

The Winds of General Education
in the WELS

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Winds change. A good sailor will carefully monitor the winds so that his sailboat does not end up on the rocks. Sometimes the winds blow favorably to propel the sailor toward his goal. Other times the winds gust against the sailor and his boat to hinder their progress. If the sailor fails to monitor the winds, his boat could end up on the rocks.

It is the same for those who tend the sails of secondary education in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (hereafter referred to as the WELS). These winds also change. They sometimes force schools to change direction. One school ended up on the rocks.

General education on the secondary level has changed direction in the WELS. There are people who would question that this type of education has ever existed or should ever exist in the WELS. Yet as we look back at the history of secondary education in the WELS, we see that it started and grew with general education. At the present time, the WELS is not *synodically* involved with general education to a great extent. Perhaps a look at the history of WELS general education on the secondary level will help us to see what path we should take in the future.

The WELS began secondary education in 1866 with the founding of Northwestern College (hereafter referred to as NWC). This school had a preparatory department that handled the secondary education as well as a college department for further studies.

From the very beginning, general education played a large

role in the growth of NWC. Sixty-two of the sixty-eight students enrolled in 1866 were in the general education course. It appears that the heads of the school wanted to continue this trend. Advertisements for the school appealed solely to students "who wanted a general education on the high school level or who intended to prepare for a professional career outside of the Church."¹ The leaders of NWC no doubt intended to establish another great college similar to the colleges that play a dominant part in the field of education today.

Financial distress helped to curb such high ideals. The lack of support from congregations was understandable. They wanted NWC to produce faithful pastors and teachers. By 1871, NWC changed its course to emphasize worker-training education. In response the congregations gave their financial support. "It took just five years to cast off all pretense of glamour and glory and settle down to the humble task of serving the church."² Still NWC continued to offer general education on the secondary level.

The general education course at Northwestern College was offered as a "business course." It was similar to the regular course except "business branches" took the place of Latin and German. It extended through the four years of high school and the freshman year of college. In 1897, instruction in shorthand and typing was offered for the first time in the business course.

In 1883, the seeds were planted for Doctor Martin Luther College (hereafter referred to as DMLC). The President of the Minnesota Synod, Pastor Albrecht, proposed that a preparatory school be started in Minnesota. He was convinced that such a

school would be "an excellent opportunity for the Christian education of children beyond the elementary grades even though they did not intend to prepare for the ministry."³ General education was a part of DMLC from its very beginning.

DMLC began in 1884 with two high school departments, preparatory and academic. The preparatory course was a three year course while the academic course required four years for those "qualifying themselves for a thorough business life or for higher studies."⁴

As NWC, so also DMLC enjoyed remarkable success with its general education department. In the first year of DMLC, twenty-nine of the thirty-eight students were enrolled in the academic course. "For fourteen years, both in attendance and in the scope of the work, the [academic] department was the mainstay of the school."⁵ It is very clear that both NWC and DMLC relied heavily on the general education departments in the early years of their history and the benefits of having a general education department greatly outweighed any apparent negative side-effects.

The year 1892 brought changes in the educational program of the WELS. The Wisconsin Synod joined the Minnesota and Michigan Synods to form the Joint Synod that developed into the WELS as we know it today. Up to this point, all three synods had operated their own worker-training schools for pastors and teachers. In an effort to handle joint worker-training more efficiently, it was decided that Michigan Lutheran Seminary (hereafter known as MLS) be closed, that NWC concentrate on providing pastors and that DMLC concentrate on providing teachers. Even with these

changes, both DMLC and NWC continued to offer general education on the secondary level.

