

THE ROLE OF THE PASTORAL MINISTRY IN THE CONTEXT OF A  
LUTHERAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by

Jacob C. Behnken

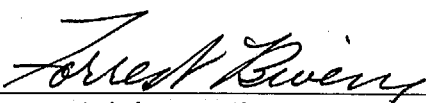
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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the role and function a pastor performs in the context of a Lutheran elementary school ministry. Recent decades have brought with them severe challenges for the Lutheran elementary school. These challenges have led to a justified concern within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod concerning the survival of this form of ministry. This thesis proposes that the role pastors play in the synod's Lutheran elementary schools will have significant impact on their future.

Pastors occupy a position of leadership in the congregations they serve. How they choose to use that leadership can bring great benefit to the Lutheran elementary school. It is, therefore, critical for the pastor to understand the Lutheran elementary school's mission; he will want to understand why Lutheran schools exist and what purposes they serve in a congregation. He will, in addition, join in that mission in ways appropriate to his office. Finally, as he performs all the duties of his ministry, he will want to do so in a spirit that supports the Lutheran elementary school. In these three parts, this thesis examines how pastors can interact with the Lutheran elementary school to the glory of God's kingdom.

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# Introduction

## A Heritage of Lutheran Education

Lutheranism has long enjoyed a relationship with elementary education. From the Lutheran Church's very beginnings, its theologians and other leaders considered the education of the next generation essential to the future of the church. Luther himself, in fact, spared no effort to instill this appreciation for education among the people of Germany,<sup>1</sup> nor did Lutheranism's leading figures after Luther waver from this stance in the slightest.<sup>2</sup> As Germany's churchmen organized parishes across the countryside, that congregations would operate schools as part of their ministry was a foregone conclusion. As confessional Lutheranism waned in Europe and dawned in America, this commitment to education remained unchanged. Early Lutheran settlers, especially the ones with ties to orthodox Lutheranism, considered an elementary school a basic feature of any congregation.<sup>3</sup> The original constitution of the Missouri Synod's forerunners even listed the establishment of a school as a requirement for all congregations within its fellowship.<sup>4</sup>

## The Reality of Challenge

Despite this commendable appreciation for education, to suggest that Lutheranism's first efforts at education in America were without difficulty would present an inaccurate historical perspective. The first American Lutheran elementary schools, for example, varied widely in quality and scope. Some were vehicles only for the basic religious instruction the parish pastor could provide while attending to all the other demands of the pastoral ministry. Others (often those of larger congregations with greater available resources) offered a more complete

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<sup>1</sup> Luther's writings on the subject, discussed below, make this point clear.

<sup>2</sup> See the "church orders" (*Kirchenordnungen*) described below.

<sup>3</sup> Wm. A. Kramer describes how the original founders of the Missouri Synod even established a regular "school day" for the 110 school-age children who made the journey across the Atlantic with the first ships of settlers. Every day, the children would sing hymns, learn portions of the catechism, and practice their reading skills. When the settlers landed, every congregation in Perry County, Missouri established a Lutheran school. Wm. A. Kramer, *Lutheran Schools: 15 Crucial Years: History of the Schools of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod from 1959-1973* (St. Louis: Board of Parish Education, The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, 1975), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne E. Schmidt, *The Lutheran Parochial School: Dates, Documents, Events, People* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Publications, 2001), 56.

curriculum under the guidance of a larger faculty of instructors.<sup>5</sup> As Lutherans have continued their efforts to provide Christian education to their youth, the challenges have continued. From legal issues and cultural difficulties to financial uncertainty and enrollment questions, Lutheran congregations have encountered a formidable task in maintaining elementary schools.

Even a cursory survey of the current scene reveals that the same challenges exist today. Some would suggest, in fact, that today's environment presents the church with unprecedented difficulties in its endeavor to provide elementary education. Lutheran congregations face rising costs, shrinking student bodies, and what observers classify as a general decline in Lutheran elementary education.<sup>6</sup> To make matters worse, many such challenges exist beyond the control of church and school leaders. A high inflation rate in the educational field, which relies heavily on human resources, the ability of large public schools to offer programs appealing to parents and students alike, and a smaller population of congregational children, are all catalysts to the present challenging environment,<sup>7</sup> and although Lutheran pastors, teachers, and congregations are not responsible for them, they must nevertheless confront them.

In recent years, many congregations' response to such challenges has meant the reduction or elimination of elementary-school ministry. The Wisconsin Synod, for example, reports 35 fewer of its schools exist in 2012 as did in 2002, a decline of nearly ten percent over just ten years (Chart 1). Many more schools than these have eliminated staff or taken other budget-reducing efforts in an effort to survive. Though congregations most often reach these kinds of decisions with a heavy heart, one can hardly find fault with them. "Why go to such time, effort, and expense to operate a Lutheran elementary school," some legitimately ask, "when other avenues of ministry cost less and perhaps are yielding significant fruit?" The realities of the present age, therefore, can often result in the end of a congregation's long and rich heritage of elementary education.

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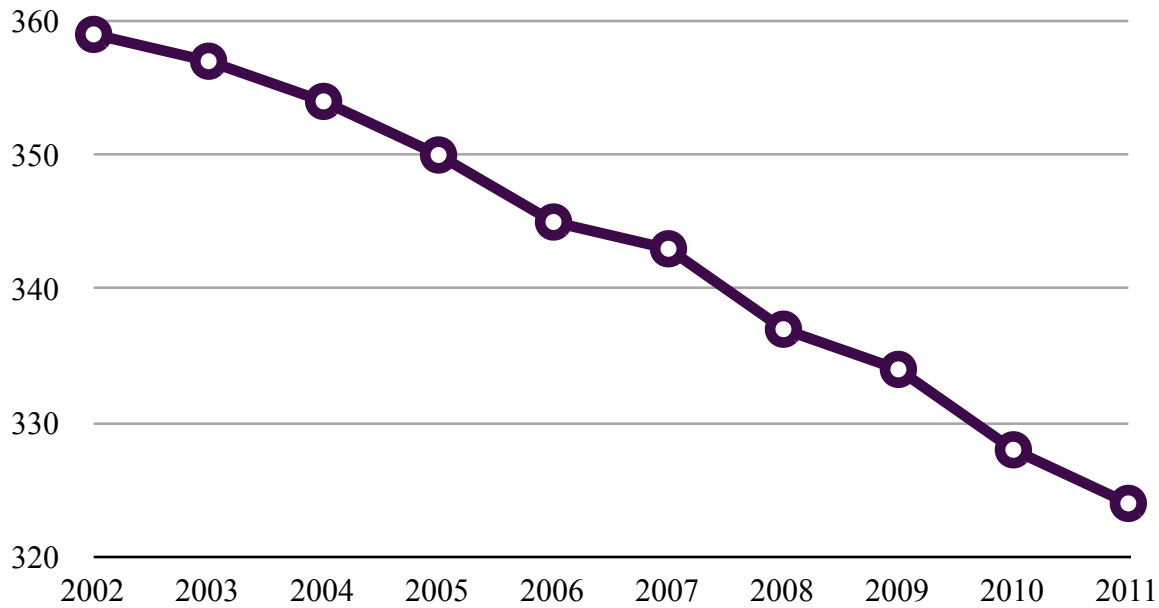
<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 13f. Schmidt highlights the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods as two bodies that continued to support education on this level even after the American public school system was in place across the country.

<sup>6</sup> Donald W. Patterson, "What Practical Experience Teaches Us about Lutheran Schools," *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium* (20 September 2011), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Meitler Consultants, Inc., "Attitudes about Lutheran Schools: Joint Study of LCMS and WELS" (Unpublished, 1992), 1.



**Chart 1. Number of WELS Elementary Schools**



### **Long-Term Effects**

That these harsh realities are assailing many congregations across the country is well established in Wisconsin Synod circles; what is less clear, however, are the long-term effects this phenomenon will have on confessional Lutheranism in America. Many within the Wisconsin Synod treasure the heritage of Lutheran elementary education and express grave concerns over the potential dangers of losing it.<sup>8</sup> Will the church have difficulty retaining its youth without the influence of a Christian elementary education? Will the end of daily instruction in a Lutheran elementary school over time give way to a membership who are less “doctrinally aware” because they did not receive the same degree of religious instruction in their youth? These questions and more fester in the minds of many who cringe when they consider the lasting effects on their congregations and synod every time a Lutheran elementary school closes its doors to future students.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark G. Zarling, “What the Mission of the Church Teaches Us about Lutheran Schools,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium* (19 September 2011), 22.

## **The Role of the Pastor**

The present challenges to the Wisconsin Synod's elementary school system combined with its long history of Lutheran education lead to a pressing question: What will the Wisconsin Synod be willing and able to do in order to preserve its elementary schools? Answers to this question will come from a wide variety of groups throughout the synod and its congregations. Decisions about how congregations choose to educate their youth will no doubt be the product of the entire community.<sup>9</sup> One cannot underestimate, however, how parish pastors will influence these outcomes through the course of their ministry. Pastoral leadership will in many ways guide congregations as they make decisions concerning the future of their elementary schools.<sup>10</sup> In what ways do the pastoral ministry and the Lutheran elementary school intersect? What are appropriate ways in which the pastor can serve to the Lutheran elementary school's blessing? It is true that a wide diversity of gifts among pastors together with a wide diversity of needs among congregations makes for no single right answer.<sup>11</sup> The Lutheran Church's long history of successful Christian education under the capable leadership of faithful pastors committed to God's Word does, however, suggest principles for addressing this generation's challenge to preserve the Lutheran elementary school. As the Lutheran pastor understands, joins in, and supports the Lutheran school's mission, he occupies a unique position to help preserve it.

## **Literature Review**

### **Overview**

The modern emphasis on education and its philosophical underpinnings have made Christian education a topic of many literary contributions. In one sense, therefore, Lutherans find themselves ahead of the times since, throughout its history, Lutheranism has assigned a central place to education. Through a variety of writings, the earliest Lutheran writers offer much useful guidance in the matter of education. Today's Lutheran theologians have followed after them and

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<sup>9</sup>Noel Weeks, *The Christian School: An Introduction* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 92.

<sup>10</sup>Kurt Taylor, *Christ's Commission and Lutheran Schools* (D. Min. Thesis, Ashland Theological Seminary, 2007), 175.

<sup>11</sup>Kramer, *Lutheran Elementary Schools*, 58.

provided a focused corpus on the topic of Lutheran elementary education, especially as the church has grappled with what the future holds for their schools. A review of pertinent literature reveals that many of these endeavors have taken place outside the Wisconsin Synod's fellowship, most notably in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod together with its Concordia Publishing House. While the Wisconsin Synod too has dealt with these issues through literary contributions of its own, the following overview may nevertheless reveal some gaps which future Wisconsin Synod authors might wish to fill. Relatively little of the literature has devoted itself entirely to a discussion of the pastor's role within the Lutheran elementary school, but what is available nevertheless offers useful insights.

