

Achieving the Purposes of the Church through Parish Education

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I sense a mood of frustration in the church today. The golden age of American Christendom has past. The church is no longer a highly respected institution in society and the focal point of people's strength and support, loyalty and commitment. Society itself no longer endorses and reinforces the traditional values and world-view of the church. And the family can no longer be assumed as a primary source of stability and spiritual nurture in people's lives. While this is hardly news, the church has struggled to adapt to a changed reality. Structures and strategies carefully developed on the old assumptions are not and ought not be easily dismissed. Verifying new assumptions and developing new approaches will be done cautiously, with Scripture as arbiter.

Our frustration is heightened by the results-orientation of our culture. Though ours is not a church given to extensive research and statistical evaluation, we do have a sense for the statistical bottom line and an innate cause-and-effect line of thinking. Our church body is not growing. Many of our churches face a declining membership. Attendance figures for worship and Christian education, financial stewardship and volunteer service statistics are monitored with concern. Post-confirmation drop-out, adult delinquency, and members moved-but-not-transferred seem an increasing problem. The number of broken marriages and serious counseling problems, though not statistically compiled, are clearly on the rise. There is a sense that church members are less theologically discriminating, less morally committed, less spiritual in their thinking and lifestyle. We're moving through the hand-wringing and finger-pointing phase of concern to the point where we want clear problem-identification and solutions. The spiritual renewal project initiated by the last synod convention is just one expression of that consensus. The focus for evaluation and action has been especially on the two subjects linked by the essay committee of our district: the church's mission and the church's program of Christian education.

A significant number of WELS congregations have undergone the process of developing a (new) mission statement. The synod itself, as part of strategic planning has redrafted its mission and objectives. In part, this has been a response to a renewed emphasis on evangelism and a re-evaluation of home and world mission priorities. It reflects also a growing emphasis on lay ministry. But I suspect that the impetus has more subtle reasons as well: a questioning of the outcome objectives for ministry we want to see embodied in Christian church members and a questioning of the traditional forms and programs of ministry which are to shape this generation of Christians. Because parish education is the critical path (and a historic strength and emphasis) of our church toward its mission/objectives, the title assigned to this essay is apropos.

The notes accompanying this essay assignment include the questions: "How well have we done in the past? Where are we now?" Rather than simply offering my subjective judgment in answer to these questions, I've asked you to complete the evaluation sheet distributed to conference participants. Tallying your responses should provide a better picture of our strengths and areas needing greater attention. The nature of this essay, nonetheless, is editorial rather than objective research. It invites critical response more than theological affirmation.

Like the evaluation sheet distributed, this essay will use the objectives proposed for this summer's synodical convention as the common ground for "the purposes of the church." Like the evaluation sheet, the essay will address parish education in four categories: full-time parish education agencies, volunteer-led programs of Christian education for children and youth, adult ministries of Christian education and parish assistance to the home (and individual) in Christian education.

There are some preliminary issues that need attention however. The first concerns the content of Christian education. Obviously, the Word of God is the essential core of Christian education. Only that Word, as the Spirit applies it, can effect God's purposes for His church. But it is not quite so simple as to say, "We teach the Bible!" What portions of the Bible? Systematically and dogmatically or isagogically and exegetically? From what theological perspective (e.g. the centrality of Christ and objective justification, the clear distinction of law and gospel) and for what objectives (e.g. cognitive knowledge, affective values, missional skills)? With a comprehensive curriculum or as a topical response to issues and needs of the day? How will auxiliary content be integrated into parish education, such subjects as the Lutheran Confessions, church history, Lutheran worship and comparative religion? And how will the other disciplines of academia and elements of contemporary life be integrated with Scripture to form a distinctly Christian world-view? These are not questions with simple answers, either...or and one-way-only. But if we are to achieve the purposes of the church through parish education, these questions require continual answering.

One source of frustration in parish education is related to its content. Adult Christian education has had little curricular planning or long-range strategy. Few congregations offer systematic Christian education for youth. The Sunday School curriculum is at the end of its life-cycle. Lutheran elementary schools and high schools have found religion curriculum study the most difficult of their academic evaluation and planning. What should we teach to whom, when, and how? The memorial to the synod and its Board for Parish Education from this area's principals' conference seems perfectly timed. An integrated curriculum, studied and developed from clear and common objectives, with a life-long perspective on Christian education and a coordinated role for the various agencies of parish education, can alleviate our frustration.

A second issue for attention I'll call "expectations." In one sense that term describes outcome objectives, what we hope to see in students as a result of Christian education. Seldom are these objectives communicated to or perceived by learners in concise and cogent terms. More likely such expectations are "caught" through a combination of teacher emphases and methodology as well as peer norms and behavior. Let me illustrate. Tests and questions of the kind Prof. Kuske at our seminary calls "Type one or two" (repetition or recollection of facts) send the message that what is expected out of Christian education is correct cognitive awareness of truth. Discussion or questioning intended to stimulate strong feelings and evaluate contemporary situations in life will send the message that students are to have Christian values and attitudes. Projects that ask the student to do something with the principles learned (e.g. comfort the hurting, witness to the unchurched, develop a chancel drama, keep a daily Bible study journal) communicate the expectation that Christian education is for doing. I suspect that the primary "expectation message" we've been sending is cognitive. Without balance that subtle signal is easily translated by human nature into dead orthodoxy and the "confirmation = graduation" syndrome.

A teacher's law/gospel emphases create a critical sense of "expectation." Of particular concern should be the temptation to moralize in these immoral times. Endless warnings against sexual sin, without the full and rich power of the Gospel to forgive, to empower and motivate, will alienate people who've been led to view Christian education as a club and Christianity as "decency." A teacher's pet peeves and "hot buttons" are shapers of expectations, to negative effect if not recognized and controlled.

