

FAITH LIFE IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

PHOTOS BY SINI FERNANDEZ



Nathan Pettit teaches Christian Studies and is Dean of Student Life in the Middle School and orchestrates Middle School Chapel. Modus Vivendi recently spoke with Nathan about the Middle School Chapel experience. During our conversation, it became clear how students' faith, academic, and social/emotional lives are supported both in the classroom and during Chapel on Tuesday mornings.

MV: HOW DO YOU APPROACH MIDDLE SCHOOL CHAPEL WITH INTENTIONALITY?

NP: We prayerfully and collaboratively design a Middle School Chapel curriculum aimed to capture the students' imaginations with the beauty of Christ and his Kingdom. We also provide ebbs and flows in conjunction with what we find healthy for students, for example, we incorporate local pastors and people who are passionate about Middle School students in our speaking rotation; we highlight and celebrate important dates on the church calendar: Reformation Day, Advent, Lent, and Easter, for instance.

MV: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE THEMES ADDRESSED IN MIDDLE SCHOOL CHAPEL?

NP: Our curriculum largely follows a two-year rotation, relating the biblical story but then how students are a part of that story. Through Chapel, we hope to help the students find themselves in the biblical story of God's rescuing, restoring love in Christ. Middle School students want to know the reasons behind the admonishments they are given; they hear so often that we hope they become people of wisdom, compassion, and courage. Chapel helps them answer the question: Why should you become a person of wisdom, compassion, and courage?



Because as humans, we are commissioned to bear God's image in and for this world. We will bear His image and steward His world well as we become people of wisdom, compassion, and courage.

One theologian/philosopher I often read has said, "You can't first answer the question, 'Who am I?' until you've first answered the question, 'Of which story am I part?'" As God's story shapes our own, a rich soil is laid in which wisdom, compassion, and courage may grow and thrive. We're more moved by stories than we are convinced by arguments.

MV: HOW DOES CHAPEL REINFORCE WHAT IS TAUGHT IN THE CLASSROOM?

NP: In their Christian studies classes, students walk through the entire story of Scripture. Chapel then provides a platform to zoom in on key parts of the story that the students are already familiar with and

explore it from different angles and emphases.

MV: WHAT SORT OF OPPORTUNITIES DO STUDENTS HAVE TO SHARE THEIR TALENTS AT CHAPEL?

NP: We have a Chapel band, which practices each Friday as part of our Servant Leadership Clubs. Students with musical ability and a desire to serve participate by leading our student body in worship each week we have Chapel.

Another aspect of this bleeds into our Advisory program, which is connected with Chapel. Advisory is a place where students are regularly applying what we've learned in Chapel through discussion, activities, and service projects—each student is asked to bring his or her skills and passions into that realm as we continue to work out what we've heard and experienced in Chapel.

MV: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WAYS MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS ARE ENCOURAGED AND SUPPORTED TO SERVE IN THE SCHOOL AND BROADER COMMUNITY?

NP: Service occurs as a regular theme in a couple different ways. As we explore the part we play in God's story, we find that we were made to steward and serve this world well. One way we recently unpacked that was by designing, packaging, and delivering Fall Treat Bags to the Hopelink Redmond location.

Additionally, service as it pertains to student life at Bear Creek is a weekly emphasis and it primarily plays out when our Servant Leadership Clubs meet each week. Students choose areas to serve in the school or broader community. Some options include visiting a retirement home, cleaning up trash at local parks, and assisting downstairs in the Lower School.

MV: HOW DO YOU SEE STUDENTS' FAITH LIFE INTERSECT WITH REAL SCENARIOS THEY ENCOUNTER IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS?

NP: Such a huge part of the Middle School years is the question of identity. Students regularly question how they fit in, how their interests and gifts match up with others, and so forth. We hope one of the ways their faith grows in their Middle School years at Bear Creek is by rooting their identity in Christ.

This fundamental area shapes the way students relate to one another, seeking to treat one another with dignity and respect. We hope it fuels a great work ethic academically, without making everything about their grades.

MV: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SHIFTS YOU ARE SEEING AS TO THE CULTURAL CLIMATE FOR STUDENTS IN THIS AGE GROUP?

