Al Lopus: Today we’re going to discuss how a Bible college has transformed its faculty and staff culture to flourishing and why that matters. It’s our pleasure today to talk to Dr. Peter Teague, president of the Lancaster Bible College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Lancaster Bible College exists to educate Christian students to think and live in a biblical worldview and to proclaim Christ by serving him in the church and society.

Peter is one of the most influential leaders among Bible colleges and has played a key role in Lancaster Bible College’s growth. He has also played a broader role in the leadership of the Association for Biblical Higher Education on their board and mentoring other Bible college presidents. Lancaster Bible College has completed the Best Christian Workplaces survey four times over the last nine years. In the past year, they have been certified as a Best Christian Workplace at the “Flourishing” level.

Thanks for joining us today, Peter. Let’s start off with a little background information about Lancaster Bible College.

Peter Teague: Thank you, Al. It’s a great privilege to talk with you today. I admire you so and the work you do on behalf of so many of our organizations, and this is a real privilege to spend some time with you. Lancaster Bible College is one of 126 accredited Bible colleges through the Association for Biblical Higher Education in the United States.

Lancaster Bible College has grown over the years to be the second largest accredited Bible college. We currently have 2,000 full-time students. We were started in 1933 in the city of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with seven students. Today we are in seven locations and six states, so the Lord has really expanded our footprint. We currently have 350 full-time and part-time faculty and staff. We’re just very grateful for the way the lives of our students are being transformed by the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ as we teach them the Word of God.

Al: That’s been fantastic, and it’s been a joy to see your growth over the last several years since we first connected. How did you get connected and become affiliated with LBC?
Peter: Well, Al, I’m a pastor’s kid. My dad pastored for 64 years, so I have had a very good, stable upbringing in a Christian home. I went to a Christian liberal arts college, and there I met and married my wife. We’ve been in ministry for 41 years now. Really I’ve only had two jobs in my entire career. I started out as the superintendent of the Christian School of York in York, Pennsylvania, a post I held for 23 years.

York is 30 miles away from Lancaster Bible College, and nine of those 23 years, I served on the board of trustees at Lancaster Bible College. After 23 years, I was looking for less responsibility. Our school had grown there in York. We had 720 students, 450 families. So it was one of the larger Christian schools on the East Coast.

At the invitation of the president of Lancaster Bible College, I became the academic dean, a post I held for just a couple of months when I realized there was a devious plot, and it involved me. The search committee for the next president asked if I would go through the interview process, which I declined. They came back a few months later and said, “Would you just go through the process?” which I did.

It was a confirmation that God was calling me to the presidency. I’m the fifth president, starting my sixteenth year, and I really enjoy what I do. I really stay connected with the students. The average stay for a college president is four years, and I’m in my sixteenth year. Every day I get energized being with our students and faculty and staff and board. I’m a very blessed man to have only two ministry assignments in 41 years.

Al: Oh, that’s remarkable! That’s an interesting devious plot you described to get you at LBC. When you became the president after that process, what problems were you trying to solve?

Peter: Well, Lancaster Bible College came to the Bible college movement rather late. There was Nyack Missionary School and Moody Bible Institute before us. We were a very fledgling institution for many years, really for many decades. Oftentimes our trustees would come together and ask whether or not we could continue another six months.

When I became president, my predecessor, Dr. Gil Peterson, had laid a very solid foundation financially. What I did discover, though, was we were known more for what we were against rather than what we were for. We would be considered a separatist school. Our doctrinal purity got in the way of relationships and transforming lives to the glory of God. I have been able to tackle that and have broader networks and perhaps more inclusive of people who maybe aren’t dotting every “i” and crossing every “t” the way we would.

Then secondly, I found internally there were just a lot of silos. Departments were not communicating with one another. There was a wall between the faculty and the staff. I have tried to do my part in just being a real person, a transparent person, an honest person, realizing it takes all of us to manage and lead a college, and we’re all important because we all have different spheres of influence in the lives of our students.

Al: That’s interesting. So you had these silos. You had these different groups. You know, it’s very typical in Christian higher education. One of the things I know you began to work on was your culture.
One of the unique terms you used to help define your culture is “DNA.” In your context, what does DNA stand for?

