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Sarah Kooeinga

Graduate Student, Grand Valley State University

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ESSAY

The Death of a Private School

SARAH KOOIENGA

“For in grief nothing ‘stays put.’ One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral? But if a spiral, am I going up or down it? How often—will it be for always?—how often will the vast emptiness astonish me like a complete novelty and make me say, ‘I never realized my loss till this moment?’ The same leg is cut off time after time. The first plunge of the knife into the flesh is felt again and again.”

— C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

In *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis contemplates his overwhelming sorrow and ponders challenging questions in the aftermath of the death of his beloved wife, Joy. Indeed, the death of a loved one is the comparison that I heard most often in the wake of the permanent closing of the Christian school where I had attended as a student for 13 years and served as a middle/high school teacher for another 7 years. Only a very small portion of my life contains memories not intertwined with that place or that community of people. But now, that place is inaccessible to me, and those people are scattered.

Glory Christian School (GCS) originated as a Baptist elementary and middle school, expanded to include grades K-12, acquired students who were from denominations other than Baptist, determined that classical education was the best model of instruction and attempted to implement its theory and practices, and ultimately relabeled itself Christian for its final five years. Facility-wise, GCS basically consisted of two wings—elementary and middle/high school—connected by an antique gym. At the far end of the high school wing, was perhaps the school’s most prized physical aspect, the high school gym; and ringing the outside of the building were lush, green baseball, softball, and soccer fields. But, the reality of Glory Christian School was not the transitions, name changes, or physical features; GCS was not merely a place of learning for the duration of my childhood and adolescence,

nor was it simply my place of employment where I punched a clock and sped home upon finishing my shift. Instead, GCS was my home, and the people there were my family. The school’s demise did, in fact, feel as if a terminal illness had finally run its course and we were all left standing at its graveside, watching as a part of our own lives was interred forever.

Humble Beginnings

More than 30 years ago, in the middle of a spreading field in an oft-overlooked suburb of a moderately sized Midwestern city, a determined group of families gathered in prayer to dedicate a plot of land that would become Glory Christian School. Since I missed the genesis of the school by just a few years, I do not remember that event or the initial struggles those first families faced as they, their children, and the school’s four teachers embarked on an academic, emotional, and spiritual mission to provide an alternative to public education in their community. My earliest memories of GCS now seem like they come from a different era entirely: all-school potlucks in a long, white pole barn on the fairgrounds; bus rides with so many fellow students that we were crammed three to a seat; epic and contentious ten-minute recess soccer matches with breaks to gawk at snakes and blue birds’ eggs discovered in the amber fields that would become the future locations for the expanded high school wing and state-of-the-art gymnasium; flag duty on the rounded hill between the fragrant flowering trees; Thanksgiving Feasts and Fun Nights; and dads’ basketball league on Saturdays, which gave us children the run of the school for a blissful few hours’ exploration.

Academics and the arts filled my childhood memories as well, to be sure. Stories were written; plays were performed; and the silliest records with songs for the multiplication tables were played over and over and over, cementing our mastery of numerical relationships. There were trips to Lansing and the Capitol Building and informational excursions

to countless parks, zoos, and museums. In the fifth grade, I was “fitted” to play the flute and given the measureless gift of music as my classmates and I embarked on the adventure of concert band. Then there was the year that we believed the gym teacher was a real giant since he had to duck to enter our classroom door and the time when we launched our self-made rockets into “space” on the soccer field. The memories are, all-in-all, nearly idyllic.

As a middle school and high school student, my time at Glory could have been occupied with all of the following: sports, band, choir, student council, Powder Puff football, tailgaters, Iron Man volleyball, pep band, all-nighters, and movies projected on the outside gym wall while the GCS family huddled on blankets and in cars and laughed and laughed together. In weekly chapels we students joined with our teachers in worship, prayer, and spiritual instruction—privileged to hear the words of both local pastors and professional speakers and athletes.

