

PREP TALKS:

TALES OF CHALLENGES &
OPPORTUNITIES IN CHRISTIAN
EDUCATION

BERNARD BULL · JAMES PINGEL · MICHAEL UDEN

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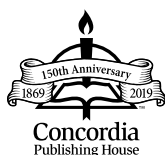
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DEDICATION

Dedicated to mission-minded risk-takers, dreamers, and difference-makers who persistently join in co-creating the future of Lutheran education.

—**Bernard Bull**

Dedicated to those inspired and called to minister according to the Way, God's truth, and Jesus' life.

—**James Pingel**

Dedicated to the preservice teachers with and from whom I have learned in the School of Education at Concordia University Wisconsin since 1998. By now, many are veteran educators themselves, but their love for learning, students, and our Savior inspires and encourages me still.

—**Michael Uden**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the many teachers who contributed to my own formation as an educator; for my family, for not only enduring but also embracing the seemingly constant twists and turns of my life and work; and for Dr. William Cario, who supported and encouraged my leadership, scholarship, and writing for almost thirty years.

—Bernard Bull

I want to thank my former colleagues and friends at Sheboygan Lutheran High School (Sheboygan, WI) and Mayer Lutheran High School (Mayer, MN)—individuals who faithfully served in the trenches with me and who shaped my Christian leadership walk for life. I think of them, and the real-life ministry experiences we endured, learned from, and celebrated, almost every day.

—James Pingel

I am blessed beyond measure by God's gift of my family: my wife, children, and grandchildren. You know me fully, encourage and inspire me daily, and love me still. I also gratefully acknowledge the children from foster care whose lives and stories I have studied, shaped, and shared. Your courage, vulnerability, and resiliency are gifts I hold close.

—Michael Uden

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INTRODUCTION

Fictional Stories with Real-World Implications

BY BERNARD BULL

“If these walls could talk.” Every Christian classroom is the set and stage for dozens, hundreds, even thousands of stories. These stories represent the countless moments, challenges, and joys of Christian education. They are stories about teachers and their journey to help students develop in mind, body, and spirit. They are stories of students and all that they bring with them to the classroom. They are stories of faith and doubt, victory and disappointment, judgment and forgiveness, change and constancy, wonder and boredom, community and isolation, tradition and innovation, conflict and resolution, pain and comfort, learning and unlearning, clarity and confusion, Law and Gospel. Within these stories are rich lessons about the past and present as well as sources of wisdom for the future.

Ask any student or teacher who has spent more than a few months in a classroom, and they will surely have many stories to tell. Yet, while the actual stories of the classroom are quite powerful and can often be shared, sometimes they are too close, too personal, and too private. They are better left untold, or at least revised to respect and protect the people involved. At the same time, they are too important to be left untold. They contain too much wisdom to be squandered. How do we share these stories?

This book is one possibility. In the following twenty chapters, some more in depth, others only a few short pages, you will find stories of the modern Christian classroom and school. None of them are true stories in the sense that they actually happened at a particular time or in a particular place. Yet each one of them is drawn from the realities of modern education. They reflect some of the pressing questions, increasingly

common challenges, and any number of important themes in Christian education today.

In some cases, a chapter is a compilation of many stories. In other instances, it is inspired by an actual event. Yet they are all ultimately stories, what you might consider fictional case studies, intended to serve as a way to help you reflect on the realities of the Christian school in a contemporary age. They invite you to consider the challenges, questions, and realities of actual teachers and students. Some read as incredibly realistic, so much so that many readers will relate with all or part of a story. “That story is my story,” some might feel. Others are more fantastical, even verging on hyperbole or what one might consider a Disney version of the real thing. The beginning and ending might be a bit too clean and too simple for you. No worries. After all, they are ultimately stories.

In fact, that is one of the benefits of using fictional case studies to reflect and further prepare for life in the modern Christian school. They are separated just enough from the real world to give you greater opportunity to critique them with abandon. You can take what is useful and leave what is not. You can challenge some of them as unrealistic while embracing others as inspiration to create similar, real-life versions of the story in your own classroom or school.

