

WELS Early Childhood Outreach: An Investigation of Program Strategies

by

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Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in Education

Graduate Studies

Martin Luther College

New Ulm, MN

May 2017

Signature Page

Date:

This thesis paper has been examined and approved.

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Abstract

In recent years, the early childhood ministry (ECM) in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) has seen great growth with outreach being one of the similar broad program goals of an early childhood learning center (ECLC) but recent data suggests that few ECLCs are meeting it. This study used the markers of evidence of the outreach goal to identify and investigate three baseline ECLCs and the top three ECLCs in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in order to identify strategies used in the top ECLCs that contributed toward the attainment of the outreach goal to connect children and parents to Jesus and the associated church. The investigation analyzed an interview, observation, and document report from each site. The researcher found that the personal connections and Gospel invitations by the director and/or teachers are the keys to communicating the Gospel in ways that connect the children and parents to Jesus and the associated church. Through these findings, congregations and ECLCs will have information to guide them in establishing a stronger connection between the parents/caregivers of the children that attend their ECLC. This investigation will also allow others to see if these strategies apply more broadly to a larger population because no one strategy will work for every case.

Keywords: early childhood ministry, outreach, strategies

Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to thank my loving God and Savior, for giving me the opportunity and ability to write this thesis. Without him, I can do nothing. “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6; New International Version, 2011).

Secondly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my graduate advisor, Dr. John Meyer, for his continuous support, motivation, patience, and immense knowledge. His guidance helped me in all the time of research and writing of this thesis, and my entire graduate career. I could not have imagined having a better advisor and mentor. I would also like to thank the rest of my thesis committee for their support throughout the years.

My sincere thanks also to the early childhood directors and staff that allowed me to come onto their campuses and conduct my research. Each one was gracious, supportive, and excited to share their information with me with the higher purpose of benefiting others through my work.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my friends and family, especially my parents, for supporting me throughout writing this thesis and in my life in general with encouraging words and prayers. Their love and encouragement has motivated me to achievements beyond my own expectations.

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Chapter I: Introduction

An early childhood ministry (ECM) is not just mere babysitting or watered-down elementary school education but the nurturing of children ages six weeks to eight years old in a pedagogically sound way, emotionally, physically, cognitively, and spiritually. In recent years the ministry has seen great growth in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). In 2010, early childhood ministries were already surpassing Lutheran elementary schools (Wietzke, 2010). “More WELS congregations are opening early childhood centers or expanding their existing schools to reach young families. The 2012 school year ended with 403 WELS early childhood ministries serving nearly 11,000 children and their families” (Wietzke, 2012). The Lord has seen fit to bless this growing ministry. Gauger (2008) wrote about the blessings of this growing ministry.

It might be one of the synod’s best-kept secrets: WELS operates more early childhood centers and preschools than Lutheran elementary schools. And for good reason, according to Martin Luther College Early Childhood Professor Cheryl Loomis - “This is a great opportunity to minister to families, to do outreach in the community, and to educate the whole child.” (p.22)

No matter what curriculum the early childhood learning centers (ECLC) choose to use, they have similar broad program goals. Outreach is an important program goal of ECLCs. Many of the ECLCs “have been formed to intentionally reach out to their community with the Gospel” (Holman, 2007, p. 1). WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools (2001) stated that the ECLC’s purpose is driven by the great commission: “The mission of the church is embedded in the programs and activities that each Christian congregation carries out” (WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools, 2001, p. 1). The

document goes on to report that WELS congregations believe an ECLC “is a significant and integral thrust of a congregation’s ministry of outreach and nurture” and helps the congregation “carry out its mission” (p. 2). It is clear that the WELS believes that connecting children and parents to Jesus and the local congregation is an important reason that churches begin an ECLC. The Commission on Lutheran Schools (2001) goes on to state the following:

As parents enroll their children in an early childhood ministry, the congregation can offer opportunities for worship, personal contact, and the invitation to become part of a Christian congregation that brings people into the arms of Jesus. Doors are opened to families with baptized and unbaptized children. The congregation gains the opportunity to present the message of salvation and to lead parents and children to receive the blessings of Christ through baptism. They can provide spiritual nurture opportunities so that each believer can grow in his/her faith. (p. 2)

Though outreach is an important goal, recent data suggests that few ECLCs are meeting it. “In the 2010-2011 school year, 320 children were baptized and 348 adults were confirmed after involvement with a WELS early childhood program” (Commission on Lutheran Schools, n.d.). Despite these encouraging statistics, the above numbers represent only a fraction of the potential. The child baptisms represent about 3% of enrolled young children. Assuming two-parent households, the adult confirmations represent 1% of all households. Current records do not permit calculations of child baptisms compared to unbaptized children or adult confirmations compared to

unconfirmed adults. Given the strong emphasis on mission outreach, however, the ratios are smaller than reasonably anticipated.

Problem Statement

Despite the disparity between the ECLC's outreach goal and the struggles in achieving it, no empirical research has yet been conducted on how best to connect children and parents of the ECLC to Jesus and the associated church.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify strategies used in ECLCs that contribute toward the attainment of the outreach goal to connect children and parents to Jesus and the associated church. This study provides congregations and ECLCs information to establish stronger connections between the church and ECLC children and caregivers. One research goal is to help congregations communicate more efficiently with parents/caregivers to build a stronger bond and trust. Another research goal is to identify effective practices for outreach. It is worth further investigation to see if these apply more broadly to a larger population because no one strategy will work for every case.

Another reason this study is important and focused on the outreach goal is because of the huge impact this goal has on the future generation of believers. "God gives parents the responsibility of building on the foundation of faith the Holy Spirit creates in their children's hearts at baptism" (Boggs, 2005, p. 10). While the Holy Spirit is the only one who can grow faith in a person's heart and knows who has faith, in his Word we find examples of how important the continuation of studying his Word is on a long-term basis, beginning with early childhood. Proverbs 22:6 (New International Version, 2011) states, "start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not

turn from it.” The Apostle Paul wrote of the training of Timothy from a young age in Second Timothy.

I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.... and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:5 & 3:15, NIV, 2011)

From these passages “we see how the godly examples of faithful parents and grandparents can bring eternal blessings to children and children’s children” (Schuetze, 2000, p. 113).

The Parable of the Sower describes a farmer who goes out to sow his seeds on different types of soil. Called workers do not want the children and parents to be like the seed that fell on rocky ground as “someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time” (Matthew 13:20, 21a, New International Version, 2011). Although the Holy Spirit can work in any situation, the Parable of the Sower points to the importance of a God-fearing home when raising a child. Children and families are only part of the ECLC for a few years at best before moving on to other schools or programs. Unless the caregivers of the children support and continue the spiritual aspects of the ECLC curriculum, the long-lasting impact is uncertain. Rather, the Lutheran ECLC seeks to water and feed the gospel seed which God plants. Then, with the Lord’s blessing, children and parents will grow roots in the Word over time and remain in it throughout their lives.

