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Will more intentional and effective parish education practices have a significant, positive impact on reversing membership losses in the LCMS?

TEACHING THE FAITH IN THE PARISH

by Mark Blanke

AS WE REFLECT ON PARISH EDUCATION in the church, we inevitably align with one of two possible frames of reference. Either we focus on a philosophy behind our parish educational efforts (usually linked to a theological orientation) or we consider a methodological focus. The methodological focus allows one to consider the way that parish education is implemented within a church — regardless of the philosophical lens, except in those few cases where the methods might run in opposition to a certain philosophical orientation.

This paper will elaborate on the methodological aspect of parish education. It will focus on research into how we are presently doing in the church, what implications there are for specific methodologies and make recommendations for change.

Full disclosure requires that I share that I consider myself to be an advocate for parish education. This paper is written with the biases and prejudices that accompany the role of advocate. I would wish for the readers of this paper to increase their advocacy for parish education.

My operational hypothesis for this paper is that *more intentional and effective parish education practices would have a significant, positive impact on reversing membership losses in the LCMS.*

In order to construct an argument that supports the hypothesis, we need to take a look at the current state of parish education in the LCMS. Are we effective? Are we using techniques that are consistent with known effective methodologies? How intentional are we in planning and executing our educational ministries?

State of parish education within the LCMS

The decline in membership in the LCMS goes back about

40 years. If we had been implementing intentional and effective educational practices during that time period it would be hard to find support for my hypothesis, but indications are that we have not been implementing such practices. Insights into our educational practices can be found in various sources, including the 1970 Report on Confirmation and First Communion, the 1970s research that led to the book *How Different are People Who Attend Lutheran Schools?*, the 1995 *Congregations at Crossroads* study of the LCMS, the 2006 Institute for Religious

Education study of parish education practices in the LCMS, the 2010 *What's Happening in LCMS Confirmation* study, data from several Lutheran Annuals and the 2014 study of “healthy” congregational characteristics and educational practices.

The *Congregations at Crossroads* report said that “Nowhere is the need for a culture shift more evident than in the findings on Christian education,” which it described as having too low a participation level, being

too often seen as something that is only for children and too teacher-centered, offering content that is neither relevant or “engaging in content and process.”

This study gives us some idea of the state of religious education in our church body in the 1990s, but what other data is available to give a glimpse at our more recent efforts? What do we know about what our people understand and what we are doing in religious education efforts in the LCMS?

In an article in *The Lutheran Witness* titled “How Do We Get to Heaven?” Rev. Andrew Simcak quoted data from the Barna Research Group regarding how adults from different denominations answered the question “Can a good person earn his way to heaven?” The

An effort to educate our educational leaders on the value of designing educational experiences that seek to apply learnings to the process of living a Christ-like life has the potential to greatly enhance the educational experiences that are already happening in our churches.

percentages below are the percentages of those from each denomination who said “yes” to the question:

Assembly of God	22%
Baptists	38%
Presbyterians	52%
Lutherans	54%
Episcopalians	58%
Methodists	59%
Mormons	76%
Catholics	82%

Bergman’s 2006–2007 report on Confirmation:

1. 77 percent of pastors report that there are no classes for youth (other than Sunday school) prior to the start of Confirmation instruction.
2. 82 percent of pastors agreed with the statement that “For most Lutherans, youth confirmation is the most important Christian education event in their lives.”
3. 77 percent of pastors report that the percentage of confirmands still involved in the congregation as seniors in high school is less than 60 percent; 22 percent of pastors report that less than one out of five seniors are still involved.
4. While 92 percent of pastoral respondents indicated that

One of the greatest errors an educational leader can make is to believe that their learning experience is somehow exempt from the truths that we know to be operational everywhere else.

to prepare confirmands to receive Holy Communion was a “very important” or “important” goal of Confirmation instruction, post-Confirmation youth answered the following question with these responses:

In Holy Communion, one receives:

