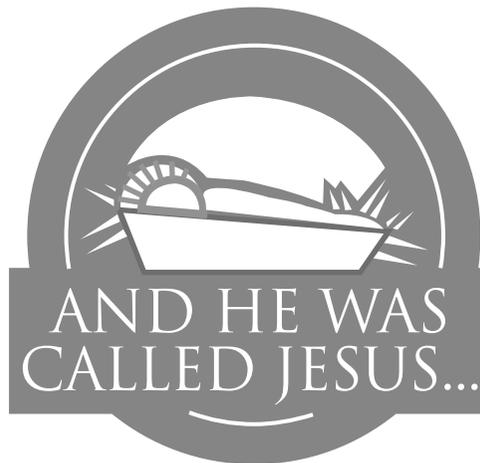


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All hands on deck!

Though war is ugly and its purpose is to kill people and destroy property, its horrors prompted the Geneva and Hague Conventions and the Geneva Protocol which, in effect, state that not just anything goes, even in war. The humane treatment of prisoners and a refrain from the use of certain kinds of weapons are, in theory, a universal standard.

And then there's the devil. What standards might we expect him to observe in his battle against the church? Don't think too long or hard.

Already a loser, and a sore one at that, the devil concluded some time ago that indeed anything goes. And leading us to believe that we—not him—are the enemy is a sleight that he practices with relish.

Playing upon our insecurity, our vanity, and our fears, he tempts us to look at each other and our fellow ministries and see something or someone other than an ally. When another school or congregation grows, we could rejoice in that blessing. The devil prefers that we become suspicious of their "tactics." Another school receives praise from the community for its exemplary programs. We could see a model from whom we might learn. The devil prefers that we wallow in self-pity or blame others that we haven't been so honored. My students seem poorly prepared for my level. I could see a challenge to which I might apply my skills, energy, and persistence. The devil prefers that I hold my student's previous teachers responsible for the "hole" I have to get them out of.

And in his wisdom God has blessed the efforts of many other Christian ministries not in our fellowship. We can't look past the doctrinal differences we have with them, but we can still admire and encourage quality service when we see it and allow that God can and does advance his kingdom through these ministries. The devil prefers that we hold them in suspicion and contempt.

Of course, legitimate concerns that must be addressed are ever before us within our own ranks and without. What is necessary, however, is the prayerful pause that asks whether I'm concerned or envious. Am I alarmed or just insecure?

When he feels circumstances warrant, a ship's captain cries "All hands on deck!" In the hour of challenge, whether the hands belong to a cook or a machinist is of no consequence. Pulling together is what matters. We are in the end times, facing a formidable enemy who has no principles about how he fights. As we look at one another, God help us see allies; God help us encourage one another; God move us to be faithful to our own callings and then resolute in our desire to make other ministries better as we are able.

Jesus told his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." What comfort, inspiration, and strength are in those words for 21st century disciples who must not lose sight of who is on our side, and who is not.

PML



...and others

“Do You Know What I Know?”

John Schultz

Simon Peter answered him, “Lord to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” John 6:68-69.

A familiar Christmas song asks an intriguing question:

Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king,

“Do you know what I know?

In your palace warm, mighty king,

“Do you know what I know?”

The people on the streets of Bethlehem didn’t know. The innkeeper didn’t know. The people in the crowded inn didn’t know. The greatest event in the history of the world, the coming of the long-promised Messiah, was taking place and had little or no impact. One can imagine that people walking by the cave door and glancing inside would have only thought, “poor young woman, too bad she had to give birth in a stable.”

How different it was inside that stable-cave. The young woman knew. Mary believed and was now experiencing the announcement made by the angel Gabriel, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most

High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God,” Luke 1:35. Even though he was born like every human, even though Mary nursed him and wrapped him in cloths, even though she heard his newborn cry, Mary knew. She remembered Gabriel’s words from God, “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High,” Luke 1:31-32.

Joseph knew. He who undoubtedly helped with the delivery, remembered the words of the Lord’s angel, “...what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins,” Matthew 1:20-21.

The shepherds knew. As we look inside that dingy stable, we see a strange sight. People are kneeling before an animal-feeding trough. Shepherds are on their knees. They knew. They heard and believed the angel’s message that a Savior, the Christ, had been born to them. They would find that Savior in David’s town wrapped in cloths and

lying in a manger. They knew all right. They had heard the music of the angel chorus, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests," Luke 2:14.

The Magi knew. They traveled a long distance. They followed a star unwaveringly. They offered him treasured gifts and "bowed down and worshipped him," Matthew 2:11.

Simeon knew. This senior citizen knew that this was no ordinary child. As he took Jesus from his mother's arms and held him, he praised God and said, "My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel," Luke 2:30-32.

Mary, Joseph, shepherds, Magi, Simeon, they all knew who the child was who looked like all other infants. Why? Because they had been told. It was revealed to them. Peter and the disci-

ples knew and believed that Jesus was the Holy One of God because they had heard from Jesus the words of eternal life. Eventually Jesus sent them to others that they too may know and believe. The shepherds "spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child," Luke 2:17. We know from God's word, we believe through the Holy Spirit, we cannot keep silent. Others must know. That is our calling.

Read some more: Acts 10:27-48

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you have caused us to know and believe. Move us with zeal to share what we know with the world.

Amen

John Schultz served as principal/administrator of Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School, New Ulm, MN. He is currently retired and living in New Ulm



Christmas Concert at
Martin Luther College
Sunday, December 14, 3:00 pm

Midyear Commencement Service
Thursday, December 18, 10:00 am

What Living Faith Looks Like (Part 2)

David Sellnow

Previously, we introduced ourselves to the epistle of James and then pinpointed our focus on chapter two of the letter. James began the chapter with this admonition: “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism” (James 2:1). Let’s explore how favoritism manifests itself in the church ... and in the process, examine the sinful tendency in our own hearts to do the very things James censures.

Quit favoring the rich

James spoke of a specific example of favoritism that he abhorred: “Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become

judges with evil thoughts?” (James 2:2-4).

Given the circumstances described by James, most of us would have the same guilty instinct. The “gold-fingered man” is dressed in the finest apparel on the market and is obviously a well-to-do member of the community. The “poor man in shabby clothes” is filthy, living in abject poverty, the sort of fellow whose home is a hovel of dirt or a cave or a tunnel. Who wouldn’t be more inclined to offer the well-dressed man preferential treatment? Maybe in our congregations today we wouldn’t discriminate so much about who would sit where ... but we do practice discrimination in terms of whom we invite to sit in our churches in the first place.

Some years ago, I did a ministry internship in one of America’s largest cities. Our congregations there were planning expansion, looking at locations around the metro area for planting additional churches. I was assigned to do demographic research, to find out which portions of the urban sprawl were

Editor’s note: Commentaries on James chapter two are being featured in this year’s volume of *The Lutheran Educator*. Called workers are invited to use these pages and accompanying discussion questions as part of faculty or other church staff meetings throughout the year.

projected for population expansion. This would cue us as to where future church work might be warranted. I didn't really know the city yet; to me the research was simply a matter of maps and statistics. The area I suggested as deserving immediate attention, because of swelling numbers of residents, turned out to be a section of slums. The initial reaction of others on the planning committee was incredulity. "Put a church where?" The norm for us was to put churches in the suburbs, in affluent neighborhoods, among people who could pay their own way, so to speak. How could we afford to start a ministry where the people had no money to support it?

