional ways. Cici, a freshman, said one of her favorite things about Lancaster Mennonite “is the people and how they treat you and how you get to be welcomed when you come in. When you’re new, you don’t have to sit alone. Other students will come sit with you, even though you don’t know them. Then you start having a conversation with people and you get to know them. At lunch the teachers also look around to see if anyone is alone.” When Cici was asked if LMHS had met her expectations so far, her face lit up when she said, “Yeah, I really like the school. I know there’s going to be drama anywhere in school, but here it’s so different. Here when someone doesn’t like something they tell you, but they don’t yell at you. They just tell you what you did so you understand. I like that. I don’t know, there’s just something different here.”



Part of the component of a nurturing environment at LMHS is that students are accepted without expectation of conformance or performance. Mrs. Moyer talked about a student who had a particular disease which affected his appearance. He was a member of FFA and had many

friends. When he died he was mourned by the school community. Mrs. Moyer said, “It was really touching to me as a teacher to be part of that because I know he could have been mocked instead of mourned.” She cited other examples on campus where students and faculty have been accepted in some unusual circumstances, just because they were human beings and loved by God.

Community. As a senior looking back at his three previous years at LMHS, Adam considered the school environment to be like a community. “Everybody is so friendly on campus. In some schools there are lots of individuals in one spot and [yet] you kind of feel alone. But at Lancaster Mennonite it’s more of a community, and I feel like I know everybody I see.”

Devin shared an example of this caring community from the previous year. One of his teachers was the father of a special needs daughter who had fallen and was in extremely critical condition in the hospital. Devin said “In chapel, this teacher opened himself and his emotions up to us as he talked about the situation and basically begged us for prayer. He also kept sort of a journal of the current situation on the whiteboard in his room, what his hopes were, and what to pray for. It was interesting because the next day there was often an exact match of what we had prayed for. This went on until she was back home resting safely.” Devin said he personally believed he had a part in this child’s healing because “we were definitely all in this together.”

Mr. Kennel, Lancaster Mennonite High School’s principal of five years, has been in Mennonite education for 31 years. He said LMHS works hard at the community aspect of school, focusing on each other and on the community with a holistic approach. He said, “I tell potential students we have a high trust level – we expect the best out of our students, and I think students then offer their respect as well.”



Principal Kennel described an example of the “high trust” he referenced -- a specific time during the week that is intentionally designed to build community. Two times a month the schedule accommodates a 20-minute period that is specifically designed for students to have “down time.” He said, “We have [600] students who have much of the campus open to them. It is a time to just ‘be.’ Our world stops together. It’s a time for conversation or to throw Frisbee. Teachers are around. We recognize the importance of socialization and emotional well-being. We work hard, but we stop and we play. It’s unique – I didn’t start it but I appreciate it. It’s an example of trust and it enhances [our] community.”

Mr. Kennel had a theory about the value of community. Almost every year, he realizes the challenges that an English-spoken 30-minute chapel has on the engagement of international students – a level of disinterest, often because of the language barrier. So he has given permission for students to be elsewhere during chapel time. But invariably within a week they come back and say, “Can I please go?” Mr. Kennel shared his explanation: “It’s because they sense that something more than just chapel happens in chapel. When 600 people are heading

one direction, and you're going the other direction to study in the office, you are left out of the community that happens there. Chapel isn't just about the religious experience. It is about coming together and experiencing both the joys and sorrows we face together, and the things that matter. We have learned that [when we have chapel], we stop our world for a little while."

Advisory groups. Advisory groups were frequently mentioned as a way to build community at LMHS. Groups of 10-15 students meet every Wednesday in place of chapel. Students from different grade levels meet with a faculty member who stays with the group throughout their four years on campus. As freshmen, Mr. Ulloa's current seniors started with him as their history and advisory teacher when he first came to LMHS four years ago, so he said, "We've done the whole high school thing together."

Mr. Dietzel, a teacher in his 41st year at LMHS, said Lancaster Mennonite promotes a decentralized guidance department with a "marvelous guidance core curriculum" – some of their own and some from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The majority of the advisory agendas are planned by a guidance counselor who is assigned to assist and work with a particular group. Activities take into consideration the grade level of the students, what they might be dealing with at that age, and where they might be headed next. Together the two adults get to know the students and their individual interests and needs. Their main goals are to help students determine courses to take, work on next steps (college and career), and encourage them in their personal and academic lives.



