

“How Should We Financially Support Our Lutheran Elementary Schools?”

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Abstract

Due to the increase in cost of education as well as economy troubles, there seems to be a growing issue for funding the Lutheran Elementary Schools. Finances are not a new problem with the church, but it is still a major point of discussion. The goal of this study is to compare different ways in which a school can be funded to figure out how the schools should be funded. Based on the reading of numerous essays and presentations that there have been on the topic with in our circles, it is clear that there are many opinion for which template should be followed when deciding on funding. Models for funding have changed from what the Wisconsin synod has done in the past. Looking at what is being done, what has been done, and what some say should be done, there should be a good foundation to figure out how we should fund our Lutheran Elementary Schools.

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Introduction

One size fits all! “One size fits all” is a description for a product that would fit in all instances. The term has been extended to mean one style or procedure would fit in all related applications. This saying has been used for over 5 decades.

When it comes to apparel labeled as one-size fits-all, does it really fit all? When a wristwatch could be considered to fit all people, does it? What about those hats with the adjustable clips or strap on the back? In women’s clothing, a flexible or open garment may be labeled as one-size-fits-all, however, the size is typically a medium size (able to expand), rather than actually fitting petite or extra-large sizes. Even though women of all sizes might be able to put the article of clothing on, the petite woman may look like she is swimming in it, while on the larger woman; the article of clothing may not be flattering at all. Does it really fit all sizes? What if your wrists were too big to get the wristwatch on, or so small that the watch would slide right off? What if one’s head is too large even for the one-size-fits-all hat?, What if the hat won’t fit even on the final clip or can’t be made small enough to fit so it won’t easily fall off? Is there truly a one size fits all?

The same can be said about many other aspects of life. When it comes to teaching, there are many templates, or models, that teachers can follow. There is not one way of teaching that fits all situations, or all teachers, or all students for that matter. Media does not have a template that fits all situations. In order to meet the unique needs of all people, there are different types of publications and procedures that they will need to implement. Even then they will not reach everyone. Parents can read all the parenting materials they want; this does not mean there is only one way to handle all parental situations. A doctor could have two identical cases, use the same procedure or medicine for both, and still the outcomes can be completely different.

In our society, so many times, we want a one size fits all. We want to know how it is supposed to be done. It would make things so much simpler. But that is far from the case. There is no one size fits all. The same can be said about how congregations feel about supporting Lutheran Elementary Schools. There seems to be a desire in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) to have a single template for how congregations financially support their schools. There are many models for funding the schools, as well as opinions and papers written on the “correct way” for the church to support the school. Is there a model that all of the schools should follow. How should the Lutheran Elementary Schools be funded?

Literature Review

The focus on so much of literature on Christian Education has to do with the specific programs that a church runs (bible class, confirmation, evangelism, etc...). When it comes to what has been written on the Lutheran schools, the devotion of the writing tends to focus on the philosophy of the school. However, there is not a lot of attention given to cost. Tuition and funding is usually brought in, but the authors of the papers, who have experience working with the finances of schools, usually focus only on what works for them in their situation and perceive that their way is the right way. Sure it works for that specific situation, but what if that opinion does not work. What are some of the other options out there for how a school can be funded in the different situations? That is where some of the attention needs to be. Finances are a reoccurring topic, and the funding of the schools should be as well. How the Lutheran Elementary Schools are funded is important, for the church, the school, the members, the staff, the students, and the synod. Give what is needed, and understanding of how the schools should be funded based on the situation.

Christian Education

In his Great Commission our Savior Jesus Christ commanded “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”¹ This is a command taken very seriously by the Christian congregations in the WELS, as can be seen in the mission statements developed by the churches in the synod. Just as the mission statement of Calvary Lutheran Church:

“Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church, Thiensville, Wisconsin, exists as Christians united in faith and worship by the Word of God to share the saving gospel of Jesus Christ with the Mequon-Thiensville community and the world. As such, our mission is to reach out to the lost and to nurture the faithful through public worship, Bible study, fellowship, and promotion of Christian education at all levels.”²

One of the ways in which the devil succeeds in tearing down God’s Church is by clouding this vision of the church, causing Christians to lose sight of the purpose, of the mission. With Satan continuously on the prowl, Christian Education plays an important and vital role in the church.

¹ Matthew 28:19

² Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church’s Mission Statement

When the risen Savior commanded Peter, “Feed my lambs,”³ he was directing Peter, and his disciples, to care for God’s people. This command was not to physically feed the people, but spiritually, to teach and preach to Christ crucified, feeding the sheep, the lambs with the everlasting food all need. Christ is placing this responsibility on his disciples, on his church to preach and teach to all people. The Holy Spirit is thus given opportunity to enter the hearts of unbelievers and bring them to faith, and that believers grow and be strengthened in the faith, as not to be torn away by the devil. Christian education is important and vital.

