

# Is There Hope for Lutheran Education in the Inner City?

Marlene Lund

## Introduction

Lutherans have a long tradition of supporting education. Martin Luther's letter "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" (1524) was written in response to the decline of church-run schools. Luther saw the reform movement as a way to affirm the responsibility of parents, the church, and the public authorities to ensure the education of all children. Luther said, "A city's best and greatest welfare, safety, and strength consist rather in its having many able, learned, wise, honorable, and well-educated citizens."<sup>1</sup> Luther, Melancthon, and other reformers paved the way in advocating for a strong classical education for all regardless of wealth or stature.

When Lutherans came to the United States, they brought with them a desire to educate their children in church-run schools. When Henry Melchior Muhlenberg arrived in America in 1742, he was to assist the development of Lutheran churches and schools in Pennsylvania. Eight years later, his travels along the eastern seaboard took him to New York, where the first Lutheran school, St. Matthew, was established in 1752. Unfortunately, like many other struggling inner-city schools, St. Matthew closed its doors in 2005 after 253 years of ministry.

The determination to establish schools was even greater in the Midwest, settled by the Saxon Lutherans. "So important were church schools to them that when they organized what is now The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod the establishment and support of congregation parochial schools was listed as one of the primary purposes for the establishment of the Synod."<sup>2</sup>

When the public school movement began in 1821, Lutherans took two different paths. Older eastern denominations and more recent Scandinavian immigrant groups tended to favor strong public schools and saw the parochial school system as unnecessary. However, both The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod continued to advocate for and support congregation-based schools. This practice continues today.

According to their websites, congregations of the LCMS currently operate 880

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*Marlene Lund serves as the Executive Director of the Center for Urban Education Ministries. Marlene has served for forty-two years in Lutheran education and continues to dedicate her vocational life to urban education and to equity for all children.*

elementary schools and over 1,200 early-childhood centers and preschools, serving approximately 200,000 students. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America operates over 1,500 early-childhood centers, elementary and high schools. While many fewer in number, WELS also continues to operate and support schools.

Simply stated, a quality education is a way out of poverty. While many Lutheran schools continue to flourish, the sad fact is that many of the Lutheran schools located in the inner city have either closed or are in serious jeopardy of closing, often with enrollments of under one hundred students. Many factors contribute to the closing of inner-city Lutheran schools, including the strained economy, the loss of called teachers to the workforce, the rise of charter schools, declining church membership, and a loss of denominational loyalty. Churches need to be enmeshed in their local communities to thrive. Schools were and are one important way to accomplish that goal to make the church stronger.

Churches and schools can and must continue to serve the underserved in our cities by strengthening programs, using new methodologies, and embracing change.

I believe that innovation and change, although seen by some as a path worse than death, are the answers to our current dilemma. In 2008, the Center for Urban Education Ministries embarked upon a path to research schools that have proven sustainable while remaining true to their missions. Through this effort, called the Charlie Project, we conducted over two hundred interviews and site visits in many faith-based and private schools. The Charlie Project came to several conclusions:

- Governance structures for Lutheran schools must be changed so that schools are not dependent upon individual congregations for their survival.
- Alternative means of support, in addition to tuition, are required to sustain a school.
- Parents are savvy consumers and expect quality, innovative programs from schools.
- Lutheran schools need to be open to children and families of all faiths, no faith, and all incomes.
- New models and alternative designs must be explored in order to offer Lutheran education in inner-city areas.

Over the last seven years of work, several models for sustainable Lutheran education opportunities have emerged:

### **Philanthropic Model**

This model encourages congregations without schools to “adopt” a school in the inner city and to support it with volunteers and finances. The model entails a concerted effort at development and engagement and requires a dedicated staff

person to build and to maintain these relationships. An example of this model is Holy Family Lutheran School in Chicago, which serves children living in a high-poverty area. The school has a large portion of its budget supported through philanthropy. This model assumes that Lutheran churches embrace and believe, as did the Lutherans of old, that education is an important part of our heritage and vocation.

### **Lutheran-supported charter schools with wrap around programs**

Charter schools have become a growing part of the educational landscape. They are often located in the inner city and are sometimes blamed for the demise of traditional Lutheran schools. Some have shown excellent results, while some have been criticized for failing to produce significant progress for their students. The fact is that many parents who are struggling financially will never be able to afford a quality education that requires tuition payments. Charter schools led by Lutheran groups have proven a successful model for providing a quality education for children living in the inner city. Educational Enterprises Inc., a group led by Lutherans, has opened several charter schools in both Phoenix and in St. Louis. At the Lutheran-led charter schools in Phoenix, students in the EEI system for two or more years outperformed the local districts' average by more than 15 percent on state tests. The St. Louis schools are located in what were closed Lutheran school buildings. Both the Phoenix schools and the churches who own the properties in St. Louis are able to offer faith-based after-school programs to the children who attend the charter school. While many believe this is not the ideal solution, it enables us to serve our communities by providing a free, i.e., subsidized, quality education to underserved children while still being able to share the Gospel, albeit at a different time and in a different way.

