

Teaching the Child of a Non-Christian Home

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By Mark A. Jeske

I am honored that such a distinguished enclave of educators would call upon a mere pastor for enlightenment in their profession. There is, of course, a common notion in our Synod that a Seminary diploma automatically certifies a person for absolutely any Synod job. Still, I must say that you have a lot of nerve to ask a part-timer with two years' experience to tell you teachers how to teach.

My justification for being here, I guess, is that our school, St. Marcus, has only 30 member children of 76. Our 46 non-member children (60%) rank us first in percentage of total enrollment. It will be the purpose of this paper to consider the impact of non-WELS students in our classrooms and the task of educating children from non-Christian homes.

Table I: Church membership and baptisms at St. Marcus School

Grade	<u>K</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>		
Member	3	4	5	3	2	0	2	6	6	30 member children	40%
Non-member	10	8	5	5	3	4	3	6	2	46 non-member children	60%
Baptized	7	4	8	4	4	3	4	12	8	54 baptized	71%
Not baptized	6	7	2	4	1	1	1	0	0	22 not baptized	29%

I. Definition

If I may insult your intelligence a little, whom are we talking about with this assignment? Which are the non-Christian homes? God alone knows which (if any) of our children are not His, and He alone knows for sure which homes are His or not. We can't judge hearts. What we must deal with in the classroom are symptoms of sin when it happens, outward signs of belief and unbelief, and those are evident to some extent in *all* our children. Much of what is said in this paper would apply also to problem children of "Christian" homes. I think the point of the assignment, though, was how to deal with the non-WELS and unchurched children in our midst.

It will probably not surprise you to hear that our schools differ widely in the number of non-WELS students that they enroll. In WELS' 19 city schools the percentages range from 0 to 60%, from 0 to 72 students. The trend is clearly growing. Central city schools and churches are on the cutting edge of sociological change, and as the Lutheran ghetto of 1880-1930 thins out and spreads over the entire metropolitan area, all schools will find themselves dealing more and more with families without a solid Lutheran background. Churches and schools are prisoners of their neighborhoods, since the buildings don't seem to move much. Perhaps that's one of God's ways of keeping His witness alive in more places.

Table II: Breakdown of city schools' enrollments

School	Total	Member children	Other WELS	non-WELS	& %
* 1. St. Marcus	76	30	0	46	60%
* 2. Beautiful Savior	115	59	1	55	48%
* 3. Siloah/Zebaoth	205	107	26	72	35%
* 4. St. Peter's	67	45	0	22	33%
5. Gethsemane	74	52	2	20	27%
6. St. James	96	73	3	20	21%
7. Christ	120	104	5	11	9%

8. Gloria Dei	81	71	4	6	7%
9. St. Lucas/ <i>Messiah</i>	360	272	66	22	6%
* 10. Garden Homes	107	99	1	7	6%
11. Redemption	104	100	0	4	4%
* 12. Atonement	203	195	2	6	3%
13. Centennial	94	77	14	3	3%
14. Fairview	93	80	10	3	3%
15. N. Trinity/ <i>St. John's</i>	241	195	43	3	1%
16. St. Matthew's	99	89	9	1.	1%
17. St. John's (68 th)	213	211	1	1	.5%
18. Salem/ <i>Risen Savior</i>	277	238	39	0	0%
19. Mt. Lebanon	<u>181</u>	<u>181</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0%</u>
	2806	2278 (81%)	226 (8%)	302	11%

*participated in the Anderson/Roethle study, 1977-78

Consider Table II for a moment. For brevity's sake, only the Milwaukee city schools are listed. Note the following:

1. The proportion of non-WELS to WELS students is directly related to location.
 - a. The central city schools all have a high percentage of non-WELS children;
 - b. The lowest percentages are in the outlying areas;
 - c. Middling percentages (5-10%) are located in transitional areas.
2. The highest percentage schools are also leaders in cross-cultural ministry.
3. The 11% average is deceptive—13 of the 19 are below the average. The median is 6% non-WELS students, and that number would likely drop if the suburban schools were included.

II. Problems

What difference will a non-Christian child make in your teaching? What effect will a non-Christian home have on a child? One basic assumption that you all surely share is that the home environment has enormous influence on a child's faith, ability, and work. A child receives half his education at home (for better or for worse; not all teaching is verbal). Home is a breeding place for values and attitudes. And that is good. Margaret Mead notwithstanding, God gave children first to parents, and we ought always to reinforce our parents' sense of personal responsibility for the training of their children. This is especially useful in a society increasingly enamored with socialism and obsessed with expanding governmental control over people's lives. Paul told the Ephesian *fathers* to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord. Non-member parents often regard us as just another government agency to manage their kids and maybe keep them out of trouble for a while, while they struggle with their own problems. We seem to be just another public school with tuition, good discipline, smaller classes, and tougher academic standards.

At the Seminary a student is taught to trust in the power of God's Word to convert heathen and motivate saints. At DMLC students are impressed with the wonders that Christian education can work in little heathen. But just as new pastors often become crestfallen when they see firsthand that God's invitation is not irresistible, so new teachers often become disillusioned when it seems as though the miracle of Christian education is not wondrously transforming students. I think the main reason is that the home and the streets are equally forceful educators with the classroom, and where the home is not Christ-centered, the teacher has some serious handicaps.