### **Literary Contributions from Early Lutheranism**

As with many topics pertinent to the church and its faith, Martin Luther was the first Lutheran father who devoted himself to the matter of education. A survey of his work reveals that few of his writings deal specifically with the topic, though it comes as no surprise that the reader still gains a multitude of invaluable insights from them.<sup>12</sup> The student of Luther finds the majority of his comments on education in four documents.<sup>13</sup> Two of them the Reformer crafts in the form of letters. In them, he addresses the nobility who would have held a good deal of the responsibility for educating children in sixteenth-century Germany. In "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate," Luther urges civic leaders not to forget that the education of the youth was essential to the preservation of the gospel in Germany.<sup>14</sup> "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" urges city leaders to support education - financially and otherwise - because it served the good of both church and state.<sup>15</sup> Luther in his writings emphasized this twofold

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<sup>12</sup> Schmidt, *The Lutheran Parochial School*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Braun, "What our Fathers Taught Us about Lutheran Schools," *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium* (19 September 2011), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate," trans. James Atkinson, *Luther's Works: American Edition Volume 44*, ed. James Atkinson and Helmut T. Lehmann, 115-217 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 205f.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," trans. Albert T. W. Steinhäuser, *Luther's Works: American Edition Volume 45*, ed. Walther I. Brandt and Helmut T. Lehmann, 339-378 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 350ff.

benefit of Lutheran education - that it was indispensable not only for training up the next generation in the gospel but, in addition, for the maintenance of a well-ordered society.<sup>16</sup> Luther's writings, therefore, provide the church with an unsurpassed explanation of the scriptural, theological basis for Lutheran education.

Luther wrote not only to the nobility of his day but to the common people as well, to parents with children who needed education. In his perhaps most interesting writing on education, Luther delivered a sermon in 1530 entitled "On Keeping Children in School." It might come as somewhat of a surprise that the people of Luther's day were struggling with a weakness that finds a parallel in today's society: the tendency to downplay the importance of education in the lives of children.<sup>17</sup> As Europe was finding its way out of the Middle Ages, the affluence of the average member of society was increasing. Economic improvements were allowing even lower-class families to increase their household wealth.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, no laws yet prescribed a minimum level of education for children. This combination created a scenario in which it was tempting for many parents to forego their children's education in favor of putting them to work in the family business. Against such thoughts Luther directed his formidable writing skills. He pointed out that it was an offense before God (who himself had placed parents into their roles) for them to neglect giving their children an education and thereby to deprive society of citizens who could fill important vocations in service to God and neighbor. In his sermon, Luther calls parents with such thoughts to repentance.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Luther, of course, lived in a day when church and state were inexorably linked. Education was, therefore, the responsibility of both institutions, and both carried them out together. Schmidt, *The Lutheran Parochial School*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, modern society typically does not neglect education altogether, as Luther's society was doing, yet even as today's parents value quality education as a means of improving one's wealth and societal status, they nevertheless easily forget the value of the Christ-centered education Lutheran elementary schools can provide. Luther's criticisms of the people of his day remind church leaders of the present to remember well King Solomon's axiom, "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecc 1:9). The church of the twenty-first century dare not simply assume that it deals with a societal apathy toward Christian education like never before and therefore assume that it has justification to abandon efforts to educate the next generation.

<sup>18</sup> Consider, for example, Luther's father Hans who through his hard work appeared to have worked his way from a common worker in the mines to a mine owner himself who was able to provide his son with an education that would have provided him with even greater opportunity. It is no wonder why Hans was so upset with Luther's decision to redirect his schooling to enter the monastery.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," trans. Charles M. Jacobs, *Luther's Works: American Edition Volume 46*, ed. Robert C. Schulz and Helmut T. Lehmann, 207-257 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 213f.

Especially noteworthy for today's Lutheran pastor, Luther also expounds on education within the context of the Lutheran parish. In 1527, the Reformer set out to visit the churches across Electoral Saxony; his goal was to measure the Reformation's progress and to provide help in areas of weakness. At the conclusion of his travels, Luther composed a set of instructions. These instructions, among other things, include direction for the the education of the youth in each parish.<sup>20</sup> These documents are of special interest because, in addition to guidelines for parish schools, Luther instructs pastors on appropriate conduct in connection to them.<sup>21</sup>

Besides Luther himself, two of his coworkers in Wittenberg, Philip Melancthon and Johannes Bugenhagen,<sup>22</sup> also participated in providing sets of instructions to Germany's parishes. Their instructions contain guidance in regard to education as well. In fact, they often provide greater detail than Luther himself. These documents took on historical importance because they served as organizational models for later Lutheran efforts in education.<sup>23</sup> While they are products of their time, these writings remain beneficial writings as they provide enlightening insight into the way these brilliant theologians approached education in their day. As today's Lutherans confront their own issues and struggles, they do well to listen to these faithful men from the past.

### **Recent Practical Writings**

A survey of more recent writings reveals that education has continued to pique interest among Lutherans. Many of these volumes delve into the practical questions of how to go about the task of educating. For the last several decades, Concordia Publishing House has released a large amount of literature concerning Lutheran education. Authors have devoted a good portion of these writings exclusively to the parish-operated elementary school. These contemporary

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony," trans. Conrad Bergendoff, *Luther's Works: American Edition Volume 40*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff and Helmut T. Lehmann, 263-320 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 314ff.

<sup>21</sup> Schmidt, *Lutheran Parochial Schools*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> During the course of the Reformation, Melancthon earned the title *praeceptor Germaniae*, teacher of Germany. In fact, however, Bugenhagen (often called the "pastor" of the Reformation) contributed to just as many writings about schools. Schmidt, *Lutheran Parochial Schools*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Schmidt, *Lutheran Parochial Schools*, 27.

resources serve as valuable material for the pastor as he considers his relationship to this aspect of the congregation's work. In 1963, Concordia produced a volume of essays entitled *Lutheran Elementary Schools in Action*.<sup>24</sup> The essays contained therein provide a wealth of material to consider; perhaps most pertinent for the pastor's role is Theodore Gerken's article, "The Lutheran Elementary School and the Congregation." In it, Gerken provides practical insights into the relationship between a congregation (together with its pastor) and the Lutheran elementary school. The essay offers practical insights into the various facets of this relationship - from budgeting and tuition to interpersonal relationships. One drawback to these articles, however, is the almost fifty-year separation between the time of their publication and today. This separation makes it impossible for these essays to address every issue one might expect in a more recent publication. In the same vein, Concordia just two years later published Walter Beck's fine history of Lutheran elementary schools.<sup>25</sup> In 1975, Wm. A. Kramer released a similar work under the auspices of the Missouri Synod's Board of Parish Education.<sup>26</sup> Though unpublished, another more recent contribution comes in the form of a report Meitler Consultants of Milwaukee completed as a joint project for the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods.<sup>27</sup> The consultants' goal was to analyze and evaluate current attitudes toward Lutheran education. As a result, its findings provide useful indicators for the future of Lutheran schools.

During the 1990's, Concordia Publishing House, in conjunction with the Missouri Synod's Board for Parish Services, printed a series of booklets addressing the evolution of Lutheran elementary schools within their fellowship. One can assume these documents found their way to print as a result of the struggles their schools were facing during that time. These little volumes are of a practical nature and are more of a workbook for congregational committee use than academic work meant for scholarly digestion. They do, nevertheless, offer some useful information and insights into the broad topics which they treat. Most relevant to the present

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<sup>24</sup> Victor C. Krause, ed. *Lutheran Elementary Schools in Action*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963.

<sup>25</sup> Walter H. Beck, *Lutheran Elementary Schools in the United States: A History of the Development of Parochial Schools and Synodical Educational Policies and Programs*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965.

<sup>26</sup> Kramer, *Lutheran Elementary Schools*.

<sup>27</sup> Meitler Consultants, Inc. "Attitudes about Lutheran Schools," Unpublished, 1992.

study is Peter Czaplewski's *Pastoring a Congregation with a School*.<sup>28</sup> Also useful is Keith Looman's *School Purpose: Why Congregations Operate Lutheran Schools*.<sup>29</sup> Both works offer useful guidance as pastors and congregations seek to define and carry out an effective relationship with a Lutheran elementary school. In addition, Robert Oesch provides a valuable resource with *The Church-Worker Team*.<sup>30</sup> As he navigates the often difficult topic of coexistence within a congregational staff, he offers a practical approach to the interpersonal relationships that must exist among a congregation's called workers for the best of its ministry. Though it is more peripheral to the topic, Carl Moser's publication on the role of Lutheran schools in congregational evangelism efforts is useful to consider as one defines a Lutheran elementary school's mission.<sup>31</sup> Finally, Martin Wessler explores the critical issue of how to provide for the often significant expense behind elementary schools. *Funding Lutheran Schools* describes the typical models for raising the necessary funds and offers advice to the congregation deciding on a specific approach in a given context.<sup>32</sup>

### Recent Theological Writings

Beside these practical volumes, a good amount of literature explores the theological foundation of Lutheran education. In the footsteps of Luther and the other early reformers, these writings attempt to define the various theological underpinnings of Lutheran education. Since the Lutheran pastor will always want to allow scriptural truths to guide him, these resources will provide him a worthwhile read. The collection of essays in *Learning at the Foot of the Cross*<sup>33</sup> offers excellent insight into these theological matters. Sandra Doering's "Making Disciples: The

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Czaplewski, *Pastoring a Congregation with a School*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996.

<sup>29</sup> Keith Loomans, *School Purpose: Why Congregations Operate Lutheran Schools*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> Robert C. Oesch, *The Church-Worker Team*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993.

<sup>31</sup> Carl Moser, *Sharing Christ: How Lutheran Schools Can Be Evangelism Agencies of the Congregation*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Wessler, *Funding Lutheran Schools*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993.

<sup>33</sup> Joel D. Heck and Angus L. Menuge, eds., *Learning at the Foot of the Cross: A Lutheran Vision for Education*, Austin, Texas: Concordia University Press, 2011.

Goal of Christian Education,” for example, offers a well-articulated overview of the theology of Lutheran education. It excels at answering what are and what are not appropriate expectations of a Christian congregation when it operates an elementary school. This thought process is vital for a pastor to consider, both for himself as he carries out his ministry and for his congregation as he leads God’s people in their service to their Lord. Susan Mobley considers similar issues in her essay entitled “Historical Foundations in the Lutheran Reformation.”<sup>34</sup> Mobley’s viewpoint provides a contemporary perspective on some of the same historical writings noted above, so it certainly merits attention in this study. Finally, two companion articles, Patti Hoffman’s “The Where of Education” and Bob Riggert’s “The How of Education,” each offer a scholarly assessment of the manner in which Lutheran congregations have carried out their mission to educate their youth as well as a forecast of the Lutheran elementary school’s future.

## **Dissertations**

The recent struggles of Lutheran schools have encouraged a number of doctoral candidates to explore the issue in their dissertation work as well. As far back as 1951, Arthur Miller studied the *Educational Administration and Supervision of the Lutheran Schools of the Missouri Synod*.<sup>35</sup> More recently, Bradd Stucky studied the role of the Lutheran school board.<sup>36</sup> In both cases, the authors seek to describe present realities in Lutheran elementary schools, identify potential weaknesses, and suggest possible roadmaps to improvement. In one sense, they provide valuable information; however, the Wisconsin Synod reader must recognize that neither of these writings come from a Wisconsin Synod background, and so at times they describe situations that do not exist in the Wisconsin Synod system. Peter Bender’s *The Lutheran*

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<sup>34</sup> Susan Mobley, “Historical Foundations in the Lutheran Reformation,” *Learning at the Foot of the Cross: A Lutheran Vision for Education*, ed. Joel D. Heck and Angus L. Menuge, 3-22, Austin, Texas: Concordia University Press, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Arthur L. Miller, *Educational Administration and Supervision of the Lutheran Schools of the Missouri Synod*, PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1951.

