

# ***SUNDAY SCHOOL COMMITTEE REPORT***

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## Introduction

At its Fall 2019 meeting, the Board for Youth Outreach (BYO) surveyed statistical reports from our Synod on Sunday School attendance and found that from 1997-2017, Sunday School attendance had declined over 51%, while Sunday Divine Service attendance has decreased only around 22% and baptisms have only decreased around 34%. The BYO made a recommendation to the Synod that an ad hoc committee be formed.

*Image 0A – Select Survey of Statistical Reports in Relation to Sunday School Enrollment*

	1957	1967	% Change '57-67	1977	% Change '67-77	1987	% Change '77-87	1997	% Change '87-97	2007	% Change '97-07	2017	% Change '07-17	% Change '97-17 (20-year period)
Baptized Membership	13,601	15,682	+15.30%	19,634	+25.20%	21,454	+9.27%	22,098	+3.00%	19,945	-9.74%	16,829	-15.62%	-23.84%
Average Sunday Church Attendance	NA	6,953	NA	9,099	+30.86%	9,220	+1.33%	9,754	+5.79%	8,901	-8.75%	7,567	-14.99%	-22.42%
Children Baptized	560	385	-31.25%	430	+11.69%	453	+5.35%	401	-11.48%	375	-6.48%	264	-29.60%	-34.16%
<b>Sunday School Enrollment</b>	<b>3,404</b>	<b>3,959</b>	<b>+16.30%</b>	<b>3,208</b>	<b>-18.97%</b>	<b>3,098</b>	<b>-3.43%</b>	<b>2,988</b>	<b>-3.55%</b>	<b>2,133</b>	<b>-28.61%</b>	<b>1,451</b>	<b>-31.97%</b>	<b>-51.44%</b>
VBS	NA	2,670	NA	2,545	-4.68%	2,527	-0.71%	2,803	+10.92%	2,629	-6.21%	2,149	-18.26%	-23.33%
Summer Camp	NA	319	NA	251	-21.32%	200	-20.32%	302	+51.00%	335	+10.93%	373	+11.34%	+23.51%

The Synod in convention in 2021 approved this motion: “That the synod president appoint an ad hoc committee with the goal of identifying the reasons for this decline and seeking solutions or alternatives to providing a thorough biblical education for the children of our congregations with a report to be made to the next convention.”

This report has three goals. **First, to identify reasons for decline.** (E.g., why is what was valuable for so many decades now not seen as such? Is there other research out there from other church bodies or groups [ie., Pew Research, etc.] on the decline of Sunday School?). **Second, to seek solutions or provide alternatives** for providing a thorough Biblical education for the children of our congregations. **And third, to provide encouragement** for congregations/leaders/parents feeling guilt or distress over Sunday School attendance and youth engagement.

## Part 1: The Decline of Sunday School

### The Decline In General

While specific numbers are hard to find, Sunday School has seen a slow decline across every denomination in the last 50+ years according to many anecdotal studies.<sup>1</sup> Even a 1959 *Christianity Today* cover story<sup>2</sup> asked the question, “Shall We Close the Sunday School?”<sup>3</sup> The decline has accelerated since the 1990’s, with Barna reporting in 2005 that 20,000 fewer churches were offering Sunday school to particular age groups compared with 1997. Sunday School attendance reached a low point in 2020, as to be expected with the Covid-19 pandemic shut-downs.<sup>4</sup> One study found that children’s (0-12) participation is down on average by 30% and youth (13-17) involvement is down by 40%. It also stated that although “congregational and program size varies widely, churches are currently averaging a median of five children and two youths in their educational programming overall for a median sized church of 75 worship attendees.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The Decline of Sunday School in Our Synod**

After the initial data provided by the BYO, the *Annual Statistical Reports* for each year, as published in the *Synod Report* for the following years, were more closely examined. The goal was to look at Sunday School Enrollment as a percentage of Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members. The formula and limitations can be found at Appendix 1A. From about 1930 to 1980, between 60% to 80% of Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members were listed in the Sunday School statistic, peaking in the early 1970’s. A strong pattern of decline is evident afterwards, to the point where the percentage of Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members listed in Sunday School dropped to between 30% and 50% from 2005 onward. If a goal is to maximize Sunday School enrollment among its own Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members, then it appears that ELS congregations on average have been less successful in recent decades than in the mid 1900s.

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<sup>1</sup> For a mere sampling of sources:

“Sunday School is Changing in Under-the-Radar But Significant Ways,” Barna.com, July 11, 2005.

<https://www.barna.com/research/sunday-school-is-changing-in-under-the-radar-but-significant-ways>

Novak, Cindy, “Reinventing Sunday school: A reformation in faith formation,” *Living Lutheran*, August 27, 2014.

<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2014/08/reinventing-sunday-school>

“The Decline of Religion in American Family Life,” *American Enterprise Institute*, December 11, 2019.

<https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-decline-of-religion-in-american-family-life>

“Is Sunday School on Life Support? Here’s the Research...,” *Children’s Ministry Magazine*, January 3, 2019.

<https://childrensministry.com/sunday-school-life-support>

Hays, Charlotte, “Why Sunday Schools Are Closing,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2009.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124598071177158161>

<sup>2</sup> Doll, Ronald C., “Shall We Close the Sunday Schools?” *Christianity Today*, August 31, 1959.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1959/august-31/shall-we-close-sunday-schools.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The article begins quoting Wesley Shrader of *Life Magazine* who characterized Sunday School as “The most wasted hour in the week.” After asking the question, “if even the one hour in 168 is worthwhile for this purpose,” the article gives this encouraging response: “Though the Sunday School seems to limp along, it often accomplishes wonders. Only an all-wise God could utilize untrained volunteers, meager physical facilities, and limited materials to change the course of so many lives.”

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, Ericka, “Sunday School Paused During the Pandemic. Will It Come Back?” *Christianity Today*, April 29, 2022.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/april/sunday-school-covid-pandemic-disrupt-decline-hartford-resea.html>

<sup>5</sup> “Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond Covid-19,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, April 2022., pg. 3.

<https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Religious-Education-During-the-Pandemic-April-2022.pdf>

On the other hand, in the years before the Covid-19 pandemic, between 2012 and 2018, even though the raw numbers of pre-confirmation aged children and children enrolled in Sunday School both dropped, the *percentage* of children of Sunday School age in Sunday School remained relatively stable.

