



The Kieschnick Lecture Series

Is There Hope in our Cities?

**Marlene Lund, Executive Director, Wheat Ridge Ministries' Center for Urban Education Ministries
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I'm going to start this session with a story that I first heard during a postnote maybe fifteen years ago. The speaker, Marianne LaTall, was a wonderful Lutheran educator who saw the value of children and, particularly, the value of surrounding them with Christian love and care. She was an innovator, especially in early childhood education, and helped many-a novice teacher and administrator understand the great opportunity we have as educators.

So here's the story: Quite a few years back when the ban on eating meat on Fridays still existed in the Catholic church, there was a group of good Irish Catholics who lived in a tenement on the lower east side of New York City. Also living in the building was a nice young Jewish boy named Samuel. Every Friday night Samuel climbed out on his fire escape and grilled a big juicy steak. The mouths of our Irish Catholic friends would water at the smells. This went on for months until all of the neighbors finally got together and plotted to marry off one of their neighbors, Mary Kathleen to Samuel. They figured that he would convert to Catholicism and their problem would be solved. After several months, Kathleen and Samuel fell in love and were to be married. Samuel agreed to be baptized and went willingly to the local priest. The priest poured the water of baptism on Samuel pronouncing the words, "You were born a Jew, and you are now a Catholic." So Mary Kathleen and Samuel were married and the neighbors were sure their Friday night problem was solved. With great anticipation, the neighbors gathered at their windows that next Friday night seeing Samuel setting up his grill on the fire escape. But what was he doing – he was preparing a nice juicy steak to put on the grill. As they listened to Samuel saying his prayers over the meal they heard the words, "You were born a cow, and you are now a fish."

Transformation – Webster defines it as "the operation of changing one configuration into another." Lutheran schools have a strong and long history in this country. In fact, most immigrant churches started schools as a way to preserve their faith and heritage when they came to this new world. One of the mandates of the original German Synod and one of the jobs of Muhlenberg was to start Lutheran schools. It wasn't unusual to find schools in church basements attended by the congregation youth. However, when Horace Mann opened the first public school in Boston in 1821, things began to change. Universal public education became the norm and many of these Lutheran schools closed and the children attended local public schools. However, there remained a strong presence of schools in the country throughout the 20th century. Depending on what flavor of Lutheran you were, you either supported a local Lutheran school, a college or public education.

Which leads us to today. We are going to speak to the plight of our Lutheran schools, focusing especially on those located in our inner cities. I'm going to indulge in a few statistics – basically the bad news –and then spend the majority of this time on the good news and the hope for the future.

I'll begin with New York City as that is where I'm most familiar. When I began serving in Lutheran schools, there were 25 thriving schools in the city. Eight have closed, including the oldest Lutheran school in North America, St. Matthew, Manhattan, founded in 1752. Out of the 17 remaining, one will close at the end of the school year and several others are in jeopardy. Many have enrollment well below 150 students and many have combined classes to make ends meet. The school where I served as principal had 550 students when I left in 1992; it now serves 50 students.

In Detroit, out of 30-plus Lutheran schools, the last closed its doors on January 1, 2011. There are no Lutheran schools in Los Angeles.

So that's the bad news – and maybe even more than bad, the scary news. The question facing us today is, "How do we transform our old model of doing school and reinvent ourselves?" My contention is that we do it by taking a good look at what we have to offer – our assets – including our colleges and universities, our property, our historical Lutheran theology of service and vocation, our engaged philanthropists, and our deep community relationships-- and start thinking out of the box. If we continue to do business as usual because we've always done it that way, the painful disappearance of these marvelous ministries will continue.

I've been very privileged over the past two years to spend significant time traveling the country to visit schools in our cities that are not only surviving, but thriving.

For the purpose of this lecture I'm going to group the schools into categories. Some of you know that the Center for Urban Education Ministries, a part of Wheat Ridge Ministries, has been engaged in the Charlie Project over the past two years. The Charlie Project began when several foundations met to discuss the alarming trend of Lutheran school closings. Despite significant dollars put into these schools there was little change in the rate of school closures. With that in mind, we began by looking at the current state of urban Lutheran schools and by looking at the common threads which exist in those that are either thriving or holding their own. Inspired leadership, a strong business model, challenging academics and a willingness to explore new programs were all present in these schools. I'll speak more about the Charlie Project later in this lecture.