Dottie, the family and consumer science teacher, said advisories were one of the many places where teachers could infuse their faith with devotions or another faith-building exercise. Teachers are encouraged to have prayer and Bible reading during their advisory sessions. However, even if they do not, most teachers consider advisories to be an important and formative spiritual influence.

Opportunities. Part of what helps students and parents believe there is a place for each student at LMHS is the variety of activities available to them. Mrs. Moyer said, "Because we're a comprehensive school, there's just a wide variety of activities to become a part of. If they're interested in agriculture, there's a strong FFA program. If they're interested in the arts, drama, or music, our programs are strong. I just see a wide range of opportunities for students to find a place for themselves." Mr. Dietzel greatly values co-curricular activities as part of a student's high school experience. Maya, a tenth grader, especially loved her participation in drama and music; she was excited about going to Harrisonburg soon for a group orchestra contest.

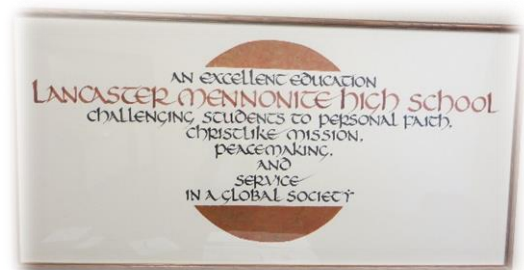
Mr. Dietzel also talked about the comprehensiveness of the high school and believed it is a niche the school has in the community. He said Lancaster started out in the forties as a rather academically-elite school, but over the years met the needs of its constituents by offering agricultural courses, business, and more rigorous courses for college placement. He said, "We're also large enough to participate in the local public school athletic leagues and competitions, which is another part of our comprehensiveness."

In addition to courses, athletics is strong at LMHS. Some partnerships with other private schools exist in order to broaden the opportunities for involvement in sports. For example, LMHS has no football program, but students who are interested may play with a team from the Catholic school in town. LMHS and the Catholic school have formally developed a coop in a number of areas to strengthen both of their programs. There are also opportunities to be involved in yearbook, school newspaper, worship team, Student Council, National Honor Society, Campus Corral, orchestra, string ensembles, various bands, a wide variety of clubs, and numerous contests. One student enjoyed being on the “Student Advancement Committee” which allowed him to give tours to prospective LMHS students and also mentor international students. He said, “It’s a cool program.”

Diversity

LMHS has a high percentage of non-white students on campus, around 20% this year. These include Hispanic, African-American, and international students. An appreciation for the increasing diversity was a priority for many students, teachers, and parents. Mrs. Weber, family and consumer sciences teacher, considered diversity a strength of LMHS.

She has been at LMHS for 35 years and said they were making a conscious effort to create a global culture at school. In fact, the word “diversity” is articulated in the mission statement and the word “global” in the vision statement. She said this as she read the vision statement from a framed set of words on the wall.



Andy included diversity as one of the things he and his wife most value in the student body – diversity in both ethnicity and socio-economic status. He commented: “Unless you are in the Lancaster city school district, there isn’t a lot of ethnic diversity in Lancaster County. That’s a value we hold on to and is important to us, and to me as a board member too. It’s also important to the school, evidenced by the fact that we’ve offered close to \$2 million in financial aid, which brings a variety of socio-economic levels to us.”

Maya said she enjoyed getting to know students who grew up differently than her, both US students of another race or ethnicity as well as international students. Mr. Dietzel believed a diverse student body gave students a “richer education experience, heightening their exposure to a broader world before they leave here.”

International students. A strong international population adds to the diversity on campus. As Mrs. Weber put it, “One of the strengths of LMHS is that we are so multicultural. We talk so much about being global, consequently, we are trying to invite the globe here. To me, LMH is the mission field. I don’t have to go to another country.” Mr. Kennel voiced similar thoughts when he said, “As a child I remember praying that we could get Bibles into China. Never did I imagine that I would have so many diverse students in my world.”