**Peter:** Well, thank you, Al, for asking. We each year have all of our faculty and staff together for some in-service training. It’s really a marvelous day. We mix it up, but we always unpack our DNA, which is not only our mission but our vision, our core values. We do use the term DNA to define our culture.

The *D* stands for devotion. Each faculty and staff person is devoted to God, and therefore we work as unto the Lord. Colossians 3:23 reminds us that whatever we do…brush our teeth, teach a class, eat a meal…we do to the glory of God. We like to promote the culture that says if you work at LBC, there’s a level of devotion unlike other places of employment. We are devoted to becoming more like Christ. Some days we take a step forward. Some days we take a step backward. But we’re always striving to be more Christlike in our relationships and how we serve our students and one another.

We’re also devoted to benefiting others and advancing their work. Our job, I like to say, is far more of a calling than a career. I believe it’s that calling that sustains us. Let’s face it. We’re involved in challenging work every day. It’s demanding, and that call of God upon our lives is something we go back to and we gain our strength from.

The *N* stands for need. I like to say we need each other. There’s an interdependence. I’m not the most important person on the campus when the boiler goes out in January in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. It’s my physical plant team that knows how to replace a boiler. Because we need one another, we have to always be about working in a collaborative spirit, communicating with one another, considering the big picture when we’re making decisions and working on projects.

I like to say we need to connect the dots. For us, that means to try to keep everyone in the loop who needs to know. We’re interdependent upon each other, we need one another, so we have to be keeping each other informed.

I think timing is important too, and we really strive to be courteous and respectful by letting people know early in the process some of our initiatives, some of our changes, budgetary issues, personnel issues. When we do not plan ahead the way we should, it affects the timing of good communication. This is something we’ve really worked on at Lancaster Bible College since we have been involved with you, Al.

Then of course the *A* stands for anything. It’s that little fine print at the bottom of the position profile we give to our team members. Anything we need to do to get the job done. Whatever we’re asked or required to do to serve our students or to advance our LBC mission is really a part of our job description.

I believe customer service is everything. For us, it’s our students. We have really worked to put the needs of our students in advance of our own agendas, and we check our personal agendas at the door so we can be taking care of our students. We are really striving to have our colleagues live and breathe our DNA every day, make them passionate about what they do for our students.
Al: You know, it’s remarkable to me that that focus on the student has really caused you to remove the barriers or the differences between faculty and staff as you try to create a really positive student experience. I know you’ve worked on this as a team, so how have you worked as a team to bring together faculty and staff to improve the student experience?

Peter: Well, I think it starts at the top. I think the leadership of a college or a church or an organization has to have a very approachable and accessible spirit. I personally have an open door policy, and that’s a statement in itself because 87 percent of my day is scheduled for me by my assistant. I, like most others listening today, have a very demanding schedule, but I always try to have an open door policy.

Our colleagues know if they have a question or a problem, they’re able to go directly to any member of our presidential leadership team. That includes me. They don’t have to fear they’re going to be ratted on or there’s going to be some kind of reprisal. It’s just a good way to keep our finger on the pulse of the organization.

Another benefit to this strategy is the ability to hear a lot of good ideas from our people. Al, I’ve been in this education business for 41 years, and I maintain that the good ideas come from the bottom up most times in an organization. I so admire my team members. They are working on the front lines, on the battle lines, in the classrooms, in the cafeteria, in the dorms. They come with some great ideas, and all we have to do is be open and listen to them and implement them.

A couple of years ago, every one of our employees received from my office a red envelope. They know they can write a note, place it in that red envelope, and it will go to me alone. Anything they want to say to me! It doesn’t even have to come electronically, because conceivably even our IT staff could read it. It’s one of their direct lines to the president. It can be sent anonymously. They may disclose their identity if they would like. Either way, it merits presidential attention. It shows they matter to me.

Beside the traditional phone calls or emails, we also have a link on our employee portal for our colleagues to come directly to me electronically. They can submit a question or a concern or a suggestion. Then I’m very committed to getting back to people. I think the fine art of getting back to people has been lost today in our culture, and I think every phone call, email, and note deserves a follow-up, and I’m very, very demanding on my presidential leadership team and myself.