The church’s goal in Christian education is to allow the Holy Spirit to work through the means of grace. Christian education aims at imparting wisdom for this life and for eternity, and it is the Gospel alone, through the means of grace that equips the children of God for both this life and eternity. This is not to say that the Gospel is the only tool that is used for every kind of wisdom, but it alone imparts heavenly wisdom and harnesses a person for proper employment and enjoyment of the wisdom stored up in human experiences and the works of man. Christian education is for the whole man, the whole Christian, body and soul. The Gospel reveals what a God-pleasing spirit can be. The church is to take opportunity to educate its members in this doctrine.

In the Home

Historically, parents have been viewed as the primary teachers, especially in the spiritual training of children. This view is found in Scripture. In the Old Testament, God laid out his plan for keeping the worship and praise of the Lord at the forefront. “God wanted education in the faith to be a family thing. He did not want the education of children confined to a single Sabbath hour, nor left only for religious professionals to conduct.”⁴ As Moses told the Israelites as they were about to enter the land of Canaan: “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”⁵ The Old Covenant shows that the Lord almost exclusively used home education

³ John 21:15-17

⁴ Braun, Mark. What Our Fathers Taught Us about Lutheran Schools. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at the “Symposium on Lutheran Schools,” September, 2011); available from <http://wlsce.net/content/2011-symposium-lutheran-schools>; Internet.

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:6-9

to keep his covenant alive in the hearts of his people. The process of parents educating the children in the home was to be carefully followed, and the blessings would abound. God told his people, “In all places where I record my name I will come to you and I will bless you.”⁶ Some other very valuable advice for teaching children in the home can be read in the Psalms and Proverbs.⁷

Parents were expected, are expected, and will continue to be expected to be the chief providers of spiritual training. The responsibility of Christian nurture, of Christian education, unquestionably lies with the parents. Scripture is clear when it assigns parents first with the privilege and obligation for the spiritual teaching of their children.⁸ It is their God given responsibility to carry out this duty. There are numerous occasions in Scripture that show that Christian education in the home is not an option, but a requirement that every faithful parent should and will gladly do. Christian education has the best opportunity to flourish when it is done in the home. This is where the spiritual shepherds of the congregations, the pastors, need to encourage such learning to take place in the home. “Nowhere else may religion be taught so easily and with such abiding results as in the home.”⁹ Children are most influenced by their parents. Practically all that children know and experience in their life is passed down from generation to generation. All this knowledge children gain from the parents includes religion.

It is in the home where children are to be nurtured in the Word and by the Christian family relationships. The strong Christian education, from which Christian lifestyles are developed, happens best when the Word of God is taught at home. It is where the youth receive a growing sense of mission. The home was, is, and will be the first school for Christian education and remains the most vital for our lives, the lives of our children, and the lives of our members and congregations.

In the Church

⁶ Ecclesiastes 20:24

⁷ Psalms 78:2-8; 103:13; Proverbs 1:8-9; 6:23; 13:24; 19:18; 20:11; 22:6, 15; 29:15, 17

⁸ Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Proverbs 1:8-9; 22:6; Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21

⁹ Degner, Steven C. Encouraging Christian Education in the Home. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at AZ-CAL Pastoral Conference Phoenix, Arizona, October 1978); available from <http://www.wlsessays.net/node/425>; Internet.

The purpose of the church is to nurture the members of the congregation and to reach the Gospel message out to the community. The church teaches us to live God-pleasing lives among one another. The congregations look to develop stability and health to the homes of its members and the people in the community. The church acts as a vehicle through which families receive the Gospel through Word and Sacrament, publicly worship God, and are encouraged by their fellow believers with whom they join in worship. Through this work, there is a growing desire to care for and support each other as Jesus did, and continues to do.

This care and support from the church to its members and the public includes the ministry Christian education which it has been charged to do. The predominant way the church carries out Christian education is through the preaching of the pastor. The opportunity the pastor has every Sunday to preach law and gospel to all those who need to hear it is valuable, and God willing the faith of the listeners is strengthened. But one hour a week (or even 15-20 minutes for the sermon) is not enough time for proper Christian education to flourish. The church carries out this ministry in a many ways: Bible information class (BIC), Bible class, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School (VBS), etc. The church uses these programs to train God's people.

