

Is School Choice the Right Choice for Churches?

Prepared

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The purpose of this paper is not to discuss whether or not a church can morally accept state monies, whether or not it can enter into a school choice program given the “religious exemption” clause, to discuss the separation of church and state or even to define what the school choice voucher program is¹. Instead the purpose of this paper is to explore whether churches that have a school choice program have benefited as a church body, apart from any benefits that the school might have experienced.

It isn't that I am against choice schools personally or that I question the value of them. Even if the only thing a choice school did was teach young people about Jesus and gave them a standard education without ever bringing a single person into the church I would be in favor of it. However I simply wanted to know how having a choice school affects the church to which it is connected.

To fulfill the goal of this paper, I thought it best to interview pastors from three different churches. One was a church with a choice school that was 100% choice, one about 50% choice and a third that had strongly considered taking part in the choice program but had not. Then by considering the background, mission, and result for each church it would be possible to see if taking part in the choice program had been (or would probably have been) beneficial for these churches individually and to see if making a similar choice might benefit other churches.

The churches and their pastors that I interviewed are as follows; Pastor Jon Hartmann who is pastor at Atonement Lutheran Church located in Milwaukee WI at the address of 4500 N Sherman Blvd. He also served at Garden Homes Lutheran Church which also was involved in the choice program. The second church is Risen Savior Lutheran Church also in Milwaukee, Wisconsin located on 96th St and Brown Deer Road. Their pastor is Pastor Ken Fisher and he

¹ If you are interested in such topics or would simply like background on what “school choice” is then consider consulting another paper written for a church history project by James Hoogervorst called “Is School Choice the Right Choice for WELS schools?” written in 2004.

has been the pastor there throughout the entire choice program and planning. Finally I interviewed Pastor Christian Winkel at Redemption Lutheran Church located on 68th St just off of Silver Spring, again, in Milwaukee. All information about each church comes from the interviews (or in the case of Atonement via an email interview) with the respective pastors.

The Traditional Done Untraditionally

When most people think of entering into the choice program, they probably think of doing it for outreach reasons. This way they can give the children of the community an opportunity to attend WELS schools which have traditionally been considered to be a strength of the WELS and furthermore have been considered to be good schools. This was not the case at Atonement. Instead their goal was inreach. Atonement had a working school that was not in danger of closing from lack of students. There was no master plan of reaching out to the community. Rather they saw a need in their own congregation and a way to fulfill that need, and the way was through the voucher program.

Atonement saw that they had a number of members who were not able to pay the tuition that the school required and yet they wanted to send their children to Atonement. Given that the choice program was set up for this very reason, so that parents could choose which school their children could go to, Atonement saw an opportunity to open its doors to its own. The result is that the school is now at capacity with about fifty percent of the children taking advantage of the voucher program.

Even though the numbers are not the result of a strong outreach program for the church that does not mean that some outreach is not done. Pastor Hartmann says that the “outreach” that the school does is done simply by being a good school. The result is that it isn’t necessarily a “neighborhood school” as many choice schools might try to be. Instead they have students from

all over the Milwaukee area, some as far as Delafield. People hear about the school not by an evangelism program but more through word of mouth and referrals. As a result Atonement reaches into the entire Milwaukee area including but not limited to their neighborhood, they just do not have the need or really the capacity to be the neighborhood school.

Still, the school draws new or at least non-members. The school also serves as a touch point for the members of the church. It is the policy of Atonement to require that all parents who enroll their children at the School to attend a Bible information class. This does not mean that they are required to join the church but they do hear the Word of God and the opportunity for the Spirit to work faith in the heart of those who attend is there as well. This makes sense on a simply practical level as well. It allows the parents to see what the school will be teaching their children. This way there are no surprises when the child comes home with a question about Jesus or baptism from their own religion classes.

Were the goals of Atonement met when they introduced school choice? It seems as though they were. The school is at capacity and all the children of the church are given the opportunity to attend. Since the number of choice seats is limited by the school the church still retains control over who can attend, making sure that those who really want to attend are going to be able to do so, even if they don't receive choice monies.