We open our home, of course. My wife, Paula, and I live in the college manse. We host a welcome reception for all of our new employees and their spouses or their families. We do this two or three times throughout the course of a school year to spread the attendance out. This just makes a marvelous gathering in a home, just to let our hair down, show them we love them and we care, and we’re investing in their lives and in their future.

Something we also do, Al, is I hold a monthly birthday celebration with all of our new hires. Our colleagues who are celebrating their birthdays that month are invited to join me, and we have cake and ice cream. I have a mixer and just a little bit of fun. They also have the opportunity to look me in the eye and tell me anything they’d like or ask me anything they’d like at those monthly birthday parties. They have proven to be really successful. Those are a few of the ideas we try to implement.
Al: Yeah! Wow! That’s great! You know, one of the themes that is coming out clearly is **communication**. Communication is always a challenge on a college campus. What are some of the examples of the ways you’ve tackled this communication challenge?

Peter: Well, Al, it’s interesting you would ask that because I have been at this a long time, and I have had to learn the fine art of communication. It takes awhile. My mistake is once I said it once, I thought everybody heard it, understood it, and would rally around it. Now you say it and say it and repeat it.

Probably what I am known for the most around the campus of Lancaster Bible College is communicating the mission. I’m so thankful that all of our employees are united behind the mission of Lancaster Bible College, probably stronger than they’ve ever been in our 81-year history. I think in order to be effective in communication, we have to be very, very transparent. Sometimes we have a lot of wrappings around ourselves. We don’t want people to get in to see our heart, our mind, our routines, our habits.

We have a fear that once they see us they’re not going to like us. I think we have worked at trying to be more open and to share and rejoice in the successes of other people. Oftentimes our egos get us in trouble. Ego-driven ministry leaders are very dangerous today. There are too many of us who let our egos dictate, but we have to park our egos at the door to celebrate the successes of other people. We have so many team members, like most organizations do today, who are really hitting it out of the park. They are really doing a marvelous job, and we have to celebrate them often.

I think an important ingredient in communication is prayer. We have a very open atmosphere here at Lancaster Bible College. We have regular faculty and staff prayer meetings. We have a prayer chain. I personally keep a prayer journal, as many of my staff do. I think it’s important that people know we care enough to pray. I think that’s a good communication technique.

Here at Lancaster Bible College, we use email and other forms of technology that are convenient and timely to communicate with our people. That’s all important, but I’ve discovered that nothing beats personal interaction. In some way, our computers keep us prisoner in our office, and I have had to discipline myself along with my presidential leadership team to get out of our office, go into offices, look people in the eye. “How’s it going? What’s your greatest success this week? What’s your greatest need? How is your spouse? How are your children?”

I think that level of personal interaction goes a long, long way. We also encourage all of our faculty and staff to attend our chapels. Chapels on our campus are held Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings. Of course we record all of our chapel speakers, and we post links on our website so people who are not on our campus and are at other locations can join us. We’ve gotten a lot of positive feedback from them as well.

We also have a monthly prayer meeting in our chapel prayer room, and I usually make this a priority in my life so I am there. I lead it. We will have approximately 40 people. We have a written sheet of prayer requests and answers to prayer. They’re held on the first Wednesday of each month. This has just proven to be a marvelous way to communicate and to fellowship with our faculty and staff.
Al, if I could also share one other idea we’ve implemented that we just love, we call these our First Friday Fellowship. Every month we serve a light continental breakfast. Just as the name suggests, it’s a time of great fellowship and prayer and periodic updates. We also use this venue to recognize a colleague or a team who has gone above and beyond the call of duty that month. These are marvelous times. We get as many as 200 people who will attend those First Friday Fellowship times. Those are a few ideas we use, Al.

Al: Wow! Yeah. Well, that’s great. This theme communication has come up. We describe and talk about real communication. You know, that’s where it’s not only where you speak it but you’re also listening to it. You know, bottom up. You described that as part of your style. Another key driver of employee engagement is how they are involved in decision-making. Communication is part of that, but give us some practical examples of how you address this faculty and staff being involved in decision-making.

Peter: Well, we talk a lot about collaborative decision-making, and I sometimes am not as good as I talk about it, but we are working in that area. Before I give you a couple of our examples, Al, I would say there are many decisions that cannot be made collaboratively. We as leaders have to make some of the tough decisions. I have found there are several key decisions we can distribute throughout our faculty and our staff.

