

August 2025

To: Ordained and Commissioned Ministers of the Gospel
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

The Reverend Doctor Matthew C. Harrison
President of the Synod

Dear Friends in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Enclosed with this letter is a newly published report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations titled *A Theology and Philosophy of Lutheran Education*.

There may be no greater battleground for the souls of our children than education. Our schools—from kindergarten through universities—have faced constant obstacles in recent decades. Declining birthrates and shifting demographics have sapped our student bodies, pedagogies are at odds with our theological convictions, moral views contradict biblical teachings, and perverse racial and sexual ideologies continue to confront students and educators alike.

That said, our schools and other educational efforts have never been in a better place. Many primary schools have full enrollment. High schools are thriving and being started anew across the country. Classical and homeschool alternatives have arisen to complement our Synod's schools. Our university system has committed itself to a theologically robust Lutheran identity. Enrollment at those universities is burgeoning, with some at near capacity. Not only Lutherans but also Christians of many backgrounds are flocking to our schools because of their biblically faithful, theologically substantial, and morally conservative views.

In this age, though, we must be vigilant and remain committed to the core principles that make Lutheran education "Lutheran." In response to their assignment from the 2023 Synod convention, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) has produced this document, *A Theology and Philosophy of Lutheran Education*. In this report, the CTCR affirms God's Word, centered in Christ and rightly divided by Law and Gospel, as the principle that guides both Lutheran theology and Lutheran education. It uses Luther's magnificent catechetical structure of creation, redemption, and sanctification to explore how Scripture guides us in various spheres of education. A copy of this report is being mailed to all active rostered church workers stateside for their study and consideration and will also be available online at lcms.org/ctcr.

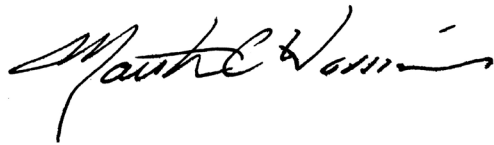
St. Paul's words in Romans 12:2 are a strong reminder of the ultimate goal of Lutheran education: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Our schools at every level and in every place want to see Christians transformed by the renewal of their minds, that they might not conform to the ways of this world but know that which is beautiful and good and true. We want them to bring those with such renewed minds into their vocations in this world, so they might make known the good news of the Gospel and the

forgiveness we have in Jesus Christ. We want them to lead holy and upright lives in the sight of a dying world in need of salvation. We want them to be salt and light to the saltless and to those in darkness (Matt. 5:13–16).

It is true that we need more pastors, not to mention teachers and school administrators, deaconesses, and directors of Christian education, Christian outreach, family life ministry, parish music, and church ministries, as well as parish assistants. We also need artists and musicians, authors and publishers, filmmakers and journalists, politicians and scholars, doctors and nurses, lawyers and judges, architects and police officers. We need baptized Christians who can distinguish the truth of the Scriptures from the lies of this fallen world. We need baptized Christians to do the work they are called to do with moral uprightness and theological clarity.

St. Paul says, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). I firmly believe a sound Lutheran education rooted in the theological principles of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions will, by God's mercy, produce just such God-glorifying students and contributors to the church and to society. It is my hope that, in the coming months, we may even produce a condensed pamphlet version of this document to share more broadly, especially for the many parents and students who may not be Lutheran, as an introduction to Lutheran education and to the theological principles that give shape and form to it. In the meantime, I commend this report and pray that our church workers, parents, and other concerned laity will benefit greatly from it.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew C. Harrison". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, President
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

A Theology and Philosophy of Lutheran Education



a report of

THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY
AND CHURCH RELATIONS

MAY 2025

A THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY
OF LUTHERAN EDUCATION

A Report of the Commission on Theology
and Church Relations

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

May 2025

Abbreviations

AC	Augsburg Confession
AE	<i>Luther's Works</i> . American Edition. 82 vols. Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1955–.
FC SD	Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration
LC	Large Catechism
SC	Small Catechism



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PREFACE

The 2023 Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod convention passed Resolution 5-10, which tasked the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) with articulating a “theology and philosophy of Lutheran education.”¹ The convention specifically asked the CTCR to “develop principles of Lutheran education rooted in Lutheran doctrine,” including doctrines such as “justification, biblical creation, first article gifts, right and left kingdom perspectives, and Lutheran anthropology.” The process was to include consultation with representatives of the Concordia University System universities and Synod education executives, among others, with the goal of producing a “clear, concise, and readable” pamphlet that would be accessible to “workers, lay leaders, and families” and applicable to all levels of education, from preschool through secondary education.

