

THE HISTORY OF MARTIN LUTHER SCHOOL

THE LUTHERAN SCHOOL ASSOCIATION
OF WARREN

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INTRODUCTION

The Spring of 1982! I can remember standing outside of the gymnasium at Martin Luther School after the graduation service. The six of us graduates, shaking the hands of our loved ones and plotting how we would destroy the dreaded Records that we had to play through the years at MLS. A new chapter in our life was now beginning - the high school years. Four of the group were planning to go to the other MLS - Michigan Lutheran Seminary. I was heading off to Northwestern Preparatory School in Watertown, Wisconsin. As I write this now in April of 1998, I am finishing my formal education in preparation for the pastoral ministry. One last assignment is due. The Senior Church History Paper. I have decided to write about the history of Martin Luther Grade School of Madison Heights, Michigan, since I am the first graduate of this school to enter the pastoral ministry. The history of this school is really quite an interesting one because of its type. In the late 70's, it was the first association school in our synod.

BEGINNINGS

The seed for the beginnings of an association school grew out of area pastors discussing the idea in study groups, interest from some parents, and discussions at congregational council/voter's meetings. The date of July, 1976, was set to meet at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Sterling Heights, to discuss the concept of a joint Christian day school. At that first meeting all in attendance set forth their ideas. It was noted that the entire area had no WELS elementary school and that a number of congregations had tried unsuccessfully to establish one. Would it be possible for all the area congregations,

working together, to establish a school? The pastors decided to “feel out” their respective congregations. Approximately a year after this initial meeting, the idea of an association school would soon become a reality. Martin Luther School would become the first association school in the Wisconsin Synod. There were nine congregations that comprised the association (Ascension, Cross of Glory, Divine Grace, Hope, Mt. Olive, Our Shepherd, Zion, Zoar, St. Mark’s).

On February 5, 1977, the first meeting of the Christian Day School Study Committee was held at Our Shepherd Lutheran Church, Warren. The lay representatives and the pastors from the area congregations faced many problems - location, financial responsibility, transportation, organizational structure, and numerous others. Many meetings later, in July 1977, the committee presented its recommendations to the individual congregations as well as the philosophy and objectives of the school (printed below). This resulted in the birth of the Lutheran School Association of Warren. It was decided that the school was to be run by a board of education comprised of the pastors and lay representatives of each member congregation. Plans were made to begin classes in September, 1978.

MARTIN LUTHER SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY

Because man is by nature a lost and condemned creature; because God has worked out man’s salvation through the atoning death of His Son, Jesus Christ; because salvation is laid hold of only through faith which the Holy Ghost works by means of the inerrant, absolute Word of God; because all of the earthly activities in the life of the redeemed child of God are motivated by faith in Christ and focused in Him; because the

whole body of knowledge proceeds from and is centered in the creative work and continuing activity of our God, Martin Luther School exists:

MARTIN LUTHER SCHOOL OBJECTIVES

TO EQUIP THE CHILD SPIRITUALLY

To teach the child the Scriptures in its truth and purity. To teach the child God's plan of salvation as found in the Bible. To teach the child the basic Christian doctrines contained in the Bible. To apply all Scriptural truths to bring about the fruits of faith in the life of the child. To equip the child with those things essential for a Christian life during his time of grace. To equip the child spiritually by providing a Christian environment and experiences which will enable him to grow in his faith, by encouraging the child to live his faith, by instilling a reverence for what is sacred and holy, by instilling in the child a love for God through encouragement of individual and family Bible study and prayers and also through encouragement of devout public worship, by instilling a desire to be a good steward by giving freely of his time, talents, and treasure for the work of the church in all areas, by encouraging the child to dedicate his life to the full-time ministry of the church so that he may serve God in whatever walk of life he may enter.

TO EQUIP THE CHILD MENTALLY

By instructing the child in all appropriate branches of learning, by treating each child as a unique individual, by encouraging each child to use his God-given talents to the fullest extent, by providing experiences which will help him to meet and deal with the problems of life, and by developing in the child the ability to compare the correctness of the learning of man with the absolutes of God's Word.