I’m thinking back to 2008. You remember there was a tremendous economic downturn, and that had a very negative impact on the enrollment numbers of Lancaster Bible College. I knew I was facing no other choice but to cut costs so we would balance our budget. The most difficult part was deciding where I would make those cuts.

I called together an all-employee meeting. I had all of our faculty, all of our staff, and I communicated to them that we were enlisting their feedback to help us come up with viable solutions. We formed a cost-cutting task force committee. It was headed up by a member of my presidential leadership team. There were about 12 people representing all aspects of the college. We had people from our physical plant to our staff to our faculty.

Everyone knew time was of the essence and they had to work very swiftly. This committee was formed, and they actually emailed all of our colleagues and said, “Would you give us cost-cutting ideas to help balance the college budget?” No idea was rejected, and as a result, we made it through those lean years, and we never had to lay off one person. I am so thankful for that.

In the 16 years I have been president of Lancaster Bible College, every year we have given an increase to every faculty and staff member. I think that’s a testament to the team we have who feels ownership in some of the decisions we have made together. If you have time, Al, I’ll give you another idea we used.

Al: Yeah, this is great. Yeah!

Peter: It was just last year that we had a particularly challenging time with our medical insurance renewal. We could stay with our current carrier, which had a robust network of providers at a higher
cost or move our business to another provider without realizing an increase in price. That was quite a decision we had to make.

If we had done the latter, the network of doctors would not have been near as good for all of our faculty and staff, so we enlisted the help of a task force committee. We had representatives from all over the college, including our newer capital region colleagues down in the Washington, DC, area. We brought them together, and we presented the facts. They were asked to go back to their areas, discuss it with their team members, and to come back to us with their recommendation.

Based on their feedback, we ended up staying with the provider with the more robust network but incurred slightly higher cost. You see, although we had to pass on higher cost to employee contributions, they understood the reasoning behind the decision. They weren’t surprised. We learned what was important to our workforce in this process. Those are two examples, and I think you can see some of the decisions they’ve been able to help lead us through and, therefore, feel a part of the mission and ministry of Lancaster Bible College.

Ali: Yeah, that’s obvious when we ask the question, “I feel involved in the decisions that impact me” how it is you get such high scores there and how that connects to your culture. One last question is do you believe there’s a connection between having a healthy culture and improving organizational outcomes and performance or however you measure it at Lancaster Bible College? What are your thoughts on that?

Peter: Well, I think there is, and I think the healthy culture is fostered by the word caring. I believe any employee in any setting is highly motivated when the people on their team, the people in management, the people in leadership, really care for their well-being. We try to care not only for the employee but for the employee’s spouse and family.

We really care about our colleagues at Lancaster Bible College. It takes a great deal of time and effort to invest in these precious resources that we call team members, but it’s worth it. As Christ followers, I think we witness caring and loving attitudes every day in the way we treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I like to think we can depend on each other to do whatever it takes and to complete whatever the task is on hand. That is why starting with my office all the way through, including physical plant, I want each person to commit themselves to God for the task every single day. Of course, some days are better than others, but the important thing is we learn by our mistakes, we focus on what we can do better tomorrow, and we continually strive to build and maintain a flourishing campus culture all wrapped up around caring for one another, Ali.

Ali: Well, that’s a great summary. Of course that is very much a reflection on the commandment to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Caring wraps that up, because our neighbors oftentimes are those we work with every day. They’re our closest associates and our closest contacts. Yeah, that’s a great summary.
**Peter:** I think we’re modeling caring for our students, Al. You know, we are training the next generation of students here at Lancaster Bible College, and we want them to see that in us and catch the whole value of people caring for people so when they graduate, they take that with them into ministry and the workforce.

**Al:** What you’re doing is also showing those students what Christian community is about. It gives them a model from which to move forward themselves in their lives and to spread that community as they are moving and growing in different ways. That’s absolutely fabulous.

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Well, my friends, your leadership is a gift. Let’s work together to be sure that Christian workplaces set the standard for the best, most effective places to work in the world. We’ll see you next time on the Flourishing Culture Podcast.