

# An Evangelism Perspective of the Lutheran Elementary School

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Your essayist has a special interest in the topic assigned to him. Not only is he deeply interested in the work of evangelism; not only did his call to the Seminary include the development of an evangelism training curriculum for our Seminary students; but, even more to the point at hand, he was from 1965-84 pastor of a congregation, Apostles, in San Jose, California, which from the outset used its school as a mission arm of the congregation and did so with very positive results.

A look at statistics<sup>1</sup> would indicate that in our Synod at the present time use of the Lutheran elementary school as a mission arm of the congregation is more of the exception than the rule. Of the 377 schools in the Synod 185, or 49.1%, have zero unchurched children enrolled in them. Just 17% of our schools fit the following criteria: Ten or more children are unchurched, or 10% or more of the total enrollment is unchurched. Over the past seven years the percentage of unchurched children in our schools has actually declined, from 4.6% in 1980-81 to 3.5% in 1986-87. From 1985-86 to 1986-87 there has been a modest increase, from 3.3% unchurched mission prospects to 3.5%. By way of comparison we might note that the number of unchurched students in LC-MS elementary schools grew from 10% in 1985-86 to 11% this year.<sup>2</sup>

It is especially in the heartland of the Synod that the Lutheran elementary school does not appear to be in substantial use as a mission arm. In the schools of the Western Wisconsin District the percentage of mission children is 2.5%; in the Northern Wisconsin District, 3.4%. In the Southeastern Wisconsin District the percentage is somewhat higher, 5.5%, largely because of the number of mission children in Milwaukee's inner city schools. Contrast with these figures the percentage of mission children in the schools of the North Atlantic (15%), South Atlantic (18.1%), South Central (13%), Pacific-Northwest (16.6%), and Arizona-California (20.7%) Districts.

Should we be encouraging our congregations to make more substantial use of the Lutheran elementary school as a mission arm? If so, what are some of the problems that need to be anticipated and dealt with? What principles should guide the use of the Lutheran elementary school as a mission arm? To suggest answers to questions such as these is the purpose of this essay. The answers have been drawn from three sources: 1. The essayist's experience of being deeply involved in a school that did serve as a mission arm of the church; 2. A certain amount of reading, although the literature that deals specifically with this subject is not in plenteous supply; 3. The response to a questionnaire sent out by your essayist to the 64 congregations of our Synod which have schools in which at least 10% of the children are unchurched or which have at least ten unchurched children enrolled in them.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics supplied by the WELS Board for Parish Education.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Reporter,' LC-MS newsletter for church leaders (Feb 16, 1981, vol. 13, no. 6) p 2.

<sup>3</sup> A gratifying 51 of the 64 congregations responded to the questionnaire, an indication, it appears, of interest in the subject at hand.

The following questions were asked:

1. Is one of the stated purposes of your school that it be a mission arm of your congregation? If Yes and it is In writing, could you please include a copy of your mission statement?
2. Total number of adult confirmations 1982-86. Total number who were directly school-connected.
3. Total number received by affirmation of faith 1982-86. Total number of the above who were directly school-connected.
4. Do you charge a tuition for unchurched, non-member children? If yes, what is the amount?

We will follow this outline:

- I. The purpose of the Lutheran elementary school
- II. The mission potential of the Lutheran elementary school
- III. Problems that need to be acknowledged and dealt with
- IV. Policies to guide schools that seek to be mission arms of the congregation

### **Purpose**

Basic to our understanding of the purpose of the Lutheran elementary school is our understanding of the purpose of the church, of which the school is a part. Our Lord has not made it difficult for us to ascertain the reason for the church's existence. Each of the four Gospels ends on a similar note. In the well-known Matthew 28 passage Jesus instructs his followers to "make disciples of all nations" and to do this by using the means of grace, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19,20). Mark closes with the commission, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:15,16). In the last chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus puts it this way: "The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk 24:46,47). In John, Jesus says to his disciples, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you .... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (Jn 20:21,23).

Equipped with the means of grace, empowered by the Holy Spirit, emboldened by Christ's promise to be with them always, Jesus' followers went out as the church to do the work of the church, a task that can, properly understood, be summed up in just one word: evangelism.

