By Greg Chandler

The challenge before students in Dr. Steve VanderVeen's leadership class was this: organize a fundraising event for City on a Hill, a ministry center set in a former hospital in Zeeland, Mich., that was in need of a fundraising event. It didn't take long for the students to develop an idea. They would put together a holiday benefit dinner. But how?

“They had to figure out everything,” said Dr. VanderVeen, professor of management at Hope and director of the Center for Faithful Leadership, a program that has been in existence at the college since 2005.

“They went around town and got some of the restaurants and coffee shops to donate food and coffee.”

That wasn't all. The students also developed a promotional campaign, sold tickets for the event, and got some of their friends on campus to help out with serving the diners, setup and cleanup.

“It didn't take long for the students to learn about carrying out a project from beginning to end, but also something about themselves and each other.”

That's part of the goal at the Center for Faithful Leadership. Students learn that leadership is not just a set of skills or a position in an organization, but an extension of themselves that can be developed and applied in every situation, ranging from business to family life.

“Leadership is making a positive and significant difference by helping people meet their need to make a positive and significant difference,” said Dr. VanderVeen, who came to Hope in 2004 from Calvin College, where he had taught marketing and management for 15 years. He sees the center, located in the Anderson-Weeksman building on Eighth Street, as a perfect fit for the college, where Christian values and service are core to the educational process.

“(The center) enhances education for leadership and service in a global society through academic and co-curricular activities,” Dr. VanderVeen said.

“Since last fall, the Center for Faithful Leadership has implemented a minor in organizational leadership practice, a mentoring program that initiated 73 learning relationships, and leadership roundtables for student leaders of co-curricular activities. Students in the program get a broad and applied education in any career they choose.”

In the process, the students not only learned about carrying out a project from beginning to end, but also something about themselves and each other.

The Center for Faithful Leadership draws its inspiration from several concepts – the idea of authentic identity, as expressed by Gordon Smith in his book Change and Call; the idea of integrity, as voiced by Robert Quinn in Change the World, and the idea of servant leadership, as articulated by the late Robert Greenleaf.

The center provides students with learning opportunities that involve concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract concepts and active experimenting, with the goal of helping students“grow in wisdom, seek their purpose and develop dispositions toward becoming inner-driven, purpose-centered, externally-open and other-focused,” Dr. VanderVeen said.

Hope senior Brittnee Longwell, of Zionsville, Ind., was among those students who worked on the City on a Hill project. She credits Dr. VanderVeen for his encouragement of her leadership abilities.

“The best and most unique part about these courses, and Steve’s teaching style, is that it is all wrapped around what it means to be a servant leader.” – Brittnee Longwell '09

In her senior year, she and her leadership mentor had its share of twists and turns. “I never thought of myself as a teacher. I was thinking I wasn’t smart enough to do that,” she said.

She has helped me understand what servant leadership skills I possess and will use as I enter my senior year and beyond.”

Dr. VanderVeen had designs of entering into pastoral ministry. But by the end of his junior year, he realized that the ministry was not for him. He finished his degree in English and then attended Western Michigan University to earn a master's in business administration. Dr. VanderVeen worked six years as a stockbroker before he returned to Calvin in 1989 to teach marketing. Six years later, he earned his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois-Chicago.

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In the leadership minor, students typically attend classes built around intensive projects. This gives students the opportunity to learn concepts while putting them into practice under the guidance of a mentor.

“What I try to help students learn are concepts related to servant leadership and team-building,” he said. “But I also want them to reflect on what they are doing and why as a way to better understand who they are. It is learning about leadership from the inside out—because that is the most authentic kind.”

More than 25 years after he decided against pursuing pastoral ministry, Dr. VanderVeen has come to see the spiritual aspects of the work he does. “I'm a minister, but I do it in a much more applied way,” he said. “The purpose of the center is to enhance the education students are getting across campus, to add value, and to give students the opportunity to work with people from other programs.”

He envisions involving engineering students in the leadership program next year. “Engineering is a program where they're already doing project-based learning,” he said. Dr. VanderVeen hopes that his work makes a lasting difference in students' lives, and it's especially rewarding to him when he can see that happening already on campus.

For example, there were ripples from the planning of the City on a Hill benefit: some of the students from the leadership program worked outside of Dr. VanderVeen's class with members of Hope's Student Congress on an ornament sale that raised another $1,500 for the organization.

The Center for Faithful Leadership links academics and action in enabling students to study leadership, serve as leaders and reflect on both experiences as they prepare for their post-Hope lives and careers. Here director Dr. Steve VanderVeen meets at the center earlier this summer with (left to right) Brittnee Longwell, Christina Tassoni and Kolleen Gierum.

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