

## 2010 WLSTC Keynote Address Notes

Hope and a Future – Musings on Lutheran Schools in the 21st Century

Prof. Paul E. Koelpin

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**Program Description:** As the watchwords “downsizing,” “reduction” and “change” swirl about, those of us involved in Lutheran education may be searching for some sense of stability and identity. How does the Lutheran school fit into a “vision” for the future of the church? What is the purpose for the Lutheran school as the 21<sup>st</sup> century congregation carries out its ministry? We do well to remember that our “hope and future” rest in the hands of a changeless God. The “hope and future” that Jeremiah prophesied was directly connected to the gospel promise of a Savior. So too, Lutheran education must retain its commitment to teaching and modeling the critically vital message of repentance and faith.

[The following pages contain notes that were prepared to accompany a PowerPoint presentation. The assignment called for a presentation, not a paper, so the notes may not contain thoroughly measured thoughts or transitions. The bullets indicate shifts in thought. These notes may not include every concept or idea that was considered during the live presentation.]

### Introductory Comments

I need to make a disclaimer before I begin: I have not had the experience of teaching in a grade school classroom. And I have very little parish ministry experience with a school. That said, I am a product of Lutheran elementary school education (as are most of you). I greatly admired my teachers, and I honor the work that you do. In many ways your service is much more difficult than what I do as a professor at MLC. You have to deal with discipline and family issues that I don’t have to manage. And for many of you these issues have a way of almost displacing your teaching. I have great respect for the teachers I had as an elementary school student; my own children respect and love the teachers from whom they are privileged to learn. I presently teach at MLC – to say that I have a “vested interest” in the direction of Lutheran education would be something of an understatement. There is an interdependent relationship between our schools (the need for teachers) and MLC (the supplier of teachers). I need to ask myself: am I just championing an anachronistic way of serving people with the gospel?

I have used “musings” in the subtitle intentionally. It is my way of indicating that I will be “thinking out loud” – perhaps it is also my way of hoping that you will absolve me for any lack of organization or clarity or resolution. I will be making broad statements about schools and the place they have enjoyed in our church body – please understand that I cannot know or comment on every circumstance. My goal is to be both honest and encouraging. Some of what I say may apply to your situation(s); some perspectives may not. I have divided my thinking into exactly that: perspectives. This was my way of trying to grasp and divide the rather wide topic suggested by the Jeremiah passage as it related to Lutheran education. Each section suggests a different angle from which to address the conference theme.

It is my personal contention that we will need to review as much history as possible in order to evaluate the present and future of our Lutheran schools.

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---

### The “Jeremiad” – The prophet’s perspective

- What adjectives would you use to describe Jeremiah the prophet?
- I get the impression that many of us are feeling like Jeremiah. Recall that Jeremiah did not have an easy life as God’s prophet to a disobedient and disintegrating Jerusalem. His prophecies are full of lament – everything’s in moral decay, the people have lost their zeal, God has lost his patience with his wayward people. How did this happen? What went wrong?
- It can be helpful to ask the questions: Why did the people in Jeremiah’s time fall away? Are the temptations to apostasy relatively the same then and now? There is always the temptation to be attracted to the world. Everyone is charmed by the prospect of success. At the same time there is always a frustration with God when things don’t go the way one might want them to go.
- The modern word “jeremiad” is an eponymous word taken directly from Jeremiah’s name. It means to lament the decline and decay of what had in the past been solid and strong.
- Everything’s changing. Everything’s different! There is no stability anymore! Why do I do what I do?! Reflecting on the world around us has a way of bringing us down and making us anxious.

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### Issues of Change and Continuity – History's perspective