The closing of MLS was a traumatic event for the Michigan Synod of the WELS. In an effort to foster unity among the three synods, MLS was reopened as a "feeder" school for NWC and DMLC. The Joint Synod conducted and financed the school while the Michigan Synod owned the land and handled the repairs and improvements of the buildings. In 1917, the three synods formed three districts of the WELS and the WELS took over everything except the property of MLS. In 1941, the WELS took over MLS completely. Throughout these years and continuing even into the 1970's, MLS continued to offer general education. At some time between 1974 and 1989, general education was discontinued at MLS. This transition cannot be dated because of limited resources of information. MLS will not be mentioned in the rest of this paper for two reasons: the resources of information are limited and MLS has not been under the sole control of the WELS throughout its history. It is sufficient to say the general education was a part of Michigan Lutheran Seminary.

In the early 1920's the need for another school of secondary education was apparent to the leaders of the WELS. The Dakota-Montana district felt this need more acutely because of the lack of Christian day schools in the district. In 1922 Professor August Pieper helped to foster the desire for a secondary school in an essay to the district. He said, "We must found Lutheran high schools for all Lutheran boys and girls; otherwise they will be lost to our Church and to Christ."⁶ Note that he encouraged a school for "all Lutheran boys and girls." Professor Pieper

envisioned a school that would offer general education, not an exclusive worker-training school.

Two years later the president of DMLC, Professor Bliefernicht delivered an essay to the Dakota-Montana District. In this essay, Professor Bliefernicht called for the founding of a synodical high school because of the "utter inadequacy of state schools for Christian needs."⁷ Professor Bliefernicht also realized that general education helped to advance worker-training education. In the same essay he said, "How often have we experienced it in New Ulm that such young people who came to us only to receive a general high school training later decided to be trained as a pastor or teacher."⁸ Professor Bliefernicht saw the need to educate WELS people with Christian secondary education for the benefit of the WELS congregations. He also saw that the best way to recruit pastors and teachers was to get the young people on the campus of our worker-training schools even though they were not enrolled for worker-training education. It is obvious that Professor Bliefernicht believed that students are drawn from the general education course of studies into the worker-training course of studies instead of vice versa. It appears that this opinion is not held today.

A major milestone in the educational program of the WELS came in 1927. The proposals offered by the Moussa report to the 1927 WELS convention reflect the heavy emphasis which WELS people have placed upon the education of its young people. The foundation laid by this report is responsible for the reputation that the WELS has attained in regard to the education of its

youth. The proposals would appear revolutionary even today. How much more revolutionary they must have appeared in 1927!

The Moussa report involved all levels of education in the WELS. It proposed that every parish have a Christian day school. It recommended that NWC and DMLC drop their prep departments and that the WELS "authorize and subsidize prep schools in many different areas."⁹ It encouraged NWC and DMLC to offer college courses that would educate students who did not intend to prepare for the ministry. The Moussa report envisioned a WELS educational system that would serve every WELS young person without regard to age or intended course of study.

The Moussa report intended to establish a bridge between the Christian day schools which were being established throughout the WELS and the WELS colleges which were located in Minnesota and Wisconsin. It recognized that even the Christian day schools needed WELS high schools. It stated, "If we are able to stock our congregations with members who have attended our own academies, we could be sure of more understanding and zeal in behalf of all our schools."¹⁰ The Moussa report proposed that if we did not offer our WELS people a general education on the high school level, all our WELS schools would be adversely affected.

The Moussa report was followed almost immediately by the founding of Northwestern Lutheran Academy (hereafter known as NLA). NLA began in 1928, one year after the Moussa report was given. The desire for an academy in the Dakota-Montana District had been cultivated well and the lack of Christian day schools in the district prompted the Synod to implement the Moussa report first in the Dakota-Montana District. NLA was "committed from

its very beginning to a program of general Christian education."¹¹ NLA began as a WELS high school with the dual purpose of offering general education as well as worker-training education.

The depression of the 20's and 30's prevented the further implementation of the Moussa report. The Great Depression did not depress the WELS zeal for general education on the secondary level. In 1934, the Board of Regents of DMLC recommended to the Dakota-Montana District Convention that tuition be abolished in the WELS high school departments. This would apply to general education students as well as students preparing for the ministry. One of the reasons was that "actual experience has shown that many of those who received their high school training with us have been leaders in congregational life, manifesting a special interest in the affairs of the Synod and in those of Christian education."¹² This proposal shows the high priority that was placed on a general Christian high school education. It was felt that no student should be deprived of this educational opportunity for lack of financial resources.

