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FROM CONCORDIA SEMINARY
RESEARCH CENTER —
EMPIRICAL EVALUATION STUDY
OF LUTHERAN PAROCHIAL EDUCATION

The first report of an extensive evaluation study of the effectiveness of parochial education within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has just been released by Ronald L. Johnstone, Director of Research for Concordia Seminary Research Center.

The results of careful empirical investigation in eight important areas of faith, knowledge, and life indicate a distinctly limited impact of formal elementary and secondary parochial education. Although congregations within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod have traditionally operated on the principle that such full-time education is the ideal form of Christian education and although these congregations currently support 1,364 elementary and 23 secondary schools in the United States, the results of this study strongly suggest a thorough evaluation of the principles and techniques involved in such an educational system.

Encouraged by an interest in evaluating the impact and effectiveness of parochial education on the part of a number of educational boards within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and with their financial backing, Concordia Seminary Research Center launched a large-scale research project in the spring of 1964, designed to answer the following questions: What differences does Lutheran parochial education make in attitudes, beliefs, and behavior patterns of Lutheran youth?

The research procedure was to select a representative sample of all Lutheran youth of high school age in St. Louis and Detroit, including the full range of exposure to parochial education from 0 to 12 years. Random probability sampling techniques were used to

assure such representation. The original sample consisted of 584 youth, of whom 548 were interviewed. The response rate of 93.8 percent is unusually high for a study of this kind and yields high assurance of the representativeness of the data. Each of the 548 students was personally interviewed by trained interviewers using a specially developed, standardized interview schedule and questionnaire.

Since the primary objective was to measure the effectiveness of Lutheran parochial education, the initial task was to test for differences in students' responses to a large number of questions by relating such responses to varying amounts of exposure to Lutheran or public education. Stated very simply, the goal was to discover whether students who had attended parochial schools for all grades gave different answers than those with lesser amounts of parochial education.

However, since numerous studies show the great relevance of family background and environment in setting the stage or establishing limitations for subsequent formal education outside the family, it was necessary to test carefully for the effect of family background. The basic question here was this: "Assuming one finds a difference in response based on varying educational experiences, is such a difference truly and accurately traceable to education, or are family backgrounds and experiences in the home more relevant?" That is, when one looks separately at students with differing family backgrounds, do the differences initially traced to differing educational experiences disappear?

Following this mode of analysis, careful examination of the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of Lutheran youth was made in eight measurement areas. Brief summaries of the data follow.

1) *Personal characteristics*, including such

variables as self-image, degree of participation in school life, occupational goals, educational aspirations, organizational memberships, friendship patterns, and the like. There were no differences traceable to parochial versus public education in this general area except for one highly predictable discovery, namely, that the more parochial education a student has experienced the more likely it is that his closest friends will be fellow Lutherans. One other item is related to the educational variable but is equally strongly influenced by family background. This is the fact that the probability of choosing professional church work as one's future vocation increases with the amount of parochial education.

2) *Family relationships.* No differences in terms of personal relationships to parents and participation in family life appear in parochial school children compared with public school products.

3) *Social and political attitudes.* On a variety of social and political issues relating to constitutional rights, government control of free enterprise, nuclear warfare, social problems, communist threat, political party preference, and the like there were no differences related in any way to parochial versus public education.

4) *Participation in the life of the local congregation.* In probing into such phenomena as frequency of church attendance, attendance at the Lord's Supper, frequency of personal prayer, membership in the congregation's youth organization, attendance at Bible class, monetary contributions, informal discussions of religious questions, and personal witnessing, differences traceable to education could be found only with respect to church attendance, private prayer, and attendance at Bible class and formal youth activities. When, however, the factor of differing family backgrounds was introduced into the analysis, the differences on the basis of education remained only for those youth who

come from what this study has defined as "marginal Lutheran families," that is, those families in which the parents are least likely to attend worship services, are only nominal members of the Lutheran Church, and carry on little or no religious instruction in the home. For those youth from the families we have defined in the study as "ideal" and "modal" Lutheran families, there are no differences at all based on varying amounts of parochial versus public education.

For example, 63 percent of the youth from "ideal" Lutheran families who have gone all the way through parochial schools report that they "pray several times a day." Likewise 64 percent of the youth from "ideal" families who have attended public schools report praying several times a day. These findings contrast with those for youth from "marginal families." We find that 53 percent of "marginal" youth who have an "all parochial" education report praying several times a day, whereas only 19 percent of the "marginal" youth with "all public" education report this. Thus there is no difference among the youth from "ideal" families, but a significant difference among those from "marginal" families.