The CTCR’s primary task is to provide guidance to the Synod in explaining and defending what it believes, teaches, and confesses, in accord with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Its charge from the constitution and bylaws of the Synod is to “conserve and promote the unity of the true faith,” “provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism . . . , and heresy,” and “aid congregations by providing a variety of resources and opportunities for recognizing, promoting, expressing, conserving, and defending their confessional unity in the true faith.”² This report aims to fulfill that charge and the Synod’s resolution, but it is not comprehensive, nor does it provide actionable directions for pedagogy. It provides an overarching principle that drives all of Lutheran education and a theological analysis of select doctrinal themes that pertain most directly to the current intellectual, pedagogical, and social concerns facing classrooms at every level and which were named in the resolution.

Ultimately, this is a theological report. It focuses more on explaining the relevance of these doctrines for Lutheran education than on educational method or practice. Many other themes and topics could have been considered (for instance, explaining the sacraments to students and families from nonsacramental churches, the

1 2023 Resolution 5-10, *2023 Convention Proceedings*, 155. The resolution is provided in full at the end of this booklet.

2 LCMS Constitution, Article III, 1 and 6; cf. Bylaw 3.9.5.

use and role of classical or biblical languages, curriculum and methodology, among other perennial concerns). However, the Commission does not envision this document as the end of the discussion. Rather, it intends that other, more educationally specific entities of the Synod (such as the Concordia University System and its universities, Synod education executives, and others not named in the resolution, like school administrators and educators) might take up these ideas and augment them, expand on them, apply them, or otherwise use them in their context as they see fit.

In the process of drafting this report, the Commission engaged specialists in Lutheran education—including Concordia University System presidents and administrators and Lutheran school administrators and teachers—in the hopes of addressing concerns that are most relevant to them. Yet it concluded that those educational professionals are more apt to evaluate competing educational theories and prescribe more specific applications than the Commission itself. This report is submitted for the purpose of clearly and faithfully articulating how these Lutheran doctrines could and should govern education within Lutheran institutions.

A THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY OF LUTHERAN EDUCATION

THE OVERARCHING PRINCIPLE

What guides Lutheran education?

The truth of Holy Scripture—God’s Word—is the guiding principle in Lutheran churches, in the schools of those churches, and in the education those schools provide. Lutheran Christians affirm that Scripture is the ultimate authority for our faith and life together.³ The books of the Old Testament and New Testament are the inerrant Word of God—inspired by the Holy Spirit, trustworthy and true in all that they teach (John 10:35; Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:16–21).⁴ We also believe that the Lutheran Book of Concord, which contains theological statements from sixteenth-century Lutheran reformers, is a correct interpretation of that Word of God, and we require that all pastors and rostered teachers in our churches and schools affirm those teachings without reservation or alteration. The teachings of Holy Scripture govern what we believe (our doctrine) and what we do (our practice). Wherever that Word of God speaks, we must abide by it and conform our minds to it. That extends to matters of science, creation, and history, or any other subject, in addition to the teaching of the church’s faith. Where and to what extent it does not speak on a matter, we are free to exercise the God-given reason that all humans have, yet always bearing in mind that human reason is fallible and subservient to what God has clearly said in His Word.