Research Question

What policies or procedures are instrumental in assisting the ECLC to achieve its outreach goal to connect parents and children to Jesus and the associated church?

Definition of Terms

BIC. Bible instruction class.

EC. Early childhood.

ECLC. Early childhood learning center.

ECM. Early childhood ministry/ies.

Evidence/Markers. Signs determined by the researcher that indicate the outreach goal is being achieved: 1) families from EC attend BIC classes, 2) families added by adult baptism, 3) families added by adult confirmation, 4) child baptisms as a result of the EC, 5) children who transition to kindergarten in congregation's school and/or Sunday school.

Outreach. Sharing God's Word with non-member preschool parents/caregivers.

Outreach factor. A reproducible strategy or technique used by a congregation/pastor/principal/teacher to help the ECLC reach its outreach goal.

Outreach success. Achievement of the outreach goal common to ECLC's of connecting parents and their children with Jesus and the operating church.

WELS. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to evidence that is gathered in the WELS ECLCs and does not represent other denominations. The small number of school interviewed is also a limitation. It is also limited to observable behaviors of parents and children, recognizing that only God can see the heart.

Another limitation is schools not wishing to participate in the study. This research is limited to the performance aspects that contribute to the attainment of the outreach goal of connecting parents and children to Jesus and the supporting congregation. It is not assumed that a child of a parent/caregiver who becomes part of the congregation will enroll their child in a Lutheran Educational School (LES). The research will also benefit the children if and when they leave the ECLC because they will still be receiving valuable Christian education from their parents/caregivers who have taken interest and steps in becoming involved with the congregations. These steps include attending church and Sunday School to hear and learn God's Word, taking a BIC class, and spending time at congregational events with Scripture and prayers. The assumption is that the parents will have learned more about their Savior in this process and that they will pass this knowledge along to their children.

Overview

Chapter two is a literature review that shows the importance of parents' influence on their children and information that may contribute to make an ECM successful in achieving its outreach goal of connecting families to Jesus and the church. The third chapter will explain the methodology that the researcher used in order to carry out the research. The fourth chapter will summarize the results of the data analysis. Chapter five

will explain the results and give conclusions about the data as well as suggest answers and give recommendations to WELS ECM leaders.

It is the hope of this researcher that the information in this study will add to the body of information that aids congregations in becoming better equipped to serve as outreach ministries. The outreach factors will hopefully be useful and reproducible to WELS congregations, as they look to better meet their ECM outreach goals.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

The goal of connecting families to Jesus and the church has been the emphasis of the Christian church since the first congregations were started in the New Testament as seen in the early childhood of Timothy and Jesus' own words to his disciples of allowing the children to come to him. Today, schools and ECLCs are striving for the same goal. It is not only about bringing families into the church but how to keep them active in the church. While it is the Holy Spirit who does the work on the person's heart, what can called workers and members of God's kingdom do to lead people to the cross?

The problematic situation of bringing families into the church affects both the ECLC and the congregation and raises important issues of how to go about it. More specifically, there is a lot of discussion about different techniques and events that can bring families into the church, but there is little research about exactly how to create the bridge and foster a sense of community.

The Importance of Parents

It is important for the parents to be the number one influence on their children when it comes to religion. God gives parents the primary responsibility of raising and nurturing their children.

Scripture identifies the family as our first and most enduring relationship. It teaches that children are a "heritage from the Lord" (Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Psalm 127:3) and that God gives parents the direction to "bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and

instruction of the Lord. Ephesians 6:4). (Commission on Lutheran Schools, 2001, pp. 3-4)

In 1 Samuel 2, the story of Eli and his wicked sons shows how God holds parents accountable for the way they train their children (NIV, 2011). Because Eli did not rebuke his sons when they disobeyed the Lord, the Lord chose to let both sons die on the same day, as well as Eli, and chose another priest to do his work. It is imperative for the ECLC to reach out to the parents and the community if they want to keep the children in the Word. In his book, *The Family Friendly Church*, Ben Freudenburg (1998) cited Search Institute's landmark report, *Youth in Protestant Churches*, "a parent's positive influence on a child's faith development dwarfs all other influences" (p. 9). He went on to say that he believes that "Parents are the primary Christian educators in the church, and the family is the God-ordained institution for building faith in young people and for passing faith on from one generation to the next" (p. 10). Freudenburg also listed four family practices that he finds particularly important in helping young people grow in their faith, both in childhood and later on in adolescence: 1) talking about faith with your mother, 2) talking about faith with your father, 3) having family devotions or prayer, and 4) doing family projects to help other people (p. 17). One last point Freudenburg made was quantity and quality. He said that "if we are to nurture faith in our children, if we are to pass on our values and wisdom, we must be willing to spend a quantity of time in a quality way" (p. 37).

One way the ECLC can help build stronger relationships with parents is to show the value Christians place on the family. The church instructs the parents to baptize their children and provides various educational situations for the children such as Sunday

School, Vacation Bible School, Catechism classes, and other learning opportunities and activities. Martin Luther wrote the Small Catechism for parents to instruct their children in God's Word. The church and ECLC are not going to take away the God given responsibility he placed on parents to instruct their children but instead be a partner and supporter of that great responsibility.

Reaching the parents/caregivers is of high importance when striving to connect families to Jesus and the church. The primary questions are how to reach the parents and in what ways work best. The pastors of Beautiful Savior Lutheran Preschool in Clarksville, Tennessee, both get involved with the preschool in many different ways. They meet potential families that are interested in sending their children to their school, they conduct chapel for the children, greet preschool families as they arrive every day, invite the families to "worship, Bible classes, and fellowship activities at the church so they can get to know the entire church family" (Balza, 2011, p. 25). The pastors try to set aside time each day to make small talk with the parents so that one day, Lord willing, they will be there to talk about the big things, like the Gospel. The church is seeing the benefits of the Holy Spirit's work through the pastors because each year two to three families have joined the church since the ECLC has been started.

Building Relationships with the Parents/Caregivers

Gauger (2008) described how important it is for not only the teachers to build a relationship with the community but also for the congregation as well. Looking at the example of Hope in Henry County, Georgia, she referred to a few ways the congregation became involved. Two ways were through a Mom's Morning Out program and the Henry County Moms Meet Up Group. This way the mothers will be familiar with the people of

the congregation by the time they send their children to school. Janine Techtmann, the director/teacher of the preschool stated, “It is our hope and prayer that, as relationships are built, the families bring their children not only to preschool but also to church each week” (Gauger, 2008, p. 22). Her congregation looks to the ECLC as a way to build relationships with people because they are caring for their children. Their pastor, Paul Seager added to this, “They will learn that we’re honest, truthful, and caring. That we are responsible with their children will lead them to trust us when it comes to caring for their souls” (Gauger, 2008, p. 22).