But, if the parents are to be responsible for the Christian education of the children, is the church taking away that responsibility through these programs? The important thing to remember is that the church and all its Christian education programs are not to take away the responsibility that the parents have in the training of their children. Far from it! Pastor Leonard Koeninger asked, "Whose is the child?"... "the church has a vital interest in the child," yet even that may be selfish if the child is regarded as a tool" to make the Church large in numbers, powerful in this world, glorious in the eyes of man." In the Lutheran church "we have always believed that the child belongs to the parents, and consider our schools as an institution offered to parents to assist them" in their parental duty. Above all, the child "belongs to the Lord," because "the Lord laid down his life for all in self-sacrificing love. He sought the life of all at the expense of his own life."¹⁰ The church aids the parents in the spiritual welfare and nurturing of the children. The aid is by the encouraging parents to fulfill their responsibilities, providing instruction and materials

¹⁰ Braun, Mark. What Our Fathers Taught Us about Lutheran Schools. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at the "Symposium on Lutheran Schools," September, 2011); available from <http://wlsce.net/content/2011-symposium-lutheran-schools>; Internet.

for the parents to carry out their task, and helping and supporting the spiritual growth of the parents and children.

As wonderful as the WELS school system is, the churches need to be cautious that Christian education is not taken out of the home. At times it seems as if the church is becoming less dependent on the home as a place for Christian education, worship, and Bible study. The home has always been the primary agency for Christian training; the school was to be used as a reinforcement to that which was being taught in the home. These roles are something that the congregation needs to keep at the forefront of the mission of the church. At times, it almost appears as if the school and other church run programs are becoming the main training ground for Christian education, with the parents taking on the role of the aide. “Another obstacle Satan uses to block the use of the Word in the home is the fallacious thinking that the church has the primary responsibility for educating the children. Parents are often willing to relegate the training of their children to the church or the school.”¹¹

Luther once said that where God builds a church, the devil builds his chapel nearby.¹² One might say that where God builds a Christian home through his Word, the devil builds his shack nearby. There is a danger in our synod with our excellent systems of Christian education. Satan has been busy, creating a fallacious way of thinking, that the church is primarily responsible for educating the children. This way of thinking needs to be stopped. There needs to be guidance from the church and school to lead parents to continue to educate in the home. Satan has been successful far too often in today’s world of blocking the use of God’s Word in the home. And in doing so, parents very quickly are willing to relegate the training of the children to the church or the school. But “the home has abdicated as a purposeful Christian teacher. Most if not all the responsibility has been shifted to the church. The...school was never intended to supersede the home as a teacher of religion.”¹³ This is an important and serious issue facing Christian education today. The primary training center of children in God’s way must remain in the home, under the tutelage of the parents. The greater emphasis needs to be in the home.

¹¹ Degner, Steven C. Encouraging Christian Education in the Home. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at AZ-CAL Pastoral Conference Phoenix, Arizona, October 1978); available from <http://www.wlssays.net/node/425>; Internet.

¹² Luther, Martin. *Table Talk*. Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1967.

¹³ Degner, Steven C. Encouraging Christian Education in the Home. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at AZ-CAL Pastoral Conference Phoenix, Arizona, October 1978); available from <http://www.wlssays.net/node/425>; Internet.

Some would argue that the roles had to change because the environment in which the schools serve has changed. In today's culture and society, where so many children are being brought up in broken homes, by single parents, many would say that the church can no longer assume that the children are being provided with a Christian model and reinforcement for the classroom in the home. There are more special needs children and other problem cases among student. The influence of TV and media continues to undermine the purposes of Christian education.

Yet even in this time when it would appear that the need for the LES is high, there are growing expectations and demands of the schools, of the class, of the teachers, requiring more competence in more academic areas with less positive feedback. Demands for more: better services, improved quality, higher standards, more professionalism. The changes in society are reshaping the family. And the changes in the family are reshaping society. The changes have impacted the church's dual ministry of outreach and nurture with an increased sense of uncertainty, insecurity, and frustration. The Christian church continues to have an abiding interest in families. Even though the effectiveness of the teaching ministry of the church is being hindered by the important issues, the trends, and the challenges that are impacting the Christian family, education still remains parental. George Stoeckhardt noted that "a Christian mother has, of course, the same duty toward her children." Irwin Habeck lamented that "today many fathers try to evade this responsibility by saying they leave the religious training of their children up to the mothers because fathers do not have much time to spend with their children." Habeck continued, "Even more reprehensible evasion of duty when parents say they will leave the religious training of their children up to the church." But William Beitz points out very adamantly, "The matter of education is primarily one of the Christian parents according to God's own arrangement." "While Christian education will always be essential task for the church, no specific methodology or format for such education dare be absolutized," and "even a cursory study of the history of the church will reveal a variety of ways of doing Christian education."¹⁴

Lutheran Elementary Schools (LES)

¹⁴ Braun, Mark. What Our Fathers Taught Us about Lutheran Schools. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at the "Symposium on Lutheran Schools," September, 2011); available from <http://wlsce.net/content/2011-symposium-lutheran-schools>; Internet.