We were asking ourselves the wrong question; we were looking at people and the situation from a worldly point of

*Love in Christ
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impartially to all.*

view. The very word ministry means service; it implies nothing about a return on our investment. When we consider people whom we should be serving with the word of Jesus, income levels or living conditions are not relevant consid-

erations. People are people. All need Jesus' love equally.

A counter example occurred in the same congregation. Outreach efforts in our own neighborhoods led us to a man who was homebound, confined to a wheelchair. He lived alone in a small apartment and didn't take very good care of himself. His apartment was filthy and infested with cockroaches. The place reeked. He reeked—so much that it was hard to be near him. But a couple in the congregation befriended him. They picked him up and brought him to worship. They went to his apartment and scrubbed and cleaned. They saw no reason to be any less loving toward him than toward anyone else who needed to hear the gospel. Theirs was the sort of unprejudiced attitude that James had hoped to see in Jesus' people. They acted in love that flowed from faith. Love in Christ doesn't pay attention to what sort of person is being loved, but shows love impartially to all.

What's your favorite favoritism?

Even in our own congregations, people show partiality in various directions, often associated with economics and social status. Successful business people may have little respect for the poor. Struggling wage-earners will resent persons with wealth and advantages. Then there are the middle-class folks who don't particularly want to associate with "trailer trash" and at the same time are envious of whoever has more money than they do. And yes, all of these people are gathering together week by week

in the same Christian churches to worship the all-loving God who “is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34 KJV). Can you see why James saw a problem with this?

Beyond economics, we make judgments about people for all sorts of other reasons. For example, in one community, church members became upset when students from a nearby college showed up with orange and purple and other color hairstyles. Rather than rejoicing over each soul that was turned to the Lord in repentance and praise, men who dyed away their gray and ladies who routinely tinted their own hair auburn or chestnut were offended by other hues on younger people. It seemed incoherent, an opinion divided against itself, trying to face two directions at the same time. But that is how discrimination works, however it manifests itself.

James says that those who discriminate in one way or another become “evil-thinking judges.” The reasons for showing favoritism are inconsistent and dubious even if examined on purely rational grounds. Above that, discriminatory feelings are utterly contrary to the faith in which we are one together in Christ. “Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3). There is nothing that makes us more worthy of God’s mercy than anyone else. Yet he showed mercy to us all. We have every reason to be receptive to everyone in Jesus’ name, regardless of race or income ... or aroma or hair color! Love from God extends equally to tailor-dressed attorneys and tattooed biker dudes. “There is no difference, for

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:22-24).

Rich or poor?

James continued his harangue against Christians who bypass the poor. He pointed out that God’s view of such things is radically opposed to the opinions evident in human affairs. Once again, he appealed to his readers as dear brothers, loved by God, urging them—and us—to live that love. “Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor” (James 2:5-6).

There is no special virtue in being poor. A poor man is just as damnable as a rich man; both are inherently sinful. But the Bible is full of examples that show how God blesses the poor with a wealth of faith. There is the widow with one meal left for herself and her son, who trusted the word of Elijah (1 Kings 17). There is Jesus’ story of a beggar, Lazarus, who had nothing on earth but everything when he was carried to Abraham’s side in heaven (Luke 16). There are the letters to believers at Smyrna and Philadelphia, who suffered afflictions and poverty and had little strength, yet Jesus commended their faith and their faithfulness (Revelation 2,3). Here in James, it is noted that the poor are chosen to love God and be included in his kingdom. They love

much because they have been given much. They are rich in faith, realizing where they would be without the Savior. Such awareness of spiritual need is hard to accept if you are a wealthy heiress or self-made millionaire.

Being rich, in itself, is not a vice. Great men of faith such as Abraham

If you look at life the way God does, you don't look at how a person measures up in the eyes of the world.

and Job had vast fortunes. However, the Bible is full of cautions concerning wealth's power to pull people down. There is Jesus' story of a man eager to build bigger barns for his bumper crops, who would die empty-handed because he was "not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21). There is Jesus' pronouncement: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort" (Luke 6:24). There is the maxim that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24). There is urgent warning against attachment to the things of this world, because "if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). Material success is not something to be sought after. If

God gives it, fine. But if it becomes the object of your pursuit, watch out. "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24).

A believer's prayer is neither to get rich nor to become impoverished, but asks, "Give me only my daily bread" (Proverbs 30:8). That is not a request for middle class economic status—there's nothing inherently virtuous about being middle class either! Believers simply rely on God and recognize him as the one who provides all things. Their focus is on God, not on things.

If you look at life the way God does, you don't look at how a person measures up in the eyes of the world. You understand that God has chosen "the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are" (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). You may be a nobody in this world; that doesn't matter. It is God—not any prestige or possession or position on this earth—that makes you somebody. The same goes for your neighbors. So think of them that way, rich or poor, and offer them the riches of God's love.

Stop encouraging exploitation

Too often even Christians fail to see how certain patterns in society go contrary to the will of God. True, some things we see easily. We quickly identify who is sinning in their sexuality. We loudly protest the murder of unborn children. Those sorts of societal ills we

readily recognize as defiance of God. But we are far less keen at seeing sin when it comes to materialism and how money is managed. We bank on ever-increasing income. We buy enough to keep our budgets always partially in debt. We measure our national economic health by how much we all spend on holiday shopping sprees. We have come to believe that a house without at least two full bathrooms and a two-car garage is virtually unlivable. In the process, we conveniently forget that Jesus said, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

We have become confused. The goals of capitalism and the goals of Christianity are not identical. At times they are not compatible. We can't believe that money makes the world go around, and at the same time believe that Jesus Christ provides the one thing needful. When we idolize riches, we do so at the expense of our souls.

Frequently we idolize people who are rich. We admire their achievements. We watch their programs. We buy their products. We seek out their seminars. We think the way we will get ahead is by emulating those who are rich. James had a different perspective: "Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?" (James 2:6-7).

James' initial audience consisted of Jewish Christians, at a time when they still met within the traditional Jewish

community. Back in verse two, where the NIV translation speaks of someone coming into the meeting place, the term James actually used was "synagogue," the usual Jewish house of worship. The wealthy persons James described as oppressors were perhaps leading members of the Jewish community who rejected Jesus as Christ and made life hard for Jewish Christians. The very persons that James' readers were trying to impress, the very ones to whom they were ingratiating themselves, were people who opposed the name of Jesus.

We do ourselves no favors when we curry favor with the worldly rich. It is slander to the name of Jesus to put our trust in anyone or anything other than him. When we act as though we need strong finances in order to survive, as though material means are the necessary means by which God will bless his people, we allow ourselves to be exploited by the materialistic ideology of this world. We must not think that procuring endowments from prominent donors is what will sustain our church's future. Jesus alone is the rock that secures the church. Jesus' gospel is the means of God's grace. We welcome offerings for our churches and schools, but we depend on the Lord, not on contributors. "Do not put your trust ... in mortal men, who cannot save" (Psalm 146:3). God calls us to believe that he will provide.