Donald Abdon makes a key point with his thesis: "Evangelism is the task of the church. All other aspects of church life and activity support this task and are the means for carrying out this task." He defines evangelism as "the fundamental Christian mission of bringing the gospel to all people, both within the church and outside of it."<sup>4</sup>

The church has one calling. That calling is to evangelize, to proclaim the good news of forgiveness of sins and life through Jesus. Abdon writes:

The Gospel itself is and remains the same good news of God's love and mercy in Christ for both Christian and non-Christian. For a Christian, the Invitation of the Gospel is applied to one who is

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5. Do you charge a tuition or something comparable, i.e., a separate school fee, apart from the regular offering, for member children?  
If yes, what is the amount?
  6. Do you require parents of unchurched children to attend the Bible Information Class? If yes, what is your procedure if they don't attend it? What is your procedure if they attend the class, but don't join the church?
  7. Do you have written policies that govern non-member applications for enrollment? If yes, could you please enclose a copy of those policies?
  8. How do your school's mission prospects come to know about your school? Please number in order of frequency, putting an N/A in front of each that doesn't apply in your case.  
 Yellow pages  
 Newspaper ads  
 Members telling their friends  
 Established reputation in the community  
 Sign out front  
 Other:
  9. Your comments and suggestions regarding the use of our Lutheran elementary schools as mission arms of the congregation.

<sup>4</sup> Donald A. Abdon, *Training and Equipping the Saints* (Elk Grove Village, Ill 60007: Parish Leadership Seminar, Inc, 1975) p. 2.

already a member of the Body of Christ. When evangelizing a Christian, we are inviting the individual to apply what is already his to his oft-times weak and failing life. When evangelizing a non-Christian, the offer of God's love and mercy in Christ is applied as an offer to enter into the eternal life God has won for him through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ .... Evangelizing, then, is a strengthening process for the Christian; it is an appeal for conversion to the non-believer. Both need evangelizing.<sup>5</sup>

The mission of the church, then, has a sharp focus: It is to evangelize those within the church and to evangelize those outside the church. The WELS model constitution makes this very clear. Article III, Purpose and Objectives, states, "The continuing purpose of this congregation, as a gathering of Christians, is to serve all people in God's world with the gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures (Matthew 28:18-20)." That this purpose might be carried out, the constitution lists three primary congregational objectives:

To proclaim the law and the gospel, to lead sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ for life and salvation (2 Timothy 4:2; Luke 24:46-48).

To strengthen believers in faith and sanctification through the means of grace (Romans 10:17).

To equip believers as disciples, stewards and witnesses for sharing the gospel of Jesus with our fellow men (Ephesians 4:11,12).<sup>6</sup>

You will note how these objectives pick up on both the outreach and nurture aspects of evangelism. The first objective listed emphasizes outreach; the next two key in on two aspects of nurturing, strengthening and equipping the believer. In both cases, outreach and nurture, the church's tool is the same, the gospel in Word and Sacrament.

The church, then, has one calling, to preach the gospel, a calling which is carried out in two ways, through nurture, which strengthens and equips the believer, and through outreach, which calls the unbeliever to repentance and faith. Some aspects of the church's work by their very nature will be more oriented toward nurture than outreach and vice versa. But, to do justice to the whole calling given to the church, it would appear to be wise that in whatever ways the church carries out its mission it take into account both the outreach and nurture aspect of its one calling.

It is only natural that the Lutheran elementary school, which is a part of the congregation, should see the purpose of the congregation as its purpose also. One pastor writes, "I see the Lutheran elementary school as simply another facet of the ministry of the Word. It is all part of the function of the church. So if we believe that one of the facets of the ministry of the Word is to reach out to the unchurched with the message, 'Repent and believe the Gospel,' then that is also a part of the school's purpose .... The great commission that established the purpose of the church has also established the purpose of the school."<sup>7</sup> To what degree the school's emphasis will be on outreach and to what degree it will be on nurture will, of course, depend on the local situation.

It is interesting to note that 43 of the 57 congregations that responded to the questionnaire replied that one of the stated purposes of their school was to be a mission arm of the congregation. The statements of purpose they sent along with the questionnaire, however, almost invariably came short of including the unchurched as an integral part of the mission of the school. For the most part entrance would be by exception rather than in fulfillment of the school's purpose of outreach, as well as nurture.