Expectations are caught by classroom norms and out-of-classroom behavior as well. The Bible class in which no one but the pastor speaks communicates the impression that passivity is the expectation of "good" members. When sinful life-styles do not bring admonition and, as necessary, church discipline, the expectation communicated makes Christianity an "ideology." Peers establish the expectation of church and parish education. What the majority model becomes an unwritten set of outcome objectives. The church and school have been pressured by our society to lower expectations. Once-a-month worship attendance has become respectable. Bible class is optional. Who honestly expects that people will read the Bible devotionally on their own? Would the language and life-style of our day go unrebuked by the prophets? I'm aware of the dangers of legalism and pietism. But I fear we have lost a clear sense of piety. And we do not fully appreciate the subtle

strength of “expectations” to shape how people view the purpose of the church and Christian education. We need to deliberately shape the expectations of Christians from Scripture.

Expectations can be addressed on an individual as well as group basis. If we believe that each Christian is a unique creation of God (with intellectual, emotional and physical traits and capabilities) and a unique re-creation of God (with spiritual gifts unique to his place in the body of Christ), then the best Christian education should have some individualized components. Between the grading of the classroom and the lumping of adults into one Bible class, expectations may need to be individualized. Interviews (teacher, parent and student or pastor, lay-leader and member) can help Christians assess where they are in their life of spiritual growth and service, where and how to work at their growth and service within the church’s ministry program, when and how to expect encouragement as well as accountability. Establishing expectations for one’s own spiritual life with the help of a teacher, pastor or fellow Christian may be a difficult concept to develop and implement. But the hours spent in counseling the aftermath of stunted spiritual growth and agonizing over declining spiritual life in the church suggest that such prior, personal attention would be worth our effort.

Method is a third concern basic to parish education. Most of us are inclined to teach the way we were taught, evidence that modeling is the most effective method of teaching. Over years we develop a style of teaching with which we feel comfortable. Continuing education can help us develop a broader repertoire of teaching skills. It’s a visual society; we should develop visual tools and styles. It’s a relational society; we can develop discussion skills, small group or team structures, and peer teaching methods. It’s a pragmatic, “NOW” generation; we ought to master the art of illustration or story-telling, life-related methods such as problem-solving and projects that provide an opportunity to practice truth. It’s a biblically illiterate generation that needs to be taught how to study the Bible, pray, witness and share Christian counsel—skills not learned at a parent’s knee. The principle is to adjust teaching methodology to objectives, content and the modes of learning in our students. I’m just beginning to discover how much there is to learn about teaching.

Modeling deserves special attention for several reasons. It was a primary teaching method of Jesus (Mark 3:14) and basic to the purpose of “making disciples.” Jesus said: “Everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). St. Paul says, “I urge you to imitate me” (I Corinthians 4:16). In a society lacking sufficient Christian parental models and role models, teachers and pastors have a gap to fill. Modeling requires getting close to the student, becoming transparent, self-disclosing. While that can be done for a group, it inevitably means more one-on-one time. That time ought to be prioritized for students who will become leaders and peer models, secondly for those who lack good parental models. With adults this principle suggests that pastors invest prime time with members who can themselves become leaders, models and teachers, that pastors teach truth, attitudes and skills by modeling to key leaders (II Timothy 2:2). Our nature is to invest most of our time with the weak and hurting. Demands in the form of counseling, sick calls, shut-in calls and delinquent calls fill up the schedule before all the needs are met. The “discipling” approach that develops others for sharing ministry is a longer term, but more efficient way. And the principle has application to the elementary classroom. It may be more work to train a volunteer mother than to do things oneself. But multiplying our ministry by investing that time can provide modeling and one-on-one Christian teaching to children we can’t by ourselves. It is time consuming to identify and disciple children who can become peer models and spiritual leaders. But our objectives may make this the most effective time spent in the long run.

A final issue of general concern is the assumptions on which we base parish education. Whether consciously or not, we make assumptions about the level of motivation our students have. Our assumption may be simply that they should be motivated to learn God’s Word. Young children probably are. Older children frequently have another agenda, one set by hormones and media. Part of the teaching role is to gain their attention by plugging into their interests, questions and needs. Before Gospel motivation can occur, Gospel has to be heard and appropriated. We may under-estimate the motivation of many adult learners, who are willing to do more home-study than we ask of them. And we may not accurately assume what’s inhibiting adults who don’t come to Bible class. It isn’t always disinterest, but misapprehension or the fear of embarrassment. Assumptions need verifying.

Teaching must be based on assumptions about prior Christian learning and theological awareness. The challenge is meeting people of wide-ranging spiritual development in one class. Today's mobile society and our desire to do evangelism through Christian education make children's ministries more complex. Individual analysis and attention, peer teaching and broader-scope development of a lesson are possibilities to explore. Adult Christian education has tended to lump mature Christians with new Christians, with the risk of frustrating both. Offering more options and curricular strategies will require a change in the assumption that only the pastor should teach adults.

With adolescents and adults we should not simply assume either that there is understanding of and agreement with our church's doctrinal position across the board...or that our position will be accepted simply on the authority of pastor and teacher. Society's religious pluralism and challenging of absolutes have affected our members, requiring "back to the basics" lessons and classroom excursions.

We may have intellectually understood that the spiritual reinforcement of the home is no longer an assumption we can generalize. But I'm not sure that we have arrived at a new set of clear assumptions and a teaching strategy based on those assumptions. Nor have we assessed well the impact on adults, many of them single, of changing spiritual demographics. Spiritual fellowship is an important dimension of Christian education, providing support and accountability. Close Christian friends and caring mentors will have to become a surrogate spiritual family. If we so assume, the way we structure Christian education should reflect it.

There are other assumptions behind our teaching, such as how people learn best, but let's move on to the assignment of "Achieving the Purposes of the Church through Parish Education."

The proposed mission statement for our synod reads: *"As men, women and children united in faith and worship by the Word of God, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod exists to make disciples, using the Gospel to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service, all to the glory of God."* Before analyzing the specific objectives that amplify this mission statement, let's call up some emphases in this statement.