The years that followed the Moussa report proved the predictions of the report to be true. All WELS high schools offered general education to their students. These graduates returned to their congregations with a burning zeal to start Christian day schools. The rapid growth of Christian day schools created a sharp need for day school teachers. The increase of students studying to be teachers led to the beginning of a second teacher-training college in Milwaukee. This rapid growth on all

levels of education in the WELS prompted a call for a complete study of the WELS educational program. God had blessed the educational efforts of the WELS to the point that the system was ready to burst.

The Keller report was an answer to the call for an evaluation of the WELS educational program. The services of the Bureau of Field Studies and Surveys of the University of Minnesota were engaged with Dr. Keller of the University of Minnesota as the Survey Director. It was hoped that this survey would offer advice to relieve the educational crisis as well as provide direction for the future.

The Keller report recognized that the WELS educational program put a severe strain on the Synod's budget. It stated, "It is the judgment of the educational consultant that the Synod cannot afford to carry its present commitments for education without some easing of the load."¹³ It did not recognize that some of the leaders of the WELS had begun to shift the winds of education away from general education to an exclusive emphasis on worker-training. These leaders added this amendment to the Keller report: "The Synod does not consider itself to be engaged in education as such but specifically in the education and training of public workers in the church."¹⁴

This statement was added by the Advisory Committee on Education, the Planning Committee for the Educational Institutions of the Synod and the Board of Trustees of the Synod. It is a radical departure from the foundation that was established by the Moussa report. Although it did not exclude general education, it left it to the mercy of worker-training

education. This was a precarious position because of the crowding of the WELS high schools. It implied that general education could be limited or eliminated if it interfered with worker-training education. Essentially, it was the beginning of the end of general education in the high schools supported by the Synod. The winds had begun to change.

The Keller report made some interesting recommendations in its report. Remember that these recommendations are based on a survey of many synodical groups in which no sentiments against general education were found. Such sentiments may have existed but they were not made known to the survey. The Keller report recommended that new synod prep schools be started immediately in areas of greatest student potential. Since there is no recommendation against it, it appears that these prep schools would offer general education as all the other prep schools were offering at that time. As a temporary measure, the report recommended that preparatory departments be established with financial aid from the Synod in the larger area high schools of the WELS. The report advised against starting prep schools in the Nebraska and Arizona-California Districts because of low enrollment potential and high costs.¹⁵ The Keller report offered wise advice to relieve the crisis in the educational system of the WELS without deviating too far from the foundation of the Moussa report. Unfortunately this advice was not followed.

The first indication of how much the winds had changed against general education in WELS prep schools was given in the report of the Committee on Teacher-Training Facilities to the

1965 WELS Convention. It stated: "The preparatory departments have one purpose: to supply initial training for future pastors and teachers."¹⁶ The report claims that the isolation of worker-training students from other students helps to keep them from leaving the worker-training course. These students are "exposed to less of the pressures and influences which tend to dissuade them from entering the teaching and preaching ministries."¹⁷ This report offers no evidence to support this claim and it ignores the fact that all WELS prep schools still offered general education at this time. Instead of trying to bring the prep schools and area high schools closer together as the Keller report recommended, this report advocated that the prep schools offer worker-training education and the area high schools offer general education. As far as the Synod prep schools were concerned, this report set the winds directly against general education.