There were some exceptions:

<sup>5</sup> Abdon, pp 5,6.

<sup>6</sup> *Model Constitution and Bylaws for Congregations of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1981) pp 8,9.

<sup>7</sup> This and other undocumented quotes that follow are drawn from comments solicited by the questionnaire.

The purpose of this school is to provide a Christ-centered education based upon the Inspired Word of God, the one and only authority for faith and life. We believe that an education without Christ is an education without foundation and purpose. It is in the light of this purpose that \_\_\_\_\_ Ev. Lutheran Church operates this school for the education of our congregation's children and for reaching out to the community with the Gospel of Christ.

\_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran School's primary purpose is the Christian training of the children whose parents are members of \_\_\_\_\_. But our school also realizes its responsibility to heed the Lord's command to make disciples of all nations. Therefore our Christian day school is committed to serving as a mission arm of the congregation.

[Our purpose is] to reach our community children and families with the Gospel and to train our own children with a Christ-centered education.

From reading a few score of school handbooks it became apparent that what most of them could use is a clearly articulated statement of purpose that is kept separate from a statement on enrollment procedures. Ideally a statement of purpose should come first which clearly sets forth why the school exists. It would be in this statement of purpose that the school would tie itself into the church's work of evangelism through nurture and outreach. Then would come an article on enrollment procedures which would list entrance requirements, order of acceptance, etc. In this connection Kent R. Hunter, an LC-MS pastor, asks a question that we perhaps should be asking also: "Is it a mission school perspective to accept members first, other Lutherans second and non-Lutherans third? Or, in terms of wanting to make disciples, wouldn't it be better to accept members first, non-Lutherans second and fellow Lutherans (who already have a church) last?"<sup>8</sup>

### Potential

Theoretically speaking, it would be difficult to reach any other conclusion than the one drawn above, namely, that the Lutheran elementary school, as a part of the congregation, exists for the same reason as the congregation and, therefore that outreach will be a part of its purpose for existence.

Practically speaking, how effective a tool for outreach is the Lutheran elementary school? Let some of our congregations answer that question:

A Milwaukee inner city pastor: Without the use of the school as an evangelism tool would no longer exist at [its present location].

Another inner city pastor in another state: Without the school and its outreach in the community our membership would be dwindling such faster than it has. Our school is the chief mission arm of the congregation.

[The school is] an appropriate and useful means of encouraging young parents back into the church, or into the church for the first time.

This appears to be an excellent side door for people to become more at home in a church setting .... Whether or not we ever reach the parents, we have an opportunity to let the Holy spirit work on the hearts of these children.

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<sup>8</sup> Kent R. Hunter, *The Lutheran School: Opportunity for Mission!* (St. Louis: LC-MS Board for Evangelism Services and Board for Parish Services, nd) p 12.

The first two quotations above point to the potential of the Lutheran elementary school to help bridge cultural gaps. Another inner city pastor from yet another state writes: “Out of one hundred families in our church, twenty-eight are school related. I don’t think our church would be here if it wasn’t for the mission outreach of the school into our black and Hispanic neighborhood.”

The effectiveness of the Lutheran elementary school as a mission arm, however, is by no means restricted to inner city congregations. In fact, the top two congregations in number of directly school-related adult confirmations in the past five years were suburban congregations in the Arizona-California District. Of the congregations that responded to the questionnaire, 30.6% of adult confirmations in the period from 1982-86 were directly school-related.

The Lutheran elementary school in many cases has become or has the potential to become a vital part of the congregation’s program of outreach because it meets a felt need. People are interested in their children’s welfare. The church in its school offers an agency that many parents perceive to be in the best interests of their children’s welfare. The church is thus able, through its school, to meet the parents at their point of perceived need. In an article, “Christian Day Schools: An Open Door to the Unchurched,” Kent Hunter takes up this point. He writes:

Traditionally, Christian day schools have been nurture oriented. Christian families supported the school to insure a good, Christian education for the children of the parish .... In the last decade, however, things have begun to change. Public education has lost much of its good reputation .... The mood surrounding education at this point in history has generated a powerful felt need in thousands of parents. The Christian church has an unprecedented opportunity to reach out with evangelistic efforts through the Christian day school. Many denominations are taking steps to seize the opportunity: a new Christian school is now opening on the average of every seven hours.<sup>9</sup>