- Historians are fascinated by the movement of time – and particularly by what things change and what things stay the same. [This is, by the way, what is most instructive about visiting a museum – a person is “forced” to observe the passage of time by the way people lived and functioned.] It also occurs to the observer of history that there are so-called “static” elements involved in a review of the past. Time introduces change into the equation of life, but place can be static. Consider this in reference to schools: they were, at some point, put in a place, and there they stand. The people, the economy, the trends and circumstances all have changed around it.
- The saying goes that those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it. There is some wisdom in this aphorism, but the real question is what do we learn from history? Evaluate this statement: History does not teach us how to tread challenging paths more wisely but what paths to avoid.
- Reviewing history can make us particularly thankful. St. Paul's, New Ulm, recently observed the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the school. It was a great time of celebration and reflection. A time to recall what had changed and what had stayed the same. The building, the teachers, the methods of instruction had all changed. What had stayed the same was a commitment to the gospel message.
- Reviewing history can also make us anxious. St. Paul's has also experienced declining enrollment, budget difficulties, and reduction in its ministry force. It is also rare for church bodies to maintain stability without a major issue (either a split or amalgamation) for more than 150 years. These are trends that make people who view history anxious.
- There are two constant strands: human beings and the eternal God. One of the reasons historical patterns tend to repeat is the human element involved. People are susceptible to the same pitfalls. Despite warnings they tend to fall into the same traps. But Jesus Christ is the “same yesterday, and today and forever.” The gospel message does not change.
- Given the trends of declining enrollment, dramatically increased costs and fewer WELS children attending WELS schools, we find ourselves asking the question: How do we get back to where we were? This is a bit of a “Back to the Future” question.
- We “do ministry” differently today. How does the Lutheran school fit into the vision for the future of the church? And how will we pay for education? What will be the impact of the tuition model? Do we need to reinvent or revitalize? This may be a critical question. One may be tempted to say “reinvent” in light of new approaches to teaching and learning. We may need to “reinvent” in reference to the physical plant. I would not disagree that there may need to be some “reinventing” done, but I prefer the notion of revitalizing because it puts the emphasis on message over method. In the Church the message of the gospel is the means used by the Spirit to energize and enthuse for “works of service.”

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### Challenges / Objections / Criticisms – The critical perspective

Some of these are criticisms are well-intentioned. Some are simply challenges that are part of our 21<sup>st</sup> century reality.

- Not worth the cost when we have public schools  
In the end this is chiefly a cost objection. Schools are costly ministry – no question. Do we treasure the heritage enough to pay for it? I suspect that it is cost (i.e. tuition) that is the chief factor in the loss of WELS children at churches that operate an LES.
- Absolves parents of too much responsibility  
All of us know that there are parents who use that school as a surrogate, but this has never been the intention of the school. The school exists to assist parents in educating their children at a critically important, formative time in the child's life.
- Schools are not outreach  
This objection is raised by those who consider outreach to be the only mission of the church. I am clearly not opposed to outreach – I started an exploratory congregation in Maryland, but the mission of the church is to “get souls to heaven.” This is a “lifelong” mission which involves evangelism, education, encouragement, discipline. We sometimes underestimate how difficult it is to keep watch over the sheep. Devilish temptations from world and flesh can so very easily lead astray. The school sets an important foundation for faith and life at a formative time in a young Christian's life.
- LES children are not challenged to be “salt and light”  
I heard this objection from a member when I served as a vicar in a mission congregation that did not have a school. I understand this sense of this well-intentioned argument, but it misses the point. LES children do not live 24/7 at their school. They function regularly in settings other than school, and often the solid spiritual foundation that has been laid by parochial education provides the children with greater confidence as they approach confrontations to faith as “salt and light.”
- LES cannot offer important “extras”  
How important are the “extras”? Can these be met in some other way?
- LES education does not insure church faithfulness  
All of us know of Lutheran grade school graduates who are no longer faithful members of the church. Education is no guarantee of faithfulness, but we are mindful of the Proverb: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”
- “Familiarity breeds contempt” syndrome  
There is truth in the adage. It suggests that time can be unkind – that the more accustomed we are with something, the less attractive it becomes. Instead of seeing Lutheran schools as a heritage and blessing, we see the flaws and disparage them. We are not immune or exempt from this type of thinking.
- Demographics  
One of the great problems for a church and school is the fact that they are established in a specific place (location). When communities and families and memberships change, churches and schools need to adjust to the new social reality. Some schools may simply find it impossible to continue operation. Others may need to consolidate.

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### What Did Luther Say? – The Reformer’s perspective

Below are a series of Luther quotations – so we have a sense of the heritage that we bear.

- My beloved Germans, buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God’s grace and word while it is there! For you should know that God’s word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been. (LW 45:352)
- It is highly necessary, therefore, that we take some positive action in this matter before it is too late; not only on account of the young people, but also in order to preserve both our spiritual and temporal estates. If we miss this opportunity, we may perhaps find our hands tied later on when we would gladly attend to it, and ever after have to suffer in vain the pangs of remorse. (LW 45:371-2)
- But if children were instructed in schools, or wherever learned and well-trained schoolmasters and schoolmistresses were available to teach the languages, the other arts, and history, they would then hear of the doings and sayings of the entire world, and how things went with various cities, kingdoms, princes, men and women. Thus, they could in a short time set before themselves as in a mirror the character, life, counsels, purposes – successful and unsuccessful – of the whole world from the beginning; on the basis of which they could then draw the proper inferences and in the fear of God take their own place in the stream of human events. (LW 45:368-9)
- I would advise no one to send his child where the Holy Scriptures are not supreme. Every institution that does not unceasingly pursue the study of God’s word becomes corrupt. (LW 44:207)
- If I could leave the preaching office and my other duties, or had to do so, there is no other office I would rather have than that of schoolmaster or teacher. For I know that next to that of preaching, this is the best, greatest, and most useful office there is. (LW 46:253)
- When schools flourish, then things go well and the Church is secure. . . . The youth furnish recruits for the Church, they are the source of its well-being. . . . God preserves the Church through schools, and schools are the conservatories of the Church. They may not have a fine appearance, but within they are most useful and necessary. (Kretzmann, Luther on Education in the Christian Home and School, 93)

