



FELLOWS FEATURE

Answering God's Call in the Public Schools

by Ashley Storm

C.S. Lewis Institute Fellow

This article originally appeared in the Winter 2012 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

How had the Fellows Program changed me? As I completed Year 1 of the Fellows Program, I struggled to answer the question. I knew that the texts had challenged me, the lectures convicted me, and the people pushed me, but it was hard to put my finger on what had really changed.

During a phone interview for Year 2 of the program, I was finally ready to answer the question.

A New Perspective

A few months into Year 1, all Fellows participate in a day called Urban Plunge, an opportunity to work hands-on with an inner-city ministry. Through this, Fellows learn about urban poverty, have chances to serve and converse with those in need, and walk away with a keen awareness of the impoverished population. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I wasn't expecting to be surprised. The truth is, the poverty didn't surprise me, the statistics didn't overwhelm me, and the experience wasn't all that foreign. In spite of that, God used that day and the reading during that month to change my life entirely.

I cannot recall which text I was reading when God nudged me. But there I was, one weekday evening, reading for the program. As I sat in my room, God confronted me with this idea: if I continued to teach at my current high school, I would only ever make rich people richer. The thought was not mine, for I had been at this wealthy and high-achieving school for five years and hadn't considered that thought even once. In fact, I had spent nearly all of my short time as a working professional with one goal in mind—comfort. So,

as my reading was interrupted by the thought, I did what any normal person would do: I politely ignored it. I'm sad to say that the conviction had to cross my path more than once for me to pick it up and consider it. Yet, as I pursued that conviction, God was clear in not letting me back out of the new life to which he was calling me.



Ashley Storm

Initially I had no idea what obedience to that prompting would look like. Did it mean becoming a high-school teacher in the inner city? Did it mean stepping out of the great schedule I had received at my current school? Did it mean something in between? In the months to follow, I wavered between pursuing God's calling fully and passively wondering if I'd heard him incorrectly. In this, I was reminded of the words that John Calvin lived by: *prompte et sincere*. *Promptly and sincerely* echoed loudly: both my mind and heart needed a pep talk to pursue the life to which I was being called and to lay down the life from which I was being called away. *Promptly and sincerely* in this case meant full and immediate obedience, moving forward in fear and on faith, waiting for God to answer.

Through the spring I interviewed at several schools. I entered dilapidated buildings, walked through metal detectors, stepped over dead rats, and answered the question, "Why would you want to come here?" more times than I can remember. To be honest, I wasn't sure what I had to offer apart from a willing spirit and conscience confronted by Christ himself.

Facing the Prospects

At the end of it all, God brought me to a school that qualifies for Title 1 federal funding, meaning that more than 40 percent of the students come from at-risk homes, in which they are living at or below the poverty line. Many as well come from the undocumented population of society.

Facing the prospects of the difficult first week of school, I remembered one of the first assignments at the outset of the Fellows Program—writing a letter to ourselves. My letter had included a series of admonishments about putting both feet in and staying fully committed to what God wanted in and through the program. Taking my cues from that experience, I sat down and penned a letter to myself. Like God's people in Deuteronomy 6, I was in desperate need of reminders about the nature of the task to which God called me. It wouldn't be enough to live this year with a passive notion that God had once called and moved me; I needed a present reminder that God was still calling and still supplying.

So for several hours, on a rainy September night just before the first day of school, I sat in the same chair where I'd read for hours and hours during the prior year filling up my head and heart with godly wisdom; I penned myself a letter that would be the reminder of what it meant to fully obey Christ in this new location under these new circumstances.

The letter was really a pep talk. A note for the hard days. An exposition of the heart that drove the decision to leave the favorable for the ignored. A reminder of the gentle "follow me" I'd heard from Jesus during that November night when he had called me so specifically away from one life and into another. One week into this new place and I found myself repeating certain lines from the letter over and over again. It shouldn't have been all that surprising that the very thing God had initiated he had used, but I continued to be surprised and loved through these holy coincidences.

