

John W. Oberdeck

## The Critical Role of Education in a Congregation's Mission: Congregation and Family Together

SOMETHING ABOUT EDUCATION in our congregations needs to change. At least, that's the implication of the theme of this edition. But what needs to change? And why should it be transformed? Other articles in this issues no doubt are tackling the why and what questions. I want to address the "Who" question. Who needs to change in the critical role of education in a congregation's mission?

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REV. DR. JOHN W. OBERDECK IS  
PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AND  
DIRECTOR FOR LAY MINISTRY,  
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY WISCONSIN.  
JOHN.OBERDECK@HOTMAIL.COM

Education is critical to a congregation's mission; otherwise we would not bother with that tricky business we call catechesis. But to whom does the responsibility primarily belong? This is not an easy question to answer. Tension exists, and has existed for some time, over the locus of Christian education. Is the responsibility rooted in the home or the parish? The dining room or the classroom? The priesthood of all believers or the office of the public ministry?

Of course, this is a false dichotomy, and the obligation is a shared one. Nevertheless, questions remain. Is the congregation the center for Christian education supported by the family? Or is Christian education located in the family and supported by the

congregation? Which is primary and which is secondary? As congregational education is transformed, how are these responsibilities to be shared? What needs to change, and what needs to stay the same?

Navigating through transformational times is never easy for those called to serve God's people in his church. That's why I look for guidance to those who have traversed similar rough seas before us. In this article I want to share with you three principles to guide us through transformational times. But before I do, I want to take us back to a time even more transitional and tension-filled than our own—the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

### Who is Going to Do It?

IN 1524 LUTHER WROTE, "Today we are living in a different world, and things are being done differently" (Luther, "To the Councilmen of All cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," 370). I suspect that in 1524 when Luther wrote these words, he was understating the case. The development of moveable type was transforming communication, and the challenge to the Roman Catholic Church brought forward by the Reformation was transforming the world. As pertinent as they were in his own day, Luther's words are just as appropriate today, and all the more so when we realize the source of the quote comes from a treatise on the subject of education—specifically who should be doing it!

### It Is the Family's Responsibility

I ASSUME that most who read this article are familiar with the thesis of Ben Freudenburg in his book, *The Family Friendly Church*.

Parents are the primary Christian educators in the church, and the family is the God-ordained institution for faith-building in children and youth and for the passing of faith from one generation to the next. (Freudenburg 21).

A number of Bible passages come immediately to mind in support of parental responsibility for instruction in the faith.

"And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children..." (Deuteronomy 6:6–7 ESV). The word translated "teach diligently" (למד) in Hebrew comes from a word describing the sharpening of swords and arrows, which gives us a sense of the seriousness with which education is to be done. Not only should there be an edge to education, but the learning experience should leave a mark. A second root of the word means "repeat" and several Bible translations (Jerusalem, New English) use this root in translation (Harris 943). Regardless of which root we choose, education by impression through sharp teaching or education through rote repetition is the responsibility of parents.

Many other Scripture passages can be cited. The responsibility of one generation for the next is amply attested to in the Psalms. "He [God] established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children . . ." (Psalm 78:5–6 ESV). Ephesians 6:4 (ESV) states, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

In *The Large Catechism*, we find Luther, after spending many paragraphs on the responsibility of children toward parents, addressing the responsibility of parents toward their children.

Therefore let all people know that it is their chief duty—at the risk of losing divine grace—first to bring up their children in the fear and knowledge of God, and, then, if they are so gifted, also to have them engage in formal study and learn so that they may be of service wherever they are needed (Luther, *Large Catechism* 410:174).

The words spoken to sponsors in the Baptismal Service in *Lutheran Service Book* provide a more subtle description of the relationship between church and home.

After the sponsors have accepted their charge to assist in bringing up the child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, the pastor responds, "God enable you both to will and to do this faithful and loving work and with His grace fulfill what we are unable to do" (*Lutheran Service Book* 269). What is the congregation unable to do? The congregation can't tuck the child into bed at night with bedtime prayers, establish the practice of family devotions, or faithfully bring the child for worship. The congregation can encourage, exhort, and urge, but the parents and/or extended family must do what the congregation is unable to do.

*The Small Catechism* may also be enlisted in support of the role of the family, inasmuch as the headings of each chief part begin with "As the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household" (Luther, *The Small Catechism with Explanation* 11). However, Luther actually has his foot on both bases. The quote above is from the German edition, while the Latin edition of 1529 couches the introduction in terms of schoolteachers and students (Luther, *The Small Catechism*, 351, note 24). It appears that Luther did not want to leave either the home or the school (church) out of the all-encompassing task of guiding the next generation into the living faith received in baptism.