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### The Challenge of Attraction – Caution's perspective

- This is a difficult concept to address. I am not advising against outreach possibilities within our schools. And I am fully aware that some of our schools enroll almost all non-member children – there are clearly mission prospects in this type of setting. I am only sounding a “caution” that the attractive context of our Lutheran schools – high quality education, safe and moral places to learn – could also present a challenge. It seems to me that we put ourselves in a difficult position if we are unable to create a link between school and church.
- There is always a tendency to want to become something more glorious – something bigger, something more attractive. By way of analogy, would we want to become like the schools of other denominations (e.g. Catholic) – where the school is merely private, and it has lost much of its connection to the church?
- These are some “possible pertinent questions”:
  - How do we attract students to our schools?
  - Why are parents and students attracted to our schools?
  - Is there any subtle shift in the mission of our schools?
  - Is the school more private than parochial?
  - Is the vision for the school more “glorious” than is consistent with the cross?
- The point is: maintain your Lutheran identity! Certainly, you are Christians, but you have a distinctly confessional heritage of which you don't need to be ashamed. You are called Lutheran because you believe that the Lutheran Confessions are the clear exposition of Scriptural truth.

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### Believe in What You're Doing – Encouragement's perspective

- The challenges of Christian education – whether perceived or actual – can cause some of us to doubt what we do. Why do we do what we do? Is it worth the money spent?
- What do you believe in? You believe that Jesus Christ lived, died and rose for you. Your faith is grounded in the Lord Jesus. He is the object of your faith (and faith never exists apart from an object.) Therefore, you believe that it is worth teaching and modeling a Christian life. Don't doubt the value of what you do. You are setting the faith foundation for the lives of young people.
- Be passionate about the Passion. St. Paul resolved to preach "Christ crucified." The "it is finished" of the cross is followed by the victory of the empty tomb. Everything that was necessary for the salvation of the world was accomplished during that Passover weekend in Jerusalem. Our present days on earth are truly "days of grace" – unmerited days God gives us to promote the cause and advance of the gospel.
- In this respect consider a definition of teaching I heard once – a definition that helped me identify my role as more than just a purveyor of knowledge. Teaching is "evaluation on display." You model the sensitivity of faith in all that you do. This is a "macro-picture" of the teacher. The children you teach watch how you react to everything that happens in that classroom – from discipline to discovery. It is good and right to say that we "teach all things from a Christian perspective," but this may result in the uncomfortable sense that sometimes the topic is not particularly "Christian" per se. There is no need to "spiritualize" the material. It is better to see yourself as a Christian teacher who just so happens to teach a wide range of subjects.
- What is distinctive about Lutheran education? We don't want to take for granted the heritage of the "Word and Sacrament" approach to the means of grace. We also bear the "sola" heritage: Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura. The right division of law and gospel is also clearly descriptive of a Lutheran approach to Scriptural theology. There are three additional things I would emphasize as critical for Lutheran teachers.
  - 1) Model the first of Luther's "95 Theses" – repentance is the whole life of the Christian. You are a model of life's struggle with the "old nature" and the "new man."
  - 2) Teach a "theology of the cross," not a "theology of glory." Christians should expect that their lives will be any different than Christ's life – we will, because of our relationship to Christ, face the same opposition and challenges that he faced.
  - 3) Also teach clearly the distinctive Lutheran, Scriptural theology about matters of the will – i.e. "I cannot by my own reason or faith believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, nor come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel . . . ."
- We have a "good thing" in our schools. They are a treasure.