Good Shepherd in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, is an example of an ECLC that looked to the structure of their physical building to help represent their philosophy of building a community atmosphere. The inside of their ECLC looks like brightly colored storefronts in a town square, all focusing on the church’s cross. “This design demonstrates the importance of community to the pastors, teachers, congregation members, and families bringing their children to this center” (Wietzke, 2012, p. 24). The early childhood director at Good Shepherd, Rachel Nass, described the setting in this way, “We’re going to be a community; we’re going to be working together as teachers, together as children, and together as a family” (Wietzke, 2012, p. 24).

The school takes this philosophy beyond merely the structure of the building. Jonathan Were, pastor at Good Shepherd noticed how having children affected the parents’ perspective on spiritual matters. Therefore, the school encourages parents to take Bible Information Class (BIC) on Christian doctrine.

Nass went on to say that a theme at the school is partnering with parents, “We’re here to support the parents and be part of the community in that way” (Wietzke, 2012, p.

24). At Good Shepherd, spiritual development of the entire family is also key. “Here you’re going to be hearing the Word of God in a Lutheran community” (Wietzke, 2012, p. 24).

In the WELS, it is customary for the teacher and sometimes the principal to make home visits (Markgraf, 1990) where they visit each student and their family in their home, share what is happening at school, discuss daily school activities, learn a little more about the family, and ultimately share God’s Word. This is one personal opportunity to invite the family to church or another function the church may be hosting.

Both the pastor and principal of Risen Savior in Milwaukee (Vik, 2008) felt that time was the greatest reason standing in the way of more parents joining the congregation. It was not about race and ethnicity but about time. Both felt they were stretched to their limits serving those who had called them and were not able to do more because of time to “reach all the parents and see them willingly join Risen Savior” (Vik, 2008, p. 5). They did find that the growth of the congregation members was not coming from the parents of their students but from relatives and friendship evangelism. The principal’s, Mr. Clemons, next words resonate with the program goals of the ECLC in the WELS, using the children to reach the parents and families with God’s saving message,

At first (it) used to frustrate me because in reality the numbers of parents who have joined is still much lower than we’d like. However, after a time I realized that even if we couldn’t reach all of the parents, God was allowing us to reach hundreds of children with the gospel on a daily basis. We had the hopes of reaching to every parent and sharing the saving message to them also, but we trained every child like theirs were the parents we wouldn’t get. (pp. 5-6)

Building Relationships with the Community

Once again, the ECLC is faced with the same question, what more can be done to reach those parents that normally would not be reached because of time? According to Zak (2008), congregations can try to create more opportunities to reach the families of young children at events that allow their ECLC and congregation to get to know one another. In order to do this, each ECLC and congregation should get to know their community inside and out. What makes it tick? What are their interests? What are their needs? They should be compassionate and see how they could use the strengths and weaknesses of the community to build relationships. For example, summer camps for children. It could be the usual Vacation Bible School camp or soccer camps but others might be gymnastics, music, art, horseback riding, or any other camp that may be beneficial (Zak, 2008).

While the ECLCs and congregations may try their best to plan and host events of all different venues to attract and retain families, they must also look to their initial connection to young families: the ECLC itself. Of the ECM work being started in the WELS, Greg Schmill, director of Lutheran Schools stated, “The Lord is giving us a wonderful opportunity to reach children and families in the community... It’s a ministry that has been blessed greatly by our Lord” (Wietzke, 2010, p.23). Many WELS churches are looking towards opening or adding ECLCs to their congregations and schools. One article expressed the increase as an “explosion in the number of congregations either beginning or now carrying out early childhood ministries” (Wietzke, 2010, p. 23). The schools and congregations that are beginning these ministries hope to make a stronger connection to their community, which can be seen in the following literature. Casmer

(2006) stated, “In order to reach out into this community in recent years, Mount Lebanon has stepped in a new direction... the earliest of these facets was the addition of an Early Childhood Center to the day school’s program” (p. 12). Their pastor stated that the program’s purpose was that it would “better serve the families of Mount Lebanon with Christian childcare and would better reach into the neighborhood of Mount Lebanon with God’s Word” (p. 12). In his essay, *Of Snakes and Doves: Using Our Heads and Following Christ’s Heart in Evangelism*, Daniel Leyrer (n.d.) emphasizes the draw of a Christian school environment where the parents feel safe in placing their children in the school’s care, especially an ECLC,

The growth of the number of early childhood schools in our church body is testimony to something evangelists have known for years. Nothing attracts the unchurched to our churches more than quality care and education for their children. While it is true that Joe and Joanne Unchurched may not send Johnny Unchurched to our preschool, elementary school, or high school for the right reason, snakes do not fret. They’re happy for the opportunity to place the gospel on young hearts and happy that Joe and Joanne view their church school as something they need. (p. 6)

Another example of using the ECM as a draw for families can be found in the history of the churches of Las Vegas (Strong, 2007). Green Valley Lutheran Church began their ECM in the fall of 1997 with a two-fold purpose; they wanted to give a “Christ-centered education to the youth and to serve as an evangelism tool by reaching out to the families of the community” (p. 15). The church and school required all non-member parents to take a four-week adult information class (BIC) so that they would know what their

children would be learning in school. According to Strong (2007), “Through this ministry, a number of families have become involved in the church and members of Green Valley” (p. 15).

Pastor John Vogt, of Emanuel, Lansing, Michigan (Sonntag, 1993, p. 58), is an example of how some people who may not first be on board with opening an ECM as an outreach mission later on can see the possibilities and benefits. He said that when the congregation first opened their ECLC, “I was not a zealot – or even an advocate – of opening a day care center in our congregation... I have been made a believer, however” (p. 58). His congregation had been made up of primarily older people and with the new center it drew in much younger families in the church. In 1993, the previous year had seen fifty-one child baptisms as a result of the ECLC.

Summary

The Holy Spirit’s work through the efforts of all involved with an ECLC allow for successful changes in practice to take place. This, God-willing, leads to a successful attainment of their outreach goal of connecting the families to Jesus and the church. But as Zak (2008) said in his *Forward in Christ* article, “Connection to our Communities,” “what works for one may not work for another, so we should try different things. We must determine what works best on our community” (p.11).

Chapter III: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to identify program strategies used in ECLCs that are associated with attainment of the outreach goal to connect children and parents to Jesus and the associated church. This study sought to identify common strategies, policies, and procedures that achieve the outreach goal in ECLCs. 2011-2012 school year data was examined to select six sites. Three sites displayed markers of evidence for outreach and three sites did not. The markers of evidence, in order of importance were (1) people added by adult baptism; (2) people added by adult confirmation; (3) child baptisms as a result of the EC; (4) children that transition from the EC into the congregation's school and/or Sunday school; and (5) adults from the EC attending BIC class. Data used to identify the markers of evidence was taken from information obtained from the Commission on Lutheran Schools in 2011. Three sites not displaying the markers of evidence were included as a baseline comparison to help identify strategies that promote outreach or that vary by context.