Fictional case studies might not recall real events, but they can offer real and important insights. They can invite us to imagine, to reflect, and to discuss, and that is one of the prime purposes of this book. While you are certainly free to read this book alone, we designed it to be consumed in community, as fuel for the fire of discussion among classroom teachers and administrators. Our hope is that this book will serve as the spark for countless hours of discussion and even more reflection. May it aid you as you grapple with what it means to be faithful to God’s call in Christian education, as well as consider some of the distinctive features of Christian education in this particular age.

These are far from an exhaustive or even a systematic collection of stories. In fact, we made no effort even to arrange the stories by a given theme, nor did we strive to cover a specific list of critical issues. This loose structure gives you an extra measure of freedom to read the chapters in whatever order you deem most useful. Skip to the chapters that capture your interest or are most relevant to your current situation. Return to others when they are most appropriate.

There are so many other important stories to be told, and we hope that this book might even inspire others to join in the story creation and storytelling. What these stories all represent are challenges and questions of this age. They are an invitation to pray, discuss, and consider the implications for your context, to read them and seek out wisdom from God's Word as you ponder their relevance for your important work.

Some topics are far more intense and emotionally laden than others. You will find fictional cases about loss, fear, and trauma. At the same time, you will find other stories that venture into what seem like the more mundane aspects of a modern school, such as awards banquets and grading systems. However, every story includes one or more moments of tension and conflict. They are intended to draw you and others into personal and group consideration about how we might respond, prepare for, or learn from them. They will invite you to think about the lives and backgrounds of students, the formation of one's personal philosophy of education, and what it means truly to live out the mission, vision, values, and goals of a distinctly Christian school.

As the owner of this book, you are free to use it as you wish, but I'm compelled to share what I hope will happen. What I imagine is a group of teachers, perhaps a small group of friends who all teach, or maybe a faculty gathering for weekly meetings. I picture them reading one of the shorter or longer case studies in advance and then gathering to use that case study as a launchpad into a rich and vibrant discussion. Some will be inspired by what they read. Others will be troubled or even annoyed.

The questions at the end of the chapter will offer a starting point, and people will begin to share their real-world stories and examples. They will discuss and maybe even debate some of the themes and ideas. They will turn to the Scriptures for wisdom amid this discussion. Some in the discussion will be inspired to explore further or even to consider changes to their classroom. Perhaps a small group will gather in a follow-up meeting to consider next steps. Yet before any of that happens, the entire group will come together in prayer, asking for God's wisdom and grace as they venture into their respective classrooms, participating in creating many more real and important stories of Christian education. It is with this hope that I am honored that you've elected to open this book, to read it, and to use it as a resource as you strive to grow as a Christian educator.

DREAMS AND MUSINGS OF A MODEL STUDENT AND AN ASPIRING TEACHER

BY BERNARD BULL

Candice couldn't wait to begin her calling as a teacher. With fond memories of her childhood schools and teachers, her own experience as a middle school student shaped her dreams and expectations of that future classroom where she would stand in front of the class, smiling but firm, and the students would sit attentively, anxious to learn. Of course, that is not exactly what happened in her childhood classrooms, but Candice was a model student, an excellent and obedient pupil throughout her years in elementary and high school. She loved the order and structure of school. She got it. She had high marks. She tested well. Her color-coded binders never lacked order. Even her penmanship rivaled the precision of what you might find in a typed and printed essay.

Candice received countless accolades and affirmations when she was a student, which only further served to solidify her love for the classroom and fuel her desire to become a teacher one day. While she would not necessarily explicitly state as much, Candice loved the way that many of her teachers commanded the classroom and seemed to have the respect and admiration of students, parents, and others in the community. She admiringly recounted the stack of cards and small thank-you gifts that filled the desks of some of her most beloved teachers during the Christmas season.

