

**Today's WELS LES—An Evangelism Opportunity**  
[Written for PT341—Theology and Practice of Evangelism. 12 Feb 2002]  
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The Lutheran Elementary School (LES) itself cannot be studied alone. The LES remains a branch of a larger entity, the congregation, and must be studied in such a light. Therefore the church and its overall mission must be reviewed before a proper evaluation of the LES as an outreach arm of the congregation can be made.

What is the mission of the Church? Jesus himself answers that question in the great commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19,20). Our Savior’s command then dictates the two-fold mission and purpose of the Church. First, Christ’s church is to make disciples of all nations by sharing the gospel in Word and sacrament with all nations. Secondly, Christ’s church is to keep on teaching those who by the grace of God have been made Jesus’ disciples by continually serving them with the Word. David Valleskey clearly makes this point as he establishes the mission of the church based on Mathew 28:19,20 in *We Believe—Therefore We Speak*, an evangelism textbook:

They were to make people Jesus’ disciples by employing the means of grace (baptism in particular), through which the Holy Spirit creates faith. And then they were to help people grow as disciples as, through the Word, they taught them to obey, to guard, and to hold fast to everything Jesus had commanded, i.e. all of his Word.<sup>1</sup>

The Church has the responsibility, as its mission and purpose, both to reach out with the gospel and to nurture with the gospel.

As part of the Church on earth, each local congregation plays a role in carrying out the mission of the Church. Under the guidance of its fulltime called worker(s), the local

congregation feeds its members the only food that will cause faith to grow, the gospel (Rom 10:17). As promised by God, the Holy Spirit works through the Word and the sacraments to edify congregational members. Recognizing its responsibilities to the lost and unchurched in the area, the congregation will also be faithful to its mission by reaching out with that same powerful gospel. Thus the “church is faithful to Christ’s commission to make disciples of all nations, both when it reaches out to unbelievers with the means of grace, and when it nurtures believers with the same means.”<sup>2</sup>

Through the fulfilling of the mission of the Church, each congregation is equipping its individual members to do mission work. As Valleskey phrases it: “nurture fuels evangelism . . . Nurture also equips for evangelism.”<sup>3</sup> The key to creating a healthy active group of evangelists is creating, through the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, a healthy group of believers. The strong faith of a congregation cannot help but show itself in its desire to share what God has shared with the congregation. The gospel creates evangelists as St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God (2 Corinthians 4:13-15).

One of the many ways in which this grace overflows in thanksgiving is through the members of a congregation reaching out to more and more people with the gospel.

These gospel-made evangelists then seek out opportunities to do just that, share the gospel. This takes place on two different levels: on the congregational level and the individual

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<sup>1</sup> Valleskey, *We Believe—Therefore We Speak*, . 128.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

level. As a congregation, God's people establish evangelism committees, plan and organize outreach events, and reach out through regular public worship. They recognize the need to evangelize, the opportunities to evangelize, and use the gifts given to them as a congregation to share God's Word. As a united front, the congregation remains faithful to its mission by reaching out in these and other ways.

Individual members, on the other hand, often utilize much more informal means of evangelism to carry out their mission as evangelists. Much like a congregation, the individual also begins by identifying opportunities to reach out with the gospel. The first step is often considered to be identifying a personal mission field. "A helpful first step in establishing relationships is to identify one's personal mission field. Studies have shown that a typical church member has on the average six to eight unchurched friends or acquaintances . . . this is the Christian's personal mission field."<sup>4</sup> Once that mission field has been identified the individual, empowered by the powerful message of the gospel and taught by the congregation, shares the gospel with those within his or her own personal mission field. By doing so the individual, along with the congregation is faithful to his or her mission to which Christ has called him or her.