<sup>36</sup> Bradd W. Stucky, *The Desired Role vs. the Actual Role of the Lutheran Elementary School Board as Viewed by Selected Principals, School Board Chairpersons, and Pastors of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod*, Doctor of Education Dissertation, Florida Atlantic University, 2000.



*Day School: Its Theological Foundation and Practice* is much like the previous two.<sup>37</sup> It explores the relationship between theology and the day-to-day operation of his Missouri Synod congregation's Lutheran elementary school. Joyce Natzke completed her dissertation in 1996 for Marquette University. In her work, she examines the organizational structure of four Lutheran schools.<sup>38</sup>

### **Journal Articles**

As the topic of education has turned into a popular topic of debate and exploration, it is hardly surprising that a number of journal and periodical articles have also appeared on the issue. The self-described "Lutheran journal" *Logia* devoted its eleventh volume to the matter of Lutheran education. Two of its articles stand out in their pertinence to a pastor's relationship to a school. Mervyn Wagner writes a fascinating article as he describes "Ten Theses and Some Antitheses" on Lutheran schooling.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, his theses make some keen observations about what a Lutheran approach to education really is. In addition, Timothy Pauls delves into a discussion of the distinction between a Lutheran and secular education.<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Albinger writes from an educational viewpoint in a recent *Lutheran Theological Journal*.<sup>41</sup> In his work, he works to define a philosophy of education suitable for use in a Lutheran elementary school.

### **WELS Contributions**

Throughout its history, the Wisconsin Synod has stood out as a leader among Lutheran bodies on the issue of Lutheran education. As one would expect, therefore, its authors too have contributed to the body of literature on the topic. In the fall of 2011, for example, Wisconsin

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<sup>37</sup> Peter C. Bender, *The Lutheran Day School: Its Theological Foundation and Practice*, Sussex, WI: Concordia Catechetical Academy, 1996.

<sup>38</sup> Joyce S. Natzke, *A Case Study of the Organizational Culture of Four Lutheran Schools*, PhD Dissertation, Marquette University, 1996.

<sup>39</sup> Mervyn Wagner, "Lutheran Schooling: Ten Theses and Some Antitheses," *Logia* 11 (2002): 3-12.

<sup>40</sup> Timothy J. Pauls, "Toward a Distinction between Lutheran and Secular Approaches to Education," *Logia* 11 (2002): 43-46.

<sup>41</sup> Kenneth Albinger, "Can We Find a Theologically Informed Philosophy of Education for Lutheran Schools?" *Lutheran Theological Journal* 44, no. 3 (2010): 146-53.

Lutheran Seminary hosted a symposium on Lutheran elementary schools in which the three essayists - Dr. Mark Braun of Wisconsin Lutheran College, President Mark Zarling of Martin Luther College, and Pastor Donald Patterson of Holy Word, Austin, Texas - treated the topic of elementary education from historical, theological, and practical perspectives respectively. Their work was not only thoughtful and scholarly, but it served as an inspiration for those present to preserve the rich tradition of Lutheran elementary schools in the Wisconsin Synod. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's (WLS) online essay file also houses a number of fine articles on both the broad topic of Lutheran education as well as the Lutheran elementary school. Some of these articles treat practical issues, such as Ledell Plath's essay on funding elementary schools<sup>42</sup> and Wayne Mueller's insights on the relationship between pastor and principal.<sup>43</sup> Though still practical, others are of a more theological nature like Wilbert Gawrisch's "The Separation of Church and State as It Relates to Our Christian Schools."<sup>44</sup> In all cases, the WLS essay file provides an invaluable resource for the Wisconsin Synod reader who desires to study the topic of Lutheran elementary education.

## **I. The Pastor Understands the Lutheran School's Mission**

### **Context**

As a Lutheran pastor seeks to define his role in a Lutheran elementary school, he will find a broad spectrum of models to emulate. Some pastors dedicate a significant portion of their ministry time to the Lutheran elementary school, while other pastors (perhaps even as members of the same staff) assume a less direct role with the school.<sup>45</sup> Regardless of how a particular pastor perceives his function toward an elementary school, however, it is essential for him to appreciate that the members of his congregation typically perceive him as the leader of every

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<sup>42</sup> Ledell D. Plath, "Funding Lutheran Schools," *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File*.

<sup>43</sup> Wayne D. Mueller, "The Pastor-Principal Relationship," *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File*.

<sup>44</sup> Wilbert R. Gawrisch, "The Separation of Church and State as It Relates to Our Christian Schools," *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File*.

<sup>45</sup> Czaplewski, *Pastoring a Congregation with a School*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 7.

aspect of the congregation's ministry, including a Lutheran elementary school.<sup>46</sup> If a pastor, therefore, perceives the school as the exclusive responsibility of others, he must still recognize the leadership role within it others perceive as inherent to his position. That leadership role encourages the Lutheran pastor to see the school, like all areas of the congregation's ministry, as part of his call to shepherd the congregation.<sup>47</sup>

### **Recognizing the Mission**

The reality that congregations look to their pastors as leaders of a congregational elementary school comes with an implication: it means the pastor has a responsibility to recognize and appreciate the school's mission. Author Keith Loomans observes that in situations in which individuals of the congregation fail to see a clear vision and purpose for any part of ministry, especially one like a school that comes with great demands, they are typically unsupportive of it.<sup>48</sup> Cognizant of this fact, the pastor, regardless of his level of personal involvement in the school, can serve it well by ensuring he understands and can articulate the school's mission.<sup>49</sup>

### **Appreciating the Mission**

Understanding the school's mission enables the pastor to appreciate the elementary school as part of the congregation's ministry at large. He can see the Lutheran elementary school as a special blessing God has given him in his ministry.<sup>50</sup> From its very beginning, Lutheranism has shown the highest appreciation for the work of the Lutheran school. As a pastor to his

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<sup>46</sup> Loomans, *School Purpose: Why Congregations Operate Lutheran Schools*, 2.

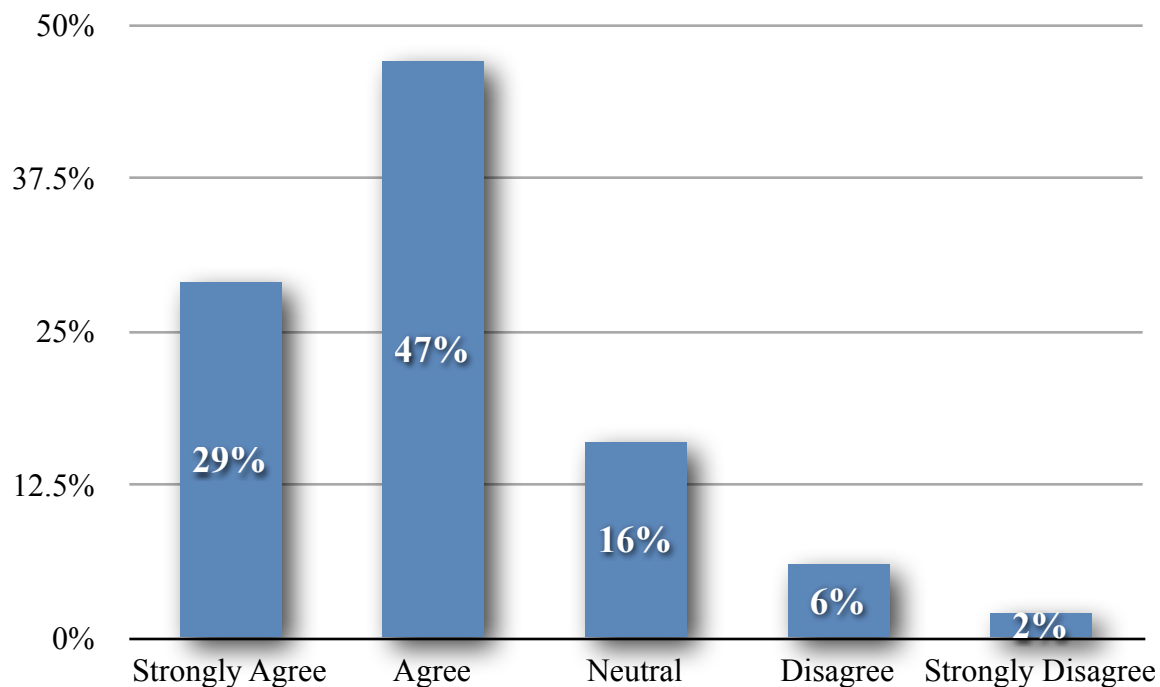
<sup>47</sup> Gerken, "The Lutheran Elementary School and the Congregation," *Lutheran Elementary Schools in Action*, ed. Victor C. Krause (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 103.

<sup>48</sup> Loomans, *School Purpose: Why Congregations Operate Lutheran Schools*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Taylor, *Christ's Commission and Lutheran Schools*, 93.

<sup>50</sup> Kurt Taylor notes the absolute necessity of the pastor actually being willing to work with a Lutheran elementary school in the first place. He encourages pastors holding calls from congregations with Lutheran elementary schools not to forget considering in their deliberations whether they are willing or not to work with a Lutheran school. He fears that too often, pastors find themselves in ministry with a school when they would have preferred the alternative - to the detriment of both school and pastor. Taylor, *Christ's Commission and Lutheran Schools*, 92.

**Chart 2. Pastors' Appreciation for Schools**



*I see examples every day of my congregation's elementary school helping the congregation carry out its ministry.*

people, Luther himself recognized that Christian schools assisted the church in carrying out its gospel ministry. He therefore encouraged the councilmen of Germany to maintain such schools in the strongest terms:

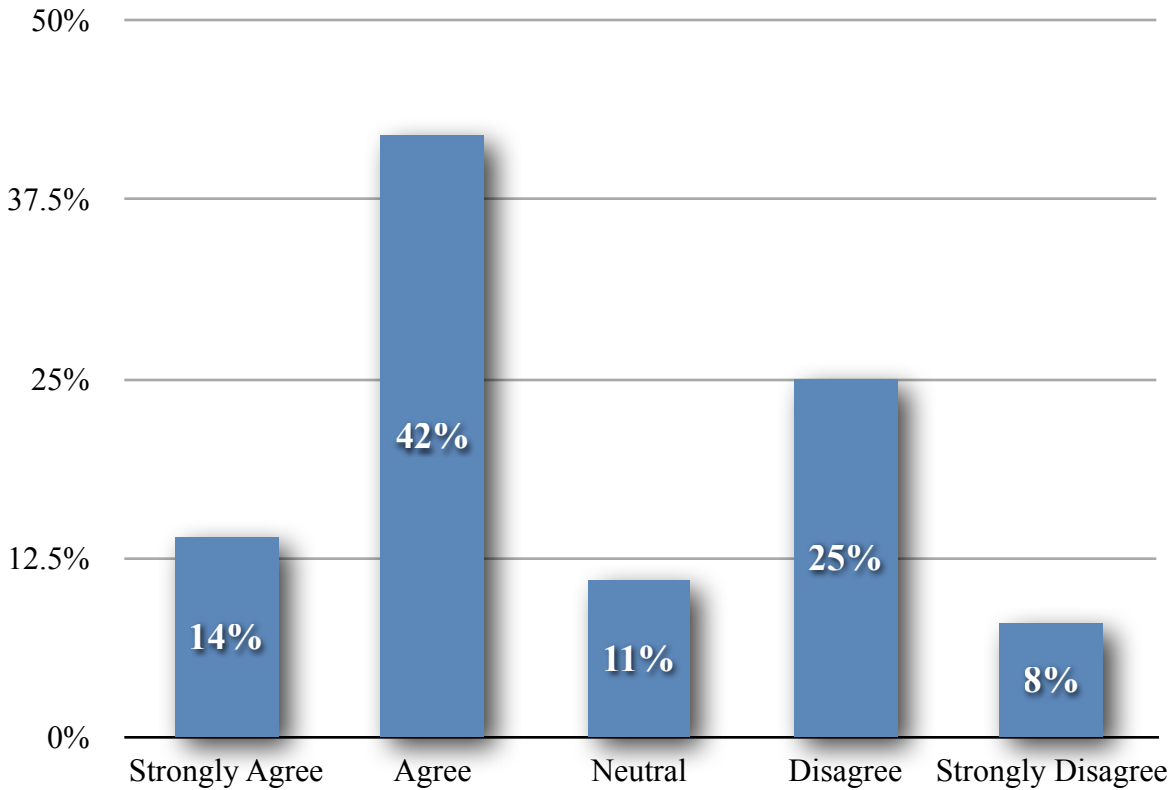
Now that God has so richly blessed us...and provided us with so many men able to instruct and train our youth aright, it is surely imperative that we not throw his blessing to the winds and let him knock in vain. He is standing at the door; happy are we who open to him! He is calling us; blessed is he who answers him!<sup>51</sup>