Lawbreakers

Putting too much stock in the rich and

in riches exemplifies how we are out of sync with God. Rather than loving all people unconditionally, we prefer those who can offer us perks in return. This lack of proper love was pinpointed by James as a pivotal problem. “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do

*It is God—not any
prestige or possession
or position on this
earth—that makes
you somebody.*

commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker” (James 2:8-11).

James’ accusation left no loopholes. Maybe you’ve managed to do okay in respect to one of God’s laws, but you’ve botched it badly in other areas. It doesn’t matter which of God’s commands you’ve violated, nor how mildly or severely you’ve transgressed. You are a lawbreaker. God’s law convicts every one of us with an overwhelming array of evidence. Our greatest failing is our lack of love.

If we could love with all our hearts, we would do well. “Love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10). Jesus had said that the first and greatest commandment is to love God fully, and its corollary is to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:36-39). James called this the royal law of Scripture. It is the heart of the law, and it is where we fall most miserably short of what God expects of us.

James pointed again at favoritism as the centerpiece of our lawbreaking. Even after we have been converted to Christ, our self-oriented tendencies diminish the extent of our love. We spend much to send our own children to Christian schools, but expend less on extending Christ’s love to lost souls around the world. We are pleased to be part of God’s kingdom ourselves, but often feel no great urgency to include others in his grace.

Once, when a congregation was planning an open house, the pastor asked one of the members if he had invited his farmhands and their families. The man gaped as though his pastor had proposed something preposterous. The thought had never crossed his mind; indeed, it made him uncomfortable. Mexican weed-pullers weren’t really the sort of folks he wanted in his church. To him they were only hired hands, a lesser breed of people.

We try to convince ourselves we are law-abiding. We set up church policies and programs. We want everything to honor God, according to proper guidelines. But we forget what the real line is: love. We callously, oafishly and repeat-

edly step over that line. We strain out gnats while swallowing camels. We make sure we have glorious choirs singing in our balconies, but meanwhile fail to notice neighbors in need across the street. When James described the sort of religion that God accepts, he mentioned nothing of formal church activities. “To look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27) – those are the kinds of aims we are to seek.

Next time: Living faith is faith that acts. 🍀

Talk about it

Use the following discussion starters within your school faculty or with other church staff.

1. Can you think of ways in which your church or school inadvertently pays more attention to well-to-do people than to lower-class people? How could such faults be corrected?
2. Look at what Jesus will say to his sheep on the last day – Matthew 25:35-36. Are we as individuals and as congregations routinely engaged in the sorts of activities Jesus describes?
3. What steps could you take to steer your ministries toward benefitting different groups of people—persons that you aren’t presently serving?
4. Agree or disagree: Resentment by poor people toward wealthy people is just as much of a moral problem as wealthy people’s insensitivity toward the poor.
5. Have you known any believers who have expressed great faith even while their lives were a great struggle—economically or otherwise? Share their stories and pray for a faith like theirs.
6. Jesus said, “You cannot serve both God and money.” In what ways in our own lives do we lean toward serving money more than we serve God?
7. Make a list of things in your personal life that you tend to think of as necessities, when they really are added blessings and luxuries.
8. It has been said that what makes capitalism work is human greed. What spiritual dangers confront us in a capitalistic society? On the other hand, what good character traits can capitalism foster?
9. In a congregational meeting, someone says: “I know we should rely on the Lord and not on money. But if we don’t collect enough money to pay the bills, all our relying on the Lord won’t keep the bank from foreclosing, and we’ll have to shut down our school.” How would you respond to the comment?
10. Make a list of groups and activities in your church and school. Evaluate each one in reference to your ministry’s spiritual mission—to reach people in Christ and strengthen them in Christ. Are there any groups or activities that are keeping us busy but also are keeping us from attending primarily to our Father’s business?

David Sellnow teaches in the History and Religion Division at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN.

So, What Do You Do During Your Day?

Mark Zarling

In July 2007, Mark Zarling assumed his duties as the second president of Martin Luther College.

A FORMER STUDENT joined me at a round table. We were enjoying a recess in the conference schedule, and he sat down to visit for a few minutes. It was a thrill to see him and to learn how God was using him in his first assignment. But then he hit me with his question: “So, now that you’re a president, what do you do during your day?”

He had no malicious intent. He simply wanted to know how I was adjusting to a different ministry with new responsibilities. But I didn’t know what to say. How would I explain it without seeing his eyes glaze over and a formerly pleasant chat morph into one-sided monologue?

I sat silent and then finally said, “I don’t know where to begin.”

After one year, what do I do during the day? I do know the days aren’t long enough, but why is that? What is consuming my time? Those questions forced me to stop and consider bigger questions, questions that every called worker in every ministry needs to ask on a regular basis. I believe that these questions are key to a leadership model that embodies our theology and mission.

Perhaps my thoughts can promote a dialogue at a study club or faculty meeting.

Can I articulate the connection to the great commission?

The Lord Jesus has given his church a glorious task. We call it the great commission. Go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them . . . baptizing them. Nothing else matters when we weigh priorities of time and resources on the scales of eternity. That means we always come back to Christ’s commission as the touchstone of reality and the driving force that directs our energy.

Can I explain to a friend on the street how a proposed director of institutional research and assessment for MLC connects to the commission? Can I relate how state licensure fits into the mission of MLC? Can I defend the time taken up in co-curricular activities as beneficial in the program of a college that exists to train workers commissioned for the commission?

You have similar questions at your field of labor. Look at the church calendar or the school calendar. Why do we do what we do? How does it finally

Zarling

relate to the reason we exist as a body of believers? If we can't articulate the commission connection, neither will our people. And if our people can't understand the mission connection, then we lose the passion and the priorities and the purpose for what we do. Leaders need to clearly articulate how the work always relates to Jesus and saving souls!

Can I see clearly how Jesus would answer the challenges of a changing world with his changeless truths of the Word?

Information-age technology makes information readily accessible. But in this avalanche of information, are we buried by trivia? Do we lose focus on what is critically important? Ambassadors of Christ analyze and assess contemporary society in order to identify how Satan has repackaged his age-old temptations and attacks. Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun. The serpent's poisonous whispers still echo from Eden. Yet he is deceitful enough to wrap his lies in packages that appeal to each generation anew. Can we cut through the web of deceit with the sword of the Spirit? That means daily study in the Word so that the Spirit sharpens our witness of the Christ. How often do we give answers without first listening to the questions people have? Leaders make time to search the Scriptures so that the Spirit can constantly sharpen our eyesight. We need to recognize the staggering spiritual warfare around us while keeping our gaze solely on the Victor. Let us fix our

eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Can I see the important tasks and not just the urgent tasks?