We may not pay enough heed in parish education to the truth that God's Word unites us. St. Paul never took that for granted (I Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 1:27). Jesus prayed earnestly for that oneness (John 17:11, 21-23). The early church was hailed by society for its unity, a major reason for which Jesus so prayed (Acts 4:32, 2:47). It is a significant purpose of Christian education to unite us in truth and in love. We've understood unity in truth far better than unity in love. Yet both the outreach dimension of our mission (John 13:35) and the nurture aspect of our mission (Colossians 3:12-16) are rooted in demonstrable, functional unity in love. That, not avoiding errorists, is the primary focus of church fellowship. Unity in truth should inspire unity in love, but failure to teach for and work at unity in love sends a message that contradicts the biblical words. Modeling teaches this truth, for better or worse. Parochialism that inhibits churches of the same faith working together, pastor-teacher tensions and win-at-all-costs approaches in voters' meetings defeat the Spirit's work toward oneness. We are a loving people, with greater unity than any other church body of our day perhaps. But we have not adequately developed structures, traditions and norms that allow this oneness full and free expression. Teaching for unity is an objective that needs greater attention, from classroom to board-room, if we are to achieve the purposes of the church through parish education.

The committee appointed to draft the mission/vision statement for the synod chose the term "make disciples" (Matthew 28:19) despite some concern for ambiguity. It did so not only because these are Jesus' "Great Commission" words. The term communicates the principle of life-long learning from our Master. The church's traditional focus of Christian education on children needs this expansion to "discipleship." The term also carries an active sense of following. Our teaching is to shape a life-style of commitment and conformity to the Master's pattern. It is truth processed into values, attitudes and actions, not mere intellectual assent to doctrine. The church's traditional focus on right doctrine, with primarily cognitive approaches to teaching, needs this expansion to right living—not as some legalistic impingement on grace's power to free volition, but as the clear communication of God's loving will for His forgiven people. (The mission statement deliberately

emphasizes “using the Gospel.”) Disciples are undergoing life-long transformation toward the character of Christ (Ephesians 4:20-5:2).

The committee chose to define the mission in a two-fold statement, winning the lost and nurturing believers, as does the Great Commission. The two are twin, not competing aspects of the church’s mission. The lost are won to be nurtured in their faith; and believers are built up in that faith in order to win the lost and nurture each other. Too often, in the face of limited resources, Christian education and outreach (both evangelism in the community and mission planting by the synod) are pitted against each other adversarially. Fiscal turf is defended, then, rather than the church’s purpose served. Parish education becomes an institutional end unto itself, and “mission work” becomes a guilt trip laid on voters. Resource allocation decisions will always confront us; we should never have more money than vision. But the twin purposes of the church should remain complementary. I cannot find a biblical basis for arranging the two in primary and secondary ranking. Individually and as churches, we will have to ask ourselves whether we have done so...at the expense of one and in imbalanced favor of the other.

In the original draft, “lives of Christian service” read “lives of ministry.” The intentional focus on the universal priesthood of believers and volunteer public ministry was softened to avoid ambiguity. The principle remains. Parish education that produces passive spiritual dependents rather than mutually inter-dependent “ministers” is misdirected. Hebrew 5:12 expresses the frustration of parish education that fails to reproduce “teachers” among students. We may have unwittingly borrowed the wrong model from the academic world. Christians don’t suddenly become “priests” and ministers in the Body of Christ upon graduation from a prescribed course of classroom learning. They are such priests from their baptism. They have a role of service in the Body of Christ—commensurate with their spiritual maturity and gifts—by virtue of membership in Christ’s Church. If we need a model from our world, make it vocational training—learning while doing and learning by doing. Christians all have a vocation, a calling. We have inadequately assessed the implementation of this truth in full-time parish education, inadequately integrated the process of parish education.

Truths and objectives merely assumed are easily lost. “All to the glory of God” stands at the end of the mission statement to remind us whose mission and ministry this is and for whom it is done. Today’s “success orientation” has invaded too much of what is called church growth. Human nature already had too much of this thinking. Our goal isn’t to leave our mark on a church or school, create an institution that is the envy of others or prove some point with children’s scores on achievement tests. We aren’t climbing professional ladders and competing for recognition. But we probably aren’t honest if we don’t admit to some wrestling with such motivation. On the other hand, we are building monuments of excellence, dedicated SOLA DEO GLORIA, with our ministry. To be satisfied with less is to denigrate the God we serve. Some of us need our sights and standards raised; we may have become too comfortable. Others of us need the encouragement to glorify God with what is; we may be demanding of ourselves and others what lies in God’s domain.

The first objective proposed for adoption by our synod says: “To testify to the truth of God as fully revealed in the inspired, inerrant, infallible Holy Scriptures and articulated in the Lutheran Confessions.” That’s not exactly a new thought, nor should it be. But if the purpose of the church is the mission of its members, the question is in place: has parish education equipped members for this mission? How well do WELS Lutherans know the truth of God? And do they testify?

The nature of this objective suggests a systematic approach to Scripture, a particular strength of Lutherans and of full-time parish education. We teach Bible history with clear doctrinal aims. The catechism organizes Christian faith dogmatically; and courses in the Lutheran high school are designed to affirm and amplify doctrine. We probably need make no apologies for our indoctrination of youth, especially through our schools. They know systematic truth. But a lot of intellectual water goes over the dam between confirmation and adulthood. I don’t know too many adults who’ve read their catechism recently or know much of anything about the Lutheran Confessions, as did an earlier generation of Lutheran adults. Surveys suggest an alarmingly illiterate adult population in Christian doctrine. There are probably hundreds of stories you could tell that verify the surveys, stories of active members who were apparently unaware of a theological truth we assumed. Even

the basic conviction that Scripture is inerrant and infallible has been so publicly denied that our members can unknowingly contradict this truth with such contentions as “That’s just St. Paul’s idea” and ill-harmonized creation/ evolution assumptions. Popular psychology has eroded the doctrine of original sin in members’ thinking and popular opinion has made universalists out of too many Lutherans.