We believe that the center of this Word of God and of these Lutheran Confessions is Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God and Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who is true God and true man. He is the Word of God made flesh (John 1). With all Christians of every time and in every place, we believe in the saving death and res-

3 See FC SD Comprehensive Summary, 9.

4 See also *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (Adopted 1932), sections 1–3, available at <http://www.lcms.org/doctrine/doctrinalposition>, and *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, available at <http://www.lcms.org/doctrine/scripturalprinciples#IV>.

urrection of Jesus Christ, and we proclaim the forgiveness of sins through faith in this Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:16; 2 Cor. 5:11–21; 1 Peter 1:23–25). While that may not necessarily provide concrete direction for all practical matters related to education, it must be said that Jesus, the forgiveness of sins He offers through His Gospel, and the mission and ministry carried out in His name and at His command (Matt. 28:16–20) are the reason for the work Lutherans do in their congregations and in their schools and give focus to our proclamation, worship, and education.⁵

How does this Lutheran understanding of the Word of God as the overarching principle of Lutheran education (and Christ as the incarnation and center of that Word), then, impact the work of our schools on a practical level? We may divide matters such as these into three different spheres or domains, corresponding to the three articles of the ancient Christian creeds: one dealing primarily with our daily, bodily lives, or the gifts of creation; one dealing with salvation, or redemption from sin; one dealing with the Christian life, or sanctification.

5 See also LC II, 54–55.

THE FIRST ARTICLE

Lutheran Education and Creation (or Our World, Lives, and Everything in Them)

What role does human reason play in Lutheran education?

Lutherans believe that God has created every person and has given each of them the gift of human reason, which helps all people—including those without Christian faith—to understand and appreciate the world around them. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism says that God has given me “my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, *my reason* and all my senses, and still takes care of them.”⁶ God has given us human reason to understand the world which He has created, to support and protect our bodily lives, and to love and serve our neighbors. As the Lutheran Confessions say (citing St. Augustine):

We grant that all people have a free will. It is free as far as it has the judgment of reason. This does not mean that it is able, without God, either to begin, or at least to complete, anything that has to do with God. It is free only in works of this life, whether good or evil. Good I call those works that spring from the good in nature, such as willing to labor in the field, to eat and drink, to have a friend, to clothe oneself, to build a house, to marry a wife, to raise cattle, to learn various useful arts, or whatsoever good applies to this life.⁷

Human reason in this sense is not reduced to strictly logical, cerebral expressions, but also includes creative expressions such as art and music. We are free to use this human reason, but only in a way that does not contradict what God has revealed to us in His Word.

6 SC Explanation of the First Article; emphasis added.

7 AC XVIII 4–5.

Lutherans have often referred to this as the *ministerial* use of reason, which helps us understand the truths God has revealed in His Word, the truths that are present in His observable creation, and the basic conventions of language, grammar, logic, and rhetoric that we use to communicate and debate. This is different from the *magisterial* use of reason, by which sinful humans force Holy Scripture to conform to our natural understanding of the world and everything in it.⁸ Human reason, as we see it exercised in education, must not undermine or contradict Holy Scripture. Where Scripture speaks, we must believe and teach that truth. Where Scripture does not speak, we are free to use the human reason given to us by God to pursue an understanding of our world. Even non-Christians have the gift of human reason and use it to the benefit of those around them—think of the innumerable advances in science, technology, the fine arts, literature, history, to name but a few, where we have learned and benefited greatly from those who do not share our Christian faith. Nevertheless, this does not mean Lutherans divide or oppose faith and reason. On the contrary, we believe that Christians should always use human reason in light of the truths God Himself has revealed in Holy Scripture. Human reason informed by God’s Word will prevent its misuse or misapplication, which is especially harmful in areas like morality and ethics. Moreover, Lutherans also understand that human reason—unlike God’s Word—is not infallible. The human understanding of the world around us will invariably change as we gain more information or as we revise our prior knowledge through experimentation, logic, etc. We cannot trust human reason to be correct in all things; we can, however, trust God’s Word in all that it tells us.

How do Lutherans study subjects not clearly revealed in Scripture?

