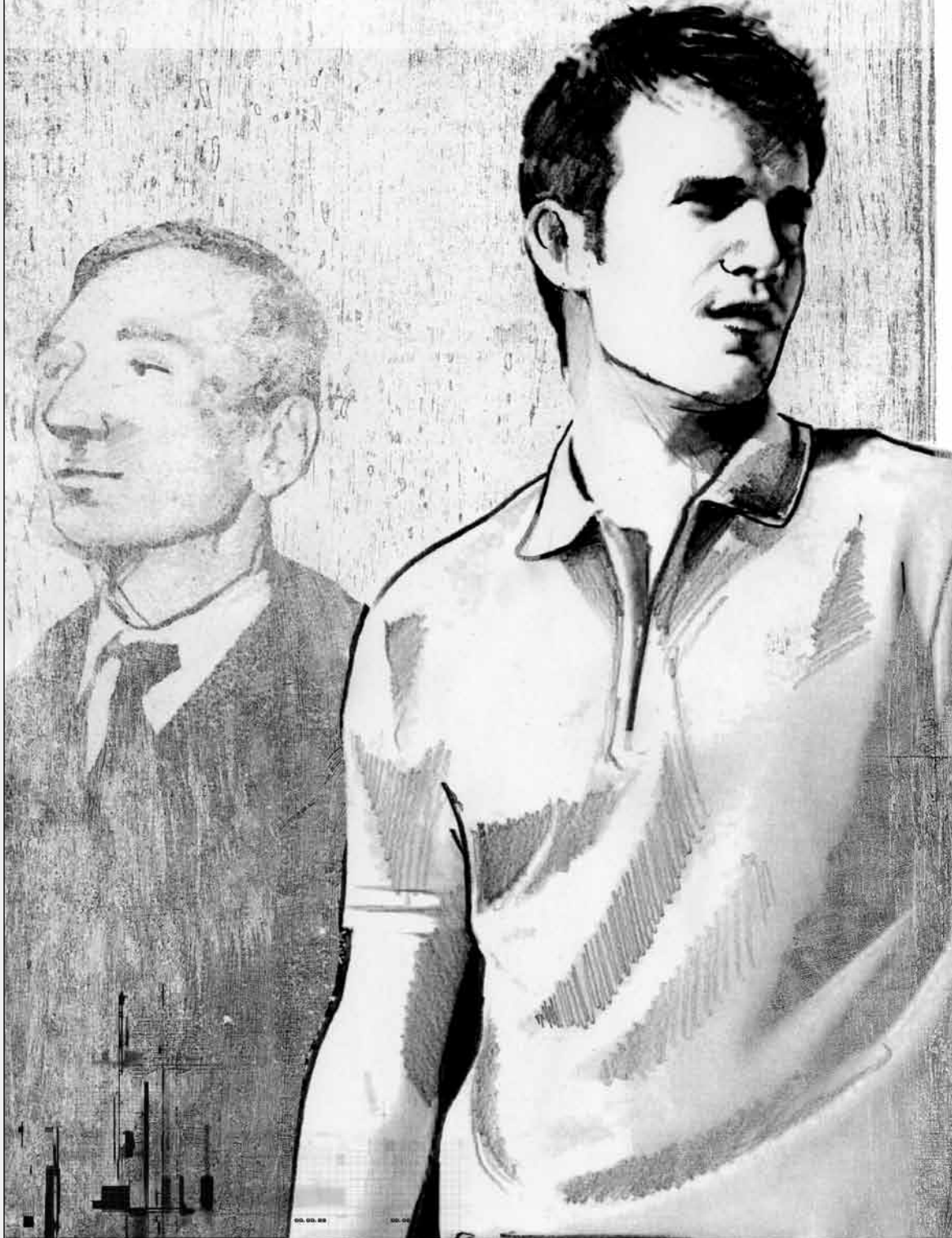


DR. LEROY WILKE

From Yesterday to Today: A Historical Perspective of DCE Ministry Contributions to the Church's Mission



Anniversaries are universal; they mark important events or milestones in most cultures around the world. Here in American culture, we often observe anniversaries based on years as they relate to high school and college graduation, an engagement, years of marriage, years of service in the work force, and on it goes. In some cases, reunion events are held to pay tribute to anniversaries marking a significant number of years. While the same can be said in terms of recognizing significant anniversaries acknowledging accumulated years of service for either a professional worker in the church or even an institution, it is not often we pause to recognize the anniversary of an office of professional ministry in the church. But, we do so in 2009 as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the office of Director of Christian Education (DCE) in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS).