Finally the mission of the church is kept in first priority. As Pastor Hartmann says, "we need to maintain balance and make sure that the tail is not wagging the dog."² What he means is that the church needs to be job number one and the school augment the work of the church. It can happen that maintaining the school becomes such a big priority that it comes first in the budget and time of the members. Through choice the church has been relieved of some of its financial responsibilities and is able to focus further on its own specialized work.

² Hartmann, Jon. Interview by author, via email, 7 November 2005.

The church still supports the school and is concerned about the work done there as well, but the important thing is that balance is kept. Balance in stewardship, so that members don't think that the state is supporting the school now so we don't have to. Balance in mission, so that the church and school are both supported by the time and talents of the members but also so that the school does not overshadow the work of the church. And balance in time, a choice school requires extra administrative leadership and that fact needs to be recognized as well as addressed in a way that does not keep the teachers out of the classrooms or keep them from properly preparing for each day.

In the end Atonement strives to keep what many would consider to be the traditional ministry of the church alive by incorporating new opportunities to help it to carry out its mission. They are successful and will continue to be so because they recognize what they are and what they are not and balance the stewardship of their time, talents and treasure with their overall mission to preach Christ crucified to young and old alike.

From Old to New

If you would have looked out over the congregation of Risen Savior five years ago you probably would have seen a sea of grey haired people; at least that is how one of the members had once described it. There probably was no shortage of walkers and canes either. Risen Savior was a church that primarily functioned as the home church for the residents of Luther Haven, a nearby WELS retirement community that is run by Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services. Every Sunday a Risen Savior member takes a bus load of Luther Haven residents to and from church and thus was the bulk of the membership formed.

So how could a group of older people, who often have difficulty getting out, do out reach? The idea of a choice school for the community seems to be one good option. The choice

to start a voucher school was not automatic, however. There were no families in the Risen Savior Congregation. There were no children. There were no parents in the congregation that pledged to send their children to the school, so it was possible that no one would even attend the school if it was opened.

Plus they had other ways in which they were reaching out the community. One of those ways was Youth Haven, an after school program where kids could come and experience a Vacation Bible School type of program throughout the year. It starts at 4:30 and ends at 6:00 and is free to attend. At first it was only one day a week and only had one child enrolled. But those numbers and the number of times that they met during the week began to grow so that by the time the school was built there were twenty children involved. In 2005 there are about fifty to seventy-five kids who meet Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Most of the children involved are not attending Risen Savior School but are from other schools who get off the bus at about 4:30 so the time frame is ideal for them.

Before the decision to start a choice school was made, it took two years of watching what was happening with other WELS schools, planning, and convincing before the congregation was in agreement that this was the course of action to take. During the process some of the members of the congregation who lived at Luther Haven seemed to think that the school was a big gamble that they were not entirely sure would work, but at the same time they were excited too. They were excited because they were able to be part of an outreach effort that was targeting hundreds of young lives as well as their families. So with some trepidation but also with high hopes and excitement the process of starting a new school began.

Planning needed to be done to get the school started. Some choice schools in Milwaukee are simply schools that are paid exclusively for and through choice funds. Risen Savior school

was going to be different. To show that the church was interested in the school and so that the members would see that this was their school just as much as the community's the initial building loan, all 1.5 million dollars of it, was paid for entirely by the church. In addition to that the rest of the building loan costs are split fifty-fifty by the church and school. From the beginning Risen Savior knew what a challenge supporting and running a school would be and so they planned their budgets and financial set ups accordingly.

Just as the goal of a person who wrestles an crocodile is not to keep from being bit but to capture the alligator so also the goal of the church is obvious, to bring the neighborhood in, and to help them to realize that this is their church. Starting and running a choice school, however, is going to take up a great amount of time and energy, just as not getting bit by the crocodile is going to take a great amount of time and energy. Yet how are these goals met?

One way is simply by telling people that you love and value them. Sure you can say that, but can you put your money where your mouth is? Risen Savior did, essential they invested 1.5 million dollars into the community saying, this is how much we value you. We see that you have a failing school for a neighborhood school. We see that you need help as families. We are here to be a part of this community and we mean it. Here is a new school that is well staffed and carefully run; your children are welcome here.