Image 1A – Sunday School Enrollment as Percentage of Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members

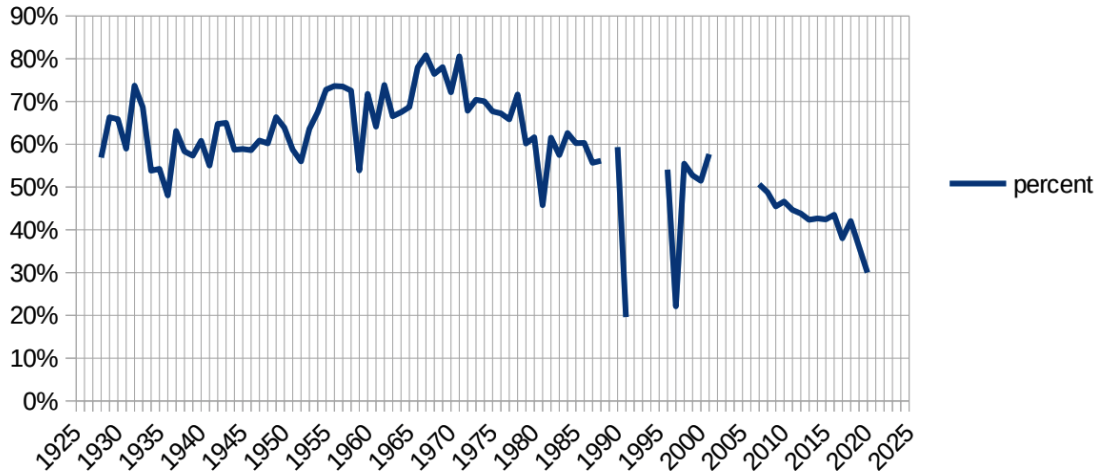


Image 1B – Detailed Look at Sunday School Enrollment Prior to Covid-19

Synod Totals

	Baptized Members	Confirmed Members	Sun. Sch. Enrollment	Pre-Conf. Baptized Members	% of Pre-Conf Bapt. Mem. in S.Sch.
2011	19,262	15,041	1,885	4221	45%
2012	18,703	14,775	1,721	3928	44%
2013	18,026	14,318	1,570	3708	42%
2014	17,799	14,122	1,569	3677	43%
2015	16,928	13,350	1,518	3578	42%
2016	16,675	13,306	1,466	3369	44%
2017	16,929	13,113	1,451	3816	38%
2018	16,576	13,207	1,417	3369	42%
2019	16,444	12,677	1,357	3767	36%
2020	16,315	12,614	900	3701	24%
10-Year Trend	-15%	-16%	-52%	-12%	

*enrollment declining pre-COVID*

*but as a % of children that age, relatively stable*

**Historical Perspective: Societal Challenges and the Need to Find New Methods Are Nothing New**

In 1879, one of the foundational pastors of our church body, the Rev. U.V. Koren had a schoolhouse built near Decorah, IA, called the Rovang Schoolhouse. His goal was to teach the Christian faith in a parochial school setting, something that the Missouri Synod, whom he had much contact with, had recently had great success with. However his idea was not popular with many congregation members, who desired that their students acculturate into their new country via the public school system. The Rovang School never opened as intended.

Rather they "compromised:" students would attend public school during the year, and then for two weeks at the beginning of summer and for two weeks at end of summer they would attend the church school to learn the Christian faith and the Norwegian language. This method was adapted in other regions, and was a normal method of religious instruction for children for about 40 years in our Synod, until a method popular in other religious circles called "Sunday School" became the favored method of religious instruction for youth among Norwegian Lutherans sometime after the 1920's. The wide and normalized practice of Sunday School among our churches is thus less than 100 years old.

The concept of Sunday School had been introduced by churches in England in the 1700's as a way to give poor and orphaned children access to education. It was not merely for teaching Bible stories, but also reading and arithmetic, and lasted four or five hours each Sunday. For many children, it was the only education they would receive. As the movement spread to America through protestant church groups, it likewise at first served the poorest and least privileged of students. As the schools grew to more middle class Americans, many of these same groups saw Sunday School as a way to teach morals over doctrine – a way to non-denominationalize American Christianity.<sup>6</sup> The curriculum at these Sunday Schools became more and more simplified. During this same time, Roman Catholics tended to rely on parochial schools and special weekday classes to teach the faith. Lutherans found themselves in the middle of these two methods, and with different goals.

Interestingly, our own Synod in 1920 in only its third convention since the reorganization, tackled the pressing issue of how best to give youth a Christian education. In a sermon on the importance of Christian Education, the Rev. E Hanson listed dangers facing youth of the day, which might sound familiar: "The shameful disregard for divine truth, which is so apparent in our day; the lack of respect for the civil government which manifests itself so clearly in such movements as socialism, and anarchism, which are constantly gaining ground; the jealousy, greed and avarice which are revealed so clearly in the many strikes, and in the constant struggle between capital and labor; and, finally, the disregard that so many show in regard to the laws of marriage, as well as all the immorality which is so prevalent in our time; these are dangers which threaten to destroy both the church and the state."<sup>7</sup>

In the same sermon, the Rev. Hanson gave possible solutions to these issues already being conducted in the few churches in the Synod at the time. Sunday School was one option conducted at many congregations, another was the summer school model mentioned above, and a third was "the so-called Gary plan" which was being tried at one congregation through release time from the public school.<sup>8</sup> Hanson cautioned against

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<sup>6</sup> C.f. the brief history of the Sunday School movement at <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/sunday-school-movement>

<sup>7</sup> E. Hanson, "School Sermon on John 21:15-17," *Proceedings of The Third Annual Convention of The Norwegian Synod of the American Ev. Luth. Church*, 1920, pg. 109.

<sup>8</sup> Ironically, the Gary Plan, the brainchild of William Wirt (1874-1938) in Gary, Indiana, was largely influenced by the philosophy of John Dewey (1859-1952), who called himself a "religious humanist." Dewey was not secretive about his goal of replacing the outdated Christian religion with a practical "religion" modern man could actually carry out. The Gary Plan of "work-study-play" segmented knowledge into specific, practical areas, that could be directly applied to occupations and daily life. It was the forerunner of today's technology education programs. The relation to religion was in its inclusion of "release-time religious instruction" as part of the plan. In hindsight, this merely segmented religion into a practical, scientific exercise, and not something to be lived or something which encompassed all of life.

overestimating each one of these methods' abilities at providing religious instruction, saying, "under no circumstances should we entertain the idea that this is all the instruction our children need...If so little time were given to the instruction of your child in arithmetic, geography or history, as is given to instruction in God's Word in the schools mentioned, what kind of knowledge would they acquire?"<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted that Hanson concluded that Christian parochial schools were the answer, for they alone, he said, would be "able to fulfill all the demands in the words of Jesus, 'Feed My lambs!'"<sup>10</sup> In the time since, while valuable, not even parochial schools have proven to be the silver bullet once envisioned.