When it comes to biblical teachings on the faith or morality (these teachings are most often referred to as “theology”), what Scripture says is clear and must be reflected in our own teaching. But what about subjects like the sciences, art, or music? Where Scripture does not directly address these subjects, we are free to use our God-given human reason to explore them. This is because God has established His world in an orderly way that is open to human study and observation. However, our teachers must distinguish between the complete certainty of what God has revealed in Holy Scripture and the provisional nature of what is known by other means. For instance, in relation to disciplines such as the natural sciences, it is scripturally clear that God created the world in six days (Genesis 1). That means

8 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1:196–200.

we cannot accept an evolutionary theory that contradicts this six-day creation. On the other hand, Scripture does not teach how we are to conduct scientific research, such as the use of scientific methods of experimentation, so we are free to teach that method as human reason best sees fit, at the same time always conscious of the truths revealed in Scripture about creation. Lutherans are not opposed to science. Nicolaus Copernicus found support in Wittenberg among the Lutherans. Even when scientific views contradict the Bible, we do not deny the use of reason within its domain. Rather, we revel in the advance of science where it confirms the complex ordered nature of the world from subatomic particle to the far reaches of the universe or identifies a common human as ancestor of all living people, thereby pointing to a creator.

The arts and literature are approached in a similar way. We teach, study, and practice the visual or fine arts using our God-given “eyes, ears, and all [our] members”⁹ to create and appreciate the beauty of the sung word, painted canvas, or architectural design. This is a gift of God’s creation. To take but one example, Martin Luther himself extolled the ancient histories, poetry, and literature of the classical period, even though they were composed by pagans who did not know the God of the Holy Scriptures. They provided illustrations of beauty, skill, and citizenship that could be admired by Christians. On preparing youth for participation in government, for instance, Luther says,

Here we are excelled and put to shame by the pagans of old, especially the Romans and Greeks. Although they had no idea of whether this estate was pleasing to God or not, they were so earnest and diligent in educating and training their young boys and girls to fit them for the task.¹⁰

There are no strict rules in Scripture governing history or poetry, music or art. Yet we must not use those created gifts in a way that undermines what God has revealed or in a way that misuses His creation. In the case of the humanities or social sciences, we are free to create, read, and interpret all the literature in these fields as expressions of God-given human reason, but we do so with a discriminating eye. Like the natural sciences, we dare not teach the findings of non-Christian social theories as if they were certain or categorically true. Moreover, we must reject them when they conflict with scripturally based beliefs about humanity or the created world or morality. Social theories can and may be wrong, for their authors are not infallible—only God’s Word is infallible and trustworthy.

9 SC Explanation of the First Article.

10 Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” AE 45:367.

Why do Lutherans value the study of nontheological disciplines?

Lutherans seek to educate students in subjects and disciplines not expressly revealed in Scripture because we also believe such studies contribute greatly to the life of the mind, to the well-roundedness of the individual, and to the betterment of the common good. We encourage that the study of engineering, agriculture, art, architecture, history, literature, music, and other such disciplines be rooted in and subservient to God's Word. God has created a world that testifies to Him in its order and beauty. A Christ-centered education will help students cultivate their God-given faculties: They will learn to use their "eyes, ears, and all [their] members" and their "reason" and "senses" to observe and delight in the beauty and order throughout God's creation that testifies to Him. As the psalmist says, "Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them" (Psalm 111:2).

Through these studies, students and teachers practice good stewardship of their God-given mental faculties. In addition to cultivating a delight in God's handiwork, studies in various fields also prepare students for their vocations of service to their neighbor—whether as doctors, musicians, artists, engineers, architects, or in any other career. Lutherans encourage all educational disciplines—from practical vocational skills to liberal arts, fine arts, social sciences, and STEM disciplines—to celebrate God's creation as His creatures, to give glory to the God who created the world and everything in it, and to recognize simultaneously both our distinct status as the image-bearers of God and the humility we should have as fallen sinners standing in awe of the heavens and earth that God has created.

How does a biblical view of humanity inform Lutheran education?