So far, the mission of the Church on earth, the individual congregation, and the individual Christian have been reviewed. What does this have to do with the LES as an outreach arm of the congregation? Everything! The LES is just another extension of the congregation. And as such it shares the same mission as the Church, the congregation, and the individual Christian. The mission of the LES is to make new disciples and to train existing disciples in the truth of God's Word. As Valleskey put in an essay, *An Evangelical Perspective of the Lutheran Elementary School*, "Theoretically speaking, it would be difficult to reach any other conclusion . . . , namely, that the Lutheran elementary school, as part of the congregation, exists for the same reason as the

congregation, and therefore that outreach will be part of its purpose for existence.”<sup>5</sup> Another Lutheran pastor is quoted in that same essay saying: “I see the Lutheran elementary school as simply another facet of the ministry of the Word. It is all part of the function of the church. So if we believe one of the facets of the church is to reach out to the unchurched . . . that is also part of the school’s purpose.”<sup>6</sup> Although any responsible Christian will avoid greatly compromising the nurture aspect of the mission and purpose of the LES, the outreach potential of the LES cannot be overlooked.

The LES therefore is one of many tools the Church has at its disposal to carry out the Great Commission. Utilizing the LES as an outreach arm of the congregation will only be successful (humanly speaking) if there is member support of this evangelism effort. The congregation as a whole must be educated to understand the validity of viewing the LES as means for outreach as well as a means for nurture. This goes back to instilling a mission mindset among the members of the congregation through the study of God’s Word. Only when the Holy Spirit has created a desire and a zeal for mission work through the Word will a congregation see the LES as an opportunity for evangelism. All the human persuasion in the world will not open hearts, minds, and eyes to the mission potential of the LES. Only a mission mindset created in the heart by the Holy Spirit will lead a heart to want to share Jesus with other people in this way.

Once the particular mission field of the LES has been identified, the workers within the school itself are trained to instill a mission mindset within all involved in the school. Among this group are the pastor, the board of education, the teachers, parents and the students. The pastor will educate his people about all the wonderful outreach opportunities a LES provides through

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>5</sup> Valleskey, David J. “An Evangelism Perspective of the Lutheran Elementary School.” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File: 1987. p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 3.

his sermons, bible classes, and the meetings he attends. The board of education as well will see to it that the faculty, the parents and congregation remain always aware of their responsibility both to nurture and reach out.

The LES teachers have a unique role in establishing the LES as an outreach tool. They will teach the young evangelists, the students. They will witness face to face to unchurched children through, devotions, bible history lessons, and prayer. And they will also model evangelism for their students as they interact with unchurched students and parents. Pastor Anthony Schultz emphasizes the importance of modeling and providing opportunities for our children to witness in a presentation entitled “Training Children to Witness”. In this presentation he addressed Sunday school teachers, but the application to LES teachers is clearly seen. He states:

I believe our kids by the time they get this age (primary to intermediate grades) do not necessarily need someone to tell how to share their faith, but what we can do is alert them to opportunities . . . to seize opportunities . . . to not miss the chances God gives to us to tell someone about Jesus . . . and these opportunities are really countless.<sup>7</sup>

On all levels and in every aspect of the LES, opportunities to foster a mission mindset among all members of the congregation abound.

If the mission mindset will be emphasized as described above, and the LES will be recognized as an outreach arm or extension of the congregation, a few practical concerns must be addressed as a congregation prepares to use its LES to reach out to the unchurched? *We Believe—Therefore We Speak*, as well as the previously mentioned essay, “An Evangelical Perspective of the Lutheran Elementary School”, both offer a number of guidelines:

1. Be properly motivated.
2. Emphasize your philosophy, aims and purpose.
3. Present the message of salvation to the family.