A similar frustration in the lack of regard for Christian education was noted in 1931 by the Rev. S.C. Ylvisaker (President of BLC, 1930-1950). He lamented parents' lackadaisical attitude in their children's Christian education. At the same time, he envisioned Bethany Lutheran College as a place where "our young men and young women are encouraged to study and appreciate what is noble and pure and beautiful, where they are exercised in habits of Christian culture, where they learn to express through the medium of song or other forms of art that which is beautiful and noble, and in general develop that sense and spirit of refinement which enriches our whole life."<sup>11</sup> The habits of Christian culture and piety would carry over into their lives and eventually into their vocations as parents, strengthening the broader church as a result.

Yet, overall today, we see a relaxing of this piety and culture, which has seemed to expose itself in our Sunday Schools' attendance. So, lest we become discouraged as Sunday School attendance declines in our Synod, it is important to note that the societal challenges which spurred Sunday School on to such enormous popularity are no longer the same. We are, however, facing new challenges. In addition, perhaps "piggybacking" onto Sunday School (or summer school, or the Gary plan) with the distinctive Lutheran purpose of teaching the good news of God's plan of salvation over morals or practical skills, was a method suited to a time and place. New opportunities are being presented to us to be faithful to the Scriptural and Lutheran purpose of Christian education.

### **Survey of Congregations on Challenges**

Qualitative surveys with over 20 congregations were conducted. Two open-ended questions were asked:

1. What ministry at your church has been uniquely or especially helpful in connecting young people with Jesus? (some examples may include: the Christian Day school, family style Sunday school, Sunday school for babies, etc.)
2. What holes or weaknesses have you observed in your current process of raising young people in the faith? (some examples may include: lack of Bible history, inability to share or defend the faith, etc.)

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pg. 112-113. Hanson continued, "When we also consider that many of those who are teachers in the Sunday school often have little or no experience in teaching, then it must be self-evident that the fruits of the Sunday school will be very meager. If the children also get the idea-which is often the case-that when they have attended the Sunday school they need not attend the service, then the usefulness of the Sunday school is of very doubtful character."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pg. 113. Rev. J. A. Thorsen and his brother Rev. M. Thorsen echoed this same sentiment in a letter to the Synod in convention recorded in that same report (pg. 128-129).

<sup>11</sup> Ylvisaker, S.C., BLC *Bulletin*, April, 1941;; cited from "Sigvard Christian Ylvisaker: A Commemorative Volume at the Centennial of His Birth," edited by Peter T. Harstad; Lutheran Synod Book Company, BLC: 1984., pg. 113.

When responses were categorized, these are those things that emerged as either helpful to the Christian education of young people, or a hole in the ministry:

<b>Helpful to Ministering to Young People</b>	<b>Holes In Ministering to Young People</b>
Parental Involvement (8)	Lack of Parental Involvement (8)
Non-Day School Formal Children's Programming (8)	Lack of Bible Knowledge/Familiarity (8)
Christian School (7)	Difficulty Experiencing the Love of Jesus or Seeing the Real Life Application (4)
The Divine Service (4)	Lack of Post-Confirmation Engagement (3)
	Lack of Other Kids in Program (1)
	Insensitivity Regarding Difficult Topics (1)

A common thread was family/parent involvement. Eleven (11) different congregations reported that they perceived that parental involvement or lack thereof directly contributed to the connectivity of young people with the faith.

Non-Day School Formal Children's Programming was the second area noted for being helpful to reaching children. Here as well, many congregations reported including families as part of their outreach to children, either by having families be a part of their formal non-day school programming, such as hosting a "family Sunday School" or a multi-generational catechesis program, distributing family devotional or catechetical resources, or regularly buying and giving families books, hymnals, etc. In these ways, some congregations are attempting to address the second "hole" in their ministry, a lack of Biblical knowledge, by targeting homes.

### **Other Research on Children and the Faith**

One key demographic survey conducted in Switzerland, perhaps the only one of its kind, found a correlation between parents' faithfulness to church and their children's faithfulness to church when they grew older.<sup>12</sup> The study found that if both father and mother attend regularly 33% of their children will end up as regular attenders. 25% will not come back to church. If the father was *irregular* and the mother *regular* only 3% of children will become a regular church attender. 38% will not come back to church. If the father was *non-practicing* and the mother *regular* only 2% of children will become a regular church attender. 60% will not come back to church.

A presentation given at a WELS Christian Family Seminar in 2019 noted from certain WELS Statistics that attending a Christian Day School barely increases these numbers, and Sunday School attendance seems to be even less of a factor in church attendance as a young adult.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Werner Haug and Phillipe Warner, "The Demographic Characteristics of the Linguistic and Religious Groups in Switzerland" in Volume 2 of *Population Studies No. 31, The Demographic Characteristics of National Minorities in Certain European States*, ed. by Werner Haug and others, published by the Council of Europe Directorate General III, Social Cohesion, Strasbourg, January 2000. Cited from [www.christianpost.com/news/fathers-key-to-their-childrens-faith.html](http://www.christianpost.com/news/fathers-key-to-their-childrens-faith.html)

<sup>13</sup> Olson, Lawrence, "Christian Family Seminar" at Lord of Love Lutheran Church, DeForest, WI, January 26th, 2019.

The Switzerland survey went on to state however, that if the father was *regular* and mother *irregular* 38% of children will become a regular church attender. And if the father was *regular* and mother *non-practicing* 44% of children will become a regular church attender.

In other words, this suggests that the father's influence by his commitment increases in proportion in response to the mother's indifference to religion. While we would never encourage mothers to not attend church, the results are worth noting for the amount of influence fathers seem to have. This makes sense, given that fathers have been tasked by God with the primary vocation of bringing their children up in the training and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

Another survey found how much bringing the faith from merely being confined to the church into everyday life at home affected children as young adults. 82% of children raised by parents who talked about faith at home, attached great importance to their beliefs and were active in their congregations were themselves religiously active as young adults.<sup>14</sup>

From these studies, it seems it would be difficult to overstate the influence that parents can have on their children in bringing them up in the knowledge of the Lord.

### **Suggestion for future research:**

While the numbers, qualitative surveys, and outside research give us a fairly broad picture of the state of Sunday School today, it may be desirable for future research to study more in depth a handful of ELS congregations that have seen Sunday School increases and decreases, and look for patterns that explain their exceptions to the synod average.

