

**OUTREACH AND OUR LUTHERAN  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS AND PRE-SCHOOLS**

**Ohio Pastor/Teacher/Delegate Conference**

**Zion Lutheran Church  
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## Objectives

1. To see the correspondence between the mission of the church and the mission of a Lutheran elementary school and pre-school.
2. To impress upon ourselves the potential that the Lutheran elementary school and pre-school have to serve as congregational tools for outreach.
3. To look at the challenges that come with using the Lutheran elementary school and pre-school as outreach arms and to ascertain how to overcome these challenges.
4. To study and evaluate ways to bring unchurched children into the school and their parents into the church and to keep them there.
5. To establish guidelines that will help the Lutheran elementary school and pre-school to function well as evangelizers of children of members and non-members alike.

In its 2013 report to the Synod, the Task Force on Lutheran Schools included a section on “The WELS school as an outreach tool.” The section began as follows:

Perhaps one of the most significant issues facing our schools is whether or not to use the school as a tool to assist the congregation with its outreach and evangelism efforts; or determining how to be an outreach-minded school if that is what they have determined they want to do. Most (but not all) agree that early childhood programs are appropriate outreach and evangelism tools, but there is significant debate about the role of the Lutheran elementary school in this work.<sup>1</sup>

That is the subject on which you have asked me to address you in this pastor-teacher-delegate conference: Outreach and Our Lutheran Elementary Schools and Pre-Schools. It is a subject in which I have a strong interest. My call to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was to teach New Testament and Pastoral Theology, *with emphasis in evangelism*.<sup>2</sup> For twenty years, 1984-2004, I taught evangelism to the senior class at the Seminary. Though I had to cut back on my classroom work in 1996 after accepting the call to serve as the Seminary’s president, evangelism was one of the two courses I continued to teach even during my years as president.<sup>3</sup>

Coming a little closer to the subject before us today, in the nearly twenty years (1965-84) I served as pastor of Apostles Lutheran Church, San Jose, California, prior to accepting the call to the Seminary, I found the school to be a significant “player” in the overall outreach work of the congregation. We did not have a pre-school,<sup>4</sup> but we did have a thriving elementary school, which had grown to an enrollment of over 200 by the time I left for the Seminary. The school proved to be fertile soil for outreach. Slightly over 40% of our congregation’s membership could be traced back directly to the school.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> WELS Book of Reports and Memorials (May 2013), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> This was the first time that a call to the Seminary included such an emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> The other course was the exegetical-practical study of the Pastoral Epistles.

<sup>4</sup> We did have a pre-kindergarten class for 4-year-olds, which we were able to conduct without having to meet all of the legal requirements mandated for a pre-school.

<sup>5</sup> God blessed us with a large number of adult confirmations each year, a big percentage of which were school families. That was *then*, of course, and that was *there*--a time of mind-boggling growth in San Jose. When we arrived in San Jose in 1965, there were about 800 newly-built homes slightly north of the property that had been purchased for building a church. To the south and east and west were nothing but fields. Within seven years the church was surrounded by about 25,000 homes. And we were the very first church of any kind in that area. What a mission field!

So, I come to this assignment with a bias. My experience has been that, properly utilized, the Lutheran elementary school (and presumably, perhaps even especially, the pre-school also) can serve well as an integral part of a congregation's outreach to the community.<sup>6</sup>

To give you a little roadmap of what follows, there will be three parts to this presentation. The heading for each part will be in the form of a question:

- 1. Should we use our Lutheran elementary schools and/or pre-schools for outreach?**
- 2. What obstacles might we encounter when we seek to use our schools and/or pre-schools for outreach?**
- 3. What are some ways to overcome those obstacles?**

After each section I am going to ask you to discuss what I have presented. I have prepared some discussion questions for that purpose.

One more thing before we start. I have tried to make this a practical rather than a theoretical paper. With very few exceptions (I'll usually tell you what those exceptions are), what I will be talking about to you are things with which I have had personal experience in my ministry. I don't claim that I have all the answers, but I can say that I have personally wrestled with the issues I will be bringing up. They are not just things I have read about.

### **One:**

#### **Should we use our Lutheran elementary schools and/or pre-schools for outreach?**

To answer that question we need to ask ourselves other questions, such as: What is the mission of the Church? What assignment has the Lord of the Church given to our congregations? Article III (Purpose and Objectives) in the constitution of the congregation where I am presently serving as a vacancy pastor, St. John, Victorville, California, states:

##### **Section 1**

The continuing purpose of this congregation, as a gathering of Christians, is to serve all people in God's world with the gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures (Mt. 18:18-20; Mk. 16:15).

##### **Section 2**

The primary objective of this congregation shall be to proclaim the law and the gospel in our congregation, community, and the world (2 Tim. 4:2), so that through the means of grace the Holy Spirit might:

- A. Lead sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ for life and salvation (Lk. 24:46-48).
- B. Strengthen believers in faith and sanctification (Ro. 10:17).
- C. Equip believers as disciples, stewards, witnesses, and servants to share the gospel and live their faith (Eph. 4:11,12; Mt. 5:16).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> But only as a *part*. If 40% of our congregation's membership came through the school, this meant that 60% of our membership came through other forms of congregational outreach. Congregations are not fulfilling their God-given mission if they rely solely on the school to reach out to the lost in their community.

<sup>7</sup> The wording is from the *Model Constitution and Bylaws for Congregations of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1981), pp. 8,9.

Not all of the constitutions of WELS congregations are identical. But I believe I am safe in saying that every constitution, if it has an article on Purpose and Objectives (or something similar), covers basically the same ground as the above. The purpose of our congregations, the assignment that the Lord of the Church has given to them, is to preach, to proclaim, the gospel. Another way of saying this is that the purpose of the Church and of our congregations is evangelism, since the basic meaning of the term “evangelism” is to announce, to tell, to proclaim the “evangel,” the good news, the gospel.

To do that, as Section 2 from the constitution cited above reminds us, the law has to be proclaimed also. Our Savior tells us, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Matthew 9:12). That’s the law’s job: to tell people that they are sick and need help. “Through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20).<sup>8</sup> In its broad sense evangelism, then, includes both the preaching of the law and the preaching of the gospel. But the law will always serve a secondary purpose. It is needed to reveal our lost condition and our need for help. But the main message is the gospel, which tells of the help that only our Savior can provide.

Who needs to be evangelized? Believers and unbelievers alike. As the above constitution nicely puts it, the Church proclaims law and gospel to “lead sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus” as well as to “strengthen believers in faith and sanctification” and to “equip” them as “disciples, stewards, [and] witnesses.” The message we have to tell to “congregation, community, and the world” is one and the same: the gospel, the good news that, in Christ, God has reconciled the world (and everyone in it, believer and unbeliever alike) to himself (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:19).

Sometimes people pit nurture of the believer and outreach to the unbeliever against each other, as though you have to decide between one or the other. When we see that the mission of the Church is evangelism, proclaiming the gospel to believer and unbeliever alike, we quickly understand that there is no conflict between the two. The only tension that might arise is in determining how much time and energy, how much people power, how many dollars and other resources to devote to each.<sup>9</sup>

Believers need to be evangelized. They need to hear the gospel. We are not Calvinists. We do not believe in the so-called perseverance of the saints. We reject the adage, “Once saved always saved.” We are convinced, therefore, and rightly so, that believers need to be evangelized all their lives. Our congregations, therefore, spend a great amount of time and energy on nurturing the believers in their midst.

I’m serving a congregation right now in a retirement call. It’s a long-term vacancy, the third such call I have accepted since retiring from the Seminary in 2004. So, when I say that it takes a lot of time and energy to nurture a congregation, I’m not relying on my memory from when I left the parish ministry for the Seminary back in 1984. I’m doing right now what you pastors are doing week in and week out: preparing and preaching sermons, preparing and teaching Bible classes, teaching confirmation class, preparing for Sunday worship, visiting the sick and shut-in, counseling people with the Word, etc. It’s supposed to be a part-time call; but the only part-time thing about it is the salary.

Nurturing, evangelizing, the believers in our congregations is a full-time job. And it’s worth every minute. “Feed my sheep, feed my lambs,” says Jesus. The food they need is the gospel. Members of our congregations would feel short-changed, and rightly so, if their pastor didn’t faithfully put all his gifts, all his energy, to work in shepherding them with Word and Sacrament.

But it’s not only the believer who needs to be evangelized. “I have other sheep,” Jesus tells us, “that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16). Jesus is talking here about the elect, those chosen by God, in Christ, from all eternity to be a part of his one flock, the holy Christian Church. Jesus says, “I must bring them.” He also says, “They will listen to my voice.” But, wonder of wonders, he has enlisted us in his service!<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> We may recall from our confirmation days the simple SOS acronym: The law **S**hows **O**ur **S**in. The gospel **S**hows **O**ur **S**avior.

<sup>9</sup> This tension is not only present on a congregational level, but on a synodical level. Recognizing that both nurture and outreach are a part of the purpose of the Church, we don’t, for example, pit ministerial education against home and world missions and vice versa. But we will struggle with how best to use limited resources to carry out both functions.

<sup>10</sup> In 2 Corinthians 6:1 Paul calls himself and his missionary companions “God’s fellow workers,” literally, “ones who work together (with God).”

He has entrusted us with the evangel, the good news, the gospel. When Jesus sent out the 72, he assured them, "He who listens to you listens to me" (Luke 10:16). As we proclaim the gospel we are the voice of Jesus. As we serve as the voice of Jesus, using the same gospel that nurtures the believer, Jesus promises that he will gather in his elect.

Actually, Jesus will do this with or without us. He tells us, "This gospel of the kingdom *will* be preached to the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). Jesus will see to it that his voice goes out to the ends of the earth. Well then, we might ask, why don't we just sit back and let someone else be his voice? Let me give you three answers to that question:

One, it is *God's will* that we evangelize the unbeliever. As you approach the chapel at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, you see three Greek words in large letters above the door. Jesus spoke these words, recorded in Mark 16:15, shortly before his ascension. The Greek words are "*Keruxate to euaggelion*," which means "preach the gospel." "If you love me," Jesus says, "you will do what I command" (John 14:15). To disregard, to disobey, his command to proclaim the gospel, frankly, is a sin.