### **Specialized Schools**

Lutheran schools that serve special populations are ways to continue our Lutheran call to educate, but to do it in a very specialized way. For example, Lutheran Social Services of New York operates the New Life School, which serves students ages 8–21 (grades 3–12) whose educational and emotional needs cannot be met in a mainstream classroom setting. The students are taught in small groups and have shown remarkable progress to date. In addition, the Safe Haven Program, which also meets at the New Life School, serves children who have entered the United States as unaccompanied minors and who are either awaiting placement in foster care or to be reunited with their families. This school offers these children, who are often traumatized, hope for the future. In both instances, we follow our Lutheran call to educate and serve a very important niche in the alternative-education world.

## **Networks**

The cost of operating a traditional Lutheran school can be streamlined by centralizing functions such as tuition collection, purchasing, human resources, and curriculum development. Lutheran Urban Mission Initiative (LUMIN) operates six schools in Milwaukee, WI, which share their mission, vision, and resources. It is often difficult for individual congregations to let go of the control of their school. However, this model has proven to be extremely effective for the churches that have adopted this model.

## **After-school Programs**

Churches can also provide educational opportunities for their local public, Lutheran, or faith-based schools by operating innovative and effective after-school programs. One example is the McClintock Partners program in Charlotte, NC. In 2007, the church decided to adopt their local middle school, which, over the years, has led to an amazing ministry of volunteerism, special clubs, family nights, mentoring, etc. According to their website, the mission for McPIE is “to ensure that McClintock students have access to the support, opportunities, and resources which will provide them with the best education available anywhere and to ensure their future, life-long success in the twenty-first century world. We seek to create a sense of community centered on the school and to build social capital between people from different socioeconomic, educational, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.”<sup>3</sup> While not providing a traditional educational setting, these volunteers help change the lives of children through the sharing of their individual expertise and enthusiasm.

## **Blended Learning Model**

The Center for Urban Education is currently involved in a pilot program with four Lutheran schools around the country. This model, called “blended learning,” is one that can cut budget costs, increase test scores, help close the achievement gap, and provide an increase in student motivation. Ultimately, this approach could be a deciding factor in whether these schools and the kind of education they provide will be available at mid-century. Due primarily to funding concerns, Lutheran schools have not kept pace with advances in technology. Now, Lutheran schools have an opportunity to be proactive and to get ahead of the technology curve by adopting a blended learning model.

Blended learning, according to the Clayton Christopher Institute for Disruptive Innovation, is “a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through the online delivery of content and instruction, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace and at least in part a supervised brick and mortar location away from home.”<sup>4</sup> Blended learning is not just an initiative to make room for technology, but a fundamental redesign of instruction, using the technology

already available. Christopher posits that blended learning will lead to a systemic change in education, producing new school models, staffing structures, schedules, and resource allocation. It changes the factory model of education in order to meet the needs of twenty-first-century learners of many different types and abilities. An example of this model, which has been extremely successful, is Amazing Grace Christian School in Seattle. This Lutheran school, which closed its doors due to low enrollment, reopened as a model blended learning school. The school has become extremely successful and has recently added a high school to accommodate the students who wish to continue their education at Amazing Grace. They accomplish this all in an innovative, cost-effective, Lutheran environment.

## **Summary**

Lutherans have a long history of advocating for and providing high quality education for children. There is hope for Lutheran education in the inner city, but only if we recommit to Martin Luther's call to educate all children. This means that we must be willing to change and to innovate, to open our hearts and our purses. For too long, the church has retreated from our inner cities. Taking a stand and putting our efforts into creating innovative models for Lutheran education are essential for the health and welfare of our children and our communities. "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." We need to teach our children to fish!

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" (1524) in *Luther's Works, Vol. 45: The Christian in Society II*, eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 356.

<sup>2</sup> M. Kieschnick, "A brief history of Lutheran schools," *Lutheran Partners*, 22 (2), (2006, March/April): 38ff.

<sup>3</sup> <http://christelca.org/ministries/change-the-world/mcpie/>.

<sup>4</sup> "What is blended learning?" [www.christenseninstitute.org/blended-learning](http://www.christenseninstitute.org/blended-learning).