Similar results appeared with respect to the frequency of church attendance. The proportion of youth from "ideal" families attending church every Sunday are 100 percent and 93 percent for those with "all parochial" and "all public" backgrounds respectively. For youth from "marginal" families the proportions are 71 percent and 31 percent respectively. Again, no difference in the "ideal family" category; but a significant difference in the "marginal" families.

5) *Evaluation of congregation and pastor.* "Do you feel that your pastor understands the problems and interests and concerns of young people like yourself?" "Do you feel that your local congregation does enough for its young people, or could it be doing more in your opinion?" "Are there cliques among the young people in your church?" In the

answers to these and a series of similar questions there were no differences related to differing educational experiences.

6) *Biblical biography and church history knowledge.* With respect to correct identification of various Biblical personalities there is a direct relationship with parochial education. The more parochial education, the more likely was the student to make correct identifications. Equally noteworthy, however, are the relatively low scores for all Lutheran youth, regardless of educational background. For example, only 6.6 percent of all youth correctly identified Nathanael, and only 17.1 percent correctly identified Enoch. With respect to time sequence relationships within the Old Testament, there was no relationship between education and accurate answers.

7) *Lutheran doctrinal knowledge.* In this highly crucial area there are few differences traceable to parochial education. When education is a factor, it is almost invariably relevant only for those youth from "marginal" Lutheran families. Further, the concept of "justification by grace through faith" is far from being crystal clear in the minds of Lutheran youth, regardless of educational background. In fact, fewer than half of the questions that explored the understanding of this crucial doctrine showed differences at all traceable to education, and these differences were centered in the youth from "marginal" families, and to a lesser degree in those from "modal" Lutheran families. In no case were there differences based on education among youth from "ideal" Lutheran families.

Looking at just one of the relevant variables we find the following: In responding to the statement: "The all-important thing is that a person is *sincere*, regardless of whatever religion he believes in," only 43 percent of all Lutheran youth chose the traditional Lutheran position and disagreed with the statement as presented. Both family background and educational experience are relevant here. Further, they appear equally

significant. Looking solely at family background, we find that 63 percent of those from "ideal" families correctly disagreed with the statement, whereas only 32 percent of those from marginal families disagreed. Similarly, 65 percent of those with "all parochial" education disagreed with the statement, whereas only 26 percent of the "all public" correctly disagreed.

8) *Religious attitudes.* Included in this section are attitudes regarding the church's involvement in social issues, the question of conflict between Bible and science, the right to question teachings of the church, ecumenism, and so on. There are no differences in this area at all, except for an increasingly tolerant attitude toward interfaith dating and marriage correlating with a decreasing proportion of parochial educational experience.

Conclusions

Although further depth analysis of the data is still being done, the following preliminary conclusions appear clearly dictated by the data:

1) It seems clear that our system of formal Christian education has not produced the difference in attitude, belief, and behavior that we have hoped it would accomplish. We have a relatively large number of youth in our sample, and they represent the complete spectrum of Lutheran youth. Further, we have explored a great diversity of opinion, belief, attitude, and behavior. And yet we have discovered very few differences.

2) Further, we have to consider the potentially powerful effects of family background and home environment. When we introduce this variable into the analysis, it becomes clear that when there is a relatively sound Lutheran family behind a youngster, Lutheran elementary and secondary education does not produce measurable differences.

3) On the other hand, the impact of parochial education can be seen if we are careful to focus very specifically on a cer-

tain type of youth. Here we refer to the important discovery that those least likely to receive a Christian education and strong Christian influence in the home, namely, those youth from "marginal" Lutheran families, are measurably affected by their contact with formal Christian education in the Lutheran elementary and secondary school. By no means does parochial education always yield significant differences even among these youth. But when parochial education can at all be shown to produce differences in attitude, belief, and behavior, it is almost always for youth from marginal Lutheran families.

However, at this point we must raise the question: Who is most likely to attend Lutheran schools? Particularly, who is most likely to go all the way through the parochial school system? We find that 40 percent of the children from "ideal" families, 22 percent of those from "modal" families, but only 9 percent of those from "marginal" families have gone all the way through parochial schools. Consider further the fact that we have found that according to the definitions of family types used in the study there are more than twice as many "marginal" as "ideal" Lutheran families. Putting these two pieces of information together, we find that

children of "ideal" families are about 10 times as likely to attend Lutheran schools for all of their elementary and secondary education as are children from "marginal" families. What this points out all too clearly is that those who are most likely to be measurably affected by parochial education are least likely to be receiving it. Or to turn it around, those who are least likely to exhibit differences traced to parochial education are most likely to experience parochial school education.

Notes:

The complete results and analysis of this study will be published in book form in the near future.

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This study was conducted and reported by Ronald L. Johnstone, Ph.D., director of research for Concordia Seminary Research Center.