

**It's Time for the Church to Return to Having Children
as the Center of Its Missional Focus**

By Rev. Dr. Douglas Kregel

“Texas hospital experiences ‘summertime baby boom,’ delivering 100 babies in two stretches totaling 91 hours,” was the story headline posted by CNN on July 4, 2021(1). Could the COVID year result in a new baby boom? If so, will the LCMS be ready to engage the newest members of the Alpha Generation (individuals born from 2012 to 2025)?

The LCMS has a long history of providing Christian education and care for young children. In 1868, Rev. Wilhelm Loehe, one of the founding fathers of the LCMS, wrote a booklet regarding the care of young children called *On Infant Schools, or Von Kleinkinderschulen*. Loehe authored this booklet as one of his first acts of pastoral care after beginning his pastorate at Neuendetelsau, Germany. Therefore, early childhood education and care is just as much a part of the LCMS’ heritage as the mission to North America Loehe supported (2).

The biblical way of valuing young children continues to be supported today by professors serving at Concordia Theological Seminary, another institution Loehe was instrumental in founding. “Children are priceless,” is the point Rev. Dr. Charles A. Gieschen emphasized repeatedly in an article regarding how God values children. After surveying the Bible, Gieschen concluded that “If we take Jesus’ teaching seriously, it leads us to conclude that children should not only be included in our missional focus, but should be at the center of it” (3). Years later, but in the same vein of thought, another exegete, Rev. Dr. Daniel Gard, wrote, “You, the Lutheran Christian educator, wherever you are, are the frontline of the mission field” (4).

However, will the above statements change in 2021 now that students attending early childhood centers are the largest demographic sector in the Lutheran educational system? The LCMS Office of National Mission's School Ministry Department reported that there were 1,741 early childhood centers which served 63,483 children during the 2020-2021 school year. This makes early childhood the largest branch of the LCMS educational system. Since many centers provided care 12 hours a day, five days a week, an argument can be made that early childhood is the largest area of contact between LCMS churches and the communities those churches serve.

Some within the LCMS may receive this news with less than full enthusiasm as they remember when Lutheran elementary schools were the largest missionary effort in the Synod. However, the church could react to this new reality by joining Loehe, Gieschen and Gard in celebrating children of any age and the educators who serve at any level. Or did a bias against early childhood education and care develop in the LCMS sometime after Loehe?

If there is such a bias, the Synod would not be the first institution to suffer so. On November 20, 1959, the United Nation's Commission on Human Rights drafted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child that was passed by the United Nation's General Assembly. Principal 7 of this document stated that "The child is entitled to receive and education..." (5). Many other world-wide initiatives followed in which the education of children, and specifically the education of young children, were addressed at the highest level of national governments throughout the world (6). Such extreme measures were needed because caring for young children was not previously perceived as a national, or international, priority. Yet, even with hundreds of nation-states dedicating themselves to spending billions of dollars on foundation phase teaching, the status of early childhood education and early childhood educators remained at a low level (7).

Ironically, at the same time the nations of the world began spending billions of dollars to improve early childhood education and care for their citizens, the LCMS' early childhood centers began to decline (8). While LCMS early childhood education and care has lost approximately half of its previous enrollment, the Bible has not changed the way it values children. As Gieschen pointed out, children are priceless and should be at the center of the LCMS' missional focus. Gieschen (2013) wrote that "The testimony of the Gospels about children is one that renews our zeal to be about biblical and Lutheran missiology: baptizing and teaching" (p.210)!

The Synod knows how to renew its zeal for missions in and through early childhood education and care. Dr. Judisch A. Christian, while serving on staff at the LCMS International Center, and with Synod-wide cooperation and support, thoroughly researched the topic. Seventeen years later with a new baby boom occurring, it is time for the Synod to renew its zeal for reaching out with the Gospel through the foundation phase of education. By using its substantial experience, knowledge and resources, the Synod can again make children the center of its missional focus. Christian's landmark research reported there to be six stakeholders "...in the operation of the LCMS early childhood program" (page 30) (9). These six stakeholders Christian studied were as follows: a pastor, a teacher, the chairperson of the early childhood operating board, two parents, and the director of the early childhood center.

Out of this group of six stakeholders, the only relationship pair that involved two professional church workers was the relationship between the pastor and the director. However, these two professionals represent two different demographic categories. Researchers describe such categories as "relational demography" (10). The relational demography between those serving in the role of pastor and those serving in the role of director stand in stark contrast to each other: the pastor is male and in most cases the director is female; the pastor often has earned

a Master of Divinity degree from a LCMS seminary, while only “9% of early childhood educators are certified by the denomination as ‘ministers of religion, commissioned,’” according to Christian (2004, 6). In addition, Rev. Dr. John W. Oberdeck reported in the *Lutheran Education Journal* that only 8.2% of the LCMS clergy have experience teaching preschool students (11) (For more information on the history of early childhood education and care in the LCMS see note (12).)

According to the author’s own research of the pastor-director professional pair, one of the issues inhibiting such pairs from developing high-quality professional relationships is how the directors perceive the work contribution of the pastors. In this research the directors were asked to grade this statement: “My pastor does not mind working his hardest to support me.” The directors responded with relatively low scores representing that they did not strongly agree with this statement (13).

Could it be that the lack of high-quality professional relationships between pastors and directors is one of the reasons why “The number of child baptisms per year plunged 55 percent from 1990 to 2010 – precisely the era in which early childhood centers were growing in both numbers and aggregate enrollment,” as MacPherson observed (14)? Or is it that men in general are not warmly welcomed into the professional field of early childhood education and care (15)? With so many differences in relational demography between pastors and directors, high quality coworking seems unlikely. This, in turn, like a chain of dominoes, may adversely affect the other key relationships Christian noted as necessary for a successful coworking between churches and early childhood centers.

