

Parish Education in the WELS and its Growing Importance Today

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The year is 1992. A fifteen year old boy is arrested for shooting his parents. At high school sporting events around the city of Milwaukee metal detectors appear as police try to prevent students from carrying in guns and knives. Through the eyes of television the world looks on as the city of Los Angeles breaks out in mobs and hundreds of adults, as well as children, are seen looting stores and literally destroying the city. The list goes on and on, and as it grows the question is very silently heard, "What is happening to our youth of today?".

The answers to such a question are just as numerous and controversial as the problem. Fingers have been pointed. Books have been written. Countless numbers of solutions have even been offered. However, as scientists and psychologists continue searching for some kind of an explanation, it still appears as though our world today, beginning with its youth, is quickly going down hill in regards to its morals and brotherly love.

Is there one clear cut answer - one solution that would actually make a difference in the world? Many so-called "experts" may not think so. However, we as Christians know that there most certainly is. The answer lies in the power of God's Word - in the truth and love of the Gospel message. And turning to that Word, not only do we find our solution, but we also realize that what is happening in the world today isn't so shocking in the first place. After all, our Lord clearly warned us of what would happen in a world where men no longer teach and honor his Word. And very simply put today's youth don't know that Word, because in many places Christian education for our youth is becoming a thing of the past. However, if the lack of knowledge and instruction in God's Word has brought our world to where it is today,

common sense tells us that it is only true knowledge and instruction in that same all-powerful Word which will turn this world around.

Ever since the beginning of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, our church body has realized its dual calling in the proclamation of God's Word. From the very beginning the founders of our synod knew that we must not only faithfully preach God's Word from our pulpits and administer the Sacraments, but equally as important we must train our youth with Christian education and instruction. Through the years, therefore, the WELS has developed what is certainly today one of, if not the best, Christian educational systems there is. And it is a program of which we can be very proud. However, we must also realize that with today's changing world there is an ever increasing need and urgency for Christian education to reach out to today's youth, and such is a calling to which our synod has responded well over the years. It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to review the history of Parish education in the WELS focusing primarily on our Christian day schools and Sunday schools, and to see how our synod has responded to the growing realization of and the need for that education to continue today.

The Christian Day School

As mentioned earlier, when our synod was first organized in December of 1849, our early fathers already realized the great need there was for Christian education. Coming from a strong German-Christian background in which education was stressed, the truth of Proverbs 22:6 was well known by our first pastors - *"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it"*. With this Scripture reference clearly in mind it was then resolved at the first convention of our Synod in May of 1850 "that every pastor in the Synod should devote himself especially to the youth

and conduct day schools, Bible hours, and Mission hours" (Continuing in His Word, p.210). We know from the church records of St. John's in Milwaukee that one Christian day school already existed there as early as 1848, and in the years to come many more were to follow. Simply statistics over the years speak for themselves. The following chart scans the years of our Synod showing the number of schools along with the enrollment and number of teachers where possible.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Schools</u>	<u>Enrollment</u>	<u>Teachers</u>
1848	1		
1860	23		
1875	85		
1893	141	8,621	119
1935	134	10,560	308
1950	188	14,622	438
1975	293	27,632	1,241
1990	365	31,980	1,728

What a remarkable blessing the Lord has showered upon our church body. From one little school house to three hundred and sixty-five Christian day schools, our church has grown to reach out to its youth. And yet these numbers are much more than mere statistics. They are witnesses for a system, which despite opposition over the years, has stood the test of time, realizing with each passing year the growing need for Christian education.

One of the most trying times for that system appeared in 1889 when the Wisconsin State Legislature passed the Bennett Law. This law was "quite evidently an attempt to restrict and to impair the efficiency of our day schools" (Continuing in His Word, p.215). It set up a legal period of time for the school year, required that certain subjects be taught in English, and assigned power to enforce such requirements to the local public school boards. Despite some controversy over the language question, however, our Synod stood firm and worked together to help have the Bennett Law repealed

within two short years, thus freely opening the doors of our schools even down to the present day.

In 1917 the plans first began to develop then for the present structure of our system. A School Commission was formed which set up visitations to each one of our schools. In 1933 this plan was revised under the new office of the Executive Secretary of the Board of Education and the following goals were adopted:

1. Every District is to establish a District Board of Education, which is responsible first to the District, but is to work in cooperation with the Synod's Board of Education.
2. This District Board of Education is to provide for visitation of each school at least once a year and is to solve its own, purely local problems.
3. This District Board is to make a complete report to its District and to the Executive Secretary according to a detailed plan prepared by the Executive Secretary.

In 1935 F. W. Meyer from Fon du Lac, Wisconsin became the first Executive Secretary of the Board of Education, and to this day much of the same structure remains in place overlooking our schools.