International students come from many different countries and stay with either host families or in a new dorm on campus. According to one teacher, students this year come from China, Korea, Ethiopia, Russia, Vietnam, and more. And one of the goals is to become even more diversified.

According to Mrs. Weber, one of the advantages of having students from other countries is that “it challenges us with a different value system and compels us to adapt how we work. It also adds a challenging component to our teaching. So we have conversations about that. We have to think out of the box, and that’s a good thing for us.”



Maya perceived some advantages to knowing students from other countries. “The dorm with international students is really cool because I get to make connections with people that I wouldn’t get the chance to otherwise. So that’s been really enriching to meet new people, and you learn more about other cultures by meeting them, which is a lot of fun. I just like people that have come from different places.” Maya laughed when she elaborated on what she learns from others. A student from Germany is in her friend group and they often eat lunch together. Girls in the group find it fascinating to compare food, high schools, clothing styles, and even chocolate between the two countries.

Adam said he benefits from making friends with international students as well. At the first of the year, he introduces himself and offers help in finding a class or in navigating the schedule. He said, “Just talking to them, making them feel more welcome, and being a friend is something I can do.”

Mr. Kennel attributed their work with international students as one that has enhanced the LMH community to learn and grow. He said, “My world has changed in my understanding of culture. We are learning how to bring together a diverse population into our community. It fits very much into the statements and goals of who we want to be, both globally and locally.” He said his desire would be to have international students come from 15 countries with 10 students from each country in order to create a better cross section of what it means to be global. “Having diversity on our campus has made us a better place.”

Diversity of thought. According to several persons, diversity of race and ethnicity can contribute to diversity of thought. This too was valued. Mr. Dietzel said 40 years ago LMHS’s student population was nearly all white and Mennonite, and now it’s less than 50%. The school has attracted students from other Protestant denominations, Catholics, non-Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists. Maya commented how a diverse student body adds a totally different perspective to some aspects of school. She said, “I think of my Bible classes where we come to think about God in different ways. So it’s just interesting to hear their different ideas.”

Mr. Dietzel, Mrs. Moyer, and Devin all credited teachers and staff with bringing diverse experiences with them to LMHS. Many have been in alternative service, taught in other countries, or had other international experiences. One was involved in putting the *Mennonite Hymnal* together. Mr. Dietzel said, “We’ve been deliberately working hard at ethnic and cultural diversity, including gender disparities. We’ve also brought in a Chinese professor we are sharing

with Lancaster Catholic this year.” Devin further explained the value of teachers’ varied experiences: “It’s like they have all these different perspectives on their faith from all around the world and they bring them together. It’s pretty cool.”

Students at LMHS are exposed to diverse perspectives related to faith in numerous ways, most particularly chapel and Bible classes. Mr. Kennel shared an example from a guest chapel speaker. Michael Shenk works for global peace, reconciliation, and non-violence. He presented on those topics in chapel; “some students bought in and some did not.” After chapel, students wanting to engage further in the conversation were invited to a classroom for more discussion. The Q & A session went for another hour and a half and covered many different perspectives from a variety of people. Mr. Kennel said, “It felt very good to realize that was what education needs to be — the invitation to be able to speak one’s mind in a broader way. And then gently to be surrounded and challenged with [a variety of] perspectives too. That was the best of the best of what we desire to do and what our involvement should be.”

Because she wanted them to learn honor and respect for others, Carol believed the various faith backgrounds her children were exposed to would benefit their faith development. She said, “That’s the way of world peace. When they are in a religion class that is not necessarily their own faith practice but someone else’s, I want them to learn to respect it.” She said she did not think of this positive result before her children had attended LMH for a while. But “it is one of those happy accidents that my kids are learning not all people are exactly like us.”

Andy also embraced the exposure his daughter was receiving related to other faith perspectives. He articulated, “I have absolutely no problem with that whatsoever. I would continue to encourage the school to do things like that because exposure changes people and it just has to happen. We’re fragmented as it is.” For example, Andy was pleased there had been opportunities for his daughter to learn about various religious contexts and world religions in order to compare and contrast other religions with Christianity. “The goal was not to come away scared of them, but rather to focus on the ways we’re the same. That’s the kind of message I think my kids need to hear. For us and where we sit in our life experiences, that’s powerful and positive. We spend plenty of time in this world focusing more on how we’re different than alike. I like to focus on how we’re alike.”