Space does not allow for a complete review of the history of the DCE profession. (An article is cited at the conclusion of this article for reference.) Instead, this article seeks to highlight significant contributions of DCE ministry to the larger mission of the church. Reflections and observations have been gathered from a number of long-time serving DCEs and from Rev. Dr. Dale Griffin. In his 25 years of service with the former LCMS Board for Parish Education (BPE), Dale served as advisor to the DCE department of the Lutheran Education Association (TEAM, now DCenet) and edited the DCE Bulletin. He has been a significant advocate and champion in shaping DCE ministry.

DR. LEROY WILKE, DCE, IS THE FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF LCMS DISTRICT AND CONGREGATIONAL SERVICES. CURRENTLY HE SERVES AS AN ADJUNCT FACULTY MEMBER AT CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, ST. PAUL. HE IS THE SECRETARY/TREASURER OF KINDLE AND A MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF REGENTS, CONCORDIA SEMINARY, ST. LOUIS. LRWILKE@COMCAST.NET

We can trace the birthing of the DCE office in the LCMS to 1912 when a congregation in the English District, St. Mark in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, called teacher A. W. Kowert to become their "teacher, organist and choir director." The 1935 and 1938 Synod conventions resolved to study the matter of the office of a Christian education director. In 1938 the LCMS convention accepted and defined the office of "director of religious education." Prior to 1940, six congregations called a teacher to function as a DCE with music as a primary responsibility in addition to supervising the education agencies. Five of the six congregations previously had a day school.

In 1956, Valparaiso University instituted the Youth Leadership Training Program (YLTP) which would eventually provide the Synod with such outstanding DCEs as Rich Bimler, Bill Karpenko and Rich Soeken. It was at the 1959 Synod convention that action resulted in the rapid development of the DCE office. A resolve of an overture which was adopted stated: "That congregations be encouraged to analyze their parish education program and, where needed, to establish the office of 'director of Christian education' in order to provide additional leadership for the educational program of the congregation" (*Reports and Memorials*, p 283; *Proceedings*, p. 224). Dr. Griffin joined the BPE staff in 1961, and by this time considerable attention was being given to promoting the office of DCE. Between the YLTP program and renewed efforts toward DCE development within the official synodical structure, DCE training and shaping the professional office began in earnest.

Another significant year is 1983. Prior to that year DCEs were listed in The Lutheran Annual, but not rostered. Only those DCEs eligible for classroom teaching in a Lutheran school had official recognition. In response to an overture, the 1983 convention resolved that "the word 'teacher' in the Constitution of the Synod be interpreted to include directors of Christian education who have been trained and certified by the Synod; that such directors of Christian education

be eligible to apply for membership in the Synod; and that all noncertified directors of Christian education be encouraged to seek the certification of the Synod.”

With this resolution, the office of DCE attained full maturity as an officially recognized ministry of the Synod in its own right by inclusion on the official roster of the Synod. Through the efforts of many people, the DCE became recognized as a commissioned minister along with classroom teachers. Associated with this effort were college DCE professors who helped to characterize the office of DCE more definitively. Through these efforts, the office of DCE became defined, with a colloquy route for certification adding to the recognition of this ministry.

Numerous contributions to the mission of the church have been made throughout the past fifty years. Here are some contributions noted by DCEs serving throughout the Synod. While duplications might occur, the heart and spirit of the impact of this multi-generational ministry shine through the various responses.

Significant Contributions of DCE Ministry

- Expansion of vision and focus on mission. Examples include new and innovative programs for children’s and youth ministry, reaching out to the unchurched, equipping congregation leaders to see a greater vision of what the church is about, and developing servant leaders.
- The development of local, district, and national youth gatherings along with servant events. These gatherings and servant events have impacted several generations in terms of hands-on missional activity by the baptized people of God.
- New opportunities for congregational growth. That well-prepared and entrepreneurial DCEs can impact the growth of a congregation is seen, for example, in congregations who have called a DCE when they believed they were on the edge of growth.