TO DEVELOP THE CHILD PHYSICALLY

By teaching him to respect his body as a temple of the Holy Ghost, by providing experiences which promote physical well-being through a physical education program and inter-scholastic sports, by encouraging cooperation with the public health agencies, by encouraging good health habits, and by developing an interest in physical activities as a wise use of leisure time.

TO PREPARE THE CHILD SOCIALLY

By instilling a respect for each other, for those in authority, and for his own and other people's property, by encouraging Christian love toward all people, by teaching the child to participate responsibly as a Christian citizen of his country, and by teaching and encouraging good manners.

TO CARE FOR THE CHILD'S EMOTIONAL NEEDS

By standing in "loco parentes" (in place of the parents), by helping him to cope with his sensory feelings (sensations such as pain, cold, bodily well-being and sickness), by helping him to understand and control the feelings that govern his thoughts and actions (such as sorrow, anger, gladness, surprise, love, hatred, trust, distrust) and learn to give release to these feelings in a God-pleasing way, and by developing aesthetic feelings toward the wonders of God's creation.

THE DREAM BECOMES A REALITY

THE FIRST TEACHERS

The dream became a reality when the Lord granted two capable workers early in

1978. On January 31, 1978, Leon Brands received the call from LSAW(Lutheran School Association of Warren). After much deliberation, he accepted the call. According to the March 6th minutes of the Board of Education, two other teachers were called by the association. Elizabeth Serwe & Linda Eckhoff. Both of which declined the call. The District President suggested the name of Susan Wichert, of Benton Harbor. She was about to be married and was going to move to the Detroit area. On May 1st, her acceptance letter was received. On June 17th she was married and became Susan Weir.

THE SCHOOL BUILDING

The Lord again answered all prayers. Pastor Henderson telephoned and/or visited 5-7 area school districts to see if any were interested in selling their facility. The word was also put out to interested parents and congregations to be looking or gathering information on any possible sites that might accommodate 30-40 children. Pastor Henderson met with a representative of Sixma School in the fall of 1977. There were furnished classrooms to be rented in a former public elementary school in Madison Heights, only a few miles west of what was considered the "ideal central location." The children also have access to the playground and to the gymnasium facilities in this school building." Following that meeting, area pastors and any other interested persons met at the location, agreed that it would suit their needs financially and geographically and arrangements were soon made to lease (on a year to year basis) the property from the school district.

A portion of the facility was also leased to various groups from time to time for continuing education classes etc. Sometimes this posed problems with either parking or the interaction of these other groups with the smaller school children. Efforts were made

to keep the facility separated as much as possible to avoid unnecessary conflicts and interruptions to the children's educational experience. The gymnasium, however, was a shared space for all groups and dates and times had to be reserved.

FINANCIAL

The school has a set budget which is divided into two components. Each congregation within the association contributes to half of the budget amount based on the number of its communicant members. This half is referred to as the communicant share. The other half is based on the total number of full time students. This half is referred to as the student share (See also Addendum I, Article VIII). Martin Luther School has usually not had a problem meeting their budget as the budget was based on the number of children in the school as well as the number of communicants from each associated congregation. Each congregation was budgeted according to its size and as size fluctuated, so did the amount of the congregations' contributions. The school also received gifts of money from time to time from outside sources which helped them to meet their budget.

SCHOOL BEGINS

Martin Luther School was started and began with two called workers, a principal, Leon Brands who taught grades 4-8 and a teacher, Susan Weir who taught K-3. 9:00 AM Wednesday, September 6 was the first day of class. 37 students were enrolled which represented 18.1% of the potential in the eight congregations. Leon Brands states:

"The school day went well. The teachers were happy....and it was a happy

group that went home after Day #1. They all returned on Thursday! I went out of my way to make the first days of school pleasant for the students, so that "school" didn't bring to mind negative feelings. Comments and reactions from students were positive and feedback from parents was also good. We complied with state regulations, school text and other supplies were on hand, parental support was evident, as was the grace of God; and so Martin Luther school was a reality!"¹

Ms. Weir only taught kindergarten through November of that first year and then Linda DeRuiter was called as a full time kindergarten teacher. Following that first year, there were three full time teachers and the grades were divided as Kindergarten, 1-5, and 6-8. The enrollment grew to 48 as the year progressed. During that first year a music program was added. Mrs. Pat Maaske volunteered to set it up and run the program. Pat, who was a substitute public school teacher, would come twice a week to conduct 3 twenty minute music sessions. A library was also begun with the help of volunteers.

