

# **Research Update: The Lutheran Elementary School, Early Childhood Education, and Congregational Ministry Focus**

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Every congregation has a limited amount of capital to invest in ministry. The concept of “capital” can be understood in terms of the financial, facilities, personnel, program, and energy resources that are devoted to the overall ministry of the congregation. How these capital resources are gathered and allocated determines the ministry focus of the congregation.

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Dr. Alan C. Klaas, Vice President for Institutional Advancement at Concordia University—River Forest, and also a consultant for Mission Growth Ministries, a firm specializing in providing counsel and coaching for ministry, has observed that there are two major categories of Lutheran congregation with respect to their primary focus of ministry. After years of church consulting, he has concluded that there are those churches in which the primary focus of ministry is outward and is aimed at reaching the lost with the gospel. Fewer than 20 percent of all WELS and LCMS churches would fit in this category. The second category is made up of those congregations in which the primary focus of ministry is on serving current members. This group, which comprises roughly 80 percent of Lutheran churches, is made up of two roughly equal subgroups: those that desire to be more outreach oriented but aren't, and those that are very content being inwardly focused.

## **Lutheran Elementary Schools**

Ongoing research at *CHARIS* dealing with Lutheran elementary school enrollments triggered a question related to the extent to which congregations are outwardly focused. At a time when elementary school enrollments are declining and baptized and communicant memberships are down, Bible class attendance and adult confirmations are up. Trying to understand the causes for the precipitous decline in LES enrollments has engaged the attention of *CHARIS* and others who fear the long-term ramifications on Lutheran high school and college enrollments.

Maintaining a Lutheran elementary school requires a significant outlay of human and financial resources and requires the allocation and maintenance of substantial physical property. In addition to providing excellent Christian education, these elementary schools also provide athletics, music, and dramatic opportunities, as well as other co-curricular programs.

The question occurred to us regarding the amount of “capital” required to support an LES and the extent to which it contributes to a diminished emphasis on gospel outreach into the community. The hypothesis was generated that those congregations that support a Lutheran elementary school are less likely to have a strong emphasis on outreach and evangelism. We supposed that the amount of energy that had to be devoted to supporting an LES took away from the overall ministry energy of a congregation. We further supposed that parents and others in a congregation with an LES were naturally drawn into the programs and activities associated with a school, thereby creating a primary focus of ministry that was inwardly directed.

## **Variables**

To determine if a correlation exists between the presence of an LES and gospel outreach, we defined the dependent and independent variables for a regression analysis to determine if performance in one variable could predict performance in the other. Consequently, we simply defined the “ministry emphasis” of the congregation in terms of the number of students enrolled in the Lutheran elementary school. We defined outreach as the number of adults confirmed during the same year. We used the 2004 data from the WELS Statistical Report.

## **Methods**

Regression analysis is a statistical technique that allows the researcher to determine the extent to which variance attributable to one variable is able to predict the variance associated with one or more other variables. In this study, we wanted to know if enrollments in Lutheran elementary schools were able to predict the number of adult confirmations in a year. We reasoned that the larger the enrollment, the more congregational energy would have to be devoted to supporting and maintaining that form of Christian education, and the less capital would be expended in outreach to the community as measured by adult confirmations. We made the same prediction with respect to early childhood programs, but this subject will be treated later in this report.

## **Findings**

Using the data from the 2004 WELS Statistical Report, we conducted a regression analysis using “Lutheran Elementary School Enrollment” as the independent (constant) variable, and “Adult Confirmation” as the dependent variable. Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical software, we were able to obtain an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and a report of coefficients. The amount of variance calculated in the ANOVA was significant at the  $p < .01$  level. Table 1 (at the end of this report) demonstrates this level of significance with an “F” of 15.551 and a significance level of .000.

Calculating the coefficients for the two variables yielded a correlation of -3.944. This negative correlation means that there is an inverse relationship between the two variables. The data is reported in Table 2 at the end of this report. This correlation coefficient is also significant at the  $p < .01$  level. This would seem to support the hypothesis that the more ministry energy that is put into Lutheran elementary schools, the less is allocated toward evangelism and outreach.

## **Early Childhood Education**

Enrollments in early childhood programs have been growing steadily in both the WELS and the LCMS over the past decade. Many congregations have envisioned these programs as a means to serve the community and to function as an early point of contact with families that might not have a church home. Still other congregations have considered early childhood programs as necessary precursors to the LES. We decided to test the assumption that early childhood programs promoted evangelism and outreach by performing the same statistical analysis, this time using early childhood program enrollments as predictors of adult confirmations.

## **Findings**

Not only do early childhood programs not promote evangelism and outreach, they too are negatively correlated with adult confirmations. As shown in Table 3 at the end of this report, the ANOVA yielded an “F” of 6.178 and a statistical significance between the variables of 0.013. Calculating the

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coefficients for the two variables yielded a negative correlation, -2.486, which was significant at the  $p < .01$  level. The regression analysis is shown in Table 4 at the end of this report.

