

Funding Lutheran Elementary Schools

by LeDell Plath

“Enrollment plunged from 116,000 students in 1962 to 44,216 students last year,” reported *The Milwaukee Journal* on September 18, 1988. The enrollment of Catholic schools in the Milwaukee Archdiocese declined that drastically. The article states that “most educators sum up the top problem with one word: money.” Others interviewed said that the problem goes deeper. They believe that the purpose of Catholic schools has changed.

The schools of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod have not experienced enrollment problems of the magnitude quoted above. We, however, have problems which need our attention if we are to carry out the Lord’s directives as effectively as possible. Those problems are evident as we look at individual congregations and as we become familiar with the WELS elementary school system.

Congregation’s Problems

Some congregations with Lutheran elementary schools are having financial problems. These congregations are not receiving sufficient offerings to meet all of their obligations. Some congregations are trying temporary solutions: needed building maintenance is delayed, salary increases are put on hold, important new programs within the congregation are not funded, and offerings to WELS and other outside agencies are cut back or not increased.

The financial problems have challenged the leaders of congregations to identify the causes. Some causes which we have heard in our conversations with pastors, teachers or lay persons include these: many parents of school children are not contributing generously or at all, many school children and parents are not attending services regularly, the sanctified life of other members of the congregation (besides parents) is at a low level, the number of traditional Christian families is decreasing and the cost of operating a school has increased.

Costs have increased not only because of inflation but also because the pupil/teacher ratio is lower today than 20 years ago. For example, the ratio in 1967-68 was 26.6 to one. In 1988-89 the ratio is 19.9 to one. This lower ratio increases the cost of education.

A change in the needs of children is one reason for the lower pupil/teacher ratio. Those needs are the result of societal changes. The number of traditional Christian homes is smaller today than 20 years ago. The greater the number of unstable nontraditional homes in a congregation, the greater the number of school children who will need special attention.

It is not unusual that 20 to 50 percent of the children in a classroom come from nontraditional homes, such as single parent homes or homes with a divorced parent. Children from these homes usually need special attention spiritually, academically and emotionally. If 25 percent of a classroom’s children have unusual needs, the number of children the teacher is able to teach effectively is much smaller than in the classroom with only a small number of children having special needs.

In many of our schools special education teachers (part- or full-time) are called to meet the needs of a growing number of children. Obviously this costs extra dollars and puts extra strain on congregational budgets.

Synodical Perspective

The issue of funding schools is better understood if we examine some information regarding the entire synod rather than looking at the issue from only the congregational perspective.

The following is some information regarding the number of Lutheran elementary schools in WELS:

Years	Number New Schools	Number Schools Discontinued
1970-1975	60	7
1976-1981	82	2
1982-1987	25	24

In 1970 WELS Lutheran elementary schools numbered 244, in 1976—312, in 1982—374, and in 1987—374. (Incidentally, the enrollment for the period from 1970 to 1987 increased from 26,070 to 31,032.) What caused the dramatic decrease in school openings and the dramatic increase in school closings? How much impact did funding have on the high number of closings in recent years?

We know from our contact with personnel in the schools which closed that the reasons for closing are not the same. Lack of students, an insufficient financial base, and lack of enthusiasm and support for the school were some of the contributing factors.

Are the reasons the same for the small number of school openings from 1980-1987? Is the main reason money or are there other possible answers? Did we promote the opening of schools as vigorously during the entire time? Have we begun to take Lutheran elementary education for granted, assuming that schools will automatically open? Do we assume that when a congregation opens a school that the school will automatically thrive? Have we given those fledgling schools the help and support they need? Should congregations which open schools be offered help with setting up a financial program for supporting all of their financial responsibilities? Did the number of new mission openings affect the number of schools being started?

Another item of information is related to funding our schools. The percentage of total contributions by our congregations to WELS and other agencies outside the congregation decreased from 20.4% in 1985 to 18.5% in 1987 (*Statistical Report of the WELS*, 1985, 1987). (The average percentage over the past 12 years is 21.3.) Given the synod budget of \$17 million, that decrease of 1.9% meant a loss of about \$300,000 for the WELS treasury.