THE YEARS THAT FOLLOWED

CONSTITUTION

Martin Luther required a unique constitution because it was unique in the Synod. By the start of school on September 5, the Constitution proper was completed. The By-Laws were a different story. Many long and drawn out meetings were held before it was finished in 1981. But that wasn't the end. Discussion was reopened in 1982 and was finally printed in 1983 and distributed in 1984 only then to be amended in 1985. This constitution was eventually given out to other church groups who sought to benefit from the groundbreaking work accomplished by Martin Luther's Board. I have attached this

¹Brands, Leon. Organizing and Beginning a Lutheran Elementary School. 1979.

constitution as Addendum I. It is worth reading through it to see how unique it is in almost every aspect.

THE SCHOOL BOARD

The school board itself, which consisted of 17 members (one pastor and at least one lay person from each of the association congregations), was very different from the normal 3-4 member school board which most of our synods grade schools have. This was beneficial in that many experiences and ideas were discussed and these experiences and ideas came from various areas of the of Metropolitan Detroit - city and suburb alike.

Both pastors and lay school board members each had an equal say in how the school was to be run. One group did not dominate the other. None of the pastors on the school board had ever been associated with a school before, so this association school concept would prove to be a new experience for all. Although it is important for both the pastor and lay person(s) to be in agreement, if the pastor does not take the leadership role and is not behind something the congregation will not be either. Likewise, lay leadership needs to be strong because the pastor cannot handle everything.

The parents of the children that went to the school also played a big role in the success of it. They were very cooperative and because they had to drive their children in to school they were able to converse with the principal and teachers on a regular basis (more than just at conference times).

TEACHERS

The success of the school is dependent primarily on a good teaching staff, and the Lord has blessed this school with just that. Here is a list of those teachers:

- ▶ Leon Brands came as the first principle in March of 1978. He left in June of 1983.
- ▶ Susan Weir arrived in May of 1978 and left in 1982.
- ▶ Linda DeRuiter served from September, 1979 until 1981 as Kindergarten teacher. Returned to head the preschool department in 1993.
- ▶ Sheila Toll took over 1st and 2nd grade in 1981 and taught until she got married in 1985.
- ▶ Lisa Ibisch began as Kindergarten teacher in 1982 but left in December of 1982 to have a child.
- ▶ Karla Hutchinson became Kindergarten teacher in December of 1982 and has served in that position to the present time. First grade was also added to her duties in 1994.
- ▶ Susan Hopkins also came in 1982 to teach the middle grades(3-5), but her stay was only a year.
- ▶ Kathy Brands then became the middle grade teacher in 1983 and taught until 1992.
- ▶ Doug Fillner came in as Principle and upper grade teacher in 1983 -present.
- ▶ Lisa Carmichael served on the staff from 1985-1990.
- ▶ Sarah Fillner began teaching then in 1990 - present.
- ▶ Besides the above teachers, there were also many volunteers. Pat Maaske, Betsy Workentine and Gloria Aita all helped with the Music Department.

"This staff has been totally dedicated to its work, realizing that they have served the

Lord, as well as the children.”² One of their main objectives has been to encourage the children to serve the Lord in the public ministry. To this date, 52% of all the graduates have gone to Michigan Lutheran Seminary and one has gone to Northwestern Preparatory School. Out of that 52%, 15 have studied to become parochial school teachers or are in the process of achieving that goal. One is entering the preaching ministry this year, and two more are in the pastor track at Martin Luther College.

