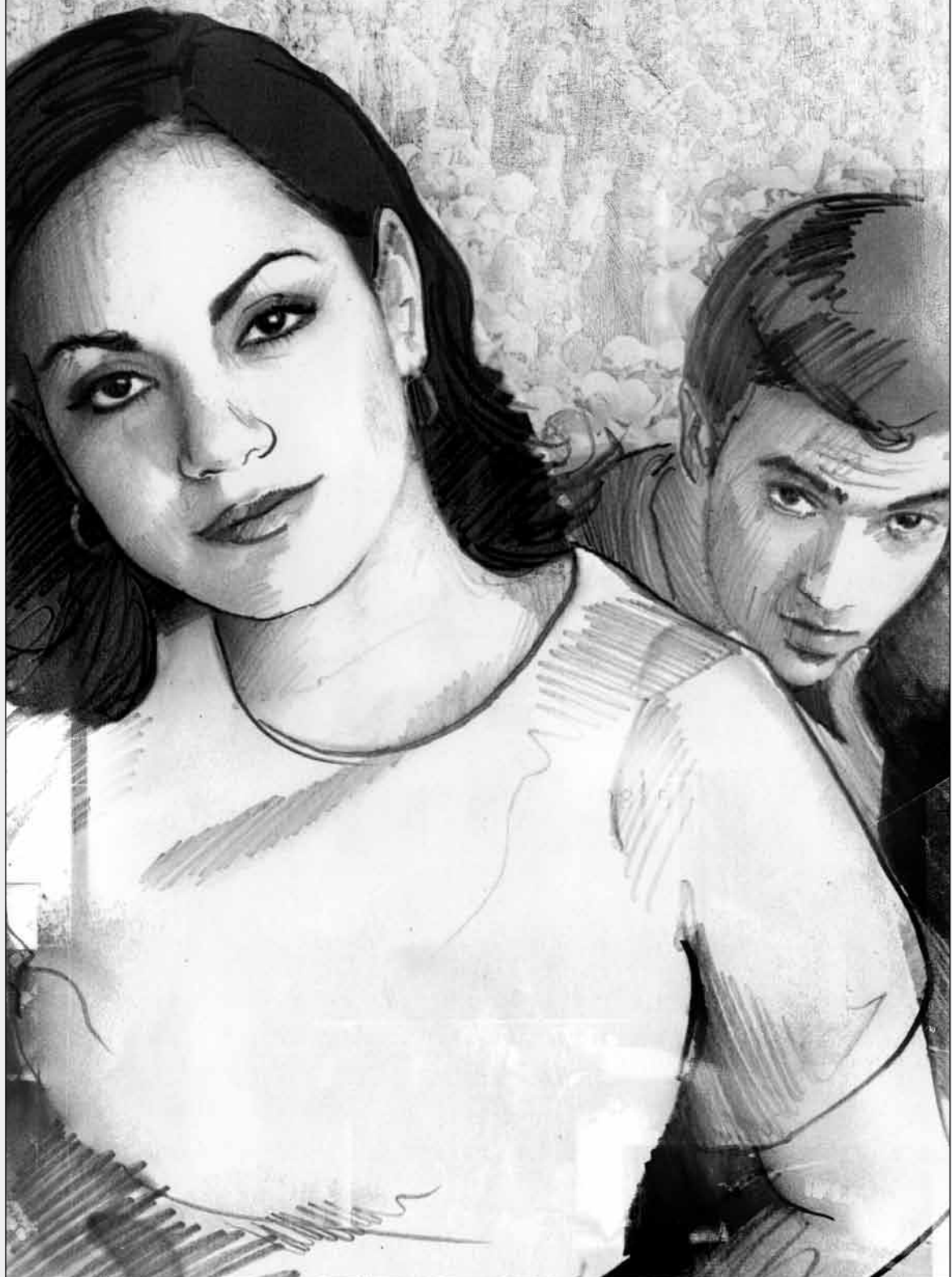


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## DCE Ministry: A Catalyst for Advancing the Church's Mission



“Catalyst” is defined as “somebody or something that makes change happen or brings about an event.” What is it, then, about a fifty-year-old profession in our church that can suddenly effect change, and what is the event that we are seeking to bring about?

In 1959, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) established the position of Director of Christian Education (DCE). The resolution passed by convention reads as follows:

Whereas, The development of an organized and systematic program of Christian education is a necessity in every congregation; and

Whereas, Many congregations would benefit from the services of a director of Christian education who would assist the pastor in providing the professional leadership for the Sunday school, Saturday classes, and other educational activities of the congregation; therefore be it

Resolved, 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. (*Proceedings*, p. 224)

In 1962, the Synod designated that two teacher preparatory colleges develop and deliver DCE preparation programs, further aligning the role of the DCE with that of Christian educator.

In 2008, there were 630 certified DCEs serving congregations in the LCMS, or about one DCE for every ten congregations in the Synod. Another 330 individuals who

have been certified as DCEs are now serving in other LCMS ministries, such as classroom teachers, pastors, professors, and district executives.