### **It is the Community's Responsibility**

BEFORE PASSING THE RESPONSIBILITY for Christian nurture and education solely to the family, there is a word of caution, however, and it comes from none other than Luther. In his 1524 essay, "To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany that they Establish Christian Schools," Luther doesn't deny parental responsibility, but he does establish parental shortcomings that make reliance on the family alone an inadequate strategy for Christian education.

Luther begins his argument by pointing out that the largely ineffective monastery schools are closed in evangelical territories, and many parents are simply sending their

children into the workplace rather than seeing to their education. While one might think, Luther argues, that the princes ought to be concerned and remedy the situation, the reality is that they are more interested in "sleigh riding" than attending to the educational needs of their people. Since society absolutely must have an educated people for the clergy and for the professions, someone must provide adequate schools. Luther's answer is for the city councils to establish schools for their communities.

In case the councils respond by saying the parents ought to provide the education, Luther presents three reasons why that's a poor solution.

In the first place, there are some who lack the goodness and decency to do it, even if they had the ability. Instead, like the ostrich [Job 39:14–16], they deal cruelly with their young. They are content to have laid the eggs and brought children into the world; beyond this they will do nothing more. . . .

In the second place, the great majority of parents unfortunately are wholly unfitted for this task. They do not know how children should be brought up and taught, for they themselves have learned nothing but how to care for their bellies. It takes extraordinary people to bring children up right and teach them well.

In the third place, even if parents had the ability and desire to do it themselves, they have neither the time nor the opportunity for it, what with their other duties and the care of the household . . . (Luther, "To the Councilmen of All cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" 354–355).

Before going further, there are some limitations on how we can apply the three areas of concern expressed by Luther. First, Luther is addressing education in the liberal arts, not just the catechizing of the young; it's the whole education package

that Luther is talking about. Second, when Luther puts education of the young into the hands of the community, he is assuming a Christian community that openly supports Christian values and Christian teaching. Such an assumption is not tenable today. (I wonder what Luther would think of the contemporary educational scene in which any vestiges of religion are suppressed in the public square?) Third, when Luther describes the challenges presented by parents, he is describing the community as a whole, not the circumstances found within a given Christian congregation.

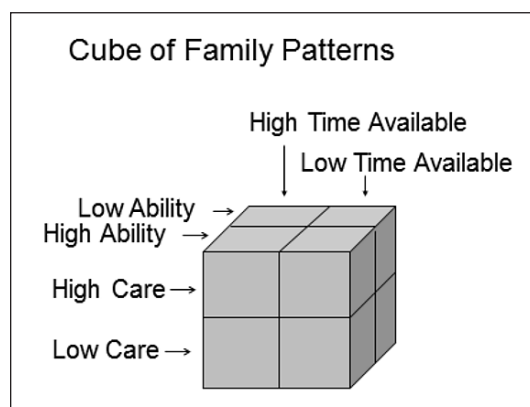
Though these limitations present sizable hurdles for application today, I'm going to jump them anyway and suggest that the three concerns expressed by Luther can guide how we transform the educational mission of congregation in our own day.

### Understanding Family is Essential for Transformation

THINK about these three concerns of Luther as if each is a bipolar category. The first deals with care. How much does a given family unit care about faith? How committed are they? We can on the one hand imagine with some ease families that show up periodically or not at all, except for Christmas and Easter. On the other hand, we know of families who have devotions, attend every Sunday, and are fully engaged in the life and ministry of the congregation. The second concern deals with ability. How well is the family unit equipped to be the primary education provider for the child? Have parents absorbed for themselves an understanding of what it means to be justified by grace through faith? Can they apply Law and Gospel in ways that divide them rightly? Some households will be able, while others won't. The third category is time and opportunity. Many family units today are struggling as they attempt to balance job responsibilities in a struggling economy, childcare needs, and the added responsibilities if it is a single parent home. Other families do have time and opportunity to be a center for feeding the growing faith

of children in the home. In each bipolar category we can imagine families all along the continuum, from high to low.

Now let's consider what it would mean if we take care, ability and time and think about them three dimensionally—crossing the bipolar categories by height, length and depth, thereby creating a "cube" of family patterns. We then arrive at eight different possible family patterns. [See illustration below] Let's take a look at those patterns, starting with the four that form the upper story.



### Families that Care

*High Care – High Ability – High Time* My immediate reaction to this pattern is that it's the pastors' and teachers' families in the congregation. The commitment is present, the skills are all there, and while the schedules can be quite hectic, time will be taken. There are lay families in our congregations who have the same pattern, and called workers give thanks when they encounter these faithful families. I call these "Foundational Families."

*High Care – High Ability – Low Time* Imagine the level of concern that exists when the ultimate importance of faith is known, and there is knowledge to be shared, but never any time to do it. The transformation needed for this family involves priorities and scheduling. Are there resources available that can help relieve the workload? Or, is it possible to say "No" to time-consuming habits? These are the "Busy-Busy" families.