## **Part 2: Solutions and Alternatives**

### **Biblical Basis for the Goal of Sunday School**

Before providing a solution for Sunday School, it is vital to define, from Scripture, for what purpose Sunday School is intended to serve. Perhaps the best place to begin when identifying the goal and purpose of Sunday School is with the Word of God as spoken through the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: "***The goal is that we would no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, when people use tricks and invent clever ways to lead us astray. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we would in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head***" (Ephesians 4:14-15).

Our Lord Jesus the Christ, in His "Great Commission" shows where to begin these efforts.

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<sup>14</sup> Briggs, David, "The No. 1 Reason Teens Keeps the Faith as Young Adults," Oct. 19, 2014. [www.huffpost.com/entry/the-no-1-reason-teens-kee\\_b\\_6067838](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-no-1-reason-teens-kee_b_6067838)



*“Therefore go and gather **disciples** from all nations by **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by **teaching** them to keep all the instructions I have given you. And surely I am with you always until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).*

While it is specifically through the Means of Grace, God’s Word and Sacraments, which the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens faith, God’s Word directs us to various practices where these Means of Grace may be applied. Some such practices include:

- The Fellowship of Believers

*Hebrews 10:25 Let us not neglect meeting together, as some have the habit of doing. Rather, let us encourage each other, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

- Singing the Word of God With Other Christians

*Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

- Mentoring/Learning from the Example of More Mature Christians

*Hebrews 13:7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Carefully consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.*

- The application of spiritual gifts

*Ephesians 4:11-12 He himself gave the apostles, as well as the prophets, as well as the evangelists, as well as the pastors and teachers, for the purpose of training the saints for the work of serving, in order to build up the body of Christ.*

In addition to the general directives for the Church to grow up as the body of Christ, Scripture does speak specifically to the raising up of children. Children are to be trained so that they will grow and thrive as children of God.

*Proverbs 22:6 Dedicate a child to the way he should go, and even when he becomes old, he will not turn away from it.*

The most important ingredient for a well-trained child is the Word of God.

*Psalms 78:4-7 We will not hide them from their descendants. We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders that he has done. He set up testimony for Jacob. In Israel he established the law. He commanded our fathers to make it known to their children. Then the next generation would know it, even the children not yet born. They would rise up and tell their children. Then they would put their confidence in God, and they would not forget the deeds of God, but they would keep his commands.*

*2 Timothy 3:14-15 As for you, continue in the things you have learned and about which you have become convinced. You know from whom you learned them and that from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (In 1 Corinthians 1-3, Paul separates knowing Christ/Scripture from both gnostic, mystical wisdom speculation and wisdom according to worldly standards)*

While the Word of God may be taught in a formal setting, this teaching is to take place throughout the life of the child so that God’s Word is memorized, internalized, and tied to their whole Christian life.

*Deuteronomy 6:7 Teach them diligently to your children, and speak about them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road, when you lie down and when you get up.*

Psalm 1:1-2 *How blessed is the man who does not walk in the advice of the wicked, who does not stand on the path with sinners, and who does not sit in a meeting with mockers. But his delight is in the teaching of the Lord, and on his teaching he meditates day and night.*<sup>15</sup>

The Word of God should be taught in a way that is age and maturity appropriate. A foundation of basic principles should be laid first upon which deeper concepts and application can be built.

1 Peter 2:2 *Like newborn babies, crave the pure milk of the word so that by it you may grow up with the result being salvation.*

Hebrews 5:12-13 *In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the beginning principles of God's word all over again. You have become people who need milk, not solid food. For everyone who lives on milk is not acquainted with the word of righteousness, because he is still an infant.*

Children are to be exposed to things such as monuments, festivals, etc. that will prompt them to ask questions that will lead to discussing the Word of God.

Joshua 4:4-6 *So Joshua called the twelve men whom he had selected from the people of Israel—a man from each tribe. Joshua said to them, "Go to the middle of the Jordan in front of the Ark of the Lord your God. There each man is to lift up one stone on his shoulder. The number will correspond to the number of the tribes descended from the sons of Israel, so that this may be a sign among you when your children ask in the future, 'What do these stones mean for you?'"*

See also Exodus 13:3-16 for the passover as teaching tool.<sup>16</sup>

The responsibility for raising children in the faith is primarily that of the father.

Ephesians 6:4 *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother," which is the first commandment with a promise: "that it may go well with you and that you may live a long life on the earth." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*

Colossians 3:21 *Fathers, do not embitter your children, so that they do not become discouraged.*<sup>17</sup>

Other older Christians may offer assistance in training younger Christians.

Titus 2:3-5 *Likewise, encourage older women to be reverent in their behavior, not slanderers, not enslaved to much wine, but teachers of what is good, so that they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, busy at home, kind, and submitting to their own husbands, that the word of God might not be slandered.*

Upon reviewing the Scriptural directives regarding raising children in The Church, Sunday School has served the purpose of:

- 1) Proclaiming the Gospel to children through the Word of God

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<sup>15</sup> *Historical Example of Scriptural Application:* In the Didache, the oldest extra-biblical Christian catechism, the Christian life is treated as a whole. Staying rooted in God's word is accompanied by participation in services and striving to live a Christian life (see Didache 3, 4, 7-9).

<sup>16</sup> *Historical Example of Scriptural Application:* Lutheran churches have historically communicated the truths of Scripture in the texts of rites, the festivals and seasons of the church year, and the architecture of the church building and surroundings (cemetery, physical placement in neighborhood, etc.).

<sup>17</sup> *Historical Example of Scriptural Application:* Luther's Small Catechism begins with the superscript: In the plain form in which the head of the family shall teach them to his household.

- 2) Proclaiming the Gospel to children through music
  - 3) Creating an opportunity for fellowship with other Christian children
  - 4) Encouraging children and their families to attend the divine service
- to the end that they, as part of The Church, grow up in all things into Christ.

### **Solutions, Alternatives, and Recommendations**

After understanding the historical perspective, surveying congregations, and outlining the purpose for which it was intended, we must note that Sunday school is not the “end all, be all.” Sunday School was meant to connect youth to the Gospel, which can be accomplished in the current formats but could also be accomplished in other or additional ways. There may be many ways in which children may grow up in all things into Christ.

As some congregations are now already doing, other congregations might consider offering a “**family Sunday School**” or **family workshops** at least on a semi-regular basis where the whole family is taught what to believe and confess. Some congregations have successfully held a preschool “**Power Hour**,” where parents are taught with their young children, and modeled how to read God’s Word, sing, or conduct home devotions. Pastors might also consider producing or giving out **devotions to the heads of households** on a regular basis, perhaps modeling for them in their home what to do. It could be advisable to view home catechesis as an organized form of education which the church may encourage, with an emphasis on brevity, ease, and integration into the everyday lives of people.

