

Prairie Bible College sharpens its edge

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If the word of God is the sword of the Christian, Prairie Bible College is officially sharpening its edge. Getting back to “Bible basics” is the renewed focus of the Alberta college famed for its equipping of missionaries. This fall sees the launch of a compelling new program called Encounter at the college, located half way between Calgary and Red Deer.

The new one-year program represents a return to Prairie’s roots and a crystal-clear focus on the future. “We want Prairie to be synonymous with Bible teaching,” says Peter Mal, Director of Enrollment Management. “Prairie had a broad based liberal arts education, and now we’re focusing on the Bible.”

College President Mark Maxwell says, “We felt we had strayed from our core purpose and when we surveyed our own Bible content, we found it lacking.”

Encounter features the best faculty the college has, and covers everything from the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) to Psalms and Proverbs, to the Gospels and Acts to the Pauline Epistles. It includes theology and a course on Christian living that features devotions and service intended to bring home the message of God’s love and reconciliation. In other words: the Bible is it.

“The program is intended to be a greenhouse experience,” says Maxwell, the grandson of Prairie founder L.E. Maxwell. “It’s one year of Bible drenching.”

According to a document handwritten by L.E. Maxwell in 1923, rooting students in the Bible is what Prairie is all about. “Knowing Christ and making Him known,” he wrote. Two generations later, his grandson sees “nothing lacking” in the motto. “It’s an anchor point for everything we do... a cry of solidarity with the global church,” says Mark Maxwell.

Hence, the move away from a broad-based liberal arts education that the college offered through its now defunct grad school for about 10 years, until 2003. At the time, several Bible colleges across Canada sought degree-granting status, and Prairie had gotten on the bandwagon. Enrollment declined. “We were losing our core reason for being,” says Maxwell. “I believe those were distractions.”

Setting out to chart new territory earlier this year and redefine its purpose, Prairie consulted faculty, students and associated

clergy. The answer was clear. “The response was universal,” says Maxwell. “You need more Bible and you need better Bible.”

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By going back to basics, Maxwell is closely following in his grandfather’s footsteps, despite what some have seen as a long detour in his own life. He assumed the presidency of the college just five months ago in February. Over the last 25 years, he has worked in finance, always directing a portion of the profits to missionaries. In the last 10 years he has built (and sold) businesses focused on money management.

Despite concerns voiced by his grandmother years ago when he left to study business, Maxwell never lost touch with Prairie. After

earning his MBA from Baylor in Texas, he often served on the board of directors of the college. At the same time, he and his wife traveled to a number of countries and experienced the dynamics of the underground churches around the world.

After seeing so much, Maxwell takes the helm of the college with a passion to see students grounded in the word of God and prepared, spiritually and intellectually, for what lies ahead of them.

According to Peter Mal, Canada’s Christian youth also have a more immediate need. “The young people I’ve been talking to are fed up with glossy Christianity,” he says. “There are elements of the Bible we’ve missed.” Today’s youth want something more than “lights and smoke,” he says.

Mal, who meets a lot of young people considering their future, says, “We see hunger in this generation... We believe our one-year program is for every young person. At 17, 18, you might not have much

direction. But you can have this grounding and then go wherever you want, or stay at Prairie and continue.”

Maxwell agrees. A one-year foundational program gives students an anchor point—well worth the time investment. “We believe it will make a difference in their lives,” he says.

As president, he would like to see the program take off and be used by other institutions. “We’re happy to support liberal arts schools,” he said, “[but] we are focused on Bible basics.”

If numbers count, the return-to-basics approach is already a success for the inter-denominational school founded on the vision of knowing Christ, and making him known. The college has seen its fall enrollment climb by between 15 and 20 per cent. With more than 15,000 alumni serving in 114 countries worldwide, Prairie knows the meaning of success. It was keen to get back on track and focus on the Bible. Its founder would be proud.

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