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Creating the New Home-Centered Curriculum

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Esplin: Thank you for meeting with me to discuss your role in creating the new home-based, Church-supported curriculum. Please introduce yourselves, including how long you've been with the Sunday School curriculum or what your particular role is in the department.

Brian Hansbrow: I'm Brian Hansbrow. I'm in the Curriculum Division of the Priesthood and Family Department. I've been up here for thirteen and a half years but mostly involved with curriculum. I've focused solely on curriculum for about the last seven or eight years. I was with Seminaries and Institutes until 2005.

Esplin: And do you write curriculum for more than just Sunday School?

Hansbrow: It's general Church curriculum. It's all Sunday curriculum, and now home-centered curriculum.

Murphy: I'm Paul Murphy. I was with Seminaries and Institutes for about fourteen years before I came here. I have been here for two years. Previously I was working on Seminaries and Institutes curriculum for about six years.

Barnes: I'm Ted Barnes, and my background is in editing. I started out at the Church as an editor in 2002 and did all kinds of projects—some of them

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curriculum related—and then about 2011 or 2012 I joined the curriculum team, and I’ve been here ever since.

Esplin: *And the fourth person on your team who is not here is Mike Barber.*

Hansbrow: Yes, he came in from Florida about 2010 or so. He taught at a local college there. Educational psychology is his background. He is a great writer, so we brought him on board. When I came here in 2005, the youth curriculum was already underway. We started with the idea that we needed to update and modernize youth curriculum. It was going really heavy from 2005 to about 2007 or 2008, and then it sputtered. It kind of slowed down a bit. And then about 2010 or 2011, it started picking back up as a discussion by the leaders of the Church and auxiliary presidents, who were involved, of course. Then they started to settle on some ideas, and that’s when they came back to the curriculum team here and said, “We want to start developing some test materials that have this kind of approach.” Dave Marsh was working closely with Seminaries and Institutes at the time on nine fundamental doctrinal principles and we added three to get to a twelve-month curriculum, because we had one topic per month. Anyway, Ted and I came at that project, and so did Mike Barber, and we had other team members back then with the youth *Come, Follow Me* curriculum, and that was basically 2011. Toward the end, we were testing material, and then in 2012 we were developing for launch in 2013. So it was just kind of a rapid push to get that out.

Esplin: *How has it gone from there to now Come, Follow Me for Sunday School, Come, Follow Me for Primary, and Come, Follow Me for Individuals and Families? How have we gone from the youth curriculum to an integrated curriculum for the whole membership of the Church?*

Hansbrow: That happened immediately. The month that we launched youth curriculum, January of 2013, we went right back into our executive council, and they said, “When are we doing this for the adults?” So 2013 was a year where we really started talking, “What should this be?” We had created this nice wonderful curriculum for the youth, and there was an approach to teaching and learning there that was a little different. The model was a little different. It wasn’t just about participation, but that became one of the ways people evaluated whether or not they were following the model. Our director at the time, one of the brethren that was leading our little team, focused on a little phrase in the Church handbook.

Barnes: That phrase from the handbook was quoted in general conference about being “home centered and church supported.” That phrase came

from the handbook. So we wrestled for a long time, wondering, “What does that mean, and how should that guide the curriculum?” Our leaders would say, “You’re never going to get this curriculum right until you focus on the home.” We weren’t even thinking about the home at that time. We were just thinking about Sunday School and adults—in fact, the adult Sunday School and the Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society.

Hansbrow: Sunday School was hardly even involved at the time.

Barnes: The big concern was Relief Society and priesthood, but I think Elder Christoffel Golden said, “You’ll never get the curriculum right until you figure out the home.” He had a vision for how curriculum needed to be more than just a classroom experience, that learning and teaching is much broader than that, and if we limited ourselves to just what happened at church, we’d miss out on most learning opportunities.