These individuals have been a gift to God’s church, but one would be hard-pressed to identify how parish education in the church has been changed significantly by the influence of DCEs in our church body. In fact, a recent study showed that 75 percent of LCMS pastors felt that parish education effectiveness had either declined or stayed the same in the past fifteen years. (IRE, 2007)

If DCEs are responsible for providing “additional leadership for the educational program of the congregation,” and yet there is the sense that educational effectiveness is declining despite the fact that capable DCEs exist in the LCMS, what is the hope of DCEs serving as catalysts for any significant change? Is it possible that we have been aiming our efforts towards an agenda that hasn’t yielded the results of which we are capable? What might be the needs that exist now in the LCMS that are DCE-specific and which, if accomplished more effectively, would benefit the church achieving its mission more fully?

Most simply stated, the mission of the church is aligned with the Great Commission of our Lord, to make disciples of all nations through baptizing and teaching them to obey God’s commands. As directors of Christian education, one can assume that we serve this mission by teaching others to obey God’s commands, but perhaps we have been misguided in the way we have carried out this task. Specifically, there are two tasks related to our responsibilities that may have been overlooked, and which just might be the catalytic ingredient in better helping our church to achieve its mission: advocacy and goal-orientation.

### **DCEs as Advocates**

Because of the clarity that the Scriptures provide regarding the need for education in the church, many DCEs may have become complacent in their assumption that church leaders and laity would all embrace the importance of education for all members.

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Data seem to indicate, however, that instead of firmly embracing the importance of congregational religious education, many laity and leaders portray a passive and even a dismissive attitude towards religious education in the church. For example, while most research indicates that only 11 to 14 percent of our adults participate in religious educational opportunities, pastors rated the effectiveness of their congregational adult educational experiences as moderately high, especially in relation to their other educational efforts (IRE, 2007). If leaders are not holding up high standards and expectations for education in the church, DCEs must focus significant resources on elevating the perception of the importance of education in the church.

In addition to the biblical and Reformational mandates for prioritizing education in the church, DCEs must advocate that a comprehensive and well-implemented education program will benefit the church. Research clearly shows the importance of the role of religious education in developing healthy disciples and congregations. While there is significant research beyond the following resources, these three citations are based on significant research efforts which summarize much of the other related data.

1. In his books, *Effective Evangelistic Churches* and *High Expectations*, Thom Rainer's research showed that an effective Sunday educational ministry was one of the most important and consistent predictors of a congregation's "success" (identified by Rainer as growing at a consistent rate, having a high percentage of members in worship, and retaining new members at a high rate). These studies were consistent within the Southern Baptist churches which Rainer studied as well as in 500 non-Southern Baptist churches.

2. In a 1990 study of 12,000 people from six different mainline denominations, Search Institute studied aspects of congregational life that may influence the development of faith maturity within congregations. The study, *Effective Christian Education*, found that:

- a. Only two factors had a strong relationship in predicting faith maturity of youth: "family religiousness over a lifetime" and "Christian education involvement over a lifetime."
- b. There were only two factors which showed a strong correlation with the faith maturity of adults: "church involvement over one's lifetime" and "Christian education involvement over a lifetime."
- c. In assessing the role certain congregational qualities had in predicting faith growth and the development of congregational and denominational loyalty, only one characteristic within congregations showed a strong relationship: the quality of formal Christian education.

An oversimplified summary of this extensive research indicates that *an effective and intentional religious educational experience is the one congregationally controlled factor that has the greatest potential impact in the development of faith among youth and adults as well as the enhancement of congregational and denominational loyalty.*

3. As a response to the Search Institute study, the LCMS engaged some of the same researchers to conduct a study of the congregational characteristics related to the development of faith maturity within members of the LCMS. The study was called "Congregations at Crossroads" and was completed in 1995. The study was conducted among active members of the congregation, and some of the findings related to the quality of religious education in our churches were:

- a. Only 46 percent of the active adults who participated in the study indicated that "the congregation helps members apply faith to daily life."
- b. Among the regular worship attendees in the church, only 38 percent of the adults and 19 percent of the youth had an "integrated faith," that is, a faith that expressed itself in a dedication to God and a focus on service to one's fellow man.
- c. Only 22 percent of the adult respondents agreed with the statement: "The congregation has a thinking climate



that encourages questions and expects learning.”

- d. One conclusion of the study was that “Among LCMS members, little correlation exists between faith maturity and leader-centered, one-way communication in Christian education. That is to say that, in and of itself, knowledge imparted by a teacher has little impact on a person’s growth in faith. By contrast, learning processes that engage people in interaction with the leader and with each other have a significant impact on faith. In these settings, people talk about their understanding of God and help each other apply their faith to issues and concerns in their lives. **Few youth or adults report frequently experiencing this kind of interactive educational environment.**” (Pages 19-20 – emphasis added)

The same study found that educational experiences were not as much a factor in faith growth and congregational vitality as was effective education that followed specific parameters of educational methodology.

The research findings clearly point to the important role that quality Christian education plays in helping the church to carry out the Great Commission. Still, many churches (and DCEs) don’t treat educational programming with the focused dedication that it deserves.