Clearly we have only scratched the surface of the history behind our Christian day schools in these short paragraphs. That is, however, not without reason, because as one looks over the years of our Synod there is no lack of articles showing what a tremendous blessing our schools have been. And this paper is not trying to say otherwise, for our Christian day schools are second only to Scripture in being the primary and most important educational tool we have for our children today. However, turning to an educational survey which was done for the WELS in 1962 helps to focus our attention on another vital aspect of Parish education which until recently has not been given that much attention.

The Sunday School

At the 1961 convention of the WELS it was recommended that an outside educational consultant be hired by the Synod to study various aspects of our educational structure. The main emphasis of this study was to focus on our Synod's prep schools and colleges, however, many other facts concerning the education of our younger children were also found. Of primary interest to us here is that in the 1961-62 school year 24,171 children attended our Christian day schools. Truly a blessing for our church. However, one additional fact leaves questions to be answer. The 1962 study also showed that this 24,171 children represented only 40.1 per cent of the elementary age children in our Synod (Educational Survey for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, p.87). In other words, only two out of every five children of elementary age attended our Synod's schools in that year, and although such an extensive study has not been conducted since, recent figures do not appear much different. Now, of course, it can be argued that having 40 per cent of our children attending our schools is something to be thankful for, and indeed it is. But what about the other 60 per cent who don't attend our Christian day schools? How can our churches reach out to them as well?

The answer to that question lies in our Synod's Sunday school program. As we will see in briefly looking again at the history of our church body, this form of Parish education has been questioned over the years in regards to its importance and practicality. However, as our Synod today is preparing to reach out to today's changing world, we will also see those questions very clearly being answered, reminding us that Sunday school is a vital and important part of our youth's education.

Sunday schools actually have a rather rich history when it comes to Lutheranism in America. Already in the late 1700's we begin to see them grow

rapidly in several church bodies, and by 1927 there were an estimated 143,000 Sunday schools being conducted in Protestant churches. In the Wisconsin Synod, however, with such tremendous emphasis being placed on the Christian day school, it took a while longer for Sunday schools to be recognized as they are today. In fact, one only needs to return to our Synod's first convention of 1850 where every pastor was urged to "devote himself especially to the youth and conduct day schools, Bible hours, and Mission hours" (Continuing in His Word, p.210). Sunday schools were not even mentioned yet!

That, however, soon changed when the Bennett Law and the question over which language should be used in our day schools developed. As the dust first rose and then slowly settled in this matter, there developed a decline in the enrollments of our Christian day schools. To tide the situation over, therefore, Sunday schools were put into place to insure the education of our children, and before long their benefits were being seen. By 1935 one pastor comments that they are now here to stay - that these schools "used to be the exception rather than the rule," but now hardly a parish existed without one (WLQ, Vol. 32, p.277). However, from their very beginning Sunday schools have often had an asterisk placed behind their name because people realized that they did not live up to standards of the Christian day school.

The chief limitation of the Sunday school is apparent from the very name it bears. It is a course of instruction which goes into action once a week and lasts less than an hour. It is true, the children of the Sunday school are receiving the most vital knowledge which can be offered them in this life, yet they receive only forty-five to fifty minutes of this most necessary instruction once a week. No matter how efficient and faithful the Sunday school teacher may be, a child will not thrive spiritually as we would desire nor acquire a thorough biblical knowledge and Christian training through the medium of the Sunday School (Continuing in His Word, p. 212).

Such an analysis of the Sunday school is indeed, true, and for that very reason they often appear to take a back seat to the Christian day school in the early years of our Synod. In fact, compared to our day schools, very little has been written in regards to the value of the Sunday school. And the majority of articles where they are mentioned usually go on to insist on the superiority of, not the Sunday school, but the Christian day school.

As the years progress, though, and one pages through the synodical proceedings of our church body small changes are seen. In 1939 a motion is passed to begin work on Sunday school materials of our own. In 1945 thirteen thousand dollars is added to the Synod's budget to produce Sunday school materials. New courses are added in 1951, '57, and '63. And in 1966 William Fischer is installed as Secretary of Part-Education, a position created to give extra attention to the education of our youth outside the Christian day school.

The Christian Day School versus The Sunday School

So which one should it be? The Christian day school or the Sunday school? For many years that was ^{the} question being asked in our Synod and people were quick to answer. Many churches wrestled with the problem. Many people's feelings were expressed and even hurt. However, as we look to the present history of our church body it becomes clear that the question never should have been "either...or", but has always been "both...and".

Turning way back to the year 1919 we see that this idea already existed in the minds of many. In an article for the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly entitled "Why Not the Sunday School Alone?", Herman Meyer sets both the Christian day school and the Sunday school in their proper place. He writes:

To avoid all misunderstanding, we wish to state from the very beginning that we are not moved by any hostility to the Sunday school. The question is not whether to have a Sunday school, or not. That question must in every case be answered according to the prevalent local circumstances. We fully realize that there are localities where it is wellnigh impossible to have regular parish schools (p. 30).