Hansbrow: The research supported that. We looked at some of what the research the church had available. Some of the studies came from BYU, and some if it came from the Research Information Division of the Church. We looked into that research. What we learned there was that lasting, deepening conversion—you know, this idea that if people are going to have their own experience—if you were to ask, “Where did that conversion happen for you in your life?” Sunday School was way down on that list. But what was really high on that list was people’s personal devotion. Their personal scripture experiences, their personal prayers, their family prayers actually were great indicators. Somebody would have a family experience of studying the scriptures that led into individual study of the scriptures. So we kind of really latched onto that idea, saying, “If we could really influence how people use the scriptures on their own and with their families, that is the goal.” A few hours at church each week can’t compare to the 168 hours that people have each week.

Murphy: Reading the scriptures at home can’t be to prepare for a lesson. The overall goal can’t be to have a better class, because that better class isn’t necessarily what’s going to make the overall goal of individual conversion.

Hansbrow: The goal wasn’t just to have a great class. They don’t read just to have a great class. The goal was to be in the scriptures and receive revelation and have their own experiences.

Murphy: So the goal of the great class was the other way around.

Esplin: *So you essentially flipped the model. Instead of focusing on what was going to happen in Sunday School and priesthood and Relief Society, you focused*

on what would happen in the home. In other words, how can priesthood and Relief Society—and Sunday School and eventually Primary—facilitate a great home experience?

Barnes: I think Elder Cook mentioned this a bit in his conference talk. The previous curriculum model essentially said, “The goal is conversion.” We knew we had to have the Spirit for that, but then we focused on great classes. The previous curriculum was all about the class. We focused on whatever we could do to have a great class, and in order to have a great class, well, we had to have a great teacher. So the whole idea was we had to be fantastic as teachers, and we all had to create a great experience, and then this would lead to the Spirit.

But what the research said was, “No, it’s personal and family scripture study—scripture experiences!” So what great teachers do is they encourage those experiences to happen. They say, “Tell me about the experiences you had when you read that scripture on your own.” Or they say, “Tell us how you were in Matthew chapter 5 this last week. Where do you feel that the Lord really spoke to you?” You get people to start having a different kind of experience with the scriptures and start thinking about how the scriptures are speaking to them—how the Spirit is working on them. Then our classes become a different experience too. As a teacher, I’m not just there to say, “This is what we’re supposed to get out of Matthew 5. This is what you need to understand.”

Murphy: Now, that last approach needs to be there too. The role of a teacher is to make sure the doctrine is clarified and reinforced, that they testify of those things. But it’s also asking, “Scott, what experience did your family have this week? Or what experience did *you* have this week? And now let’s talk all about that.”

Esplin: *Once that happens a few times in a class, people will be wanting to have experiences at home because they know that the teacher’s going to lead a discussion about what happened that week.*

Murphy: And the research bore that out. We were afraid that this experience would cause people who hadn’t read at home to withdraw or feel guilty. But we actually found that it inspired people—that it made them want to have their own experiences—you know, if you hear your neighbor share . . .

Hansbrow: “Sister So and So’s having that kind of experience? I should do that. I don’t want to miss out on that.” That’s the real experience!

Murphy: And then the hope is the individual and family resource will help people have those experiences. People who haven’t had great experiences with the scriptures in the past—this could help them.

Esplin: *That need a guide, something that can help them.*

Hansbrow: And help them find the relevance of it, help them find meaning for themselves. So a lot of people would tell us, “You know, I used to read the scriptures. Now I feel like I’m studying the scriptures.” We heard these comments from people, even lifelong members, who you would think, “Oh, you already know how to do this.” And they’d say, “This taught me how to do something that I was not experiencing before in the scriptures. It taught me how to ask the questions in a different way and look for things in the scriptures in a different way.” We really felt, “We’re on to something there with that home focus.”

Murphy: I think it’s important that all of this was done and tested independent of any conversation of a Sunday schedule change. We didn’t know until a few months ago that that change was going to be happening, and we needed to start making some adjustments, but not very many. I think that speaks to the Lord understanding and revealing line upon line what needed to be in place at the right time for that change to take place.