In the footsteps of Luther, pastors of the Wisconsin Synod almost without exception recognize the blessings elementary schools bring as they assist congregations in their ministry (Chart 2). Nevertheless, they also reveal a degree of uneasiness that a school can also overshadow other elements of that ministry (Chart 3). Schools demand a considerable investment of time, not only from teachers and school staff members but from pastors as well. Schools require, in addition, significant investments of capital.<sup>52</sup> Salaries for school faculty and staff often dissolve weekly congregational offerings in short order, and the maintenance of suitable buildings and grounds

<sup>51</sup> Luther, "To the Councilmen," 352.

<sup>52</sup> Patterson, "What Practical Experience Teaches," 17f.

**Chart 3. Pastors' Uneasiness toward Schools**



*I sometimes feel the elementary school overshadows other areas of the congregation's ministry.*

often seems daunting. These realities make it an easy temptation for any pastor to sit back and just imagine the grand things his congregation might accomplish if only maintaining a school were not part of their congregational “obligations.”

That tempting line of thinking makes a clear mission for the Lutheran school all the more critical.<sup>53</sup> It allows the pastor and others to view a school in the context of its blessings rather than its challenges.<sup>54</sup> With a clear mission for it, one can observe an elementary school fulfilling a valuable role in the context of the congregation’s ministry.

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<sup>53</sup> Gerken, “The Lutheran Elementary School and the Congregation,” 87.

<sup>54</sup> Moser, *Sharing Christ*, 14.

## Defining the Mission

In order to achieve this perspective, to define a school's mission for oneself becomes of supreme importance. What exactly is the mission of a Lutheran elementary school? In one sense, the answer is an obvious one: The purpose of a Lutheran elementary school, like any agency of a Christian congregation, is to proclaim the gospel.<sup>55</sup> One's mind races to Jesus' great commission of his disciples in Matthew's closing words: "Go and make disciples of all nations, *teaching...*"<sup>56</sup> Above all else, this statement defines the mission of the Lutheran school. As the pastor serves a leadership role within the school, he does well to emphasize this mission as central to all aspects of the school's ministry.

Such an emphasis distinguishes Lutheran schools from public education and even from most other Christian schools in the United States. American society has flavored Christianity with a heavy dose of moralism and synergism. Too often, society portrays Christian schools as little more than institutions that base their education not on secular wisdom but on "what God requires."<sup>57</sup> The focus of many such schools, therefore, centers on raising children who will "make a decision for Christ" and achieve a certain level of morality to prove it. In the end, such a theological perspective weakens such school's proclamation of Christianity's central message - the gospel - as it causes the school community to emphasize right living above all else.

As the pastor defines the Lutheran school's mission, he does well to guard against this viewpoint so popular in society today. The fact is, even lifelong Lutherans can fall into this pattern of thinking. Not only is it a part of their culture; it is also part of their sinful nature. That quality of fallen humankind which the Apology of the Augsburg Confession calls the "opinion of the law" (*opinio legis*) stops at nothing to convince people that their works can earn them God's favor.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, American society lauds achievement and success, and it praises institutions that promote these characteristics at a high level. The dual influences of nature and society can combine to lead even Lutherans to operate under the assumption that their schools exist for the

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<sup>55</sup> Gerken, "The Lutheran Elementary School and the Congregation," 85f.

<sup>56</sup> Matthew 28:19-20.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Weeks, *The Christian School*, 12f.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, *Apology* 5 (3) 144.

same reason as any other “elite private school” - to produce students of the highest academic and moral caliber.

The Lutheran pastor, however, recognizes that the primary mission of a Christian education is to proclaim the gospel to sinners.<sup>59</sup> That realization often has real implications in practical situations. Sometimes, a Lutheran school may find itself educating a child who exhibits what the world would consider a deficiency. Perhaps such a student cannot achieve on an acceptable academic or social level. Perhaps such a child even lacks moral character. Under the influence of society, one’s first inclination might be to remove such a student from the institution - especially one of moral deficiency - because that student is failing to live up to its expectations. Jesus, however, offers a different approach.<sup>60</sup> As he called his disciple Matthew, he said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”<sup>61</sup> Lutheran education does not see as its primary mission to educate only children of a certain level of Christian living, but to provide the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work faith in the hearts of all children through his powerful means of grace.<sup>62</sup> Harry Coiner writes, “Therefore the emphasis in Christian education is not on man’s goodness or on his ability to save himself. Rather, the emphasis is on God, who in great love planned a means of salvaging this dead human creature and reestablishing His life with him.”<sup>63</sup>

An accurate definition of the school’s mission in this way brings with it great joy. Throughout its history, the Lutheran Church has championed education because it has

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<sup>59</sup> Harry G. Coiner, “The Purposes and History of the Lutheran Elementary School,” *Lutheran Elementary Schools in Action*, ed. Victor C. Krause (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 4.

<sup>60</sup> This is not to suggest that a Lutheran school never has to remove a student from its classrooms. Sometimes just that is necessary. The focus, however, rests on the spiritual welfare of the student body as a whole as well as the individual student. (If a student consistently brings harm to other children’s spiritual upbringing, removal of that student is often best.) Note, however, that the motivation for removing a student does not come from a desire to maintain a pharisaical sense of elitism.

<sup>61</sup> Mark 2:17.

<sup>62</sup> As it teaches the entire Word of God, the Christian school will, of course, still teach and encourage sanctified living among its student body. In doing so, it maintains an appropriate balance of law and gospel: proclaiming law to the child who has sinned, proclaiming gospel to the repentant sinner, and with that same gospel, encouraging lives of thanksgiving to God.

<sup>63</sup> Harry G. Coiner, “The Purposes and History of the Lutheran Elementary School,” 5.

recognized all the spiritual blessings it bestows on congregations.<sup>64</sup> Congregations with schools, for example, can enjoy the school children's participation with them in public worship. Junior or classroom choirs can edify and beautify the worship experience. Often school children can perform works of service for other segments of the congregation. Perhaps at Christmas time, for example, a classroom can make cards with words of spiritual encouragement for the congregation's elderly members. Though these spiritual blessings sometimes go unnoticed by the congregation at large, the pastor who recognizes the mission of the Lutheran elementary school will appreciate these blessings, no matter how small they may seem.<sup>65</sup>

### **Expanding the Mission**

In addition to the elementary school's spiritual mission, the Lutheran pastor can also recognize the good purposes schools achieve for this world. Recognizing the dual function of a school - to train children in God's Word and to prepare them for life in this world - allows a pastor to find an even wider mission for his congregation's school. Christian congregations operate Lutheran schools primarily to proclaim the gospel to the next generation and, through that message, to bring that generation to faith in Christ. Congregations also operate schools, however, to train children for their lives on this earth, that is, to give them the knowledge and skills they will need to serve as useful and productive members of society.<sup>66</sup> In other words, a Lutheran elementary school serves not only to proclaim God's second-article truths; it also serves to promote God's first-article gifts. In his discussion of Lutheran schools, Luther emphasized this twofold purpose. On the one hand, he encouraged parents to send their children to Lutheran schools because through them, their children would learn of their Savior. Just as emphatically, however, he encouraged them to send children to school because by educating

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<sup>64</sup> Author Bradd Stucky notes how schools provide opportunities for "evangelism, nurture, service, fellowship, and worship." Bradd W. Stucky, *The Desired Role vs. the Actual Role of the Lutheran Elementary School Board*, 47.

<sup>65</sup> Gerken, "The Lutheran Elementary School and the Congregation," 107.

<sup>66</sup> Peter C. Bender, *The Lutheran Day School: Its Theological Foundation and Practice*, 17.



children, they would in essence be giving a gift to the future. They would be ensuring that society would have people with the skills and abilities to fill all its various vocations.<sup>67</sup>

Lutheran elementary schools take this responsibility seriously, for they have received it from parents to whom God has given responsibility to raise their children as well as from the government which has God-given authority to manage society.<sup>68</sup> Not only, therefore, does the Lutheran elementary school seek to put forward its very best in its gospel proclamation, but it seeks to excel in all the other aspects of its education, not because it craves the status of an elite haven of private education, but because it seeks to glorify God with its best efforts. The pastor can appreciate not only the spiritual blessings of a school but the earthly ones as well. He can, for example, rejoice when the congregation's students excel in academic or athletic endeavors because such things can serve to benefit society at large.<sup>69</sup>

### **Refining the Mission**

Maintaining a correct understanding of a Lutheran school's mission can also prevent inappropriate expectations from it. A constant threat is to lose sight of the shared mission and purpose between congregation and school.<sup>70</sup> Thankfully, the majority of WELS pastors report that their congregations see their elementary schools as a part of their ministry (Chart 4). A failure to make this connection could introduce adverse effects. For example, congregations could begin to rely on the school's tuition dollars to maintain the rest of the ministry budget. Meanwhile, those tuition dollars allow the congregation's stewardship efforts to plateau. Another dangerous line of thought leads congregations to assume that their operation of a school releases them from other ministry efforts. Sunday school ministry, for example, might experience neglect

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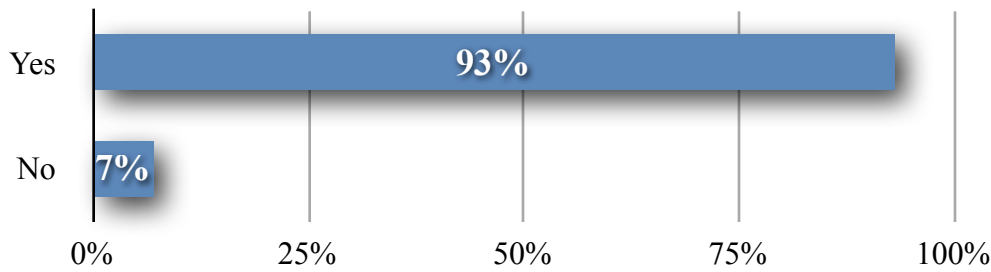
<sup>67</sup> Luther, "A Sermon on Keeping Children in Schools, 251. See also Schmidt, *The Lutheran Parochial School*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> Luther notes how it is always parents' responsibility to raise up children, but he points out that parents often lack the ability to carry this out on their own. For this reason, he encourages the upkeep of schools. Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen," 355.