God has given his church a mission. That mission is clear: to use the Word to train and equip the next generation, that they serve the Savior in this life while clinging to the hope of eternal life. Just as Jesus command Peter, “Feed my lambs,”¹⁵ the church too is to value the spiritual training of the children. This is important work. Within WELS circles one of the major programs that the church uses to carry out this important work is the Lutheran Elementary School.

God gave the responsibility of teaching to the parents, as he established his intensive training of the youth to be done in the home. However, during the last 150 plus years, the Lord has guided the development of the Christian day school among Lutherans. The day school was unique among all outward forms of child instruction in the churches past. The schools have been able to carry out their ministry free from control and influence of secular government and have been protected by God against the attacks, pressures, and persecutions from other religious groups and government groups.

The WELS has been blessed with a highly respected education system. Today this system serves 41,596 students in 515 schools.¹⁶ These schools range from Early Childhood Ministries (ECM), to LES, to Lutheran High Schools (LHS) and Preparatory High Schools (PHS). These numbers do not include the students being served at two WELS colleges or at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS). The school year of 2011-2012 is the first time since 1993 that enrollment in the WELS LES has increased. "The enrollment totals remind us of the great privilege and blessing that God has given us that we are able to share the gospel with more than 41,000 young people through our WELS school ministries—and not only with the children but with their parents and families as well! Praise the Lord!"¹⁷ Though there are some needs and desire to update courses, books, and classrooms, there is no pressing need to hastily improve the curriculums. There is no scramble for teachers and full confidence that the teachers will represent the theological position of the synod fairly and clearly. These schools are used to assist the parents in the nurturing and education of the children. “We have repeatedly expressed our

¹⁵ John 21:15

¹⁶ WELS School Statistics 2011-12;

¹⁷ Greg Schmill, director of the Commission on Lutheran Schools

conviction that the parochial school offers the best opportunities for keeping our children in the faith and bringing them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”¹⁸

These schools prepare the children, the students, differently than public school. Lutheran elementary schools do not only care for the mind and body of the students for this life, but care also for the spiritual well-being and souls of the children. Unlike the public schools, the Lutheran elementary schools have Jesus as the center of everything taught. What a joy to know that when the youth of the congregation are able to go the church’s LES, they will hear about their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the good news of salvation throughout the entire curriculum and activities. “The spiritual value of the daily religious training, which constitutes the real reason for the continuance of our schools is, of course the priceless advantage which our schools can bestow on our children.” The chief benefit of Lutheran schools is that they furnish “helpful and inspiring instruction for the salvation of immortal souls” and helped lay “the only cornerstone for a life that is well-pleasing to god, a growing faith in the redemption of Jesus Christ.” Our schools are “certainly worth saving and worth expanding.”¹⁹

Supporting the Lutheran Elementary Schools

Encouraging

The Lutheran schools are a wonderful asset in the WELS that helps parents lay the wonderful foundation for the spiritual life of their children. But the schools are in danger. Already back in 1925 J.P. Meyer was already warning of the danger. While people say “the Christian day school is the ideal,” they too often find “it impossible to create enough interest in their members to maintain one.” Meyer goes on to warn that the views and methods in the school were becoming materialistic. There were demands for unification of the school system, calls for standardization of school requirements, the seeking of accreditation, and competing to build up schools “on entirely different educational principles from ours” as harmful to Lutheran schools “We stand in danger of throwing away the kernel in order to retain the husks.”²⁰

¹⁸ Braun, Mark. What Our Fathers Taught Us about Lutheran Schools. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at the “Symposium on Lutheran Schools,” September, 2011); available from <http://wlsce.net/content/2011-symposium-lutheran-schools>; Internet.

¹⁹ Walter a. Maier, *Walther League Messenger*, in “Our schools are Worth Saving,” *LSJ* 57 (August 1922): 247-48.

²⁰ Braun, Mark. What Our Fathers Taught Us about Lutheran Schools. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at the “Symposium on Lutheran Schools,” September, 2011); available from <http://wlsce.net/content/2011-symposium-lutheran-schools>; Internet.