For one thing, non-member parents often ignore the importance of Sunday morning worship, leaving the children to get to church on their own or not at all. Such an attitude burdens the child with decisions he shouldn't have to make and curses him with a poor example. We need to keep insisting that Sunday morning is an indispensable part of our program. If parents refuse to acknowledge that responsibility, they are seriously hurting our ability to train the child, and perhaps we should tell them that we cannot work under such circumstances. Not only does poor church attendance hurt the child's relationship with his Savior, but it provides a bad example for the rest of the room.

Another serious handicap in teaching a child from a non-Christian home is that the environment often directly contradicts what the child learns from us. We teach that it is a serious sin to despise God's Word, while a careless parent who sleeps till noon on Sunday teaches that the Third Commandment is meaningless. We teach that adultery is sin, while mama has a live-in boyfriend. We teach that drunkenness offends God, while Uncle Louie staggers in at all hours with funny smelling breath. We teach that the husband is the head of the household, while many kids today have never seen their fathers. Ponder Table III, the number of St. Marcus children with both, one, or neither parent at home:

Table III: Number of parents living with children

<u>Grade</u>	<u>K</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>Total</u>	
Both	2	4	2	1	0	1	2	2	1	15	20%
One	11	7	8	7	4	3	2	9	6	57	75%
Neither				1		1	1	1		4	5%

It is no great coup to teach non-member kids to memorize the Catechism. Most are bright enough to pick it up with enough class repetition. But teaching to hit the heart is much tougher than teaching to hit the head only. Kids get hypocritical when they see the Bible's commands and promises flouted and ignored without divine punishment immediately forthcoming. Hearing the Word blesses people only as they keep it, and that doesn't happen often when the little people become cynical about God's threats and promises. You can teach a child how to pray a lot more easily than you can inspire him to pray spontaneously.

There are many other social problems found also in our own families but aggravated in homes where Christ is not Lord. A non-Christian home increases the risk of child abuse, neglect, long stretches of baby sitters and day care centers, alcoholism, drug abuse, and violence as a way of settling differences. The incidence of female-heads-of-household in the city has increased tremendously in the last few years. With the mother away at work, the kids have to raise themselves. Video games replace reading, homework evaporates, late hours are normal, and diet is terrible (has anyone ever done a paper on the effect of junk food on child concentration?) Kids come to school pooped, unprepared, and wired up with the sugar jitters.

III. Challenges and Opportunities

And yet. And yet the task of working with children from non-Christian home or semi-Christian homes is worth the effort, and it is justifiable as a second reason for the school's existence after training the congregation's own youth.

Conservative Christians are often accused of ignoring people's social needs in their determination to save souls. More liberal churches pride themselves in doing something for people now rather than just pining for the big piece of pie in the sky by and by. We don't have to hang our heads one bit, though. Our school system is doing our communities an enormous favor. 83 years ago Prof. John Schaller of our Seminary spoke to the Synodical Conference convention in Bay City, "The parochial school is the very mainstay of civic and social virtue." He pointed out that only Christian schools really train children in true *obedience to law*, motivated by love for the Savior who commanded us to render to Caesar what is his, in *treating our neighbor*

with mercy and forgiveness, a concept not outstanding in public schools, and in *respecting the rights and property of others*, motivated by Christian honesty. All these attitudes militate against ego, self-aggrandizement, and the 1980's cult of self. All these are virtues indispensable for our American system of personal liberty. I think we would all agree that in 1983 our schools are superior to public schools academically, socially, and morally.

The main reason for enrolling non-member children, though, is because our schools are wonderful agencies for home mission work. A child gets an enormous dosage of the Word of God each day, and that Word is the *power* of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. The school is a natural bridge to unchurched families who might otherwise never have crossed our thresh-hold. It has been my experience that often children catch the excitement and bring it home, shaming and inspiring the parents to seek some answers. Of the 24 adults whom I confirmed in the last two years, 20 are now members because of the school. In addition we welcomed 17 teenagers. Without our school, St. Marcus might be on the verge of closing. We don't get many transfers.

In 1977 the GBHM commissioned Anderson/Roethle and Associates to do a large-scale analysis of our central city churches and schools. I think the opinions of these outsiders bear some mention here. Permit a few quotes:

“Lutheran elementary schools are the best evangelism outreach of the congregation to their surrounding community. It should also be noted that these schools represent a significant social ministry in the center city ... providing an opportunity for quality education and upward mobility for center city residents ...

“Our analysis of Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod congregations indicates that gaining church membership through the elementary school is the only way in which the Lutheran Church has effectively evangelized the center city. If other approaches to evangelism are effective, they have not been successfully tried by the Lutheran Church in Milwaukee. A quality elementary school is attractive to the black population and to non-Lutherans ...

