

The Teacher as Minister to Children and Parents

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Thus far, much has been said to focus attention on the Biblical description of the called servants of Christ. Likewise, we have surveyed the directives, admonishments, and encouragement provided to the family by Scripture. Now we want to add a word of application. The effort will require that we venture out of the sanctuary of God's Word into the arena of something a bit more subjective. The previous presenters have restated what God states in His Word. Now we shall offer some observations and opinions about the ministry of the Lutheran school teacher as it is defined and practiced within the Wisconsin Synod today. It shall be our intent to consider the limitations which exist for the called teacher as they relate to his role as a professional educator and teaching minister of the Gospel. We shall conclude our consideration of the issue of an expanded ministry to parents by raising questions and concerns over what changes would be necessary to accommodate this ministry.

We are living in an age of professionalism. While the term "professional" in its modern context may seem cold and cause some to feel uneasy, I believe that members of the WELS can use it in a God-pleasing manner to describe those who serve in the various forms of the public ministry. After all, a call into the public ministry obligates the individual to be professionally competent, even to excel in such competence.

The ministry of the Lutheran school teacher as it is defined and practiced today emphasizes the role of a professional educator teaching in an elementary school classroom. The Christian educator today is not only expected to be an exemplar of Christian faith, but also a well-trained member of the Christian teaching profession. A high degree of competence, strong teaching skills, and even recent post-graduate work are sought-for qualities in the teaching candidates of our Wisconsin Synod schools.

For example, when a vacancy exists, congregations are primarily concerned that they will receive, either through assignment or the calling process, a qualified Christian professional for their Lutheran elementary school. Responsibilities outside of the teaching profession are often deemed incidental and less important by calling bodies. Today's parents, boards of education, and most faculties have high professional expectations as they relate to the profession of teaching and the operation of a school program. In some instances, congregations are looking for educators who are specialized in a particular activity or field of learning. Many schools have developed departmentalized programs which capitalize on the training and skills of individuals within their school system.

The office of the principal is a specialized position in the Lutheran elementary school which requires additional professional skills. The role of the principal is such that he is expected to be a model teacher and spiritual leader. As the administrator of the school, he is also expected to keep himself well-informed concerning current developments in the world of education. In addition to the mass of routine administrative duties, he must also supervise all educational activities of the school program.

Historically the teachers of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod have viewed themselves first of all as teachers of the Gospel serving in Lutheran elementary schools, and then called servants of the congregation. It is my understanding that the issue came before a synod convention a number of years ago. The teachers requested that this concept be clearly stated on

their behalf. An awareness of the need for professionalism on the part of WELS teachers may have been refueled more recently by the rise of industry and increased pressure in the public sector concerning the professional qualifications and training necessary for employment in the business world, as well as in public education.

Perhaps several illustrations will illuminate the point which I wish to make concerning the emerging concept for Christian professional teachers within the WELS. In the past, our congregations willingly called teachers with two years of training or less. During my high school years, there were three-year graduates coming out of Dr. Martin Luther College. Since the principal's role at one time was viewed more as that of a "head teacher," supervision of instruction and school administration were not perceived as important and necessary components in the teacher training program. The teaching profession and people's perception of it have experienced tremendous changes. I do not believe that our people will willingly accept teaching candidates who have questionable credentials. Current expectations are such that we expect an individual to enter our classrooms who is well trained in Christian doctrine, teaching methodology, curriculum content, and classroom management.

The case for a greater emphasis on educational professionalism at the congregational level can be further developed when one considers that principals and classroom teachers are being encouraged, or in some cases even expected, to keep current with the latest educational research by completing post-graduate work. In many instances, the pursuit of professional excellence, or experience, is encouraged with monetary rewards. Our synod's Board for Parish Education has also sensed and stressed that for our schools to be credible in the age of home schools and other phenomena, professional competence is necessary.

The trend towards educational professionalism has not adversely affected congregational activity. I do not believe that our Lutheran elementary teachers thus far view their professional training as something which sets them apart or above other people, but in and among them. Lutheran elementary school teachers also recognize that theirs is a call to serve the congregation and to build the kingdom of Christ. The weekly schedule of a teacher is also filled with hours of directing choir, playing for church services, assisting with Sunday School and other areas of congregational life.

A perspective of the teaching ministry which includes a ministry to parents should be considered an expanded ministry. As such, this perspective raises questions concerning the professional educator and how the opportunities for a broader ministry to parents would be limited, through time constraints, training, and inclination. Furthermore, what will happen to the concept of a well-trained professional Christian educator if the teaching ministry receives pressure to change direction?

Teaching five days in the week is a colossal task. Planning, lesson preparation, correcting, and school related activity gobble up large portions of time for the Lutheran teacher. The majority of WELS Lutheran elementary school teachers are also involved in other areas of congregational life. Many of our called workers are also parents who need time to develop a healthy family relationship that they might serve as role models to other parents. Due to heavy workloads and time constraints, involvement in a ministry to parents may be limited, or even impossible, for many of our called workers.

The training of teachers in the Wisconsin Synod has supported the concept of preparing individuals for a full-time ministry in the classroom. The main thrust of the DMLC education program is preparing well-qualified professional teachers who are also knowledgeable in the Scriptures. Preparation for congregational service is considered important, but not critical. The

classroom responsibility facing a future Christian teacher receives emphasis. Adding formal training in a ministry to parents may cause the college a great deal of difficulty in terms of the curriculum. There is also the difficulty of finding individuals to offer instruction in this area on the undergraduate level.