Achieving the purposes of the church through parish education means redirecting effort and resources toward adults. A number of churches have made concerted efforts toward recruiting adult members for a basic Bible Information Class. Christ Lutheran in Pewaukee is resurrecting Luther’s intention that fathers (parents) teach the catechism to their children. That’s just one way of using children’s education to re-teach adults. Our elementary schools and Sunday schools could find more ways of forging partnerships with the home and getting parents into study of God’s truth through take-home projects. Courses for adults in one of the Lutheran Confessions can be an interesting forum for rediscovering confessional theology in contemporary application. A campaign to encourage self-study, with articles and pamphlets articulating timeless doctrine in contemporary style, is ambitious but not beyond our capability. If we believe that the re-indoctrination of adult members is critical, we will develop the strategy to accomplish this.

Knowing and testifying to the truth are not coincidental. Testifying suggests clear testimony and argumentation to those who are in error, when truth is in controversy among us and when truth is denied by society. Not everyone has the same gifts, so we should not be surprised that few are adept at public testifying. What should alarm us is if few can clearly distinguish truth from error and some apply innate skills of debate with misguided theology.

Because our church is pointedly confessional, we teach for the distinction of truth from error at every level of parish education, at least in areas of historic theological difference. We have probably not utilized such educational methods as agree/disagree, evaluation-discussion and problem solving as much as rote learning to assure that people have internalized truth’s distinction from error. The result is that both young and old have some difficulty with the subtle errors of contemporary humanism and existentialism. Remember that the world and its media are teaching with powerful effect. The challenge to parish education in this area can only be expected to increase, and our objectives and methods of teaching will have to accommodate that reality. “Christian decision making” sounds like some avant-garde course cooked up by trendy churches; but it is in this area that a lot of our people are looking for help. People make mature, spiritual decisions only when they are spiritually mature. While they’re maturing, they need help with everyday applications and close support ties with other Christians yet another argument for developing small group fellowship/ support/ accountability structures as an adjunct to parish education.

Our church fellowship principle and church-state concerns, together with the current social taboo against calling anyone’s ideas wrong, may account for some reticence to vocally testify in our members. Still, Lutherans for Life demonstrates the willingness of WELS people to stand up and be counted. And German Lutherans haven’t lost their propensity for a good argument with a Roman Catholic or a Baptist. Teaching positive testifying, reinforcing the principles of logical argument and creating forums for debate should be easier for a church committed to full-time Christian education. Methods of education that require students to verbalize their faith in its application are critical. A growing emphasis on forensics in our elementary schools is one evidence that the practical skills of testifying are taught alongside biblical wisdom. One might even expect that the communications curriculum of Lutheran schools would rank right behind the religion curriculum in excellence and emphasis. Our schools should consciously single out students with gifts of wisdom, debate and public speaking for special encouragement to develop and apply their gifts in testifying to the truth of God. And the church should relearn a lesson in the success of Lutherans for Life. We testify best when we are organized, in a cause, with a clear “enemy” and the encouragement and “ammunition” provided by leaders. We may have too many such “enemies” today. Marshaling members to testify requires some concentration of effort or a proliferation of cause-based organizations.

The second objective proposed for our synod reads: *“To seize every opportunity the Lord provides to evangelize lost souls and establish ministering churches throughout the world.”* Evangelism hasn’t been a

strong suit of our synod, though this purpose of the church has received considerable attention recently. Like many other churches our emphasis seems to be shifting from training a few evangelists toward equipping every member for “friendship witnessing.” These two tracks of evangelism should be complementary. In doing the latter we will identify candidates for the former. Maybe the first outreach role of parish education is to inculcate a “mission mindset,” a passion for rescuing lost souls with the gospel, a drum-beat of sensitivity to this purpose of Christians and their church as well as to the opportunities for witness around us. Parallel to this, parish education’s role of leading Christians into the Word for maturing faith will serve the church’s outreach purpose best. People witness for conviction and from a store-house of assimilated truth (note Jesus’ words in Matthew 13:52). When applications, illustrations and discussions of Scripture are focused frequently on every Christian’s role of witnessing, the purpose is better served than by an occasional workshop. There is a place for units on evangelism in the curriculum and regularly scheduled classes and seminars on witnessing. God’s people appreciate help in organizing Biblical truth for a focused presentation to the unchurched; and skills, insights and structures for witnessing may be best learned in a concentrated setting. But Christian witness is not an ad hoc issue, rather a life-style communicated throughout parish education.

The difficulty is that this does not come naturally to most pastors and teachers. They weren’t trained for it. Their work tends to remove them from many “natural” opportunities to practice it. And most course materials don’t integrate it. It’s hard to teach a lifestyle we aren’t living. And when church lay leaders and parents don’t model a witnessing life-style, the message has an academic ring to it. We’re far better at raising prayers and dollars for somebody else’s mission work; and that isn’t exactly a strength of our churches today. We’re becoming more parochial, if church budgets are an accurate barometer. First called workers and then lay leaders are going to have to own evangelism as a priority, live it and pray it in order to teach it and illustrate it. The passion for lost souls is caught by students from their teacher-models. Then the skills are taught. And I suspect that when personal witness and congregational evangelism have the priority in practice that they are accorded in principle, mission work at home and abroad through our synod will be dearer to our hearts and better supported by our dollars.

Two symposia have been hosted by Dr. Martin Luther College on the subject of evangelism and the Lutheran elementary school. That deserves applause. One facet of study is the school’s role in equipping young witnesses. Curricular materials are beginning to surface. We can hope to become more adept at teaching and encouraging evangelism within the limits imposed by a Christian classroom. The other facet of study is the school’s role as an outreach program of the church. In communities where public education is tainted by low levels of academic achievement and disciplinary problems, the Lutheran school can be a “perceived need” attraction to unchurched families. To reach the lost through our schools effectively requires some revision in the assumptions of the teacher and a coordinated strategy of outreach to the home. In most of our congregations the school is not likely to serve a major role in outreach, however.