Lyle Schaller, a respected observer of and prolific writer on the contemporary church scene, maintains that “for denominations interested in reaching the young parents born after 1950 ...the closest to a guaranteed thrust is the Christian day school.”<sup>10</sup>

Admittedly, dissatisfaction with the public school system, in the inner city or the suburbs, produces less than spiritual reasons for the unchurched to want to enroll their children in the Lutheran elementary school. But then, how can we expect the unbeliever to be properly motivated? One is not led by the Spirit until he has the Spirit. One pastor writes: “Parents often come to us with the primary concern of a good education for their children .... Then they discover the blessings of faith in Christ who is the foundation of our ministry.” This was invariably our experience during our years at Apostles, San Jose, CA. Like the lame man in the temple (Acts 3), the families who came to us wanted something good: but they received something better. The Lutheran elementary school can serve as a wedge, a crack in the door, through which the church can enter with the fullness of the gospel.

Research indicates that 75 to 90% of all church members trace their entrance into the church back to a friend or a relative. Church growth people call this a “web movement.” The point is that the gospel tends to flow most readily along a natural network, from friend and relative to friend and relative. In the case of the Lutheran elementary school the bridge or web consists of the children. Hunter writes:

The Christian school that invites unchurched people to enroll their children has an open door into homes of thousands of people. The school child has a family brothers and sisters, parents, grandparents—as well as friends. The child himself can be reached with the gospel, of

<sup>9</sup> Kent R. Hunter, *Christianity Today* (May 29, 1981) p 18.

<sup>10</sup> As quoted by Kent R. Hunter in *Great Commissioning the Christian Teacher* (Corunna, Indiana: Church Growth and Analysis Learning Center, 1980), p 10.

course. Equally powerful is the God-given link that child provides to many others who may be unchurched .... The children become natural bridges God can use to spread the gospel.<sup>11</sup>

Though it is not precisely to the point of this symposium on the Lutheran elementary school, we want to at least mention the fact that the pre-school also has the same evangelism potential. Whether or not we agree with the concept of parents sending their children to pre-schools will not change the fact that they are doing so and in ever greater numbers. The question, then, is this: Will these children be enrolled in secular pre-schools or will we see this as one further opportunity for outreach?

Several of the pastors responding to our questionnaire mentioned the evangelism potential of the pre-school. Says one: "Our pre-kindergarten is our largest producer of contacts with non-members. This has the potential to increase non-member students in the other grades and also adult accessions above our past experience." Another writes: "Our pre-school is designed to be a community service 'bait' that wins souls for Christ." Apostles in San Jose has operated a self-supporting developmental kindergarten for four year olds the past several years as such a 'bait,' requiring no religious commitment from the parents during this year. If they want to enroll the children in the regular kindergarten the next year, however, and nearly 100% desire to do this, then Bible information class attendance is required. After one year of seeing the results of the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of their little ones, the parents are for the most part very willing now to attend this class.

### **Problems**

If we are ready to recognize that the purpose of the Lutheran elementary school includes that of outreach and that in many cases there is real potential in our time for the school to be a mission arm of the church, we need also to recognize that there are some very real problems connected with the use of the school as an evangelism agency.

#### **1. Cost**

"Never expand a school on the basis of mission potential," a pastor writes. "That is why [our church] got a school in the first place, that is why we are trying to call a third full-time teacher, so we can open the doors to thirty more students, and that is why we are near to bankruptcy." Another makes this assertion: "Although [our school] has enjoyed soul winning success through its school, using a school as an evangelism arm is an expensive way to reach souls. It would be poor stewardship, indeed, to open a school for the sole purpose of winning people for Jesus. It would be much better and cheaper to call a full time evangelist." Another response: "This is a costly venture, inasmuch as it constitutes 70.7% of our budget."

#### **2. Backdoor losses**

A pastor reports: "78% of the 'delinquents' of the congregation are school families or those who once did have their children in the school." "Only rarely have we gotten a strong family through the school," writes another pastor. "Sad to say, we also seem to have 'lost' some families of long standing just as soon as their children finished school/confirmation." Another echoes the same complaint: "Over the years we have noticed that a high percentage of those who were instructed and joined the congregation because they had children in our school also drifted away after the children were no longer in our school."