Since Lutheran Christians believe God has created each individual, as Scripture declares, this will have important implications for how Lutheran educators talk about humanity and the moral and ethical choices all humans must make. Scripture clearly reveals not only the six-day creation but also how God has created humanity and desires all humans to live in accordance with their created design. God has made us either male or female, according to our biological anatomy (Gen. 1:27; Gen. 2:21–23). He has created marriage as a lifelong bond between one man and one woman (Matt. 19:3–9; 1 Cor. 7:10–11). He has instituted marriage between one man and one woman for the purposes of companionship and procreation (Gen. 2:18–25). He has reserved sexual activity solely for marriage between that one man and that one woman (Ex. 20:14; Matt. 5:27–30). Through the sexual union of that one man and one woman, God fills the earth (Gen. 1:28). God gives life—from

conception through natural death—as a precious gift, and that gift of life must be respected and protected (Psalm 51:5; Psalm 139:13–17; Jer. 1:5). God creates every human—no matter ethnicity, language, or nationality—and therefore condemns racism or bigotry of any sort (Acts 10:34–35; Acts 17:26).

That which is rooted in God’s Word must be upheld and practiced in our schools even when it does not resonate with wider cultural opinion. We abide by what Scripture teaches—in our classroom instruction, student discipline, or personal counsel. However, Lutheran educators also understand that many within our schools may not share the same beliefs about how God has made us biologically or how he commands us to live sexually. We trust our administrators and instructors to exercise responsible discretion in attending to these conflicts and addressing them with sensitivity and patience. At the same time, we require a commitment to biblical teachings concerning marriage and sexuality and also require our teachers to support and be committed to the same. Only through “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) might our educators remain faithful to God’s Word and bring it to their students (and their parents) in a way that contradicts unbiblical, immoral beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors condoned by the larger non-Christian culture (and even many misled or erring Christians).

THE SECOND ARTICLE

Lutheran Education and Redemption (or the Gospel of Jesus Christ)

How does the reality of sin inform Lutheran education?

Lutheran Christians believe that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God, perfectly reflecting His righteousness as His good creation (Gen. 1:27). However, we also believe sin entered the world with the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). The entrance of sin has removed our original purity, holiness, and godliness, and placed us under God’s judgment and wrath (Rom. 5:12–21; 7:21–25). This sin has infected every human being at conception (“original sin”).¹¹ Sin has twisted our desires toward things God has prohibited or things that are unhealthy for us spiritually or physically (“concupiscence”). Acting upon these desires, we believe, think, and do things contrary to God’s Word (“actual sins”). All of these forms of sin—whether we know of them or not—are against God’s will. Yet we believe that Jesus alone offers the forgiveness of sins to those who believe in His Gospel.

This understanding of sin impacts our education in several ways. First, on an intellectual level, we believe that sin has led to the misunderstanding and misuse of God’s creation (Rom. 1:18–32). We must correct that misunderstanding and misuse through our instruction. For instance, we are obligated to correct mistaken theories and views often taught in classrooms that deny God’s creation or that condone sexual sins. Second, on a personal level, we must instruct our students about the nature of sin, its implications for their spiritual lives, its temporal consequences in their daily lives, and the need for repentance of those sins. Third, we believe that we must also offer students grace for their sins by sharing with them the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we seek to model that grace in the care we offer our students. That also means we do not withhold disciplinary action as a consequence for their disobedience (Heb. 12:9–11), yet we also give teachers discretion

11 AC II.

to allow students to make mistakes, learn from their errors, and improve. Student discipline is also a valuable opportunity to teach repentance and offer forgiveness.

What role does the Gospel play in Lutheran education?

