

**Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium
Mequon, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
September 20, 2011**

**A Reaction to the Essay of Rev. Donald W. Patterson:
What Practical Experience Teaches Us about Lutheran Schools**

Pastor Patterson, after months of research, weeks of writing, days of editing, the final communication you sent me was “thanks for the opportunity.” Having read, re-read and dug through your essay I respond, “thank you brother in arms.” Thank you for taking the opportunity and responding with the loving, insightful and honest evaluation from a Christ-owned servant leader.

The scope of this assignment was to share what your practical experiences teach us about our Lutheran schools. You were to compose and share what our dictionaries might define as your *actual engagement in a certain kind of work or practice*. You have completed your assignment thoroughly and faithfully. Bear with me now, but in my view, your work smacks of a messy field report birthed from the heart of a soldier who battles for souls on the front lines. I’m not throwing you under the bus when I describe your work as a “messy field report.” I found your manner of symposium-speak to be transparent, risky, and challenging. Pardon the awkward word choice, i.e. the “messy field report,” I’m confident you will interpret the expression as a compliment. My intent is to offer praise and thanks to our Lord for allowing this record of your actual engagement to cross my path and challenge me as well as our brothers. Pastor Patterson, within your essay I see the beating heart of our Savior. I see the messy report of a servant who knows, above all else, he is loved by Jesus. I see the messy report of a man who returns his love to Jesus and His Word. He loves souls. He loves the battle field with all its messy challenges. In view of all that, I thank the One and only who has made this so for you.

Throughout the essay, Pastor Patterson made several references to the proverbial elephant in the room. His propositional statement swung open the door for the huge pachyderm. “The fact is that while we have Jesus Christ in our schools, less and less people are using them. What are we going to do?” (p 4). By God’s grace we all know to turn straight to His Word. There we find forgiveness for our sins of omission and commission. There we hear the voice of our Shepherd which makes us wiser and stronger. There we gain the right to pray to the One who has ascended and rules His gospel kingdom. What are we going to do when the battle for souls turns deadly or turns south? We run to our Lord. Then with iron clad assurance He arms us with His forgiveness and His Spirit’s gifts, we survey the field. We listen to the thoughts and words of one another. We even listen to the thoughts and words of those held captive. We must! Pastor Patterson’s personal recon would suggest that in so doing we especially open our eyes and ears to three major areas of concern.

Our essayist rightly targets the category of personnel as a critical concern. Relationships are the heart and soul of his discussion points, and rightly so. Proactive, healthy, personal, professional and Christian relationships are the nexus for Lutheran school pastor, principal, teachers, parents and students. Pastor Patterson leads us through many personnel issues designed to bring about our best. One of the many statements that turned me into a bobble-head was: “Ministry is a faith driven way of life not just a teaching job” (p 6). That truth invoked

one of my fondest memories of my former platoon's church and school ministry. Imagine, instead of bolting out of your worship facility on Sunday you actually sit around with your principal and his family, your entire teaching staff and several grade school families, to talk about life and ministry in Christ. Imagine sitting and talking after your worship services until three in the afternoon when someone finally suggests a food run to Hunan express and Wendy's for the kids. Imagine the afternoon turns toward evening before the first suggestion of heading home for the day. I would not have shared that fond memory if it had been an isolated experience. Truth is, that scene played itself out numerous times for us. I am not suggesting one must take this Sunday afternoon ministry team hang-out scene and force it upon their situation. However, I dare to hitch this practical experience to that of the essayist's and suggest that aiming love, responsibility, ministry talk and ministry passion at the hearts of one another can hit a sweet-spot. Ministry as a faith driven way of life can spontaneously erupt into the most informal yet productive, proactive and enjoyable moments of life, yes, especially life on the battlefield.

Permit a brief lament, the mandated length of a reaction paper forces me to offer but a passing shout-out to the essayist's fine insights regarding proactive school boards, an annual look at the big picture and providing our principals the tools and time to carry out their mission. There are critical "we have to address this!" (p 11) action items to be understood and implemented stat!