Research Question

What policies or procedures are instrumental in assisting the ECLC to achieve its outreach goal to connect parents and children to Jesus and the associated church?

Research Design and Procedures

The research design was a descriptive research study using qualitative methods and a case study approach. A qualitative method was important to this study because there had been little or no research conducted on this topic. This research therefore needed to use an inductive method to build theory rather than test it. Inductive research of

this nature relies upon rich description and flexible design which allowed the researcher to pursue emergent themes. Understanding was achieved through the researcher spending time in the actual setting. Therefore, sample size is small and selection purposeful (Merriam, 2009).

This study sought to identify program aspects used in ECLCs that are associated with attainment of the outreach goal. Information from six different ECLCs was gathered and compared. Three ECLCs were highly successful in attaining the outreach goal and three were not. Data from the WELS ECM coordinator was used to determine which centers and their congregations would be deemed as having program success based on the evidence/markers stated in chapter one and were therefore invited to participate in this study. Phone calls/emails (see Appendix A) were made to each of the directors to tell them about the study to see if they would be willing to participate. Information about whether the site was being used as a model of outreach or the baseline was not shared with the ECLCs. Interviews, documents, and on-site observations were conducted.

The directors were guided with specific questions for the interviews (see Appendix B). The interviews helped the participants to focus on specific ways they have attained the outreach goal. They also helped to show what aspects of the ECLC general curriculum are common among ECLC's which attain or do not attain the outreach goal. All the discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Constant comparison was used to identify useful categories and themes in the data.

The interviews led to the identification of documents that would be helpful in showing what strategies used attributed to their success in achieving the outreach goal. Document review looked at policy handbooks, registration forms, and procedures.

Document reviews provided evidence of some ways that ECLCs have been successful and can be reproduced.

On-site observations were led using a checklist (see Appendix C) based on factors suggested as effective from the literature review in chapter two. Each observation lasted about an hour followed by the interview which lasted one to two hours in length. Along with the checklist, there was a descriptive narrative of any other aspects the researcher observed while on-site.

Population and Sample

The process of choosing the congregations and ECLCs who would take part in the study began with sending the markers and evidence information to the WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools. The CLS compared the specified markers and evidence in the WELS database and provided the document: WELS Early Childhood Ministries that Added Members in 2012-2013. The data was analyzed by first finding the ratios of each of the categories, taking the total number of children enrolled in the program and dividing it by how many took part in each category.

Table 1

ECMs That Added to Membership 2012-2013

	2012-2013 Enrollment	Attended BIC	Added by Adult Baptism	Added by Adult Confirmation	Added by Child Baptism
Site 1	18	10	1	11	12
Site 2	40	20	4	11	11
Site 3	115	35	2	23	15
Site 4	24	2	0	0	0
Site 5	22	2	0	0	0
Site 6	27	2	0	0	0

Note. Comparison of key indicators of evangelism success in baseline (sites 4-6) and exemplar (sites 1-3) early childhood ministries.

The categories are the evidence markers: (1) adults from EC attend BIC classes, (2) people added by adult baptism, (3) people added by adult confirmation, (4) child baptisms in result to the EC, and (5) children that transition to kindergarten in congregation's school and/or Sunday school. The percentages were analyzed and compared.

The categories were ranked as follows: (1) adult baptism, (2) adult confirmation, (3) children transitions, (4) child baptism, and (5) adult BIC. Adult baptism was weighted the highest because it most likely means the parents have not been involved with any church before and shows their commitment to Christ and not necessarily a church denomination. Adult confirmation was ranked second because if the adults are confirmed they will most likely be joining the congregation. There was also the possibility that they would have cheaper tuition rates if they are part of the congregation. Third was child transitions to kindergarten in congregation's school and/or Sunday school because the family is keeping their child involved in the church. Child baptisms were next because some parents may want their child baptized because they know they were baptized as children, and it is important for their children but not necessarily because they want to join the church. Ranked the lowest was adult BIC because it is sometimes mandatory for parents to attend these classes when they enroll their children in a preschool program. This may show their response to policy and not be a strong indicator of their voluntary actions like getting baptized themselves or becoming confirmed.

Three ECLCs and their congregations were chosen according to their weighted percentages that highly met the markers and evidence and three as a baseline. The

baseline group were not merely the lowest percentages but the average percentages for all the WELS ECLC. For this study, the directors were the voice of the congregations.

The sample of WELS ECLCs and their congregations that were chosen had the possibility to be located anywhere in the United States of America. The three participating schools and congregations had the possibility of being of different ethnic and socioeconomic standings. They also had the possibility to be located in rural surroundings or a densely-populated city. It was made clear that any and all information gathered during the research would be kept confidential. Congregations and their schools' identities were kept confidential and names were not to be identified in the final research paper unless given permission by the participants. Congregations were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. In that case, any information the researcher had already gathered about the ECLC and the congregation would not be included in the reported data.

Instrumentation

The first instrument used was the WELS 2012 data of the evidence and markers accepted for this study of all the churches and ECLC that met one or more of the criteria. Second, a phone call/email that was sent to the top three congregations/ECLC that met the markers and the three baseline sites that were chosen (see Appendix A). Thirdly, a list of questions for onsite or phone interviews (see Appendix B). The last instrument was an observation checklist for onsite visitations (see Appendix C).

Data Analysis Procedures

The data for the WELS 2012 congregations and ECLC that met the criteria was used to select the top three sites and baseline sites. Audio recordings from the interviews

were transcribed to minimize errors. The transcriptions from the responses given in the interviews were coded and analyzed for commonalities using a constant comparison method.

On-site observation checklists were handwritten during the visit. This allowed for detailed descriptions of the surroundings. They were later typed into separate documents along with descriptions of the many photos taken during the visit. The six observation reviews were then coded and analyzed for commonalities using a constant comparison method.

The documents taken for review were each individually analyzed. The four documents collected were policy handbooks, registration forms, newsletters, and bulletins. The documents were then coded and analyzed for commonalities using a constant comparison method.

Limitations

One limitation is that the case study included only six ECMs so that the researcher could go in-depth. Therefore, the results are representative of only the cases studied and cannot be generalized to the entire population of WELS ECMs. Another limitation may be researcher bias because only one researcher coded the transcripts.