- 1) 28% ... “Bread and wine as symbols of Christ’s presence”
- 2) 40% ... “Christ’s body and blood and bread and wine”
- 3) 31% ... “Christ’s body and blood which replace bread and wine”
- 4) 1%... “I’m not sure”

What LCMS Youth and Adults Understand

In a 2001 article in *Lutheran Education*, Dr. Lou Jander revisited some of the findings from the 1995 study of LCMS congrega-

tions. The study, which involved mainly *active members* of our church body, asked respondents to indicate their understanding of key concepts in our theology. The following table shows the percentage of respondents who felt they had a “good or very good” understanding of the concept and the percent that felt the concept was “important or very important.”

Concept	Understanding		Importance	
	Adults	Youth	Adults	Youth
Sanctification	27	13	47	30
Grace	66	54	79	62
Justification	38	30	51	41
Law	60	63	51	47
Gospel	70	62	84	67
Priesthood of all believers	25	12	29	17
Baptism	90	85	89	83
Evangelism	65	30	45	27
Stewardship	66	20	50	22
Means of Grace	47	29	61	42
Lord’s Prayer	91	86	90	78
Original Sin	73	64	47	36
Apostles Creed	80	67	72	56
Confession	78	66	71	64
Absolution	58	25	68	37
Righteousness	48	41	52	46

Taken from a survey of the LCMS completed in 1995 by Benson, Roehlkepartain and Andress.

The data from these sources provides evidence that, on the very basic level of developing a cognitive understanding of our faith, our educational programs are proving to be ineffective.

Statistical data from *The Lutheran Annual*:

1. Retention

- a. 65.3 percent of the children baptized in 1963 were confirmed in 1976
- b. 54.9 percent of the children baptized in 1977 were confirmed in 1990
- c. 46.9 percent of the children baptized in 1990 were confirmed in 2003
- d. 46.9 percent of the children baptized in 2000 were confirmed in 2013

While there are likely many factors that influence the retention of children in the church, educational programming (or the lack thereof) is likely one of those factors.

2. Pastoral support — statistically, there seems to be enough pastoral resources to justify an adequate focus on religious education in the parish.

- a. In 1971, when we had the largest number of baptized members, there was one pastor for every 570 members.
- b. In 1993, there was one parish pastor for every 488 baptized members in the Synod.
- c. In 2003, there was one parish pastor for every 471 baptized members in the Synod.
- d. In 2013, there was one parish pastor for every 376 baptized members in the Synod.

When one considers the increase of DCEs, DCOs, deaconesses, DPMs and other commissioned ministers added to congregational ministries since 1971, we can assume that the ration of member to church professional is even lower. It is not likely that inadequate staffing can be to blame for our membership decline.

3. Sunday school

While the Synod has lost 19.5 percent of its baptized membership between 1993 and 2014, “Sunday Classes and Bible Study Groups” have had the following statistical changes over the same ten year period:

- Ages 2–3: -62%
- Grades 5–6: -54%

- Ages 4–5: -52%
- Grades 7–8: -54%
- Grades 1–2: -57%
- Grades 9–12: -32%
- Grades 3–4: - 54%
- Young adults and Adults: -28%

While it is obvious that our membership is aging, which may account for some of the decline in grade school age classes, one could assume that an increase in adult membership would lead to an increase in adult study attendance. Data from 2014 shows that attendance at adult *and* high school Sunday morning Bible studies represents only 9.5 percent of our confirmed membership.