In order for the schools to continue exist, to succeed, and to grow there needs to be support. Support includes encouragement. This encouragement for the LES needs to come from the teachers, the congregation members and its leaders (council members, board of education members, elders, etc...) and of course the pastor. “Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.””²¹ Paul Kretzmann, in his *Popular Commentary on the Bible*, explains that this verse means “every encouragement should be given the children that they may learn to know and love their Savior.”²² “It is certainly quite reasonable to expect that we Christian Day School teachers and pastors do just that, give *every encouragement* possible to the children of our communicant membership so that they may learn to know and love their Savior more dearly. For those of us who have the blessed privilege of serving congregations that maintain Christian Day Schools, this encouragement surely takes the form of building or increasing our Christian Day School enrollments. Since it is quite unreasonable to think otherwise, we will assume that all agree that this responsibility of encouragement belongs to each of us – pastors, principals, and teachers.”²³ For this encouragement to take place, all must be on board, and that includes board members. Having board members who are completely behind the school are genuinely encouraging other communicant parents to benefit themselves and their children through the Christian education the congregation maintains is key.

Another way in which a congregation can support the school is by asking the Lord’s blessings upon the LES. It seems that there are times when the effectiveness of prayer is forgotten or even neglected. While the Lord may not take away all of the struggles that the school is facing (decreasing enrollment, shortage of finances, etc...), the results of prayer can be sure, for God has promised, “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”

In so many situations, this support is easier said than done. Encouragement is preached from the pulpit and heard from the teachers in class. Board members and congregational members share how important Christian education is, and what a treasure the Lutheran school is, but who is going to pay for it? Support of the Lutheran school includes financial support. Then

²¹ Matthew 19:14

²² Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary on the Bible*, New Testament, Vol. I, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo.

²³ Richard Scharf, “Building the Enrollment of a Parochial School Through Children of Communicant Members.” [Pastor-Teacher Conference, Wayne, Michigan, January 1964]

the excuses come: “Our children can get a better or more diverse education elsewhere cheaper.” “We cannot afford the tuition.” “Offerings have not been what we expected, we cannot pay the bills for the school.” “All that time and money could be spent on other aspects of ministry.” It really comes down to the value we place on the school: “What is the true worth of our Christian day schools?”²⁴

Kurt Oswald urged:

“We must first of all become convinced of the intrinsic value of Lutheran Christian day schools ourselves. Their Christ-centered environment, the Christian personality of the teachers, and the motive for study which leads children to look at all knowledge as a God give instrument for our use in the building up of his kingdom all gave Lutheran schools their unique value. Teachers who teach their children to be honest because their Savior wants them to be so are building and molding Christian character, but teachers who teach children to be honest because of what others might think, or because it is for their own good are doing exactly the opposite, encouraging children’s innate selfishness and nourishing the pharisaic Old Adam in them. Instruction in citizenship that sets aside God’s grace and elevates the Golden rule to a place of distinction instead can surely be nothing else than a detriment to Christian training.”²⁵

Funding

Discussions on how the church is going to financially support a school are not a new subject, but it is a topic that continues to come up again and again. In nearly all LES settings, the funding issue is what generates the most questions, concerned debate, and reaction. The members of the congregation want to know how school bills are going to be paid. Whose responsibility is it to make sure that there are funds to pay the salaries of the teachers, make sure the building is updated and utilities paid, or that the curriculum is advanced to where it needs to be? These things cost money.

²⁴ Braun, Mark. What Our Fathers Taught Us about Lutheran Schools. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at the “Symposium on Lutheran Schools,” September, 2011); available from <http://wlsce.net/content/2011-symposium-lutheran-schools>; Internet.

²⁵ Braun, Mark. What Our Fathers Taught Us about Lutheran Schools. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at the “Symposium on Lutheran Schools,” September, 2011); available from <http://wlsce.net/content/2011-symposium-lutheran-schools>; Internet.

Historically, Lutheran elementary schools have been financed by the church. “A school is the concern of the whole congregation, not only of those who have children of school age. Also those who have no children, or whose children have been already confirmed, should gladly help along.”²⁶ It was expected that all members of the congregation would contribute to the school. This was usually done through their offerings. Then the school would be able to operate with the limited and manageable financial concern. Pastor John Brenner put it this way, “This fact is recognized among us, at least to a certain extent. Our congregations ask those also who have no children to contribute toward the support of the parochial school, and our synods establish and maintain colleges and seminaries for the common good.” Lutheran education on all levels was not to be considered “entirely the private affair of their parents.”²⁷ It was the dedication the members had for the children in their congregation, the concern for the spiritual edification of the youth, and their generosity with their gifts that kept the schools going strong.