Summary

The researcher used information on the ECLCs that added members to the WELS in 2012-2013 to identify the highest scoring three congregations and their ECLCs who met the markers in attaining the outreach goal and three that served as a baseline in 2012-2013. The researcher contacted the congregations via their directors to find out if they would participate in the study. The researcher conducted the interviews with the

participants. The researcher traveled to observe each ECLC. The information obtained during the visits were transcribed and coded so that the researcher could compare the information to find what factors might be contributing to their outreach success.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

What policies or procedures are instrumental in assisting the ECLC to achieve its outreach goal to connect parents and children to Jesus and the associated church?

The purpose of this study was to identify program strategies used in ECLCs that were associated with attainment of the outreach goal to connect children and parents to Jesus and the associated church. The various sources of data were analyzed to answer the research question. In this chapter, the analysis of each data source and the major findings are described. The chapter is divided into the (a) interview analysis, (b) observation analysis, and (c) document analysis. For all of the following analyses, the top three sites are in order Site 1, Site 2, Site 3. Sites 4-6 are the baseline sites and are not in order of success but given a number to keep all information for a particular site organized.

Interview Analysis and Findings

Promoting baptism. The interviewees took similar approaches to discussing baptisms as they do their approach to inquiring parents. The baseline program directors wait until the parents make the first move by asking about baptism or inquiring about how their child may be baptized. They wait until the first quarter meeting or until report card time around October or November. The directors know which students have been baptized because it is included on their registration forms along with other church information. The directors wait for the parents to bring up the topic of baptism before it is opened for discussion. Once the topic of baptism has been brought up, the biggest frustration for the directors is getting the families to commit. One interviewee stated that “we have had some that have rescheduled and rescheduled and then dropped and then we

have had some that really aren't interested." (Site 4) She meets with them for a parent/teacher meeting and then brings the principal into the discussion (not necessarily during the same meeting) and then a meeting with the pastor. She states that she doesn't want the pastor to come in the middle of a parent/teacher meeting and this is why she waits to have the pastor involved. She wants to give the families the freedom to set up the meeting with the pastor on their own so that they "know what's coming" (Site 4).

The top program initiates the discussion of baptism by sending home a letter in November to "any of the kids' families who had children who were not baptized" (Site 1) and also sends home the WELS synod booklet about baptism. She writes to the families that "this is a real important piece of our puzzle here, I don't want to push this on you but I'd like you to read this pamphlet and if you are interested in talking to me or pastor about it, we would love to do that and this is why it is important to our school and congregation." She tries to make it laid back and not pushy, giving the information to the families and letting the Holy Spirit do the rest. "I can do what I can do and He does the rest. So, just try to make it non-threatening."

Advertising and community involvement. Advertising and community involvement are so closely intertwined that they are both included in this next section. All the programs do some sort of advertising to get the word out about their school and programs to the general public and community. This section is focused on their approaches to advertising and their community involvement and not specifically their intent on attracting the unchurched, which will be discussed in a separate section.

Two of the baseline programs rely heavily on signs that are already placed on their properties to notify the public of their school while the third baseline program is

working hard on having their existing sign be changed from only saying that it is a church to including the school on the sign. Another way the baseline programs advertised was by using the public library. The director and principal went and read to the children, thus reaching many groups of kids. Some baseline groups used the parents they presently had to spread the word (word of mouth) by using a referral program to get a 10% discount to families on their tuition if they referred someone to the school. Another advertising venue was using parents to run the concession stand during a softball tournament in the park and having school folders available to pass on to any inquiring families. One baseline program had a 4th of July parade float and set up a popcorn and water stand out front of the school to make themselves more visible to the public during the parade. Some of the baseline programs also advertised by putting an ad in the local newspaper. One director relies only on word of mouth for advertising but is working on the sign being changed to include “school” on it.

The top programs have a variety of approaches to advertising their school programs. They use Vacation Bible School (VBS) programs, “as much free advertising anywhere that I can get, we do” (Site 1), several newspapers, and word of mouth. One interviewee said they have a pumpkin patch as a yearly advertisement, which has brought in “hundreds and thousands of people” (Site 2). It is run for four weeks and every time a visitor comes they are handed a flyer about the school. This gets the ball rolling to introduce the families to the church and school. After talking with the families they fill out a questionnaire and information card and then the director follows through by calling and inviting them to the church and school. The director felt the pumpkin patch has been successful “because they are already here and they can see the campus and they are like,

‘Wow, I didn’t know this existed here.’ They may drive by everyday but not know that we are here.” (Site 2)

Another interviewee stated that the way they get parents in the door is by doing a lot of advertising. They send out postcards four times a year, roughly 25,000 each year. The 2nd week of November each year they host a free kids’ carnival that they put on for the community. They rent out the town center and from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. the community knows that this is the place to be to have fun for the whole family. They have bounce house after bounce house, up to 15 of them, as well as face painters, balloon makers, a magician, a clown, and the fire department even participates by talking to the children, having fire safety demonstrations, and allowing the children to see how they use the equipment. They also have different vendors: cotton candy, popcorn, and food. One of the teachers does a cheer squad and all of this helps to bring attention to their school. The carnival isn’t the only way that the school advertises. They utilize VBS, hosting different open events like rummage sales or including food trucks with the open events; they try to do different things throughout the year to have open for the community to do. But the school does not act alone. The congregation supports and is an ally in their outreach mission. The director says that a lot of what the school does parallels their mission with the congregation, reaching out to the community. “So we don’t really have to strategize or justify doing things to the congregation because it is one and the same. It is a parallel mission. We are reaching out to the community for programs for the kids, for the parents, for people.” (Site 3) At open forums, the congregation is an active participant in brainstorming ideas for new events to reach out to the community.

All the directors stated that word of mouth was their biggest way of advertising. While the baseline groups relied heavily upon word of mouth as one of their only (or only) approach to advertising, the top programs utilized word of mouth but created many more opportunities to spread the word about their school and programs. The biggest drawback for advertising for all the groups was money. One baseline director said that advertising is too expensive and they don't budget for it. The top groups, even though faced with similar monetary problems, always made a plan and budgeted in advertising, using what they could and then finding ways for free or reduced prices for advertising but never settling for doing no advertising.

The amount of community involvement is something that all the schools are still actively trying to figure out. Even the top ECLCs are brainstorming and thinking of ways to get into the community. One thing a top interviewee felt was ineffective in connecting with the community was going to community events and setting up a booth promoting their services and school. She felt that if the community already knows about your school, you don't need to do any of that because you already have a good foundation. She says if they were a new school starting out, that "would be the place to start, because what other thing are you going to do because you don't have word of mouth" (Site 2).

Identifying church affiliation. All of the interviewees said that there is a section on their enrollment/registration forms asking about the families' church affiliation. One caution an interviewee had when discussing having the information on the registration form was that even if the parent puts down they attend a certain church, they may not have been there for many years, "so it's more in the conversations" (Site 6) that she finds out how their affiliation stands. Identifying the unchurched as early as registration time

plays a large part in the top ECLCs' third theme in their approach to attracting the unchurched.