#### **3. Attracts the churchd rather than the unchurched**

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<sup>11</sup> Hunter, Christianity Today, p 19.

A pastor writes: "Very frankly we have not found the school to be a good mission arm for authentic mission prospects." Another expresses concern that if the congregation begins to publicize its school, because of anti-discriminatory laws it will not be able to control enrollment. The result will be a school that could be dominated by members of other churches who might argue in class for their particular religious position, e.g., only believer baptism, and thus cause an unsettling situation for the members' children. One school handbook sees this as posing a "fellowship problem." "We find it next to impossible," the handbook states, "to educate a child with divided church loyalties .... For this reason we will enroll only children whose parents are willing to give us the whole child."

#### **4. Discipline problems**

All too often when our schools enroll non-member children we are simply inheriting some other school's problem. Many a public school principal has breathed a sigh of relief when he's heard that a certain student, who has caused nothing but grief to teachers and classmates alike, is now going to be attending the Lutheran school down the road. "Be careful of those who use school as 'reform school,'" one pastor cautions, "especially when they want to enroll in upper grades." Any schools that have enrolled non-member children probably have experienced first-hand what he is talking about.

#### **5. Lack of Bible knowledge**

All of our carefully worked out curriculum of Bible teaching, which builds from grade to grade upon previously taught truths, gets thrown out of kilter when a new sixth grader enrolls who has never heard the story of creation or of Good Friday. Teaching is less complicated if everyone is on relatively the same level.

#### **6. Poor home environment**

Mark Jeske writes about the home environment often encountered in Milwaukee's inner city:

We teach that it is a serious sin to despise God's Word, while a careless parent who sleeps till noon on Sunday teaches that the Third Commandment is meaningless. We teach that adultery is sin, while mama has a live-in boyfriend .... We teach that the husband is the head of the household, while many kids today have never seen their fathers .... Kids get hypocritical when they see the Bible's commands and promises flouted and ignored without divine punishment immediately forthcoming ....

There are many other social problems found also in our own families but aggravated in homes where Christ is not Lord. A non-Christian home increases the risk of child abuse, neglect, long stretches of baby sitters and day care centers, alcoholism, drug abuse, and violence as a way of settling differences.<sup>12</sup>

It is not just in the inner city that such a negative home environment hinders the student's learning and growing. Young teachers just starting their work at Apostles, San Jose, had to learn that a teacher shouldn't automatically assume that the last name of a child is the same as his or her parents' last name. Broken homes at times seemed to be the norm, rather than the exception.

#### **7. Disinterest in the spiritual aspect of education**

Non-Christian parents, especially if they are putting out monthly tuition payments, will generally be interested in their children's academic achievements and can usually be counted on to see that homework is

<sup>12</sup> Mark Jeske, 'Teaching the Child of a Non-Christian Home,' an essay delivered to the Metropolitan Milwaukee Teachers' Conference (February 17, 1983), p 4.

done. But they are not as likely to view Word of God homework such as Bible history worksheets and Bible verse and catechism memory work in the same light. That is not so important in their eyes compared with what their children need for life in the “real” world.

You see this same attitude surfacing in their children’s oft-times sporadic church and Sunday school attendance. Even Sundays when their class sings in church doesn’t necessarily mean that all the mission children in the class will be present. This can frustrate a teacher, especially if one-fourth or more of the class is composed of such unchurched mission prospects.

## **8. Member/non-member Imbalance**

This does not appear to a major problem with WELS schools at present. The 1985-86 school year statistics indicated that 6.7% of the students in our schools were either members of other Christian churches (3.4%) or mission prospects (3.3%). By way of comparison, 44% of the children in LC-MS schools in the 1985-86 school year were non-Lutheran, with a 50%+ figure projected for 1990.<sup>13</sup>

Yet it has already become a problem in some of our schools. A pastor reports: “To our regret we have come to a situation where the majority of our enrollment are active members of other churches .... We are honestly looking for a God-pleasing solution—other than closing our school.” Another expresses the fear of becoming “a community school.” Another asks: “If non-members outnumber members’ children, who will set school policies?”