Connections to Faith

Of one of Lancaster Mennonite’s strengths, Mr. Ulloa said, “It’s a powerful thing to be able to talk about faith in school.” This seems to be what Maya was talking about when she referred to the integration of faith into course content: “What I like is when teachers bring God into it, which you can’t get everywhere. I like how they make the connections for us.” She went on to say that in some way, any teacher can incorporate faith into any class. “You can even bring God into music -- you’re doing this to worship God, you know. Or history -- there’s another perspective of what God might have thought about the things humans have done. Or in science - there’s also a perspective of creation and what that could have meant.”

Related to faith development, a strength for Andy were around the opportunity his daughter had for “rootedness” in Anabaptist thought and in the importance of the life and acts of Jesus. Andy believed there was a long history at LMHS where students have learned Anabaptist ways of thinking and believing by being around people who have lived and embraced these views in the context of Lancaster Mennonite School. For him, “the rootedness that has been developed for many years is alive and well in the school, maybe in much different ways than it was 50 years ago, but it’s still there foundationally. So it’s a lens you can look at the world through. That’s just powerful stuff for me. Those are the experiences I’ve had in life, so I want them for my kids too.”

Chapel -- a “touchstone.” One of the important structures in place for faith development is chapel. Carol referred to the chapel experience as “a touchstone for students every single day.” She further explained that any Christian symbol students see (such as a Bible verse on a wall poster) or any activity in which students participate (such as chapel), points them toward faith. “It’s a part of their life here. I mean the touchstone is that they’re always touching it while they’re here in high school. Every day somewhere in the day it touches their life.”

Chapel at LMHS meets four days a week; Wednesdays students and faculty meet in advisory groups, which serve as a “small group chapel.” Mr. Ulloa’s perspective on the main purpose of chapel was to answer the question, “How do we walk this life together?”

Schedules for larger group chapels include a wide array of programs – speakers from local churches, persons from other countries, teachers, and students. Many remembered their favorite chapel speakers. Mrs. Moyer shared her most memorable chapel speakers of the last year or two.



One was Leymah Gbowee, peace activist from Liberia and 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner. The other was a Greek Orthodox priest who showed pictures and explained their icons of faith. Cici remembered a football player for the New York Giants who shared his personal testimony, and as a result, encouraged her in her own faith walk.

She credited chapel with helping her faith grow because when people share their testimony, she said it makes her want to “keep going and keep believing and don’t stop.”

A chapel speaker that was impactful to Maya was a woman who gave her daughter up for adoption, but eventually wanted to have a relationship with her. The speaker compared her experiences of receiving letters from this daughter to her relationship with God, saying that God wants us to read our Bible and communicate with him more. “I may not always agree with what they say,” said Maya, “but I like that because it challenges me and makes me think about it. Questioning is how you grow, you know.”

Devin most remembered the guy who talked about secular music versus Christian music and how he had taken the extreme measure of deleting all of his Jay-Z and Kanye songs off his iPad. Devin said that chapel “got really controversial because those two sides kind of came together

and we couldn't really find a middle ground on the topic. But those discussions then help you figure out where you stand.”

In addition to speakers in chapel, many consist of personal stories when someone shares from their life experiences, such as difficulties faced, battling of anorexia or depression, or the loss of a family member. There is a chapel curriculum to make sure chapels support goals of the school. Mr. Dietzel, who planned chapels this year, said they cover the four C's of chapel: community, celebration, commitment, and challenge.

While students may often speak in chapel at a Christian school, it may not be so common for a student to “preach.” However, Lancaster Mennonite has its own student preacher! When asked how he got into preaching at least once a year, Devin said he goes to the same church as Ms. Landis, LMHS Associate Principal. She knew he had preached at church, so she was influential in having him also preach at school. He hopes to become a pastor someday. But there is a story behind this desire and calling.