State of Religious Education (2006) data from research done by CUNE and the Institute for Religious Education (IRE):

- 1. Pastors estimate that around 50 percent of eligible children participate in Sunday School at least one half of the time.
- 2. On average, pastors say that 46 percent of youth are still active in their congregation four years after confirmation (lower than the estimate in Bergman’s study.) If this estimate is accurate, it means that we lose over 50 percent of our youth between Baptism and confirmation and an additional 50 percent between confirmation and graduation from high school.
- 3. Only 32 percent of congregations offer some sort of midweek learning experience for their children (other than confirmation classes).
- 4. Pastors estimate that about 21 percent of adult members participate in adult learning experiences, but attendance data from the same congregations show the number attending Sunday study is close to 9 percent and an additional 5 percent attend midweek studies at the church. Pastors also estimated that 19 percent of members attend more than one study at a time. Synod data suggests attendance figures closer to 14 percent for adults.
- 5. Pastors were asked to rate the following items from 1–10 with 1 being low.
 - 6.0 The degree to which the congregation makes parish education a priority.
 - 4.1 The degree they are satisfied with the education participation levels in their congregations.
 - 6.0 Their congregations’ effectiveness in education of children

- 5.2 Their congregations' effectiveness in education of youth
- 6.0 Their congregations' effectiveness in education of adults

- 6. 45 percent of pastors say they feel parish education effectiveness in the LCMS has diminished over the past 15 years. Thirty percent say it has stayed the same and 17 percent say it has improved.
- 7. A majority (57 percent) of pastors have had no college coursework that focused on educational methodology other than the one required seminary course and a similar percentage have not taken any continuing education that has focused on the topic — yet, pastors estimate that 23 percent of all their time is spent on Christian education efforts for their congregations.

The research is clear: we have a poor perception of the state of our educational ministries, we have poor attendance at all levels, participation is declining faster than our membership losses and pastors are expending a great deal of time preparing and leading educational ministries without having adequate preparation for the task.

Summary of the state of parish education in the LCMS

While one cannot determine causality from the data, it is clear that too many members of the LCMS are deficient in their understanding of our faith and too few are active in our education offerings (as well as other congregational activities.) In fact, virtually all of the data points to significant inadequacies in our educational ministries in the church. What is missing from the data is the exact cause of these inadequacies.

The problems can't be linked to inadequate staffing, and all of the findings can't be attributed to the changing demographics (primarily an aging population) of our Synod. All indications are that the Word is still being preached in our churches and the Sacraments are being properly administered. Synod efforts have amplified

our service to the poor and hurting in our world, especially during the past few years, so it is unlikely that we are being seen as more detached from society today as we may have been in years past. In the past 30 years we haven't seen a major schism or split related to theological differences. Changing societal perceptions of Christianity and religion in general has definitely contributed to our membership losses, but there are other evangelical denominations that are seeing fewer losses or even slight growth. I believe that through the process of eliminating some of the variables and identifying the deficiencies that

are obviously present in our current education ministries, we can make an assumption that educational deficiencies contribute to our membership decline.

Making changes that would help our educational efforts to be "intentional and effective"

As we consider our educational practices, I'd like to propose the following operational assumptions:

1) It is only "effective" education if people learn. The difference between teaching and talking is that teaching has happened if the recipient gains a changed perspective. Talking is "effective" if a person has formed words and expressed them.

2) There are better ways to teach and worse ways to teach. This seems an obvious statement but it means that there *are* preferred methodologies. Acceptance of this simple assumption would lead one to a search for the educational methodologies that have the greatest potential for success. For example, the research from many sources show the inadequacies of teacher-centered learning experiences, especially in adult education, so we can assume that the focus on teacher-centric methods (which the *Congregations at Crossroads* study said are prevalent in the LCMS) would be detrimental to effective learning and less-effective than alternative methods.

We have a poor perception of the state of our educational ministries, we have poor attendance at all levels, participation is declining faster than our membership losses and pastors are expending a great deal of time preparing and leading educational ministries without having adequate preparation for the task.