Historically, the Sunday school has been the program of choice for child evangelism (with Vacation Bible School a frequent point of entry). A recent Gallup poll indicates that over 70% of the unchurched have some interest in religious instruction for their children. Lutherans have never attracted children in the numbers that Baptists and Pentecostals have. The major reason, I believe, is that we haven’t tried as hard. In fact, we’ve sometimes pitted the Lutheran Elementary School against the Sunday School. And too few elementary school children attend Sunday school, for reasons understandable but in need of addressing (hopefully, with the results of a comprehensive effort at developing an integrated curriculum). A major drawback to evangelism by our children in the Lutheran elementary school is that the most natural environment for meeting unchurched friends is foreclosed. That is compounded when elementary school children don’t attend Sunday School because they can’t invite unchurched friends to come with them—the easiest route of witnessing. (Further, when the kids don’t attend Sunday School, their parents don’t come to Sunday Bible Class frequently.) In many of our congregations the Sunday School needs shoring up, not only as one critical approach to achieving the church’s outreach purpose but because there is an increasing number of member children whose Christian education is sporadic.

Pre-schools and day care are likely to be effective outreach programs for most of our congregations. However much we may wish moms would stay home with their toddlers, the trend is against that. And unchurched families can hardly be expected to share our values. If educational psychology identifies the first six years of a child's life as formative, why not take advantage of the opportunity to teach the love of Jesus to as many little children as possible our own members' children? The children of the unchurched are our best path to the parents. Parish education need not be assumed to commence at age 6.

We've given little thought to parish education as an outreach means for youth and adults. An effective program of youth ministry has been demonstrated to attract unchurched friends in other churches, however difficult the development of effective youth ministry (among other things it requires staff). The Lutheran high school faces the same outreach inhibitors that the Lutheran elementary school does, though part-time jobs afford Lutheran high school students more witness contacts. Without effective parish youth ministry, invitation and "envelopment" routes are closed to our young witnesses.

Today's adults are going back to school, often for personal enrichment. Parish, educational programs aimed at unchurched adults (short-term, topical and "coping" in nature or "Intro to the Bible" in nature) can be an attraction in themselves or an opportunity for members to bring an unchurched friend. The membership implications of our traditional Bible Information Class and the liturgical heritage and nurturing purpose of our Sunday worship are outreach inhibitors that educational approaches designed for the unchurched don't have.

Objective three states: "*To help each other grow and mature in the faith through public worship and life-long study of the Word of God.*" This objective probably best matches the role of parish education, especially if one studies topically the passages of Scripture which establish the purpose of God's Word. My organization of these passages may be subjective, but approaching the subject of the church's purpose and the role of parish education from this perspective seems essential.

I think we'd agree that the primary purpose of Scripture is "to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (II Timothy 3:15). Such passages as John 20:31, 1 John 5:31, John 5:39, James 1:21 and more verify that God's will for our salvation is the chief purpose for his inspiration of Scripture. Parish education in our churches reflects the primacy of faith in Jesus and the salvation He won for us. I thank God I'm a Lutheran Christian.

While that central truth has been impressed on our children through parish education, I'm not as sure that the certainty of salvation is as clear among youth and adults. Our topical and historical approach to Christian education for teens, coupled with adolescent uncertainties and our predilection for warning against temptations and errors, can confuse this primary purpose of Christian education. Perhaps we assume too much. It would be worthwhile to monitor what percentage of our teaching and preaching is clear proclamation and application of the Gospel. When adults are not in Bible class and personal Scripture reading, human nature confuses the centrality of God's grace to our life and salvation. Though I can't quote any statistics, my fear is that too many adult members are not clear and certain about their salvation. The rituals of "church," the *opinio legis* of human nature, the syncretism of society and the countless issues addressed by Scripture and church conspire against the simple faith in Jesus of a child. The reminder is at least in place that spiritual maturity begins with and reinforces the central truth of salvation.

There is a vast pool of Scripture related to the objective of spiritual maturity. Ephesians 4:13-15 describes maturity as "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ," as no longer susceptible to alluring falsehoods, as "growing up into Christ." Colossians 1:28 and other verses use the word "perfect" or "complete" for maturity. In Hebrews 5:12-6:3 the word maturity is defined as "distinguishing good from evil," becoming "teachers," advanced theology and piety. In I Peter 2:2 "growing up in your salvation" is premised on a love for God's Word. In Colossians 3:16 Paul says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom." In the previous chapter (2:7) he phrases it, "continue to live in Christ, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught.

Spiritual maturity assumes continuing education (John 8:31-32). Because spiritual maturing parallels the intellectual, emotional and psychological maturing process in human beings, we should not expect mature

Christians when their spiritual growth slows or stops at age 14 or 18. Our current approach to parish education may produce children who are spiritually mature beyond their years, but adults whose spiritual life lags behind their intellectual and psychological growth. The result is that they face adult challenges with an adolescent faith. In fact, because stunted spiritual growth means the functional loss of much that was once learned, adults may have fewer spiritual tools to apply to their life now than they did at age fourteen. Their inability to apply a mature faith to an adult life results in emotional crises, self-centered decisions, the loss of peace and joy, and too often a drift from the church. Christianity loses life-relatedness, even reality for them. The problem may be masked by remaining ties to the church (social, family, institutional), but the inexorable spiritual drain continues. THIS is the root problem of the church today. And while we have developed excellent structures and strategies to teach our children, we lack a “philosophy of ministry” and a strategy to address that problem in adult education. Because that is true, even our time-honored forms of children’s education are suffering. Spiritually immature adults become a contradiction to what the church and school are teaching their children; and low levels of financial stewardship threaten our schools. Adult Christian education ought to be the focus of our attention and energy today.