Specific training and courses in parenting and family life may not be consistent with student development and training at the undergraduate level. The college student simply may not be mature enough to perceive or appreciate the complexities and principles of Christian family living. Likewise, I cannot visualize a young teacher serving effectively in such a ministry during the beginning years of teaching.

It would also seem that there are a number of teachers, who for a variety of reasons, might not have an inclination to serve in an expanded family ministry. I have met individuals in the teaching ministry who are very effective with children, but lack the confidence and the skills to work with other adults on a regular basis. There are some who will oppose their involvement in a family ministry on the basis that it is not perceived as a function of their calling and it will possibly deter from the pursuit of educational excellence. Many single teachers will have serious questions and doubts about their ability to serve effectively. The married individuals who do not have families of their own may also be somewhat reluctant to serve in this area. It will only be natural for parents to question the reliability of a non-parent when counsel is offered in the area of family living.

In the Sermon on the Mount, our Savior says, "You are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13). By the word "salt" Christ points out what the office of a called worker is to be. You are salt—not the kind that belongs in the kitchen, but the kind that salts flesh, that is the whole world. This is indeed a splendid office and a great and glorious honor, that God should call His ministers salt, and should tell us to salt everything on the earth. He entrusts this ministry to us and wants us to serve vigorously. In the very next of the Sermon on the Mount, Christ goes on to say that we "are light" (Matthew 5:14-15). Here is the second part of the ministry which He entrusts to His servants. We are to be called a "light of the world" and are to be one, that is, to instruct souls and guide them to eternal life.

The Lutheran elementary school and its teaching ministers do, have a unique opportunity in these stressful times to assist parents. As great as the influence of a school, particularly a Christian school, on the development of a child, the Christian professional educator can hardly ignore the effects the home will have on his ministry to children. As the teacher looks within the home and views its effects, he may possibly begin to see his ministry in a context which is broader than a ministry only to children. A ministry to assist parents in fulfilling God's expectations as they relate to the raising of children, may indeed be a need which can be effectively addressed by the Church through a ministry to parents.

If the teaching ministry moves into areas which involve a ministry to parents and families, congregations, pastors, and teachers will need to study the effects of an expanded ministry on the Christian educator and what changes would be necessary to accommodate this ministry. An initial obstacle which would have to be overcome is the congregation's perception of this ministry as it relates to the scope of the call of teachers and pastors in its midst. However, it is my perception that time, training, and talent are the critical issues which need to be addressed once a congregation has identified this ministry as a need worthy of its efforts.

The first step leading to the development of a family ministry is to identify the need and the sacred responsibility which the church has "to build up the saints." A plan for ministry should be developed on the congregational level. The ministry ought to address the important

role that the school and its called teachers play in the lives of children and their parents. At the same time, careful consideration must be given to the concept of what is expected of teachers and ministers of the Gospel. Individual abilities, workloads, and inclination will play a role in determining the form and organization of such a ministry. The scope and responsibilities of individual calls may even need to be reconsidered by the calling body.

An expansion of the ministry of the Lutheran elementary school teacher will require additional time and effort on the part of every member of the teaching staff. It is critical that the time factor be carefully considered from the perspective of what is already expected professionally from the Lutheran elementary teacher. The degree of involvement may necessitate the rearranging of school and congregational responsibilities for some individuals. Under some circumstances, there could be additions to the budget in terms of extra staff or administrative costs.

Once a program has become organized, and the role which various individuals will assume has been clearly identified, training and staff development can proceed. It is encouraging to note that every WELS teacher has already been equipped with the fundamental tools for parenting. Since God's Word is a primary tool in developing a program for effective parenting, it is reasonable to assume that every Christian teacher will be able to contribute in some manner to a program of ministry to parents. The degree of participation on the part of every teacher is a variable. Depending on the degree of involvement and program organization, additional training and staff development will still need to take place. It is realistic to assume that those who will take a leadership role in this ministry will need training from some outside resource.

We cannot overlook the importance of receiving additional training in this area. I do not feel that the burden should be placed upon the undergraduate program of Dr. Martin Luther College. It is an area in which skills can be acquired by completing post-graduate work at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Wisconsin Lutheran College, as well as Dr. Martin Luther College. Training and inservice work could also be made available through Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service. In this age of humanism, I would not view the public sector as a viable source for developing a ministry to parents. Though there is a wealth of parenting material currently available from other sources, it seems that the Board for Parish Education should be encouraged to speed up its efforts to produce or recommend a parenting program.

To serve effectively in the 20th century as "salt" and "light" may mean a rethinking of our position as it relates to the public teaching ministry. The called Christian professional teacher is a person whose ministry could be expanded to serve the needs of children and their parents. There can be little doubt that the need exists. I believe that an expansion of the church's ministry is possible and may even be necessary. In fact, assisting parents may make the ministry of the Lutheran elementary teacher a complete ministry to children's needs. To move away from the concept of a trained professional Christian teacher would cause me concern. At this point, I view the two ideas as being compatible as long as the changes in ministry are done in a manner which utilizes the strengths of a congregation's resources without a loss of excellence and credibility on the part of the Lutheran elementary school and its trained professional staff. However, before any changes take place, much work has to be accomplished, including the training of individuals, and the development of programs for parenting on the congregational level.