At first there were things we were worried about. Would this grab hold? Would teachers grab hold of this? Would families grab hold of this in the way that we hoped they would? When that announcement was made and that prophetic direction given, a lot of those concerns went away because it was couched in probably what was the most important purpose, and that was protecting our homes and fortifying our homes and making our families stronger. It wasn’t necessarily a Church program anymore. It was a spiritual lifeline for a lot of people.

Esplin: *You all have an inside perspective on the curriculum as it was rolled out and prepared. Knowing its story, how have you seen it play out in your individual wards and families? Knowing what you know about the curriculum, you went to church for the first time since the announcements. What was the discussion in your wards? Was it what you were hoping for? Maybe what fears and concerns do we as Church members need to avoid? What things do we need to change as church members to adopt what you were hoping would happen?*

Barnes: Well, I think you couldn’t have asked for a better implementation plan than President Nelson’s and Elder Cook’s and from several of the Brethren. The messages that I hoped people would hear about the new

curriculum were exactly what the Brethren said. We were thinking, “How are we going to message this? How are we going to help people understand the real vision?”

Hansbrow: That was six months ago, and then all of a sudden we were finding out how it works.

Barnes: There’s a scripture that comes to my mind a lot lately, and that’s when the prophet Samuel is looking for a new king and the Lord says to him that a man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. Sometimes you worry that a new curriculum or a Sunday schedule will be looked on its outward appearance while missing the heart. But I think if you listen to President Nelson and Elder Cook and even Elder Bednar and the others, they really express the heart of both the Sunday schedule change and the curriculum coming together. People are going to notice things about shorter church and this nice big manual we get to bring home and all the nice pictures and so on, but that’s the outward appearance. The heart is what you heard from President Nelson and Elder Cook in conference.

***Esplin:** Wonderful! What are your greatest hopes? In conclusion, if you could give any message to teachers, to families, to individuals about this curriculum. What do you hope happens, and what do you hope we can do to implement it?*

Murphy: I’ll speak to the teachers for just a minute. I think it’s been our feeling that teachers can really do some marvelous things in supporting the home. One of the things that they can do is to let go of the feeling that they have to cover all the material in the classroom at church now. Now it’s not an opportunity for them to say, “Here’s all the things that I studied,” and feel this obligation.

Hansbrow: And now twice as much with the schedule.

Murphy: Yes, you have two weeks now of material, and many Gospel Doctrine teachers feel this way—that they have to be the one that knows more than anyone else in the room. Those days are gone, and now we get to say, “I am one person in this room that’s had an experience in these scriptures. There are many others in this room, and what can I do to tap into their experience and bring that to bear in the classroom?” I think that in and of itself will transform and motivate people at home—because when they come to church knowing that what they’ve experienced at home will be drawn upon and that they’ll be able to share that, they’re going to be motivated to share those experiences and to have those experiences week after week after week in their homes.

Hansbrow: If I could just tack a little more onto that. Years ago our managing director had been trying to figure out what the relationship between Church and home is, and we actually looked at this view out this window. Someone made this comment—this has been impressive to me ever since that moment and that’s why I’m sharing it. The idea is, “As a teacher, if I’m trying to describe to you what’s out that window, I could spend a long time talking about trees and streets and buildings and this and that, but until you stand at the window yourself I, as a teacher, would never have done it satisfactory justice, right? In sixty seconds of you having your own experience of looking out that window, you would see far more than I could explain in sixty minutes, and you’d see it at a greater depth, and it would be more meaningful to you, and things would stand out to you that are different than the things that would stand out to me. And I think that’s what we are trying to do—we are trying to elevate learning. We want the learners to know that they can have a rich experience. Now, you don’t have to be a scriptorian in the traditional sense to teach or to learn.