Devin loves to tell how he became a Christian first and then a pastor. He did not grow up in a Christian home, but when his older brother came home from the Marine Corps, he wanted to attend church. Devin saw his brother as a role model, so he decided to go along. Because they didn't know where to go, they called up a long-time family friend who happened to attend a local Mennonite church, so the two boys visited there. Devin attended regularly and became a Christian during his freshman year of high school. About a year later, he was searching for what he wanted to do with his life. He said to God, “‘If you have a plan for me or a career for me that you've gifted me for, let me know as clearly as possible.’ I put God to the test a little bit. I asked him to let someone tell me within a week what I should do with my life.”

Shortly after his request to God, Devin was shocked at the words that came out of his mouth in a conversation he was having with an adult male acquaintance who was struggling with his faith. Devin found himself saying, “God will meet you where you're at, and he'll walk you through it.” He surprised himself with this comment, but the response from the man was, “Man, that was deep! You ought to be a pastor!” Devin thought to himself, “Well, I guess that's my answer. It doesn't get much clearer than that!”

Devin continues to be involved with the Mennonite church. He credits the combination of church and LMHS for motivating his commitment to follow Christ and for nurturing him on the journey. He said chapels have had the greatest influence on his faith development. “A lot of speakers come in and give you a very challenging message. I like when chapel makes me uncomfortable. Chapel's not supposed to be a comfortable thing. It's supposed to challenge you; it's supposed to push you beyond your comfort zone.”

Friday Bible studies. Outside the daily educational schedule is something which has occurred for at least 30 years: Friday morning Bible study. It is a student-initiated, student-led spiritual meeting that is held from 7:15 to 8:00 am. It takes place in the gymnasium and has increased in attendance from 25 to around 100 students who attend voluntarily.

Mr. Dietzel served as one of the two school advisors for the Friday Bible studies and said, “For me, it is the most influential role that I play. It is a prime example of what it means to mentor. We meet once a week to plan and pray with a leadership group of students. Then on Friday, we sit in the back and they're up front. One of our most gifted alumni left here to study youth ministry for four years, then came back as campus pastor. Last year he got a full ride to Yale Divinity School for his doctoral degree. That has been the single most rewarding thing of my career. It's why I'm here.”

Faith integration. Mr. Dietzel said deliberate teacher modeling, mentoring, and integration of faith are LMHS's greatest strengths. These actions by faculty and staff have positively influenced students in their lives. Adam said, “I'm so appreciative of [those influences] because they are very instrumental to who I am. It's nice to be able to learn about history right alongside how Christianity grew. It's such a unique experience.”

One of the reasons teachers chose to work at a place like LMHS is because they want to work with adolescents and provide support for their faith development. “We all care about spirituality,” said Mr. Ulloa. “Teachers genuinely care about how students are developing, and we're not limited in integrating our faith into our content. So when I'm planning a history lesson and I wonder, ‘How does this fit into God's understanding of the direction we're going?’ or ‘What do we do as Christians to respond to this?’ I don't have to avoid that question. In fact, it can be a segment of our lesson.”



Even though Mr. Ulloa deliberately incorporates faith into his classes, he is cautious not to assume that all students believe in Christianity. As he plans lessons, he typically asks himself, “How are non-Christian students hearing this?” He said, “Maybe it's just me still trying to get used to the Christian education context, but I never want my students to feel like they are forced to participate in something that they don't want. There's a balance that I'm trying to figure out. I want to open the door, but I think we have to trust God that He's helping us with that. I really try to open myself up to the Holy Spirit's guiding.”

Mr. Kennel's sentiment was similar: “We want students to know that our faith is a natural response to anything we work on. We try to be very intentional, but we do not expect our students to come from a faith background. When I interview students, I want them to know that faith is the central core of why we do everything we do. And they need to be open to that because we don't apologetically invite people into a community that is inclusive. But faith [for us] isn't negotiable. Neither is it a place to make sure they all claim Jesus as they walk across the stage [at graduation]. Our faith statements are invitational; we are on a journey.”