However, research also shows that professional coworkers can achieve high-quality professional relationships when the pairs agree to pursue a common vision (16). The Lord’s

vision of children being the center of God's intended missional focus (see Gieschen above) would certainly qualify for such a uniting vision. With the re-adoption of such an understanding of mission, both pastors and directors may begin to perceive themselves as missionaries on the front line of the mission field (see Gard above). By returning to what the Bible teaches us about valuing children and Christian educators at all levels, by returning to the good work Pastor Loehe started with his little booklet about the care of little children, the LCMS may continue to demonstrate that its members most certainly do take Jesus' teachings seriously and are ready to share the Gospel with the new baby boom and the Alpha Generation.

Endnotes:

1. Cullinane, S. (Sunday, July 4, 2021, updated 8:27 PM EDT). Texas hospital experiences

'summertime baby boom,' delivering 100 babies in two stretches totaling 91 hours. *Cable News Network, Inc.*

A debate has occurred in the LCMS regarding the relationship between the declining birthrate in the LCMS and its relationship to the decline in membership in the LCMS. This debate is represented in the following articles:

Cook, R. (2017, March). Limits of interpretation. *Journal of Lutheran Mission*, 4(1), iv-vii.

Curtis, H. (July 17, 2017). Synod demographic studies offer insight despite critiques.

<https://blogs.lcms.org/2017/synod-demographic-studies-offer-insight-despite-critiques>

Gieschen, C.A. See note 3 below for the full reference. At the end of his article, Gieschen asked,

“Why is it that Mormons and Muslims know the importance of children for the future, but Christians seem to have lost sight of this” (page 211). He then provided references to the increasing birthrates of both religions.

MacPherson, R. (2016). Numerical decline in the LCMS. *The Lutheran Witness*, 135(11),6-7.

MacPherson, R. (2016). Generational generosity: Handing down our faith to our children and our children's children. *Journal of Lutheran Mission*, 3(3), 85-121. Retrieved from blogs.lcms.org/2016/journal-of-lutheran-mission-december-2016.

Schumacker, W.W. (2017). Demography and mission in the LCMS: A response to the Journal of Lutheran Mission, December 2016. *Lutheran Mission Matters*, 25(1), 18-26.

As far as the current author can determine, the above debate only considered exogenous (external) demographic data (e.g., the birthrate in the LCMS) and did not include endogenous (internal) demographic data such as statistical measurements of the quality of the professional relationships shared between pastors and preschool directors. Such internal data is equally in importance to the external data in determining the reason for the decline in LCMS membership. The current author suggests that the birthrate among LCMS members, while a factor, is less of a factor than the birthrate of the communities where LCMS congregations are reaching out with the Gospel of Jesus Christ via institutions dedicated to early childhood education and care.

2. For more information on Loehe's initiative's in supporting the Christian education of young children see <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Wilhelm+Loehe+as+religious+instructor.-a0280625472>, or see Thomas Kothman, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, February 1, 2021.

3. Gieschen, C.A. (2013). The value of children according to the Gospels. *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 77, 195- 211.

4. Gard, D. (Summer 2018). A final word... the teacher as missionary. *Lutheran Education Journal*, 148, 101-102.

5. United Nation's Document A/43540.
6. Coates, E.A & Faulkner, D. (2013). International perspectives on progress, change and development in early childhood education and care, 1993 to 2013. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 21(2-3), 121-124.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2013.832944>.)
- 6., continued. Herczog, M. Rights of the child and early childhood education and care in Europe. *European Journal of Education*, 47(4), 542-555.
- 6., continued. Faulkner, D. & Coated, E.A. (2013). Early childhood policy in England: twenty years of change. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 21(2-3), 244-263.
<http://dx.doi.org/0.1080/09669760.2013.832945>
7. Vujičić, L., Željko, B., & Ivković, Ž. (2015). Social Status and Professional Development of Early Childhood and Preschool Teacher Profession: Sociological and Pedagogical Theoretical Frame. *Croatian Journal of Education*, 17(1), 49-60.
doi:10.15516/cje.v17i0.1540
8. See www.luthed.org for statistics. The 2007-2008 school year was the apex of early childhood education and care in the LCMS with 1,406 centers and 133,225 students.
9. Christian, J.A. (2004). *Relationships between stakeholders' perceptions of leadership behaviors of directors administering Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod early childhood programs and programs' ministry activities* (Doctoral dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Saint Louis University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education). Retrieved from the ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

10. Tsui, A.S., Porter, L.W., & Egan, T.D. (2002). When both similarities and dissimilarities matter: Extending the concept of relational demography. *Human Relations*, 55(8),899-929.
11. Oberdeck, J.W. (2001). Comparison of Pastors and Teachers Teaching Religion. *Lutheran Education Journal*, 36(4), 247-269.
12. Christian, J. (2014). Early childhood education in the LCMS: Affecting lives and faith of young children and their families for generations. *Issues in Christian Education*, 47(2), 7-12.
12. Kregel, D. (2020). Improving professional relationships and organizational leadership in congregations: Starting with pastors and preschool directors. *Lutheran Education Journal*, 156(2), 50-63.
14. MacPherson, R. (2016). Numerical decline in the LCMS. *The Lutheran Witness*, 135(11),6-7.
15. Cooney, M.H. & Bittner, M.T. (2001). Men in early childhood education: Their emergent issues. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 29(2), 77-82.
16. Deluga, R.J. (1998). Leader-Member Exchange Quality and Effectiveness Ratings: The Role of Subordinate-Supervisor Conscientiousness Similarity. *Group and Organizational Management*, 23(2), 189-216.