- Entrepreneurial trend settings in the areas of parish education, curriculum development, leadership development, youth ministry, and other facets of the church's mission.
- A focus on outreach. DCE ministry at its best does not merely serve the existing flock, but broadens the focus as the mission of Jesus.
- A team focus on discipleship. In effective teams, everyone is focused on discipleship from seeker to new believer to being part of a ministry team.
- Service and leadership in various executive staff positions at the district, synodical and other Lutheran agency staff levels. Many DCEs have moved from the parish into roles such as district education executives, mission and ministry facilitators, LCMS president's office, youth ministry, district and congregational services, mission services, outdoors ministry, Concordia campuses, Concordia Publishing House, Lutheran Hour Ministries, Wheat Ridge, international missions, chaplaincy, and institutional settings.
- Service and leadership at the district and higher education levels and other Lutheran agencies as members of boards of directors and boards of regents.
- KINDLE, (The Karpenko Institute for Nurturing and Developing Leadership Excellence) whose mission is to enhance the Church by fostering and multiplying servant leaders, focuses on equipping experienced DCEs in the formation of congregational servant leaders.
- Injecting creativity, energy, and leadership into the total ministry of a congregation. A variety of new ministry activities can be pursued when more than one called worker leads a congregation.
- Increased awareness of, sensitivity to, and actualization of the "priesthood of all believers" (1 Peter 2:9; Ephesians 4:11-13), with DCEs increasingly equipping laity for the work of ministry.
- An increased focus on sound educational theory of a developmental nature, especially since developmental perspectives are increasingly being utilized in the parish.



- Increased expertise in the area of children's ministry, helping it to grow outside and beyond a school arena.
- The advice and counsel given by education leaders and pioneer DCEs to new DCEs, sharing of wisdom "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

Examples of the Impact of DCE Ministry in Congregations, Districts and Synod

- Fluidity of role. Most early DCEs were focused on youth ministry and parish education, while some with music abilities were asked to serve in their congregational music ministry programs. Some DCEs shifted to outreach and human care, while others served as camp directors, congregational volunteer coordinators, and even as parish administrators. The fluid role of a DCE became a great blessing for multiple ministries.
- Strengthening of programs. Examples include new and energized educational programs in the areas of children's ministry (for example, Sunday school and VBS programs), expansion of youth ministry beyond a high school youth group by involving middle and upper elementary grades, and the development of strong adult education through regular Bible studies and small group experiences.
- Servant events, from local to national to an international level for both youth and adults.

- Creative ways to reach children and families, such as through children’s messages in worship, ministry to the Christian home, Lent and Easter programs, and expanding the role of parents in confirmation.
- A focus on mission. Missional DCEs have had great impact in starting new churches.
- Expansion of vision for Christian education. DCEs have taken the lead in establishing Christian education as a “womb to tomb” journey.
- Emphasizing that children and youth are part of the church today, not just the church of the future.
- Support of children, youth, and their families as they grow in their faith journey as disciples of Jesus Christ who emulate their love for the Lord in their relationships with God and others. One result is the development of ministries across the life span.
- Stronger connections of people’s gifts and ministries. Lay leadership formation, teacher development, new and expanded ministries, a systemic approach to educational, youth, and other ministries, and small group development are examples of such connections.
- Providing/leading a process of strategic planning for congregations, districts, and synodical agencies.
- Recruitment of church workers and an increasing number of qualified and trained lay workers.

How the Presence of DCEs Serves to Expand Team Ministries in Congregations

- Creating a new culture. As lifespan Christian educators, DCEs multiply the ministry of parish pastors and lay leaders by working collaboratively with various groups by bringing an educator’s perspective to these tasks and processes. This fosters a culture of shared gifts, mutual edification, and conflict resolution that is unique in the church.

- New models of team ministry. An increased number of congregations have teams consisting of multiple DCEs who serve with one senior pastor.
- Expanding outreach. Examples include the training of congregation lay people to serve as youth leaders and leaders for cross-cultural mission trips, organizing service in a local prison, coordinating Stephen Ministry, and teaching classes in the Lutheran elementary school.
- A new focus on strengthening the team by placing more emphasis on working together for the greater good of the Kingdom through regular staff meetings, position descriptions that identify boundaries and accountability, setting common goals, and developing strategies for ministry.
- Fostering a culture of trust. Effective multiple staffs have enabled laity to navigate ministry with greater confidence when team members experience a climate of trust and are encouraged to openly express ideas, opinions, discouragement, and disagreements. Multiple staffs who spend significant time together in prayer and study of God’s Word are energized to engage in the practice of open and honest communication.
- An emphasis on support. DCEs have been equipped to serve in a multiple staff, with most having interests in various ministries. In a multiple staff, team members acknowledge their different areas of expertise and interests while affirming one another in those gift areas. Such support is reflected in ministry programs and in the service of volunteers.