Attracting the unchurched. Once again there is a large division between the approaches of the baseline program directors and the approaches the top three program directors take. The baseline approach is to do what has been done in the past and what other schools do, especially focusing on having the kids sing in church and having a summer VBS to attract the unchurched. One interviewee said "our biggest thing is having the children sing in church." (Site 4) The director felt this is the foremost way for the families to hear what they are preaching and teaching. She also puts up posters and flyers on the children's lockers informing about church times or a certain celebration that might be coming up like Ascension or Easter. "It's just kind of word of mouth." (Site 4) She says they have a good turnout for their summer VBS, having 99 children attend. She explained that the community is very busy and it is all about constantly doing things so she thinks that if "you can constantly [be] doing things here and inviting people to come" it will attract people. Another interviewee said that they think "the biggest thing is word of mouth." (Site 6) Other than word of mouth she feels that improving their school sign so that it says "school" on it will attract people because right now it just says "church" on it. The third interviewee admits that they don't do anything different to attract the unchurched. "The sign is out there and we have done some advertising when it is in the budget but as far as (attracting the unchurched)... I don't know that there is anything different that I do to attract a non-member. Not that I wouldn't want to!" (Site 5)

When looking at the top ECLCs there are four themes that appear when looking at the different approaches they take when trying to attract the unchurched: (1) They try to

make lots of opportunities to attract the unchurched. (2) They try to be encouraging rather than pushy. (3) They quickly identify those who are unchurched and (4) then they make a plan of what to do with them and connect them to Jesus and the associated church.

The top programs intentionally make lots of opportunities to attract the unchurched. First of all, they have the basics as the baseline groups: children singing in church, summer VBS programs, and considering word of mouth to be the biggest thing to attract the unchurched (Site 1). They also include other opportunities such as friendship Sundays and Friendship Day, where the unchurched are invited to come to the congregation and the children sing to them and then they are invited to come to the other services (Site 2). They have rummage sales and on Easter Sunday, one director said they sent out 5,000 postcards inviting families to bring their children to an Easter egg hunt for kids on Easter Sunday (Site 1). They also had an Easter breakfast to try and keep the people to stay for church and the breakfast. The top programs also have Christmas programs and invite the families to attend. One director said, “We do everything we can to invite them to come to services” (Site 2). They have the services specifically to attract the unchurched and to make the opportunity to “invite them in and we tell them the premises of what we do.” (Site 2) This director felt that these intentional services set them apart from other programs.

They not only make the opportunities but also realize when unplanned opportunities are happening and take advantage of them to attract the unchurched. They make sure to have information out and to be personally available if anybody has questions (Site 1). They take the time to answer questions and seize the opportunity to share the Gospel with those parents that are in need of hearing the Word. Their children

are hearing God's Word on a daily basis, but sometimes the parents do not understand all that their children are learning. When the parents come in and ask the teachers to explain the Bible story, they are able to "give them a reference and like a little light comes on, 'Opportunity! Opportunity! Invite them to church, invite them to come.'" (Site 2) Inviting the parents to church creates more opportunities to come and worship. The directors are in turn building trust and creating more avenues for unplanned opportunities to arise. Wise and curious parents are then able to interact with the director and teachers to ask questions. "I think with outreach and getting parents in, it's taking every little opportunity you have and doing the best with it. Not letting an opportunity pass you, one, because you are busy, you just don't have the time, and two, following through is important. Yes, you can bring them to come to church but making sure that you are encouraging them to come to church." (Site 2)

The top programs intentionally invite unchurched families to come and visit their church in multi-opportunistic ways while making sure that their invitations are not pushy or threatening but encouraging. "Our goal is to kind of do the best we can to bring them to our faith by inviting them and not forcing it on them or pushing it, but inviting them and encouraging them to come and join us for worship, 'Your kids are singing on Sunday, we would love to see you!' And we have found that doing it that way is one of the best ways versus pushing them, 'Oh, you gotta come.'" (Site 2) The interviewee goes on to say that the teachers at her school encourage the parents frequently, "not push it on them but encourage them, what their kids are learning they could learn too. And how their kid feels about God and their praying and how they could be role models too." (Site 2) She said that sometimes the parents aren't ready to make that a part of their lives yet

even though they send their child to a Christian school, but to keep encouraging them, “just like what your child is learning you can learn too... if you join us.” (Site 2) As teachers, the directors also encourage their students to come to church. They know which ones attend church because they talk frequently about church with the children. One director said they talk about church “especially on Mondays, ‘How many of you went to church on Sunday? Well if you haven’t gone to church on Sunday, Miss ___ goes to church here every Sunday and if you guys would like to come in, Miss ___ would love for you to sit by her or sit with her at church.’” She motivates them by allowing them to sit by her and states that if the children want to go to church it is amazing how much the parents will do to please their kids (Site 3). One of the directors purposefully changed the time that she went to church because she knew of one of her families that had started going to BIC and then coming on Sundays. She wanted to be able to see the family each week and felt that “they were encouraged” by seeing her and she was able to model what she advised about going to worship. She also felt that the family felt more comfortable knowing somebody at church as they became more familiar with going to church.

Quickly identifying those that are unchurched is another approach that the top three programs take. One director said that after inviting the families to church it is important to recognize the families that are unchurched. She doesn’t put them on a list or anything like that but as a teacher “we identify them.” (Site 2) On the enrollment forms there is an area for the families to mark if they have a church home. They go through the enrollment forms and also have their teachers go through the forms to find parents that do not have a church home.

Then they put into place their fourth approach of making a plan of what to do next to connect them with Jesus and the associated church, namely inviting them to worship and special services on a frequent basis. While they talk to all of the parents and build personal relationships with all the parents, they intentionally converse with and invite them to church, “Well, hey, at such and such, we are having this service coming up. Or we are having this...” (Site 3) Or if they know something is relatable or pertinent to what they have been discussing and it is coming up in a sermon/service, they make sure to let the parents know. Knowing which families are unchurched also helps the directors when the families are in need and the unplanned opportunity of sharing the Gospel is not lost on them. “By knowing (which families are unchurched) that I think it helps us in a sense. I always as a teacher, even as a preschool director, you do your best to encourage all the parents but... and especially when they are in a time of need and they come to you with issues or problems and that gives you such an opportunity to share the Gospel with them as well as encourage them.” (Site 2)

A personal relationship with the parents. One resonating theme that all the interviewees put emphasis on time and again was relationships with the parents. When asked what their best strategy is, Site 1 revealed that what works are just doing the simple things, “Nothing extraordinary, nothing big but are just simple, connecting. It’s those connections that make the difference. One at a time.” All the interviewees felt that this was the most important thing when connecting families to Jesus and the congregation. “Taking the time to make the people feel that *you* care about them. That is the biggest thing that I have found to be effective. When they walk in that door, make them feel welcome, make them feel that you genuinely care about them” (Site 1).