Here are a few excerpts of what God revealed as I sat with my computer on that rainy night:

You followed the prompting to leave what was comfortable, what was enviable, and the place where your reputation was housed to go and see what God was talking about. You trusted him and you left your old school knowing it wouldn't be easy, knowing that these days and months might bring you to tears, fully aware that you would be laying one life aside for another . . . Over the calendar year leading up to your new school, your word for the year

was "control." Everything about this decision gives the opportunity for God to have control or for you to keep it like you always have. Give all of this to God and be amazed by what he will do at that school. Jesus loved the poor, the unlovable, and the needy. Read his story and emulate his behavior. The vineyard is ripe and you are in it, so be good fruit. You won't make it through this year, this school, this situation if you don't let God do the work. You saw how the last year went, how you labored, how you felt, and how you had to go. Sometimes discomfort is a gift that lets us know that we can't stay in that place anymore. You probably are hesitant to agree, but that pain prompted you toward God and as your pain increased, God gave you a vision for what he was calling you to in this next year . . . Have you tasted him in the early mornings and long days at your school? You will feel tired. You will feel defeated. But you are not alone at that school. God goes before you. God goes with you. Have full confidence that for what he has called you, he has also prepared you . . . Your heart alone will not be able to take or understand all that will happen this year. You hope that it will be more than you can ask or imagine, but you fear that it will be more than you're willing to give, more than you're able to take, and harder than your heart can stand. Trials are how God loves you. Growth is evidence that you're both in it together. So how did you grow? What do you know now that you didn't know before? Did you give God the chance to be greater than you asked or imagined him to be? Your year is not your year. It belongs to Christ. Put yourself in positions to trust him and watch him prove himself both worthy and spectacular. Be excited, for he called you here and he is prepared to make himself known at your school. Keep your heart in this call, your hand in Christ's, and have an amazing year.

Challenges Aplenty

On the one hand, teenagers are the same everywhere; on the other hand, this new situation proved to be very, very different. My daily conversations turned from college hopes, prom dresses, and new cars to how to handle being homeless while being a student, how to go to college when one is an undocumented minor, and how to push through high school after having your first child and no money to care for him. Most people wouldn't consider this to be career advancement, but promotions along the career ladder of faith are rarely written on the world's terms. God brought me to this school with a purpose, and as the difficult days started, this was the reminder that had to be active within me.

The challenge in a school like this was not whether I could have passion and care toward those whom I was called to teach, but whether I could stand the intensity and difficulty of doing so. Every class period took everything I had. Whereas it had been easy to build rapport at my previous school, I spent weeks and months loving and trying to convey my genuine investment in students who tried so hard not to be known. The school itself had its weaknesses, a resistance to change in some areas, and sometimes a coldness resulting from years of difficult battles.

I recall that the first decoration I added to my room was a simple three-by-five index card on my desk that said: "Matthew 5:41-42. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you."

Just coming to this school felt like going the second mile to me. Sometimes just arriving seemed like enough obedience to satisfy Christ's commands. But slowly I came to realize that this journey was about the daily picking up of the cross we had referred to so many times during Year 1. In my head I knew that I was where God had called me to be, but, honestly, my heart had a hard time keeping pace. Most mornings I missed my old comfort, my old way, and, frankly, my old reputation.

A Year-End Perspective

As I write this, this school year has come to a close. I go back now and reread the letter I wrote to myself at the beginning of the year. To read those words raises the hair on my arms. Looking back, I sense a godly confidence that comes from knowing that God knew about all I would come across in this new adventure. He knew I would meet the boy who walked for days with his father and brother to come to America for a better life, the boy with the rare illness who will most likely die within a year, and the kid whose brother had been murdered who ended up in my class after being expelled from another school. There are hundreds of these stories within my school walls, and all of them could break a heart. This year was hard, but the hard and the good seem to be partners that dance together often.

I've come to realize that growth for me looks a lot like growth for my students. In a school like mine, our statistics don't necessarily reflect all the growth that has occurred from September to June. There are lessons that can be learned only in what seems to be the

dimmiest of places. But God is in those dim and misty crevices and reveals things to us as we follow him on the narrow path. The truth is, I was not sure I could do what he asked me to do by coming to this place, but the larger truth is that I was able because he equipped me for the very place he called me to.

© 2012 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE
8001 Braddock Road, Suite 301 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
Discipleship of Heart and Mind

*In the legacy of C.S. Lewis,
the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can
articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ
through personal and public life.*