- A focus on leadership with a servant heart. As a team works together, respects, and encourages one another (publicly and privately), they model a servant leader heart for Christ and others, helping to shape how the congregation can function as a healthy family system.

Examples of the Contributions of DCES to Children's, Youth, Adult, and Family Ministries

- Broader perspectives on what a congregational approach to discipleship should be for professional staff and congregation members fostered through small groups, retreats, servant events, prayer ministries, and online social networking.
- Creative ways to reach children and youth, such as children's messages, seeing youth ministry in both relational and programmatic ways, and seeking to walk with young people during their adolescent journey.
- Reshaping of youth ministry in cultural contexts through a more in-depth focus and breadth in planning and implementation based on sound theoretical and theological foundations, the use of quality resources, and well-designed events,
- An expansion of focus. As DCE ministry has matured over the years, many have moved from a focus on youth to a focus on adults and families which have led to the creation of dynamic adult and family education, service, and social services, including ministry among seniors.
- Innovative methods of teaching and the development of curriculum for all age levels.
- Proactive responses to needs, such as equipping and training leaders in life-span ministries in response to the decline and disintegration of the family.
- New involvement for children, youth, adults and families. Some have memories of growing up when congregational life

meant worship on Sunday (with the choir singing) and classes in a Lutheran school for children K-8 during the week. There was no Sunday school for children, youth or adults, no VBS; no mission trips/servant events/service projects (except to send mission offerings). There were no opportunities to be a part of the worship service through drama, dance, or song, and family education experiences did not exist except for watching one's parents or grandparents. Such gaps in congregational ministries now have been filled through ministries that edify members of all generations.

During the Next Ten Years, Which Opportunities For Ministry Can be Seized by DCE Ministry?

- A growing number of DCEs will serve larger parishes and other institutions as specialists in settings where leaders have identified critical targets for growth, such as junior high ministry, spiritual directors in institutional chaplaincy settings, and Christian education consultants on a national scale. A larger number of medium/smaller size congregations will engage a generalist DCE.
- Depending on economic conditions, DCEs could have important roles in serving congregations that are no longer able to call multiple pastors.
- DCEs will continue to take leadership roles in expanding mission/servant events and activities locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally (long and short term) as "organizers" of such events.
- To develop a greater mission awareness, DCEs will take on specialty roles with district and national offices, including work with RSOs, that focus on exploring mission opportunities, providing support, and helping with personnel development.
- DCEs will explore new vehicles for ministry, such as utilizing the technological tools that are available and finding alternatives to district and national youth gatherings.
- Stretching the thinking of the Church to be missional in accord with biblical teachings and the Lutheran Confessions can be another focus. Pastor and DCE teams will be called upon to cultivate imagination in seeing the possibilities of what the Spirit wants to do with and among the people they are called to lead, including equipping others for mission and ministry, domestically and globally.
- Understanding and developing the capacity to innovate a new culture within congregations that will lead to thinking with a missional focus.
- Expanding ministry with children and their families who are in need of the love of God and solid instruction in living with and for Christ in a turbulent culture. Possibilities include sports ministries for children, marriage preparation and enrichment, mentoring blended families, parenting classes, curriculum series for new Christians, and a greater use of online instruction.
- An increasing sensitivity to changing circumstances in church and society and preparing how to make the most of the opportunities.



- Seizing the "age wave" of seniors who are a rapidly expanding mission field.
- Focusing individuals on mission and ministry opportunities that exist rather than being pulled away by external forces. DCEs will continue to assist individuals to look for ways to be involved in significant hands-on ministry opportunities that make a difference.

As one can see, the ministry of the DCE has grown and has made significant contributions to the mission and ministry of the church. Through it all, God has richly blessed the Concordia University DCE training programs, their directors and those who helped to shape this professional ministry, congregations and agencies of the church who have engaged DCEs, and the 630 certified DCEs who are now serving Christ and His church. As we prepare for an unpredictable and changing future, uncertain of what it may hold, the next fifty years will be filled with numerous challenges and exciting opportunities. While this anniversary is a special chapter in the history of the DCE ministry, more will be written.

Reference

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Contributors

Steve Arnold, James Bradshaw, Roger Buck, Tom Couser, Steve Christopher, Bill Cullen, David Funke, Dale Griffin, Jim Haack, Paul Krentz, Tim Lindeman, Jonathan Loesch, Denise Sprengeler, Sue VonFange.