Pastor Patterson then leads us to ponder and evaluate our educational program. I appreciated the unapologetic and informed approach of our essayist. "We want only the best for our God and his children" (p 12) prompted our brother to place before us such matters as

- The healthy balance between informational and experiential learning
- Authentic learning experiences
- Team-teaching
- Accreditation
- Teaching our children to be current in technology
- Facility improvement
- Extra-curricular offerings ... the best you can

Perhaps with good intention the essayist avoided using a term like "educational best practices." There I went and said it. The snarky side of me wonders if now is the time for us to eyeball one of the great threats to our school ministries, i.e. miscommunication and misunderstanding about educational program. My brothers and I on the clergy roster must respect and listen to our brothers and sisters on the teacher roster to better understand what "educational best practices" means in the hearts and minds of our blessed fellowship. One small way I'd propose to close a perceived gap would be to accept that the bullet points above or the educational strategies and practices of which our teachers speak are not at all inherently new to us. They are not new to pedagogy nor are they new to andragogy. If "new" or "new-fangled fiddle faddle" pop into your head, dismiss either thought. As far as I can tell, the only thing new in the current educational approach would be a renewed respect or better understanding for how we fearfully and wonderfully made creatures do actively receive, retrieve and make sense of information. Or to simplify, we are welcoming, or in some cases, welcoming

back into our classrooms educational methods and practices that have always naturally occurred outside our classrooms.

Our essayist next leads us to school advancement. Again, the practical experiences of our brother has taught him and us well. Permit me to share a few highlights along with a few brief comments.

Pastor Patterson writes “we can never assume our people are staying on mission. We have to help” (p 15). I trust I’m not the only man in this room would have to admit it but I can never assume I’m “staying on mission” either. Collaboration is key. I’m just saying.

“The demand for orthodoxy as a prerequisite to be at our schools is for our teachers, not our students” (p 16). Not only could I not say this better, I never said it quite this well. Mr. essayist, thank you for this clear phrase.

“My experience is that we are too slow to react to changing context in and around our congregations and schools” coupled with “Time spent actively listening to the people you serve is much better spent than time sitting in meetings guessing what is going on out there” (p 17). I rarely allow myself to say this but “truer words have never been spoken.” Our guess work is almost always inaccurate at best, deadly wrong at worst. I cannot understand how Christian leaders can all but say, “don’t let the door hit ya as you leave ... then we’ll presume to tell you, and others?, why you did leave.” To borrow from an earlier portion of the essay, “we have to address this!”

Admittedly, as I leave the school advancement section of this practical essay I fear I leave entirely too much on the table. An ongoing, well executed plan to reach our communities through our schools, viable plans for funding sustainability, the reference to “The Future, Funding, and Faith” from our CLS office, these and many more thought provoking items have been offered by our essayist. Do grapple with these issues soon.

Finally, in the concluding remarks of this essay Pastor Patterson reminds us of the urgency of our mission no matter what form of gospel ministry we have under our prayerful consideration. Mr. / Rev. essayist, what a way to summarize this for us all: “Saving schools is not our mission. Saving souls is” (p 19). What does this mean? Practically speaking, “you know it when you see it.”

Our clarion call takes us from this beautiful gymnasium back to the messy battlefield under the banner of Christ. The love of Christ compels us to know and share His life-giving Word with all. It puts us on our scuffed up knees prayerfully considering what you so boldly state up front: “The gospel is our freedom and comfort. The gospel also empowers us to make honest assessments of what we do and why. We do not need to fear discovering any area for improvement. Gospel freedom always breeds honest assessment” (p 3).

Dear fellow soldier of the cross, thank you for your “messy field report.” Thus concludes my messy reaction. We may now return to the battle knowing this: Christ champions us, we champion Him and all the rest will be added unto us.

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