Philanthropy and Building Use

Let's start with what I call the philanthropy and building usage model. Several traditional Lutheran K-8 schools that are doing well have adopted this model. Holy Family Lutheran School was established in 1985 in the infamous Cabrini Green public housing community in Chicago. It began with a congregation seeking an alternative to the under-performing elementary schools in the neighborhood. It also followed on the heels of a Lutheran school which had just closed its doors. In 2008, the school moved to a brand new building in the Lawndale section of

Chicago, just a few miles away from its previous site, and still serves the same population of children. Tuition covers only 25% of the expense to run the school. The rest of the money is raised through philanthropy and other programs which utilize state and city funding. From the onset of its mission, Holy Family enlisted the help of other more affluent congregations and built a financial support base of people who were excited about the vision put forth. Next year, Holy Family will merge with St. Gregory Episcopal School in order to strengthen both ministries. Holy Family has superb leadership in their president, Susan Work, and their principal, Cheryl Collins. Holy Family takes advantage of city and state funding in their preschool and after school programs, helping to offset their budget. They have a business and development plan which raises significant third-party dollars. They have a clear vision and are not afraid to invite others in. Holy Family serves a community need and does it with excellence.

Government Funding

Please pardon me as I climb on my soapbox and digress for a moment. We all know that the battle for choice in education has been raging for a long time. Strong teachers unions and some of our politicians say that giving parents a choice will ruin the public school system. I have always contended that the issue of choice in education is not a topic about education but about social justice. As many of you know, lots of public school teachers and many, many politicians choose to send their children to private or parochial schools. They have a choice because they can afford a choice. Often our schools and those of other faith traditions saw parents working two or three jobs in order to offer their children a better option. With the advent of the charter movement, the choice that wealthy parents already had became possible for those in poorer neighborhoods. In a few limited states there are either voucher programs or tax credits available to those who wish to send their children to a school of their choice rather than public. These programs have been challenged in court, battered as substandard, accused of taking money from the public sector, etc., etc. So what solutions does that hold for us as Lutheran educators? One of our rights as citizens is to voice our opinion – unfortunately Lutherans usually aren't very good at that. We're pretty law-abiding non-confrontational folk, but just think what might happen if we organized our parents to make a political statement about their desire for choice in education. Eleven percent of all students in this country attend a faith-based or private school – what a statement we could make! But back to the task at hand. There are states that do offer government support for faith-based school programs.

Several years ago, New York instituted a Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program which provides free half-day classes for any four-year-old in New York. The legislature included attendance at nonpublic schools in this law. Some pastors dug their heels in and said that they couldn't possibly allow a UPK program to operate in their church because there would be no religious symbols, no prayer and no Bible stories allowed. Other pastors and education leaders looked at this program not as a threat but as an opportunity. With creative scheduling and additions, they figured out a way to offer the religious curriculum at times other than the three hour UPK class. Some schools offered full-day classes for working parents at a reduced rate – the children simply did their religious activities in the afternoon rather than in the morning. Another school added a free optional hour at the beginning of the day in which children are fed

breakfast, Bible stories are shared and prayer is offered. In many cases, working with the government not only allowed the schools to stay open but to continue to serve the community.

Another example of government funding, and one that most of us wish was universal, is the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP). Created in 1990, it is the nation's largest and oldest school voucher program for low-income families. The program has grown from 337 students at 7 schools in 1990-91 to more than 20,000 students at 102 schools in 2010-11. Eligible students may receive up to \$6,442 in 2010-11 to enroll at the private Milwaukee school of their choice. The Wisconsin Supreme Court has twice upheld the constitutionality of the MPCP. On June 27, 2002, the United States Supreme Court upheld voucher programs such as the MPCP that let parents choose among non-religious and religious private schools. Several Milwaukee Lutheran schools have been able to take advantage of this program, helping them to stay in the city. One shining example is St. Marcus Lutheran School which serves approximately 380 students from prekindergarten through 8th grade. St. Marcus was like many schools in the city – down to under 100 students in the 1980's. They decided to reinvent themselves by adding early childhood education, building a new school and, in 1992, participating in the choice program. While this helps tremendously, the school also took stock of its program and embraced the KIPP model where all involved – from students to teachers to parents – believe that there is no excuse for failure. Administrators, teachers, parents and students are expected to do whatever it takes to ensure the academic success of every student. The Hope Schools in Milwaukee have a similar story to tell. Located in Milwaukee on three campuses and also following the KIPP model the Hope Schools serve poor children through participation in the MPCP and provide an education of excellence. Both schools are college preparatory programs with the expectation that all of their students will go on to succeed in college.

This leads us to the next, and maybe most controversial, model – faith-led charter schools.

Charter Models

Now I know the word “charter” has a bad connotation for many Lutheran educators – in fact, we can trace the demise of some of our schools due in part to a charter school moving into the neighborhood. Two years ago I was probably in the same place where many of you fall – charters? No way!! However, I believe that when we begin to see the charter movement as an opportunity rather than a threat, we will be making some good progress. In the case of children in high poverty areas, parents have no choice but to send children to their local public schools. They simply cannot afford even the lowest tuition. Charters have given them a choice – and many are taking it. There are more and more charter schools opening that are led by faith-based groups. Depending on the state, the process can be friendly or very difficult. According to the Leadership for Quality Education group, charter schools are (or should be):

- publicly funded, and are not vouchers for private schools
- open to *all* students
- pioneers and innovators in public education
- meeting the needs of parents

- appealing places for teachers to work
- committed to improving public education
- operated by an exciting array of non-profit groups
- playing an important part in school reform
- demonstrating a record of student achievement.