One glance at the calendar and we all wonder where we'll find the time. It is imperative for leaders to prioritize the precious gifts of daily time and of the talents of our people so that we aren't wasting opportunities for reaching souls. Satan would have no problem with a very busy church and school if that busyness centered on the wrong things. I'm personally convinced that the more important the gospel task is before us, the more distractions Satan throws in the way. The phone will ring often, but pray that the Spirit help us diagnose which of those voices on the other end needs added time because of a spiritual crisis at home that only the gospel of Jesus can soothe. The to-do list will never be finished, so pray for wisdom to know which task can be delayed without detriment to kingdom work, while another task is absolutely critical to our witness efforts. Pray for wisdom to see the gifts and abilities of those surrounding us in the body of Christ, and find ways to use those wonderful Christians. Leaders aren't loners! We are called by God to work with the Word and with his people. Let them find joy in working beside us in meaningful gospel service.

Can I make time to pray?

Almost nine decades ago a sainted semi-

nary professor encouraged called workers to fervent prayer. “A Christian who does not pray is a lung that does not breathe, a heart that does not beat, a body that does not live, a spiritual corpse; he has a name that he lives, and is dead. Where there is little prayer, where it is weak and weary and cold, or consists only of feeble efforts and half-hearted sighs, there the life of faith is near extinction.” (Pieper, “The True Reconstruction of the Church,” *The Wauwatosa Theology*, vol. III, page 304)

Prayer is second nature to the child of God. As newly assigned graduates, we all spent fervent time in prayer, asking Jesus to help us, to use us, to forgive our mistakes. But as we gain experience in the ministry and become proficient in our tasks, we could easily be deluded into thinking that our efforts make the Word efficacious. We can stumble headlong into the rut of routine and not even know that we broke the neck of passion for ministry in the process.

One thing about a move to a new calling—your comfort zone is gone. God blesses you with a brand new circumstance, and suddenly the pillars of routine are shattered and the foundations of the familiar are gone. And when that new call presents new challenges, God makes clear that the same old lesson plans or worked-over Bible classes seem like a size 9-narrow on a size 13-wide situation. Everything is new; everything is different.

Lovingly, God empties the self-confidence from the soul so that he can fill it up with the works and merits of Jesus alone. Now those passages and promises

one assigned as memory work bring the soul a needed life rope: My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. When I am weak, then I am strong. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. It is God who works in you to will and to do of his good pleasure. We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.

So, what am I doing with my day? I’m still learning how to answer that question. But I can say that Jesus has forced me to look at some hard questions and brought me to my knees to hear his answers from the Word. So, in retrospect, it’s been a great year. I pray the same for you and yours. ✠

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When Should a Child Enter Kindergarten?

Becky Lindenberg

THERE WAS A kindergarten teacher gearing up for her first day of school. The pencils were sharpened, the markers were all brand new, and the books were clean and crisp. After the first day of school, this very exhausted teacher mumbled to a co-worker, “I forgot how young they are in September” (Guignon, 1997). In many states the age children may enter kindergarten is five. However, more and more parents are waiting an extra year and enrolling them at age six. This paper will explain kindergarten late-entrance enrollment, show what research has concluded about it, and present solutions to this issue.

There are laws set for parents in regards to when their child can enter kindergarten. In most states, a child must be five years old by September 1 or December 1, though some states have cutoffs as early as June (Parentcenter.com, 2008). In the state of Wisconsin, “a child must be five by September 1 of the school year” (Wisconsin DPI, 2008).

Entrance to kindergarten is based on age and not a child’s ability (Wisconsin DPI, 2008). A school district cannot

deny any entrance to an age-eligible child based on his “readiness” skills. Therefore, there is not mandatory screening for enrollment, but school districts in Wisconsin are allowed to test incoming kindergarten children to assess their skills. This way they are better prepared to meet the needs of each child (Wisconsin DPI, 2008).

Despite the laws, many parents are holding their children back until they reach age six to start kindergarten. This trend has been coined as “redshirting”, after the college sports practice of deferring eligibility for freshman players (Walkup, 2007, p. 6). Parents redshirt their children so that they will be older, larger, or more mature (Weil, 2007). Parents do not want their child to be the youngest or smallest in his class. This idea stems from the thought that children need to have high self-esteem and feel good about themselves. If they wait a year to enter kindergarten, ideally they will be able run faster, write neater, read more quickly, and essentially, be more successful

Along with parents, there are some teachers who encourage redshirting little ones. Jane Anderson, a kindergarten

teacher near Asheville, NC, is a strong proponent of older kindergartners. “Every year I have two or three young ones in that August-to-October range, and they struggle a little,” says Anderson (Weil, 2007). In fact, Mrs. Anderson followed progress (through second grade) on one student who entered her class at age five. She found that the student was always one step behind. It wasn’t because of lack of effort or ability. She worked hard and had great parental involvement (Weil, 2007). It is a phe-

It is the responsibility of schools to meet the needs of children as they enter school and to provide whatever services are needed...to help each child reach his or her full potential

nomenon that Mrs. Anderson and hundreds of other teachers see every year: too often, the little ones stay behind (Weil, 2007).

There is some research that has also encouraged redshirting. “In early 2000, the National Center for Education Statistics assessed 22,000 kindergartners and found...the older kids were four times as likely to be reading, and two to

three times as likely to be able to decipher two-digit numerals” (Weil, 2007). The study also found that older children are more advanced in their fine motor skills and are more socially adept than their younger peers.

There has been, however, much research that has proven that redshirting does not affect children in the ways previously mentioned. Researcher Karen Magliacano compared two second grade groups’ scores from Metropolitan Reading Readiness Tests and the Iowa Basic Skills. One group was students who were 5 years old when they entered kindergarten. The other group was students who were 6 years old. The study found “no significant difference between the samples in reading test scores as a result of chronological age” (Guignon, 1997).

Sandra Crosser, an education professor at Ohio Northern University, also did research on the effects of redshirting. She tested 253 seventh, eighth, and ninth graders; 190 of them entered kindergarten at age five, and 63 entered at age six. The research was based on their fifth grade ability and achievement tests in math, reading, and other subject areas. The results did not show a significant difference in academic achievement between five and six year old entrants (Crosser, 1991, p. 145).

One question that has been asked is, “If kids don’t enter until age six, what are they doing for a year?” There are junior kindergarten programs designed for these children. They are, more or less, a “holding tank for kids who are too old for preschool” (Weil, 2007).

Other children with delayed enrollment may spend another year in their current preschool program or with mom at home. Still others, to put it bluntly, will spend “another year watching TV in the basement with Grandma” (Weil, 2007). Because of repeated and/or extra programs that teach kindergarten level concepts at home, studies have shown that older children may learn more per grade, but tend to have more behavior problems in kindergarten (Weil, 2007). This is most likely due to boredom and lack of challenge.

The conclusion I drew from research is a quote taken from Elizabeth Graue, a professor who studies school-readiness at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She says, “Readiness is a relative issue” (Walkup, 2007, p. 6). If we go back to state law, entrance to kindergarten is based solely on age. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), “It is the responsibility of schools to meet the needs of children as they enter school and to provide whatever services are needed...to help each child reach his or her full potential” (NAEYC, 1995). It is normal for children to enter kindergarten with a wide variety of abilities and maturity levels. Redshirting them won’t necessarily result in long-term benefits. In fact, there will always be kids who can’t cut on the line, use too much glue, throw the ball crookedly, and form their letters incorrectly despite their entrance age. It is the teacher’s job to educate each child to the best of his ability.