Amazing journeys commenced and finished at the double doors to the high school—mission trips to the Dominican Republic and New York changed the lives of students and chaperones alike; departures and arrivals of the senior trips to Colorado amused observers with the anticipation and then realization of what two 24-hour bus trips in one week can do to a person’s psyche. At Homecomings, alumni could return to their academic roots, one large family reunion, while graduation could be likened to a grand family celebration, with the entire school gathered outside together to send the newest alumni off in the year’s surprise mode of graduate transportation (sometimes classic cars; cattle trailers; trolleys; or, in my case, a whole motorcade of motorcycles), waving to them as if they were all our own children.

When I returned to GCS as a teacher, I gained a new perspective on these school events and traditions that had so completely filled my childhood and adolescent memories. While I fell in love all over again with the Glory students and sense of Christian community, GCS was not really the towering place I had seen it as when I was younger. There were fewer students when I returned as a teacher, and my fellow faculty members were no longer concerned with shielding me from the truth of the school’s struggles with enrollment and debt, as well as the conflicts regarding teaching assignments, curriculum choices, and personality clashes. As a teacher at Glory, I felt an uneasiness I had not felt during my rose-tinted student days.

Tragic Ending

In July of 2014, I received an email that I could at last pick up my contract for the upcoming school year. Finally. It was rather late for contracts, and I was a bit annoyed. More than a bit. I was decently angry. Looking back on that time, it seems strange that I would feel this way since it was not completely out of the ordinary for GCS to extend contracts at the end of August, or the beginning of September. One particular school year, I even taught for an entire month before I received my contract! This year of 2014 did feel different somehow, though. That particular week was quite busy for me, and I planned on heading over to the school towards the end of the week to deal with the paperwork. That Thursday night, I received the phone call. “Are you at home?” the head of my program queried. I answered in the affirmative, thinking that I must have unknowingly done something wrong and was now suddenly about to be fired. “It looks like GCS is going to have to close.”

It is still, more than a year later, infinitely difficult to precisely describe the thoughts and feelings I had at that moment or immediately thereafter. I am not exactly sure how I responded—though, my words were most likely those of shock and horror. Grief arrived later.

Now, it is like processing the death of a loved one. I wake up on some days and expect to do the normal school morning routine as if nothing had ever gone wrong—unconsciously struggle with the alarm clock, pack all the day’s materials, navigate the traffic, open up the dark classroom, greet the sleepy faces, share a Bible passage and time of prayer with my students, and launch into the splendid tale of Antony and Cleopatra or a deep discussion of the significance of Scout’s view from Boo’s porch at the close of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Instead, I lapse into moments of stunned inactivity; there are still boxes and boxes of lesson plans, assignments, and visual aids—prep work that literally deprived me of nights of sleep—crowding my bedroom floor. What should I do with all of it? My own academic records are stored somewhere in another school since mine no longer exists; my teacher evaluations are filed away in some lawyer’s office, if they were even completed at all. Now, I—and the rest of the Glory Christian School community—live in the era of “why.” How did this happen? What went wrong? In retrospect, there were warnings that all was not right. There were things we should have noticed. There were things we should have done. There were maybe more things we should *not* have done.

I have no desire to use this venue to trample on the memories of Glory Christian School or the character and reputations of my fellow laborers in it. If anything, it is my hope that this article will offer a helping hand for others in similar places, in similar fights to maintain an educational institution that is other, that is unique. Through extensive assessment of my experience in belonging to and serving in a Christian private school, I have concluded that there are several characteristics that are most necessary for the success of a private school. In the specific case of Glory Christian School, the following flaws existed in these critical aspects: lack of effective leadership, poor student acquisition and retention, irresponsibility with finances and stewardship, illogical faculty appointments and neglect of morale, and defective school community/teamwork. Unfortunately, many of the issues that GCS struggled with are also occurring in other private schools across America.

Lack of Effective Leadership

During my seven-year tenure at Glory, there were no less than five superintendents/principals who held the highest position of leadership within the school—all men with varying amounts of educational experiences and knowledge, but not all consistently schooled in how to lead a classical Christian institution like GCS. They took different titles (Superintendent, Principal, Head of Schools, etc.) depending on how they wanted their position to be viewed—and according to enrollment numbers, of course. At times, we had elementary and high school principals as well as a superintendent. Other times, there was only a high school principal who managed all the school's functions. Each leader had his own ideal of how Glory should operate, and many times these ideals were not to be questioned. With each new leader came new requirements for lesson plans, grade recording, classroom procedure, and faculty conduct—including dress code, which addressed critical issues such as female faculty not wearing backless shoes, and reading assignments on topics that ranged from classical education to bullying and from what to do in the first days before a new school year to how we could run our school like Disney World runs its company.