These relationships are not just superficial relationships but go much deeper, they are personal relationships built over time. The top sites interviewed commented that the relationships need to be personal relationships, getting to know the parents “as best as you possibly can” (Site 3). The top sites all suggest getting to know where the parents work, be current on what is happening in their lives, and know what is going on at home. They view it as a huge important part of their ministry and how much it helps them in their ministry to the children by getting to know the parents on this deeper level.

I am just as open and honest with parents as they will let me be because then they are as open and honest with me as I’ll let them be. And I have found that that really works because then I can have some very serious conversations about them with their kids and they know where I’m coming from because I can tell them that their kids had a terrific day and they know that it is coming from all the love in my heart and I can tell them that their kid had a really rough day and that it is coming from all the love in my heart. And I can then also tell them all about the things that we are doing as far as church goes and they know where that is coming from. They know that I am not pushing anything. They know that I don’t have any agenda. They know that I am not coming at them. “Oh you need to be in here” or “you need to do that.” No. This is just who I am... Week 1 I will talk a lot about their kids, “they are doing a great job, they are doing this.” Week 2 I try to talk about them and try to figure out what is going on with them. How is their life going, how is their job going, how was their day, how is everything with them... “And so I want to know what is going on with your day, with your world so that we can still have that open communication. Because I’m here for you also,

mom and dad, not just here for your kid, I'm here for you also, in more ways than just educating your kid. I offer more services to you than just educating your child." And that has opened more and more doors. (Site 3)

In the literature review, the pastor and principal of Risen Savior in Milwaukee felt the greatest reason that was standing in the way of more parents joining the congregation was the lack of time to reach all the parents on a deeper level. A few of the interviewees felt the same time restrictions. Site 5 and 6 both conduct home visits. Site 6 has the home visits with the new families at report card time around October/November and then gradually does the home visits with the remaining families after having some time off from the first round of home visits. Sites 3 and 4 had tried home visits but both no longer conduct them. Site 4 has the parents come to the school. The director felt that she was chasing them in order to set up a time to meet and only a few would agree. Site 3 agreed that there really is not enough time to do home visits when they have around 40 students for each lead teacher (morning and afternoon sessions) and that when they did conduct the home visits they received lukewarm results. Instead, they have a meet and greet school night where the parents and children come in to get to know their teacher better. At this point, the director says she has spoken with the parents three or four times on the phone and would have seen them at the onsite tour.

It is also important for the parents to connect with each other and the members of the congregation. "Not having a separation between them dropping off their kid but connecting with them [each other]. Creating those friendships and them connecting. Because by them being together they become friends. So many friendships come out of this" (Site 2).

Inviting the parents to church. All of the directors interviewed invite the parents to come to church. Each of them verbally invited the families as well as posted it in writing in one way or the other. The differences between the successful sites and the baseline sites are in the frequency of the invites and the purposeful intention of the invitations. Site 6 invites the families just at the beginning of the year and then when the children sing in church and admits that she does not send out information about the congregation events “as much as I should”. Site 5 invites the families occasionally when there are changes in the church calendar (Advent, Lent, etc.). The director says that she does not invite them because many of her students have church homes but that she does include the church information on the calendar that goes home once a month as well as a copy of the monthly church newsletter. Site 4 director says that she has a bulletin board in the hallway with the church calendar, services, and Bible class times and that she makes a point to invite the families during the special times of year like Ascension or Easter and puts a little blurb about it in their school newsletter and by the students’ lockers. When asked the same question, the principal from Site 4 said they take great pains to not be too upfront with the parents in inviting them to church and discussing religion. The opposite was stated by the top sites where each of them sought out opportunities to talk with the parents about religion and inviting them to church.

The top sites invite the families frequently, whether by mouth or in writing. They intentionally look for opportunities to share their Savior with the parents and to invite them to church or BIC. Site 2 director invites the families at every opportunity and doesn’t let any pass her by. She intentionally looks for the opportunities and then acts on them by inviting them to church. Sometimes she sees the opportunities as ways to further

her bond/friendship with the parents and gives them more invitations to get to know God's Word and come to church. One way that presents opportunities to share an invitation with the parents is when the parents do not completely understand the Bible stories that their children are learning in her class and they come to her and ask her about the particular story. She gives them a reference and then she says that a little light goes on in her head,

“Opportunity! Opportunity! Invite them to church, invite them to come.” And you know, you may get one or two families a year but you try. I think we encourage them a lot, not push it on them but encourage them, what their kids are learning they could learn too. And how their kid feels about God and their praying and how they should be role models too. Sometimes I think they love to have their kids come to school here but they are not ready to put that in their life yet. But I tell them, “Just like what your child is learning you can learn too... if you join us.”
(Site 2 director)

Other opportunities she finds are when she sees the families are in need, not just with superficial things but when she sees them in need of spiritual food. She says the parents have never been brought to faith because no one has ever talked with them about God; they have no idea that they have a Savior who loves them and died for them. She says it can be simply sharing the Gospel with them and they become interested and that's when she lets them know that they have BIC classes they can attend. The director says that these are some of the best ways to get parents in through your doors and to share the Gospel with them is by talking with them about the Bible stories and discussing their questions. She says it “is by inviting them and making an [abundant] amount of

opportunities for them to come through your doors,” by not allowing them to just drop their kids off but instead connecting with them, befriending them, and helping them connect with other parents at the school. She reiterated that the best way to get them to come is by inviting them to come, “because a lot of them won’t come if they aren’t invited.”

Site 3 director also intentionally looks for the little opportunities and encourages her parents to attend church. She lets her parents know that she isn’t going to drag them to church but lets them know how important God’s Word is for them and that she supports them and continually encourages them to come to church. She emphasizes the point of not giving up on the parents because sometimes it takes longer for some of them to take her up on the invitation and then “they get there and they understand it.” Once the parents “get it” they see her as a person and not just the preschool director but as a mother and as their friend. In the interview, she discussed the different hats she wears and how she asks them which hat is she wearing at the moment to decide what type of conversation they are having. “Which hat do I need to put on? Am I ___ your friend? Am I ___ the preschool director, am I ___ one of the school administrators? What do I need to wear right now?” She finds that this helps when conversing with them and attending to their needs as preschool parents and as humans themselves, in need of a loving and forgiving Savior.

While the above examples are of unofficial invitations, the top sites also give many official invitations. Site 2 gives around 8 official invitations per school year with 6 formal events: two friendship Sundays, their Christmas pageant, a harvest fest, book fairs, and also the end of the year graduation. During the year, the congregation tries to include

the school in many of their events. For example, they have a family game night that the church puts together but all of the school parents are invited to come. When there is a Lutheran Women's Missionary Society rally all the mothers from the school are invited.