For congregations who struggle with a critical mass of children, perhaps they might consider offering **multi-generational catechesis** or Bible study. After all, we have a number of examples in Scripture of catechesis looking like this. In Psalm 78, the whole congregation is asked to tell the generation to come the praises of the Lord. In Titus 2:1-8 we see older men teaching young men; older women teaching young women; young men and women teaching their children. In Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21, fathers are given the duty to instruct their children. And in Acts 2:38-47, entire households are seen coming together, “sharing all things in common,” and continuing “steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

For congregations who struggle with finding the personnel to teach children, and who also have families struggling with raising their own children in the church, perhaps individuals without children of their own can be called upon to act not as teachers, but as “sponsors” of children and families, encouraging them with resources, notes of mutual consolation and comfort, and assistance at Bible studies or the Divine Service. Some resources that can potentially be used or given are listed below.

For parents, the task of educating children also need not be over-complicated. It is not a question of whether children will be taught by them, but when and what is taught. For instance, faithful attendance at the Divine Service powerfully communicates the 1st and 3rd commandments, even without the commandments themselves being spoken. On the other hand, drilling the 3rd commandment, while being lax in attendance at the Divine Service also teaches that the Word of God is perhaps not as important as the commandment says.

Similarly, as examples from Joshua 4:4-6 and Exodus 13 show that merely exposing children to things such as monuments, festivals, etc., will prompt them to ask questions that will lead to discussing the Word of God.

It is not that children need to be taught *everything*, but as Luther says in his preface to the Small Catechism, they simply need to be taught what the words *are*. Then, after children become familiar with what the words are, then teach them what it *means*. Later, these things may be *expounded* and applied, often by simply going about daily life.<sup>18</sup>

“Begin by teaching them the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, etc., following the text word for word so that the young may repeat these things after you and retain them in their memory.”

“In the second place, after the people have become familiar with the text, teach them what it means.”

“In the third place, after you have thus taught this brief catechism, take up a large catechism so that the people may have a richer and fuller understanding.”

Finally, viewing hymns as devotional and teaching tools as opposed to mere praise music, means that singing the Word of God with other Christians may be one of the easiest and most valuable ways to imprint the Word of God on hearts. Developing or suggesting resources for families may be something which the **ELS Committee on Worship** may consider doing.

These solutions may offer a start, but we acknowledge that there may be many other solutions that could be offered as well. These discussions about Christian education for children and catechesis are just the beginning, and we believe it would be helpful to continue the discussions about catechesis in our midst. We brainstormed various venues for letting the discussions about catechesis happen, and we would suggest that the **Board for Youth Outreach** consider hosting times for discussion between parents, pastors, and laity involved with childrens’ religious instruction. Perhaps time be set aside at the annual Lutheran Youth Association convention for this purpose, or at regional youth retreats, or moderated virtual round-table discussions. Perhaps the youth we are aiming to catechize might be included in these discussions.

Since we noted that the issues we are experiencing in Sunday School programs have their root in larger cultural issues, potential solutions are not limited to individual congregations or families.

The data presented in *image OA* shows that summer camps are experiencing growth. Perhaps the **Board for Youth Outreach** might encourage those leading these camps to view them as important catechetical opportunities. The Board for Youth Outreach may wish to explore possible reasons why the camps are now growing.

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<sup>18</sup> Luther, Martin, “Preface to the Small Catechism,” in “An Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism,” Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2001.

For parents and schools, the Covid-19 pandemic allowed a shift to occur in what a school might look like. Many in our country found success in organizing pods of students, centered around parents committing to teach their children – a good shift considering the 4th commandment gives parents this authority. It is possible this shift also can carry over to Sunday Schools or to religious instruction in general. Perhaps this can be an area researched by the **Board for Lutheran Schools** for some of our smaller churches as a means to establish formal programs so students may “grow up in all things into Christ.”

Beyond the congregational level, a strengthening of our College’s emphasis on family vocations might also benefit our churches. It is interesting to note, and worthy of future study, that the strongest years of Sunday School involvement in our Synod were those years when students from S.C. Ylvisaker’s time at Bethany were now parents of young children themselves. S.C. Ylvisaker had created a program where “students were not to receive just a smattering of this and a smattering of that,” but they were to “acquire that essential earmark of true culture, a well-rounded training in, and understanding of the fundamentals.”<sup>19</sup> At the time, Bethany stressed “sound knowledge in certain fundamental branches.” Ylvisaker noted that the students of Bethany were the “light set on a hill.” As Christian students came to Bethany, Bethany would send these “lights” out into the world where they would further grow and strengthen the church, perhaps most fundamentally through their own families. Perhaps the **Board of Regents of Bethany Lutheran College** might consider looking into a return to some of these goals set forth by S.C. Ylvisaker, and a strengthening of certain “fundamental branches” at Bethany which might be considered crucial to the well-rounded education in Christian culture and piety (such as religion, arts, and humanities) would in time lead to again to a flourishing of our individual congregations and the education of our youth through a new generation of parents or Christian laity who will have “grown up in all things into Christ.”

Finally, the current Synodical Statistical Report seems to be lacking in useful data regarding engagement of children, and is unclear what number is actually being reported for “Sunday School Attendance.” (See Appendix 1 – “Formula and Limitations for Synod Report Data in Regards to Percentage of Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members Enrolled in Sunday School.”) We suggest that the **ELS Secretary** may wish to ask instead for a data point such as “number of all children engaged in a regular organized Bible instruction.”

### **Part 3: Encouragement**

#### **Scriptural & Practical Encouragement For Pastors & Congregations**

Dear Pastors and Congregations,

A special committee of our ELS was tasked with looking into the decline of Sunday School attendance in the last 20 or so years, offering solutions, alternatives, and encouragement. A full report will be available at [ELS.org/SundaySchoolReport](https://ELS.org/SundaySchoolReport). Here are some takeaways and encouragement for you.

##### **1. Lift up your hearts, your sins are forgiven!**

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<sup>19</sup> Ylvisaker, S.C., *BLC Bulletin*, April, 1932; cited from “Sigvard Christian Ylvisaker: A Commemorative Volume at the Centennial of His Birth,” edited by Peter T. Harstad; Lutheran Synod Book Company, BLC: 1984., pg. 113.