While LMHS teachers and staff try to make the Christian faith an invitation rather than a command, many students reported that Bible classes contributed to their spiritual development. Not surprisingly, Devin's favorite class was Spiritual Formation. Both he and Maya had the class right after chapel and they each referred to helpful class discussions which allowed students the opportunity to articulate what they had heard, or what the school's stance or the secular view

was on the topic presented. Devin said, “It really pushes you to develop your walk with God and kind of molds you into the person that you want to be for the rest of your life.” Cici credited teacher-led devotionals for enriching her sense of God. She said, “When my English teacher reads something reflective before class starts, it makes me want to just keep believing.” One teacher said her colleagues who were Bible teachers “get at the core of what it means for students to learn the basics of Christianity, or for those who have already developed faith, to reflect and maybe sometimes even go back to the basics. Our Bible department has a big responsibility.”

Mrs. Weber was grateful for the freedom LMHS teachers had to live out their values. “We don’t have to be afraid to say a prayer versus reciting the Pledge of Allegiance before a soccer or lacrosse game. We are encouraged to do this and it’s so much fun that we have the freedom to infuse our faith.”



Influences on Faith. Maya identified another positive influence on her life – her friends. “I get encouragement from them, especially spiritual encouragement. We don’t all have the same beliefs but we are able to strengthen each other in our faith. When one of us is going through something that’s pretty tough, we are able to share it with each other and give encouragement from God. It’s not just, ‘Hey, you’re going to be okay,’ but it’s, ‘hey, you’re okay because God is watching and he loves you.’”

Mr. Ulloa appreciated that LMHS was a Mennonite school, “even though only about a third of our students would call themselves Mennonite.” Carol recognized the differences in religious backgrounds of both teachers and students, but personally believed the differences were insignificant. She indicated, “It’s always important to be faithful to your faith background if that’s an important piece of your life, and it is for us. But I wouldn’t say that it’s ever been a problem here in any way. And you know, are we a denomination or are we Christian? What’s first? It’s important to me that my children go to a Christian school that accommodates lots of different faith backgrounds because that’s the world.”

The spiritual lives of students are strengthened at LMHS, but so are teacher’s spiritual lives. One teacher said, “I’ve grown in my faith since I’ve been here because I’m surrounded by adults who are people of God. And I think seeing the way they interact with each other and the way they interact with students has been powerful for me.”

Connections to Learning

According to Mr. Kennel, LMHS seeks to offer “high academics and broad academics” with the goal of offering whatever it takes to help students reach their potential, whether they excel in academics or struggle and need support. Both Mr. Kennel and Andy said the school is surrounded by some very excellent schools, all of them top-notch. So in order to draw students to Lancaster Mennonite, the school needs to be as good as or better than schools in the surrounding districts; so far, they have been able to compete.

Teachers. “It all starts with high-achieving teachers who choose to be at Lancaster rather than somewhere else,” said Andy, recognizing the importance of teacher quality in an educational setting. Bernadette echoed this sentiment when she said, “The teachers here are really great.” Mrs. Moyer teaches a wide range of students -- from those who need academic support to those who are gifted. She appreciated being a part of a group of “strong faculty members” who broaden student’s lives and bring many skills into the classroom.



Mrs. Moyer reinforced an earlier comment when she said, “Speaking of why we teach here, the most obvious thing would be that teachers really want to be here, are proud of being here, and would do anything for our kids. There’s a real commitment to being here.” She then shared her perspective as an alumna of LMHS: “For some of us who came as students, it’s kind of a dream come true to be back as faculty. Overall, it’s a wonderful place to be. We feel called to be here; it’s our mission. And the most important thing is probably that we’re here because we love it.”

Part of the reason teachers loved their work at LMHS is because they felt supported by others in the community. One made this comment, but it was echoed by several: “We feel respected by our administration, our parents, and our students.” Regarding the work with colleagues, one teacher sensed a “unified group of educators deciding what’s best for students.” Teachers also sensed an openness to interact with the administration. The superintendent and principals had similar goals to the teachers, yet were open to hearing different perspectives. Said Mr. Ulloa, “It’s an incredibly powerful thing when you have the full community focused on the same things.”

