

A Brief History of Lutheran Schools

The following are excerpts from an article written by Melvin M. Kieschnick, an associate in ministry who has served Lutheran schools nationally and internationally for 45 years. The article was published in the March-April 2006 issue of the magazine *Lutheran Partners*.

Lutheran schools have always had a prominent role in the Lutheran church. Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon were professors at Wittenberg University. Melanchthon focused on curriculum revision at the post-secondary level. Luther centered his attention on the lower academic levels. He stressed the education of children and assigned responsibility for this task to parents, the church, and public authorities. He advocated instruction in the vernacular for girls and boys and a curriculum heavy on religion and music.

When Lutherans came to this country they often brought with them a determination to educate the young using a curriculum that included religious instruction. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg arrived in America in 1742 to assist the scattered Lutheran churches and their schools, especially in

Pennsylvania. In addition to assisting with parish schools, Muhlenberg conducted one of the first “charity schools” in Pennsylvania. St. Matthew Lutheran School was established in New York City in 1752.

The emphasis on parish schools was even greater among the Saxon Lutherans who immigrated to the Midwest. Their goal was that every parish support a school. So important were parochial schools to them that, when they organized what is now The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), “the establishment and support of congregation parochial schools” was listed as one of the primary purposes for the establishment of that Synod.

Norwegian Lutherans in Minnesota in the late nineteenth century played a prominent role in establishing nine separate church-owned and -operated academies (secondary schools). These were regional schools rather than congregational schools and had close ties to the denomination’s district or other judicatory. These schools were either only for girls or coeducational, were often the only high school available to the students, and often included residential facilities for students. Most notable among these is Oak Grove Lutheran School in Fargo, North Dakota. Originally intended only for

girls, it was named Oak Grove Lutheran Ladies Seminary. Today this school, headed by the Rev. John Andreasen, continues to be faithful to its strong religious values and reaches an international student body in its grade 6–12 programs.

The first public elementary school, under Horace Mann, was founded in Boston in 1821. The emergence of the public school system had a significant impact on the role of congregation- or synod-sponsored schools.

Among Lutherans, two distinctly different emphases emerged. The LCMS and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) advocated strongly for congregation-based schools. Usually a single congregation supported a school, and an association of schools sponsored a joint high school. This practice continues to this day; there are some 1,500 early-childhood centers, more than 1,000 elementary schools, and approximately 100 high schools in the LCMS. These schools enroll almost 300,000 children. The LCMS developed an extensive system of prep schools, colleges, and universities with the principal objective of preparing qualified and church-certified teachers for its schools. Such teachers are on the LCMS roster as commissioned ministers, are subject to the same

church oversight as ordained pastors, and are officially recognized by government agencies as ministers of religion.

The WELS has 383 preschools enrolling 8,500 students, 354 elementary schools with 26,700 students, and 27 high schools with an enrollment of 6,500 students. The synod operates Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota, as its teacher-training institution. Some 80 percent of the teachers in WELS elementary and high schools are graduates of this college.

While the status of both LCMS and WELS teachers as commissioned ministers remains unchanged, the mission of the colleges and universities of the LCMS have now all expanded, offering not only training for the teaching ministry but also a variety of other liberal arts programs.

In contrast to these LCMS and WELS systems, other Lutheran churches have placed their emphases on post-secondary education, resulting in the 28 colleges now affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). These colleges share a common mission of preparing students for exercising their Christian ministry of vocation of service in and to the church and the world.

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The three immediate predecessor-church bodies to the ELCA each had a different stance toward congregation-sponsored schools. The former Lutheran Church in America (LCA) discouraged congregations from operating schools, supporting them only in unusual circumstances. The LCA officially opined that the church's primary responsibility was to support public education and saw parish schools as being inconsistent with this basic commitment. Thus, there were fewer than twenty LCA elementary schools, and these were principally in urban New York, Philadelphia, and the Caribbean.

The former American Lutheran Church (ALC) had a somewhat different history. It should be noted that in areas such as Minnesota there were many ALC churches, and the public schools often had a strong Lutheran (or at least Protestant) aura. In communities composed primarily of Roman Catholics and Lutherans, the Catholic children went to their own parochial schools, while the Lutherans went to the public schools, where the teachers were likely to be Lutheran, classmates went to the same Lutheran congregation, and Christmas and other

church festivals were observed in the public schools. In other parts of the country, especially California, the situation was different, and many congregations operated day schools. Some thirty of these California elementary and high schools continue in the ELCA.

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In the years immediately preceding the formation of the ELCA some seventy ALC elementary schools became affiliated with the ELCA.

The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), the third body included in the ELCA, brought with it the LCMS tradition of seeing the parish school as an effective place to train persons for Christlike service in the church and the world. The AELC brought into the ELCA 19 elementary schools with 4,227 students and 218 teachers (about half of whom were officially rostered) and 27 preschools with 461 students and 30 teachers.

Since the formation of the ELCA, several major movements in congregation-based schooling have arisen. Certainly the most dominant is congregation-supported early-childhood education. Major attention on this mission and ministry opportunity has come from the former Division for Higher Education and

Schools (now part of the Vocation and Education program unit) and the ELEA. Data have been collected, resources provided, partnerships developed, and educational conferences convened. These two groups also assist in opening new schools, providing accreditation processes, and advocacy with government agencies.

Today, congregation-sponsored schools are a massive, if often unnoticed, ministry in the ELCA. There are some 1,600 early-childhood centers ministering to more than 100,000 children and their families and 275 elementary schools ministering to some 50,000 students.

Lutheran schools at all levels are probably the most ethnically inclusive agencies in the ELCA. The percentage of non-Anglos goes up at each age level. Thus, the non-Anglos in preschools total 13 percent, in elementary schools 24 percent, and in high schools 33 percent.

Approximately 50 percent of all teaching staff are Lutheran. In almost all cases they meet state certification requirements. Salaries are usually well below those paid in public institutions at the same level.

The amount of money involved in ELCA preschools, elementary schools, and high schools is some \$500,000,000 (yes, five hundred million) a year.

There is consistent evidence that congregations with schools (at whatever level) gain new members from school families, and the average growth of congregations with a school exceeds the average for congregations without schools.

Concurrently, there has been growth, though less dramatic, in groups of congregations supporting Lutheran high schools. There are currently 17 high schools with ELCA congregation support. Most of these are jointly supported by LCMS congregations. (Latest LCMS policy permits continued ELCA/ LCMS partnership in schools where that is now in place, but no new partnership can gain LCMS recognition.)

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Two significant regional organizations supporting ELCA schools are The Lutheran Schools Association of New York, headed by Marlene Lund, and The Lutheran Schools of Southern California and Hawaii, headed by Alan Feddersen.

In closing, as I look at the current situation regarding ELCA congregation-based schools, I want to highlight the following:

1) There is ongoing need for these institutions to evaluate and be clear on how their mission is integral to and supportive of the congregations that sponsor them. Continued attention needs to be given to securing third-source funding. Too often the teachers are subsidizing the schools through working for too-low salaries. With third-source funding, schools can accept more students on a blind-to-financial-need basis.

2) We owe gratitude to God and to all of those people who commit their time and energy, often at considerable personal cost, to the nurture and support of God's children so that each one is assisted to more nearly become all that God intended them to be.

3) The seminaries of the church need to continue to train pastors to understand their relationship to congregation schools. A suggested text is *The Pastor and the Lutheran School*.

4) Continued concern is needed for all the children of our land, whether in public or private, that all may receive the best possible education.

5) The call of Jesus to care for his children is new every day. God will surely continue to bless those

who exercise this care of children and their families through Lutheran schools.