Enrolling children in kindergarten at

age five is not only acceptable, but encouraged. Children will be successful if their parents and teacher are willing to work together as partners in education. Elizabeth Graue has some excellent ideas for parents to help get their five year olds ready for Kindergarten. The first thing parents can do to prepare their children for school is read to them. Reading to them every day will boost their comprehension skills, vocabulary, and critical-thinking/problem solving skills. Parents can also use everyday tasks like setting the table to help teach math concepts. Children should also be involved in activities with other children to encourage positive play and cooperation. Finally, parents should tour the kindergarten classroom so their children feel more confident as they enter kindergarten age (Walkup, 2007, p. 6).

Teachers should work just as hard to ensure confidence and success for five year olds entering kindergarten. They should complete a variety of pre-assessments within the first month of school. These pre-assessments should include, but are not limited to: following directions, dressing himself, recitation of the ABCs and counting, using pencils and scissors, cooperation activities, vocabulary questions, and self-portraits (Parentcenter.com, 2008 & Weil, 2007). They should also complete several reassessments throughout the year to monitor progress. Teachers should also get to know each child—how she learns, frustration levels, and likes/dislikes. They should be able to teach to their individual needs and set attainable goals

for them. They should be able to monitor achievement of those goals through informal and authentic assessments.

Finally, teachers and parents need to be in constant communication with each other. There needs to be more than just parent-teacher conferences. Every parent should have this courtesy, especially one who was thinking about redshirting. They need to be reassured that entering their child at the age appropriate time was a good decision. If their child is struggling in any way, they need to know immediately so they can step in and help the teacher. They also need to know that their child is a success. Teachers need to remember that phone calls don't always have to be negative. Parents love to hear how wonderful their children are as well, especially when there is an uneasy feeling about age-eligibility enrollment.

"I forgot how young they are in September." Yes, children are little at the beginning of the year. However, redshirting them is not the solution. Students don't need extra time before kindergarten, but rather to be brought into school to begin their education. It is our job as educators to lay the foundation for those little five year olds. With patience, understanding, and excitement for learning, we (as teachers) can help any child be successful in their education. 🌟

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God Has A Plan

Carol Lee Alfred

PERHAPS YOU remember, in your youth, someone asking you, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Most likely, many reading this article had known for some time that they would be teaching in a Christian Day School. But what if your answer was not what your friends or family was expecting to hear—what if you wanted to teach in a public school? Certainly, God has a unique plan for each and every one of us and while our path may seem different to some, we remember that God has a plan for all. He truly guides us through all our days (Joshua 1:9—The Lord your God be with you wherever you go). I never imagined that my teaching career would take me to where I am today. My story begins 40 years ago...

I have been a member of the WELS my entire life, and my educational background reflects that. I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and baptized at Pilgrim Lutheran Church. My childhood days were spent in Bloomington, Minnesota, and I attended Bloomington Lutheran School for grades K-8. I continued my Christian education at St. Croix Lutheran High School graduating in 1985. I earned an associate’s degree from Bethany Lutheran College in

Mankato in 1987 and went on to finish my undergraduate education at Minnesota State University, Mankato (MSU, M) majoring in elementary education.

Teaching jobs were at a premium in 1990 when I graduated from MSU, M. For every teaching position in Minnesota there were roughly 500 applicants. Determined to find a teaching position, I decided to broaden my search and sent my resume to school districts nationwide, not knowing what type of response I’d get or where a response might come from. I never even bothered to look at a map when I started mass mailing resumes; I was just hoping to get a telephone call or letter from somebody, anybody. And then the phone rang one summer day; I was at work when my parents took the call from a superintendent at the school district in Elko, Nevada. They wanted to interview me for a teaching position.

Not having the slightest idea where Elko, Nevada, was—it was time to get out the map. To my amazement, I found out several things about Elko, Nevada:

- 1) No big planes land near Elko – just those small, regional, prop planes.
- 2) Elko is about an eight-hour drive North of Las Vegas, over and

through the mountains.

3) Elko is not a major city, and in my opinion at the time, in the middle of nowhere, even though it had a population of 24, 461.

Was this where my teaching career would begin? As it turned out, it was.

I was somewhat apprehensive about being so far from home, and I talked at length with my parents about the opportunity. I was unsure if Elko, Nevada, was really where I wanted to be. But the decision was a little easier to make when my parents reminded of something the principal in Elko said.

They [my parents] reminded me of why I was chosen from hundreds of applicants to be interviewed for this position. I just assumed it was because of my ability to do a good job (even though they knew nothing about my teaching skills), or maybe because I had decent grades, or perhaps it was because I had student taught in the grade they were hiring. These things may have helped when I headed into the interview, but why was I even chosen for an interview—a recent college graduate who lived 1500 miles from Elko?

When we arrived in Nevada, my parents had asked the principal, “Why did you pick our daughter, Carolee Schwartz from far away Minnesota, for this position?”

His answer was unbelievable to me. He said, “I noticed that she had attended Christian schools nearly all her life, and I believe that public schools need good Christian teachers who are excellent role models for our children.” He made it clear that he couldn’t say that in

public but he was very open in his discussion with my parents. You see, this principal was a member of the Lutheran Church of the Missouri Synod, the only Lutheran church in Elko. I was dumb-founded.

I taught first grade in Elko for two years returning to Minnesota in 1992 to get married. I did not find a teaching job in Minnesota immediately, but responded to an ad from an area public school. It seemed that they needed a second grade teacher to start as soon as possible; in fact, the school year was already two weeks in session. The Lord had a plan for me, and I was blessed with securing that job and within a week I was teaching second grade. I have been with the Gibbon Fairfax Winthrop (GFW) school system since 1992 and have taught first grade for the past 15 years.

Today, I ‘m still a public school teacher but my children all attend St. Paul’s Lutheran School (WELS) in New Ulm, Minnesota. Teaching is a challenging job no matter if it’s at a Christian school or in the public school, and after one particularly challenging day a few years ago I once again was amazed at the hand of God in my life.

The day of teaching was a trying one. Our pastor’s daughter babysat our children after school and, like every other day, I went to pick them up at the pastor’s house. The pastor’s wife, who is a preschool teacher, answered the door that afternoon and, needless to say, she became the sounding board for my “less than great” day. I had decided in my heart that day, perhaps I would be bet-

Alfred

ter off teaching in a Christian school. At least then I would have God's word to back some of the expectations I have for the children and their behavior.

Amazingly, our pastor's wife said something to me that I will never forget. In fact, I don't believe she even knew what tremendous impact her words would have on me.

She said, "You know, God has put you in that school for a reason. You are there as a Christian role model, who holds Christian values and beliefs. The way you teach and the expectations you have for your students, reflect the Christian public school teacher that you are. Just remember that public schools

need good, Christian teachers too."