### **Policies**

Yet with this catalog of problems we don’t intend to suggest that we may be better off to back off and reserve the Lutheran elementary school for members’ children only. Rather, being aware of the problems that exist, we can formulate policies that will minimize them so that the school can achieve its outreach evangelism purpose. The policy statements that follow do not pretend to be inclusive; nor is it assumed that all will agree with every point. But they can perhaps serve as a starting point for schools that desire to draw up or revise such policies.

#### **1. Be properly motivated**

Actions that look right but which are not properly motivated do not accomplish the Lord’s work the Lord’s way. Neither decline in enrollment nor the financial assistance that tuition students bring should be what leads a congregation to open the doors of its school to the unchurched, but rather a concern for souls who could benefit from the message of salvation the school is privileged to teach.

#### **2. Use the school as a mission arm of the congregation**

Several of the pastors who responded to the questionnaire pointed out the importance of viewing the Lutheran elementary school as just a part of the congregation’s total outreach strategy. A few examples:

Without the use of the school as an evangelism tool [our congregation] would no longer exist at [present location] .... Allow me to add, however, that although our school has brought in many prospects and members, In most recent years we have seen our ability to touch the black community coming more from within the congregation and our members’ networks of associates. This is a more healthy and effective way to do evangelism.

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<sup>13</sup> Les Bayer, ‘The Non-Lutheran in a Lutheran School,’ one of the Lutheran Education Association Monograph Series (Fall 1986, vol. 12, no. 1), p 2.



My primary source of prospects is still the word-of-mouth work of my members and the efforts of the evangelism committee, not the school. The school is my secondary source of prospects.

This, in general, seems to be a more healthy approach rather than staking the congregation's whole outreach program on the school. A congregation should not be led to think that the congregation's total work of outreach evangelism is being done by the school. In fact, studies by church growth researchers indicate that if congregations are thinking of starting a school and want to maximize the contribution of their school to church growth, they should start the school "only when the church has become effective at winning and incorporating new people. Otherwise the school will further diffuse a mediocre outreach."<sup>14</sup>

### **3. Make sure that your financial base is firm**

Ideally, perhaps, the school will not charge tuition to either members' children or unchurched mission prospects. In some instances this may work. A pastor from Texas writes:

We have had absolutely no problem in not charging tuition .... Our members go with attitude that if the Christian day school is indeed a vital arm and part of the church—which is supported by the free will offerings to Christ—well, that makes our policy ... very consistent and loving.

That this does not appear to be the standard practice in our Synod can be seen from the fact that 54 of the 57 questionnaires indicated that non-members are charged a tuition, an average of \$967 a year, with a high of \$1900 and a low of \$200, with most amounts in the \$600 to \$1300 range. Only twelve schools, on the other hand, reported a tuition, or school pledge, above \$300 for members, with a high of \$1350.

This is not the place to get into a lengthy discussion regarding the merits of charging tuition. But two points are apropos to the topic under consideration: First, concern must be given to the entire ministry of the congregation, of which the school's ministry is only a part. If the school becomes such a drain on the budget that it drastically weakens the congregation's ability to provide other vital ministries, then there is an imbalance that needs to be rectified.

Secondly, there is the matter of the perception of the unchurched. Hunter writes: "What does it say to a non-Lutheran family when they have to pay more tuition than someone else?... We should try to treat all families equally in order to work toward the receptivity of non-Lutherans."<sup>15</sup>

Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod teacher and researcher, Martin Wessler, tackles both of these concerns in a yet to be published book intended for LC-MS school boards. In a chapter entitled, "Funding Lutheran Schools," Wessler makes reference to the funding problems that can occur, especially when the school is opened up to non-members. He advocates tuition as "an appropriate source [but not the only source] of income for Lutheran schools. Through tuition parents share in the responsibility of providing a Christian education for their children." He then suggests that, in an effort to "fair and appropriately reflect the ministry of the congregation and school,"

a single tuition rate, based on the cost-per-student, should be set for all students, members and non-members alike. When a single tuition rate has been established, the sponsoring congregations may provide a tuition subsidy for its member children who attend the Lutheran school, and provide a tuition subsidy for unchurched children. Congregations may choose to provide such support from its mission budget.