Lutheran theology clearly distinguishes between the Law and the Gospel. Certain passages of Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments set forth the Law, God's requirements for our lives (or His "unchanging will"). These requirements reflect the moral standards for how we are to live in accordance with how God has made us and what He has told us to do, especially as we see this in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:2–17). We believe that obedience to this Law will help to protect us from temporal consequences and bring temporal blessings in this life, that the preaching of this Law makes us aware of our sins against God and His Word, and that this Law provides concrete guidance for how we should lead our Christian lives. The teaching of the Law is distinct from the Gospel. The Gospel, also found in both the Old and New Testaments, is the promise of the forgiveness of sins on account of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, which we receive by faith alone. We unreservedly proclaim the forgiveness of sins for all who believe in Jesus, that Jesus is the only hope and path for salvation, and that God brings sinners to repentance and faith and forgives their sins through the preaching of the Word—rightly divided between Law and Gospel—and administration of the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

While we believe the Law provides shape and form to the moral life and should govern our instruction and behavioral expectations in Lutheran schools, it cannot be an end in itself when dealing with fallen sinners. It must be accompanied by a proclamation of the Gospel. Teaching the Law may provide clear moral expectations to students, but only the teaching of the Gospel (through which the Holy Spirit gives and sustains faith) will lead to changed hearts, renewed lives, and eternal salvation. Ultimately, all truly good works are fruits of the Spirit that arise solely and freely from faith in the Gospel (Gal. 5:22–23) rather than from the fear of the Law (Gal. 2:16), as the Lutheran Formula of Concord says.¹² We desire that all students in Lutheran schools hear the Gospel of what Christ has done for them, believe in Jesus Christ, and receive Baptism for the forgiveness of their sins. We do this in the confidence that, through faith in the Gospel, they will grow to have the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16), conform themselves to God's Word, and live

¹² FC SD VI 5.

according to God’s Law. Lutheran schools also maintain the distinction between Law and Gospel when it comes to the discipline of students. Though there may be consequences and punishments for misbehavior, these are also occasions for the declaration of the forgiveness of sins in Christ.

Why do Lutheran schools teach theology and gather for worship?

Lutheran Christians do not provide a strictly secular or intellectual educational experience, free from religious curriculum or practice. A central part of education in a Lutheran institution is to provide for instruction in the Christian faith (“catechesis”), primarily from the Holy Scriptures and Luther’s Small Catechism. That may come in the classroom, in the form of theology classes required for all students (Lutheran or not), as well as in teaching within other disciplines where the faith of Lutheran teachers informs their instruction in the humanities or sciences. There is no “religion-free” space in Lutheran schools. While theology is taught unapologetically from a Lutheran perspective to students, Lutheran or not, that faith should also come through in other areas of the curriculum.

Likewise, worship is essential to every Lutheran school (e.g., in regularly scheduled chapel services, classroom prayers or devotions, Scripture memorization, and the like). Such worship opportunities allow Lutheran schools to share what makes them most unique: the faith that they believe, teach, and confess. Lutherans do not simply speak about their faith, they also sing about it, and they sing about it in worship. We read Scripture, confidently pray according to our Lord’s promises, sing hymns or psalms, and preach the Gospel in a way that children come to learn and believe the truths of the Christian faith and commit them to the head and the heart. The worship life of a Lutheran school enables students, faculty, and staff to hear the Word as it is read, taught, proclaimed, prayed, or sung.

THE THIRD ARTICLE

Lutheran Education and Sanctification (or the Christian Life)

What is the relation between Lutheran schools and the state (laws, educational regulation, etc.)?

Lutherans typically distinguish between God's two ways of working in the world. This is sometimes described as God's right-hand and left-hand "kingdoms." His right-hand, eternal, spiritual kingdom is where He works through the preaching of His Word, and His left-hand, temporal, earthly kingdom is where He works through the authorities He has instituted in the civil government. In the left-hand kingdom, God has established authorities in the form of governments, politicians, judges, militaries, and law enforcement to protect the lives and property of citizens (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-14). This also includes state regulations concerning education. Our Lutheran schools seek to abide by all civil laws and regulations, including those that govern education. Our Lutheran schools also urge their families to be good citizens, pray for their leaders, and play an active role in our political system. Lutheran institutions serve this left-hand, civil realm by preparing law-abiding citizens to contribute to society in many practical ways, from the politician to the social worker, from the accountant to the elementary school teacher.