- 3) Content knowledge is not synonymous with teaching capability. Some have advocated that teaching ability is influenced only by knowing the material in a greater amount than your learners. Experience should tell all of us that there is more to teaching than merely knowing the content. We have all had teachers who have done a better job of educating us than have other teachers — yet all of our teachers have probably known the content better than the students they teach — so the mere knowledge of content must not be a significant determinant of capability at teaching.
- 4) The Church is an open system, affected by things outside of the Church. While our doctrines shouldn't be swayed by societal trends and the preferences of our members, things that take place in society (wars, court decisions, technology, calamities) do influence our programming and how our message is interpreted. We can make the assumption that the characteristics of learners (developmental capabilities, teaching style preferences, personal goals, retention capabilities) should be considered when planning educational programs within the Church.
- 5) Pastors are the key to improving education in the church. While it is true that our Synod has developed the office of the DCE to provide leadership for the educational programs of the church, only 600 or so DCEs serve the 6200 congregations of our synod and they are responsible to their senior pastors to design the educational efforts that fit the pastor's vision for the best direction for the church and how to best use its resources. The data indicates that the deficiencies of our educational ministries are systemic to the entire synod and as such, should be prioritized by those who have the authority to make these prioritizations.

What evidence exists to show that effective and intentional Christian education may help with growth in membership?

The most significant reason for prioritizing education in the church is because we are commanded by God to make study of His Word a priority (Matt. 28:20; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; Deut. 4:9, 11:19; Acts 2:42). Also, ample data exists to show a connection between positive congregational outcomes and effective educational efforts. This data is found in research done by Search Institute, Thom Rainer,

The Institute for Religious Education and Daniel Olsen among others.

The Search Institute's *Effective Christian Education* study was released in 1990. It is a study of around 11,000 members of six major Protestant denominations. It is the most extensive research conducted on the topic of Christian education in the church in the past century or perhaps ever. Among other things it found that:

- o Effective educational methodologies could be identified
- o There was a correlation between the use of these methods and:
 1. Dedication to one's denomination and congregation
 2. The presence of "characteristics of faith maturity" in members

The authors stated that "Christian education matters much more than we expected. Of all the areas of congregational life we examined, involvement in an effective education program has the strongest tie to a person's growth in faith and loyalty to one's congregation and denomination. While other congregational factors also matter, *nothing matters more than effective Christian education* [emphasis added]. And this is as true for adults as it is for adolescents" (pg. 2).

Thom Rainer and LifeWay Research has also found correlations between educational methods and positive outcomes. In studies of 500 churches of the Southern Baptist Conference (SBC) and 500 non-SBC Protestant churches, Rainer defined a category of churches that had higher than average growth rates and greater retention rates of new members. He called these churches "evangelistic churches" and stated that: "The research is clear if not overwhelming. Sunday School [children and adult] is *the* [emphasis in original] most effective assimilation methodology in evangelistic churches today" (pg. 47).

Regarding intentional and effective education, Rainer went on to say that "the mere existence of a Sunday School [children and adult] does not produce assimilation. The classes must have the best and most thoroughly trained teachers. Sunday School works, but only if we work Sunday School" (pg. 47).

The Institute for Religious Education at Concordia University, Nebraska, together with the Office of National Mission of the LCMS conducted a study in 2014 that looked at the characteristics of congregations

that considered themselves to be healthy (“health” was self-defined by pastors but was related to growth, worship attendance, availability of resources, absence of conflict and other factors.) Congregations that exhibited a high level of intentionality in Christian education (measured by the degree to which they followed effective educational methodologies) are more likely to report being healthy.

In a study of 1,424 congregations in Indiana, which included LCMS congregations, Daniel Olsen found that the prioritization of Christian education for youth and adults had the highest correlation relative to congregational growth among the “program” functions of a church (included were Christian education, local evangelism, social action and world mission support.)

