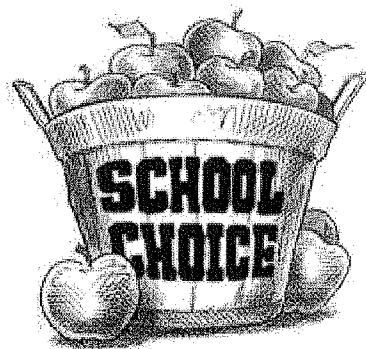


A Slow and Gentle Walk

*A close look at the method and process of implementation of School Choice at
Risen Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church and School.*



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At its genesis, school choice was a controversial issue in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). There was much concern over getting monies from an outside source to fund a WELS school. The fears of the WELS focused on two main issues. The first issue was the opt-out clause, and the second issue was the fear of the government taking over the curriculum of the schools. In the late 1990s, however, the Board for Parish Schools cited that school choice would be an opportunity to reach children of lesser income families in the neighborhood as well as give the church and school a chance to exercise good stewardship of the monies given to them. In essence, the WELS realized that instead of living in fear of what could happen they could take advantage of the situation and be proactive in their involvement. Thus, the WELS became an active player in the school choice program in 2000. The involvement of the WELS was pivotal for the program because the schools that were built and expanded allowed for more seats of which the children could take advantage. One such church to become involved was Risen Savior Evangelical Lutheran church, which started entered the Milwaukee Public Choice Program in 2003.

Risen Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church was organized in 1973. After 3 previous resident pastors, Pastor Kenneth Fisher was called to Risen Savior in 1997 as an interim pastor. In April of 1998, Risen Savior extended Pastor Fisher a full time call. Pastor Fisher describes Risen Savior at the time that he arrived as “an old and mature congregation. There were not many children in our congregation. For schooling, we worked together with Salem, but we were only supporting one or two students per year.”¹ In their five year outlook, however, Risen Savior was interested in becoming a church and a school. They did not know exactly what kind of school they would be able to support nor did they know whether it would be an early childhood center, a K-5 elementary school, or a full K-8 grade school. It was right around this time period

¹ Interview with Pastor Kenneth Fisher December 7, 2008.

that Parish Schools began looking into whether or not WELS could or should participate in the school choice program. According to Pastor Fisher, the stance that the WELS took at first was the same view he shared.² Their initial reaction to school choice was that it would not be something in which WELS should get involved. After further study, however, Parish Schools released another study where they “said it was OK.”³

Now that school choice was permissible for WELS schools to participate in, Risen Savior wanted to find out how much interest there would be within the congregation to support a school. Pastor Fisher describes the entire decision making process as a “slow and careful walk.”⁴ He adamantly makes the point that school choice was never his “pet project. [He stressed that] it could not be. The entire congregation would have to be on board for this thing to work.”⁵ Pastor Fisher and the Church Council gathered together to decide what the course of action would be. After different school choice advocates came in to talk, such as Timothy McNeil and Pastor Allen Sorum, the initial fears of the opt-out clause and of the idea that schools would be unable to teach their own views were put to rest. Pastor Fisher remembers an Urban Conference that he attended where “St. Marcus, [the first WELS choice school], reported how none of what the WELS feared ever came to fruition.”⁶ After attending the Urban Conference and hearing the different speakers, the council set to the task of discussing all of the facts in order to come to a decision. Then, in 2002, the council made a proposal to the congregation to participate in the Milwaukee Public Choice Program starting in September of the 2003-2004 school year.

Coming to this conclusion, however, was not as easy as it may have seemed. Pastor Fisher reflects, “There were many times that I would be behind the scenes as the encourager and

² Interview with Pastor Kenneth Fisher December 6, 2008.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

spiritual leader. I would find myself sitting at the kitchen table with those who had some issues to pan out concerning school choice.” Since this decision was made over a four year period of time, however, it did not ruffle too many feathers in the congregation. The leaders among the congregation took their role and made sure that all of the members of the congregation understood why the council came to such a decision.

One might also think that in order to get everyone in agreement, both the pastor and the church would have to stress it either in the worship services or in Bible studies or in the church newsletter. This, however, is not true in the case of Risen Savior. Pastor Fisher notes, “I cannot remember a time when I ever mention^{e,d} choice from the pulpit.”⁷ He further demonstrates the lack of school choice “propaganda” in Bible study by presenting in his four-inch D-ring Bible study binder a litany of topics the congregation has studied, none of which have anything to do with school choice, matters of adiaphora, or fellowship issues. Nevertheless, when they had questions, the congregation would bring them up during Bible classes. Aside from this voluntary questioning and answering, Pastor Fisher never felt the need to speak on school choice in order to persuade them one way or another. As he stated before, this was not his pet project. Rather, this was the congregation’s wishes.⁸

Because of the newness of the project and the inadequate time to build their own school, Risen Savior Lutheran School began its first year with children in the choice program in an offsite facility. “On September 2, 2003 Risen Savior Lutheran School opens with rented space (4 classrooms) at Redemption Lutheran Church with an enrollment of 51 children. The new teaching staff (Preschool, K5, 1st, 2nd, 3rd Grade teachers and principal) are installed on

⁷ Interview with Pastor Kenneth Fisher December 6, 2008.