School ministry is still very important; however, today more and more WELS schools are struggling with expenses:

“Funding a WELS elementary school ministry is a big issue...because school ministry is very expensive. The cost of education in WELS elementary schools has increased dramatically. From 1992...until today (2001), the annual per student costs for all WELS elementary schools increased 63.9% from \$1,465 to \$2,401.²⁸ Since these estimated costs do not include capital expenditures, the actual per student costs and the percent increase would be even higher. Expanded and improved curricula and activities that equip children to function in today’s complex world, more advanced technology and more current textbooks, increased called worker salaries and benefits to keep pace with financial and health needs, and rising utility and maintenance costs are but a few of the causes for the steady growth in student costs. Add to that how parents and communities have increased their expectation. The bar has been raised in education today. High quality, top notch, professional services and results are sought. Responding to this “quality movement: frequently means additional costs.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Today’s average cost per student - \$4,566

Bottom line: inadequate funding prevents WELS elementary schools from fulfilling what they were created to do: spread the gospel and train children and their families in the fear and admonition of the Lord.”²⁹

Some schools are struggling, with the cost of educating children rising faster than the membership and offerings increase. Some of the other challenges are churches trying to fund other programs to meet other needs. Some of the strong financial support of members has gone down, especially from those members who no longer have children in the school. The congregations are getting older. More and more families have fixed incomes and are unable to contribute as much as they did in the past. Satan has used materialism and greed to get in the way.

With the decrease of financial backing of the whole congregation, and the price of education increasing, there are some very strong feelings about financing the school. “There is a quietly spoken fear that our Lutheran elementary schools are under siege. They cost too much according to one argument, at least far too large a percentage of the church’s budget. They become a “tail wagging the dog” in another argument, a focus of attention that masks other urgent needs and draws too many human and emotional resources. The product doesn’t warrant the process by still another argument, fueled by post-confirmation drop-out rates.”³⁰ It is amazing how the human mind is controlled by the powerful dollar. There is such a battle for what the true value of Christian education is. People want a price tag. And if it is more than they are willing to spend, they will find all sorts of reasons justifying not supporting the school financially.

It should not surprise anyone that LES would be pointed at when there are frustrations, especially financial frustrations. The school is regularly the largest part of the budget. But finger-pointing, especially done under frustration, is not healthy for the church or the school. The schools are not less skilled than they were a generation or two ago, in fact, in many cases they are better staffed and better equipped than ever. The issue is the change in the environment. The schools are not the problem, but it is that shift in roles. We constantly teach that the parents have

²⁹ Commission on Parish School, “The Future, Funding, and Faith” March 30, 2001.

³⁰ Kelm, Paul E. Achieving the Purposes of the Church Through Parish Education. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay file, presented at S.E. Wisconsin District (WELS) Pastor Teacher Conference, Tess Corners, Wisconsin, June, 1989); available from <http://www.wlssays.net/node/1055>; Internet.

the primary responsibility for the Christian education, but does the congregation really believe that? Do the parents believe that?³¹ But even so, it is the school and not the parents on that budget line. “One pastor told me, “Funding the school is the elephant in the room!” If a church leadership cannot maintain the school’s funding, it will die a slow agonizing death.”³²

So what is a church to do? How does a church pay for the school? There is no one way that is out there for how a church is to fund the school. Here we would like a nicely wrapped model all set up for each congregation to follow. But here is also the place we learn that “one size does not fit all.” The situation of each church and school is different. There are a few general “templates” that are found within our circles. Again, these are not set in stone models, but many churches fall under following one of these patterns, with some alterations depending on their situation.

Addressing the challenge of school funding, LeDell Plath wrote:

“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. But if charging tuition harms the sanctification and the stewardship of congregational members, a tuition policy is not beneficial. Accepting government subsidy is likewise not forbidden in Scripture, but our people are master by government help if they depend on that help to pay for the Christian education costs which the congregation should be assuming. Such 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.”³³

Church Subsidy

Should the church be solely responsible for funding the school? This was historically how the schools were operated and financed. This was made possible through the generous offerings and supports of the members the church. 98% of the congregations showed the salaries and benefits for their elementary school teachers as part of the budget. The funding for these

³¹ **Lutheran Schools** (*God*) has not given you your children and the means to support them simply so that you may do with them as you please or train them just to get ahead in the world. You have been earnestly commanded to raise them for God’s service . . . Luther’s Works, American Edition, Vol. 46.

³² Patterson, Donald W. What Practical Experience Teaches Us about Lutheran Schools. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at the “Symposium on Lutheran Schools,” September, 2011); available from <http://wlsce.net/content/2011-symposium-lutheran-schools>; Internet.

