

Christian Education Practices and Congregational Characteristics

by Dr. Mark Blanke

Introduction

This research project of LCMS churches is built upon previous research by Search Institute. In 1990 Search Institute conducted the most thorough study on Christian education ever completed. It involved six different Protestant denominations and 12,000 respondents. The study sought to determine if correlations existed between educational practice and indicators of faith maturity in congregational members.

The authors were careful to say that they weren't "measuring faith" but were looking at outward manifestations of mature faith. They identified eight somewhat objective indicators for individuals (such as "serves humanity consistently and passionately through acts of love and justice") and attempted to see if these characteristics and behavior correlated with particular aspects of church life and ministry.

The study (Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations) found that effective educational practices did indeed correlate with the presence of these indices of faith maturity. In fact, only two biographical factors had a strong predictive relationship with faith maturity in youth – family religiousness and involvement in Christian education. For adults, there were also just two factors that had a strong relationship with faith maturity – church involvement and Christian education involvement.

Just going to Christian educational experiences alone wasn't a strong predictor of the presence of these faith indices. The research found that the experiences had to be well designed and delivered for them to have an effect. The study identified 17 characteristics of "effective" education of adults and 25 for education of children. When these characteristics were present, there was a positive correlation between educational participation and the presence of faith indices.

With this seminal study in mind, the IRE decided that it would be worthwhile to study whether educational practices correlated with any specific congregational characteristics. One could logically assume that, if members within a congregation are demonstrating more indices that are connected with faith maturity, that the cumulative effect would likely influence the overall characteristics of those congregations. The Practices/Characteristics study set out to determine if those assumptions were valid.

The three-year-study was a joint effort by the Institute for Religious Education (IRE), The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) Research Services, and the LCMS Office of National Mission (ONM). Data was gathered from a representative sample of the LCMS using filters applied by Research Services. Six hundred and fifty congregations were randomly selected and 212 valid responses were received (32% response rate), or 3.5% of the 6,049 LCMS congregations. We can be 95% confident that the results in the analysis are valid for LCMS congregations with at least one pastor and at least one other called staff person, with a margin of error of +/-6.6%. Congregations with a pastoral vacancy were less likely to respond to the survey, so the sample didn't accurately represent congregations with pastoral vacancies.

The eight congregational education practices that we decided to study (which were also represented in the Effective Christian Education study as "effective practices") were:

- Teacher training – the quality of teachers and their level of training

- Goals and structure – objectives and goal-oriented structuring of the classroom
- Student centered – engaging students’ lives and learning styles
- Program evaluations – regularly assessing the education program and classes
- Involvement expectations – the congregation’s expectations for its members to participate in Christian education
- Pastoral support – the pastor’s visible support of Christian education
- Generational opportunities – planned opportunities for inter-generational interactions
- Service projects – service projects as an intentional component of programming

These eight practices were determined to be characteristics of effective educational practices that correlated with indices of faith maturity.

The LCMS completed a study in 1994 that was intended to build off of the Effective Christian Education (ECE) study. It was completed by some of the key researchers from Search and was targeted just at congregations of the LCMS. The “Congregations at Crossroads” study sought to assess what congregations were doing to “promote a strong and dynamic faith among youth and adults.” This study found that LCMS congregations were somewhat deficient in their educational efforts but that certain effective educational practices (student-centered learning in particular) “have a significant impact on faith” and the study concluded that there should be an increased focus within the LCMS for “revitalizing Christian education.”

Where the ECE study showed how practices an individual undertook correlated with the presence of more faith indices, the Crossroads study noted how congregational practices related to Christian educational practices also influenced the presence of faith indices. If individuals were influenced for the better by effective educational practices carried out by congregations, a logical assumption could be made that the presence of more individuals who are demonstrating faith maturity would ultimately influence the characteristics of those congregations that implement effective educational practices. The IRE study sought to determine if educational practices correlated with any specific congregational characteristics. They did.