Two, even without God's command, *isn't that what Christians do?* After Jesus brought his message of salvation to the woman at Jacob's Well, she hurried back into town to tell as many as she could about the Jesus who had done such a great thing for her. Did anyone tell her that she had to do this? No, but her *heart* told her that she had to. The heart filled with the gospel is the heart of a Martin Luther, who exclaims in his Christmas hymn, "From Heaven Above," "My heart for very joy doth leap. My lips no more can silence keep." The heart filled with the gospel is the heart of an Apostle Paul exclaiming, "I am compelled to preach"—to evangelize, to tell the good news about Jesus. To have no zeal, no inner compulsion, to proclaim the gospel is to despise the gospel. And that is a sin.

Three, our *love for souls* will move us to join our Lord in the marvelous task of proclaiming the gospel. Souls without Christ die forever. Do you believe that? Jesus did. That is why he wept bitter tears over Jerusalem. Do we weep over the fate of the lost? "Can we whose souls are lighted with wisdom from on high, can we to those benighted the lamp of life deny?"

In his book, "The Christian Persuader," evangelist Leighton Ford tells about the day his little girl got lost. After frantically searching for her for some time, he finally found her. Without asking permission, she had walked over to a friend's house. After a joyful reunion and some stern words about never again leaving the yard without getting permission, Ford thought back on what had happened and wrote: "During the two hours Debbie Jean was missing, nothing else mattered. In my study were books to be read, letters to be answered, articles to be written, planning to be done—but it was all forgotten. I could think of only one thing: my girl was lost. . . . But," he went on, "how often. . . had I. . . felt that same terrible urgency about people who are lost from God?" Lack of love for souls, which results in holding *on* to the gospel but not holding it *out* to others, that, too, is a sin.

We all need Jesus, don't we? In the course of his life he did so perfectly what we so often fail to do. He faithfully followed his Father's will without flaw, including his will to evangelize the lost. He loved souls with a perfect love. Jesus loved Zacchaeus, whom he called down from the sycamore tree and to whom he said, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). Jesus loved the woman at Jacob's Well, from whom he drew a confession of sins and to whom he revealed himself as the Messiah, her Savior (John 4:1-26). Jesus loved the demon-possessed man of Gerasa, out of whom he drove a legion of demons (Mark 5:1-20). Jesus loved the Gentile Syro-Phoenician woman, whose faith he praised as "great" and whose daughter he freed from demon possession (Matthew 15:21-28). And then Jesus did even more. By his greatest act of love and obedience, he became obedient unto death, even death on a cross—in our place.

And what does God do? He looks at Jesus, his perfect obedience, his perfect love, his perfect sacrifice, and says to those who turn to him in repentance, "I remember your sins no more; for when I look at you I see only Jesus, and I count his obedience as your obedience, and his love as your love, and his death as your death."

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we"—with all our flaws, with all our failures—"should be called the children of God" (1 John 3:1). It is that love, the love of God in Christ, which will *propel* us to join our God as his co-workers in evangelizing the lost wherever he has placed us.

Nurture and outreach in the Church are never an either/or. It is always a both/and. If we need to devote time and people and resources to nurturing the believers in our midst, we likewise need to devote time and people and resources to evangelizing the unbelievers not yet in our midst and, more importantly, not yet in the family of God.

That brings us to the school and pre-school. The first question to ask is this: Is the school, is the pre-school, an integral part of the congregation? At a meeting of WELS principals held at Luther Preparatory School about a year ago, on January 21, 2013, WELS President Mark Schroeder presented for discussion a number of theses on “Preserving and Enhancing the Ministry of Our Lutheran Schools.”<sup>11</sup> Among those theses are the following:

- Christian education--of all types--is an integral part of the ongoing mission of the church.
- As an integral part of the mission of the church, Christian education is also an integral part of the life and work of every Lutheran congregation. Avoid characterizing schools as “ministries” unto themselves, rather emphasize that schools are a part of the congregation’s one ministry.
- Lutheran schools must be clearly and consciously linked to the mission of the local congregation. Congregational “ownership” of the school is vital not only among those who have children but also among those who do not.

If, as I assume, we agree with these theses, the next question isn’t all that difficult to answer: What is the mission, the purpose, of the school and pre-school? If the mission of the Church, which is the mission of the congregation, is evangelism, and our call is to evangelize both believer (nurture) and unbeliever (outreach), then it stands to reason that the mission of the school would also include outreach to the unbelieving world.

But we have to be careful here. We need to be clear on why we do what we do. Congregations sometimes first become serious about outreach when they see their membership dwindling. “We have to do something to get more members,” people start saying. “We can’t pay all the bills. We’re going to die if we don’t grow.” That’s doing outreach for the wrong reason. It’s seeing outreach as a way of filling pews rather than filling heaven with those who have heard the voice of Jesus speaking through us and, through that message, have been incorporated by the Holy Spirit into Christ’s one flock, the Church.

Our Lutheran elementary schools also might be tempted to arrive at a decision to get serious about outreach for less than noble reasons. It is no secret that enrollment in our schools is dwindling.<sup>12</sup> According to a contribution by John Meyer to the Martin Luther College “Issues in Lutheran Education” blog,<sup>13</sup> the Michigan District and the Arizona-California District (where I am now serving and where I served prior to my service at the Seminary) share in the dubious distinction of experiencing in recent years the most dramatic drop in school enrollment in the WELS. During the six-year period, 2006-2012, school enrollment declined by 28% in the Arizona-California District and by 21% in the Michigan District.

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<sup>11</sup> His theses were posted on June 28, 2013, on a Martin Luther College blog entitled, “Issues in Lutheran Education” (<http://blogs.mlc-wels.edu/wels-educator/2013/06/28/theses-for-discussion-preserving-and-enhancing-the-ministry-of-our-lutheran-schools/>). I will be referring to more of these thought-provoking theses in the course of this essay.

<sup>12</sup> I am talking here particularly about the Lutheran elementary school. In general, enrollment in our WELS pre-schools is on the upswing. According to a brochure, “Outreach Strategies for Early Childhood Ministry,” published under the auspices of the WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools, WELS congregations now operate over 400 early childhood ministries (ECM), which includes pre-schools and childcare centers, in 36 states plus Antigua. Five hundred ECM teachers and directors are evangelizing over 10,000 children.

<sup>13</sup> The article, entitled “Is It Too Late for WELS Schools?,” is dated May 15, 2013. John Meyer is director of graduate studies and continuing education at MLC (<http://blogs.mlc-wels.edu/wels-educator/2013/05/15/is-it-too-late-for-wels-schools/>).

Things aren't all that good elsewhere in the WELS either. Meyer writes:

WELS elementary school enrollment peaked in 1990 with nearly 32,000 students. Since then, overall enrollment has been consistently dropping. The Commission on Lutheran Schools reports this year's K-8 enrollment as 24,254 (2013 BORAM, p. 40)--a drop of 1,781 students and 39 schools since 2006. It's actually worse. Those aggregate numbers include the rapidly growing, publicly-funded choice schools in Southeastern Wisconsin and Florida, thus masking the true impact of the enrollment decline felt in most schools. The enrollment decline in the other ten districts averages 400 students per year. At this rate, those 253 WELS schools will disappear by 2051.

Also of concern is that the loss of students in WELS schools (7%) is greater than the loss of children in WELS congregations (5%), indicating that more WELS parents are opting out of the Lutheran school (WELS Statistical Reports, 2006, 2012).<sup>14</sup> Excluding districts with choice schools, Lutheran K-8 enrollment is down 13% since 2006, suggesting an even higher opt-out rate for WELS families.

Undoubtedly a careful analysis would show that there are a considerable number of factors which contribute to the decline in enrollment in our Lutheran elementary schools, e.g., the decline in membership in our congregations; the "greying" of our congregations; smaller family sizes; the perception on the part of some members that our small schools, often run on a shoestring, don't provide the amenities they think their children should enjoy.

We could go on; but that is beyond the scope of what I have been asked to do. The point I want to make is that, just as declining church membership is not the reason why a church should decide to become active in outreach, so declining school enrollment is not why a school should start thinking about bringing unchurched non-members into the school. Rather, as a part of the congregation, the school will reach out to such families because that is a part of the very reason for the school's existence, as is true of the existence of the congregation as a whole.

Our Lutheran elementary schools and pre-schools can serve as an excellent avenue to reach people with the gospel. Parents love their children. They are concerned about their mental, emotional, social, and physical well-being. They look at the public school in their neighborhood. They may be concerned about such negatives as

1. the deteriorating quality of public school education;
2. a curriculum that fails to emphasize the basics;
3. low test scores;
4. safety and discipline issues;
5. large classes and crowded classrooms;
6. the toleration and in some cases even advocacy of lifestyles with which they do not agree, e.g., homosexuality.

The list could go on. So parents look around for a school that doesn't have all those problems. Your school? If they know about it and if their visit to the school and with the principal and teacher makes a first good impression, it might well be your school.

Then there is the pre-school. Statistics tell us that only 23% of homes with children under the age of 15 have stay-at-home moms.<sup>15</sup> That means, of course, that in more than three out of four such homes there is not a stay-at-home mom. Who is going to take care of the pre-school kids while mom and dad are

<sup>14</sup> Mark Schroeder, in the theses previously cited (cf. footnote 11), speaks to this issue: "We need to recognize that the public school system is not just an alternative. Public schools have become aggressive recruiters of students because their funding is determined by their enrollment. They are competing for our students. We need to develop strategies to recruit earlier and better than the public schools do."

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html>

at work? This certainly helps to account for the rise in popularity of early childhood education and all-day child-care.