Your families are welcome here too. Do you think that when visitors visit the church they might feel as if they should knock before they enter the doors to the church or at the very least that they should have an invitation? Pastor Fisher says that the school changes that. The parents of the children can feel like they have some ownership in the church and school. They have a right to be here. This is made all the more true by getting parents to volunteer to help out around the school. They are involved, they are committed. They want the school to succeed as

much as the church does and a partnership is formed that focuses on good Christian education for young minds that need it.

Faculty is important too in carrying out this mission. They are made very aware of the fact that they are the place where the church and school comes together. They are the front lines for introducing people to Risen Savior as house of God and not just Risen Savior as School where God is taught. That is why Risen Savior looks for teachers who can be evangelists as well. They are the first contact with the parents, they have a reason for developing relationships with the parents and they are the ones who invite parents to special services and other church activities.

Second in line are the lay evangelists, they go to the families with simple law and gospel presentations. It is the goal of the evangelists to get to each family with such a presentation so that they can hear the message of the Savior. Finally there are the Pastors who are always willing to share in the mission by sharing the message of the Savior.

Risen Savior does not want to stop with the children either, and they are backing up those words with action too. The next phase of expansion has less to do with the school and more to do with the family. They want to expand into programs that will help the parents to be better people too. Whether this is in the form of counseling or support groups or whatever else the parent may need Risen Savior is committed to the whole family, not just the children and not just to get families through the church doors. They want to serve the whole person so that by helping them with their physical and psychological needs Risen Savior will be able to help the parents see their real need, their need for a Savior. In short Risen Savior is trying to be an oasis in the community, a place where empty people can go to be filled especially with the love of their Savior.

The question is then, have they been successful in their venture? It certainly seems that way. In the past five years their membership has doubled; sure there was growth before, but now it is more dramatic. In the past year alone there have been 20 adults confirmed and about half of those are the direct result of the school. There were thirty-two baptisms in 2004 and twelve in 2003. The numbers seem to say yes.

Perhaps even more important is not so much the numbers as the attitude. People are excited about being part of the church. People are excited about the school, about reaching out. They feel like they have something to offer and that their church is no longer something that is taboo to talk about. All of this results in a positive image for the church that people want to be a part of.

The school is one of the ways that Risen Savior is trying to make contacts with people. Through it there are many opportunities for outreach, many opportunities for people to volunteer and many opportunities to simply meet people and invite them to come and be a part of the church.

Turning the Tide

First off, let it be known that the author has closer contacts with Redemption Lutheran Church than the other churches. All of his cousins and his brother attended grade school there. His aunt and uncles, and grandfather are members there, he and his sister were baptized there and his parents were members there as well. As such there is a closeness to the author's heart that in a sense shared in sadness that many of the members of Redemption must have felt as they recognized that the school needed to be closed.

Redemption Church and School was experiencing a decline in numbers. From 1994 to 2003 they have had a decrease in membership of sixty-three percent. This is not quite the same

large amount of numbers that were lost at the time they were considering the voucher program but the decline was there nonetheless. The number of children enrolled in their school dropped from eighty-six in 1994 to thirty-two at the time of the school's closure and that number continued to decrease so that the total number of children enrolled in a WELS school has since dropped to four in 2003. Now this does not mean that all of these people have dropped out of the WELS as a whole, many have transferred to a church with a school, but it still shows the problems that Redemption was experiencing.

It should come as no surprise then that the members wanted to do something to turn around their declining numbers and revitalize the church. Considering that school choice was the big buzz in the WELS and Milwaukee at the time, and considering that Redemption had a long standing school that was dear in the hearts of the congregation's members, it is not surprising that school choice was an option that was strongly considered.

Although the author does not have all the details it seems as though the church was pretty divided. The pastor³ and at least one prominent member of the church were very opposed to school choice with other prominent members being strongly for opening up their school to voucher children. There were also many grumblings for and against the program from the rest of the congregation. In short there seemed to be no good solution that would please everyone. In the end the church did not open up its doors to choice students and in the end the doors of the School were closed permanently in 2001.

