

Lutheran Schools and Alienated Pastors

There was a time when virtually every LCMS pastor could point to the schools of synod and, with chest thumping pride, speak of them as the crown jewels of the church. The parochial school was understood as a near indispensable part of a congregation's work in fulfilling Matthew 28. In 1955 Synod's Secretary of Schools, August Stellhorn, wrote that the Lutheran parochial school was "the workshop of the Holy Spirit by means of the Word, the powerful means for the enlightenment, establishment, and sanctification of His children."¹ It was a sentiment with which almost every pastor in Synod could whole heartedly agree.

Such a pride is difficult to find these days. It is not unusual to hear pastors complain of the school as a burden on the congregational budget, teachers who do not want pastors in the classroom, and methods and materials that are less than satisfactory when placed under the lens of theology. Far from seeing the parochial school as an indispensable part of the congregation's educational work, pastors today will often speak with measured relief that their parish does not have a school.

Certainly there are many reasons for this. A declining birthrate means fewer parish children enrolled in schools, societal changes have resulted in parents who are less committed to a Christian education for their children, and the rising cost of education has made the a parochial school much more expensive. However, while these are certainly contributing factors, they fail to adequately explain the pastor's detachment. A major factor that need to be addressed is the nature of the educational philosophy which came to dominated Lutheran education in the 20th century.

In the second half of the 19th century, government-run education was just beginning to take hold in America. In order to justify itself -- and the public funds it required -- it developed the argument that education was a science that could be studied and researched just like any other science. This was a radical idea. Prior to this, education had always been the domain of the church. It was a firmly established principle that education and theology were inseparably bound together. Education formed a student's mind and thinking in order to allow him or her to grasp the theology of the church. The new American educators argued the opposite. Education was an objective science of learning completely detached from theology. The myth was thus propagated that what a student learned had nothing to do what confessed. Teachers could do their thing while the pastor did his.

¹ August Stellhorn, "School System in Motion", *The Lutheran Witness* p. 75 (September 1956)

This meant that Lutherans could freely adopt the methods and philosophies of secular educationalists. Teachers could be trained basically the same way that teachers were trained for government-run schools, and state licensure became a more important stamp of approval than that given by the church via its system of synodical training. All that mattered was that the content was theologically correct. But therein lies the rub. If the methods, philosophies, and pedagogies were essentially the same as those used in the government-run schools – which were much better funded and had the most up to date resources – and if teachers were trained according to the same standards as those teaching in government-run schools, then why should a congregation continue to support a parochial school? Why should parents send their children to such a school? And why should pastors take an active interest in the type of educational philosophies that were employed in the school? They were, after all, “scientifically based” and he was a theologian. If it was just a matter of content, then surely that could be taught to the children through Sunday School, Confirmation Class, and the like, without the expense of running a Lutheran Day School.

It was a myth nevertheless. In reality, the educationalists of the 20th century were not driven by the pursuit of objective scientific truth, but by their own confessions which were militantly against the Christian faith. For example, John Dewey, often considered the father of modern American education, despised the church which he viewed as an “intolerant superiority on the part of the few and an intolerable burden on the part of the many.”² Similar biases can be found in all the influencers of 20th-century education including Jean Piaget, Maria Montessori, Erik Erikson and the like. They all desired to extirpate the historic position that orthodox Christian theology should govern and regulate educational philosophy and methodology.

Over the past 20 years, there has been a growing number of pastors, teachers, and laity who have reassessed the paradigms of 20th-century Lutheran education and have found them wanting. The result is that they have searched for a new approach – one that intentionally lets theology exert her historic voice in the field of education. That search has taken them to the pedagogical model that has served the church well for almost two millennia: the classical Liberal Arts. The Liberal Arts is an educational model originating in classical antiquity that is designed to produce thoughtful, well-rounded members of society, no matter what their station in life may be. Its hallmark is its very deliberate order

² Dewey, John. *The Human Nature and Conduct: and Introduction to Social Psychology* Henry Holt and Company 1922. p. 331

of learning. The lower arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric prepare students with the basic skills needed to pursue the higher arts of math, astronomy, geometry and music.

In the 16th century, Lutherans took this classical approach to education and incorporated it with the theological truths of the reformation. The result was that the church produced thoughtful, intelligent and well-rounded Christians who lived out their faith in Christ with love for their neighbor. The Lutheran Liberal Arts equipped students not only with knowledge, but also with the tools to think critically and logically, to question and debate new ideas, and defend and confess their faith in Christ boldly. Over the past two decades, this model of classical Lutheran education has been revived and adapted to the realities of the 21st-century classroom.

The growth of this interest a classical Lutheran Liberal Art education has been nothing short of remarkable. Grass-roots organizations such as the Consortium of Classical Lutheran Education (CCLE) have developed in order to support and promote those who wish to build education upon this model. CCLE-accredited schools are now recognized by the National Lutheran Schools Association. Classical Lutheran Education has come to be seen as an educationally responsible and theologically cohesive approach to teaching the children of the church.

As the number of schools seeking to be “classical” has grown, so has the need for teachers who are trained to teach in those schools. In response to that need, the LCMS, meeting in convention in 2016, adopted Resolution 7-05A: *To Endorse Roster Status for Graduates of Classical Liberal Studies and Other Teacher Education Programs*. This resolution endorsed programs of classical training at several Concordia University System (CUS) institutions and called for the development of standards for graduates of these programs in the area of teacher education. The resolution also seeks the development of a track for roster status of these graduates. In response to this resolution, a committee was appointed by the CUS Board of Directors to develop a set of standards for these classical teacher training programs. The result was a list of 6 core competencies that every student graduating from a CUS Classical Education program is required to meet in order to be certified as a rostered classical education teacher. To date, programs have been established at Concordia University Chicago, Concordia University Wisconsin, and Concordia University Irvine.

Recognizing the need to provide scholarship around this movement, Concordia University Chicago has established the Center for the Advancement of Lutheran Liberal Arts (CALLA). An essential component of CALLA’s mission is to foster the academic development of classical education in the

context of the Lutheran confession. To further that mission, CALLA draws together scholars and educators from colleges and universities who appreciate the value of a classical education in the 21st century.

CALLA also reaches out to classical Christian educators who share a commitment to the historic confessions of the Christian church. While valuing the work accomplished within other confessional circles, CALLA seeks to act as a unique institution that strengthens the classical Christian educational community by exerting a distinctive Lutheran voice.

There are different ways to measure a school's success: enrollment numbers, financial stability, and grade scores, to name a few. These are certainly desirable qualities. After all, who doesn't want a school that is well funded? But they cannot be the hallmark of a successful Lutheran school. We Lutherans must look where the Evangelical church has always looked: to its theology. This is what classical Lutheran education seeks to do. I believe that we are only at the beginning of this recovery. As the colleges and schools of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod unpack our own rich educational heritage, we will find inspiration for developing a renewed educational voice that will benefit the entire church.

Thomas Korcok, PhD, is an associate professor of theology at Concordia University Chicago and director of the Center for the Advancement of Lutheran Liberal Arts. He is the author of *Lutheran Education: From Wittenberg to the Future*. Dr. Korcok has been instrumental in developing Concordia-Chicago's emphasis on Classical Education. For more information go to Cuchicago.edu/CALLA.