It's not difficult to see the opportunities for outreach that these two scenarios present. It's true, of course, that many non-member parents who seek to enroll their children in our Lutheran elementary schools and pre-schools come with less than proper spiritual reasons for doing so. But should that surprise us? You have to have the Spirit to be led by the Spirit. Unchurched, non-Christian families will *always* have unspiritual reasons for wanting to enroll their children in our schools. I don't know how many times a school family told me, after they had attended my Bible information class, that now they wanted to have their children in our school for reasons very different from the reasons they had when they first applied for enrollment.

The same thing applies to the pre-school. We cannot expect non-Christian parents to have a proper, biblical motive for wanting to enroll their children in our pre-schools. They are looking for a safe place for their children, a loving and nurturing environment. And, they probably figure, a little religious training won't hurt them. If they feel that we can provide that kind of environment, they are likely to enroll their children. But what an opportunity it presents to lead little lambs to their Good Shepherd!

Both scenarios remind me of the account of Peter and John and the lame beggar at the temple.<sup>16</sup> He was looking for money. He received a lot more than he was looking for! So, people come to our schools and pre-schools looking for what they *think* they need. They get that, but in addition they receive what they *really* need.

This time of unrest and dissatisfaction with public school education and growing desire for early childhood education on the part of many may well be a glorious mission opportunity the Lord is laying before us, an opportunity he has prepared us well to meet. God has graciously given to us a heritage that most church bodies do not have. Our Lutheran elementary schools are not "Johnny come latelies." We know what we are doing in the school "business." We have been at this ever since the formation of our church body.

One of our strengths over the years has been our synodical ministerial educational system. We have been preparing teachers at (Dr.) Martin Luther College for 130 years, since 1884. And now, in response to the current need, we are putting special effort into the preparation of teachers for early childhood education. We don't have to scramble for teachers and hope that they represent our theological position fairly and clearly.

Recall the story of Esther. A Jewess, she became the queen of Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, king of Persia. Haman, an enemy of the Jews, persuaded Ahasuerus to issue a decree that ordered the death of all the Jews in his realm. Mordecai, Esther's uncle, urges her to use her influence with the king to stop this proposed "holocaust." He says to her, "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14). Who knows but that God has given us our solid program of Christian education for "such a time as this"?

In some ways, however, it might be easier not to go the route of opening up our schools to non-members. We will look at that in what follows.

## **Two:**

### **What obstacles do we encounter when we seek to use our Lutheran elementary schools and/or pre-schools for outreach?**

The following probably applies more to our Lutheran elementary schools than to our pre-schools; but some of the same obstacles do pertain to the pre-school also.

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<sup>16</sup> Found in Acts 3:1-10



## *Frustration for Teachers*

The people most affected, often negatively, by opening up the doors of the school to non-members are the teachers. Here are just a few things with which at least in some cases a teacher must deal:

### *Discipline problems*

It can happen that when our schools enroll non-member children we are simply inheriting some other school's problem. Many a public school teacher or principal probably has breathed a sigh of relief when he hears that a certain student, who has caused nothing but grief to teachers and classmates alike, is now going to be attending the Lutheran school down the road.

Sound familiar? A child has been very hard to handle in the public school. He or she is endlessly getting into trouble. The parents in desperation seek out the Lutheran elementary school, hoping that the teachers will be able to handle their child. They are looking not so much for a Christian school as a reform school.

### *Learning problems*

Some of the same things said about discipline problems can be said about children with learning problems. The public schools with their larger size solve that problem to a degree by dividing the students into different groups, the high achievers in one group, the slower learners in another, and then special classes for those with significant learning problems.

Parents are sometimes concerned, and at times rightly so, that early on their children are "labeled" as slow learners, a label that tends to go with them and that determines their class placement all the way through. So they come to our schools because they feel that their children have been unfairly classified. In some cases, that may be so. In other cases, however, there might be some significant learning problems, problems with which teachers in our small, multi-grade classrooms are not able to deal.

### *Poor home environment*

I realize that the home environment of some children from the congregation may leave much to be desired. But teachers tend to have a better chance of working successfully with the parents of such children than they do with unchurched parents. Broken homes; shared custody; children being used as pawns as father and mother spar with each other; no control over what is filling their children's minds; no limit on what their children watch on TV or how many hours they watch it; indiscriminate use of Facebook, You Tube, etc.--the list could go on.

We have three daughters. All three are involved in the teaching ministry. When I hear from them about what is going on in the families of the children in their classes, especially the unchurched families, and compare that with family life thirty years ago when I left the parish for the Seminary, it's another bit of evidence to me that we are living in the last days. How the family has fallen! And what a challenge for the teacher.

### *Biblical illiteracy.*

One of the great joys of being a teacher in our Lutheran elementary schools is to have the privilege, and the freedom, to tell our children the story of God's love in Christ as found in the Holy Scriptures. We have an orderly way of doing that, each year building on the previous year. Upper grade teachers like to be able to assume that the children in their classes don't come to them as biblical illiterates. We like to be able to assume that they know the main stories of the Bible, the stories that trace and proclaim the message of salvation. We like to be able to assume that they have memorized key Bible passages and

Luther's Small Catechism. We like to be able to assume that when we ask them to look up Revelation 22 in the Bible they won't start at Genesis in their search for this location.

Teaching is a lot less complicated when everyone is on relatively the same level of biblical knowledge. I speak also as a pastor who taught confirmation classes over the years. If children have somewhat the same Bible knowledge and have memorized significant Bible passages and the six chief parts of Luther's Small Catechism prior to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, it makes for much easier teaching!

During my twenty years of service at Apostles, San Jose, California, we had teachers who simply could not handle a great disparity in Bible knowledge in their classrooms. It was too frustrating for them. It wasn't long before they accepted a call elsewhere. Eventually that led us to curtail calling our teachers directly from the graduating class of DMLC/MLC. Too often they weren't prepared for what they faced in the classroom and found it difficult to adjust. So we started calling from the field. With the call there came an accompanying letter that said something to the effect: If the fact that you might have a child in your 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom who has never heard the story of creation or the fall, or the story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus disturbs you or perhaps frightens you, it is probably best both for you and for the school that you decline the call. But if such a prospect excites you, then it may well be that serving as a teacher at our school would be the thing for you to do.

I should add here that I am grateful that in recent years MLC has made a concentrated effort to get its student body involved in outreach with the gospel, both through its annual Evangelism Day and through the many opportunities it offers its students (and graduates) to take part in various outreach efforts prior to entering the classroom. This cannot but have a positive effect on graduates who are assigned to teach in a Lutheran elementary school class that includes unchurched, biblically illiterate children.

#### *Lack of parental cooperation*

I am thinking here particularly about cooperation in the spiritual aspect of their child's education. Non-Christian parents, if they are paying monthly tuition, in some instances a rather steep tuition, will generally be interested, deeply interested, in fact, in their child's academic achievements. But, at least in some cases, we will find that they are not as likely to view in the same light Word of God homework such as Bible history worksheets and Bible passage, hymn, and catechism memory work. That will not tend to be as important in their eyes as what their children need for life in the "real" world.

You see this same attitude surfacing in the oft-time sporadic church and Sunday school attendance on the part of non-member children. Even on Sundays when the children sing in church, it doesn't necessarily guarantee that the unchurched children in the class will be present. This can frustrate a teacher, especially if a large percentage of the class is composed of non-member children. In order to assure that enough children will be present, some of our Lutheran elementary schools in California, which tend to have a large percentage of non-member children, have had to resort to all-school singing rather than singing by selected grades.

Teachers present today might be able to add to this list. But perhaps this suffices to point out that the teachers in our Lutheran elementary schools are the ones most affected, sometimes negatively, by the presence of non-member children in the classroom.

#### *Lack of Amenities*

While I was working on this paper an article appeared in the Los Angeles Times telling about the first two schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District to receive an iPad for every student. It is the first step in a program that within a year will give an iPad to all 650,000 students, kindergarten through twelfth grade, in this huge school district. Cost, including the necessary infrastructure such as providing a wireless network on every school campus, is estimated to be \$1 billion. And that doesn't take into account the fact that, as some may have conveniently forgotten, children graduate and new ones coming in will also be expecting an iPad. The iPads cost the district \$678 per device, more than what you and I would pay if we bought one at an Apple store. Their cost is so high, we are told, because they are pre-loaded

with educational software, but that software, unfortunately, has been only partially developed. On top of all this, the program was funded by a bond issue that will take 25 years to retire, though the iPads have an estimated life cycle of only three to five years.

We could, I suppose, bemoan the way that taxpayer dollars are being spent to fund educational amenities such as these free iPads. But, whether the amenities the public school offers are wise or foolish, sensible or frivolous, our Lutheran elementary schools simply cannot compete with the public schools in all the “extras” they are able to provide for their students.

Our school principal, fresh out of DMLC (after a year of tutoring at MLS), was confronted with that reality during his first year of teaching, which was the first year of our school at Apostles, San Jose, CA. He was summoned to appear in court. The summons was part of a custody hearing. A father was irate that his ex-wife had enrolled their two children in our school. He demanded that either the children be put back into the public school where he felt they could get a much better education, or that custody of the children be awarded to him so he could pull them out of the school.

The father’s attorney asked our principal questions such as, “What is the size of your library?” The principal responded, “We don’t have one.” “Describe your sports program?” “We don’t have one.” “Do you have a science club?” “No.” “What programs do you have for gifted children?” “We don’t have any.” You get the drift. That was back in the early 1970s. If it were happening today and our principal had been summoned to a courtroom in Los Angeles county, the question might have been, “Do all your students get free iPads?”

The lawyer, quite properly since he had been retained by the father who wanted to get his children out of our school, pointed out all the things that our school *wasn’t* doing, all the things it *wasn’t* offering. He was correct in asserting that there are a lot of things our schools cannot give the children that they could receive in the public school.<sup>17</sup>

What happened with the custody hearing? Stay tuned.

### ***Non-Mission Prospects***

Another obstacle to using our schools for outreach is that we often attract the “wrong” people when we open our doors to those outside of the congregation. When we talk about our schools and pre-schools being used for outreach, we are talking especially about including in our schools *unchurched* children, girls and boys who do not know Jesus as their Savior.