It can be overwhelming trying to gather together and teach the children entrusted to our care the most important things in their lives. In addition, the many things we perceive need to be done, our failures at doing them, and our guilt over our sins and failures can hinder our joy and our work. So hear the comforting words of Jesus when he tells the man, “Take heart, son! Your sins are forgiven,” which then enables him to “pick up his mat and go home” (Matt. 9:2, 6). As sinners teaching sinners, every Sunday we too are recipients of Jesus’ Absolution and His Body and Blood, which encourages and strengthens even us to “pick up our mats” and go about our important vocations.

## **2. God’s Word Endures Forever, Even as Ministries Change**

In 1879, one of the foundational pastors of our church body, the Rev. U.V. Koren had a schoolhouse built. His goal was to teach the Christian faith in a parochial school setting. However his idea was not popular with many congregation members and so the school never opened as intended.

Rather they “compromised:” students would attend public school during the year, and then for two weeks at the beginning of summer and for two weeks at end of summer they would attend the church school to learn the Christian faith and the Norwegian language. This method was adapted in other regions, and was a normal method of religious instruction for children for about 40 years in our Synod, until a method popular in other religious circles called “Sunday School” became the favored method of religious instruction for youth among Norwegian Lutherans sometime after the 1920’s. The wide and normalized practice of Sunday School among our churches is thus less than 100 years old.

Interestingly, our Synod in 1920 in only its third convention since the reorganization, tackled the pressing issue of how best to give youth a Christian education. In a sermon on the importance of Christian Education, the Rev. E. Hanson listed dangers facing youth of the day, which might sound familiar: “The shameful disregard for divine truth, which is so apparent in our day; the lack of respect for the civil government which manifests itself so clearly in such movements as socialism, and anarchism, which are constantly gaining ground; the jealousy, greed and avarice which are revealed so clearly in the many strikes, and in the constant struggle between capital and labor; and, finally, the disregard that so many show in regard to the laws of marriage, as well as all the immorality which is so prevalent in our time; these are dangers which threaten to destroy both the church and the state.”<sup>20</sup>

In the same sermon, the Rev. Hanson gave possible solutions to these issues already being conducted in the few churches in the Synod at the time, Sunday School being only one of many options.

It appears we are again at a similar point in time. God entrusts us with the task of ensuring that children “*grow up into Christ, who is the head*” (Eph. 4:15). Sunday School was meant to connect youth to the Gospel, but is not the “end all, be all.” Our goal of having children grow up into Christ may be accomplished in the current format but may also be accomplished in other or additional ways. There may be many ways in which children may grow up in all things into Christ.

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<sup>20</sup> E. Hanson, “School Sermon on John 21:15-17,” *Proceedings of The Third Annual Convention of The Norwegian Synod of the American Ev. Luth. Church*, 1920, pg. 109.

### 3. Possible Solutions

Qualitative surveys with over 20 congregations were conducted asking what things has your church found which are especially helpful in ministering to young people, and what holes have you observed in ministering to young people. A common thread among respondents was family/parent involvement. Eleven different congregations reported that they perceived that parental involvement or lack thereof directly contributed to the connectivity of young people with the faith.

Non-Day School Formal Children's Programming was the second area noted for being helpful to reaching children. Here as well, many congregations reported including families as part of their outreach to children, either by having families be a part of their formal non-day school programming, such as hosting a "family Sunday School" or a multi-generational catechesis program, regularly buying and giving families books, hymnals, etc., or a preschool "Power Hour" where parents are taught with their young children, and modeled how to read God's Word, sing, or conduct home devotions. In these ways, our congregations are attempting to address the second "hole" in their ministry, a lack of Biblical knowledge, by targeting homes.

Pastors might also consider producing or giving out devotions to the heads of households on a regular basis, perhaps modeling for them in their home what to do. It could be advisable to view home catechesis as an organized form of education which the church may encourage, with an emphasis on brevity, ease, and integration into the everyday lives of people.

For congregations who struggle with a critical mass of children, perhaps they might consider offering multi-generational catechesis or Bible study. After all, we have a number of examples in Scripture of catechesis looking like this. In Psalm 78, the whole congregation is asked to tell the generation to come the praises of the Lord. In Titus 2:1-8 we see older men teaching young men; older women teaching young women; young men and women teaching their children. In Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21, fathers are given the duty to instruct their children. And in Acts 2:38-47, entire households are seen coming together, "sharing all things in common," and continuing "steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Even the Divine Service itself is catechetical. As examples from Joshua 4:4-6 and Exodus 13 show, merely exposing children to things such as monuments, festivals, (or church artwork, holidays, furnishings, etc.), will prompt them to ask questions that will lead to discussing the Word of God.

For congregations who struggle with finding the personnel to teach children, and who also have families struggling with raising their own children in the church, perhaps individuals without children of their own can be called upon to act not as teachers, but as "sponsors" of children and families, encouraging them with resources, notes of mutual consolation and comfort, and assistance at Bible studies or the Divine Service. Some resources that can potentially be used or given have been listed on our full report available online.

The same authority of grace and forgiveness that enabled the man to pick up his mat, Christ gives you to proclaim. God promises that His church will never be overcome (Matt. 16:18). His Church is built on the "*foundation of the Apostles & Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner, whom the whole building [children included], being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord*" (Eph. 2:20-21). May God bless your work.

## Scriptural & Practical Encouragement For Leaders

Dear leaders and instructors of children,

A special committee of our ELS was tasked with looking into the decline of Sunday School attendance in the last 20 or so years, offering solutions, alternatives, and encouragement. A full report will be available at [ELS.org/SundaySchoolReport](https://ELS.org/SundaySchoolReport). Here are some takeaways and encouragement for you.

When Christian leaders consider the task of helping our young people today grow and remain in the Christian faith, it's common to feel a sense of heaviness and concern, even hopelessness and guilt. Yet, there is encouragement for you, Christian leader, when it comes to helping young people grow and remain in the faith!

### 1. Lift up your hearts, your sins are forgiven!

It can be overwhelming trying to teach the children entrusted to our care the most important things in their lives, and our guilt over our failures can hinder our joy and our work. Hear the comforting words of Jesus when he tells the man, "Take heart, son! Your sins are forgiven," which then enables him to "pick up his mat and go home" (Matt. 9:2, 6). As sinners teaching sinners, every Sunday we have the opportunity to receive Jesus' Absolution and be encouraged and strengthened to "pick up our mats" and go about our important vocations.

### 2. God's Word Endures Forever, Even as Ministries Change

It is understandable when church members lament that their once thriving Sunday School is in decline. However, Scripture does not dictate that churches have a thriving Sunday School. There are other ways to minister to young people. It's necessary to be adaptable in ministry as Paul shares in 1 Corinthians 9:22b "I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some."