At the same time, our Lutheran schools are institutions of the church that also ultimately serve the right-hand realm: the ministry of God's Word. These schools have many different missions to serve many different populations. Some seek to educate Lutherans or train them for church service, some seek to aid underserved populations by providing quality education, some see themselves as evangelistic outposts and alternatives to secular schools, and some provide higher education to a broader public. In all cases, however, they are institutions of the church, which is called to the right-hand work of proclaiming the Gospel and teaching the Scriptures in accordance with the Lutheran understanding of the faith. The government must not impede the confession and mission of our schools by overstepping its left-hand authority (e.g., when laws or regulations dictate or limit what our insti-

tutions teach about the faith, who may teach in our schools, and what behaviors we must allow). If civil government trespasses into right-hand matters (faith, morality, and the like), our schools may appeal to their constitutional right to religious freedom in opposing those actions and will obey God, not man (Acts 5:29).

What is the Lutheran understanding of vocation?

Lutheran Christians believe God has called each of us to a variety of holy vocations where we might serve God and our neighbor in word and deed. Vocations are callings from God, who places all people into a number of different roles and responsibilities in the course of their lives. The primary vocation for every Christian is the call of the Gospel. We are called to be baptized children of God who lead lives of service to God and neighbor in the freedom God has given us through forgiveness and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives (Romans 8; Galatians 5). There is no greater or holier calling than to be a baptized child of God. God has also called each of us to various places in life with specific responsibilities.¹³ In the family or household, one may be a husband or wife, parent or child, breadwinner or homemaker (Eph. 5:21–6:9; 1 Peter 3:1–7). In the church, one may be a pastor or parishioner, church worker, church official, elder, deacon, teacher, or student. We believe whatever place we find ourselves in, there God has called us to act as His baptized children. We live according to God’s Word and serve Him as His children wherever He has placed us.

Lutheran schools seek to train students for specific vocations into which God will call them. Our schools must provide a well-rounded education that prepares students for work or further schooling in everything from the natural sciences to the humanities, from technical trades to church work. It also means that all students from a Lutheran school should understand what the Scriptures teach about the world and everything in it, about sin and the redemption we have in Christ, and about how we are to lead our lives in accordance with God’s design and Word. As students are formed in the theological and moral foundations of the Christian faith, and are trained to excel in their specialized vocations in the world, they will be prepared to serve not just the church, but also society as a whole. In Luther’s words, we should “especially urge magistrates and parents to rule well and to send their children to school” that they might be of service to “both God’s kingdom *and* that of the world.”¹⁴

¹³ See SC, Table of Duties.

¹⁴ SC, Preface, emphasis added.

What is the vocation of a Lutheran teacher?

In the first place, Lutheran educators function as extensions of parental authority in the lives of the children they teach. The responsibility for the instruction of children ultimately belongs to parents. The Large Catechism says that all authority—governmental, religious, even educational—“flows and is born from the authority of parents.”¹⁵ Parents are charged with raising their children in the faith (Deut. 6:7), supporting and protecting their children in their lives and bodily needs, and providing for, overseeing, and involving themselves in their education. Parents are the primary teachers of their children. Lutheran educators work with and alongside parents in this task. Teachers do not replace or compete with parents, but rather act in place of them (*in loco parentis*) in classroom instruction or in disciplinary matters. Parents delegate this care of their children to teachers in the subjects they teach and the supervision they provide.

In another sense, however, Lutheran educators also function as extensions of the ministry of the Word through their associated congregations. Since the schools are ministries of the church, our teachers are considered “ministers” of the church too. Lutherans believe that God has established the ministry of pastors (what we call the “Office of the Public Ministry”) to preach and teach the Word, administer the Sacraments, conduct the public services of the church, and oversee the doctrine and worship life of the congregation that has called them. As servants of the church’s school ministry, however, teachers assist in the church’s work of teaching the Word (what we call the “public ministry”), not in the form of public preaching or conducting public worship services, but rather through teaching the Word to the students under their care. That means everything the teacher does in the life of the school—whether the administrative work of the principal, the religious instruction of the theology teacher, or the discipline-specific instruction of the science or art teacher—brings the Word of God to bear upon the life of the school and ministers to the spiritual as well as the intellectual needs of the students. In Lutheran schools, teachers play an instrumental role in this ministry of the Word. This is a high and noble calling, yet also one of Christlike service. At the same time, no one should take advantage of the dedication of our teachers. It is vital for the future of Lutheran schools that educators be honored, respected, and supported financially.