At the best of times, Glory's superintendent was someone whom I, as a novice teacher, could approach for advice on classroom management or procedure, someone who was entirely dedicated to the well-being of all aspects of the school and the edifying of its members. At the worst of times

(twice in my first three years of teaching), our leaders found themselves embroiled in shady dealings—both academic and otherwise—which led to resignations and the ensuing panic to find replacements.

The problems with GCS's leadership were not limited to one man. On the contrary, the school board (until the later years, practically the same group of men who served terms on a rotating basis) was not without both ignorance and ineffectuality. While remaining resistant to change, the board also made rash decisions without requesting input from or providing information to faculty and parents. As a case in point, after the shocking announcement of the school's closure, the board waited five entire days to hold an all-school informational meeting, during which no one could provide a satisfactory answer for why, after 30 years of the same struggles with lack of students and money, the board had chosen that particular year—let alone, that specific day—to call it quits.

In the aftermath of the school's closing, the failings of GCS's leadership still puzzle me. Why was it so difficult—nigh impossible!—to employ a strong yet compassionate leader who was both rigorous and flexible in his—or her—overseeing of school functions? Why was the rotation of superintendents and principals so frequent? Why could the school board not maintain order while enabling growth in a transparent and efficient way? I have tried to find satisfactory answers to these and other questions through my own research on the reasons for the closing of private schools. Kennedy (2014), for example, states that “educators are not necessarily good at running a business,” and I believe that this idea is true when applied to GCS's leaders.

Many of the men who ran Glory still wanted to be in the classroom. They loved the students, and they loved academics. Disciplinary issues, fundraising, and administrative planning were not parts of their agendas. In addition, we asked too much of our leaders. The full burden of fundraising should not fall solely on the superintendent. It seems to me that it would be wiser to assemble a group of individuals—perhaps a combined assemblage of administration, faculty, staff, parents, and students—to both brainstorm and head up fundraising efforts.

Likewise, it was a challenge to find men—or women—to volunteer their time to serve on the school board—thus, the same men were elected over and over again. They were, no doubt, fatigued by the endless struggles with monetary and enrollment issues—two huge “red flags” to prospective superintendents, who, when hired, could not seem to stay the

course for more than a few years, undoubtedly wearied by the same struggles as the board faced day in and day out. In addition, it appeared that the board placed excessive trust in the superintendent's ability to individually oversee all of the functions of the school, standing idly by while our leader let experienced teachers go for no apparent reason and hired unpracticed teachers, to the detriment of the GCS students' learning.

Poor Student Acquisition and Retention

One of the most frequently asked questions during GCS's later years and especially after the closure announcement was "Where did all the students go?" Having experienced the joys of the GCS family as a student and the benefits of a Christian education, I wondered as well why we could neither attract new students nor retain the current ones. In researching enrollment trends and retention struggles of similar schools in recent years, some definite clues come to light.

GCS was hardly alone in its struggle to find and keep students. Jon Marcus (2015) in his article "The Demise of Private Schools" declares that Catholic schools too are "hemorrhaging students" because of "falling birthrates and demographic shifts, rising tuition, the growth of charter schools, and other challenges." In her ongoing study of the decline in private school enrollment, Ewert (2013) concurs with Marcus in that, while parents have specific reasons for choosing private over public education for their children—"the availability of academic programs and extracurricular activities, religious reasons, dissatisfaction with the local public schools, and school characteristics such as class size and student-teacher ratios"—there are some definite causes for the lack of students entering and remaining in private schools (p. 2).