NP: I see students trust and seek out their teachers more than ever. I sincerely believe that our students feel known and cared for in our hallways—they understand that their teachers care about their

academic endeavors, yes, but also so much more about their holistic formation, who they are becoming. When students trust and respect their teachers, the classroom becomes a vibrant learning environment as well as a place of social, spiritual, and emotional growth.

The way students socialize and relate is changing more and more with the rise of technology and the use of social media. Students collaborate for school via text and FaceTime. They organize study sessions on online forums. They Instagram, Tweet, Twitch, and Snap each day. With so many distractions and stimuli, we covet our hallways and classrooms as a phone-free place and provide numerous ways for students to participate in face-to-face interaction, discussion, and activity. We find that immensely valuable for their health and development.

MV: HOW DO YOU TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION THE SOCIALIZATION AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS?

NP: As students step into their Middle School years, in conjunction with the classical model, we certainly see a readiness to question, discuss, and dispute with their elders. Through their Lower School and Early Middle School years at Bear Creek these students have worked hard to memorize, recite, and regurgitate poems, songs, stories, and Scripture, and now they are eager to apply it. As a result, our Chapel speakers regularly seek to interact with the students as they present—I hope this models our faith well, that we are not merely passive spectators, but active participants in worship, prayer, and teaching.

This same approach is utilized in our Middle School classrooms—our teachers regularly employ Socratic discussion, interactive lectures, and project presentations as a means of drawing out the dialectic nature of our students at this stage of learning.

MV: HOW DO STUDENTS SEE WISDOM, COMPASSION, AND COURAGE MODELED FOR THEM, AND HOW DO YOU SEE THAT LIVED OUT THROUGH OUR STUDENTS?

NP: Chiefly, I hope that through Chapel, Advisory, and their classes, students see Jesus upheld as the ultimate model of wisdom, compassion, and courage; I hope their imaginations are captured with a vision of God's love in Christ for them and that this reality would permeate all else.

I also pray that our students see wisdom, compassion, and courage modeled for them by their teachers and many of their peers. As teachers, we work hard to prepare students by considering scenarios, events, and activities in advance, pre-teaching how we should engage certain situations. So much of teaching also involves coaching—encouraging students who demonstrate moments of wisdom, compassion, and courage, while also redirecting and reimagining situations that could have been handled differently. It's all day, every day—becoming a person of wisdom, compassion, and courage isn't limited to one class or student life

program—we are becoming the person we will be each day in class, in the hallway, in the lunch room, and so on.

MV: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE THINGS YOU HOPE STUDENTS TAKE AWAY FROM CHAPEL?

NP: I hope the students leave with an imagination enlivened with a vision of the restorative love of Christ so that their affections and actions move them to participate in the life of God's Kingdom.

In particular, I hope that in grateful recognition of Christ's work for them, our students would be quick to act with compassion in their communities. That kind of affection and action are not things that happen overnight, but are formed by the often slow and daily process of practicing their way to becoming compassionate people that seek to cultivate truth, goodness, and beauty in this world.



Drew Armstrong, Upper School humanities teacher, speaks as a special guest at Middle School Chapel.

MV: WHAT ELSE WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE ABOUT CHAPEL AND IN GENERAL, CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW INTEGRATION?

NP: I've highlighted the role of the imagination throughout—doing so may sound elementary, but I find it absolutely crucial to people of all ages. It is not enough to merely equip our intellects to think rightly about the world; we need to recruit our imaginations. This idea is well reflected in a saying attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the author of *The Little Prince*: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."

Our teachers are the heart and soul of all our student life programs, including Chapel. Each week our teachers stand alongside our students in

worship, sit with them as we hear teaching, and are quick to jump in to any activity. In Advisory and Servant Leadership Clubs, they make every effort to ensure our students are cared for, supported, and encouraged spiritually, emotionally, and academically.

With regard to Christian worldview, I hope that after their Middle School years our students move beyond merely reflecting a certain perspective to find that they are being formed and shaped more and more to become the individual God intends. Each one comes to us in a different place in his or her faith and each brings unique gifts to offer others. The centrality and primacy of our formation is rooted, not in what we know, but in what we love; both in Chapel and in our classes, I hope we approach Christian education as a project of formation, rather than focusing on the dissemination of information.



Middle School Christian studies teacher Kyle Dresback and the Middle School worship band lead Chapel in praise.