BUILDING COMMITTEE

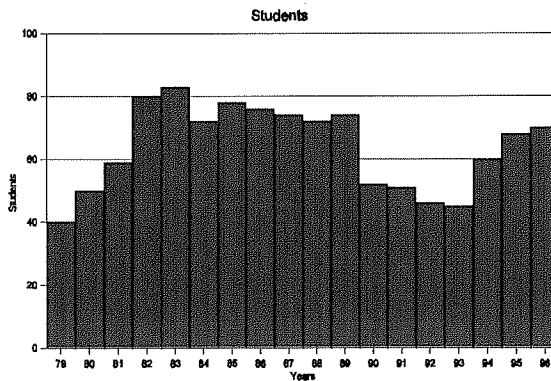
A hope which never materialized was that there would be enough funds to one day build a school rather than rent an existing one. At one time Zion was considered as a possible site for a school addition, but it was later realized that the amount of work necessary to complete such a project would be much too costly. Another reason was that many feared having an association school attached to a particular congregation within the association because it may become “that church’s school.”

A positive to this situation was that the location of the school is away from all churches and is not one church’s school. On the other hand, a negative aspect is that anyone who does not have a child in the school tends to be disconnected from the school. Therefore, some wondered what the money, that was said to be used for the school, was

² Frey, Rev. Edward. History of Martin Luther School.

really being used for. This did not pose a hindrance for those that were really interested in sending their children to a Christian day school, but for those that were members of congregations that did not have school age children. Their negativity with the idea did hinder the overall expansion of the school. Those that did have children in the school would often times invite their friends and neighbors to a special service (Christmas, graduation, etc) which did create added interest in enrollment. See chart to for enrollment trends.

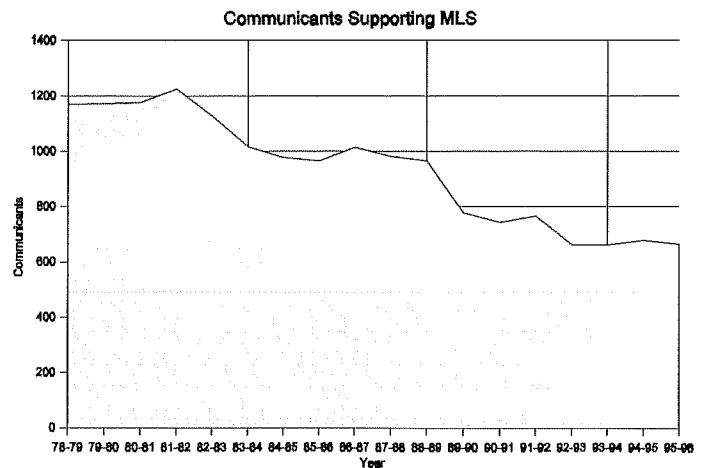
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FINANCIAL

The one area that caused the biggest problem (especially with an association school) is when one or two churches fall behind on their payments which are needed to help meet the budget. In an association setting, when a church or churches

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falls behind on their payments it is not really an issue that they can be forcibly be made to pay, rather it is a commitment on their part that they will pay a designated amount over

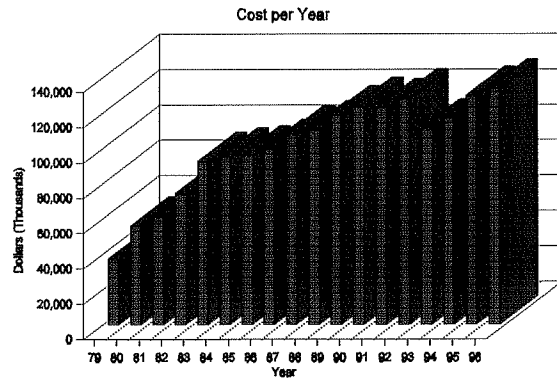
a certain period of time. There were occasions when one or more churches would fall behind on their payments toward the budget of the school and when this happened the school was able to keep operating due to other "reserve" funds (one of

the association churches closing down and leaving a sizable lump sum to the school, non-church member tuition students, savings).