⁸ Ibid.

September 7, 2003.”⁹ This was not to be a lasting arrangement, however, as the congregation had already begun plans for their own facility. In fact, “at a special voters’ meeting the voters unanimously decide[d] to move forward with the \$1.35 million building expansion project which include[d] improved handicapped accessibility (bathrooms, covered drop off, etc), 4 classrooms, a media center, and Christian life center (gym).”¹⁰ This entire process described as a slow walk was finally beginning to take form as the building that would act as the school building for years to come was in the works. It was also during this time that Risen Savior took another look at their long-term plan and decided that they might want to move on to the next two building phases. This was so that they could expand their school by one grade each year until they reached the K-8 status.

Then, on “September 1, 2004, Risen Savior Lutheran School opens its second year with a staff of six classroom teachers, one teacher’s assistant, a specialist for inclusive services and the principal. Ninety students are enrolled in K-4 to 4th grade in multi-age classrooms. Christian Education Sunday held in the Christian Life Center with an attendance of 179 on September 12.”¹¹ During this time of growth and change with regard to the school, Risen Savior started to become more of a neighborhood church. To an increasing extent, Risen Savior looked to serve their neighbors. The Milwaukee Public Choice Program not only provided lower income families in the northwest Milwaukee community the opportunity to attend and learn at a wonderful institute of learning, but it also allowed the church the chance to grow closer to the people of the community as it still does today.

Throughout the development of Risen Savior Lutheran School, the motivation for making such drastic changes has always been to spread the gospel. The congregation viewed school

⁹ <http://www.risensavior-luth.org/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

choice as something that could also help the congregation grow. Benjamin Clemons, the first principal of Risen Savior's school, comments on the ultimate goal of the school and its teachers. He says, "Each of my teachers was encouraged not only to foster good impressions with his or her students but also to find a way to get into the children's homes and share God's Word."¹² It always was and still is the intent of Risen Savior's evangelism team to meet every family of the children at the school. With this plan, a team of two people, one being the child's teacher and the other being a lay evangelist, would go to the home of a child and begin conversations with the family about their child's daily school activities. Eventually, the teacher would move the conversation to include God's Great Exchange.

Ironically, though, the growth that Risen Savior has experienced in the past few years has not come from the pool of choice parents. On the contrary, recent growth is coming mostly through relatives and friendship evangelism. Pastor Fisher notes that "there is some growth with the choice parents, but not all."¹³ In his opinion, Pastor Fisher feels that the one thing standing in many of the parents' way is him. This is not because he is white and they are predominately African American and Hispanic, but rather it is due to the fact that his plate is rarely empty.¹⁴ He says, "When it comes down to it, there are only so many things in a day I can do and still be faithful to the people who called me."¹⁵ From the school's perspective, Mr. Clemons also felt a similar frustration of not being able to reach all of the parents and see them willingly join Risen Savior. He says,

"At first [it] used to frustrate me because in reality the numbers of parents who have joined is still much lower than we'd like. However, after a time I realized that even if we couldn't reach all of the parents, God was allowing us to reach hundreds of children with the gospel on a daily basis. We had the hopes of reaching to every parent and sharing the

¹² Interview with Benjamin Clemons December 7, 2008.

¹³ Interview with Pastor Fisher December 6, 2008.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

saving message to them also, but we trained every child like theirs were the parents we wouldn't get."¹⁶

Whatever the results would be with the families, everyone at Risen Savior was glad to have the opportunity to share the gospel with so many children on a regular basis.

This is not to say that things have always been easy for Risen Savior. Since joining the Milwaukee Public Choice Program, challenges have been many. Mr. Clemons points out that "the task of teaching these children is a bit more difficult than teaching your garden variety WELS child."¹⁷ For example, many of the children that attend Risen Savior have reading problems. "The older children who join read at a minimum one grade below their current status."¹⁸ If it is not the reading skills that trouble the children, it is their math skills. "Choosing a math curriculum that would fit the talents of the children was uniquely challenging. When I was at Martin Luther College, they taught us the best textbooks to use. However, when tried on our children, they were disliked and thrown out. As a faculty, we decided that we needed to look at different models of school choice and inner city curriculums throughout the nation."¹⁹

The learning problems were only part of the story of the students as many of the children came from a difficult environment, both at home and in their neighborhoods. Mr. Clemons reflects on this situation when he says,

"Since we were opening a school in one of the worst neighborhoods in Milwaukee, we knew that we would have to be ready to take children from difficult situations who were often academically behind. The MPCP does not allow schools to screen students. Some in Lutheran schools lament this fact because they feel that too many "bad" kids are let in, or that the balance between traditional Lutheran students (white) and new students (not white) will change too much and alter the atmosphere of the school. I believe that the rule prohibiting screening is a blessing to our schools that have for too long been exclusive of anyone that did not fit the mold of what a LES student should be."²⁰

¹⁶ Interview with Benjamin Clemons December 7, 2008.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interview with Benjamin Clemons December 7, 2008.