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### Take It Personally – The teacher's perspective

- Jesus has loved you and me personally. He has reached out to us with his Spirit, given us the gift of faith and given us a wide variety of spiritual gifts – personally.
- Take what you do personally! What does that mean? That means you are passionate about what you do as a gospel minister. Be natural, don't be artificial about your faith life. Be who you are.
- Surveys of schools (classrooms) will say that the chief and most consistent factor in the success of a classroom is the attitude of the teacher. Philippians 2 is all about a proper Christian attitude.
- If Lutheran education needs revitalizing, you are on the front line of those who can help members understand the importance. Take the task personally. Understand your personal role as God's ambassador with the Spirit's gifts to reinvigorate flagging spirits.
- Give yourselves fully to the work that you do. (1 Corinthians 15)
- Especially in a time when criticisms mount and every penny counts, we need to do what we can to be as positive as possible. We cannot hide behind the call (or the cross) or make excuses. The statement is made by both pastors and teachers that even St. Paul did not come with great eloquence – he simply preached Christ and allowed the Spirit do his work. This is true, but St. Paul did not preach and evangelize without passion.
- There is a need for a human touch. In the more impersonal, digital world, there will be an ever increasing need for human interaction. Jesus' ministry was personal and face to face. There is something "organic" about the gospel that means its mode and method of communication need to remain personal.
- There is an emotional side to the school. Simply put, feeling good about the school will result in a positive momentum swing. The opposite is also true. Negative feelings will result in challenges for the school.
- Remember that you're not alone. Taking it personally doesn't mean you have to do everything yourself. Enroll parents as allies. Enlist them as helpers. Help them to take ownership.
- Do graduate school. I couldn't encourage it more. You know – about yourself – that you would be a much better student now than when you were actually "in college." So do it. Go back to school and enjoy the learning!
- Be as positive as you can be about the gospel ministry that you have. You are an integral part of your congregation's gospel ministry to members. Notice the emphasis on gospel ministry. One of the great challenges to a teacher's role is that it is not always clearly oriented in gospel work. What I mean is this: some of what you do is what the state requires. You teach math and reading and writing and social studies and science.

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---

### Of Prophecy, Philosophy and Purpose – The gospel’s perspective

The “hope and future” that Jeremiah prophesied was directly connected to the gospel promise of a Savior. So too, Lutheran education must retain its commitment to teaching and modeling the critically vital message of repentance and faith. The Gospel must drive philosophy and purpose.

I must be honest: I remain somewhat anxious about the future. What makes me anxious?

- 1) History – both biblical and church history: because they show that the line between faithfulness and apostasy is very fine. History also reveals that congregations and groups of congregations (synods) are fragile things.
- 2) The “consumer model” of stewardship. It is likely here to stay, but the “paying for product” mentality makes the management of a school rather challenging. Are the days of “I’d like your children to have what my children had” gone?
- 3) Attitudes that would like a more glorious version (vision) of the church and school.
- 4) This nagging feeling that, in a certain sense, synodical familiarity is breeding synodical contempt.
- 5) What happens to recruitment if/when schools to serve the children of our congregations decline? There may be a “chicken and egg” question here: as the schools go, so goes the synod; or is it, as the synod goes, so go the schools. There is, I believe, a direct relationship between the health of schools and synodical unity, theological security and the ministry of the church. Generally speaking, schools supply our present called workers. I am involved in the training of called workers. What happens if we no longer have a need for teachers – or, at least, a need for teachers as we once had? We’ve been an anachronism for a while, are we simply realizing that we no longer fit today’s “model”?
- 6) The mode and model of education in the future make me anxious. I happen to be one of those people who think that more technology may be “ministerially counterproductive.” I understand its value and its necessity, but ministry needs a personal, face-to-face touch.
- 7) I fear that we’ve become “lukewarm” about our schools. That we’ve taken the treasure for granted and have lost our zeal. The only way to recapture is to refocus on why we do “Lutheran education.”

I don’t know if the “market or the rain shower is moving on.” Maybe the shower is turning to drizzle. I would like to think that we are merely at a time when the LES needs revitalizing. Perhaps there is a need for some reinventing, but it seems to me that we need to focus chiefly on the renewing message of the powerful gospel (message over method). If we let this treasure go, will we “get it back”? I’m not so sure. I fear that we think we can “dabble with the world” without it affecting us. There needs to be Lutheresque urgency about our mission. The mission of the church is to get souls to heaven. This is a life-long task – the elementary school sets a tremendous foundation at a critical, formative time in life. This is no time to mark time or put in our hours.

Remember “hope” passages like Romans 5, Hebrews 10 and 11 – these encourage us and “spur us on.” When you “feel like Jeremiah,” consider the powerfully comforting Bible history lessons of Elijah and Rich Man & Lazarus. Both teach that God works through the unassuming power of the Word to create and sustain faith.