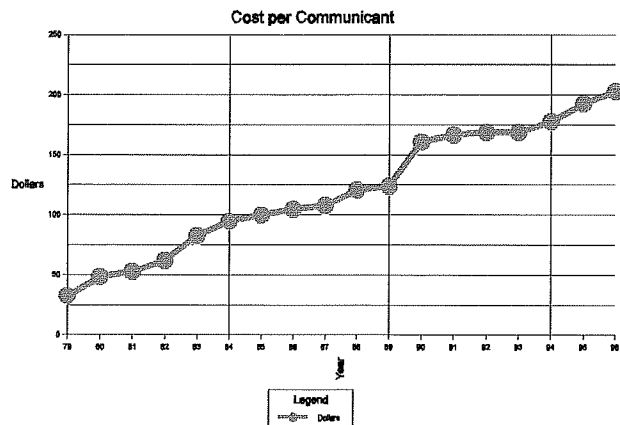
As you can see from these charts, the reasons for some of the churches falling behind was due to the fact of declining numbers of communicants and the rising costs of the school. The numbers of communicants dropped because of the withdrawal of several of the churches from the association. Ascension was the first in 1983, but it returned in 1986. Hope was the next to leave when it disbanded and

closed its doors in 1986. When it left it paid its debt to the school of \$6,116 and gave a gift to the school of \$10,000. When Divine Grace left the association in 1989, it had a severe impact on the school's finances since it had the most pupils attending the Martin

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Luther School.

The "Mile of Pennies " project was enacted to help the school also. Each member congregation saved pennies and then donated them to the school. The goal was to have enough pennies donated to equal the length of a mile. The goal was reached and proved to be an educational experience for the children at the same time.

THE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION SOCIETY

In November, 1978, what started as the Ladies Auxiliary was reorganized as the Booster Club, then eventually changed its name to the Christian Education Society. This group has done many things for the school ever since. They have hosted Book Fairs. Bought uniforms, sweatshirts and T-shirts. They even built a float for a Thanksgiving Day Parade.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Each year the school has a large Christmas production in the gym which all the congregations are invited to attend. At this event one will hear the Gospel message proclaimed in singing and speaking, and also several pieces of music played by a group playing Recorders and other instruments.

SPORTS / ACADEMIC EVENTS

Martin Luther has a fairly wide range of sporting activities that stretch through the year. The year begins with kickball and soccer. With winter comes basketball which has always seemed to be the main sport at Martin Luther. At times the team has been very good, even taking first place in the division couple of times. Then comes spring and along with it track and softball. In track MLS took fourth place three times and in softball, let's

just say we rule, winning 13 out of 15 tournaments.

Martin Luther has also been strong academically, winning the Math Contest 3 different times.

CONCLUSION

The Lord has richly blessed this school in many ways. Excellent teachers, good students, and the support of all the hardworking congregations in the association. Overall it seems that the association concept has worked well and it seems that the schools founding fathers thought things through very carefully to give the school an operating procedure that has led it through 20 years of existence. It also seems as though the school's Christ centered curriculum has had a positive influence on most of the students who have attended the school. With 52% of the graduates continuing on in one of our high schools and with 15 becoming teachers and 1 becoming a pastor, the Lord has truly blessed the efforts of these teachers. May the Lord continually bless those graduates who are pursuing these two very important vocations as well as the efforts of this faculty as they share the Gospel message with their students.

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Frey, Edward. History of Martin Luther School, Madison Heights.

Jahnke, Gene. "Eight Congregations Equal One School" The Northwestern Lutheran. LXV
(December, 1978), 402-403.

Martin Luther School Board Minutes

INTERVIEWS

Leon Brands - May 29, 1997 at 9:30am.

Rev. Robert Ehlers

Rev. Edward Frey - (via phone) May 29, 1997.

Rev. John Henderson - May 30, 1997 at 11:00am.

Karla Hutchinson - May 30, 1997 at 4:00pm.

Doug Fillner - May 30, 1997 at 4:30pm.