However, experience shows that there may well be as many, or more, *churched* families that desire to enroll their children in our schools than *unchurched* ones. I recall the devout Roman Catholic parent who wanted to enroll his three children in our school in San Jose. He had been brought up with a parochial school training, both elementary school and high school. He wanted the same for his children. But the Catholic churches in our area of San Jose did not operate schools. So he came to us. He knew that we were not Roman Catholic, of course; but he also knew that we were *Christian*. He wanted his children to be educated in a Christian school. During my years of ministry in San Jose this father was far from the only parent who already had a church home but earnestly desired a Christian training for his children.

Once you open up your school to non-members, how do you restrict the non-member enrollment to those who have no church? Should you make such a restriction? If you do accept into your school children of parents who already have a church home, how do you deal with possible church fellowship issues? Those are the kinds of questions that need to be answered.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Except perhaps for those participating in school choice programs such as are available to our schools in the Inner City of Milwaukee, in which parents can designate where their tax dollars will be spent to educate their children. From information forwarded to me by your conference chairman, I see that Ohio also has a school choice program. I am not acquainted with the details of the program.

<sup>18</sup> For a good study on the issue of non-member children and fellowship issues, you might consult the essay of Joel Gerlach, “The Application of the Scriptural Principles of Fellowship to the Participation of Non-WELS Students in Religion-Oriented School Activities.” The essay can be accessed from the essay file of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. (<https://www.google.com/#q=wisconsin+lutheran+seminary+essay+file>).

### ***Backdoor Losses***

I doubt if there is any school in the WELS that opens its doors to non-members that hasn't experienced the following: The parents attend the Bible information class. They are confirmed. They become a part of the congregation, but barely a part. Their church attendance is sporadic. Their offerings are a pittance. Their participation in the life and work of the congregation is non-existent. Their children graduate from the school and shortly thereafter neither they nor their parents are ever seen again.

A number of years ago I presented an essay for a symposium on the Lutheran Elementary School and Evangelism.<sup>19</sup> The symposium, held in 1987, was sponsored by the WELS Board for Parish Education and Dr. Martin Luther College. In preparation for that essay, I sent out a questionnaire to the 64 schools in the WELS at that time in which at least 10% of its school children were unchurched or which had at least 10 unchurched children in them.

Many of the responses I received spoke about the large attrition rate of families gained for the church through the school:

Seventy-eight percent of the “delinquents” of the congregation are school families or those who once did have their children in our school.

Only rarely have we gotten a strong family through the school. Sad to say, we also seem to have “lost” some families of long standing just as soon as their children finished school/confirmation.

Over the years we have noticed that a high percentage of those who were instructed and joined the congregation because they had children in our school also drifted away after the children were no longer in our school.

Things haven't changed much over the years. One of your conference's pastors who submitted to me information about his congregation's school writes, “I would say that about half of our adult confirmations in my years here have been through contacts with the school. Our struggle is keeping these families after their children are done with the school.” In most congregations, even in those that have a tuition charge for its members, the tuition of non-members is higher, often a lot higher, for children of non-members. I know that at Apostles, San Jose, we tried to set the tuition for children of non-members to cover the actual per child cost of educating them. So there was always a temptation to join the church to be eligible for a lower tuition rate. When that was no longer needed, the families sometimes disappeared. “Backdoor losses” of non-member families who (apparently!) become members only for the tuition break is a very real obstacle.

### ***Who's in Charge?***

In 1987, when the symposium on the Lutheran Elementary School and Evangelism was conducted, this was not so much of an obstacle as it may be today. Statistics back then revealed that 3.3% of the children enrolled in our schools were mission prospects and 3.4% came from families that had membership in other churches. More than 93% of the children in our schools were children of members of the congregation or of a sister congregation. That percentage has changed markedly. Today 7.9% of the children in our schools come from unchurched homes, while 14.3% come from church homes.<sup>20</sup> The number of children in our schools from the homes of members or from sister congregations has shrunk from 93% to slightly under 78%. In some of our schools in California the percentage of non-members is

<sup>19</sup> The essay, “An Evangelism Perspective of the Lutheran Elementary School,” can be found in the essay file of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (<https://www.google.com/#q=wisconsin+lutheran+seminary+essay+file>).

<sup>20</sup> Current figures were supplied by the WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools.

up to 75-80%.<sup>21</sup> The information submitted to me by pastors of your conference tells a similar story. Of the five congregations that provided statistics, in one of the schools 93% of the students enrolled are from non-member families, in another 89%, and in a third school 83%.<sup>22</sup>

With regard to our pre-schools and childcare centers, Synod-wide, about one-third of those enrolled are children of members or members of sister congregations. Approximately 42% are from churched, but non-WELS, homes and about 24% are from unchurched homes.

With the children of non-members making up a growing percentage of our schools' enrollments, the question, "Who's in charge here?", needs to be addressed. What happens if the majority of the students in our school are non-members? Unless things are handled carefully, there can be agitation from non-member families to have a hand in setting policies, determining direction, establishing programs, etc. After all, they are providing significant financial support to the school. If they left, it's entirely possible that the school would fold. That's one more obstacle in the path if a school is to open up its doors to other than members of the congregation.

### **Three:**

#### **How do we overcome the obstacles?**

##### ***Be properly motivated.***

I'm thinking here, not of the motivation of non-member parents who want to enroll their children in our school, but of the motivation of the church and school. Why we do what we do is of primary importance. Actions that look right but are not properly motivated do not accomplish the Lord's work the Lord's way. Neither decline in enrollment nor the financial assistance that tuition students bring should be what motivates a congregation to open the doors of its school to the unchurched, but rather a concern for souls. Jesus told Martha that Mary had chosen the "one thing needful." We have the one thing souls without Christ need: the gospel. We long to bring that message to boys and girls not only *of* the congregation but *outside of* the congregation, especially those who have yet to hear the wondrous message of free and full salvation through Jesus.

In its report to the 2013 Synod Convention, the Task Force on Lutheran Schools is very emphatic about this:

- We are not ready to use our school as an outreach tool if we are driven by financial considerations.
- We are not ready to use our school as an outreach tool if we are driven by declining school enrollment.
- We are not ready to use our school as an outreach tool if we are driven by declining church membership.
- We are not ready to use our school as an outreach tool if it is not intentionally part of the congregation's overall outreach and evangelism plans.
- We are not ready to use our school as an outreach tool if we are driven by anything other than the desire to teach Christ and him crucified.<sup>23</sup>

The church and school that is properly motivated says, "This family and these children are precious in the eyes of God. Jesus purchased them at the cost of his own holy, precious blood and innocent

<sup>21</sup> One school actually functioned for a year with 100% of its enrollment being children of non-members. It closed its doors the following year.

<sup>22</sup> The enrollment of the other two schools for which I have information is altogether different. Their enrollment is 85% and 75% WELS.

<sup>23</sup> Book of Reports and Memorials 2013, pp. 50-51.

sufferings and death. Can we, by considering them for our school, be used by God to bring to them the message of forgiveness, new life, and salvation through Jesus?" If we have such an attitude, we can be sure that the blessing of God will rest upon our work.

### ***Be careful how you advertise.***

Probably the most effective advertising of our schools is done by word-of-mouth, members telling their friends. This is not to say that the school or pre-school cannot or should not publicly advertise its existence. Public advertising, e.g., with signs, web pages, radio spots, mailings, etc., help to make it clear to the community that your school doesn't exist only for members. Advertising your school indicates to the public that non-members are welcome to inquire and apply for enrollment.

But at the same time you don't want to give the impression, especially in the case of our elementary schools, that you need to have non-members in your school if you are going to be able to survive. If we give people that impression, then we stand the risk of having those same people demand a voice in the way the school operates. After all, they may reason, the school needs us. It can't get along without us. People need to recognize that they are not doing *us* a favor but that we are doing *them* a favor--though not unwillingly--by accepting their children as students in our school.

### ***Do careful screening.***

As brought out above, parents often seek out a private school because their children haven't been able to get along anywhere else, academically or behaviorally, or both. That fact needs to be faced and parents need to be told that our schools are not equipped to handle every kind of situation. This would apply, not just to churched non-member children, but to children from unchurched families. We need to take care that our schools don't become a "dumping ground" for everyone's else's problems. Or perhaps a child needs some kind of specialized training that our school and teachers are not able to provide. Frank discussions with parents should reveal whether our school is able to work with the child the parents desire to enroll.

### ***Emphasize your school's philosophy and purpose.***

Since the majority of unchurched families will have different reasons for wanting their children in the school than the school has for its existence, it is important to make clear at the outset what the school stands for.

During the years that I served as pastor at Apostles, San Jose, the principal, Mark Sprengeler, and I worked out a procedure we followed anytime a non-member family asked about the school, a procedure that I believe would work well today also.

1. We gave or sent out to the family a copy of the school handbook. The handbook had a clear statement of the philosophy and purpose of the school. With the handbook came a brief cover letter, telling the inquirer, "Please read through the handbook carefully so you can see why we exist as a school. If you have any questions, please contact our principal."
2. Having read the handbook, the family might decide to send in the Application for Enrollment form enclosed with the handbook. That led to a visit by the principal during which he spent most of his time emphasizing our school's unique purpose, i.e., that we are a *Christian* school, a *Lutheran* school, with all that implies, not merely a private school.
3. After this meeting, if the family decided to move ahead, the application for enrollment would be brought before our school board for consideration.

4. We would have a church service the night before the opening of the school. In the sermon I would one more time reiterate the purpose for our school. One year a new unchurched family actually decided to pull their children out that very night because the father felt that this would be “too much religion” for their children.

Even with all that, parents might still not fully grasp the school’s purpose for existence; but it will not be because they have not been told, and told, and told.