This was a great blow to the people of Redemption. Morale was down and a defeatist attitude started to overtake the congregation. With the loss of the school and even more members it seemed like it was just a matter of time until the church would close its doors as well. Like a cancer patient waiting for death, so also the church was resigned to its fate.

³ The current Pastor, Pastor Winkel was not the pastor of Redemption at the time.

Yet in this darkness a light shone forth to pierce the dejected hearts of Redemption's parishioners. That gospel message was still for everyone. They still had a mission to the community, and even if it did not take the shape of a choice school it could take the shape of a place for youth to gather. Lighthouse Youth Center is the new outreach wing of the church. Pastor Winkel says that the people had their backs against the wall, they realized that they needed to change and reach out, and this was the way that they were going to do it.

As the author walked down the hall of the school where his cousins once showed him their desks, that feeling of nostalgia was gone, replaced with a sense of purpose. Where seventies style walls and colors once greeted the eye in typical WELS school fashion, there was now a coffee shop atmosphere in a large hardwood floored open area, with a comfortable lounge off to the side and a high tech tiered room on the other side of a wall that was filled with all the gadgets that make an audio-visual guy drool. The author just hopes that he gets an invite to the first Packer party.

There is something going on here, something special and hopeful. The congregation has realized that the church is not closed yet. The people have realized that there is still work that they can do and people that they can reach. This is one way that they can do it. May God bless them in their efforts.

Conclusion

If by this time the reader is not sure whether or not having a choice school is the right move for their church the rest of this paper might not make things any clearer. But perhaps just a few more observations will help to clarify any thoughts on the part of the reader.

Choice schools take work and serious administration. Of the two schools that the author visited both of them had full-time principals who did not do much teaching but mostly did

administration. That is not a bad thing, a well administrated school is a blessing, but at the same time gone are the days of the seventh and eighth grade teacher teaching a full day and then doing the administration work.

It takes a special kind of people to make a school successful for the church. Pastor Winkel⁴ said that he was not sure if he would have supported Redemption opening their school to choice students. He said that it takes a special kind of teacher to be the liaison between the church and the families. They need to be missionaries or else the program just will not work. Pastor Fisher said the same thing. It is not as if you can just open your doors and say here we are, come to our school and you will automatically be members of the church too.

That is another thing. If you want students to come into your choice school you need to invite them in. There are many choice schools in Milwaukee all vying for students. Parents are not going to just send them to you, you need to recruit. Pastor Fisher said that if regular WELS schools enlisted students as vigorously as choice schools did they would be just as successful as the choice schools. It takes a great amount of effort and inviting to make a school prosper.

It is also important to consider the neighborhood. When Hope Christian School, another WELS voucher school, considered opening up a campus at or near Redemption they canvassed the area to see if there was any interest. There was very little. The Milwaukee schools in the area are strong and the community values them. Furthermore the alderman for the area was supporting another charter school and did not want to see any more competition. For these reasons one might look back and say maybe it was a good thing that Redemption did not go the route of the voucher program.

⁴ Pastor Winkel served as a senior vicar at a church with a choice school and is thus generally for the choice program.

Finally consider the purpose of your school. Why are you considering opening a choice school or opening your school to choice students. One thing that impressed the author about Risen Savior was how carefully planned everything was. They had the growth projections, the financial set ups, the loans in place, everything was carefully calculated and planned for success. Of course this does not insure success but it certainly gave the Holy Spirit room to work. At the same time Atonement had a very different purpose. This too was thought out, so that their own students and members would benefit from the decision to allow voucher students.

Even though Redemption's school closed it was not necessarily because they did not enter into the voucher program. The numbers were dwindling and the choice program is not a silver bullet that will fix everyone's problems. Instead it is another tool that people can use for good or bad, to preach the gospel or in the case of many unscrupulous administrators in Milwaukee, to get rich. Whatever the purpose and decision of churches, may the gospel be preached to children and adults and may God's kingdom come and his harvest gathered.

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