<sup>69</sup> Peter C. Bender, *The Lutheran Day School: Its Theological Foundation and Practice*, 17. Bender also notes the reciprocating nature of these blessings. He writes: "The school serves and supports the church by the work it does in the secular kingdom." One's mind jumps to well-trained ministers of the gospel, for example, who, because of the quality education they received in youth, are well-equipped to serve the church.

<sup>70</sup> Ledell D. Plath, "Funding Lutheran Schools," *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File*, 4.

**Chart 4. Congregational Views of Schools**



*My congregation sees the elementary school as a significant part of its ministry.*

because “the kids are learning Bible stories during the week already.” Such an understanding, however, ignores the fact that some children and families of the congregation cannot or do not utilize the school. An important area of ministry for such families, as a result, falls short. Perhaps another congregation excuses their overall lack of evangelism efforts because the school on occasion attracts new families, and to many, that is “good enough.” All the while, real opportunities for doing gospel ministry in the community go unexplored and under-utilized.

### **Summary**

The above considerations illustrate the necessity for the pastor to understand the mission of a Lutheran elementary school, not only for himself but for the congregation he shepherds. Members of the congregation tend to emulate their leader’s attitude toward the ministry they accomplish together.<sup>71</sup> That realization makes it essential for the pastor to understand the school as one tool the congregation employs to use the means of grace in its midst. With this perspective well-established, pastor and congregation alike can enjoy the many blessings that flow from their elementary school.

The positive environment that such a perspective fosters also allows the congregation to explore more specific functions its school will serve in its ministry. Many congregations, for example, utilize the excellent education their school offers to give families from the community exposure to the gospel.<sup>72</sup> Other congregations might use their schools to host a strong music

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<sup>71</sup> Patterson, “What Practical Experience Teaches,” 10.

<sup>72</sup> Moser, *Sharing Christ*, 14.

program that serves to enhance the congregation's worship resources. Still others might use their school facility to serve a need in the community, like English classes for immigrants. While these examples are just a few of many, the point remains that when the pastor encourages an appropriate mission for the Lutheran elementary school among his people, the school can bring abundant blessings to individuals, congregation, and community alike. The benefits Lutheran elementary schools offer encourage pastors not only to understand their mission but to join in carrying that mission out.

## **II. The Pastor Joins in the Lutheran School's Mission**

### **Context**

Understanding and appreciating a Lutheran school's mission in a particular congregation takes a deliberate effort, yet it represents an essential part of the Lutheran pastor's relationship to a Lutheran elementary school. Whereas the previous section examined the pastor's assumptions and attitudes, this one looks at concrete actions the pastor performs in the school itself. How a specific pastor who serves a particular congregation actually participates in that mission affords a higher degree of flexibility.<sup>73</sup> The ways in which a pastor serves within a Lutheran elementary school depend more on situational circumstances. For example, what unique gifts and abilities does the individual pastor possess for use in an elementary school? What time constraints do the other duties of his ministry impose on his regular schedule? What specific needs does the school have? While the answers to such questions obviously vary to a wide degree, some general guidelines still fit the majority of situations.<sup>74</sup>

### **The Pastor's School Relationships**

Authors on the topic and called workers in the field tend to agree that the pastor's most important activities in the Lutheran elementary school revolve around relationships. The members of the Wisconsin Synod's recently formed special committee on Lutheran schools, in

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<sup>73</sup> Stucky, *The Desired Role vs. the Actual Role of the Lutheran Elementary School Board*, 12.

<sup>74</sup> The wide range of possible roles make it essential for the pastor to define his role clearly; otherwise, as Stucky notes, frustration and conflict often result. Stucky, *The Desired Role vs. the Actual Role of the Lutheran Elementary School Board*, 48.

fact, were unanimous in their opinion that relationships represent the single most important consideration in WELS elementary schools today, most notably the relationships between members of the faculty themselves.<sup>75</sup> They agree that the state of these relationships are foundational to the future of Lutheran elementary schools.<sup>76</sup> Negative relationships among a church and school faculty harbor mistrust, resentment, and uncooperativeness. The result for a congregation's ministry is only hurtful since working for the common good becomes difficult or impossible. Positive relationships, on the other hand, produce teamwork, support, and encouragement toward a unified mission. "How the faculty relates to one another makes every difference in my ministry," commented one educator. If how a church and school faculty interact with each other means so much to the future of Lutheran elementary schools, then the pastor will without doubt want to make these relationships one of his major concerns.

An environment of positive relationships begins with the leaders of that faculty. In most circumstances, therefore, the first relationship to consider in the Lutheran elementary school is that between the pastor and the school principal. An effective relationship between these two gospel ministers rests on two foundations: mutual trust and regular communication.<sup>77</sup> The principal trusts his pastor to provide the spiritual oversight and care (both in the congregation at large and within the school itself) for which the Lord has called him. He respects and appreciates the pastor's position and the duties that lead to his involvement in the school. By the same token, the pastor reciprocates with the same level of trust. He trusts the principal to serve as the elementary school's chief administrator for which the Lord has called him.<sup>78</sup> The pastor appreciates the principal's educational expertise, the kind of expertise pastors typically do not have to the same degree. This type of trust serves as a great blessing in the pastor's ministry because it allows the pastor to entrust school matters to the principal.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> This information reflects personal interviews with members of this committee. See appendices for samples of these interviews.

<sup>76</sup> Oesch, *The Church-Worker Team*, 14.

<sup>77</sup> Gerken, "The Lutheran Elementary School and the Congregation," 106.

<sup>78</sup> Not only is it wise for the pastor to appreciate this fact, but it is equally important (for his own sake) to recognize that he is not the school administrator. Bender, *The Lutheran Day School: Its Theological Foundation and Practice*, 19.

<sup>79</sup> Patterson, "What Practical Experience Teaches," 4f.

Both pastor and principal, however, find times when the pastor's involvement in the elementary school is not only beneficial but even prudent and necessary. Such times require a relationship of open and honest communication. When major issues arise, both pastor and principal can and should consult with one another. Not only can the two benefit from what their unique backgrounds and experience might offer to a particular situation, but if nothing else, they can benefit from each other's Christian encouragement. The pastor therefore serves himself and his congregation well when he makes opportunities for such communication. One pastor shared his practice of scheduling a standing weekly lunch meeting with the school principal, if for no other reason than to develop their friendship. Another pastor shared stories of the fishing trips he and his principal take a few times each year. Regardless of what suits a particular pastor and principal, these relationship-building activities are invaluable because they encourage a situation in which the team can work together for the common good.<sup>80</sup> Acknowledging these blessings encourages at the very least an open-door policy that encourages frequent and honest communication between pastor and principal.<sup>81</sup> Finally, a positive relationship between pastor and principal serves as an excellent model for others in the school community - teachers, staff, and families alike. Pastor Donald Patterson at the 2011 Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium made a simple, yet crucial comment: "We must have an open, honest relationship between pastor and principal."<sup>82</sup>

Just as a pastor desires to maintain a strong relationship with the school principal, so he should work to nurture a relationship with others on the school faculty as well. In a number of interviews, WELS teachers expressed the sentiment that the pastors of their school and congregation rarely take the initiative to develop a relationship with them. In fact, an overwhelming majority of teachers reported a desire for their pastor to relate to them as the single most important thing a pastor could do for them, yet an almost equal majority reported that their pastor could improve in this area. Meanwhile, a majority of WELS pastors reported

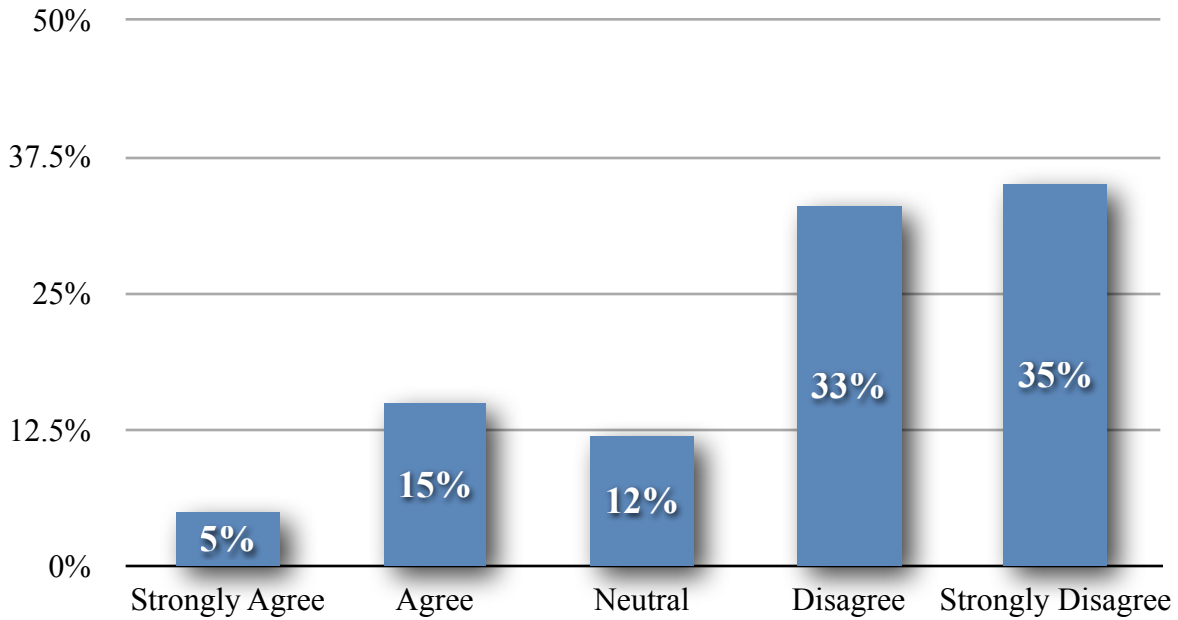
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<sup>80</sup> Loomans, *School Purpose: Why Congregations Operate Lutheran Schools*, 7.

<sup>81</sup> Those with experience also share how communication not only helps solve problems, but often, it helps eliminate problems from happening in the first place.

<sup>82</sup> Patterson, "What Practical Experience Teaches, 4.

**Chart 5. Faculty Relationships**



*I sometimes find it difficult to interact with the elementary school faculty.*

that they did not consider interacting with their faculty a problem (Chart 5).<sup>83</sup> Perhaps these trends suggest a potential blind spot among WELS pastors who may feel like they are adequately reaching out to the teachers, while the teachers feel just the opposite. Ideally, teachers expressed the desire to feel like they could go to their pastor with a trouble of any type - personal, spiritual, or professional - and trust that their pastor would offer appropriate help. That the pastor should desire this type of relationship seems natural as well; not only does it create an environment that will best serve the ministry of congregation and school,<sup>84</sup> but it also gives him opportunity to serve as the spiritual shepherd of his congregation's teachers, whom his call to the congregation also gives him the right and responsibility to serve.