Ewert, like Marcus, notes the rising cost of private school tuition as well as the dramatic increase in the number of charter schools (publically funded schools that are exempt from some of the regulations that public schools must follow). Ewert (2013) also comments on the increasing trend of homeschooling. She writes:

If both homeschool and private school families seek alternatives to public schools, then as homeschooling grows as a sector, it might draw from the population that had previously sent children to private schools...If the economic downturn led to more families with non-working adults, families that previously sent children to private schools might now

fall into the group most likely to homeschool their children. (p. 5)

In its final years as an institution, GCS attempted to address this growth in homeschooling in a unique way. Rather than stand by while parents withdrew their children from the private school to instruct them in the home, GCS attempted to incorporate homeschooling into its existing traditional program by holding homeschool classes within the GCS building and employing GCS teachers in a type of partnership with homeschooling parents. In this GCS homeschool program, students attended school at GCS two full days each week and were provided with daily assignments, to be completed at home under their parents' supervision, for the remainder of the week.

GCS homeschool students had full access to the facilities and activities of full-time students (sports, arts, social events), but they were also free to pursue additional classes and opportunities through other homeschooling programs, churches, and even colleges. Not without its glitches, the GCS homeschool program was to commence only its fifth year when the school closed; nevertheless, the program had grown to be quite successful; and many in the GCS leadership believed that this program alone allowed GCS to extend its lifespan a few more years. That being said, the homeschool program at GCS should have attracted more families who wanted to avoid or exit the secular public school system, and even the development and advancement of this homeschool program could not ultimately save Glory Christian School.

Irresponsibility with Finances and Stewardship

In addition to lack of students, the most obvious reason for the closure of any private school is, undoubtedly, finances. If the money does not exist, the school cannot exist either. Ewert (2013) cites the national recession that began in December of 2007 as a major contributor to the rising cost of tuition and also, therefore, to the decline in student populations in private schools (p. 4). This recession led to numerous financial struggles for American families, including facing the rising cost of housing (Finn, 2013). If parents are required to spend more of their incomes on necessities such as housing and food, how can we expect them to continue to pay for the "luxury" of sending their children to private schools? One option that would assist in the affordability of private schools for underprivileged students is school vouchers. However, since the State of Michigan does not permit

school vouchers at this time, it is unclear how much—if at all—vouchers would have contributed to the continuation of the mission of Glory Christian School.

In the specific case of GCS, countless financial missteps were taken—and more likely than not, these errors were committed multiple times. Through the years, GCS tried various methods of determining and offering financial aid to its students. The problem was not in proffering assistance to families who dreamed of their children acquiring Christian educations but who lacked the funds to accomplish this goal on their own. Instead, the difficulty arose when GCS searched for an efficient way to compensate for the loss of those poorer parents' tuition. It was foolish to believe that the tuition and donations of a few wealthier parents could offset the amount of money lost through the giving of financial aid to so many. It was also unwise to hand over that type of power and influence to the well-off minority.

Particularly disastrous was the time in GCS's history when a group of three families gave their solemn pledges to finance the extension of the high school wing and the addition of a dazzling new gym. Blinded by their desire to see the school building expanded and updated, the principal and board accepted the families' offer. It later became evident that this generous gift came with a hefty price tag; in the name of the entire GCS community, those same three families—six individuals amongst hundreds—demanded the resignation of the principal and the entire school board. When a handful of board members stood up to the bullying and refused to give up their seats, the families took their money and walked away from GCS, leaving the school with the afterglow of a brand new hallway, atrium, and gym—as well as their massive debt. This acquired debt haunted GCS until its very last days.

In addition to the debt, the money that GCS did receive from generous donors was not always managed in the most advantageous ways. GCS, however, is not completely to blame for this error in stewardship of monetary resources. Instead, donors would often specify what they wanted their monies used for; and oftentimes these directives did nothing to rescue the school from its financial morass. For instance, one donor would send money for new boys' soccer uniforms; and another donor would insist that his funds be spent on repainting the gym walls. I hardly wish to seem ungrateful as every donation was certainly valued, but it became frustrating to see GCS floundering under its debt and loss of students while fine uniforms with only one season's wear were packed away in the attic year after year.

One demographic to whom GCS should have turned to for help—no, one group with whom contact should never have been broken—is the school's alumni. As a GCS alum who was teaching at the school, I was privy to most if not all upcoming events and activities that GCS held and with which I could become involved. However, as far as alumni communication from GCS was concerned, over the span of a typical year, I only received a letter (and later just an email) regarding returning to the school for the Homecoming alumni pizza party (at which I could expect to see approximately 6 out of 35 of my former classmates) and perhaps an update or two on the state of the school—probably with a slipped-in request for money.