³³ Plath, LeDell D. “Funding the Lutheran Elementary School.” *Forward in Christ* June 1986.

budgets comes from the regular offerings of the members. This is not surprising. Traditionally that is the way it has been done by the great majority of our congregations with elementary schools. This means the congregation as a whole views Christian elementary education as its task, much as the community as a whole supports public education.”³⁴

There is no command in Scripture about a full-time school or any given direction on how a school is to be funded. Instead, “our God gave us a mission. His mission is clear: use the Word to train and equip the next generation so that they serve their Savior in this life while clinging to the hope of eternal life. Scripture speaks frequently about this work and emphasizes its importance.... “Feed my lambs,”³⁵ demonstrate the value of spiritual training children.”³⁶

The variation that is seen throughout most of the schools that are subsidized by the church is that the school will charge tuition to non-members of the church.³⁷ Very few churches with the WELS charge no tuition to all students including the non-members. But conditions both inside and outside the church have changed and are continuing to change. These conditions have forced congregations to reevaluate their policies about funding their elementary schools and look into alternative revenue schemes.

Full/Partial Tuition

When faced with the economic difficulty of financing the school, one of the solutions is to charge all the students tuition. “WELS schools charging tuition is not new. Early childhood ministries, Lutheran high schools, synodical preparatory schools, and the ministerial training colleges have charged tuition for many years. Lutheran elementary schools also have a long history of charging tuition to “non-members” (families who enroll in the school but are not members of the operating congregation) and to “other WELS/ELS” (families who are members of another WELS or Evangelical Lutheran Synod congregation).”³⁸ What is becoming more and more prevalent in the WELS, which seems new in these circles, is charging tuition to member families (those belonging to the congregation).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ John 21:15

³⁶ Heins, Ronald K. Member: Bane or Blessing? (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File); available from <http://www.wlssays.net/node/781>; Internet.

³⁷ Currently 96% of the WELS LES charge non-WELS members tuition; 88% of the WELS LES charge members of other WELS/ELS congregations

³⁸ Commission on Parish School, “The Future, Funding, and Faith.” March 30, 2001.

Rev. Donald Patterson would even make the argument that a school might want to look into charging tuition (if it was not previously), because it does not seem to be a good balance of funds. “For the congregation to fund the school for people in a nine year window of life at the expense of all the other age groups is not right! Call it what you want; kingdom balance, nurture and outreach, well rounded ministry, I don’t care. Just realize that having a 2/500+ ratio in adult ministry in the post “Clever Family” era³⁹ and then to have a 1/17 ratio in school ministry without expecting parents to help balance the scales creates a perilous choice for many souls suffering in silence. On the other hand if we are going to expect today’s parent to pony up for a significant part of the educational costs we had better give them an excellent educational product. They won’t spend the money on cheaply made education.”⁴⁰

There are many factors as to why a WELS school would charge tuition for all its students, even its members. However, the overwhelming factor cannot and should not be to solve the budget issue. That is the wrong reason to change the tuition policy, and will not set the right tone.

Six questions may help congregations address the question of charging tuition for parents who are members of the congregation:

- 1) How will charging tuition help the congregation achieve its purpose of making disciples for Christ?
- 2) How will charging tuition help the congregation carry out its responsibility for the Christian training of the children?
- 3) How will charging tuition help all of the adult members of the congregation mature as Christians?
- 4) How will charging tuition help meet the needs of those families who have children in the school and who are struggling spiritually?
- 5) How will charging tuition help the congregation reach out to the unchurched of the community and world?
- 6) Will the charging of tuition promote unity in the congregation or will it be a divisive factor?

³⁹ Referring to the demands put on pastoral staff in these days when the traditional family is not as prevalent as before.

⁴⁰ Patterson, Donald W. What Practical Experience Teaches Us about Lutheran Schools. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at the “Symposium on Lutheran Schools,” September, 2011); available from <http://wlsce.net/content/2011-symposium-lutheran-schools>; Internet.

Congregations will want to consider those six questions as well as the internal and external factors in the process of deciding the tuition question.⁴¹

There are some uncanny cases where churches have had to charge tuition (and even raise tuition) to get people to come to the school. There are places where people view the value of the school by how much it costs to attend. So to get people in the door, full tuition needed to be charged. Other schools that are used primarily as an outreach tool have chosen to charge full tuition for members, so that there is no disparity between the price of tuition for members or non-members. When churches give aid to just its members, or give a members discount, it can deter non-members from registering.

So is tuition the way to go? Funding a Lutheran elementary school through member tuition can have its down sides. It is not good when there is failure to discuss God's will in relation to the ministry and finances of the church and school. It is not good when there is failure to discuss God's purposes for their school and think of tuition as a good way to solve a budget crisis, forcing parents to carry their own weight, or reducing the school to a lower priority. Or it is not good when the congregation uses tuition as a substitute for on-going stewardship education and encouragement.