Findings

Congregations that self-reported being "heathy" had specific characteristics that were identified in the survey. These characteristics had "strong", "significant" or "weak" statistical correlation with perception of health. *(For those who don't regularly do statistical analysis, the lower the p-value the greater the significance. Many studies use a p-value of .05 as showing correlative significance. A .01 level or lower shows more correlation and .001 level shows a very high correlation - meaning that the correlation is very likely related to the variable being studied. The Pearson correlate was used to test the variables against the hypothesis. "Healthy and vital" were terms that were chosen to identify positive congregational characteristics. These characteristics included:*

Strongest – (.001 level)

- Lack congregational conflict
- Has a clear vision
- Growing community
- Growing congregation (cross-correlates with growing community)

Adult participation rates in Christian Education

Significant – (.01 level)

Educated congregation

Youth participation raw numbers in Christian Education

Weaker but still significant – (.05 level)

Higher average giving per member

Religious community

Higher educated community

Once these characteristics of a "healthy church" were identified, they were compared to the presence of effective educational practices to see if the practices correlated with the "healthy characteristics." These are the findings that emerged from the analysis –

1. It was determined that there is a high correlation among the educational indices. That is, if a congregation was implementing several of the effective educational practices, they were likely implementing others. The converse also is true – if a congregation wasn't prioritizing effective educational practices, it was likely that they weren't engaging in any.
2. Only 25% of the reporting congregations indicated that they were growing, but 7 out of the 8 educational practices correlated with those that were growing. Goals and structure, involvement expectations, pastoral support for education, service projects, generational opportunities, student-centered teaching, and teacher training all correlated with growing congregations.
3. Participation of children in educational opportunities correlated positively with having goals and structure in educational programming.
4. Participation of youth in educational opportunities correlated positively with goals and structure, involvement expectations, and service projects.
5. Participation of adults in congregational educational opportunities correlated positively with teacher training and conveying involvement expectations.
6. Presence of seven of the eight effective educational practices correlated with a member of the staff (pastor, DCE...) having taken college courses or continuing education that specifically focused on Christian education. That means that having staff who have had specific preparation to lead Christian educational experiences correlates with effective practices being implemented in that congregation.
7. Having a staff person who had specific responsibilities in Christian education correlated with congregations that implemented four of the eight effective practices – program evaluations, student centered, service projects, and goals and structure.
8. Congregations that exhibit a high amount of intentionality in Christian education (high scores in multiple indices) are more likely to report being healthy.
9. Healthy and vital congregations also have a high rate of adult members regularly participating in Christian education. Setting high expectations for involvement in educational programming is shown to relate to higher adult attendance.

Summary

Any church where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered rightly should be considered “healthy,” but there are also characteristics that every congregation should work towards achieving that are God-pleasing and consistent with biblical and Confessional directives that have guided God’s church for millennia. Lack of conflict, member giving, numerical growth in membership, and other “healthy” characteristics enhance a congregation’s ability to serve God’s people and should be a priority for those in leadership.

Scripture is clear, the people of God should be devoted to study of His Word (II Timothy 3:14-17, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Titus 2, Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 2:42.) The science also is clear – there are some methods to teaching that yield more benefits to the learner than others. This data show that those methods, when applied effectively in a congregation, relate to significant benefits in all areas of congregational life.

With these things in mind, we present the following recommendations:

- 1) Churches should consider enhancing their parish educational ministries (by implementing effective methodologies) as a component of enhancing their overall health and vitality.
- 2) Where possible, congregations should bring in staff who have received training in implementing effective parish educational methodologies.
- 3) In the vast majority of our parishes, the pastor is the leader of the parish educational ministries. For this reason, it is essential that our pastors have opportunities to learn (either during their college and seminary training or as a continuing educational experience) about how to implement effective educational practices. Knowledge of theology does not necessarily correlate with an ability to convey that knowledge to others nor does it imbue a person with an ability to plan and organize effective educational ministries. Mastery of effective educational theory and practices is the key to competency in teaching and effective educational planning.
- 4) When district and synodical leadership are considering issues related to congregational revitalization, it is essential that an assessment be made of the status of the church’s educational efforts and that recommendations are provided for how to enhance those efforts.
- 5) District and synodical plans should include ways to better inform our congregations of the importance of effective educational practices, and should help to develop resources as needed.