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<sup>7</sup> WELS Board for Parish Education. “Training Children to Witness.” [video]

4. Discuss doctrinal differences.
5. Do careful screening.
6. Make clear the way the school operates.
7. Expect church and Sunday school attendance.
8. Secure agreement to participate in the Bible information class.
9. Specify annual enrollment.
10. Take care how you advertise.
11. Keep non-member families informed about church events.
12. Maintain a close relationship with the pastor and/or evangelism committee.
13. Remember these are souls for whom Jesus died.<sup>8</sup>

The foundation has already been established—Christians, motivated by the gospel, want to reach out to the unchurched in this specific mission field. This excludes all other motivation. The mission mindset of the congregation leaves no room for the desire to increase enrollment or to gain financial security through opening the school doors to the unchurched in the neighborhood.<sup>9</sup> The LES exists only for two reasons: to nurture and to reach out with the gospel.

When the purpose for the existence of the LES and the mission of the LES have been clearly stated up front, little room for erroneous thinking on the part of non-member parents and students remains. This one guideline addresses a number of the guidelines listed above. The parents will be informed that the LES does not exist primarily or simply as a private school. Because the LES is not a private school, the parents will understand their child will be held responsible for bible history lessons, memory work, and church and Sunday school attendance. They will know up front that attendance on their part at a Bible information class will be either required or expected of them. They will be made aware that the pastor, the board of education, the principal, the faculty, and the congregation all work together to fulfill the mission of the school. They will be advised that these are the channels through which they will communicate concerns and receive their information regarding how and why the school is run the way it is. It is also the responsibility of the congregation to ensure their advertising says the same as their

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<sup>8</sup> Valleskey, *We Believe—Therefore We Speak*, 209,210.

mission statement. An ill-phrased ad or misleading sign could distort both the invitation to attend the LES and the purpose for which the school exists.

A second main guideline gleaned from the list above is to do careful screening. The pastor, principal, and the board of education all working together provide an appropriate “screening committee.” The use of an application for enrollment or applicant questionnaires<sup>10</sup> may also prove helpful in the screening process. Through proper screening different potential problems can be detected early: Are the parents and possibly even the child running away from a problem they caused at a previous school? Does the child have a specific need (physical, psychological, or mental) the LES staff may not be able to adequately meet? Are the parents looking for a miracle solution to a deep-rooted problem? These are all concerns *We Believe—Therefore We Speak* addresses. To disregard the warning to install a direct screening process can potentially cause major, and sometimes, easily avoided problems.

One other major area of concern is addressed by this list—how to maintain a relationship with the family before, during, and following the child’s enrollment in the LES. Remembering these are souls for whom Christ died (# 13) truly is the key to ensuring that the congregation pays proper attention to its prospect families. Keeping the families informed, involved and welcomed will naturally flow from love and concern for their souls. The subject of retention and assimilation will remain high on the priority list of a congregation that seriously considers the LES to be an outreach tool of the congregation.

The LES theoretically, and on paper, is a valid means for reaching out with the gospel. If a mission mindset is fostered among the members of the congregation, and the nurture of its members and its own students enrolled in the LES is not neglected, the LES brings with it a great

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>10</sup> See addenda for example of a sample form.

potential to further the evangelism efforts of a congregation. Finally then, the question remains—practically speaking, does today’s LES have its own valid mission field? The trends in today’s society say, yes there is a mission field for which the LES is uniquely designed.

A trend that began as far back as the 1980’s is a growing concern on the part of parents for their children’s welfare and how their child’s education may be affecting it.

The (LES) in many cases has become or has the potential to become a vital part of the congregation’s program of outreach because it meets a felt need. People are interested in their children’s welfare. The church in its school offers an agency that many parents perceive to be in the best interests of their children’s welfare. The church is thus able, through its school, to meet the parents at their point of perceived need.<sup>11</sup>

This same trend shows itself today. The following statements are taken from a current website designed to communicate information about private schooling in America:

Private School Enrollment Continues to Climb. September 2001 – Six million students—11.4 percent of the nation’s K-12 population—attended private elementary and secondary schools in 1999, according to officials at the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES). Since 1989, the private school enrollment figure has risen 15.8 percent.<sup>12</sup>