He then goes on to name the very practical reasons for such an impossibility, mentioning that location, numbers, and finances often stand in the way ^{of} small congregations supporting a full-time school. And if such is the case, it would be "sheer folly not to do what can be done, to organize and maintain an efficient Sunday school. Conversion, as well as all spiritual progress in us, is the work of the Holy Ghost" (Meyer, p.31).

Of great importance also is the fact that he goes on to say, "Even where there is a parish school, it may clearly be the duty of a congregation to conduct also a Sunday school" (Meyer, p.31). Already in his day, Meyer knew that not every child in our Synod attended our day schools when possible. And he also realized what an excellent outreach tool the Sunday school was.

Where there are such as are not affiliated with any church and could not be induced to send their children to the regular school of the Lutheran congregation, while they would consent to have them attend the Sunday school, it is clearly given what a congregation must do. Let it conduct a Sunday school and give to these children as much of the doctrine of saving grace for their salvation as it possibly can and trust to the Lord that he will prosper the work as he sees fit. Some of the pupils thus gotten into the Sunday school may even, after they have thus once felt the power of God's Word, be won for the parish school to enjoy the benefits of religious education in a fuller measure (p.32).

Having greatly praised the Sunday school as it fits into its proper role, Meyer however, also realized its limitations, many of which have already been mentioned - limitations which easily could be overcome by the

growth of Christian day schools. In short, his message to our Synod so many years ago was this:

Where we can do no more thanⁿ offer a good Sunday school, let us do it cheerfully as best we can. We are not hostile to the Sunday school... (However), even though also our parochial schools are not perfect, they are by far the best means for giving our children a Christian education, and it would be an irreparable loss if we should lose them. The Sunday school alone can never make up for this loss (p. 31,42).

In other words, it is not a question of either one or the other, but a fact of both one and the other working together. And that is exactly where our Synod still stands today.

Conclusion

In his book entitled Children at Risk, James Dobson takes a look at the youth of today and draws one overwhelming conclusion - that we are in a war against the immorality of the world today for the very hearts and minds of our children. The example of current events listed at the beginning of this paper make that very clear, for such events are becoming more and more common every day. To equip parents for this war Dobson goes on to look at such subjects as family sharing, the sanctity of life, the influence of government, television, and so on. However, as his book closes he reminds us of really the only^{way}_^ in which this war can be won.

Finally, we come to the closing words of this book and the most most important recommendation we have to offer. Our only hope as a nation, ultimately, is to ask the Father to forgive our sins and heal our great land... As we have seen, virtually all of the founding fathers revered the Lord and looked to Him for strength and wisdom. They inscribed "In God We Trust" on our our coins...

Today we cling to the same source of confidence and hope...

We must appeal again to Him who promised in the concluding words of the Old Testament, "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6 KJV). That would be great news, indeed, for the families of the world (p.270).

As social-gospel oriented as this statement may be, Dobson does hit the nail on the head. The only way for us ^{to} rescue both ourselves and the youth of ~~the~~ today from a world which is quickly plunging headfirst into sin after sin, is to focus on the precious truths of God's Word through which the Holy Spirit works. It is only by the grace of God that we are saved, and in that grace we will be moved to do all we can to spread the wonderful message of salvation in every way possible. That includes very carefully and wisely offering the best forms of Christian education possible.

We have briefly looked at the history of parish education in the WELS, and it is a history of which we can be very proud. That history is still in the making though. Today our Synod clearly realizes that both the Christian day school and the Sunday school are vital and invaluable parts of that system. And steps are being taking to make them even better. Such courses as Feeding His Lambs are being used to better train our Sunday school teachers. Materials for both schools are being produced with greater quality than ever before. Future pastors, once sent out into the field with almost no experience, are now spending class time in area day schools. Qualified teachers in our schools are turning to new and exciting methods of teaching to best instruct our youth. Recently the Commission on Youth Discipleship became a part of our structure. And the list goes on and on. In short, our Synod is continuing to answer the call, the urgent call, for Christian education for our youth today. As Martin Albrecht writes in a 1980 article for the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly:

What a blessing our own school system can be...And think of the greatest blessing we enjoy in our Christian elementary system - that of guidance by the means of God's precious Word...But when families are too far removed from Christian schools, parents will want to guide their children so that they will be able to withstand the teachings and the problems that may be a hindrance to their faith. Pastors in such congregations will do all in their power to encourage parents to send their children to Christian schools. Where that is impossible, the pastor and the congregation will try to develop a strong Sunday school system and strong program for the young people. Contact with God's Word is absolutely essential for the young as well as the old (p.304).

May we, indeed, truly realize what a wonderful blessing we have in our educational system of today, and may we never lose our desire to continue reaching out to the youth of today's changing world!

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