While no alum wants to be constantly pestered for donations to one's old school, I feel that most alumni would value an open avenue of communication with their alma mater. Why could we not have invited the alumni to participate in other activities at GCS, such as tailgaters, chapels, and graduation, to foster a wider GCS community? We should have constantly been reinforcing the connection between alumni and current students, developing a network and possibly even a mentoring system. So very few Glory students were children of alumni in the last years of GCS—an utterly lost opportunity to carry on the GCS tradition.

Illogical Faculty Appointments and Neglect of Morale

This tradition of Christian education combined with my cherished student experiences at Glory Christian School led me to seek employment at GCS. My initial interview for a teaching position consisted mainly of my former high school principal (still principal, but then head of the entire school) asking me how I had been the past few years, what I had studied in college, and which of the still available classes I would like to teach at Glory. I had never taught a day in my life. I had never studied teaching, and my fear of public speaking had basically eliminated teaching from what I felt were my possible life callings. Nevertheless, I was practically offered a proverbial platter of classes from which to pick and choose for my employment. I was later required to hold a "practice" class of 30 minutes' duration—just to check that I was competent enough to stand before a classroom—and meet with a board member for approval. On the first day of school, over 70 students sat through various English and history lessons in my classroom. I was 23 years old, and my undergraduate degree was in archaeology.

The point of the above narrative is to relate several facts regarding the appointing of teachers in private schools. First, let me say that people's undergraduate degrees are not—and should not be seen as—limitations to what they can accomplish in life, nor should they be boundaries to employment in other fields. In my case, my academic loyalties had always been split between history and English. That I had chosen to pursue archaeology and history as my undergrad degree did not limit my knowledge of English grammar or my passion for literature. To this day I remain more grateful than I can express to that principal who gave me a chance without having the ideal credentials. Perhaps what he guessed is what I now know—that I have a passion for teaching, and, through countless hours of study, mentorship, and practice, have come to excel in that field.

On the other hand, there are dangers in hiring teachers for positions for which they are not qualified. Glory's salaries were not stupendous, and many times only very young and inexperienced or ineffective teachers took employment there.

What most united all of us—our faith—should also have driven us to pursue solutions for the betterment of the school we all loved and valued and whose mission of coming alongside parents we proclaimed. But, we erred.

It was difficult to attract top-tier teachers to a small classical Christian school in the suburbs for what GCS was willing to pay those teachers. However, during my years both as a student and as a teacher, it was my privilege to work with many superb teachers who regarded their positions at GCS as their callings and to whom the pitiful wages were not deterrents to following God's plan for their lives.

Ultimately, though, many of my co-workers (as well as myself from time to time) simply became burned out. The demands of teaching are undoubtedly rigorous in any school; but it seems that in private schools, additional time and dedication are required of educators. We GCS teachers were responsible for cleaning our own classrooms (ideally, on a daily basis and if one could locate one of the school's few working vacuums), and there was always research to be done and curriculum to write and, in my opinion, an inordinate amount of meetings to attend—especially since most of the faculty were technically considered part-time and any after-school meetings were “off the clock.” Although my part-time work load

often required an average of 60 hours per week of prepping, grading, and classroom time—not to mention the extracurricular activities that I attended in an effort to support the students in their out-of-class endeavors—my paycheck for the last four years of my employment at GCS was for only approximately 10-13 hours of work a week.

Perhaps this exhausting schedule and measly compensation is normal in all private schools, but what I do not think was normal was the poor morale and lack of unity within GCS's faculty. The expected Christian school atmosphere of love and support was not always manifested by all of us. There were rivalries for the attention and favor of the administration; fellow teachers attempted to manipulate what curriculum choices were made for classes not even in their own realm of academic knowledge. Favoritism, discord, jealousy, and outright contention abounded. The high school teachers thought they were superior; the elementary teachers were their own exclusive clique; the homeschool teachers were kept ignorant about everything of importance. These

complaints and accusations were rampant and, I believe, not without cause.