To say the LES has no mission field is to deny clear statistics that show private school enrollment is on the rise. This holds true in part because a growing number of parents feel their children could get a better education in a private school rather than in a public school. A survey conducted by Public Agenda, a research organization based in New York City, reports those findings:

Survey Finds Public Likes Private Schools . . . One prominent example: 66 percent of respondents think independent schools do a better job encouraging moral and spiritual development, 9 percent think public schools do better. . . In another section of the survey, participants were asked how well certain words describe independent schools. The adjectives the public most strongly associates with such schools are *structured, safe, selective, personalized, caring, responsive, rigorous, and comfortable*. . . Specifically, 30 percent of those polled said they

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<sup>11</sup> Valleskey, “An Evangelism Perspective of the Lutheran Elementary School.” p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> The information in this survey was reported at [www.capenet.org/facts.html](http://www.capenet.org/facts.html).

would choose independent schools, a response the report's authors called "profound" because independent schools currently serve only about 1 percent of K-12 students in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Although the survey included all private schools including Catholic, nonsectarian, Baptist, Jewish and others, the fact remains, private schooling fills a perceived need among today's parents. This is the major point of contact, the bridge that leads prospect families to the church doors. Not only has God reserved a clear mission field specifically for the LES, but he also has set it up in such a way that prospects themselves initiate the first contact.

This trend has proved true among WELS Lutheran elementary schools. According to the *School Statistics 2000-2001*, enrollment among non-members and mission prospects is increasing:

When you look at LES enrollments synod-wide, 23,511 students (80%) are members of the sponsoring congregation, 2,450 (8.3%) are members of other WELS congregations, 60 (.2%) are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), 2,047 (7.0%) belong to Christian congregations not in our fellowship and 1,356 (4.5%) are mission prospects, or children with no church affiliation.<sup>14</sup>

According to these numbers, there are 1,356 children who are hearing devotions, being taught bible history facts, and who are being taught how and to whom to pray.

This number of children becomes even more important when the overall potential number of contact points is considered. If every child has at least one parent interested in his or her child's education, that brings that number up to 2,712 souls brought into contact with a WELS congregation. Hypothetically speaking, if each of those people mentions their relationship with a WELS LES to its 6 to 8 friends without a church home, our church body through its schools could possibly come away with 16,000-21,000 points of contact throughout the country.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> WELS Commission on Parish Schools, *School Statistics 2000-2001*, 17.

Although these statistics are merely numbers, they do serve to illustrate the potential the WELS has to reach out through its LES program.

There are two ways then to proceed after having studied today's LES as an outreach arm of the congregation. The evangelism potential of the LES can be ignored and the school can be operated as a means to nurture existing faith. Or the LES can be utilized to make contacts within a very specific and plentiful mission field. The proper step is to educate the members of WELS congregations who find themselves in an area where the public desires private education. Show to all the potential for outreach through the LES. Demonstrate how each member of a congregation has an opportunity to express his or her thankfulness by allowing his or her faith to show forth by supporting the outreach efforts of his or her LES so more and more may share in their joy (2 Corinthians 4:13ff).

However, just as it is foolish to begin any effort without prayerful consideration and study, WELS congregations also will plan wisely before jumping into such a mission venture. They will consider whether or not other areas of ministry (such as nurture) will greatly suffer if such a program is implemented. Will accepting more and more prospects draw a congregation and its focus from the great commission to numbers and private education income alone? These and other concerns will be studied with the help of the Holy Spirit, fellow congregations who have gone forward with similar programs, as well as with the help of the Synod itself.

Is the LES an extension of the local congregation? Yes it is. Can and does God use the LES as a means of reaching out to the unchurched? Yes he does. Will every LES produce the many, idealistic and theoretical prospects that will one day become members of WELS congregation? Possibly and perhaps probably not. However, when carefully and prayerfully used to carry out the mission of the Great Commission, God has shown in the past and present he

will use today's Lutheran elementary schools, and the message they proclaim, as affective outreach tools for WELS congregations as he sees fit.

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