Permit me to explore a few aspects of spiritual maturity from Scripture. Wisdom is probably the first biblical definition that comes to mind. Wisdom is broad-based and thoroughly digested truth aptly applied to life. It is a consistent, Christian world-view or philosophy of life. It is truth-directed convictions, values and attitudes reflected in Christian living. Scripture describes not only what wisdom is, but how it’s arrived at. And that seems to me the message for parish education.

Moses’ instruction to Israel (e.g. Deuteronomy 6:6, 11:18), the psalmists’ encouragements (e.g. Psalm 119), the prophets’ promises (e.g. Jeremiah 31:33), Jesus’ affirmations (e.g. Matthew 12:35) and the apostles’ exhortations (e.g. II Corinthians 3:3)—all emphasize the imbedding of God’s Word in the heart, with a corresponding love for that Word. Several conclusions ought to strike us. Teaching to the emotions and will, not merely the intellect, is essential. Method is not unimportant. The setting for really learning God’s Word is not merely a classroom. The home and the devotional setting impress God’s Word upon the heart. In fact, if life-long spiritual growth is to occur, it is more important that the result of parish education be a love for God’s Word and the habit of personal Bible study than that we cover a cognitive curriculum by age 14. (I suspect that our strategy through confirmation is based on the assumption that no more Christian learning is apt to occur—an assumption communicated by the strategy and caught.) I’m not convinced that inculcating a love for God’s Word and the habit of a devotional life is a significant objective of our parish education. The academic regimen of full-time parish education may even contradict that objective in adolescents, who seldom love school. Our fear that false doctrine will result from unstructured, unsupervised learning may inhibit the development of spiritual growth patterns apart from formal education.

When at the end of his testing Job says: “My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5), he is reflecting a principle of spiritual growth. Not just intellectual awareness of God’s attributes, but a personal knowledge of God is the goal of a mature faith. David’s psalms illustrate that mixture of awe and love, that heart-communication with God, that awareness of His presence and wrestling with His will. No, I’m not advocating mysticism. But spiritual life is not mundane. Forms of parish education need to encourage a personal relationship with God, not just the corporate relationship of the classroom.

It surprised me to discover how often Scripture uses words like admonition, correction, encouragement and the like in speaking of Christian maturity through God’s Word (Colossians 1:28; II Timothy 3:16 and 4:2; I Corinthians 10:11 et al.) The carefully chosen words of objective three, “to help each other” reflect this. Again (as in Colossians 3:16) the value of peer “teaching” and one-on-one, teacher with student, approaches is highlighted. Family and close Christian friends should fill this role. But when those avenues of spiritual growth are lacking, teachers should consider personal interaction with students and the church should consider developing peer structures of support and accountability.

Finally, spiritual maturity is defined by Scripture in terms of Christian living. “Training in righteousness” Paul calls it in II Timothy 3:16. Transformation, not conformity, is the message of Romans 12:1-

2. The Christian character traits of II Peter I the apostle urges “make every effort to add.” Jesus asks not just hearing, but doing the Word (Luke 11:28; Matthew 7:24). In I Timothy Paul uses couplet verbs such as “command and teach” or “teach and urge.” The purpose of parish education is not completed until people practice what we preach. Our expectations and methodology should reflect this. The third use of the law should not be slighted for fear of legalism or moralizing (though such fears should lead us to less second use—“curb”—tirades and more first use of the law to expose sin at the heart and initiate repentance).

Titus 2:12 reminds us that “*the grace of God...teaches us to say NO to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.*” Ephesians 4:20-24 describes the unending process of renewal as putting off the old self and putting on the new, “to be made new in the attitude of your minds.” The gospel motivates. The continually re-oriented mind of the Christian, aligned with God’s will, directs attitudes and behavior. Daily repentance produces Christian living. Parish education should aim for mature Christian living while carefully preserving the distinction between law and gospel. The temptation, especially in full-time parish education, is to seek short-term behavior modification rather than the long-term repentance/ renewal/ transformation process of the Spirit. Prof. Wayne Mueller has observed that the challenge to this generation is developing a clear sense of “contemporary, Lutheran piety.”

The fourth objective reads: “To encourage and equip each other for the application of our faith in lives of Christian service, for the Lord, His church and His world.” The question raised by this objective is the relationship between parish education and service. Traditionally we have segregated spiritual growth and service, Christian education and stewardship, as distinct aspects of the church’s ministry. The results can be counter-productive. Christian education, in such a model, can appear philosophical to the pragmatic mind—merely learning concepts. “Why should I learn that?” is a pragmatic question not unique to adolescent minds. “How will I use that truth?” is the more appropriate expression of that question in an educational setting. Service separated from Christian education risks recruiting unspiritual people for roles of spiritual leadership in the church. We’re just filling offices and committees because there’s a job to be done. In fact, “job” rather than “ministry” or “service” may be the impression left; and “skills” required or trained tend to become more technical than spiritual. Separating service from spiritual growth can easily turn financial stewardship into “funding the budget,” an institutional obligation rather than spiritual worship. The “Training Christians for Ministry” curriculum currently under development by our synod’s Board for Parish Services is one attempt to link systematic spiritual growth with Christian service.

Prof. David Valleskey’s course on spiritual gifts is another example of linking Christian education with service. The next logical step is individual counseling in the development and application of gifts—through spiritual growth, practical training and “apprenticeship,” and through the creation of sufficient meaningful roles and tasks for committed Christians to fill. Obviously, such counseling won’t fit into a pastor’s already crowded schedule easily...one more reason for considering expanded staff and volunteer ministry. This is the objective that focuses what is generally called “lay ministry.” (The term is ambiguous when members serve in the church’s name, by the church’s call.)

The application of our faith outside the church is encouraged in sermons and classes, but not often enough in specifics. It is probably a false assumption that today’s members know what to do. Situation studies in classes can develop specific applications. Project assignments, especially in teams, make learning by doing (application) more likely. I think we may be far too reluctant with adults especially to make specific assignments to practice biblical principles and even report (e.g. calling on a delinquent, resolving a problematical relationship, encouraging a discouraged brother or sister, developing a prayer list). Again, the word “encourage” in this objective suggests teamwork, urging Christians to work together at a project/ application. Maybe the most glaring example of how mere sermon-urging to apply our faith hasn’t been sufficient is the home. HOW to apply our faith to marriage and parenting isn’t understood (let alone practiced) by too many of us. The word “equip” in this objective suggests special classes, workshops and support groups that make biblical principles practical and implemented.