What this means is that early childhood programs are also inversely related to adult confirmations. If such programs were successful in attracting unchurched families to use the programs and facilities provided by such centers, one would expect to see a positive correlation. Instead, we generalize that these programs also represent a consumption of ministry energy that detracts from, rather than supports, evangelism and outreach.

### **LES and Early Childhood**

If the enrollments of both elementary schools and early childhood programs are negatively correlated to adult confirmations, then what is the relationship between the early childhood program enrollments and the Lutheran elementary school enrollments? We hypothesized that early childhood programs exist primarily to serve the same parents who will eventually enroll their children in the congregation's parish school. In other words, even though the overall enrollment in early childhood programs has been increasing steadily in the WELS while the LES enrollments have been declining, we have concluded that this growth is due to the number of such programs being added each year and not due to enrolling children from outside the congregation.

To test our hypothesis, we conducted a third regression analysis to determine if early childhood enrollments would serve as predictors of Lutheran Elementary School enrollments. The ANOVA yielded an "F" of 658.010, which was significant at the  $p < .01$  level. This analysis is provided in Table 5 at the end of this report. The correlation coefficients test yielded a "t" score of 25.652, which was also significant at the  $p < .01$  level. This strong positive correlation indicated to us that early childhood programs are primarily serving the children of the congregation and are not effective in outreach into the community. The regression analysis is shown in Table 6 at the end of this report.

### **Discussion**

At the outset of this report we discussed the "capital" needed to support various forms of ministry in a congregation. We also shared an unscientific framework for identifying the primary ministry focus of a congregation. We theorized that congregations that were primarily "outreach" focused are those in which the allocation of limited "capital" is directed at evangelism and community outreach. We suspected that congregations that maintain formal educational programs, facilities, and staffs devoted exclusively to those enterprises were more likely to be inwardly focused and would be more likely to allocate their "capital" toward serving their own members.

This statistical analysis of the available data from WELS congregations in 2004 supports our hypotheses.

We are not in any way suggesting that Lutheran congregations should discontinue their elementary school and/or early childhood programs. What we are suggesting is that congregations with such educational programs should be mindful of the impact those programs have on the disposition of congregations to engage in evangelism and outreach.

There has been much discussion in recent years about using the Lutheran elementary school as a vehicle for outreach. Similar sentiments have been expressed about early childhood programs such as preschool, four-year-old kindergarten, and day care. To date, the statistics would suggest that such discussions have not been reflected in reality. That is not to say that these forms of educational institution can't serve in that capacity. But other than in the inner city of Milwaukee where churches

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can participate in the Milwaukee Parental School Choice program, WELS congregations have not used their schools as means to serve a larger population.

We suspect that concerns over the application of the doctrine of church fellowship have much to do with the apparent reluctance to enroll non-WELS children in our schools. Whether this will change or not remains to be seen. The conclusion that can clearly be derived from the analysis undertaken in this study, however, is that congregations which desire to develop a primary focus of ministry that is outreach oriented are going to have to find ways to overcome the drain of energy capital by school programs. Such prioritizing is a difficult, but essential, task.

### TABLES

**Table 1. ANOVA(b): Lutheran Elementary School Enrollments and Adult Confirmation**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	373.269	1	373.269	15.551	.000(a)
	Residual	30219.113	1259	24.002		
	Total	30592.382	1260			

a Predictors: (Constant), Lutheran Elementary School enrollment

b Dependent Variable: Adult confirmation

**Table 2. Coefficients(a): Enrollment as a Predictor of Adult Confirmation**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.747	.176		21.283	.000
	Lutheran Elementary School enrollment	-.011	.003	-.110	-3.944	.000

a Dependent Variable: Adult confirmation

**Table 3. ANOVA(b): Early Childhood Enrollments and Adult Confirmations**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	149.381	1	149.381	6.178	.013(a)
	Residual	30443.001	1259	24.180		
	Total	30592.382	1260			

a Predictors: (Constant), Early Childhood enrollment

b Dependent Variable: Adult confirmation

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**Table 4. Coefficients(a): EC Enrollments as Predictors of Adult Confirmations**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.430	.146		23.500	.000
	Early Childhood enrollment	-.046	.018	-.070	-2.486	.013

a Dependent Variable: Adult confirmation

**Table 5. ANOVA(b): Early Childhood Enrollments and LES Enrollments**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1056856.583	1	1056856.583	658.010	.000(a)
	Residual	2057466.292	1281	1606.141		
	Total	3114322.875	1282			

a Predictors: (Constant), Early Childhood enrollment

b Dependent Variable: Lutheran Elementary School enrollment

**Table 6. Coefficients(a): EC Enrollments as Predictors of LES Enrollments**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	29.481	1.179		25.002	.000
	Early Childhood enrollment	3.855	.150	.583	25.652	.000

a Dependent Variable: Lutheran Elementary School enrollment