<sup>14</sup> "The Win Arn Growth Report,' No. 3 (published in 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Hunter, *The Lutheran School: Opportunity for Mission!* p 12.

Congregations would then decide to what degree they want to, or are able to, subsidize the Christian education of their members' children and also to what degree they want to, or are able to, subsidize the Christian education of unchurched mission prospects. Wessler's proposal, in this essayist's opinion, merits some looking into.

#### **4. Take care how you advertise**

The questionnaire revealed that the most effective advertising of the school is being done by members telling their friends, followed by the school's reputation in the community. This seems to be the best way to go. If we give the impression that we need to have students for our school and that people are therefore doing us a favor by offering to enroll their children, then we stand the risk of having those same people demand a voice in the way the school operates. After all, they can reason, we need them. Without them the school can't make it. People should clearly recognize that they are not doing us a favor but that we are doing them a favor—but not unwillingly—by enrolling their children in our school. As one pastor put it:

I feel that there must be a balance between two extremes. Examples of the one extreme might be advertising on the church sign inviting the general public, 'Enroll your child this fall,' distributing flyers in the neighborhood for the purpose of enrolling in your Christian day school, etc .... The opposite extreme could be expressed in comments such as, 'We're here to serve only the members of this congregation,' or, 'We only have a call to give a Christian education to the families of our church,' giving the strong impression that unchurched children 'need not apply' and are viewed as a bother and a nuisance.

#### **5. Do careful screening**

We need to realize that parents often seek out a private school solely because their child hasn't been able to get along anywhere else, academically or behaviorally or both. The fact needs to be faced and parents need to be told that our schools simply are not equipped to handle every kind of problem. On the other hand, we should not require of unchurched children that their level of sanctification and understanding of the Scriptures be the same as that of members' children before they are allowed to enroll in the school. One school handbook states: "Children enrolled here cannot hold membership in organizations with religious features contrary to Scripture (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Failure to comply in these matters is grounds for dismissal." This requirement calls for a response of sanctification before the doctrine of justification can be taught and applied. Enrollment in a Lutheran elementary school is not the same as communicant membership in the congregation.

#### **6. Emphasize your purpose and objectives**

Make sure that they are in writing and that they are carefully explained to parents of prospective students. Then, if the parents enroll their children for other reasons, which could well still occur, it will not be because they haven't been told why the school exists.

#### **7. Make clear the way the school operates**

A pastor brings up this practical example: "We have had a problem in our PTO regarding who may serve as president. We don't allow non-members to serve, but wonder if there is a good positive way to explain the reasons why so that non-members don't get upset." This is the type of thing that is best handled right at the beginning, upon application for enrollment, so that there is no misunderstanding later. There are other facts that people should know at the outset, e.g., the way our schools are administered, the place of the school board and

the principal, the way to handle grievances against one of the teachers and how children are disciplined. It is best that all of this be in writing and that it be discussed orally with the parents.

## **8. Discuss doctrinal differences**

We mentioned the pastor who was concerned about unsettling situations caused by a non-member's child arguing for a particular doctrinal position, e.g., only believer baptism. Such a situation can be warded off by being completely up-front with the family at the time of enrollment. It is important that the parents know what we will be teaching their children and that we will not permit children to argue for other home-taught views.

## **9. Secure agreement to participate in the Bible information class**

This policy fits in closely with the preceding one, as it is the way by which parents become acquainted with all that we teach. But it has another purpose, of course, if the school is seen as a mission arm of the church. The Bible information class gives the Holy Spirit opportunity to work in people's hearts through the gospel over a period of several months.

Forty-one of the fifty-seven survey respondents stated that attendance at the Bible information class is required of parents of mission students. Many replies echoed this response: "Have very tight and written policies requiring 'info class.'" On the other hand, some congregations do not require such attendance but strongly encourage it, and with good results. Writes one pastor, who has had 59 directly school-related adult confirmations in the past five years: "Many come the first year .... By the third year most have gone through the class and ... have joined the congregation either by confirmation or affirmation."

If the parents do not attend the class or if, upon completion of it, they don't join the church, most of the congregations surveyed indicate that they handle each situation on an individual basis.