Lutheran teachers often receive a formal “call” from the school as a public recognition of their training and fitness for this service. Called teachers are usually installed into their positions in public worship services, as an indication of their

¹⁵ LC I 141.

service to the church. Teachers eligible for a “call” receive training, either in a university or seminary of the church, or through some other educational program, to instruct them in the basics of Lutheran theology. All teachers in Lutheran schools are obligated to uphold the teachings of the church in their instruction and personal conduct, to submit themselves to oversight of their instruction and personal conduct by appropriate representatives of the church, and to abide by the constitution and bylaws of the school’s congregation and larger church body. In schools which cannot be staffed solely by trained Lutheran faculty, teachers are still to understand that they are serving an institution of the Lutheran Church and shall teach in accordance with the faith of the Lutheran Church.

CONCLUSION

This proposed theology and philosophy of Lutheran education derives from the Lutheran understanding of Holy Scripture and the doctrines that we believe, teach, and confess. Lutherans do not seek to be contrarians in their approach to education, yet these core approaches to Holy Scripture and to the doctrines taught by Scripture cannot help but contradict some theories of education. In many respects, this is what makes Lutheran education unique. Theology is at the core of our faith and life together, and therefore it will impact the education we offer in ways that are incompatible with secular models of education that reject our theology. What St. Paul urges the Romans should be true for Lutherans educationally: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

There is and can be no single, definitive “Lutheran” approach to education that will prescribe all acceptable forms of classroom instruction or subjects of study. Lutherans have used many different models of education over the centuries that do not contradict their confession of faith. Therefore, the ideas articulated here are not to be seen as binding us to a particular model of education, nor are they exhaustive. They do not address practical matters of pedagogy or curriculum or school policy. They are not intended for a particular level of Lutheran education (seminary, undergraduate, high school, K–8, early childhood). Nor do they advocate for a particular form of education (parochial school, classical school, homeschooling). On the contrary, this document provides some foundational theological direction on commonly asked questions which might be of use to administrators, teachers, parents, and students at every level and in every form of education. We commend this exploration of a theology and philosophy of Lutheran education to the educators and educational institutions of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, that it may support them in the work they undertake, together with us all, of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

Further Resources from the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

A Chaste and Decent Life: An Update to Human Sexuality 1981; 2023

Creation in Biblical Perspective; 1970

In Christ All Things Hold Together: The Intersection of Science and Christian Theology; 2015

The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature; 1981

Render unto Caesar . . . and unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State; 1995

To Articulate Theology and Philosophy of Lutheran Education

RESOLUTION 5-10

Reports R1, R1.2.1, R14 (CW, 1-3, 14, 64-69)

WHEREAS, Our Lutheran schools at every level face constant challenges in a world of competing philosophies; and

WHEREAS, Our Synod would benefit from a clearly articulated theology and philosophy of Lutheran education that considers sound principles from the doctrine of justification, biblical creation, first article gifts, right and left kingdom perspectives, and Lutheran anthropology, to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of various educational philosophies; and

WHEREAS, A clear, concise, and readable theology and philosophy of Lutheran education could help guide our workers, lay leaders, and families from preschool, grade school, high school, and secondary education as they make curriculum, discipline, and other decisions on a daily basis; therefore be it

Resolved, That the Commission on Theology and Church Relations—in consultation with representatives from Concordia University System universities, Synod education executives, and others—develop principles of Lutheran education rooted in Lutheran doctrine; and be it further

Resolved, That a pamphlet be produced for written and electronic distribution to help guide congregations, schools, workers, and parents in the task of faithfully leading students in their education.

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