She was not unaware of some of the challenges associated with teaching. Salaries varied widely from one school to the next. There seemed to be a growing dissatisfaction with schools in the media. The

respect for teachers ebbed and flowed, especially outside of the school walls. In addition, she realized that external mandates and growing interests in high-stakes testing put some limits on teachers that could be problematic. Despite these and related challenges, as Candice diligently worked her way through a college teacher education program, she still wanted to be a teacher. She wanted to shape young minds, help students grow and develop, nurture their faith, and work right in the heart of a Christian education system that had served her so well, one that encouraged and affirmed her daily.

Every day, this young woman dreamed of that day when she would be a teacher and have her own classroom. She imagined how she would decorate the room. She thought of how she would plan that first day of class. Whenever she learned something new, Candice soon found herself pondering how to teach the content or concept to her future students in a fun and memorable way. Candice had a keen and unusual focus on becoming a teacher, so much so that she sought out countless volunteer teaching opportunities even as she finished her studies in both high school and college.

When Candice graduated from high school, she spent the summer working at a STEM camp and doing volunteer work for a couple other education-related events in her community. From there she moved across the country to one of the top-ranked Christian teacher education programs in the nation. She entered college with the same confidence that served her so well in high school, and it worked.

Then came the day for her very first teacher education class, a course that served as a foundation and introduction to the teaching profession. She got to class early, had her laptop fully charged and ready, and took her place in the second row of the class (she didn't want to come off as too enthusiastic). Professor Janice Edwards entered the room, turned to the class, and proceeded to ask a series of questions that would start Candice on a new journey in her preparation for teaching.

- What is the ultimate purpose of school?
- What is the difference between school and education?
- What are the absolutely essential elements of a great education—and don't let any non-essentials creep into your answers?
- Whom do schools serve the best? Whom do they fail to serve well? Why?
- What policies and practices in schools are getting in the way of helping the greatest number of people reach the highest levels of learning?
- What role should curiosity and a love of learning play in school?

It was a three-hour night class, and after each of these questions, the professor stayed silent until two or three students responded to each. Deeply curious about every response, Professor Edwards asked follow-up questions or invited others to build upon or challenge the previous comments. After three hours of this dialogue, Candice was exhausted from the depth of the conversation. She'd never experienced something like this before. She also found herself with an uncomfortable and uncommon experience: self-doubt.

Candice had dreamed of being a teacher since as far back as she could remember, and not once had she asked herself any of these questions. She never thought about the ultimate purpose of school, what was essential for great learning, how school hurts or helps learning, or even the role of curiosity and a love of learning in a school context. She loved learning, but she mostly did work in school to get a good grade, to open the next door of opportunity, and to receive the praise and encouragement that comes from a job well done. Even after others left the room, Candice sat there pondering. How she could have gone this far without asking such fundamental questions about an education

system that occupied over twenty-five thousand hours of her life up to that point?

She found herself experiencing what some might describe as a sort of existential crisis, at least with regard to her longtime aspiration to become a teacher. Becoming a teacher is not enough. In fact, the more Candice thought about it, the more she became convinced that she needed to stop thinking about becoming a teacher and instead start thinking about how she could become a champion for a rich, meaningful, deep, and impactful learning experience for as many people as possible. It was not about being a teacher. This single conversation led her to have a new mission that had less to do with her and some preconceived notion of what it means and looks like to be a professional educator. Candice's new mission focused on learners, not on teachers or even on becoming one.

She pondered this new perspective most of the night and woke up early for a jog around campus. As she was running, she saw her professor walking into one of the buildings. Candice was not an especially bold or outgoing person, but after mulling over this issue for almost twelve hours straight, all of it largely sparked by that professor the day before, she could have few inhibitions. She ran over to Professor Edwards, shouting her name even as she was still twenty or thirty yards away. She was a bit startled, but she turned in Candice's direction and waited for her to get closer. She recognized her from class and even remembered her name.

In a frenzy of semi-coherent statements, Candice proceeded to tell the professor her story. She explained how she wanted to be a teacher since childhood. She talked about the role of school in her life. She also explained the torment and confusion of the past twelve hours, wondering how she could be such a successful student in this system for so many years, aspire to be a teacher for over a decade, and never consider any of the questions posed by the professor the day before. Then she

simply asked her for help. “Now what do I do? Where do I go from here?”