And to this day, I believe that God placed me where I am for a reason. So, if someday you or your ministry takes you into the public system, keep in mind that God does have a plan for you, and that He placed you where you are for a reason. Christian, public school teachers are important because they can evangelize through their words, actions, and daily living. You may not always be able to speak the Word, but surely you can always live it. ❧

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His Mother Kept All These Sayings in Her Heart

As o'er the cradle of her Son
The blessed Mary hung,
And chanted to the Anointed One
The psalms that David sung.

What joy her bosom must have known,
As, with a sweet surprise,
She marked the boundless love that shone
Within his infant eyes.

But deeper was her joy to hear,
Even in his ripening youth,
And treasure up, from year to year,
His words of grace and truth.

Oh, may we keep his words like her
In all their life and power,
And to the law of love refer
The acts of every hour.

William Cullen Bryant

Everyone is a Winner! Or Are They? The Consequences of Grade Inflation.

Frederick Wulff

IF ALL STUDENTS in a school receive high grades, the school administrator looks good in the community, the teachers are happy they can hand out good news, the students feel amply rewarded for their class attendance, and the dotting parents are assured all is well. All the way around, every one appears to be a winner. Many schools apparently have that “heavenly” situation. In Seattle, Washington, the 406-member graduating class of 2005 at Garfield High School featured 44 valedictorians with perfect 4.0 grade-point averages. Each of them in over seven semesters never earned less than an A. Last year Garfield had 30 valedictorians, the year before, 27. And nationally, Garfield may be just mid-range. Bullard High School in Fresno, California, graduated 58 valedictorians in 2005. Traditionally the highest-performing student, the valedictorian, gives the final address at graduation; but the increasing number of straight-A students has led some schools to abandon the award altogether (“One High School – 44 Valedictorians,” *Seattle*

Times, June 13, 2005, seattletimes.nwsourc.com). Even in Minnesota, we too have a preponderance of valedictorians. Minnesota’s Eden Prairie High School selected 24 valedictorians in 2007 based on students with a 4.0 GPA. More than 800 high school valedictorians applied to the University of Notre Dame in 2005. That sounds impressive—until you consider that Notre Dame rejected 300 of them. The end is still not in sight. One recent valedictorian surmised: “If there isn’t a serious review of valedictorian benchmarks, as the number of valedictorians increases every year, perhaps in a couple of years, there will be more valedictorians than not or even half and half, which might seem ridiculous now but is entirely possible” (Amanda Mene, feature editor of *The Paper* at Dana Hills High School. This opinion piece was first published in the Feb. 29, 2008, edition of *The Paper*, myochigh.com).

Grade inflation began in the colleges

If most students in a class receive an A, then they must all be excellent students,

or there is a problem known as grade inflation. This inflation is evident in all levels in the academic world, especially at colleges and universities since the 1960s. This has been well documented by studies such as that conducted by Duke professor Stuart Rojstaczer, related in *National Trends in Grade Inflation* (www.gradeinflation.com). Although the trend is universal, his statistics show private schools undergoing grade inflation at a rate that is about 25-30% higher than public schools.

Those who defend the “feel good” element in charitable grade handouts may shrug this off as a matter of pedagogical value of learning over grading. This is a fuzzy way of saying that the colleges are still turning out better students. Rojstaczer says, such assertions “are of dubious worth.” He conjectures that the resurgence of grade inflation in the 1980s principally was caused by the emergence of a consumer-based culture in higher education. Students are paying more for a product every year, and increasingly they want and get the reward of a good grade for their purchase. In this culture, professors are not only compelled to grade more easily, but also to water down course content. Consequently, both intellectual rigor and grading standards have weakened. Another theory is proposed by William Cole: “Perhaps it is not surprising that grade inflation seems to have coincided with the ‘opening up’ of the curriculum that began in the late 1960s.” Cole continues: “Many academics now seem to believe that all cultures, books and fields of study are, in some vague sense,

equally valid and thus, in an even vaguer sense, equally ‘good.’ (Sound like post-modernism?) Having embraced this relativism, some faculty members may feel that it is incomparable with making absolute judgments of our students. Giving everyone a good grade becomes the path of least resistance” (William Cole, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, quoted in *Stanford Review*, vol. XXVII, Issue 7, stanfordreview.org). There are other theories. An interesting and thoughtful causation list was submitted in an article by Jennifer Franklin and Michael Theal, “My Fight Against Grade Inflation: A Response to William Cole,” (Minnesota State University, Mankato, mnsu.edu/cetl/teachingresources). One might also consider evaluation systems in which students grade professors, thereby providing an incentive for teachers to go easy on their future evaluators (Ivy League Grade Inflation, www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/2002/02/08/edt-wof2.htm). Professor Harvey C. Mansfield of Harvard, however, maintains: “Professors who give easy grades gain just a fleeting popularity, salted with disdain. In later life, students will forget those professors; they will remember the ones who posed a challenge” (Harvey Mansfield, “Grade Inflation: It’s Time to Face the Facts,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, chronicle.com/free/v47/i30/30b02401.htm).

There have been some attempts to deal with this malady of grade inflation in colleges. In 1992, at Harvard, 91% of all undergraduate grades were B- or higher. In 1993, 83.6% of all Harvard

seniors graduated with honors. Leaders from a number of institutions, including Harvard University and Princeton University, have publicly stated that grades have been rising. Efforts are being made to change grading practices. If schools can return to using the full range of grades (Stanford University once dropped D's and F's, but then reinstated them), they can better provide a full accounting to students on how they are doing. UC Berkeley has a reputation for rigorous grading policies in some science and engineering classes. Departmental guidelines state that no more than 17% of the students in any given class may be awarded A grades, and that the class GPA should be in the range of 2.7 to 2.9 out of a maximum of 4.0 grade points. Other departments, however, are not adhering to such strict guidelines, as data from the University's Office of Student Research indicates that the average overall undergraduate GPA is about 3.25 (UC Berkeley Undergraduate Fact Sheet – Fall 2004, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grade_inflation).

However, since grade inflation is not uniform between schools, students in more stringently graded schools and departments are at an inequitable disadvantage. One hates to admit it, but a C is a killer on a transcript, especially given that an A, in today's society, does not mean "excellent." It wasn't always that way. In a commencement speech delivered to UC Berkeley, Ted Koppel admitted: "I blossomed at Stanford, but I was a C plus student as an undergraduate. As was George W. Bush when he

went to Yale." Koppel told the graduating class: "Frankly, given the state of grade inflation these days, it's difficult to argue that the document (diploma) has much value to begin with" (ABC newscaster Ted Koppel's prepared remarks, delivered to UC Berkeley graduates at Commencement Convocation 2004, UC Berkeley News, berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/05/14).

Grade inflation in middle and high schools

Young students should be taught that grades are not a source of self-esteem, but simply indicate a relative mastery of skills and facts. Grade inflation hinders a true assessment. A study on high school inflation was conducted as an ACT research project in March of 2004. The results support the conclusion that the increase in HSGPA between 1991 and 2003 is due to grade inflation, rather than to an increase in the average level of achievement (David J. Woodruff and Robert L. Ziomek, "High School Grade Inflation," ACT Research Report Series, 2004-4, ww.act.org/research/researchers/reports).