I’d want learners to know that they can trust that the Lord can speak to them through his word, and they can have a meaningful experience. They may not understand everything, but they can find something that will speak to them, that will touch them. This is Isaiah chapter 20, verse 8: “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.” I think he’s essentially saying, “Look at all this stuff around us that is going to fade away, but there’s truth that’s going to stand.” They can pull that out. They can find that. They can find things that are meaningful to them that will touch them, and if they just go to the scriptures each day and say, “Heavenly Father, what would you have me learn today?” Just one thing—they can have their own experience. A child can do this. Our children have done this. It’s interesting. Talk about a different Sunday School experience! You’re going to have a different family experience! If you go to your children and say, “OK, guys, in our scripture study, go read this on your own, and when we come together I want you to share something that stood out to you.” When your children start sharing the things that stood out to them, you’ll sit there and say, “Wow, Heavenly Father is speaking to them!” It’s an amazing thing. I just hope that everyone has those kinds of experiences, and then that will improve the church experience.

Esplin: *Thank you. I know you weren't planning on talking to me, but President Callister said I should really come talk to you because you helped put this curriculum together.*

Hansbrow: You know, we went to the Primary General Presidency and said, "We can't create something that's centered in the home and supported at church with our current model of curriculum because in my home I've got six children and they're all on different things." So how do we unify the home around one topic? So it was working with the Primary Presidency to say, "Can we create a curriculum that brings in every family member?" Because, as you know, the children all had different topics, every age-group. We asked, "How do you feel about that? What would that look like?" So it was working toward a model for children from ages three to eleven that would work. Then with the Sunday School ages twelve all the way up.

Esplin: *And that's what I'm excited about. I think you chose to keep it focused on scripture. Correct me if I'm wrong, but and as I look at this new curriculum, if I understand it correctly, we will all be studying blocks of scripture that will be integrated. We will all be in the New Testament in these particular chapters in Matthew or these particular chapters in Luke.*

Hansbrow: That alignment was another key moment where we said, "OK, if we could align, then we could have home centered, Church supported, but if we can't align, it makes it very, very difficult."

Esplin: *So am I understanding that correctly—that at the Sunday School youth level—there will be a scripture-based model?*

Hansbrow: And the Primary level too.

Barnes: And that was a big question we had: "Can we teach a four-year-old scripture stories and have it be meaningful?" And we can. And they'll still get topical approaches.

Murphy: It really is a wonderful change. The big thing is, we've been in the scriptures before. I taught young men and young women Sunday School before. That was a very prescriptive script that you would teach in the Sunday School class, and this isn't that. Yes, we're back in scriptures, but we're back in scriptures in a different way.

Barnes: It's definitely not scripted. It's like *Come, Follow Me*.

Esplin: *So it's applying the Come, Follow Me principles we learned, but with the scriptures as the curriculum.*

Murphy: There's still an effort to invite them to go and find doctrines and principles and truths that are relevant to them, but it's not a teacher giving them *their* experience or running them through *their* plan.

Barnes: We're not saying, "Let's start in verse 14 and work our way through verse 28."

Esplin: *Each of us read one verse, and let's work around the room.*

Hansbrow: You may have some of that occasionally, but it's not the model. I don't know if you've looked at the materials, but a block will be broken down into four or five doctrinal principles that you can teach in that block. The class members will have two weeks, and the teacher will say, "OK, they've had two weeks at home since we talked last. They've read the First Vision. They've read the visits of the angel Moroni in Doctrine and Covenants section 2. Now, what's the most important thing in there?" They might ask, "What inspired you the most?" What are they going to talk about? Of course, class members are going to talk about the First Vision in there! Someone might talk about the persecution that Joseph Smith faced and how they felt that kind of persecution in their life or the wrestle to find truth or temple work and the experiences they're having as they're learning about the promises of the Lord. The discussion might start a little differently. Someone might say, "You know, what really touched me was when the angel Moroni told Joseph Smith his name would be had for good or evil." You say might say, "OK, let's talk about that for a minute. . . . Now, who else has something?" We can celebrate what happened in our own lives this week as we studied a block and see what conclusions we came to.

Murphy: One of the ways we flipped the model was we used to talk about it, then invite people to go home and read it. Now, we invite them to read the material, and come together to talk about it.

Barnes: The feeling is that we are not as concerned about coverage as we are about the revelatory experience that can happen in our lives.

Esplin: *That may necessitate a wonderful change in all of us. Thank you, both for your time today and for your service on behalf of the Church. I am excited to start this. RE*