***Make clear the way the school operates.***

We want to be thorough enough so that there are no surprises. In a publication entitled, “Positioning Lutheran Schools for Outreach,” published by the WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools (no date), an appendix contains a helpful “Sample Enrollment Policy.”<sup>24</sup> It lists the following “Enrollment Requirements”:

1. Parents of the applicant must agree to attend the School Parents’ Bible Information Class to acquaint themselves with the religious instruction their children receive at St. Mark’s Lutheran School. The class meets once a week for four weeks and is offered three times during the calendar year. It is best if both parents attend the same session, but it is allowable for the mother and father to attend different sessions. There is no fee for this class, and child care is provided free of charge. Most parents find this class to be very spiritually invigorating, and each parent is invited to complete the entire Bible Information Class over an additional fifteen week period. (The full nineteen session class can lead to membership at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church.)

*The policy at Apostles Lutheran School, San Jose, where I served was similar. But parents were required to attend 12 sessions and then encouraged to complete the remaining 8 lessons in the course. Parents were also told that failure to attend the class was grounds for termination of their children’s enrollment. This policy was not legalistically enforced, however. Each year our Board of Education wrestled over what to do with unchurched families who had not attended the BIC. At times, especially if the children had begun to attend Sunday school even though the parents had yet to attend church except when their children sang, we would continue to keep their children in the school. One notable result: a graduate of the school whose parents never did attend the BIC, in time enrolled at MLC and eventually became a principal in one of our WELS schools.*

2. Parents must agree to have their child attend the worship services in which his or her class is scheduled to sing (several times each year). Singing in church is an integral part of our religious curriculum and provides our students an opportunity to witness their faith.
3. Parents must be supportive of the school, its teachers, and its policies.
4. Parents must be faithful in making timely tuition, daycare, and other school related payments.

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<sup>24</sup><https://connect.wels.net/AOM/schools/General%20Documents/Publications/Positioning%20Lutheran%20Schools%20for%20Outreach.pdf>. Appendix B, pp. 20-21. The enrollment policy is that of St. Mark’s Lutheran School, Citrus Heights, CA. The publication is available from the WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools.

5. Parents must provide academic, attendance, and behavioral records from previous schools as well as results of psychological, cognitive, or academic achievement tests for the principal's review.

Just saying that people must agree to attend the BIC and to have their children in church when their grade is singing, and just saying that parents must be supportive of the school, its teachers, and its policies and that they must be faithful in making tuition payments, doesn't guarantee that this will always happen, of course. It does, however, establish clear "ground rules" and thus makes it possible to take subsequent action, if the parents renege on what they have heard and have agreed to in writing

***Exercise caution in the enrollment of churched non-member children.***

Strictly speaking, what follows doesn't fit in with the assignment given to me: to speak to you about *outreach* and our Lutheran elementary schools and pre-schools. But I believe that in a time of declining enrollment in our Lutheran elementary schools, it is a subject that needs to be addressed, even though I know that some of what I will say will fly in the face of what I have been saying up to this point.

During the years that I served as pastor at Apostles, San Jose, we had an LES enrollment policy which set the order of student enrollment. The first group consisted of children of members; the second, children of sister congregations; the third, children from unchurched homes; the fourth, children from churched, but non-WELS, homes. Occasionally our Board of Education, recognizing that the school's mission included outreach to the unchurched, would debate about whether it would be better to put the enrollment of children from sister congregations after the enrollment of children from unchurched families. But there was no question that children from churched, but non-WELS, homes should be in the final group. We would tell parents in that group that we could not enroll their children until we knew if we would have room. We made decisions on churched non-member enrollment applications toward the end of summer. I assume that most, if not all of our schools, have a similar policy.

A policy like that works well as long as there are enough children in groups 1 to 3 to keep the school going. But what happens if the number of members' children and children from sister congregations keeps shrinking? What happens if, even after adding in some students from unchurched families, there is still a lot of room in the school? How many children do you enroll from group four?

During my years at Apostles we didn't have to wrestle with that issue since there was usually room for only a handful of churched non-members. I must say that I would have been very reluctant to have had more than a small percentage of children from churched, non-WELS families enrolled in our school. But my thinking has changed in recent years, although reluctantly. My thinking has changed because the situation in many of our schools has changed. Enrollments have been shrinking drastically. A number of schools have even closed their doors entirely. So the children of members now are compelled to attend the local public school. Or, in some cases, the parents send them to a private, Christian school that mixes error along with the truth.

Seeing this happen, *for the sake of the children of members* I have come to the conclusion that there may be merit in opening the door a little wider to churched non-member children than I would prefer, to open it as wide as is necessary to enable the congregation to be able to continue its school *for the sake of members' children*. I think I can assume from the statistics some of you have submitted that you have reached the same conclusion and probably for the same reason.

I might add here that enrolling children from churched, but non-WELS, families can result in blessings for the families who are members of heterodox churches. Though our call is not to proselytize, that is, to try to entice people from another Christian church to become members of our church, we do have every right to testify to the truth. If the school has a policy about non-member parents attending the pastor's Bible information class, this presents such an opportunity.



I recall one couple, strong members of another church,<sup>25</sup> whose children we permitted to enroll in our school. They attended my BIC. The husband took copious notes, almost transcribing my every word.<sup>26</sup> A couple of years later the husband asked to meet with me. He told me, “I’ve been going over again and again everything you said in that class and I can’t find anything that doesn’t agree with the Scriptures. I guess I must be a Lutheran.” They were confirmed and yet today, 30 years later, are faithful members of the congregation.

In its report to the 2013 convention of the WELS, the Task Force on Lutheran Schools presents another scenario. Though it is hypothetical, it is certainly within the realm of possibility, even probability:

A little girl from another church body is enrolled in your school.... She belongs to a church that teaches that God is usually angry because we’re bad; at least that’s the message she gets. She’s afraid. She doesn’t know Jesus really is her Savior and really did die for her. She learns about the real Jesus from her second-grade teacher. While in your school’s care, that little seed of faith she might have had begins to take root and grow stronger by the Spirit’s power. Or, maybe there was no faith, but the Spirit gives that precious gift as the teacher patiently and lovingly teaches Jesus and prays for the little girl.<sup>27</sup>

Such a situation and others similar to it that give opportunity to bring the unconditional gospel of forgiveness to children can prove to be a blessing to children in our schools who are from already churching families.

But that is not the main reason I am suggesting that we might open up our doors wider to children of non-member already churching families. I am suggesting this primarily for the sake of our congregation’s own children in situations where, without additional enrollment and the tuition money that it brings with it, decline in school enrollment might necessitate closing the school and thus depriving our children of a Word-of-God-centered, Lutheran elementary school education.

But especially in such situations we need to proceed with great caution. As brought out above, we need to be careful how we advertise; we need to do careful screening; we need to clearly enunciate our school’s philosophy and purpose; we need to make clear how the school operates. We need to lay everything on the table so that there are no surprises.

When the principal or I would meet with churching families requesting enrollment, we would bring out a number of points:

1. That we are a *Lutheran* school.<sup>28</sup> We will be teaching what the Lutheran Church teaches because we believe that the teachings of the Lutheran church are in agreement with the teachings of the Bible. (At this point, if appropriate, we might bring out some of the major differences between the teachings of their church and those of the Lutheran church.)<sup>29</sup>
2. That, though our teachers will certainly be willing to discuss your children’s questions (for example, “Why does your church baptize babies and ours doesn’t?”), we will not permit

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<sup>25</sup> They were members of a Christian Missionary and Alliance church.

<sup>26</sup> Causing me to choose very carefully what I said and how I said it!

<sup>27</sup> Book of Reports and Memorials 2013, p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Schroeder in the theses cited above (cf. footnote 11) says, “Schools should be intentionally ‘Lutheran,’ not just Christian or private schools. They should not shy away from a clear identity.”

<sup>29</sup> Very early in the history of Apostles Lutheran School I met with a few families who, they said, represented about 40 children. They were interested in enrolling their children in our school. They were Mormons. While I would have loved to have had the opportunity to bring the gospel to this group of Mormon children, I did not want to do this under false pretenses. So I took some time to explain to these parents the key differences between Mormonism and Christianity. They decided not to move ahead with a request for enrollment.

children to argue their particular religious views in class. You are agreeing to put your children under our spiritual care. They become a part of our flock.<sup>30</sup>

3. That the policies of our school are established by our church's Board of Education and that they would need to abide by those policies.
4. That we expect them to attend the church's Bible information class, if for no other reason than to become informed about what their children will be taught in our school.
5. That their children will be enrolled on an annual basis, renewable upon review by our Board of Education.

With such safeguards, having a larger percentage of children from non-member church families for the sake of the continued existence of the school will not pose the kind of risks that unconditional enrollment would bring. However, even with that it would be good for schools in such situations to establish a limit in the percentage of non-member, church children they will enroll in the school. In keeping with the mission of the church, I would not put a limit on unchurched children.

### ***Work at attracting people to the school.***

*Utilize your "satisfied customers."*

As mentioned previously, probably the best advertising for our schools is done by word of mouth. Families who can see how God is blessing their children's involvement in the school, families who are thankful for the Christ-centered, Word of God based education their children are receiving, are the best advertisement you can get. Encourage your school families to talk up the school among their friends and neighbors.

*Conduct an outreach-oriented vacation Bible school.*

I know that some parents look upon vacation Bible school as free baby-sitting for their children. Remembering that we can't expect proper spiritual responses from those in whose hearts the Holy Spirit is not working, I wouldn't worry about that. I would rather see the vacation Bible school as an opportunity to sow the seed of the Word in the hearts of children for whom Jesus died.

Make sure to involve your faculty in your VBS,<sup>31</sup> for two reasons. For one thing, our Lutheran elementary school teachers are likely to be the ones most qualified to teach. And for another, this is a way to forge a relationship between teacher and students and also, with follow-up, between teachers and parents. This in turn can give an opportunity to talk about the school and the ongoing benefits it can provide. Our experience in San Jose was that most years we would gain some students, not a large number, but at least a few, for our school through our outreach-oriented vacation Bible school, which included a follow-up upon the conclusion of the VBS.