I have the feeling that we do a good job of practical application in specifics with little children in school, perhaps because their situations aren't as complex and we can speak authoritatively. With older children and adults we tend to move toward the abstract. Both teacher and class tend to become less open about the issues in their life that need truth's application. Problems don't have simple solutions for pontification; and we prefer nice black-and-white issues to deal with. The art of discussion-leading, the building of mutual trust and love, the encouragement to "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2) and the willingness to risk sensitive subject areas don't come naturally to pastors and teachers trained for "theological authority roles."

Christian service in God's world may need special encouragement. By warning against lodge-like entanglements, misguided social activism and compromises in the political realm we've often sent a contrary message. Parochial schools keep parents out of the community's educational arena. And we do tend to jealously guard the time of our members for the projects and causes of the church. This objective asks us to make positive applications of civic and social service in parish education, to the purpose of getting Christian light out from under A-frame bowls.

There are two last concerns, at opposite ends of the spectrum, that this objective should raise. The first is whether the church has failed to challenge its members with big enough expectations, roles or causes. Have we settled for "holding our own" in a wicked world, making the budget and keeping the peace? If today's Christian is described as uncommitted and uninspired, perhaps it's because we haven't expected much or asked much of our people. Rather than a holy cause, the Great Commission seems a prologue to the church's constitution. I hope never again to hear the apologetic words, "I'm only a layman, but..." If youth is by nature idealistic, our schools ought to be fueling that idealism with Christian content. Then the church ought to provide adult mentors for our most gifted and idealistic youth. Let young people serve in the church, alongside and learning from the best adult models. More often than not, the message of the Gospel and the mission of the church are far bigger than our vision and program for ministry/ service. Parish education is where the *cause* of Christianity is nurtured.

At the other end of Christian ministry's continuum is the attitude that no task is beneath the servant of Christ, that in the routine roles of our life Christ is exalted. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...who made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:5-7). This "ministry mindset," as Prof. Mark Braun labels it, is critical to our teaching today. It is a self-glorifying, self-gratifying society in which "I'm just a homemaker" sounds as apologetic as "I'm only a layman" and Luther's Table of Duties sounds quaint. With Jesus we need to exalt "faithfulness in a few things" or "trustworthiness in a very small matter" (Luke 19:17). St. Paul's "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (I Corinthians 10:31) should find its way onto today's version of a sampler (sure, T-shirts and bumper stickers). An unhealthy dimension of the emphasis on so-called "lay ministry" at recent synodical conventions seems to me a struggle for control, not service. Wresting political control of the church from the clergy is the undertone. If so, it must be because ministry is being perceived by people more as authority than as service. There is no question that the "authority" (whatever that means) of pastors and teachers is not what it once was. Rather than the misconception of ministry by demanding respect, let us teach what ministry means in example—thereby commanding respect. The teacher is a servant to his class and so teaches service.

The final objective proposed for our synod is: *To recruit and train candidates qualified for full-time ministry and provide for their continuing education, so that the Word of God is proclaimed faithfully and effectively in accord with the Lutheran Confessions.* For our purposes one word in that objective bears amplification: RECRUIT.

By now it should be no secret that a shortage of pastor and teacher candidates is on the near horizon. Countless reasons have been ventured for that: the birth rate, the inability to immediately place all graduates in recent years, the decline of respect for the office of ministry in society, parents' unwillingness to encourage their children to pursue a vocation with so much grief and so little financial reward. You can add your own. To counter all such arguments I'll offer just one: the obvious joy and satisfaction of pastors and teachers in their ministry.

The role of parish education in achieving this purpose of the church is, above all, modeling Christ's ministry. That picture is worth more than a thousand words. Beyond living the joy of the Gospel we teach and the privilege of serving that our call confers, we can talk about ministry. Let young people and their parents hear about what they don't see, the personal "perks" of working with God's Word and Christian people as well as the flesh-and-blood rewards that God's Word works in hearts and lives we're privileged to touch.

The classroom is where we identify young gifts to the church for full-time ministry. Our full-time parish education provides the best possible field for recruitment. We've emphasized academic ability in such recruitment. There are traits more dear: spiritual maturity and judgment, caring or empathetic nature, leadership, inter-personal skills and the like. Personal recruitment of future workers is a priority. This generation of called workers must not only reproduce, but multiply itself.

I suspect that in the assignment of this essay there was an agenda I've largely ignored. There is a quietly spoken fear that our Lutheran elementary schools are under siege. They cost too much according to one argument, at least far too large a percentage of the church's budget. They become a "tail wagging the dog" in another argument, a focus of attention that masks other urgent needs and draws too many human and emotional resources. The product doesn't warrant the process by still another argument, fueled by post-confirmation drop-out rates. If there is a suggestion of siege, one can expect a siege mentality. And such defensiveness will do little to clear the air or the issues. I can only pray that what follows won't be fuel on a fire, but the surfacing for discussion and resolution of what otherwise festers below the surface and sows distrust.

If the church is in a period of frustration and even transition as I posited at the outset, it should not be surprising that Lutheran elementary schools—like virtually every other program in the church would come under fire. Finger-pointing is an unhealthy expression of frustration that the church has experienced before. It is unfortunate that evaluation is often initiated out of a fiscal ledger rather than on ministry merit. What is worse would be decision-making purely on the basis of a fiscal bottom line. Let's work responsibly to avoid such a knee-jerk response.