(Planning Program for WELS Center City Churches, pp VI-1,3)

As you perhaps realize, our elementary schools are our Synod's greatest and most effective bridges to non-Lutherans, and especially to people of other cultures. Initially, Hispanics and blacks are attracted to Lutheran schools before Lutheran churches. These are people we must reach if our schools and churches are to continue their service where they are. The question for us is no longer whether to bridge cultures but when. You perhaps know that Milwaukee public elementary schools now enroll more black than white children. White children are now a minority. By 1990 Hispanics will surpass blacks as the nation's leading minority. The U.S. is already the world's fifth largest Hispanic nation. One of every two immigrants today speaks Spanish as a first language.

IV. Approaches and Methods

How Will your work differ in dealing with non-member parents and children who may not be Christian? Here are a few suggestions:

Parents:

1. Make it obvious that you and the school are not rented services or fundamentalist yahoos. Make your love for people and your desire to serve very evident from the first visit.
2. Make it clear that Jesus Christ is the main reason for the school's existence. Parents will generally not need too much persuasion about our discipline, academics, and programs.

3. *Insist* on certain types of parental participation in church/school activities. This is tough. Basic goals might be: attending the pastor's class, attending church when the child sings with the class, attending your equivalent of the PTA.
4. Spend extra time during report card week. Our extracurricular activities shut down and all teachers get involved in extensive counseling. Each parent gets ½ hour, more if necessary. Often a great deal of personal and family help is given. New people and non-members will develop their first loyalty to people that they trust, not to an abstract confessional principle which they don't understand. Pastors could (should?) get involved here.
5. Be firm in your school rules. Demonstrate a willingness to suspend students after due warning has been given. Point out that it is they who have brought the trouble on themselves and must change.
6. Visit the home informally during the year, not just in August. Just as a pastor gets a lot of information and a lot of work done outside the Sunday morning service by personal visitation, so teachers can build a tremendous amount of good will and gain valuable information about the child's background.
7. Do not hesitate to use the Word, even to non-Christians. Show that our dealings and work flow from the Word's authority.

Children:

1. Love them as individuals, as people. Don't view them as challenges to be met or as obstacles to overcome. You may be the child's last chance at being saved for eternity.
2. Be patient. Bad habits built up over the course of nine years won't be eliminated in three months.
3. Have realistic expectations. Non-Christian transfer students are often out of sync with your grade levels. Do the extra work and take the extra time to help the child catch up.
4. Don't take anything for granted spiritually. Define all religious jargon. Teach to eyes, and don't go on until you get the look and smile that says he understands.
5. Be prepared to spend more time counseling non-Christian children. They have a big adjustment to make.
6. Don't overreact to undesirable symptoms in the classroom. Try to find out if something at home is causing trouble.
7. Don't automatically confirm the whole. 8th grade in spring, Make it clear that confirmation is a rare privilege, not an automatic ceremony for the glory of the white robes and carnations. Stress life commitment to Christ. Involve parents in the child's decision and gain their support.
8. Recruit constantly for Wisco and Northwestern Prep. Four years at a public high school could ruin four years in your school.
9. Above all, teach to hit the heart. (If I had gone to DMLC I would have said, "Emphasize affective as well as cognitive goals and methods.") Head knowledge is only a fraction of true, saving faith, and it is useless and incomplete without trust and commitment of the heart. Spend time with memory work *after* the recitation, too. Explain and give examples for the passages they learned. The Bible isn't a collection of proof passages—be sensitive to the context in which the Spirit has spoken. Lead the children wherever possible publicly to confess their faith and commit themselves to Christ.
10. Pray without ceasing. Without the Spirit's kindly spiritual voltage in your classroom, children from unbelieving homes will themselves just grow into unbelieving adults.

V. Conclusion

The risks and frustrations of teaching children from non-Christian homes are many. Conniving parents may take advantage of our generosity. Students may disrupt classrooms and damage morale with poor attitudes. The confirmation washout rate may be greater. Strained resources may mean turning away good mission prospects.

In my opinion, though, the joys outweigh the griefs. What excitement when the Word works in a kid and he rises above his family handicap! What excitement when a parent catches the zeal for Christ! What excitement when we can send kids to Northwestern and DMLC! What excitement when school families become unsolicited recruiters for the school *and church*. What excitement when a family and its legion of relatives and friends are impressed by their child's greatly improved behavior, Bible knowledge, and scholastic achievement! What excitement when you realize that God may have used *you* as His personal instrument of salvation! Imagine my joy, for instance, when last Sunday I baptized a woman and her six children (each of whom had a different father) and told her to go and sin no more. May God give you all energy for His work of mission and give you the satisfaction of knowing that your labors are not in vain.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT:

1. Should a school seek to serve the congregation only and admit non-members kids only as exceptions, or should the congregation use the school also to recruit aggressively from the neighborhood?
2. Should a school permit unbaptized students? When do you baptize children who come to you already of grade school age?
3. Is cooperative recruiting a possibility? Could schools with limited space send interested non-members to another school with excess capacity?
4. Should a congregation *require*
 - a. nothing if tuition is paid & people cooperate?
 - b. that the parent complete the pastor's class?
 - c. that the people must join the congregation?