If a congregation is serious about using the school as a mission arm, getting the parents enrolled in the Bible information class is certainly an area where aggressive, persistent efforts are called for.

## **10. Expect church and Sunday school attendance on the children's part**

It would be good to state right on the application for enrollment that the children of the school are expected to attend church services regularly. Families should know right at the outset that the exhibition of little involvement in church and Sunday school is grounds for re-evaluation of enrollment in the next school year and should be told why this is the case.

The teacher in the classroom, of course, will be the one who seeks by the gospel to lead the children to desire to come to God's house on a regular basis.

## **11. Specify an annual enrollment**

Make it clear at the outset that all non-member's children are enrolled on an annual basis only and that each year the school board will review and evaluate the performance of non-member children and parents. It is important that parents know this right away so they are not taken by surprise should the school board terminate their children's enrollment. Possible grounds for dismissal would be such things as refusal to attend the Bible information class, non-existent or extremely sporadic church attendance, or, perhaps, severe discipline or academic problems.

## **12. Involve non-member families in church events**

A chief concern should be to draw unchurched mission families into the congregational fellowship. A first step can be to invite them to various congregational functions, e.g., special services, programs, potlucks and picnics. Special mailings, notes from school and articles in a school newsletter can help to keep these families informed and let them know they are welcome.

### **13. Work at assimilating newly-received families into the life and work of the congregation**

The pastor referred to above who mentioned that 78% of the delinquents of his congregation are school families put his finger on a key point when he described this problem as “the result of a poorly executed school mission program.” We are not claiming that anytime a family falls away after being received into the congregational fellowship it is the congregation’s fault. Satan, obviously, is always hard at work to lead the new Christian to apostatize. But if the new member finds it difficult to “break in” to the congregation, if the congregation’s “power structure” is firmly in the hands of a few long-time members, if there are very limited opportunities to serve with one’s gifts in the congregation, if the members don’t make a real effort to let the new families know that they are really welcomed and loved as brothers and sisters in Christ, then it should not come as a surprise that new families, including school families, gradually begin to drift away. They never felt that they really belonged! Congregations need to pay as much attention to keeping the back door closed as the front door open.

### **14. Remember that mission children and their parents are priceless souls for whom Jesus died**

The Lutheran elementary school may be the one way that they will be brought into contact with the message of salvation. We will therefore want to look upon these children and their parents as wonderful opportunities the Lord places before us. We will want to pray for them regularly. We will want to show great patience with the children in the classroom. We will want to do all we can to lead these boys and girls and their parents out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.

### **A Final Word**

The purpose of the church is evangelism—to nurture the believer and to reach out to the unbeliever with the gospel. May the Lord of the church lead our Lutheran elementary schools to do both, ever more faithfully and effectively.

The Lutheran Elementary School and Evangelism Symposium  
Yahara Center, Madison, WI  
April 24-25, 1987

**Discussion Questions on  
“An Evangelism Perspective of the Lutheran Elementary School”**

1. Discuss Abdon’s thesis, “Evangelism is the task of the church,” as applied to the Lutheran elementary school.
2.
  - a. Of what value is a school’s statement of purpose?
  - b. If outreach is part of the reason for the Lutheran elementary school’s existence, how can this be made clear in a statement of purpose?
  - c. Who should be involved in formulating a school’s statement of purpose?
  - d. How can a school’s statement of purpose be put to best use?
3. Agree or disagree? The Lutheran elementary school’s purpose is more to generate a passion for mission on the part of its students than to serve as a direct agency for mission outreach.
4. If space becomes a problem, should our Lutheran elementary schools accept members of sister congregations before accepting unchurched mission prospects?
5. Discuss the use of a pre-kindergarten or pre-school as a mission arm.
6. Evaluate the pros and cons of establishing an equal member and non-member tuition scale.
7. What should be the member/unchurched mission prospect ratio in our schools?
8. Discuss the essay’s contention that school advertising should by intention kept low-key.
9. Review briefly the eight problems connected with using the Lutheran elementary school as a mission arm (pp 7-9). Do you agree that these are problems? Are there other problems that are not mentioned?
10. Review briefly the fourteen suggested policies to help guide our schools as they seek to operate as a mission arm of the congregation (pp 9-14). Do you agree with these policies? Are there other policies that should be listed?