College Board officials say that the number of college-bound high school students with A averages grew from 28 percent of the total to 38 percent in 10 years — but their scores fell an average of 12 points on the verbal portion of the SAT and three points on math (William H. Honan, "S.A.T. Scores Decline Even as Grades Rise," *New York Times*, September 2, 1998). To further delve into the question of whether schools

that give generous grades to student accomplish more than those who do not, let's look into another study. In 1987, two researchers (Donald Thomas, Ph.D. President Emeritus, School Management Study Group, and William Bainbridge, Ph.D. President, SchoolMatch Corporation, Columbus, Ohio) began to conduct "School Effectiveness Audits" to answer a basic question often asked by Boards of Education: "How effective are our schools?" After comprehensive auditing they concluded: "One of the greatest frauds perpetrated on high school students is grade inflation. In general, the highest academic grade inflation is in the lowest achieving schools. Schools which expect little and provide high grades, regardless of the level of academic achievement, are fraudulent educational systems and should be corrected" ("Grade Inflation: The Current Fraud" by M. Donald Thomas, Ph.D. and William Bainbridge, Ph.D., www.endgradeinflation.org).

The inflation problem is also of concern at the middle school level. Rochester, Minnesota, school district officials had to decide which middle-schoolers would participate in a four-week remedial summer program. Should a high grade point average make students exempt from suggestions that they attend remedial classes? At least one Rochester parent is upset that her 11-year-old son, whom she says earned straight A's, was asked to go to summer school. The school was on the spot. Still, the district would be remiss if the welfare of the student is not fore-

most. In spite of high grades, that student needed the extra assistance. ("Editorial: Summer School Raises Grade-inflation Issue," *Rochester Post-Bulletin*, June 6, 2008).

Grade inflation at the grade school level

Grading standards in primary education have received remarkably less attention, though here too, there are problems. According to Maurice E. Lucas and David N. Figlio there are two major questions related to grading standards in the elementary school. First, to what degree do the grades distributed by schools and teachers correspond to their students' performance on state and national exams? Second, and more important, how does "tough" or "easy" grading affect students' learning? The data used consisted of observations on almost every 3rd, 4th and 5th grader in the school system of Gainesville, Florida, between the 1995-96 and 1998-99 school years. Standardized measurements provided a unique advantage for a study of this nature because it administers both the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), a nationally normed exam, and the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).

The researchers found that these Florida teachers varied considerably in their grading standards, even within a single school district. In fact, the teachers' grading standards often varied as much within a single school as within the school district as a whole. Overall, their results suggest that elementary-

school students (both high and low level achievers) learn more with “tough” teachers. Variance depended on students’ individual performance levels and on the overall performance level of their classrooms. The study also revealed that the teachers who are tough graders are significantly more likely to hold Master’s degrees. The advantage of holding higher standards is that the students are then motivated to working harder. In the case of weaker students, there is also the possibility that their parents may devote more attention to helping with schoolwork when grades suggest that there is such a need (David N. Figlio, professor of economics at the University of Florida and a research associate of the National Bureau of Economic Research and Maurice E. Lucas director of research and assessment for the school board of Alachua County, Florida, “The Gentleman’s A,” Hoover Institution, www.Hover.org).

Should all students in the class be successful? Yes, in that each individual achieves at an appropriate level for him or herself, but not everyone should receive the blue ribbon grade of excellence. Everyone has value, but not everyone has the same talent or work ethic. If we award credit for a level of performance, then that level should have been achieved. In our present self-esteem society, we want everyone to succeed and receive the highest awards, even if it rewards mediocre work. That is like giving a large number of 4H participants a blue ribbon at a state fair. The rationale behind group awards, or the Danish method used by some 4H organizations,

is that it allegedly “provides recognition for the maximum number of 4-H members... in recognition of a basic need of all young people and that public recognition for achievement helps fulfill this basic need” (Danish or Group Method of Judging, 4h.wsu.edu/projects/danishsys.htm). One club newsletter to children advertised: “In most 4-H shows and classes, everyone can get a blue award” (Award Ribbons, www.4h.uiuc.edu/staff/newkids/letter4.pdf). A participation ribbon might be in order, but is the highest award meaningful if they are distributed to most of the entrants? This observation is not meant to belittle the fine 4H program, which is of tremendous benefit to young people, but to illustrate the prevalence of award inflation.

Real competition for grades is healthy

Those who favor easy rewards may have good intentions, such as reducing tension and stress. Yet, we could submit that healthy competition is good, and that a degree of stress is beneficial. Professor Mansfield of Harvard has maintained: “Grade inflation has resulted from the emphasis in American education on the notion of self-esteem. According to that therapeutic notion, the purpose of education is to make students feel capable and empowered. So to grade them, or to grade them strictly, is cruel and dehumanizing. Grading creates stress. It encourages competition rather than harmony. It is judgmental.” (Harvey Mansfield, “Grade Inflation: It’s Time to Face the Facts.”

The Chronicle of Higher Education, April 6, 2001). Is upfront honest evaluation helpful or harmful?

True, stress over grades can have unsettling consequences. Some youngsters may experience headaches, stomach pain and test time jitters. Yet, stress has an upside. Concern about grades and performance releases adrenaline and other hormones that improve performance. More blood flows to the brain and enhances our ability to do our best. "Your goal shouldn't be to get rid of stress," contends Esther Sternberg, a researcher at the National Institute of Health and author of *The Balance Within: The Science Connecting Health and Emotions*. Rather, she says, "You should aim for the appropriate stress response" (Deborah Kotz, "Relax! Stress, if Managed, Can Be Good for You," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 16, 2008). Stress response should be appropriate for individual situations. Students need to learn to accept and control stress and this begins with attitude, learning to confront challenges (coping strategies) and having realistic expectations (*Stress of Students: Healthful stress management strategies*, www.uark.edu/~caps/Stress). Having survived, even thrived, in college yourself, you might have useful insights or tips to offer your students. I personally found that as a DMLC student, if I studied more and worked harder, my comfort level before major tests was greater because I felt more confident. Keeping up on class assignments and periodically reviewing notes to avoid last minute cramming

had the same effect. These strategies not only help reduce the stress and improve the grades, they make education a learning experience. Real achievement brings about real self-esteem.

Competition helps bring out the best in our students. Witness the benefits of spelling bees, debate teams, science fairs, track meets, athletic team competitions, band chair positions, making the choir... We encourage Christians to make the best of their God given abilities and to develop disciplined skills in various areas of proficiency so that they might better serve the Lord throughout their lives.

There is a danger of being understressed all the time so that a person cannot cope when a real crisis occurs in the outside world. A lack of challenge induces boredom and ultimately low energy and a lack of self-esteem, which, ironically, is what some modern educators hope to alleviate by inflated grading and reduced test taking.