As a pastor joins in the Lutheran elementary school's mission, a few more relationships are worthwhile for him to consider. He is wise, for example, to cultivate a relationship with the school parents because through that relationship, he can encourage them in their calling to raise

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<sup>83</sup> Many teachers were also quick to point out that they understood the work load of a typical pastor's schedule leaves little time to nurture relationships across the faculty. The interviews did not reveal a sense of blame for pastors but rather a desire to be closer to them.

<sup>84</sup> Consider as well how the preexistence of a relationship helps when the pastor might want to share a word of constructive criticism.

their children in the Lord.<sup>85</sup> Making a deliberate effort to form these relationships requires a degree of forethought, but it is not particularly demanding. Spending a few moments at the school entrance and greeting parents at the beginning or end of the day, for example, can offer the pastor a nice break from his study, while over time ensuring that parents (especially non-member parents)<sup>86</sup> recognize and feel comfortable around the the pastor. Even the smallest investments of time and effort can yield great dividends in results.

Finally, the pastor must consider his relationship with the members of the school's governing body. In most circumstances, a WELS elementary school operates under the leadership of a board or some similar group of leaders who are, in turn, answerable to the congregation's governing body, that is, the congregational board that answers to the voters in assembly.<sup>87</sup> While as school administrator, the principal works most directly with the school board, the pastor demonstrates prudence when he too cultivates a relationship with these leaders. Sometimes the pastor's call prescribes his involvement with the school governing body to a greater or lesser degree. Sometimes, for example, the pastor serves an official role in the school governance (as "superintendent," for example), other times not. In his study of Lutheran schools, Bradd Stucky notes the important place a pastor occupies in the leadership of a school, regardless of a specific administration structure. He writes, "Pastors fulfill their roles leading the faculty, the staff, and the students in spiritual matters; respecting the role of the principal as administrator; meeting with the principal on a regular basis; and serving as an adviser to the school board."<sup>88</sup> In this way, he can show the school board that he has interest in and supports their work, that he appreciates their efforts, and that he stands ready to offer counsel and advice when it might be useful. Some pastors relate their practice of attending school board meetings regularly in an *ex officio* capacity; others leave these meetings in the principal's hands. Whatever arrangement is agreeable in a particular congregation, the pastor will in some way want to

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<sup>85</sup> Zarling, "What the Mission of the Church Teaches," 30.

<sup>86</sup> Nor can we forget the obvious point that these efforts often result in evangelism opportunities.

<sup>87</sup> Gerken, "The Lutheran Elementary School and the Congregation," 91.

<sup>88</sup> Stucky, *The Desired Role vs. the Actual Role of the Lutheran Elementary School Board*, 10.

communicate that this board's work is an important and valued part of the congregation's ministry.

### **The Pastor's School Day**

In addition to the relationships the pastor fosters, the way he manages his regular involvement in the actual school day deserves consideration. What represents an appropriate level of interaction between the pastor and the elementary school? Not only do the demands of the pastoral ministry make excessive involvement inadvisable, but it is also a true that pastors are not full-time elementary educators. The pastor must, therefore, find opportunities to serve within the school in ways that are appropriate to the pastoral office.<sup>89</sup> Frequently, one such way is to share daily instruction, typically in religion classes.<sup>90</sup> Although it is difficult from time to time not to take such involvement for granted, it is equally difficult to overestimate the value of this work for the school. Not only do school children benefit from receiving religious instruction from the staff member with (in all likelihood) the most theological training, but through that time they get to know their spiritual shepherd and can grow comfortable talking to him about life's issues.<sup>91</sup>

The pastor can communicate his commitment to the Lutheran elementary school by other forms of participation as well. Common ways include conducting chapel services and taking an active role in faculty meetings and discussions. As schedules permit, the pastor can participate in less formal ways as well. Students and teacher alike often appreciate the pastor who uses an open block of time for a prearranged classroom visit.<sup>92</sup> Sometimes the pastor can participate in some kind of activity, reading to the younger children, for example. The more energetic pastor might even be willing to participate in the children's recess activities. While such things are not groundbreaking, they nevertheless are meaningful ways a pastor can join in the mission of the Lutheran elementary school.

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<sup>89</sup> Oesch, *The Church-Worker Team*, 18.

<sup>90</sup> Stucky, *The Desired Role vs. the Actual Role of the Lutheran Elementary School Board*, 47.

<sup>91</sup> Gerken, "The Lutheran Elementary School and the Congregation," 106.

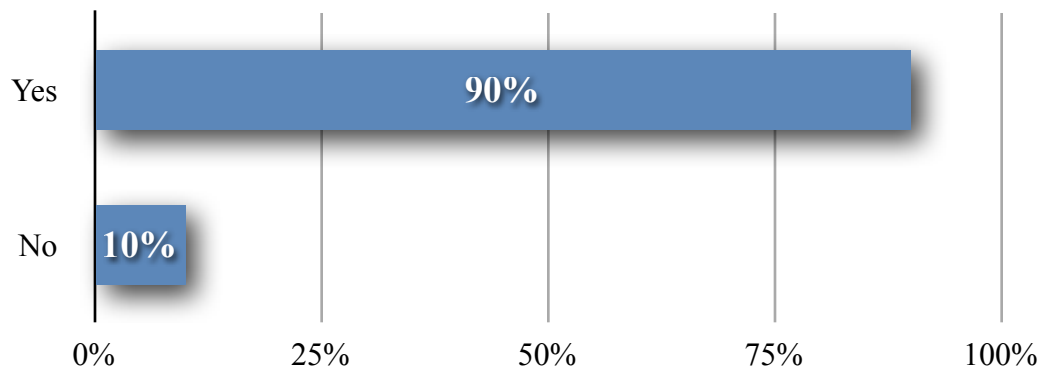
<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*



## Summary

Just as the pastor's understanding of the Lutheran elementary school's mission is essential, so his joining in that mission brings about blessing for its ministry. The overwhelming majority of WELS pastors report that they view their congregation's Lutheran elementary school as a significant part of their ministry (Chart 6). That sentiment bodes well for the future of Lutheran elementary schools. Members of the Wisconsin Synod, therefore, can be glad that its pastors almost without exception indicate a willingness to join in the Lutheran elementary school's mission.

### Chart 6. Pastoral Views of Schools



*I consider the elementary school a significant part of my ministry.*

## III. The Pastor Supports the Lutheran Elementary School's Mission

### Context

The response of WELS pastors in the field reveals that the broadness of the pastoral ministry for many pastors limits the amount of time they can dedicate to the elementary school's ministry, though many would like to participate even more. Author Kurt Taylor, however, points out that the willingness itself makes all the difference. In other words, the pastor who exhibits the willingness to serve alongside a Lutheran elementary school is of great value because he is the school's advocate in all aspects of his ministry.<sup>93</sup> Not only does the pastor join in the school's mission; he supports it throughout all his work.

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<sup>93</sup> Taylor, *Christ's Commission and Lutheran Schools*, 92.

## Support in Financial Matters

An area that deserves special attention in today's context concerns financial matters. As the Lutheran pastor shepherds a congregation, he can support the Lutheran elementary school in his consideration for it in the matter of finance. The challenge of supporting a school ministry has only grown in recent history, and that trend shows no signs of reversing.<sup>94</sup> More striking is the fact that early Lutherans faced this same challenge; in many ways, their situation paralleled that of today. Though economic conditions were gradually increasing the average quality of life across Europe, providing for elementary education nevertheless proved an elusive goal. The people needed encouragement, and Luther took up the task. In his sermon on keeping children in schools, he offered the following assessment:

Dear friends, the common people appear to be quite indifferent to the matter of maintaining the schools. I see them withdrawing their children from instruction and turning them to the making of a living and to caring for their bellies. Besides, they either will not or cannot think what a horrible and un-Christian business this is and what great and murderous harm they are doing everywhere in so serving the devil. For this reason I have undertaken to give you this exhortation, on the chance that there may be some who still have at least a modicum of belief that there is a God in heaven and a hell prepared for unbelievers, and that by this exhortation they might be led to change their minds.<sup>95</sup>

Today's pastor finds himself confronting a similar scenario. Many Lutheran elementary schools today struggle to meet operating expenses, and current trends are exacerbating the problem. The cost of funding elementary schools has outpaced inflation, in large part because uncontrollable costs like utilities and faculty benefit packages have experienced above-average increases. All such factors combine to make finances a grave concern for the future of Lutheran elementary schools.

As congregational leaders formulate and execute a plan to support the elementary school's ministry, the pastor occupies a unique position to guide and assist them in their work. In so doing, he can support the Lutheran elementary school's mission. For example, the pastor can encourage an adequate level of support for the school.<sup>96</sup> Because of his acquaintance with the

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<sup>94</sup> Meitler Consultants, Inc., "Attitudes about Lutheran Schools," 1.

<sup>95</sup> Luther, "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," 219.

<sup>96</sup> Weeks, *The Christian School*, 92. It is certain that this goal is exactly the thing congregational leaders most often desire. While they can have the best of intentions, however, they often need and request the insight of someone within the staff for guidance. Martin Wessler, *Funding Lutheran Schools* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 7.

school and its ministry, he can offer unique insight into the various expenses a school requires to function well. One of the most important of such expenses is allocating its faculty and staff an income that provides for their earthly needs.<sup>97</sup> The pastor can serve as his fellow called workers' advocate and ensure that they do not have to carry out their ministry under financial hardship, since such a situation benefits no one.<sup>98</sup> In addition, the pastor can team with the school principal to keep the other needs of the school before the congregation. Supplying up-to-date textbooks and other teaching resources, for example, represents a costly endeavor but one well worth the effort. The pastor can also encourage faithful upkeep of buildings and grounds so that the school remains useable for the school community and attractive to visitors.<sup>99</sup>

Financial realities have also given the pastor an opportunity to offer guidance as the Lutheran elementary school plans for its income. In recent decades, many congregations have explored new ways of funding their elementary schools. Whereas in past years congregations were often able to provide for school expenses solely from the congregational budget, new realities have led many congregations to supplement that support with other forms of income. These new realities have made it necessary for congregations to finance their schools with extreme care and creativity.<sup>100</sup> Many congregations today, for example, charge parents some type of fee or tuition for their children's education. Other schools seek funding from the charitable wings of local business. Still other schools reside where government funds provide some funding to non-public schools.<sup>101</sup> As congregations face current realities and seek answers to difficult questions concerning finances, the pastor can use his position of leadership to encourage an

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<sup>97</sup> Beck, *Lutheran Elementary Schools in the United States*, 466. Beck notes that one cannot blame low salaries on a lack of generosity. On the contrary, he points out that salaries are often low because funding a school is simply a difficult undertaking for most Lutheran congregations.

<sup>98</sup> Richard H. Engebrecht, "Financing the Lutheran Elementary School," *Lutheran Elementary Schools in Action*, ed. Victor C. Krause, 340-373 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 351.

<sup>99</sup> One cannot overestimate this requirement in a society that is quick to judge something on the basis of its appearance. Walter O. Seibel, "Constructing and Maintaining the Lutheran Elementary School Plant," *Lutheran Elementary Schools in Action*, ed. Victor C. Krause, 314-339 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 331.

<sup>100</sup> Engebrecht, "Financing the Lutheran Elementary School," 372.