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<sup>30</sup> That worked for the Roman Catholic father I mentioned above. But when his first child reached 7<sup>th</sup> grade and confirmation class, the differences between what he believed and what was being taught in our school became so clear that he felt constrained to withdraw them from the school.

<sup>31</sup> When we called teachers to serve at Apostles, San Jose, we did not tack on a number of extra-curricular duties, e.g., youth group, organist, choir director. We simply asked them to teach. We did, however, tell all teachers in the letter that accompanied their call that we expected them to teach vacation Bible school each summer.

*Work at transitioning children from the pre-school to the school.*

If you have both a pre-school and an elementary school, the pre-school can be an excellent feeder into the school. As has been noted above, about one-fourth of the children in our WELS pre-schools are from unchurched families. We didn't have a pre-school in San Jose during the years I served there; but we did have a 4-year-old pre-kindergarten, which served somewhat the same function. It proved to be an excellent feeder into our kindergarten and from there into our elementary school.

Transitioning children from a pre-school into the elementary school doesn't just happen. A few suggestions come to mind:

- Include the pre-school in some events of the school in the course of the school year, thus introducing the parents of pre-school children to the school.
- If the pre-school has meetings for parents during the year, invite the elementary school principal or perhaps the lower grade teacher, or both, to attend one of the meetings to talk to the parents about the school.
- Perhaps have your kindergarten teacher teach in the pre-school on a few occasions to give parents the opportunity to become acquainted with her.

*Emphasize your strengths.*

I said before that I would come back to the custody hearing to which our school principal was summoned to testify. After ascertaining from our principal that his new school lacked many of the amenities of the local public school, the attorney hired by the father to try to compel his former wife to put their children back into the public school made what turned out to be a fatal error. He asked our principal, "Then what does your school do?" Our principal calmly replied, "Well, in addition to giving them religious training, we try to teach the children to read and to write, to learn some of the basics of mathematics and science. We teach them some history and try to help them learn how to think." And then he sat down.

The judge, after pondering for a few minutes, replied to the father and his attorney something to the effect, "Sounds to me that's what education is all about. You haven't proved that this school can't do what it claims that it exists to do. My judgment is that the children be permitted to remain in the school. If, after one year, test scores indicate that the school is not accomplishing its purpose, we can re-open this case." End of story.<sup>32</sup>

My point? We don't have to be defensive about our schools in the mistaken notion that we can't offer children everything that the public schools offer. Everything that many parents are looking for in a school, and then some, is to be found in our schools. It begins, of course, with a Christ-centered, Word-of-God-based education, which at first may not mean much to an unchurched family, but which in time, with the working of the Holy Spirit in the parents' and children's hearts, will become the main reason why the children are enrolled in the school.

We need to come to grips with and capitalize on the fact that what are sometimes called "felt needs" (as opposed to the *real* need) will initially draw families to our schools: small class sizes; a loving, protective environment; caring teachers; solid moral training; and emphasis on the basics.

What people are looking for are precisely what our strengths are. We should not hesitate to play to those strengths in our advertising, to recognize and respond to people's perceived needs.

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<sup>32</sup> I might add that, though the judge probably didn't know it, there was no danger that the test scores of the two children would be anything less than excellent. Both were outstanding students who went on to do excellent work in high school. The Lord's providence was at work!

Mark Schroeder writes:

- We need to be bold in outlining and explaining the clear advantages and benefits of Christian education over public school education (without demeaning public education *per se*).
- Schools need to strive for excellence--in curriculum, in quality of instruction, in personal care for students and families. We need to recognize that we may not be able to keep up with the public sector in terms of facilities and programs, so we need to identify areas in which we can provide excellence.<sup>33</sup>

A “felt needs” approach to evangelism is sometimes criticized. It needs to be criticized, it needs to be avoided, in fact, if it is used as a part of a “bait and switch” technique. You speak only of the things that people are looking for and conveniently “forget” to talk about the heart and center of the school until you have the people “hooked.” That’s bait and switch.

A proper felt needs approach uses the perceived needs of people as a point of entry, a way to connect with them, yet without concealing our main reason for existence as a school: to evangelize boys and girls with the life-creating, life-changing gospel.

In the early days of Apostles Lutheran School, in San Jose, CA, the public school district where we were located had enthusiastically embraced a new fad in elementary education. When new schools were being built, they were constructing, not classrooms, but what they called pods. Pods were big, open buildings in which three or four classes met without dividing walls. As somebody should have figured out, children sitting in the back of their class would hear almost as much from the voice of a teacher of another class as from their own teacher. It was mass confusion. The fad lasted for only a few years and then they reconfigured the pods into classrooms.

For a few years, we were one of the only schools around with self-contained classrooms. Did that draw families to us? Yes, it did. A self-contained classroom is what these families felt that their children needed. That felt need was our point of contact. We had what people wanted. Did we capitalize on that need? Yes. But at the same time we never attempted to conceal or downplay the real reason why we believed that our school would be good for the children of those families.

It strikes me that at the present time one such point of contact would be the deteriorating moral climate in our nation. To take just one example: the change in society with regard to homosexuality. A July 14, 2011, article in the Christian Science Monitor reported this sad news:

California today became the first state to require that school districts include in their social studies lessons the contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. “History should be honest. This bill revises existing laws that prohibit discrimination in education and ensures that the important contributions of Americans from all backgrounds and walks of life are included in our history books,” said a statement from Gov. Jerry Brown... . The bill...drew sharp opposition from some religious groups, who raised concerns that schools were promoting what they call an immoral lifestyle and impinging on parental rights to teach their children about sexual issues. But supporters hail the law as a breakthrough that will give children a more complete view of history and society--and make California students safer.<sup>34</sup>

A few other sad bits of news on the same general subject: As of the summer of 2013, thirteen states, plus the District of Columbia have legalized homosexual marriages.<sup>35</sup> An article in a Fall 2013 issue of

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<sup>33</sup> For source, cf. footnote 11.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2011/0714/California-becomes-first-state-to-mandate-gay-history-in-curriculum>.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/26/us-usa-court-gaymarriage-states-idUSBRE95P10A20130626>. That number, as of January 2014, has grown to 17 states plus the District of Columbia.

the Los Angeles Times was effusive in praise of a high school in a suburb of Los Angeles that elected a transgender person as homecoming queen.

If, as they say, “as goes California, so goes the nation,” that does not bode well for the other 49 states. Parents, many of them, at least, want their children to receive a good moral training. Our schools offer just that, which is another point of contact as we reach out to the unchurched families in our community. We shouldn’t hesitate to advertise the strong moral climate that our schools foster.

To reiterate, we have what people feel they need. We shouldn’t be shy about advertising that. We have *more* than people feel they need. We shouldn’t be shy about advertising that either.

*Produce attractive, well-written, well-designed brochures.*

First impressions mean a lot. An appendix<sup>36</sup> in the publication referred to above, “Positioning our Lutheran Schools for Outreach,” reminds us, “Done correctly, brochures are not an expense, but an investment.”

Under the heading, “What’s wrong with most brochures?”, it gives the following answers:

- Doesn’t entice potential prospect to read it
- Contains way too much information
- Doesn’t answer enough of the prospect’s questions
- Too cluttered, confusing, or unclear
- Looks cheap and unprofessional (“The cost of everything is too expensive not to do it right”)
- Desired goal was not clear when it was created (e.g., What is the purpose of the brochure? Who is the intended audience?)
- Does not lead prospects to desired goal

It also suggests a number of ways to improve responses:

- Offer emotional benefits, logical benefits, and features in that order. Know the difference. A fenced in play yard is a feature that delivers a logical benefit of better campus control. What’s the emotional benefit?
- Use “you” rather than “I.” Talk to the prospect about their interests rather than your interests.
- Be brief--make your copy only as long as it takes to get your message across.
- Be friendly and informal. Write as though you were leaning over the counter talking to your prospect.
- Be specific. Tell prospects exactly what your school will do for their children.
- Personalize your message to the prospective audience as much as possible. They need to see themselves bringing their children to your school.

Unless you have someone in the congregation with special gifts in this area, it would appear to me that if you are going to use brochures to advertise your school, professional help would be invaluable. As the Effective Brochure Design appendix puts it, “The cost of everything is too expensive not to do it right.”

*Take special care with your web page.*

If it is true that we may need help with brochure designing, it is certainly no less, perhaps even more, true about the church/school web page. The church and school web page is the new church exterior

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<sup>36</sup> Appendix F, p. 28 (cf. footnote 24).

bulletin board--and then some. I need to keep reminding myself that though my generation isn't apt to look first to a church and school's web page, that is very likely the first place to which young parents today will turn.

What impression do they get? I can think of all kinds of things that would turn people off about a church and school's web page. It's unattractive; it's difficult to navigate; it's unclear; it doesn't provide the information I'm looking for; it's out-of-date.

Though I think I am able to recognize a good church/school web page when I see it, I do not have the slightest idea about how to create one. I lack both the artistic and technical skills. Once again, unless a congregation has someone in its midst with strong gifts in that area, it might well be worth the expense to receive some professional assistance in setting up your web page. In addition, it needs to be kept up to date. In my years in the parish ministry, from the mid-60s to the mid-80s, prior to accepting the call to the Seminary, I learned you could tell something about a church by the way it maintained its exterior bulletin board. If you drove by the church in February and the bulletin board was still displaying information about the Christmas services, you could quite confidently conclude that the church wasn't getting a jump on the season to come but that someone had failed to get around to updating the information. I've seen web pages that are just as much out of date.

*Put a welcoming human face out front.*

As the saying goes, "You don't get a second chance to make a good first impression." If families pay a visit to your church and school "campus," who is the first person they generally see? If your church has a secretary, that's probably the person. Or, it might be the pastor. Whoever it is, the first few moments of a visit may well determine if the family comes back again. The same thing applies to whoever answers the phone on behalf of the church and school. If you have a church/school secretary, it might be worth while to spend time with her on some dos and don'ts of functioning as the "face" of the church and school.