The data contained in the first two sections of this report should lead a person to two conclusions: (1) Effective Christian education is an integral and vital part of the ministry of the church, and (2) The churches of the LCMS are presently doing a poor job of religious education — attendance is poor, methodology is inadequate and the knowledge base and discipling development of our members is suffering. What can we do to enhance the process and help bring the LCMS back to its historical roots of excellence in education? Here are some possible responses:

A. Renew a passion for parish education. In Luther’s Preface to the Small Catechism he states that those who refuse to learn are not to be admitted to the Sacrament, accepted as sponsors at Baptism or “allowed to exercise Christian liberty in any way” and that such individuals should be denied food and drink. While Luther’s enthusiasm for education can be appreciated, his approach may be a bit more drastic than we would wish. Still, his writings speak of a passion for the importance of education that is too often missing from churches today.

B. Aim at application and lifestyle changes. Sociologists tell us that the majority of adult learners are goal oriented; yet most congregationally-based studies are not designed with clear goals for the learner. Knowledge of doctrinal content is always a good thing, but it is often the sole focus of a curriculum — especially adult education in the church. The *Congregations at Crossroads* showed us that many congregations have educational experiences that are passive and teacher-centered — experiences that do little to enhance faith formation.

An effort to educate our educational leaders on the value of designing educational experiences that seek to apply learnings to the process of living a Christ-like life has the potential to greatly enhance the educational experiences that are already happening in our churches.

C. Enhance pastors’ preparation — help them to see religious education as an “open system.” One of the greatest errors an educational leader can make is to believe that their learning experience is somehow exempt from the truths that we know to be operational everywhere else. This “closed system” mentality sees the church as somehow unaffected by what is happening elsewhere. We see this exhibited when known methodologies that enhance educational effectiveness are not implemented or even considered for application within a parish education experience. Educational leaders seem to feel that religious education is somehow independent of influencers such as methods, developmental characteristics of the learner and motivational factors. An open system perspective encourages educational leaders to seriously consider the factors that are influencing educational effectiveness and to construct experiences so these factors are dealt with appropriately.

D. Identify district educational consultative experts. Districts and other synod judicatories are facing significant resource demands. Difficult decisions need to be made relative to district priorities and where energies will be placed. As little as 10 to 15 years ago, more districts were able to have staff persons who were experts in the area of parish religious education. Resources seldom allow such specializations today, and often districts appoint dedicated and well-meaning staff to multiple responsibilities, but they often do not have the passion or the expertise to serve as a competent resource and advocate for parish religious education. There are individuals within each district who could serve as a consultative expert in the area of parish religious education. One or more pastors who come from a teaching background, DCEs or lay leaders who have been prepared for work in educational fields, have a passion for parish religious education and who have competencies to serve as consultants to congregations seeking to enhance their educational efforts could be identified. These individuals may serve for little or no pay, but need to be lifted up by district presidents and be given access to district resources in order to

adequately service the needs of congregations and to consistently promote religious education efforts within the district.

E. Define characteristics of a “healthy congregational education program.” Many congregations may be completely unaware of the criteria at which they should be aiming in order to have a “healthy” parish religious education program. What constitutes a good level of adult participation? What type of training should be present for educational leaders in the congregation? How much of a congregation’s budget should be aimed at religious education efforts? What does a comprehensive curriculum look like? How can you structure small groups so that they work together with your other educational efforts? What confirmation practices seem to enhance retention? How might the Sunday worship schedule enhance or detract from educational efforts? The answer to these and many more questions might benefit congregations in their planning and in working to enhance educational ministries. While these questions can be answered fairly easily, it is hard to get the answers out to congregations in a way that gets noticed and has an impact on congregations. Districts have better access and influence with congregations than any other synod source. It would have the potential of enhancing any information if the districts chose to serve as the distribution source and advocate for the use of this resource for congregations.

Awareness of a problem is the first step in resolving it. I have been surprised in my 35 years of serving within the LCMS to hear so little from leadership on the issue of enhancing religious education in the church — especially in light of the overwhelming evidence pointing at systematic decline in regards to education. Perhaps this article will raise awareness so that key leaders will take up the cause of reviving our educational efforts — and thereby help our beloved Synod to regain some of the membership losses that we have seen over the past few decades.

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