The first prep school to react to the new wind direction was Martin Luther Academy (hereafter referred to as MLA). MLA was formed by the separation of the preparatory and college departments of DMLC. The 1965-66 catalog indicated that preference was given to students enrolled in the worker-training courses. Yet the general education course was still being offered at the school. The 1966-67 catalog indicated what was meant by "preference." According to this catalog, general education was offered "only to students who do not require dormitory facilities."¹⁸

In all fairness to MLA, it should be noted that other factors were involved with this change of direction. At that

time, the campus was extremely crowded. In view of the presence of DMLC on the campus which was exclusively teacher-training, it would naturally follow that worker-training would receive special emphasis. Yet the 1965 Teacher-Training Facilities report did influence this decision. The influence of this report obviously prompted MLA to curtail only general education. Without that report, it is difficult to explain why the pastor-training course was not restricted like the general education course. Even with the unfavorable attitude of the 1965 report against general education, MLA was the only prep school that changed its course with this new wind direction.

The 1969 WELS convention received a report on the feasibility of the WELS prep schools. Times had changed from the educational boom of the 50's and early 60's. The prep schools were facing financial difficulties. The number of area Lutheran high schools was growing. The call of missions was also growing stronger. The report emphatically encouraged the continuation of the prep school program. It warned that the Synod would suffer dire consequences if it relinquished direct control of the training of its future pastors and teachers. Conspicuous by its absence was any mention of or support for general education in the WELS prep schools even though all WELS prep schools offered general education and only MLA restricted the students who took the general education course.

The Commission on Higher Education (hereafter known as the CHE) which had recently been given decision making status by the 1969 WELS convention placed a heavy emphasis on worker-training

in its report to the 1971 WELS convention. The CHE also made some interesting recommendations to NLA in its report. It recommended that NLA favor students in the worker-training course for the use of its facilities. It recommended that the expansion of NLA not be undertaken "as long as this expansion is necessitated by the presence of general education students."¹⁹ It also recommended that the purposes and objectives of NLA be restudied and updated.

The restudy of the role of NLA in the educational program of the WELS was done by Professor Daniel Malchow, the president of NLA. If any school was going against the wind, it was NLA. It is obvious that the leaders of the educational program of the WELS were opposed to the offering of general education by the synodically-supported prep schools. Yet NLA continued to offer general education to all students and the majority of the student body was enrolled in the general education course.

This report on the role of NLA reflects some of the confusion brought about by the wind change initiated by the leaders of the WELS educational program. It states that all the academies of the WELS "with the lone exception of NLA, are exclusively worker-training."²⁰ Yet the catalogs of these academies show that they all offered general education and only NLA restricted general education to those students who did not require dormitory space. Confusion about the purpose of the WELS prep schools was so great that Professor Malchow, a member of the CHE, did not realize that the other WELS prep schools were continuing to offer general education as stated in their catalogs.

This report on the role of NLA makes some observations about what might have caused a lack of emphasis on general education in the WELS prep schools. It notes that the set of synodical principles adopted by the 1969 WELS convention "offers no reference to support for Christian education on the secondary level other than that which helps to prepare young people for the full-time work in the church."²¹ The entire educational system of the WELS falls under the division of "worker-training." That in itself would tend to rule out any WELS involvement in general education. While these could have occurred unintentionally, they still fostered opposition to general education in WELS prep schools.

The report on the role of NLA also contains information from a survey of WELS pastors and graduates of NLA. Only six of 356 people surveyed thought that NLA should continue as a WELS high school devoted exclusively to worker-training. In answer to the question, "Should the WELS maintain a school for general education?" 271 said "yes" and 68 said "no." The pastors were asked, "Is ninth grade too young to decide a future career?" Of the 99 pastors, 49 said "yes" and 50 said "no." The parents of former NLA students were asked one question, "Why did you send your kids to NLA." The number one answer was to continue religious instruction during the formative years. The number two answer was the hope that their child would decide to enter the full-time work of the church.²² This survey shows that there was support for general education in WELS prep schools because of the religious training. It also shows that it may be unreasonable to

make a ninth grader decide to enroll in worker training. There was the hope that the students might be persuaded to switch to the worker-training course of studies while they attend the prep school in the general course.

NLA was facing opposite winds at this time. The school had a tradition of general education and there was support from the lay people and pastors to continue this tradition. Yet there was a contrary wind blowing from the CHE. Which course would NLA choose and could it change direction in time?