<sup>101</sup> Kramer offers a historical summary of the funding of Lutheran schools. While he admits the financial challenge of funding an elementary school, he also points out a study among Missouri Synod congregations that demonstrated how closing a school almost never solves financial problems for a congregation over the long-term. Kramer, *Lutheran Elementary Schools*, 68.

appropriate balance of faithful Christian stewardship of the resources God has provided together with a relentless Christian love that seeks to bring the gospel to children no matter the cost.<sup>102</sup> In short, he can support the school's mission by ensuring finances always serve, but never undermine, that mission.<sup>103</sup>

Finally, a pastor is wise to guard his own heart in the matter of financial issues. While WELS pastors overwhelmingly agree that elementary schools help their congregations carry out their mission, a majority (Chart 7) still feel that the school places budget constraints on the congregation. Feeling that the school swallows up too many funds is an easy way for any pastor to think. One needs the constant reminder that the school and congregation work together, ultimately for a united mission. Professor Heinrich Vogel of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary offered valuable insight on these issues. He noted that real arguments against Lutheran education without fail derive from financial issues.<sup>104</sup> In spite of those challenges, however, Professor Vogel wrote, "Immortal souls cannot and dare not be weighed in the balance against gold and silver."<sup>105</sup> So much did Professor Vogel value Christian education that he simply could not consider finances a worthy reason against it. Finally, he made the observation that financial challenge is, in fact, a "blessing in disguise," because whenever something has great value, it demands great commitment.<sup>106</sup> Would that all pastors show such unwavering commitment to Christian education!

### **Support in Modeling Attitudes**

The pastor can also show his support of the school community and its activities as he models an attitude of appreciation for them. He can show respect toward the school faculty with an intent that others in the congregation do likewise. An atmosphere in which the teachers

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>103</sup> He can make sure, for example, that accepting funds from a third party would never obstruct the gospel proclamation at the school or that the charging of tuition does not keep children away from the gospel.

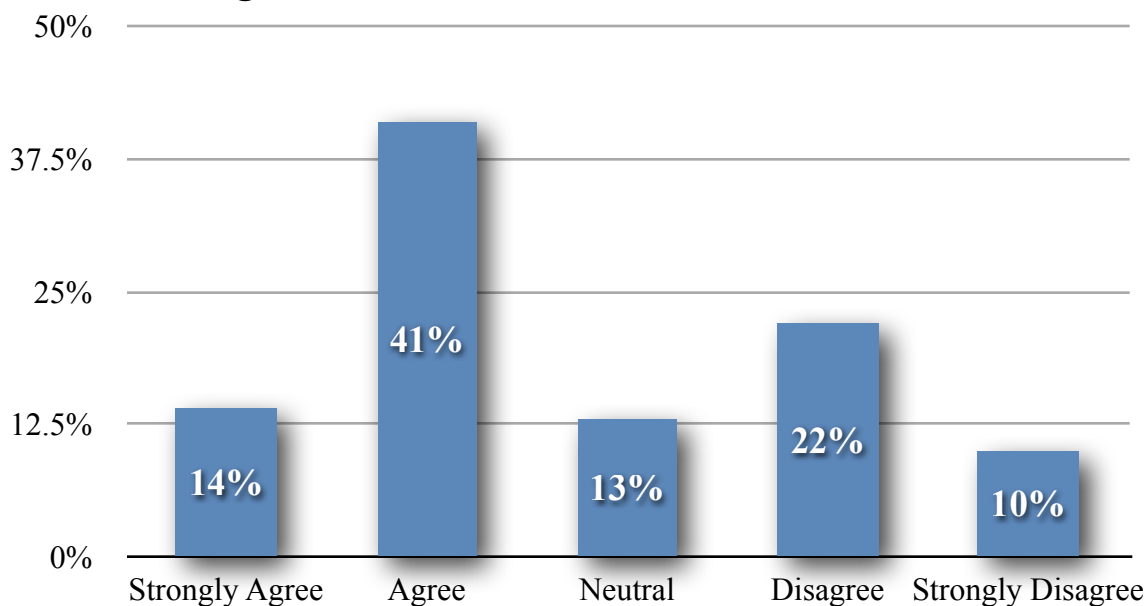
<sup>104</sup> Heinrich Vogel, "What is the Church's Responsibility with Regard to the Secondary Education of its Youth?" (19th Biennial Convention, Southeastern Wisconsin District, WELS, 21-24 June 1954), 12.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

receive respect and appreciation as gospel ministers adds legitimacy to the school itself.<sup>107</sup> In addition, as the pastor shows appreciation for the school’s various activities (athletic, dramatic, etc.), he shows that he values the school community’s work and, in doing so, helps others value them as well.<sup>108</sup>

**Chart 7. Budget Concerns**



*I sometimes feel the elementary school constrains other budgetary needs in the congregation.*

The pastor’s unique position means he can demonstrate that attitude in a very public way throughout the congregation. His sermons at public worship, for sample, can highlight the blessings and purpose of the school with appropriate application.<sup>109</sup> As the pastor teaches Bible studies, leads various groups, and offers pre-meeting devotions, he can remind the congregation of all the blessings of their elementary school and encourage them to treasure it as he does.

<sup>107</sup> Patterson, “What Practical Experience Teaches,” 15.

<sup>108</sup> Weeks, *The Christian School*, 92.

<sup>109</sup> Luther, for example, reflected his characteristic boldness in support for Lutheran schools. In his letter to the councilmen, he chided Germany’s leaders that “schools are everywhere being left to go to wreck and ruin.” Schmidt, *Lutheran Parochial Schools*, 19.

The pastor also can support the elementary school's mission as he serves as a model in his own use of it.<sup>110</sup> Most pastors with families have the opportunity to model a faithful use of the school to other parents of the congregation. Though occasions may arise when a pastor and his wife cannot make use of the school, if they have a child with special educational needs, for example, such occasions are rarities and would not diminish the pastor's ability to support the school's mission in other ways.

A final consideration concerns supporting the future of Lutheran elementary schools. The need for quality teachers who will serve future generations is constant.<sup>111</sup> A pastor, therefore, not only serves his congregation's school but those throughout the synod as he both encourages young people with appropriate gifts to consider ministry and as he fosters an appreciation for the synodical institutions that provide training for these future gospel ministers. In his support of the Lutheran school's mission, the pastor thereby helps ensure these institutions' survival into the future.

## **Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Study**

The pastor plays a critical role in the Lutheran elementary school. Too frequently in the Wisconsin Synod today, news breaks of yet another Lutheran school closing its doors for the last time. Solutions to these problems are complex and require the combined effort of synodical leaders, educational professionals, and concerned members across the synod. As leaders in their congregations, pastors occupy a unique position to combat this disturbing trend afflicting Lutheran elementary schools. The ways they could accomplish this goal are many and diverse. Perhaps most important is simply the pastor's recognition of the great influence he has.

As pastors think more about these issues, more questions undoubtedly will arise. One could explore in detail administrative models within WELS elementary schools to determine patterns of effectiveness. The matter of funding Lutheran schools and its effect on the schools themselves also deserves attention. Finally, a fascinating area of study would determine the relationship between churches and schools to determine any pitfalls to avoid or success stories to

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<sup>110</sup> Gerken, "The Lutheran Elementary School and the Congregation," 105.

<sup>111</sup> Kramer, *Lutheran Elementary Schools*, 153.

emulate. Through these and further studies, it is this author's prayer that the Lord of the Church would continue to bless the Lutheran Church with a rich heritage of Christ-centered education.

*For ev'ry earthly grace and gift  
We thank you, dearest Father.  
Now teach us Lord; our thoughts uplift  
That heav'nly fruit we gather.  
Our fathers knew and kept in view  
True wisdom's worth and pleasure  
They prized as jewels their Christian schools  
And left a lasting treasure. (CW 511:2)*

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## Research Document 1: Interview of a Parish Pastor

Interview date:

Interviewee:

Interviewee's congregation & location:

Congregation size:

School size:

Number of school faculty:

1. How do you appraise the use of a Lutheran elementary school in your congregation's attempts to fulfill the goal of Christian education of youth? Are there alternate approaches you have tried, recommend, or are willing to comment on?
2. What blessings do you and your congregation experience as a result of its Lutheran elementary school?
3. What challenges do you and your congregation experience as a result of its Lutheran elementary school?
4. What roles and responsibilities do you as pastor fulfill in the Lutheran elementary school?
5. Please describe your day-to-day activities that deal with the congregation's Lutheran elementary school.
6. Please describe your working relationship with the school's principal.
7. Please describe your working relationship with the school's teachers.
8. Would you care to see any specific changes in your congregation's elementary school? If so, what would they be?
9. What future challenges do you see for your congregation's Lutheran elementary school, both short and long-term? What are the congregation's plans to address them?
10. Can you identify ways in which Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary or WELS could have or now can serve you and your people as you jointly seek to carry out Christian education in your parish?

## **Research Document 2: Interview of a District President**

Interview date:

Interviewee:

1. From your perspective and experience, is the Lutheran elementary school the best way to fulfill the goals of Christian education in parishes of your district? Are there other approaches you regularly recommend?
  
2. What kinds of issues do you encounter in your position that relate to Lutheran elementary schools?
  
3. What advice can you offer a pastor as he serves with a Lutheran elementary school?
  
4. What advice can you offer for principals and teachers as they serve in a congregation and with a pastor?
  
5. What, if anything, can pastors do to ensure the survival of our Lutheran elementary schools?
  
6. What, if anything, can principals and teachers do to ensure the survival of our Lutheran elementary schools?
  
7. What are some general principles to keep in mind in maintaining positive relationships among the faculty of a congregation with a school?
  
8. What are some general principles to keep in mind in maintaining a positive relationship between congregation and school?

## **Research Document 3: Interview of a Professional Educator**

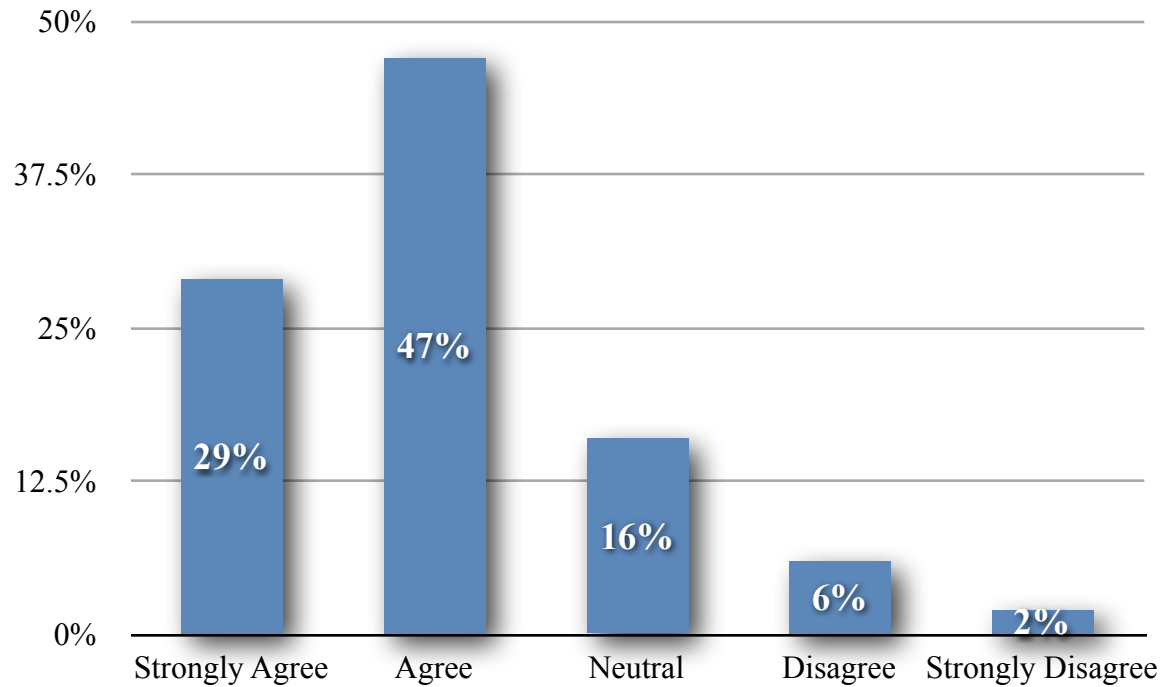
Interview date:

Interviewee:

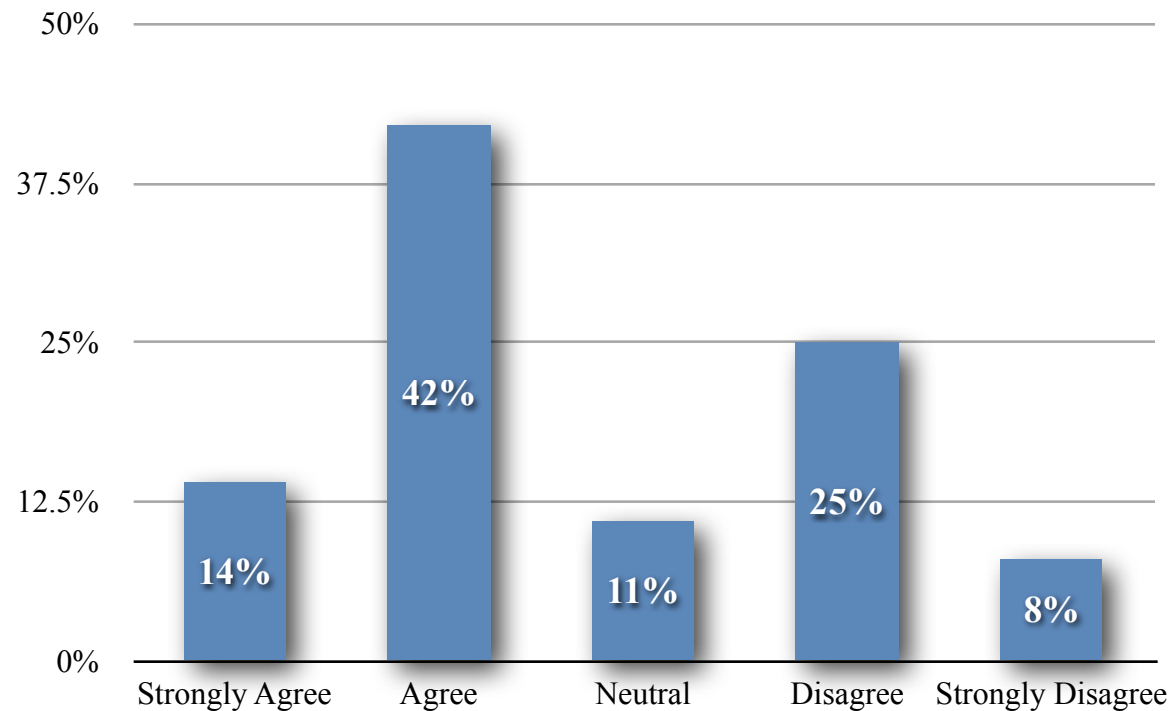
1. What different things would you identify as ideal ways for a pastor to interact with a congregation's Lutheran elementary school?
2. What advice would you offer a pastor as he serves at a congregation with a Lutheran elementary school?
3. What advice would you offer a pastor as he interacts with educational professionals, that is, principals, teachers, and others?
4. What difficulties do you often see arising as a pastor relates to a school? How could a pastor avoid these difficulties?
5. How do you advise your fellow professionals in the educational field to relate to the pastors with whom they serve?
6. What functions do you feel an educator in a Lutheran elementary school can have in the congregation at large?

## Research Document 4: Survey of WELS Parish Pastors

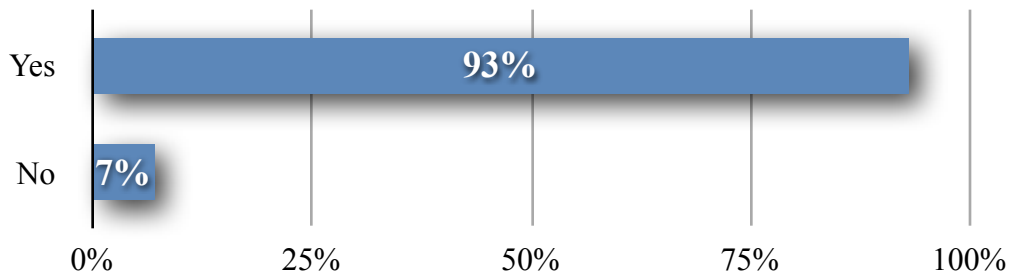
Survey conducted February 17-24, 2011, 354 respondents



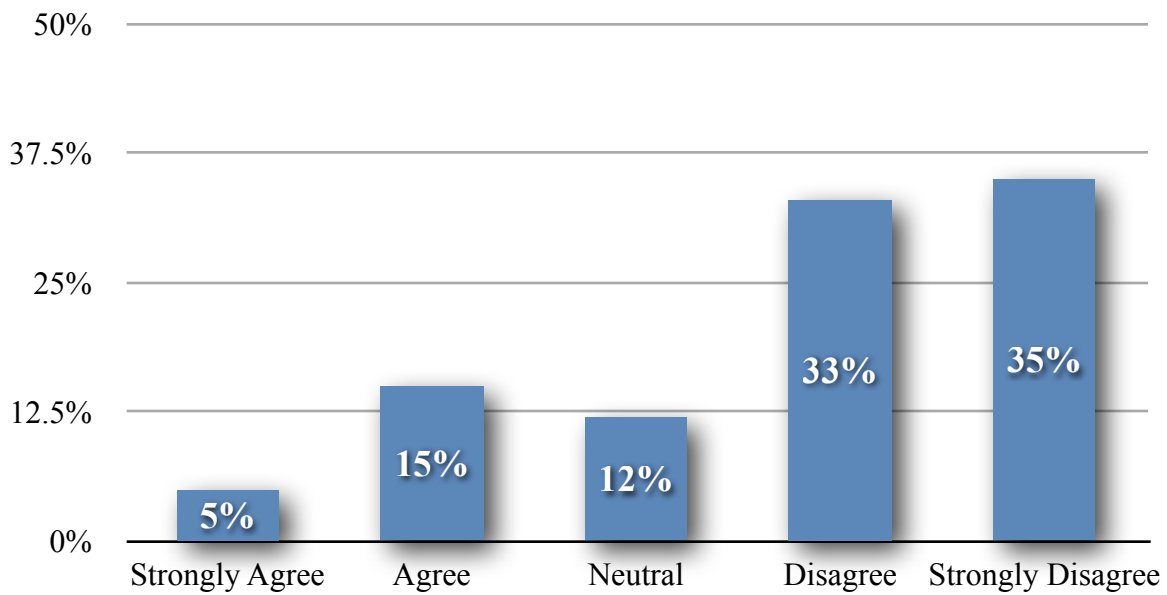
*I see examples every day of my congregation's elementary school helping the congregation carry out its ministry.*



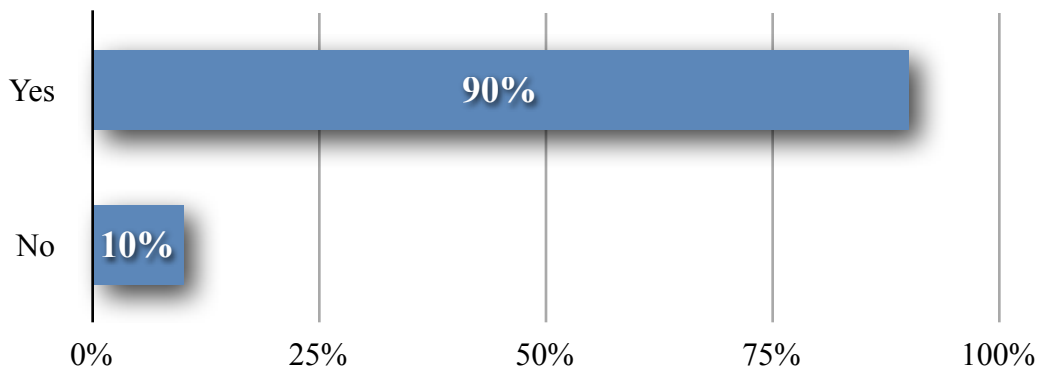
*I sometimes feel the elementary school overshadows other areas of the congregation's ministry.*



*My congregation sees the elementary school as a significant part of its ministry.*

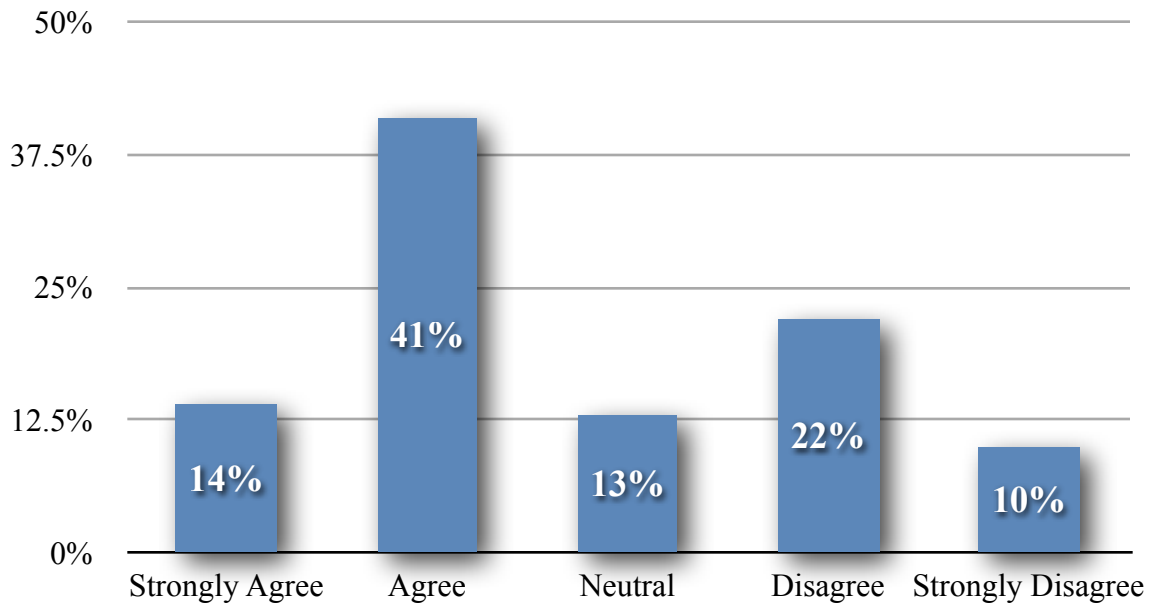


*I sometimes find it difficult to interact with the elementary school faculty.*



*I consider the elementary school a significant part of my ministry.*





*I sometimes feel the elementary school constrains other budgetary needs in the congregation.*