I can't believe that our Lutheran elementary schools are less competent today than a generation ago. More likely they are better staffed and equipped than ever. What has changed is the environment in which they serve. Expectations and demands are greater, requiring more competence in more academic areas with less positive feedback. The home cannot be assumed to provide Christian modeling and reinforcement for the classroom to the degree necessary. There are more "special" needs and problem cases among children. The influence of the media has an undermining effect on our purposes. I'd like to commend over-worked and under-paid teachers for their ministry.

Because the environment has changed and old assumptions aren't valid, because new needs and concerns have to be addressed, it won't do simply to reaffirm teaching ministry and wish this were the 1960s. The problem isn't with our Lutheran elementary schools, but the solution to the problem isn't more and better schools either. The task is to fold schools and teachers into the larger mission and current challenges facing the church, not leave schools in a para-church role with a parasitic charge leveled.

The problem is adult spirituality and the family. We continue to trumpet that the primary responsibility for the Christian education of children is the parents'. But I don't think we really believe that. Our response to declining Christian family life has been to expect less from the home and try to do more at school. We should believe what we preach because every scrap of evidence I've seen suggests that the major factor in the spiritual life and retention of children is the home. So far the attack we've mounted on society's destruction of the family has been little more than showing Dobson films. We need a bigger strategy, one that combines serious spiritual growth among adults with concentrated and multi-faceted approaches to helping mom and dad be what, under Christ, they will want to be. This has to be a "crusade," not just a "program."

The school and its teachers have a significant role to play. Parents do love their children; and the school has the easiest access to parents. Teachers have the best window on individual homes and, unless forfeited, significant credibility with parents. Teachers also can be expected to understand some child psychology, a neighbor of parent psychology. We've talked about "partnership"—home, church and school. It's time to forge

the partnership with models and strategies, even though we may have to learn what works only after we learn what doesn't. That will mean expanded role and expanded expectations for everyone involved. Greater expectations of parents may include such things as enrolling in a curriculum of adult Christian education, shared religion home-work, participation in parenting seminars and support groups, and more frequent and more pointed conferences with teachers. Let's be honest, loving and helpful with parents. The school can't do for their children what God wants for their children. Greater expectations of teachers may include some additional education in parenting, counseling and adult education. Developing resources for home-study and agendas for parent conferences will take time. The church and its pastors, with teachers, will spend long hours in the development of strategy and materials, let alone increased hours in adult education. If we'll function as a fellowship of churches, we can share resources and strategies, using the synod's Board for Parish Services to both "broker" and publish.

I know of no church and school which can simply add all that the preceding paragraph implies under the current "givens" of staffing and resources. There is a "Catch 22" we will have to face. One small solution is the application of lay ministry to our schools, freeing teacher time by picking up administrative and coaching tasks, forensic and other extra-curricular assignments, correcting, special education and even teaching where possible. I'm not naïve enough to believe this is going to be easy or even possible in most schools. The ultimate answer is additional staff focused on the critical issue of adult spiritual growth and family life. And that brings us back to our "Catch 22." The budget is already under-funded, and financial stewardship won't pick up the cost of additional staff when members aren't maturing spiritually. (I've deliberately avoided the question of where that staff will come from and how special training will be provided them. If we will, God will provide the way. And the seeds of a program to train such staff ministers exist in what is currently under study as "Alternative Forms of Public Ministry.")

The break-out from this cycle of frustration will be either exceptional giving by spiritually motivated and richly blessed individuals or tuition in the Lutheran elementary school. That's hardly a new idea; many of us are paying a hefty tuition to send our children to a Lutheran high school. And I trust we haven't reduced our offerings to our congregation's ministry to do so. We value our children and full-time Christian education. Funding up to half of the cost of a child's Lutheran elementary school education through tuition would: a) preserve congregational commitment and ownership; b) allow for the creation of a "grant fund" to assist parents who can't afford the tuition rate; c) allow the additional staff necessary to address the REAL problem—adult spiritual growth and Christian family life.

A pro-active strategy that implements tuition for positive purposes, above all staffing, can avoid the demoralizing possibility of tuition-to-rescue-the-budget down the road and more "church vs. school" arguments and conditions in the congregation. There is a fear that charging tuition will lower enrollments. That may happen in some cases, though I doubt dramatic declines if we offer grant assistance. Committed Christian families will enroll their children; and the likelihood is that the perceived "quality" of the school will be enhanced, making the school ultimately more attractive and growing. Small schools already face a number of "survival" problems that only a growing and thriving church can solve. In metropolitan areas where WELS is well represented, we may even learn to shed our parochialism to consolidate schools. But that's another subject, and I'd rather not address examples of how "we tried that once and it didn't work."

This has been an opening salvo in a complex campaign. Nothing is as simple as a few paragraphs might suggest. There may be more and better answers. My challenge to you is to question whether "sitting tight" will really address reality and to urge that we stop rehashing problems and begin working at solutions. May we do so with gratitude to God for where we've been and faith in God for where He'll lead us.

In closing, let me offer Proverbs 22:6, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." That passage has provided us a philosophy of parish education. It has reassured us when adolescent rebellion sets in. But with the familiarity of the verse may come something less than exegetical interpretation.

The verse is addressed to parental “training.” While application to parish education is certainly in place, replacing parents with school won’t faithfully interpret the proverb. The Hebrew verb for “train” in this verse means literally to put something into his mouth to be tasted, to “imbue.” The intent is an experiential knowledge of God and His will, a “taste” for discipleship. There are at least twelve Hebrew words for teaching, but the Holy Spirit chose a thirteenth for this verse. When the verb is translated “train” or “instruct,” it normally carries the intent of manners or habit. It is not mere transmission of truth, but a life-style of walking with God—in Scripture and prayer as well as in harmony with God’s will. What is rendered as a verb in English at the close of the opening clause is in Hebrew a noun meaning (his) way, a reminder that in Acts Christianity is called simply “the way.” Gesenius even suggests the word “imitation” in defining this noun, an implication paralleled by our New Testament term “disciple.”

The purposes of the church are achieved through parish education when parish education has the purpose Scripture develops in verses such as Proverbs 22:6.