The difficulties that faced NLA were noted by the other WELS prep schools. MLA had already restricted its general education course to students who did not require housing. Northwestern Preparatory School (hereafter known as NPS) which was formed when the NWC prep department was separated from the college department began to change course in 1976. The 1976-77 catalog for NPS states, "As long as space permits, the standard course is available to general students who do not register for pastor or teacher training."²³ This change follows the lead taken by MLA in 1966. Note that general education was not eliminated but only restricted by the amount of dormitory space.

As NLA, MLA and NPS all faced the problem of crowded conditions because of growing enrollments, they also felt the pressure to validate their existence. Professor Strobel of NWC delivered an essay to the Dakota-Montana District convention on the role of prep schools in the WELS educational system. He warned that we face the loss of our confessionalism if we lose our prep schools.²⁴ The 1978 Report to the Ten Districts concurred with this sentiment by proposing that MLA and NPS be

moved to allow them to grow and thrive. It praised the schools as "pacesetters in maintaining curricula that prepare students well for admissions either to the pastor-training or to the teacher training colleges."²⁵ Both of these reports failed to mention the benefits for those students who were enrolled in the general education courses of the WELS prep schools.

By 1979, NLA could no longer fight against the winds that blew contrary to general education. NLA tried to change its course to place greater importance upon worker-training education but it could not change quickly enough and the school crashed upon the rocks. The major blow against NLA that led to its closing was "the school's inability to recruit acceptable numbers for pastor and teacher training programs."²⁶ The school had not deviated from the foundation laid by the Moussa report but the WELS had. It is rather ironic that the first fruit of the Moussa report is the first casualty of the winds against general education.

The closing of NLA obviously affected the course of Martin Luther Preparatory School (hereafter known as MLPS) which was formed by moving MLA and the girls of NPS to the Campion campus in Prairie du Chien, WI. The first catalog of MLPS stated, "Preference is given applicants who are preparing themselves for either the teaching or preaching ministry."²⁷ This was probably a concession for the general education students who had attended MLA or NPS because the following catalog indicates that the school is exclusively for students preparing for the teaching or preaching ministry. MLPS was the first WELS prep school to

conform completely to the winds blowing against general education.

The latest evaluation of the WELS educational system was done by the Preparatory School Study Commission which reported to the Board for Worker Training in 1989. The commission surveyed 44 WELS laymen, 52 pastors and 24 men teachers. From this survey, it drew up a list of ten objectives that form the philosophy of the WELS prep schools. Eight of the ten deal exclusively with worker-training. Number five talks about service to the Lord which is not exclusively worker-training and number ten is "to offer a Christ-centered education to high-school-age students who do not have available an area Lutheran high school."²⁸ The commission maintains that these concerns correspond to the historical philosophy of the WELS prep school. I do not see how this list which almost completely ignores general education can conform to the philosophy of the Moussa report and others who placed so much importance on general education. The commission failed to detect the obvious wind change from the 1920's to the 1980's.

The commission seems to set area Lutheran high schools at odds with the prep schools. It blames the increase in the number of area Lutheran high schools for drawing students away from the prep schools. It says, "If they [the area Lutheran high schools] had not been opened, the preparatory school enrollments might well be stronger and the system more cost effective."²⁹ It is rather obvious that if a student is to decide between a prep school which is exclusively worker-training and an area Lutheran high school which is both general and worker-training, the

student will most likely choose the area Lutheran high school.

The commission had to recognize two positive aspects of the area Lutheran high schools. "Area Lutheran high school graduates have a lower attrition rate than do the preparatory schools or public high school graduates."³⁰ In spite of the assumed superiority of the prep schools for preparing future pastors and teachers, the graduates of the prep schools were more likely to drop out of the worker-training program. It would appear that it is not good to isolate worker-training students from general education students. The commission also had to recognize that the growing number of area Lutheran high schools indicates that WELS people are very willing to support general education in a Christian setting on the secondary level. It appears that the area Lutheran high schools have assumed the foundation of WELS education laid by the Moussa report that the prep schools have abandoned. This is possible because the area Lutheran high schools do not have to strive against the wind that blows against general education.