There are dangers when teachers are hired to perform duties or to teach subjects for which they are not completely qualified. One of these dangers is that, while a teacher may apply himself to study and increase his competency in the subject area in which he is teaching, he might still feel insecure about his knowledge and experience. Another more qualified educator might be able to take over the doubtful teacher's classes. At GCS, for example, there was always the possibility, that a teacher would be hired to teach English for five class hours and be given another teacher's history class for a sixth hour, in order for the shiny new teacher to be considered full-time. The current teacher, hence, loses a class hour—and a valuable chunk of her paycheck. Or, a teacher would arrive at Glory with a helpful skill like coaching basketball. This teacher would then be given a tasty smorgasbord of others' classes—or a newly created and funded position of chaplain, for instance—all so that he could remain at GCS

and use his non-academic gifts. This shuffling and stealing of classes caused a multitude of GCS teacher casualties and left bitterness and anxiety in its wake. Jobs were never secure. One could prep the most, provide the best instruction, assess in the most thorough way, have the most loyal parental support—and still find oneself “classless,” outside of the superintendent’s favor. This atmosphere of fear and mistrust provided the foundation for the spirit of disunity through which the GCS faculty struggled.

Defective School Community

Regardless of our faculty struggles with unity, what I loved most about Glory was that it felt like family. There was a definite togetherness, a distinct community. We teachers often remarked wonderingly how GCS kids seemed different. It is difficult to determine and describe just exactly what set them apart, but they were utterly unique—they were, in general, more eloquent and honest, more willing to serve and to speak up for causes—all in a way that was both simple and grounded—like the roots of the school and its community—yet profound. The entire Glory family loved to be together, and it was during GCS family events that the sense of teamwork, an idea of oneness, could most easily be perceived. Even with all the negative issues of weak leadership, declining enrollment, poor money management, and faculty conflict, the community aspect of this private Christian school might have been the one feature in which GCS was most successful.

Looking back, it is not easy to pinpoint how, through all the negatives, the school achieved this “familial feeling.” But, it is the most referenced regret by those of us who were there in the last days, our mutual separation from our home and our (oftentimes dysfunctional) family life. In my mind, when I think of what makes me mourn the most for the lost Glory Christian School, the memories arise of the entire school gathering on the soccer field after a horrific regional loss—only two games away from playing for a state championship—and praying over tearful teenage soccer players—who joined in leading the prayers even in their pain. On the heels of those deeply moving remembrances are the ones in which the state trophy glistens in our arms but no one looks at it because hundreds of heads are bowed in thanksgiving for the great stage on which God allowed our students to display their athletic gifts and Christian convictions. I see parents with joyful countenances laying their hands on their graduates as they kneel in the high school gym to pray

for God’s direction for their futures. I remember dozens of alumni surprising their favorite band director by performing “Be Thou My Vision” at the spring concert, days before he left GCS to follow his new pastoral calling. I can still remember where I wrote my name on the foundation of the new gym’s floor—one name with hundreds more of those of my school family members.

These images are not indicative of defects in community or teamwork in my mind. Instead, the failure of the community was to not rally and correct the obvious problems of leadership, student enrollment, financial deficiency, and teacher unity. What most united all of us—our faith—should also have driven us to pursue solutions for the betterment of the school we all loved and valued and whose mission of coming alongside parents we proclaimed. But, we erred. We were neglectful of vital components of private schools—such as teacher morale—and overly obsessed with petty details—such as dress code.

Assessment of these facts now is painful, but necessary for healing. While Glory Christian School is dead, deceased, most likely never to rise again, its struggles were those that many other private schools across America are now facing themselves. While there does not seem to be any one “quick fix” for struggling private schools, my research and reflections suggest probable causes for the precarious position of such schools. And, while it will undoubtedly not be possible to rescue every private school from demise, it is my hope that the story of Glory Christian School will serve to save others in the private school family from similar bereavement.

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Sarah Kooienga received her undergraduate degree in Greco-Roman archaeology from Wheaton College (IL) and is currently pursuing her MA in English at Grand Valley State University. She is the graduate assistant for this issue of the LAJM.