Despite their backgrounds, though, the behavior of the children has improved over the years.

Karyn Clemons, a former teacher at Risen Savior, highlights the changes in the children when she remarks that “the idea that the same children have been in the same system for four or six or even eight years now shows.”²¹ Pastor Fisher agrees that “the children over the years have made improvements and have become more and more mature in their newly found faith.”²² Even with the improvements that the teachers were making in their classrooms and the advancements the children were making in their behavior, the classroom continued to be a place of struggle.

Mr. Clemons, however, adopts a different view of the situation. He says,

“As an administrator I worked hard to convince my faculty that we are not here to teach the good kids, we were here to teach all of the students that God had brought through our doors. This does mean however that administrators and teachers have to grow in their understanding of how to work with other cultures, how to help student^s with special needs become successful in a school setting, and of how to discipline in love, appropriately using law and gospel. While it is tempting to rattle off a list of challenging students and their problems, I now realize that the bigger challenge was understanding for myself and getting teachers to understand that working with the kids we had was a blessing and that it would take further education to do it well. The techniques and tricks that worked in a rural or suburban classroom twenty years ago just won't cut it in an urban setting. Teachers have to commit to becoming better classroom managers, better instructors, and better at using law and gospel in loving Christian discipline.”²³

Thus, while it is a difficult job, the act of teaching these children serves to strengthen both the students and teachers in ways that may easily be overlooked initially.

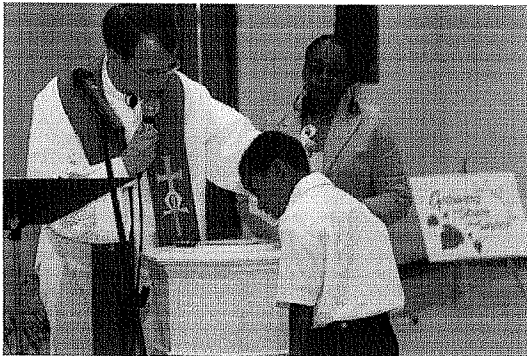
At the same time as one can see the many challenges a choice school encounters over time, one may not ignore the multitude of blessings that have come from the choice program as well. Mr. Clemons puts it simply, “Obviously, the main opportunity we have is to share the

²¹ Interview with Karyn Clemons December 7, 2008.

²² Interview with Pastor Fisher December 6, 2008.

²³ Interview with Benjamin Clemons December 7, 2008.

gospel.”²⁴ It is evident that the gospel is at work as “over 100 children have seen the need of baptism in their lives”²⁵ since Risen Savior opened its doors as a choice school. In reflecting on



her experiences in the classroom, Mrs. Clemons expresses, “The opportunity to share the gospel with children daily and to see the gospel work in their lives was motivation for the next day. It did not matter if there was a fight or something was broke in my classroom. To see the Holy Spirit at work in the hearts of the children that I was teaching was phenomenal.”²⁶ Similarly, Mr. Clemons saw blessings that may otherwise have been overlooked. He says,

“The largest blessing of school choice in my mind is that we were able to fund a school that otherwise would not have existed, which allowed us to share the Gospel daily with hundreds of children...It allowed us to step beyond the typical scope of prospective WELS members. I believe that in the long run this will be a great step towards diversity in the WELS. Our choice schools, specifically RS [Risen Savior] enroll mostly minority students. In a short time there will be a large number of African American and Hispanic students entering our Lutheran high schools and God willing moving on to our worker training schools. I believe that in the past this has been difficult because the minority students have been clearly in the minority. We have yet to reach a critical mass of minority students that will be required to create substantial diversity in the called workers of the WELS. The MPCP gives Lutheran schools the opportunity to reach out with the gospel to a large generational group and offer the same scriptural education and training that we had. There is always also a goal of connecting the parents to the church as well, which should be pursued with all diligence, but in my experience I think that the strongest connections will come from the current choice students and their future families.”²⁷

²⁴ Interview with Benjamin Clemons December 7, 2008.

²⁵ Interview with Pastor Fisher December 6, 2008.

²⁶ Interview with Karyn Clemons December 6, 2008.

²⁷ Interview with Benjamin Clemons December 6, 2008.

Therefore, while current students are enjoying certain blessings from being able to attend Risen Savior as choice students, there are possible far-reaching blessings as well that have the chance to reach many more people in the future.

The Milwaukee Public Choice Program has been a blessing to the congregation of Risen Savior Lutheran Church. It has allowed them to serve their neighborhood and to spread the gospel to many who have not yet heard it. Though they have also faced many challenges along the way, regarding both the school itself and the students who have enrolled, Risen Savior continues to look forward to working with those people who otherwise may not have the chance to enjoy a quality education, especially a Christian one. If the time should come when Risen Savior can no longer participate in the choice program due to unacceptable governmental regulations, the members of Risen Savior are likely to begin another slow and gentle walk as they once again create and implement a plan for how to best serve those around them.