This decrease in offerings has a ripple effect. Reduced offerings affect synodical work, including new mission openings. If missions are not opened, this reduces the number of potential congregations which can open schools in the future.

Could this decrease in percentage of offerings to WELS indicate that congregations are having financial problems and are keeping a larger percentage of their offerings for themselves to help pay their bills? It seems so.

Attempted Solutions

Congregations are trying to solve their money problems in different ways. Some congregations are considering adopting a tuition charge for members' children. Some churches have adopted such plans.

WELS congregations traditionally have funded their elementary schools through the offerings of the members of the congregation. We must not conclude from tradition that charging tuition of parents who are members is forbidden by Scripture. Under certain circumstances a tuition policy for members can be a blessing. Parents are moved by the Lord to pay the tuition coats and not decrease their offerings. This helps the congregation do its God-assigned work. But if such a policy harms the sanctification of the members, or if spiritual problems affecting the congregation are not addressed, a tuition policy for members is not beneficial to the Lord's work.

If a congregation is considering such a policy, thought should be given to several issues. Will a tuition policy for members improve the parents' and other members' attitudes toward the scriptural concept of giving? Will the policy promote a feeling among those who do not have children in the school that they should continue to improve their offerings in order to help support an important nurturing function of the church? Is such a tuition policy an attempt to solve a spiritual problem parents may have? Do spiritual problems exist among

others in the congregation besides parents? If so, what is being done to solve those problems in a God-pleasing, law-gospel way?

For a congregation which started its school with a tuition charge for members' children, the policy is likely a part of congregational life and accepted as a suitable means to assist with financing the Lord's work. Very likely that policy then serves as a blessing to the congregation. But even in such a congregation, the questions asked in the previous paragraph should be addressed periodically in order to determine whether that tuition policy is still the best means of helping to fund the school.

Another source of funding which many of our schools use is government subsidy. That subsidy can take several forms: tax free property, free bus service, free lunch commodities, subsidy for lunch and milk programs, and free educational materials. These free services and materials can add up to large sums. Accepting such government subsidy in itself is not forbidden in Scripture. That policy, however, can be detrimental to the church if the members develop an attitude of dependence on such outside funding.

The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:12 warns us "not to be mastered by anything." Our people are "mastered" by government help if they depend on that help to pay for the Christian education costs which the congregation should be assuming. The Lutheran elementary school is not merely education, it is part of the spiritual nurturing which the Lord directs the parents and the congregation to provide.

Considering our human nature, we might think, "The government owes us money because we pay taxes. Why shouldn't they help us?" If our first question when seeking funds for school projects is "Where can we get government help?" then we are "hooked." That feeling of dependency blunts our desire to use our God-given gifts and resources for the work the Lord has given us. We become reluctant to contribute freely and liberally to the Lord's work.

Other funding, besides government subsidy, is available in ever increasing amounts. Fraternal organizations such as AAL and Lutheran Brotherhood disburse some of their monies as fraternal gifts. Some of those monies are available to schools. Also some corporations now offer matching gifts. The same cautions apply to this type of funding as were made regarding government subsidy.

Charging tuition of nonmembers is another source of funding which receives little attention. If our schools are located in areas where the public schools are having problems, WELS schools could increase their enrollment substantially by opening their doors to those who are willing to pay the tuition. In most cases frantic parents are willing to pay sizable tuition costs to avoid the perceived or real problems of the public school.

To adopt this open-door policy as a way to provide necessary funding for our schools is questionable at best. The school then becomes a private school which has as one of its purposes the raising of funds to help the church finance its work. It is doubtful whether such a school is effectively helping to achieve the dual goal of the church—nurture and outreach. It seems that the main goal of the school then becomes self-perpetuation.