While a sailor must pay attention to wind direction, he must never lose sight of his goal. What is the goal of the educational system of the WELS? It appears that the sole goal is to prepare pastors and teachers for WELS congregations and schools. Is this a wise goal?

With the apparent shortage of pastors and teachers in the near future, this singular goal seems quite appropriate. Yet the shortage of full-time workers in the church is going to result in a greater reliance upon lay people. Is it not the responsibility

of the WELS to train the future lay people in sound Lutheran doctrine with religious training on the secondary level? An added benefit to providing general education is that more students may be encouraged to enter the full-time work of the church. When the teacher track was eliminated from NPS, not only did total enrollment go down but also the number of graduates who continued on to NWC declined.³¹ Has the restrictions on enrollment to our WELS prep schools resulted in fewer students enrolled in DMLC and NWC? The educational system of the WELS is not presently directed toward the future needs of the WELS.

It appears that we would do well to return to the foundation of educational principles laid by the Moussa report. The abandonment of this foundation has been followed by a drastic drop in enrollment at NWC and DMLC. While that abandonment cannot be held fully responsible for the drop, it did contribute to it.

The area Lutheran high schools have paved the way for the founding of preparatory schools throughout the WELS as called for by the Moussa report. Greater cooperation between the WELS and the area Lutheran high schools should be cultivated to the point that the synod would subsidize a preparatory department in the area Lutheran high school as the Keller report recommended. The WELS prep schools should be fully opened to general education as long as there is sufficient dormitory space. The area Lutheran high schools and prep schools should become less distinctive to the point that all would be supported by the joint financial effort of the synod and the area congregations and all would offer general education as well as worker-training education.

People will support the synod more readily if they see the synod in action in their community. Cooperation, not competition, is the key to success.

The winds of the sea are beyond the control of the sailor. The winds of education in the WELS can be influenced by education and encouragement. We can cultivate support for general education in the WELS. Our fathers regarded general education as an important part of the WELS educational program. Shouldn't we return to the course they set?

ENDNOTES

¹M. Lehninger, ed., Continuing in His Word, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1951, p. 156.

²Lehninger, p. 161.

³Lehninger, p. 174.

⁴Lehninger, p. 176.

⁵Lehninger, p. 176.

⁶Lehninger, p. 198.

⁷Lehninger, p. 198.

⁸Daniel Malchow, "A Restudy of Northwestern Lutheran Academy's Role in the Educational Program of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1973, p. 46.

⁹"Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1927, p. 28.

¹⁰Lehninger, p. 198.

¹¹Lehninger, p. 201.

¹²"Proceedings of the Dakota-Montana District, 1934, p. 19.

¹³"Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1962, p. 31.

¹⁴"Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1962, p. 28.

¹⁵"Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1962, p. 30.

¹⁶"Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1965, p. 119.

¹⁷"Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1965, p. 119.

¹⁸Martin Luther Academy Catalog, 1966-67.

¹⁹"Book of Reports and Memorials to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1970, p. 21.

²⁰Malchow, p. 19.

²¹Malchow, p. 18.

²²Malchow, p. 23.

- 23 Northwestern Preparatory School Catalog, 1976-77.
- 24 "Proceedings of the Dakota-Montana District," 1978, p. 77.
- 25 "Report to the Ten Districts of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1978, p. 11.
- 26 "Book of Reports and Memorials to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1983, p. 9.
- 27 Martin Luther Preparatory School Catalog, 1979-80.
- 28 "Book of Reports and Memorials to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1989, p. 17.
- 29 "Book of Reports and Memorials to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1989, p. 30.
- 30 "Book of Reports and Memorials to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1989, p. 30.
- 31 "Book of Reports and Memorials to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1983, p. 11.

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