I don't think that anyone sitting in this room would think that any of those traits are undesirable. What if we embraced the possibilities that a charter offers for us to continue our mission to educate children? And what if we offered before and after school opportunities to share the faith? Ideal, no, but workable, yes. I won't go into how this can be done as it is not the purpose of this lecture, but let me share two examples of faith-led charter schools.

Eagle Preparatory School in Phoenix, Arizona, opened in the fall of 2008. It is a charter school operated by a group called Educational Enterprises, Inc. The mission of EEI states "EEI (sic) is driven by the love of others, builds learning communities which inspire, equip, and support Serving Leaders to transform our world." EEI is owned and operated by Lutherans who have a dream that includes impacting the world with more than 500 schools and community centers. EEI Compass Education Partners began in 2010 launching Grace Adventures which provides Christian daycare and preschool and Jubilee Youth Ensemble, a children's choir. While EEI follows the strict letter of the law, separating church and school during the day, it does not prevent Grace Adventures from operating and offering Christian options before and after school. Currently, Eagle Preparatory has the highest achievement scores in their District. Inspired leadership, a solid business plan, a mission meeting a community need, and thinking out of the box all lead to the success of Eagle Prep.

The second example I'd like to share is the Catalyst Schools which grew out of Chicago's San Miguel Schools, a system of Catholic middle schools operated by the Christian Brothers. I had the opportunity to visit a Catalyst School campus two years ago and was challenged by Brother Mike Fehrenbach to tell him the difference between this charter school and the Catholic school, save the lack of religious symbols. The experience changed my view of the possibilities that charter schools offer children in poor communities when operated with the same principles as their faith-based counterparts. The Catalyst Schools offer a college-preparatory educational experience. Since many students arrive with below-average math and reading skills, teachers focus on math, reading and language arts every day for 80 minutes each. Because this adds up to 1,200 minutes of core instruction per week, the school days are longer than those at traditional schools to leave time for gym, cultural enrichment and other activities. At Catalyst Schools, the school week is 2,100 minutes, whereas the typical week at a Chicago public school is 1,500 minutes. The Catalyst Schools also work to make sure that students and their parents are prepared for the transition to high school by equipping them with practical life skills and helping them complete high school applications. After eighth grade graduation from a Catalyst School, students are tracked by the schools for four years to assure that they have assistance in searching for a college or seeking employment.

In addition to core subjects like reading and math the Catalyst School students learn values. For example, the students are met at the front door each school day by a teacher or administrator who shakes their hands and gives a word of encouragement. The social, emotional and spiritual needs of the students are also supported by the local church which volunteers with tutors, serves meals and runs a faith based after school program.

Innovative Programming

The final topic for discussion is, "How do schools offer unique programs that meet the needs of the community?" In other words, how do Lutheran schools find their niche?

I was recently in Redwood City in northern California and visited the St. Francis Center. The Center was started 20 some years ago by a Dominican sister who wanted to provide food and clothing to immigrants in the community. The community consists of Mexican laborers who often live five families to a house or in the garage of a house. Some are illegal, many are illiterate. When Sister Christina took over the pantry, she decided that the best way out of poverty was through education. Her model is to identify the twelve economically poorest kindergarten students in the neighborhood, six boys and six girls, and offer them a free education through fifth grade where they would stay with the same teacher all six years. The only requirement is that the mothers must come to school themselves every Monday and be paired up with a tutor in order to learn to read and write themselves. After the six years, children and moms graduate together. This led many of the "graduating" moms to seek their GEDs. The Center boasts over 100 volunteers, is totally supported through philanthropy, will build a community center by next year, and will house an independent daycare next year operated by one of the women from the women's business initiative. The school is only able to serve 12 children every 6 years until a new cohort is brought in, but think of the changes that are happening in those 12 families, and think of the possibilities with additional space.

Another example of innovation is St. John Lutheran School in Staten Island. Facing the same challenges as other parochial schools in the area, principal Rosemary Palisay decided to take a step back, take stock of church and school assets and move forward. The school has forged a partnership with a local specialty school serving autistic children. Through this partnership, a win-win was created. Children are mainstreamed with St. John's population and the educational experience is enhanced for all.

The Catholic community has done much work to develop cutting edge models of education. The Nativity San Miguel Network serving middle school children, the Christo Rey Model serving high school students in a work/study model and the Jubilee Schools in Georgia are only some of the ways that faith-based schools are reinventing themselves.