About twenty years ago, when I became president of the seminary, there were at that time some changes in the secretaries who served the president and the faculty. After a short time, we had two very fine women in place, both capable secretaries. But I decided to change the job description of my secretary, the president's secretary, to include serving as the receptionist for the Seminary. She was given the responsibility of greeting visitors to the Seminary, also of answering the phone. Why? Because of her warm, welcoming personality. She had the gift of making people feel at ease, of making people feel that they were important in their own right. I don't think anyone has ever walked away from the president's secretary feeling that they have been treated in a rude or cavalier manner. Close to twenty years later she is still serving in that same role: president's secretary and the Seminary's receptionist.

If in your congregation it's the pastor who tends to be the first person with whom visitors come in contact, no matter how busy he might be, he will want to give a warm, unhurried welcome to them. People will remember their first encounter with the church or school, whether positive or negative.<sup>37</sup>

*Take care of the church property.*

Back when I served in the parish at Apostles, San Jose, we had a member who had no use for meetings. (Actually, we had more than one such member.) This particular member told me, "Give me something to do. As long as I don't have to attend a meeting, I'll be happy to do it." I knew that this man took meticulous care of his yard, front and back. He refused to use power equipment on his hedges and other shrubbery since, in his opinion, he couldn't do as good a job with a power trimmer as he could with hand shears and trimmers. His yard was the showcase of the neighborhood.

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<sup>37</sup> Not so long ago, when I was a guest preacher at one of our WELS churches, someone approached me after the service and told me, "We'll never forget the time you spent with us when we visited the Seminary, how you took us on a tour of the campus." I must admit that I did not remember having done that for these people. But they did remember. I would assume that I had a few other things I could have been doing at the time rather than leading the people on a Seminary tour. But, as I used to tell my Seminary students, "People are more important than programs."

“Marv,” I told him, “I have just the job for you. I’ll make you responsible for keeping the bushes and shrubbery around the church trimmed.” He gladly accepted the job and did it faithfully for a number of years. Does it come as a surprise to you that Marv’s hedge trimming brought people to church? When I would ask first-time visitors, “How did you happen to visit us?”, a number of times I received the response, “When we drive by your church, it looks so nice. We decided to pay a visit.” A less than spiritual reason for attending? Obviously, but, as we have already said, how can you expect people who don’t have the Spirit to be motivated by the Spirit?

Our churches may not be magnificent cathedrals and our schools may not look like much compared to some public schools, but we can work at keeping up what the Lord in his grace has given to us. A fresh coat of paint, clean windows, a well-manicured lawn, and, yes, nicely cared-for shrubbery and, inside the school, uncluttered hallways, clean carpeting, and a neat reception area, principal’s office, and classrooms --these are things that we can do. And they can produce a positive first impression for the inquirer.

### ***Work at bringing school families into the church.***

I think we all agree that, in addition to feeding the children with the Bread of Life, we would want to use their presence in our school as a way of reaching their parents with the gospel. There are ways we can help to make this happen.

#### *The pastor’s role*

The pastor is going to have a lot to do with this. Three of Mark Schroeder’s theses address the subject of the pastor’s role in the school:

- Congregational ownership of the school’s work cannot be fully achieved without the full support and participation of the pastor.
- Leaders of the school will look for opportunities to involve the pastor in school-related matters (beyond the expected teaching of confirmation instruction classes).
- Schools that enroll non-members as an opportunity for outreach must work closely with the pastor to develop a specific strategy to bring non-members into the life of the congregation.<sup>38</sup>

If a church has a school or a pre-school or both, the pastor will want to be visible and approachable. One of the congregations in which I served as a vacancy pastor following my retirement tried to make this happen by doing some remodeling work in the school, which was across the street from the church. They built a pastor’s office in the school, thinking that this would help to give the pastor more contact both with the children and with their parents. While this was a well-meaning project, I don’t think it was the wisest of moves. It was an attempt to almost force the pastor to get more involved with the school.

Personally, I don’t think I would have enjoyed having that room as my office. A pastor needs a place where things are relatively quiet, where he can spend some uninterrupted time in the Word as he prepares his sermons and Bible classes. It is also helpful that those who desire to visit the pastor, perhaps for counseling, can do so in relative privacy.

A better way is that the pastor *makes* time and *takes* time, not under compulsion but because of a love for souls, to get out of the privacy of his study on a regular basis to mingle with the children and, as possible, their parents. At a church where I served a vacancy, I taught confirmation class the first hour of the day, after the opening devotion. I would try to get over to the school a little early. The upper grade classroom, where I taught confirmation class, was just up the hall from the pre-school classroom. As time

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<sup>38</sup> For source, cf. footnote 11.

permitted, I would stand at the door of the pre-school classroom while the upper grades were having their opening devotion. It gave me a chance to meet parents, most of whom brought their little ones directly to the classroom. If a pastor becomes a familiar face to people, they are a little more likely to respond favorably when an announcement of a forthcoming Bible information class is made. You have already made a connection with them.

Another way a pastor can connect with parents: participate as time permits in school activities. In another of the congregations I served as vacancy pastor, there was quite an active athletic program for the children. The ball diamond/soccer field/football field and the basketball/volleyball courts were across the parking lot from my office. I tried to spend some time with the parents at every home game. Did it mean that I might have to work a little later in the evening to get a sermon done? At times, yes. But was it worth it? Yes. Once again, it was an opportunity to make contact with unchurched parents, of whom there were quite a large number in that school.

The principal in the school of one of the churches where I served as vacancy pastor after my retirement from the Seminary set aside one evening a month (one hour, 7-8 p.m.) as a time for providing parenting skills for all the families in the school. The event was very well attended. I'm estimating that more than 90% of the parents were in attendance. The children were invited also. After an opening devotion for the whole family, the older children took responsibility for the younger ones out in the play area or, when weather didn't permit, in the gym. The principal asked if I would be willing to conduct the opening devotion. I was more than happy to do so as it provided one more opportunity to make connection with parents.

This is all anecdotal, of course. It's descriptive, not prescriptive. But I offer these rather recent examples from my own ministry as a way of illustrating that, as the saying goes, "Where there's a will, there's a way." If the pastor's desire is to get to know the families of unchurched children in the school and pre-school, he should be able to figure out ways to do just that.

### *The principal's role*

The school principal also has a lot to do with helping to bring unchurched families into the church. Let me give you two examples from my ministry, one from my pre-Seminary years in San Jose and the other from my post-Seminary retirement years. I have already mentioned our school principal in San Jose, Mark Sprengeler. He had a heart for souls. He took a call to serve as a missionary in Hong Kong at almost the same time that I took the call to teach at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. He served as a missionary there for 25 years until his retirement a couple of years ago. When he visited families who wanted to enroll their children in our school, he would spend more time talking to them about Jesus than he would in telling them about our school. I am quite certain that one of the reasons for what I considered to be excellent compliance with our school's policy that parents attend twelve sessions of the Bible information class was the way Mr. Sprengeler helped to interest people in that course.

Then, one of my post-Seminary vacancy calls. I had an experience that I never had had in all the years of my ministry. Every single person I invited to attend a Bible information class came! The first night they kept pouring in. It soon became clear that we had to find a bigger room. Then we ran out of material--a nice kind of problem to experience. Nineteen people came that night, fourteen of whom were parents of school children. And all of them, after instruction, were received into membership. I had barely met some of the school families prior to that night. But our principal knew them well. And he had been encouraging them to come to a class to learn about their Savior as well as all of the Bible-based teachings of the Lutheran Church. So, when the *invitation* came, *they* came. What a joy it was to teach all those people about the wonderful works of God. And what a blessing it was that the principal had a heart for souls. He saw the school as an integral part of the church and its mission to evangelize the unchurched, to bring to them the good news about Jesus.



### *The congregation's role*

The congregation, too, has a role to play in bringing unchurched school families into the church, not the least of which is making these families feel welcome whenever they attend church, which they are likely to do at least on the Sundays their children sing. We should never underestimate the value of a friendly greeting. When second-time visitors are asked, "What brought you back?", the response of a large share of them tends to be, "We were impressed by how warm and friendly everyone was."

A second way by which the congregation can help to draw in the families of unchurched school children is by inviting them to join the congregation in special services and events. A congregation might sponsor regular (monthly?) fellowship nights for the whole family. It might conduct an evening *family* vacation Bible school. A congregation might want to include some purely recreational activities, e.g., a church picnic, a theater or concert outing, or a sports night, such as a weekly open night in the school gym. Through participating in such congregational activities unchurched families can become a little more comfortable in the presence of church members and perhaps a little more agreeable to attend a Bible information class.

### ***Work at keeping people in the church.***

I mentioned above the often-voiced complaint that school families who become members frequently leave shortly after their last child graduates from eighth grade. This problem cannot be completely eliminated, of course. As long as Satan is alive and active, there will always be straying sheep in the congregation. But there are things we can do to help *keep in* those who have been *brought in*, ways to keep the back door from being open as wide as the front.

We are talking here about what is sometimes called the assimilation of members, which is important, of course, not just for school families but for all families. Some have described assimilated members as those who, among other things,

- feel a sense of "belonging." When talking about the church, they speak of *my* church rather than *your* church.
- feel a sense of "ownership" of the church's ministry. They don't perceive themselves as outsiders looking in, but as an integral part of the congregation.
- feel they can raise questions or opinions about the congregation's work without fear of censure. They don't perceive the congregation as being ruled by an "old guard" that is zealously protecting its turf and intimidating the newcomer.
- feel they can talk to the pastor or another member about a personal problem. They have come to see the congregation as a loving family in Christ.
- see more blessings than frustrations in their church membership. Because congregations consist of sinners, no congregation will be perfect; but they feel that the imperfections in the congregation are more than offset by the blessings they are receiving.
- would without hesitation recommend their church to a friend.

We might be inclined to say, "None of the above is all that important. As long as the Word is taught in its truth and purity and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's command, we don't need anything more." I will not argue with that. If I had to make a choice between being a member of an orthodox Lutheran congregation that was cold, closed, cliquish, and combative and being a member of a non-orthodox church that was warm and welcoming, I wouldn't hesitate. The orthodox Lutheran congregation, in spite of its many failings, would win hands-down.