Prepare students for the real world

Once graduates enter the job market, they may discover fierce competition. Students entering the marketplace will find not only competition for jobs, but also for wages, for advancement within the workplace and for business. There can be consequences of being too laid back. Applications for drivers' licenses may be turned down and tests required to be retaken. Poor production may mean the loss of a job. Complacent or careless handling of a business in a com-

petitive market could lead to profit losses or bankruptcy. We do not live in a purely socialistic society where we can complacently expect the government to solve all our problems in spite of our weaknesses. A classroom without personal accountability for performance fosters mediocrity the same way. Some students will not work very hard if they know their chance of getting an A anyway is good, or at least they can count on mustering a soft B. In that milieu, gifted students can just cruise along without effort for the easy A or soft B. No wonder so many high school and college students work just about full time. Does grade inflation motivate students to do their very best and become academic achievers? An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* states, "Nineteen percent of full-time freshman in college say they spend only 1 to 5 hours per week preparing for classes. Seniors who answered the same survey reported studying even less than freshman..." ("The Initiative to End Grade Inflation," endgradeinflation.org). That is a very sad situation!

Rewarding the truly studious and the exceptional student increases output. The Synod Ad Hoc Committee recommended to the District Conventions in 2008 "that we foster excellence by encouraging an environment where a significant percentage of each class at Martin Luther College is vying for scholarships tied to academic merit, reminding students that grades matter." The rationale given is that "this would encourage competition" as students strive for the rewards (Ad Hoc

Commission, Preliminary Report and Recommendations, 2008, wels.net). This same approach is advocated for recruitment purposes at our Lutheran high schools so that we garner the best students for entrance to Martin Luther College. In the end the kingdom work of the church benefits from this approach.

Integrity and reporting honestly

Is inflation of grades a matter of dishonesty? To a degree it is, even if everyone seems to be doing it. Jay A. Halfond, Dean of Boston University's Metropolitan College, contends: "Grading is about fundamental fairness. Not everyone performs exceptionally well and should not be deceived into thinking they have. Nobody's achievements should be cheapened by a leveling of grades" (Jay A. Halfond, "Grade Inflation Is Not A Victimless Crime," *Christian Science Monitor*, csmonitor.com).

Social promotion might well be considered as avoiding responsibility. Giving passing grades when passing grades are not really reflective of a child's ability to do the work is unconscionable. Promoting those who lack the skills or the standards required for moving to more difficult material merely shunts them off to a more difficult situation later on. Pat Vallas, CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, maintains: "When you socially promote, you not only hurt the children who are not meeting minimum standards by promoting them to another grade level

where they really can't do the work, but you are also hurting the children who are at grade level or above, because you are basically putting those children in a classroom where the teacher is forced to lower his or her standards. So the net effect is the child who is behind never gets caught up, and the child who is at grade level or above suffers." Chicago made some changes. Summer school is now mandatory for third, sixth, eighth and ninth graders, who scored two years below grade level on national norm tests ("Social Promotion," Online Newshour www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education/jan-june99/retention). Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley criticized teachers who adhered to the philosophy "just get 'em ahead, who cares, get 'em in high school, maybe they'll drop out; get 'em out of the system." He stated flatly: "No more social promotions" in Chicago schools. ("Higher Learning," Online Newshour, www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education/july-dec97/schools). In the long run, students will be better served and most parents will appreciate the upfront honesty of such a policy.

What about students with learning disabilities (LD)? Most schools, if not all schools, use the accommodation/modification approach. Government requirements have set forth an inclusion model and since July 1, 1998, students with disabilities are to be included in statewide assessments which create a general presumption that students with disabilities will not only "participate" in the general curriculum to the maximum extent possible, but will also be

held to standards of accountability. All children, including children with disabilities, must demonstrate mastery in a given area of the general curriculum before allowing them to progress to the next level or grade in that area. That means the teacher may make appropriate changes to help these children learn, but may not fundamentally alter or lower the standard or expectation of the course, standard or test (Dean B. Eggert, "Grading Students with Educational Disabilities," <http://www.bridges4kids.org>).

To this end Special Education teachers are added to faculties to make accommodations and modifications for LD students. Those thus trained devise effective teaching strategies that will help LD students be successful in a regular classroom. These teachers adjust by using alternative teaching strategies, which accommodate the different kinds of intelligences and learning styles. Annette Wulff, a Special Education teacher who taught a number of years in the New Ulm public schools at the secondary level, has seen a number of her "disabled" students respond so successfully to modified strategies that they are then able to go on and do well in college, some even achieving a place on the honor roll (Annette Wulff, awulff@newulmtel.net). Otherwise, those "failing students," who are just moved along, never reach their full potential. What a difference in the lives of these students because their disabilities were not covered over with soft grades and/or social promotion!

Look in the mirror

No doubt the vast majority of the WELS “everyday” teachers try to be fair-minded, are dedicated and committed to doing the best they can for each of their students. Anyone familiar with WELS teachers from kindergarten through our college and seminary can attest to their character and sincere devotion to their calling. Yet, it behooves us to review the nationwide problem of grade inflation that seems to entrap us in the web as well. The grade inflation phenomenon has flooded the country and we also are challenged to make adjustments as necessary. A few in the public area have come forth to meet the challenge of grade inflation.

University of Colorado president Hank Brown wanted to take on grade inflation by disclosing class rank or grade-point-average percentiles on student transcripts. Brown proposed to regents that the university change transcripts to give potential employers or graduate schools a clearer picture of student achievement (“Brown Assails Grade Inflation,” *Denver Post*, 08/31/2006). The average class grade listed on the transcript would make the report more meaningful. Standardized tests, whatever their flaws might be, are an increasingly crucial tool in determining academic abilities (“Editorial: Summer School Raises Grade-inflation Issue,” *Rochester Post-Bulletin*, June 6, 2008).

Actually, any kind of diagnostic information besides grades would be helpful to parents with children in elementary and high schools. The inability to com-

mit to an “honest” grading policy reduces the efficiency of making level assignments for students who transfer or graduate. Deception, even though well intended, causes confusion. Students who do not perform up to basic levels should be so informed. It’s like saving a drowning kid. The sooner you get to him the better. Teachers who give most students A’s and B’s only defeat the purpose of grades to motivate students to improve and work up to their abilities or to help parents and employers to distinguish actual abilities and achievement. If kids are in danger of falling short, they and their parents shouldn’t be led down a primrose path with inflated report cards. And if teachers are challenged by students and/or parents, administrators need to back up teachers who give out realistic grades.

Everyone wants to be liked, and our Christian teachers are no exception. It can be all too easy to succumb to pressure to dole out high grades. Such pressure may come from diplomatic administrators, easy going faculty members, assertive parents, or outspoken students, but our responsibility as professional Christian teachers must be paramount. From top to bottom, we need to put our standards of actual grades of achievement first. Our students may be great kids, even winners, but they can’t all be valedictorians. ❧

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Put down your busy life--
Take a moment--
Reflect on the *Christchild* Gift you have received,
Reflect on those you serve,
Reflect on your family and friends,
Reflect on the World that needs the Christmas news,
Then go to the manger and worship the King.

May this be a season of joy, worship, and reflection.

The editors of TLE and the Faculty of Martin Luther College