Mrs. Moyer perceived one strength to be teacher involvement in writing curricula. For example, a couple years ago a committee in her department planned a world literature course. She said it was “a lot of fun” to look at other schools’ world literature curriculum, look at the syllabus for Eastern Mennonite University’s world literature program, and conduct internet searches for famous writers in order to come up with a reading list. “And now, this is my third year of teaching it, and I find a great deal of ownership in it because I was part of the group that planned it before it was approved by the school’s education committee, and eventually the school board.”

Maya praised the variety of teaching styles of her teachers. She appreciated her science class: “It’s taught in a way that I can really learn. They talk some, we’ll take some notes, and then there are experiments. One time we even made a video to explain what we were learning. So for people who like to be on camera, it was another way for them to learn.” Maya also commented that “teachers are really excited about their subjects, which helps tremendously. And they are not only willing for us to ask questions, but they say, ‘Please ask us questions. Please visit us. We are here to help you.’”

Adam and Devin described a variety of teaching styles they appreciated. One teacher uses a lecture-style for an AP class, leaving the responsibility of taking notes to the students in order to prepare them for college. Another teacher consistently takes a big chunk of information and narrows it down to a few words that might start with the same letter or another pattern to make it

easier to remember. An example of a teacher incorporating diversity into the classroom is when students may choose books from a wide variety of continents and countries of the world. Mrs. Moyer said, “When I have students from Africa, and they’re reading African books, that’s just so nice to have them as part of the discussion because they know the places. And I like that other students can be a part of the same discussion.”

High academics. Because potential LMHS students look for academic rigor, it makes a difference to have 13 different AP course offerings (with two more being processed) where students receive college and/or dual credit; 39 college credits are available to them. International students expect AP classes as well. Mr. Dietzel indicated that both English and math test scores are consistently very high.

The high expectations and multiplicity of course offerings also prepare students for college. Moving to the college level is seldom a big step because students have taken a number of rigorous classes already. Carol said her children who had graduated were now at very good colleges, and she confirmed they were well-prepared. Andy said his daughter was an academically high-achiever and was pleased at the higher-level courses available to her. He said, “I believe the academics here are very strong.”



Adam expressed his satisfaction with an AP U.S. History class. “It’s an amazing class. I personally love history, but that class was really challenging academically. However, the curriculum was so interesting and it was really, really well-taught.” He went on to say [my teacher] was “such an engaging teacher. All of her lectures were very interesting and interactive. She had us role play people we were studying, and then when it came time to take a test, I would remember the scenario being acted out and know the answers!” Adam added that every day there were faith questions that went along with the history lesson, “and I thought that was just so engaging and I loved it.”

Mr. Ulloa commented that some of the departments were in the early stages of weaving together thematic topics across several subject areas – integration. For example, he planned to focus on a topic in social studies that connected to what students were reading in their English classes.

Broad academics. LMHS offers students additional opportunities in a wide variety of available electives. Adam verbalized “I think we’re very well-rounded. There are so many options you can take. I think it’s nice, all the classes that are offered.” Those options include courses that enhance the core academic areas, such as business math for a math credit, or fisheries, wildlife, or food science for a science credit. Foreign language options include: Spanish, French, German, and Chinese. For Cici, Spanish class was “the coolest class ever” because her mother’s native language was Spanish. While Cici herself was born in the US, she lived in the Dominican for the early years of her life.

Mr. Ulloa believed the variety of course offerings were “impressive” and highlighted several possibilities in the area of career and technical courses: agriculture, woodworking, metalworking, welding, and small engines. There are also a wide variety of family and consumer science

courses, which aside from areas of student interest, teach many life skills: child development, family studies, housing and interior design, foods, fashion, and more.

While classes in the arts are frequently being cut in public schools for budget reasons, they continue to be a strength and a priority at LMHS. Mr. Kennel said, “That is a niche we already have. We continue to see them as invaluable to the holistic education that we provide. We promote music and drama programs. Athletics too. [In these areas] we are very competitive with our public schools. Students get the full package. We cannot pull back on anything – we need to do it all.” Andy, whose daughter loves the arts, identified numerous course and activity options she had taken: all kinds and levels of choirs, orchestra, main stage/theatre productions, lots of art classes, and poetry. These programs also offer numerous opportunities to enter local and regional contests which are great motivators and learning experiences for students.