On the other hand, charging tuition does have its blessings as well, when parents assume a greater amount of responsibility for supporting the spiritual growth of their children. The income from tuition serves well when it helps congregations pay the expenses of operating their school as an effective tool for spiritual nurture. When the members of a congregation consciously maintain a balance between the work the Lord has given them within their congregation as well as the mission work in other parts of our country and the world, tuition fees have served the church's mission well. The school's mission is realized.⁴² Consider this issue carefully and in Christian love.

Other Sources

One of the major programs that numerous churches are using to finance the schools are school choice and tuition tax credits. "School choice is a common sense idea that gives all

⁴¹ Plath, LeDell D. "Who Will Pay for Our Elementary Schools?" *Forward in Christ* January 1990.

⁴² Commission on Parish School, "The Future, Funding, and Faith" March 30, 2001. & Heins, Ronald K. Member: Bane or Blessing? (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File); available from <http://www.wlssays.net/node/781>; Internet.

parents the power and freedom to choose their child's education, while encouraging healthy competition among schools and other institutions to better serve students' needs and priorities... a public policy that allows a parent/guardian or student to choose a district, charter, or private school regardless of residence and location."⁴³ School choice has definitely grown within our circles. With another thesis being written specifically on this topic, this author is not going to dive into it.

Consider this voiced concern, "In its efforts to improve education to provide social services, protection, and educational opportunities for all of its citizens, the government may deem it advisable to offer aids to church schools also. The church must be careful that it does not confuse Scriptural principles with interpretations of government constitutions. Accepting and making use of government aid for parochial schools may in itself not be unscriptural, but the church must still consider the effect of such aid on its schools, such as compromising the school's Christian identity, creating dependency on government aid, undermining Christian stewardship, or bringing with it "undesirable government control."⁴⁴

Conclusion

When I chose to explore the funding of our Lutheran Elementary Schools, I was assuming to find a one size fits all model for how the schools should be funded. I was biased when I began the project. I was anticipating and even probably hoping, that the church subsidizing the school for its members was going to come out as the clear template that each church should follow when funding the school. But my research has led me to a conclusion that goes against my bias. There is no one size fits all model. There is no single funding template that the schools in the WELS must follow. There is such a variety of situations and circumstances, communities and societies that insisting on one specific method for funding schools is unrealistic.

Throughout my research I have had numerous conversations with pastors, teachers, and other administrators on the topic of school funding. The consensus is that there is no consensus, or one size fits all. The Apostle Paul was not inspired to write his epistles in a "one size fits all" style but to the individual circumstances and needs of the congregations. So also today, each congregation must look to its own situation in determining how to fund their mission for Christ.

⁴³ <http://www.edchoice.org/School-Choice/What-is-School-Choice.aspx>

⁴⁴ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1967, 159-60.*

They should not feel guilty for not funding and supporting their school and Lutheran elementary program as others. Nor should they feel obligated to fund their school according to someone else's plan. They need to remember their mission in Christian education and do what is necessary to accomplish that mission where the Lord has placed them and with the gifts God has supplied. Discussion for funding our schools should not be made or conducted on the basis of poor stewardship but for the purpose of carrying out our mission of Christian education to the best of our ability.

The research has changed my biased eyes for my future ministry. There is a possibility that the Lord will one day lead me to serve a congregation that has a school. I will no longer go into that situation expecting the church to completely subsidize the school (especially for members). I now realize and understand that there is a lot more that must be researched and discussed on the subject of funding. That research and deliberation needs to lead the church to choose a template for funding that best fits the congregation, its members, and society.

Although there is no one model for all schools to follow, it is important that no matter what form of funding is used for your school, remember this perspective, from Donald Patterson, "When we do spend a lot of time, energy and money training a disciple for Jesus in our school and then later that child treks across the globe to carry Jesus to others, we are doing world missions through our schools. Don't forget that. Children are seed corn for future harvests. It's never good to sell or give away your seed corn. Funding schools takes faith in things not seen that the Lord will do tomorrow with today's investment."⁴⁵ Consider the issue of funding and financing carefully and in Christian love understand that "one size does not fit all." Then with diligence and a love for souls go about finding that one forms that's tailored and fitted just for your situation.

⁴⁵ Patterson, Donald W. What Practical Experience Teaches Us about Lutheran Schools. (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, presented at the "Symposium on Lutheran Schools," September, 2011); available from <http://wlsce.net/content/2011-symposium-lutheran-schools>; Internet.

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