*High Care – Low Ability – Low Time* Here, we have not only the challenge of schedules, but also the challenge of little knowledge of the faith or of Scripture. This is the home that is looking for maximum support from the congregation's education ministries. The care is there and parents are looking for assistance. Parents' schedules may prohibit them from active involvement themselves, but they want it for their children. A transformational education program will attempt to address the parents' needs as well as the children's for these "Frustrated Families."

*High Care – Low Ability – High Time* I suspect that families that care and have time but don't have the background in the faith are a relatively small group. But they do exist. Because they care and have the time, they can become the bridges between learning in the home and learning at church. When parents ask if they can attend confirmation with their child, I know that I have come across a "Sponge Family" that's ready to soak up the Good News.

A careful reflection on the cube of family patterns reveals that the upper story has a distinct advantage over the lower story. All four patterns in the upper story care about faith in Jesus Christ, whereas *Low Care* is the common denominator for the lower story. As a result, any consideration of transforming Christian education on the congregation level will at some point need to address the circumstances of families that could not care less about the Christian faith and who are living in a culture that increasingly agrees with them. These are families that we just don't see. We are not on their radar screen.

### **Families that Do not Care**

*Low Care – High Ability – High Time* Of all the family patterns, this is one that causes me the greatest unease. Do such families exist? Are there homes in which the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been present, but is now slipping away through every nook and cranny? I'm afraid that there are. Only consider the number of older adults in our congregations who are daily praying for their adult children

to return to the faith of their childhood for the sake of their grandchildren. This is a generation who think they know the story and have the time to invest, but do not value faith. "Falling Families" would make a good name for this category.

*Low Care – Low Ability – High Time* This pattern matches much of the description of the Falling Family, except for adding that there is no real knowledge of the Gospel. Perhaps a good way to characterize this pattern is the "Secular Family." They are engaged in many of the active pursuits of life in North America and have resources to spend, and so they do—on themselves. I know this sounds judgmental and harsh. It is, and that is part of the challenge the church has in reaching out to the disaffiliated.

*Low Care – Low Ability – Low Time* What can one say? "Strike three, you're out?" This pattern describes the "Lost Family" that not only doesn't know or care, but also doesn't have time in its stressed-out existence to find out or respond. Perhaps this pattern links most closely to Luther's comments about general education in the third decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Somebody—the city councils—had better intervene because the family can't do it, won't do it, and doesn't know what to do anyway.

*Low Care – High Ability – Low Time* By now this practice of crossing bipolar categories in order to create two- or three-dimensional typologies has grown pretty thin. Nevertheless, for the sake of closure, something should be said about the pattern that I refer to as the "Agnostic Family." The faith is known, perhaps even studied at a high level, but in their eyes, the faith fails to meet their needs. The seed of the Gospel has fallen on rocky soil, and the weeds have choked it out.

A lot has been assumed in the construction of these eight family patterns. I have simply, and perhaps naively, trusted in Luther's observation of his world in 1524. Would the constructs of care, ability and time withstand the rigor of research analysis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Without actually doing the research, the best I can



say is that the patterns have a high degree of “face validity” with significant support from personal experience.

### **On a Limb with Martin Luther**

WITH THESE CAVEATS in place, let me share guiding principles for transforming congregational education. The first three are drawn from my analysis of family patterns and focus on the irreplaceable role of families.

Nothing will be transformed in congregational education without the participation of the congregation’s families. Families are that important! And, let’s use as broad a definition of family as we can. This is about adults as much as it is about children.

Transforming congregational education will happen within a context where the family itself is under transformation. The cultural pressure on families is enormous. The target for transforming Christian education within families centers on care. Do families care about Christian education, or don’t they? We bring the Gospel to families that may be losing it!

The next three guiding principles for transforming congregational education recognize that the congregation itself is under transformation and are intended for leaders.

Leadership in the congregation will be transformational for Christian education when it doesn’t come across as judgmental toward family deficits. Most families have some awareness of their shortcomings. Encouragement and hope for the family journey is the atmosphere to create.

Transformational leadership will nevertheless recognize the pressures on families today and consciously refrain from programming that further erodes family cohesion.

Transformational leadership in the congregation will firmly ground itself in the message of God’s grace for Jesus’ sake; there is forgiveness for family failure to announce, and there is the promise of renewed life in Jesus Christ to proclaim.

To summarize, transforming congregational education is not an option, it is a necessity. Accomplishing transformation is a shared responsibility between congregations and families. To succeed, pastors and professional church workers will benefit from taking into account the family patterns of the families they are called to serve.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”  
Romans 12:2.

### **Resources**

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