One final example of innovation is the proposed Martin Luther Square in Chicago. Supported by the Northern Illinois District, the English District, Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois and Walcamp Outdoor Ministries, this vision is to refurbish Luther High School South to provide not only prekindergarten through 12th grade education, but to also

provide space for community services like senior daycare, workforce training and a community fitness center. A bold dream that will take tremendous leadership and support.

Conclusion

I mentioned the Charlie Project at the beginning of this lecture and I'd like to conclude with some of what we've learned through it. The uniqueness of Charlie is not simply in creating a sustainable school, but in tying that school to economic development and economic security in the community.

As we embark upon implementing the Charlie Project in south-central Los Angeles and in future sites, nine guiding principles have emerged as paramount. I believe that they can be applied to any urban Lutheran school wishing to start or maintain its ministry. It is appropriate here to thank those who have made the Charlie Project possible through their generous support and encouragement: The Christopher Family Foundation, The Lutheran Foundation of St. Louis, The Siebert Foundation, Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, The Van Lunen Foundation, Wheat Ridge Ministries, and several individual donors.

1. Lutheran schools start with worshipping communities. A Catholic colleague who is reopening schools in the south, coined the phrase, "We are educating not to make Catholics, but because we are Catholic." We are called to be in the community not to make Lutherans, but because we are Lutheran. God calls us to be in the breach and to engage with our communities. Some of the most profound experiences of the Charlie team were in joint worship. Palm Sunday worship at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Minneapolis brought together a diverse group of people who unabashedly testified to their faith in action. As we marched around the block holding our palm branches high and singing hymns, the community took notice. The community meetings that were held followed a worship experience and prayer. The centering of our efforts is in our beginning – the process is centered in Christ. The same was true in Los Angeles where every meeting began with a centering in our purpose as Christians. God calls us to action through our schools and churches. We must go forward in faith.
2. Lutheran schools must seek to promote change and growth in communities, not in individual congregations. One of the learnings that came through our research phase was that individual congregations cannot sustain a school. The financial and governance models that once worked are no longer working, particularly in urban areas. The phrase "strength in numbers" holds true for churches engaged in ministry in our cities. While we may be strong as a single unit, we have much greater impact when we work collaboratively with other congregations. Working together also gives us a chance to use the assets of individual congregations for the good of all. Where one church may hold property suitable for a school, another might run a food cooperative and a third might have a building suitable for developing local enterprises. By pooling those assets and sharing a common vision, great impact can happen in community. By being bold in our vision for change and growth, we attract those who might support wholesale change.

3. Lutheran schools must be locally led with a cadre of passionate people. Looking at local assets and having local leaders plan for their future is paramount to the success of any school. During one community meeting in Minneapolis a participant clearly stated that the community did not need someone coming in on their white charger to rescue the neighborhood; instead, he spoke of the need for the community members themselves to take charge of the process in order to effect permanent change. In Los Angeles, we were astounded by the local leaders' sense of urgency and the will to make something happen.
4. Lutheran schools must be focused outward towards the community. Lutheran schools in urban areas have been perceived as safe havens for students and families, very often taking a protective stance of shielding children from the community. While we obviously intend to keep our students safe, we must invite the community into the school and the school into the community.
5. Lutheran schools have a great gift in the understanding of Lutheran vocation. The vocation of the child as part of a family, as a student, as part of the local community and as part of the world needs to be included in the overall makeup of the school.
6. Lutheran-led charter schools are viable options in poor, urban communities.
7. There is no "cookie cutter approach" to urban education and economic development that will work in every community. However, with inspired leadership and clear vision, urban education will be successful.
8. Lutheran schools must have the right structures in place for sustainability, including governance, finances and accountability.
9. Lutheran schools and church need a prudent but aggressive evaluation of risk. How and where are our parishes called to take risks? Charlie has created the space to talk about the opportunities that would require taking risk.

I started with a story and I'd like to end with one ...

The children were lined up in the cafeteria of a Lutheran elementary school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large tray of apples. A teacher wrote a note and posted it on the apple tray, "Take only ONE. God is watching."

At the other end of the lunch line was a large tray of chocolate chip cookies. A bright little third grader wrote a note, which she put next to the tray of cookies, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples."

Cute story that makes us smile. But we know that God gives abundantly – there's no lack of apples or chocolate chip cookies if we trust God and use the assets and abilities that He has

given to us. If we believe that there is only one way to succeed, if we believe that we must do things the way we've always done them, if we believe that we need to hoard our resources, if we believe that we work better alone – then we are surely doomed to fail. With inspired leadership, with a clear and compelling vision, with strong structures and with dedication to vocation and service to God, there most certainly is hope for our schools in the city.