No matter how challenging our world today may be, the One who created, sustains and grows His Church remains stronger. Hear what God says through Apostle Paul in Ephesians 1:17-23 *"I keep praying that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, will give you the Spirit[a] of wisdom and revelation in knowing Christ fully.<sup>18</sup> I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know the hope to which he has called you, just how rich his glorious inheritance among the saints is,<sup>19</sup> and just how surpassingly great his power is for us who believe.<sup>20</sup> It is as great as the working of his mighty strength, which God worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,<sup>21</sup> far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion, and above every name that is given, not only in this age but also in the one to come.<sup>22</sup> God also placed all things under his feet and made him head over everything for the church.<sup>23</sup> The church is his body, the fullness of him[b] who fills everything in every way."*

### 3. Possible Solutions

When considering how to help young people grow and remain in the faith, it is helpful to review what Scripture says regarding raising young people in the faith.

The Apostle Paul beautifully describes God's plan to grow His members and His Church in Ephesians 4:14-15



*“The goal is that we would no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, when people use tricks and invent clever ways to lead us astray. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we would in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head.”*

In order that we might in all things grow up in to Christ, God has given us provided His Means of Grace, the Word & Sacraments (Matthew 28:19-20 & Luke 22:19-20). These Means of Grace are to be applied and taught in a variety of settings including but not limited to:

- 1) Corporate Worship (Acts 2:42)
- 2) Throughout the day within the family unit (Deuteronomy 6:7)
- 3) Fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ (Hebrews 10:25)
- 4) Joining with other Christians in song (Colossians 3:16)
- 5) Mentoring and/or learning from the example of more mature Christians (Hebrews 13:7 & Titus 2:3-5)
- 6) The application of Spiritual Gifts (Ephesians 4:11-12)
- 7) Discussions of God’s Word prompted by concrete examples in everyday life such as monuments, festivals, etc. (Joshua 4:4-6)

Christian leaders then, ought to develop ministries which apply and teach the Means of Grace in settings such as those noted above. When doing so, the Christian leader will remember that the primary responsibility for teaching young Christians belongs to the parents and that this teaching should be done in an age/maturity appropriate way.

#### **4. Challenges & Opportunities**

When considering specific practical applications for ministering to young people, the challenge is also often encouraging. Consider:

- 1) Challenge: There is no one simple way for all churches to reach young people. Encouragement: This means that each church can effectively reach young people in a way that fits their specific setting.  
Practical Application: What works in one location may not work in your location. Recognize your strengths and find a way that works for you.
- 2) Challenge: Some parents are not very active when it comes to raising their children in the faith. Encouragement: Rather than developing the perfect program for reaching young people, churches can be incredibly effective simply by re-engaging and re-activating the parents.  
Practical Application: Focus on finding ways to equip parents or involve them in ministering to their children.
- 3) Challenge: Many pastors are recognizing a deficiency when it comes to biblical knowledge, comfort with the Bible and applying the Bible to everyday life. Encouragement: There are many resources and ways to help teach Bible history, developing a comfort level with using the Bible and seeing how the Gospel gives new life.  
Practical Application: Focus on ways to get young people into the Bible and to get the Bible into their lives.

May God bless your work as leaders and teachers.

## **Scriptural & Practical Encouragement For Parents**

With your beloved's tiny forehead still damp from the waters of baptism, your pastor encouraged you, dear Christian parent, with this blessing, "God enable you to do this faithful and loving work. By His grace may He fulfill what we are unable to do."

Dear parents, a special committee of our ELS was tasked with looking into the decline of Sunday School attendance in the last 20 or so years, offering solutions, alternatives, and encouragement. A full report will be available at [ELS.org/SundaySchoolReport](https://ELS.org/SundaySchoolReport). Here are some takeaways and encouragement for you.

### **1. Lift up your hearts, your sins are forgiven! (So are your children's)**

It can be overwhelming trying to teach the children entrusted to our care the most important things in their lives, and our guilt over our failures can hinder our joy and our work. Hear the comforting words of Jesus when he tells the man, "Take heart, son! Your sins are forgiven," which then enables him to "pick up his mat and go home" (Matt. 9:2, 6). As sinners raising sinners, every Sunday we have the opportunity to receive Jesus' Absolution and be encouraged and strengthened to "pick up our mats" and go about our important vocations in our homes.

### **2. God's Word Endures Forever, Even as Ministries Change**

When the number of families engaged in programs like Sunday School is small or seems to decline, it can be very challenging for parents to persevere in their godly vocations of training their children. God has put us together in congregations for our mutual benefit and consolation.

Yet, in the same chapter where He shows how much He values children by calling a little child to Himself, Jesus promised that "where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Mt 18:1-4 & 20). God also promises His Word will not return void (Is. 55:11) and we see that even with very little, God provides for each and every family (Jn. 6).

As Christian parents, we want two things. We want our children in Heaven and we want lives of faith here. Both come through faith by hearing the Word of Christ (Rom. 10:17). Even as things change, His Word endures forever (1 Pt. 1:25).

### **3. Possible Solutions**

God has given parents everything they need to train their children, even if no Sunday School or other programs are available.

Fathers are given the primary vocation of training their children (Eph. 6:4). It has been found that a father's spiritual influence is the primary factor in whether or not their children will go on to become regular worshippers. If both parents go to church regularly, a study found that 33% of children would become regular worshippers. If only mom goes, only 2% will become regular worshippers. But if only dad goes, that number increases to 44%. Somehow, the father's spiritual influence increases in proportion to the mother's lack of

interest in the church.<sup>21</sup> This shows simply the great authority fathers have. What a gift God entrusts fathers with! In the Small Catechism, Luther begins each section “As the head of the family shall teach...his household.” Yet, this does not come naturally for men. We can look at this task and easily be overwhelmed (just see Adam in Genesis 3:6 & 17-19).

Like building a house, however, it just takes a few good tools and dedication. Thankfully, God has given us these tools in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Sacraments. We have all of this neatly contained in the Small Catechism. It is not that children need to be taught *everything*, but as Luther says in his preface to the Small Catechism, they simply need to be taught what the words *are*. Then, after children become familiar with what the words are, then teach them what it *means*. Later, these things may be *expounded* and applied, often by simply going about daily life.

**“Begin** by teaching them the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, etc., following the text word for word so that the young may repeat these things after you and retain them in their memory.”

**“In the second place**, after the people have become familiar with the text, teach them what it means.”

**“In the third place**, after you have thus taught this brief catechism, take up a large catechism so that the people may have a richer and fuller understanding.”