The professor commended her for the struggle and said, “Those seem like very important questions to you. What will you do with them? Do you have any ideas on how you want to go about answering them?” Initially annoyed at not getting a direct answer and resolution to her dilemma, she realized that the professor had no intention of giving her an answer or solving this problem for her. She offered no answers, only questions that somehow helped her clarify her thinking and pursue answers to her own questions. At the same time, she felt heard and honored. It was as if Professor Edwards believed in Candice’s ability to find such answers, that she was genuinely interested in her learning journey, but that she saw it as entirely her own learning journey and responsibility.

This, too, was a brand new experience for Candice. Some past teachers had asked questions, but they usually seemed to have a set answer in mind. All she had to do was get to the right answer and then bask in the smile and admiration that she received when she got it right. Professor Edwards approached the conversation differently. She didn’t seem to have a definitive answer in mind. She was more curious about where Candice would take all of this.

As Candice talked with the professor, a plan started to emerge. “I think that I want to find out how other people answer the questions you posed in class yesterday. I want to find out how people’s answers to these questions impact how different schools work and how students go about learning. I want to discover the role of both teachers and students in different schools. Maybe I can interview leaders of schools, teachers, and students. I can observe them and see where things go from there.” She saw a familiar look on her professor’s face. It was a look of approval and encouragement, but something about it seemed different than what she experienced in the past, even though she couldn’t put it into words.

“That sounds like a fascinating project, Candice. Would you consider keeping me posted about what you find out? Maybe you could share your research with the class at some point.”

For the next four months, Candice interviewed over thirty people and visited eighteen different schools. She went to urban, suburban, and rural schools. She went to public, public charter, independent, and faith-based schools. She went to traditional community schools, magnet schools, and experiential schools. She went to a Montessori school, a Waldorf school, a Sudbury school, a STEM academy, a school of the arts, a project-based-learning school, a bilingual school, a classical school, and even a virtual school. She interviewed leaders, teachers, and students from these and many other schools as well. She gathered pages of notes, questions, and observations. In every interview and every school visit, she framed her research around those initial questions posed by her professor along with some of her own: questions about the purpose of school, essential attributes, features that enhance and detract from learning, and much more. Candice observed the way in which teachers and students saw their roles in these schools. She learned about the consistency (or lack thereof) between what people said they believed about school and learning and what they actually practiced.

Finally, only a week before the end of the semester, Candice sat in her dorm room scanning pages and pages of notes. She looked at these artifacts from the largest project of her life. She experienced incredible pride and contentment with her work over the semester, a satisfaction very different from getting an A on a big test or project. She didn't do this for a teacher or a class. This project grew out of a driving question in her mind, a deep curiosity and sense of disequilibrium. She still didn't have all the answers, but she did have a much greater sense of the possibilities. Candice understood the nuances behind answers to many of her questions. She also saw a personal set of convictions begin to emerge in her own mind about schooling and her philosophy of education.

Drawing from her notes and reflections, Candice began preparation for her big presentation in class. She didn't have to give the presentation. She wanted to do it. She looked forward to taking people on a tour of her journey and how it transformed her from being an aspiring teacher to becoming an aspiring champion of a rich and diverse education system. Perhaps she would still become a teacher. Perhaps not. Either way, she would never be the same.

Reflection and Discussion

While Candice's level of focus and effort might seem extreme to many readers, it helps us highlight important questions about our own beliefs and values about education. The following questions give you an opportunity to step into Candice's shoes and consider some of your own ideas about education.

1. Candice had what seemed like an idyllic experience as a student, which in turn influenced her beliefs and aspirations about teaching. How did your experiences as a student influence what you believe and think about education?
2. For Candice, this first education class was a key turning point for her. Can you identify key events or lessons that shaped you as a Christian educator?
3. Revisit the list of questions posed by the professor in Candice's first education class. How would you answer each of those questions?
4. If someone asked you to describe your philosophy of education, what would you tell him or her?
5. How does a Christian worldview or Scripture inform your philosophy of education?
6. How much does your philosophy of education align with what you actually do in the classroom?