The Problem

We have discussed problems and attempted solutions, but have we uncovered the real problem? Do we have the same problem in WELS as many educators in the Milwaukee Archdiocese say is the main problem in their system? Is the lack of money for educational purposes the major issue?

Is part of the problem also that our congregation members truly lack the financial resources to fund our schools and to fund all of the other necessary programs which are part of our church's work of nurturing and reaching out? Can anyone of us say that the money is not there?

We do have the resources. The Lord has blessed our members abundantly. We have the resources to fund all of the programs in our entire synod adequately. No, money is not the problem. We must look elsewhere.

Spiritual Apathy

The 1987 Synod Convention addressed *the* problem, and all of us have it—spiritual apathy. The delegates adopted a resolution which directed the synod’s Board for Parish Services “to plan, initiate and coordinate an intensive and extensive nurturing program which will encourage a spiritual renewal of our Synod’s membership...” The rationale for this action was that spiritual apathy drags us down. Poor attendance at services and holy communion, low enrollment in Bible classes, lack of involvement in lay ministry, “backdoor” losses, and personal, family, and marital problems contribute to and are evidences of that spiritual apathy.

We first need to examine ourselves. Do we take our sins seriously? Do we realize our miserable spiritual condition? Do we fully appreciate the salvation offered in the gospel through the forgiveness of every one of our damning sins?

Clear Purpose

Spiritual apathy can also result from living and functioning according to a wrong or unclear purpose. In a recent survey, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod found that a major problem in their elementary school system is the absence of a clearly stated purpose to which the church and school should be committed. I believe we face the same problem. But that problem is only part of a larger problem which is the lack of a clear congregational purpose which is communicated to the members and zealously accepted by them. If that is so, how can the school personnel know if their purpose helps to achieve the purpose of the congregation? If the congregation has no clearly stated purpose, how can faculty and parents know if what they are doing is helping to achieve the church’s purpose?

It also seems logical that if the congregation and the school are not communicating a clear scriptural purpose, the members will be lukewarm in their support of the church’s purpose and the means the church is using to achieve that purpose.

The Solution

What can we do as board members, pastors, teachers and principals to renew one another spiritually? What can we then do to achieve spiritual renewal among our parents and other members? What can we do to develop a clear scriptural purpose for church and school and obtain commitments to that purpose?

I believe that principals, teachers, pastors and church boards can help solve the problem of spiritual apathy and reduce the money problems. I believe they need to address these questions: What type of Christian member are we striving to develop (Ephesians 4:11-13)? How will that member display his Christianity (Ephesians 4,5 and Matthew 28:19,20)? What is lacking in us and in our members? How can we use law and gospel to develop the type of Christian the Lord wants?

If we answer these questions by carefully studying the Scriptures, we have a game plan for solving our spiritual problems and, in turn, our financial difficulties. By addressing those questions we will find and articulate the purpose of our church. We will then be able to establish the purpose of our school so that the school helps achieve the church’s purpose.

By regular diligent study of the Word, the Holy Spirit will enflame the hearts, minds and hands of our people. They will praise and honor our majestic gracious Lord by doing everything possible to nurture carefully and thoroughly the Christians in our congregations. These Christians will in turn be motivated to reach out to those who do not know and trust Christ.

This solution sounds too simple. Not so. Diligent and regular study of the Word and then doing the tasks the Lord asks requires much self-discipline, a self-discipline which our three enemies constantly strive to erode.

Also, it is not an easy task to renew our fellow Christians spiritually. We must develop a method of getting our people into the Scriptures so that the Holy Spirit is given a multitude of opportunities to demonstrate the unbelievable love which our Lord displays for us. The Holy Spirit will do the rest. He will motivate us and our fellow Christians.

We have only one means acceptable to our Lord for moving the hearts of our people to assume a greater responsibility for funding our Lutheran elementary schools and for funding the other programs of our congregations and synod. We must get our people into the Word. When we teach “them to obey everything I have commanded you,” then we are assured of the Lord’s blessing “surely I will be with you always” (Matthew 28:20).