Adam, for one, loved the music program. “I’m a musician, and it’s just phenomenal. Everybody in the music department is great. All the teachers here are really nice and I feel like I have a connection with all the teachers. [One teacher] was an amazing director. He was more of a mentor -- it wasn’t just about teaching music, but also about how I could grow as a person through music.” As an example of the impact a teacher-student relationship can have on a student, Adam described how this director had encouraged him and a fellow cellist to do “unique things with their music.” Now they take modern music and arrange it for two cellos. They have played their music in chapel and posted it on YouTube. Adam said many teachers have similar relationships with students, and went on to share a story about a different opportunity another teacher provided for him.

Learning support. According to Mr. Kennel, about 60 students at LMHS benefit from special learning support. Both Mrs. Moyer and Mr. Ulloa spoke about a student support team for students with academic challenges. A group of people consisting of a parent, guidance counselor, and the teachers of that student meet together to come up with an individualized plan which allows the student accommodations for learning disabilities. They are also assigned to one period a day for guided study in the learning center.

LMHS also provides reading and study skills, as well as peer tutors for those who could benefit. Cici appreciated receiving the academic support she needed. She believed that in her small group of five students they were able to go over everything she didn’t get in her math class. She commented, “When you need help, they’ll actually help you out.” Bernadette affirmed her belief that “teachers are strong with helping the kids out.” After a teacher told her son what his strengths were and also what he needed to work on, her son said to her, “Mom, I can do it!”

Carol told a success story to illustrate the way teachers at LMHS see students in a positive light. She has children who land at both ends of the struggling-to-gifted spectrum. When the one who had the most challenges was a freshman, he was “bright, but just disorganized and a procrastinator.” She was concerned he would never make it and uneasy about the rigorous class schedule they were creating for him because it looked like “a recipe for disaster.” One of the teachers said something to her she’s never forgotten: “You know what – some of them get it while they’re here, and some of them get it later. It’s just our job to love them while they’re here.” Carol said her son barely graduated from high school, but “those Lancaster Mennonite

teachers put up with his shenanigans of late work and careless schoolwork until he made it.” The happy ending is that he is now in an Honors program at a university and about to graduate. Because all of her children have benefitted, Carol praises Lancaster Mennonite for providing lots of choices for different aptitude levels.

To summarize LMHSs commitment to quality education, Mr. Ulloa said, “I think we have great faculty. I think we give a high-quality education. I think we offer challenging options. I think we try to stretch our students, and try to get them to think of not only content, but how it applies to their lives, and how we can grow as people.”

Final Words

An LMHS teacher told about an experience she had when she went to a soccer game and walked past the opposing team’s huddle at half-time. She heard the coach say something like, “Do you know why LMHS is winning? It’s because they are a selfless team -- you can’t even pick out their stars because they do so well at teamwork.”

According to Mr. Kennel, “one of the strengths LMHS has is longevity. Richard Thomas was once a teacher here, then assistant principal, then principal, and now superintendent. He has been here for more than 40 years. We have a long-term perspective and this is extremely beneficial and incredibly helpful.”



“My kids kept their faith through LMH,” said Bernadette. “And they’ve helped me keep mine. I thank God so much for my kids being that way, and they got that here [at LMHS].”

At the end of her interview, Bernadette expressed her feelings as a parent, “Our household isn’t perfect, but we do always look up to God. I just want to thank everyone at this school, especially the faculty, for helping my family as much as they have.”

This report was written by Ginny Birky, PhD, from George Fox University (Newberg, OR) as a sabbatical leave project and in partnership with Mennonite Education Agency/Mennonite Schools Council. Ginny grew up in the Mennonite tradition, graduated from Bethany Christian High School, Hesston College (AA), Goshen College (BS), Ohio State University, (MS), and Oregon State University (PhD). She was on the School Board of Western Mennonite High School for six years and on the Board of Overseers of Hesston College for 12 years. She is a former high school teacher and currently teaches doctoral students in the College of Education at George Fox University. Prior to this project, all of her research had been related to public high schools. The project was supported in part by the George Fox University Grant GFU2014G07.