Our first step towards serving as catalysts in the church is to continually advocate increased intentionality and effectiveness in Christian educational efforts throughout the church and not just in our home congregations. DCEs need to see themselves as the key advocates for Christian education for the church as a whole. The LCMS has over 6,100 congregations, and only about 10 percent of those churches are served by a DCE. DCEs need to see their advocate role as extending beyond their home congregation. They need to take every opportunity to make the case for enhanced efforts in religious education throughout the church. More than any other church profession, DCEs should understand the degree to which an intentional educational ministry can impact

the church's ability to fulfill God's plan. Along with this understanding comes the charge to provide leadership in promoting intentional education for the good of the church.

### Goal-Orientation

One of the central tenets of all educators is to have clear goals and objectives for educational efforts. Perhaps DCEs have been less than effective as catalysts because we have not clearly stated the goals at which we are aiming. It seems clear from the directive of the Great Commission that we should be educating towards the goal of preparing disciples. Ephesians 4:10-12 says that the public ministry of the church exists to "prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ [the church] may be built up." Second Timothy 3:16-17 states that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Our goal is clear: our educational efforts are to be aimed at preparing and equipping Christ's disciples so that they are better able to help in carrying out the work of the church.

How often, over the past fifty years of the existence of the DCE profession in our church, have DCEs failed to adequately identify this central goal? How often have we focused on delivering programs that entertained or created enthusiasm but didn't determine how well the experience aimed at building an individual so she could follow her Lord? How many of us have been content to accept the praise that we receive for delivering an appealing adult Bible class without ever considering how that class fits into a scope and sequence aimed at building capable disciples? Lack of clarity of purpose is always detrimental to achieving organizational goals, but it is especially debilitating in education.

If our goal is to be transformational, that is, raising up a devoted disciple through enhanced learning processes, we need to

ask "why now?" What is it about this time in history that might stir us to be more intentional in this area? The answer may lie in the unique historical crossroads in which we find ourselves.

Loren Mead, in his book, *The Once and Future Church*, noted a societal and ecclesiastical shift that has taken place starting about the time that DCE ministry appeared on the scene in the LCMS. Mead believes that the church had been operating within a "Christendom Paradigm" until the 1950s and 1960s. This paradigm encouraged conceptualization of the church and nation (empire) as one. Arising from the time of Constantine, this model exhibited itself in the United States through a misguided perception of the U.S. as a "Christian nation." In this paradigm, mission work happened far away in other "unchristian" nations. While we still believed that all had the task of evangelizing, the bulk of that work could be handled only by those professionals who chose to serve in the foreign mission field. In the Christendom Paradigm, the role of the average believer was to support ministry professionals, not to do it themselves. Loyalty and obedience were the primary virtues.

Mead said that we are now in the "Time Between the Paradigms" or the "Post-Christendom Paradigm" (I appreciate



that Mead doesn't say that this is the new paradigm, but only that a shift has happened, and we are no longer in the Christendom Paradigm.) Among other changes, Mead wrote that the mission field is no longer only in a far away country, accessible only to specially trained professionals. The mission field is now right outside (and even inside) the church doors. "Average" believers have the need to be prepared to give witness because they will encounter unbelievers in daily life. The goal of impacting others' lives for Christ so that they will see Him through our actions and words is the purview of every believer. Societal shifts have made it imperative that we prepare believers for this important work. Our religious educational programs need to be deliberately aimed at helping believers to interact with the increasingly non-Christian environment in which we find ourselves.

If one feels that the goal of transforming believers into disciples is too broad and all-encompassing, perhaps DCEs' goal-orientation can be narrowed further. Studies have shown that 70 percent of youth leave the church by the time they reach age 22 (Rainer). Barna has found that 80 percent of those reared in the church will be disengaged by the time they are age 29. The DCE profession in the Lutheran church made youth ministry its focus when the Baby Boomers were filling our churches as teens. Maybe we need to shift our goal today towards reaching a population that is less and less likely to see the need for church involvement.

Perhaps we should aim our goal-orientation towards the ever-growing aging population. Retirees are a larger and larger part of our congregational population and can make a unique contribution to the work of the church. Discipling doesn't end when one retires, and the needs of this important population are unique enough to require intense, focused goal setting in Christian education.

One could identify many other trends and challenges that the church will be facing in the near future. Our task is not diminishing;

it is expanding. DCEs need to be responsive to these opportunities in a way that will serve to "make change happen" in our church and world. As catalysts, the change we are seeking is the move from a passive, recipient-oriented laity to an engaged laity who see themselves as resources to be used for the work of the church in the world. Our method for making this change happen is the same one that DCEs were called to fifty years ago and the same one that Christ directed his church to be about some 2,000 years ago: making disciples through the art and science of teaching.

DCEs have a high calling that requires expertise and dedication. Expertise and dedication, when blessed by the power of the Holy Spirit, will benefit the church in ways we can't imagine. Through God's power found in learning His Word and the truth that is found in Jesus Christ, DCEs will be catalysts indeed!

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