Sometimes we overcomplicate the task of educating children. It is not a question of whether children will be taught by parents, but when and what. For instance, faithful attendance at the Divine Service powerfully communicates the 1st and 3rd commandments, even without the commandments themselves being spoken. On the other hand, drilling the 3rd commandment, while being lax in attendance at the Divine Service also teaches that the Word of God is perhaps not as important as the commandment says. Even if it seems like a struggle, as examples from Joshua 4:4-6 and Exodus 13 show, merely exposing children to things such as monuments, festivals, (or church artwork, holidays, furnishings, etc.), will prompt them to ask questions that will lead to discussing the Word of God.

So let God’s love show forth to your family through word and deed. Find a time that works for your family for devotions or discussing God’s Word: Breakfast or bedtime could be an option. So could the drive to school, or in the parking lot as soon as practice is over. Start your day with a favorite hymn. Pray at meal times. Let your kids hear you apologize, confess your sin, and rejoice in forgiveness. Do the same for them. When you discipline your children, be sure to end the conversation with the good news that *“As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us”* (Psalm 103:12).

For homes that do not have a father who will take up the responsibility of teaching children, mothers, grandparents, and even baptismal sponsors can step in (remember how Samuel’s mother trained him; 1 Sam.

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<sup>21</sup> Werner Haug and Phillippe Warner, “The Demographic Characteristics of the Linguistic and Religious Groups in Switzerland” in Volume 2 of *Population Studies No. 31, The Demographic Characteristics of National Minorities in Certain European States*, ed. by Werner Haug and others, published by the Council of Europe Directorate General III, Social Cohesion, Strasbourg, January 2000. Cited from [www.christianpost.com/news/fathers-key-to-their-childrens-faith.html](http://www.christianpost.com/news/fathers-key-to-their-childrens-faith.html)

1-2). But in the end, the Lord assures us it is not we who build the house anyway: “Unless the Lord builds the house, They labor in vain who build it” (Ps 127:1). He is our true Father who will accomplish what we are unable to do.

May God bless your work as parents.

## Appendix

### 1 – Formula and Limitations for Synod Report Data in Regards to Percentage of Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members Enrolled in Sunday School

#### *Formulas:*

- Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members = Baptized Members — Confirmed Members
- Percent Enrolled in Sunday School = Sunday School Enrollment / Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members

#### *Limitations:*

1. Data for some years are missing. (Solution: compare BLTS and BLC libraries or ask the Synod Secretary.)
2. Current drafts has not been checked for data entry errors.
3. Annual statistical reports used to label it “Sunday School Pupils” and then changed to “Sunday School Enrollment.” The assumption is that these are synonymous categories.
4. However, it is unclear whether the reported number indicates:
  1. all children from, say, ages 5 to 14, aka grades K-8; or,
  2. all children whose names were enrolled on a roster by their parents at Sunday school roundup; or,
  3. all children who actually attended at least once; or,
  4. average weekly attendance; or,
  5. perhaps one thing for one congregation and another thing for another, hence the old “apples and oranges” problem.
5. Furthermore, the expectation is that fewer than 100% of Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members would be in Sunday School (for example, infants and potty-trainers are not in Sunday School).
6. Finally, the year-to-year fluctuation can be impacted by many factors, including but not limited to:
  1. The addition or subtraction of a congregation as a synod member could distort the general pattern, especially if that congregation had far more or far fewer Sunday Schoolers than other congregations. (The number of congregations in the synod ranged from 64 to 142 during these years.)
  2. The dramatic decrease in the birthrate (presently at less than 1/4 of its peak level, and indeed starting in 2018 funerals have exceeded child baptisms each year).
  3. Whether non-members also attend (e.g. perhaps LES or preschool children attend as guests before being listed as baptized members?).
  4. Other?

#### *Conclusion:*

Despite the limitations stated above, a strong pattern of decline is apparent from 60% to 80% of Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members listed in the Sunday School statistic from 1930 to 1980, vs. 30% to 50% from about 2005 onward. If a goal is maximize Sunday School enrollment among its own Pre-Confirmed Baptized Members, then it appears that ELS congregations on average have been less successful in recent decades than in the mid 1900s.

## 2 – Resources

Since parental involvement is key in the training of children, these resources deserve a look.

### **“Back to Basics”**

- Bible
- Catechism
- Hymnal

#### ***For parents to connect themselves to Christ:***

- [The Lutheran Study Bible](#) from Concordia Publishing House, available at the BLC Bookstore
- [Studying Luther’s Large Catechism](#) by Ryan MacPherson of the Hausvater Project
- [Thank, Praise, Serve, and Obey: Recover the Joys of Piety](#) by William Weedon from Concordia Publishing House

#### ***For parents to connect their families to Christ:***

- Resources from [The Hausvater Project](#) and [According to Your Word](#)
- Daily prayers and lectionary in ELH
- Audio Bibles (free available on [Bible Gateway](#) and other websites and apps)
- [Baby Believer Series](#) of hardcover books from Catechesis Books
- [Book of Family Prayer](#) by Nils Laache, trans. Mark DeGarmeaux, available at the BLC Bookstore
- [Small Catechism Poster](#) from Concordia Publishing House
- [Small Catechism – 6 Posters](#) from Concordia Publishing House
- [Follow and Do](#) by Joni Walker– Children’s books on the catechism from Concordia Publishing House
- [Kloria Publishing – Books and Music Resources for Children](#)
- Devotionals that are Confessional Lutheran, accessible, and easy to integrate into family life, such as: [Minute Messages: Gospel-Filled Devotions for Every Occasion](#) by Matthew Richard, from Concordia Publishing House

#### ***For church programs connecting youth to Christ:***

- [Lutheran Catechesis](#) from Concordia Catechetical Academy
- [One-Room Classroom Sunday School Curriculum](#) from Concordia Publishing House
- [30-Lesson Bible Overview](#) from Concordia Publishing House
- List of Core Hymns (for intentional use and repetition in divine services, youth Christmas services and other singing opportunities, Sunday School, VBS, etc.) – <https://els.org/wp-content/uploads/cd848889/worship/50%20Hymns%20-%20By%20Lutherans%2C%20For%20Lutherans.pdf> – See appendix 2A.
- A List of Core Bible Verses (may vary)

#### ***Recommended resources to be produced:***

In addition, our committee recommends that additional resources be considered to be produced by the following committees in our Synod:

- Written guide to home devotions (pages in ELH, elements to include, advice for beginning and maintaining a devotional routine) – *ELS Worship Committee*
- Family resources for our catechism (manual, guides, supplemental media, etc.) – *Catechism Review Committee*
- Timeline of Bible eras, plus Reformation History, and recent modern church history, in a graphic, poster form – *ELS Board for Youth Outreach*