But I need to remember that there is a big difference between me, a life-long Christian, a life-long Lutheran, a life-long WELS Lutheran, and a new Christian. The new Christian will not be as deeply rooted in Bible-based, confessional Lutheran doctrine as I am, even if he has received a thorough instruction. The new Christian is like a young, tender plant that is fragile and easily bruised. I need to be

aware of this and to work hard at putting nothing in the way of the growth of that plant, nothing that might cause the person to turn away from the Word and Sacrament through which the Holy Spirit enables him to sink down deep roots and grow as a Christian.

So, how do we facilitate assimilation of new members to help assure that they won't fall away from Word and Sacrament and ultimately from their Savior?<sup>39</sup>

*Provide thorough pre-membership instruction.*

This is not the place to take short-cuts. The Bible information class is meant to indoctrinate people, to immerse them thoroughly in the teachings of the Scriptures. We will want to focus on the article upon which the church stands and falls, the doctrine of justification through faith alone by grace alone. But we won't want to stop there. The Apostle Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Ac 20:28). We won't want to do any less.

It is also good to include in pre-membership instruction practical applications to the Christian's life. Rather than simply encouraging people to read their Bibles, give some guidance on how to study the Bible. Encourage attendance at one of the congregation's Bible classes, especially as the Bible information class draws near to a conclusion, thus helping to transition the person to a lifelong study of the Word with fellow Christians. Provide an explanation of Lutheran worship. Help people to begin a devotional life with suggestions of material and methodology. Teach biblical principles of stewardship and make sure the new member understands the way the congregation puts these principles to work. Teach the class members about spiritual gifts and how their gifts can be put to use in the life and work of the congregation. In short, help the prospective member to *get* going and *keep* going in his/her walk with Jesus.

*Take special care of the new member during the first year of membership.*

During my years in San Jose, our policy was that all new members, even those transferring in, would be publicly received into membership as a part of the worship service. This was good both for the new members and the congregation. A public reception into membership conforms with the Apostle Paul's words: "If you *confess with your mouth*, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). And through a public reception the members of the congregation have the opportunity to welcome the new members and be encouraged to remember them in their prayers.

But you won't want to stop with that, in effect saying, "Now that you have become members, you are on your own." For several months, during the course of the Bible information class, the new member has met with the pastor, sometimes one on one, every week. Now that has come to an end. There are no more weekly sessions with the pastor. Newly confirmed members can get the feeling that they have been stranded, left to fend for themselves after all those weeks of personal contact. It would be good for congregations to set up a plan for visitation of new members, especially during the first year of membership. The visitation could include scheduled visits from both the pastor and the elders. If the congregation assigns specific elders to be responsible for certain members, this would be an opportunity for new members to become acquainted with their elders.

Another way to help integrate the new member into the congregation is by assigning "sponsors" for each new family. Sponsors would keep in regular contact with the new members assigned to them throughout the first year of their membership. They would alert their assigned members to upcoming

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<sup>39</sup> What follows applies to all new members, of course, particularly converts to the Christian faith or to Lutheranism, not just to those who come into the church through the school. For more on this subject, you might read chapter seven, "Assimilating the New Member," in my book on the theology and practice of evangelism *We Believe--Therefore We Speak* (Northwestern Publishing House, 1995, pp. 272-295).

services and events, explaining their purpose and inviting them. They would answer questions or find answers to questions the new member might have about the life and ministry of the congregation.

One more thing: We will want to encourage all of our members to pay special attention to new members. They will want to make it clear to them that they are not outsiders. By their words and actions they will want them to know that they value them as fellow members of the body of Christ.

*For the pastor: take sufficient time for sermon and Bible class preparation.*

The most important thing the church has to give people is the gospel in Word and Sacrament. The responsibility for this falls primarily on the pastor. He needs to take sufficient time for careful and prayerful, intensive and in-depth study of the Word and for turning that Word into uplifting sermons and Bible classes. His prayer is that one of the things that will prompt his members to say with the psalmist, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’” (Ps 122:1 ESV), is that they know they will be fed. They know they will be edified. They know they will be confronted with their sins. They know they will be comforted with the gospel. They know they will be encouraged. They know they will be inspired. They know they will be guided. They know they will not be quite the same people when they leave church that day as they were when they entered God’s house.

If we want our new members, including our school family converts, to keep coming back, pastors need to keep giving them reason for wanting to come back. That’s not going to happen with slipshod, hurried preparation for Sunday worship and Bible class.

There is no substitute for quality time in the study. Perhaps it goes without saying, but just in case, I’ll say it anyway: If a pastor needs to have sufficient time for sermon and Bible class preparation, the congregation needs to give him sufficient time for that work. Remember Acts 6 and the words of the Apostles, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables” (v. 2). With that, the Apostles were not putting down “waiting on tables,” in this case the administration of the distribution of food to the poor widows in the congregation. They were simply saying, “The ministry to which we were called is the ‘ministry of the Word.’ It would not be right for us to get so caught up in other aspects of the congregation’s work that we would neglect what we were called to do.” You know what happened. Seven “deacons” were chosen to assist the Apostles so that they could continue to carry out their primary calling. Congregations today will want to support their pastors in the same way.

*Get people involved.*

It’s interesting how quickly “your” church becomes “my” church when people become involved in the life and work of the congregation. A brand new Christian is not ready to serve as an elder or a member of the Church Council, or in some other leadership role in the congregation.<sup>40</sup> But there are ways by which new members can become involved early on. If they are musically inclined, they can be invited to sing in the choir or to play a musical instrument. They can be invited to serve on an altar guild, or as an usher. They can be asked to serve on a committee. They can be invited to become a part of a women’s or men’s organization. If they show interest and appear to have the aptitude for it, they could be trained to serve as a Sunday school teacher.

Not all new members will be in a position to serve in such ways but will faithfully hear the Word and receive the Sacrament. We will not want to look down on them as second-class members. Some, e.g., a mother with several little ones at home or a husband whose job, which includes a long commute, occupies 70-80 hours of his week, may not be able to add service in the congregation to what the Lord has already put onto their plates. Yet we will want to provide opportunities for all to put their gifts to use in the service of the Lord in their church.

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<sup>40</sup> “not a recent convert” (1 Timothy 3:6).

Some congregations have found that a small group structure has been helpful in assimilating members. I cannot speak to this from experience, since we did not do this in the congregation I served. But I can see how, handled well, dividing the congregation into small care groups in which members are accountable to each other could help to prevent backdoor losses.

*Keep the lines of communication open.*

I am thinking here of both input into and information about the program of the congregation. One of the marks of assimilated members is that they feel a sense of “ownership” of the church’s ministry. They don’t perceive themselves as outsiders looking in, but as an integral part of the congregation.

In this regard, special care needs to be taken with women members, who usually make up at least one-half and often more than one-half of the congregation’s membership. In accordance with the scriptural principle (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:11-12) that the woman should not have authority over the man, our congregations restrict voting membership to the men of the congregation. However, this does not mean that the women of the congregation should have nothing to say, just as applying the headship principle in the home doesn’t mean that the husband doesn’t value the counsel and advice of his wife.

Inviting the women of the congregation to attend meetings of the Voters’ Assembly as non-voting members; conducting occasional congregational opinion polls; holding congregational forums in which issues are discussed, but votes are not taken (which some congregations do the week prior to the regular meeting of the voters’ assembly); having women serve on committees that carry out the directives of the Church Council--these are some of the ways by which godly women, who are just as dear and just as important to our Savior as the men of the congregation, can become involved in the life and work of the congregation, yet without violating what the Scriptures teach about the roles of man and woman.

Not only is it important to give everyone an opportunity for input into the congregation’s program, it is also important to make sure that information about what is going on in the congregation is being shared with all members. My dictionary defines “redundancy” in negative terms: “the act of using a word, phrase, etc., that repeats something else and is therefore unnecessary.” To that I say, when it comes to getting information out redundancy is not a vice but a virtue. There are a number of ways to do it: Sunday announcements (both bulletin and oral), posting minutes of Church Council and Voters’ Assembly meetings (or summaries of the same), newsletters, e-mail, congregational web page. You still are going to have dissatisfied people who grumble, “I don’t know what’s going on around here.” But let it not be because they are not told and told and told.

*Develop a member care structure for quick follow-up on “straying sheep.”*

In spite of every effort to keep the sheep in the flock, close to their Good Shepherd, some will begin to stray. It is important to have a system set up that will alert congregational leaders to this. Quick detection is essential. The further sheep wander from the flock, the more difficult it is to bring them back into the fold. Tracking attendance at worship and communion is one element. Assigning people (under the leadership of the elders) to waste no time in following up on those who are absenting themselves from the Means of Grace is another. And holding accountable those responsible for such follow up is still another element.

Some congregations have divided their membership into “zones,” geographical or otherwise, with an elder in charge of a zone responsible for watching over the spiritual well-being of the sheep in his zone. That has much to commend itself. But that will work only as well as those given that responsibility carry out their responsibilities. Again, accountability is called for.

## **A FINAL WORD**

What a privilege the Lord has granted to our congregations that have pre-schools and/or elementary schools as a part of their ministry. And what a privilege it is to be able to use our schools as a part of the

outreach ministry of the congregation. Our schools may be the one way that mission children and their parents will be brought into contact with the message of salvation. They, children and parents alike, are priceless souls for whom Jesus lived and died. We will therefore want to look upon these children and their parents as wonderful opportunities the Lord places before us. We will want to pray for them regularly. We will want to show great patience with these children in the classroom. We will want to do all we can to lead these boys and girls and their parents out of darkness into God's marvelous light.

The mission of the church is evangelism: to nurture the believer with the gospel and to reach out to the unbeliever with the same gospel. May the Lord of the Church lead our Lutheran pre-schools and elementary school to do both, ever more faithfully and effectively.