We always include, as much as possible, our parents, and invite them to come and are welcome to join us. Yes, everything our congregation does we try to incorporate our school. We do our spring picnic, we incorporate our preschoolers, let's have them sing a little and then invite them to have lunch with us. And vice versa, we invite the congregation to everything that the children do, so when we do our musical, our graduation, our friendship Sundays, we invite our congregation to come and join them, to come and watch, because that gives them an opportunity to meet some of our families and maybe they can make a connection that we didn't make. (Site 3 director)

The director views the graduation ceremony as an outreach opportunity because even though the parents are coming to watch their children graduate because this is another time that their pastor shares the Gospel with them and encourages them not to be strangers but to come back and see them at church and at school. "Just because your child graduated, don't make us strangers. Continue to come back." She says that some will come back and some do not.

The Site 1 Director says that every week the parents are invited in their weekly newsletter and are given information on what is going on with the congregation's events in church. Site 3 has many official and written invitations as well that include the invitations with specific Sundays that are key for guests and visitors. She includes the invitations on her announcement board and the principal puts out a newsletter every week

for the school where information about the church is included along with little blurbs from each of the teachers from preschool to 8th grade. The parents are formally invited to attend such events as Friends and Family Sunday, Easter, Christmas, Good Shepherd Sunday, and also whenever the choirs sing. The whole school is invited to attend church when a choir sings even if their grade is not singing. This encourages the children and especially the young preschoolers to continue on into kindergarten at the school because it helps them to think that “this would be a cool thing for you to be a part of!”

Leveraging the parent-child relationship. Another way the top sites’ directors are reaching the parents is by connecting to them through their children by getting their children excited about coming to church and Sunday School. The directors notice the hesitation of the parents to bring their children to church but also see the strong love for their children that lead the parents to want to please their child. “If the kids want to go and if it’s an easy thing for the kids to go, it’s amazing how much the parents will do to please the kids too” (Site 3). And to get the children interested in coming to church? All top directors spoke about talking to the children about coming to church. They let them know that they (their teachers) would be at church. Some of the directors taught Sunday School and encouraged the children to come and see them at this time. The top directors also invited the children to sit with them during church. The excitement of seeing their teacher at church sends the children home telling their parents, “Mommy, Mommy, Mrs. ___ is teaching Sunday School’ or ‘Our teachers are there!” (Site 2).

Connecting the parents’ experiences through their child is not just about getting the children interested and excited about coming to church and Sunday School but also showing compassion and love for the children by acknowledging the fears of new people

who are unchurched and who may be afraid of their child making noise during the service. Site 1 Director commented how connecting through their children makes a really big difference by letting the parents know that their children are welcomed to church and that it is okay if they make some noise during the service. She says,

And you know when people say, “Little kids shouldn’t be in church, they make too much noise.” I don’t agree with that. I think [it’s good] if they are in church from little on. And I try to tell parents we don’t care if there is a little noise in the back. Yeah if they are screaming, take them out. I don’t mind a little noise; that means we have kids in church, and young people in church; that is a good thing.

(Site 1 Director)

The Site 3 Director also spoke of connecting the parents’ experiences through their child because they talk to the parents about their children so much and all of the different prayers and songs they are learning. She feels that this “really gets them a lot of the times.”

The directors make the personal connections with the parents and children. They use the enthusiasm of the child to want to come to church to tug at the heart strings of the parents. They are also speaking with the parents and reassuring them that their children are welcome in church and that it is okay for children to make noise.

Taking the fear out of coming to church. The principal from Site 4 realizes that inviting the parents to church when their children are singing has not worked to bring parents into the church “mainly because that is a huge step to ask people to do is to go from being unchurched or de-churched to join our church.” He says there needs to be a middle ground, “something that is church like” but not necessarily church so that it does

not feel like such a big leap for the parents to go from unchurched to being really involved in the church. Site 3's director sees a lot of parents in her school who are put off by church and any kind of religious institutes because of their upbringing. They see that their children are interested in Jesus and they too want to know more about these topics but they question our churches because it is something different. They wonder "is this as scary as what I grew up with?" She suggests being "open and honest with all of it and show them, there is nothing to be afraid about! This is fun and it is cool, and it is comforting and soothing and just the most wonderful thing that you can have in your life and your child's life." This director and her staff try to make the steps of becoming involved with the church as easy as possible for the parents.

Along with being open and honest, Site 6's director says that "we shouldn't be annoyed with them" when the parents that are under-churched start coming to church. They do not have "good spiritual habits" and she suggests that "we should slowly encourage and train them." She makes the point that they need to be educated and not to assume that their own parents taught them. "We have to be warm and fuzzy and teach them" and meet the parents where they are at in their spiritual and church knowledge instead of expecting them to immediately be at the level of more experienced churchgoers. She also finds that parents seem to be more comfortable attending a Bible study than with a formal service.

Interviewees noticed the hesitation of parents when invited to come to church because they are unfamiliar with attending church. The interviewees discussed different ways that they get the parents into the building but not involved with an actual service and found that by inviting the parents to other events it helps to take the fear out of

coming to church “because sometimes they are nervous about coming to a service, they have never been in a church before, they don’t even know what to expect” (Site 2). For example, Site 2 has Pastry for Parents where the parents are invited to join them for chapel every Wednesday morning. Site 3 makes sure to invite the whole school family and the whole church family for events and uses the tactic of thinking of both as one unit and not two separate entities. “If something is going on school-side, the church is invited. Graduation; congregation, you are invited. Big field trip; hey congregation if you can sponsor a child, come on over.” The director invites the congregation members to come and volunteer at different school events to give the members an opportunity to make connections with the school families. “We try and mingle as much as possible. And get people to meet each other that way. Hey maybe you don’t make a connection with me because I am younger, but maybe you will make a connection with someone in the congregation. Try to give as many opportunities to have people cross paths is important.”

On educating the parents. Adding on to taking the edge off of the hesitation parents feel and getting them in the door is to educate the parents on how to help their children behave in church and what is taught in the church. The directors have all taken note on how the parents hesitate to bring their children because they feel nervous going to church and doing something wrong because church is something new to them. One director keeps track of the frequency of parents registering their children in our Lutheran schools. She realizes the parents have no idea of the premises of our faith (Site 2). To give the parents insight on what Lutherans believe, she gives them a little flyer and book about Jesus and Lutheranism. In a sense this is a child’s book, but it is a simple way for the parents to start learning what their child will learn at the school and what the Lutheran

church teaches. Site 4 has the pastor teach a twenty-minute Bible lesson stressing that parents know what their children are eating in their lunches and how they want to make sure their lunches are healthy and what they need to survive the day, “don’t you want to know what is being taught to your child religiously. This is their spiritual well-being. Don’t you want to know what is being taught?” The director also says speaking with the parents one-on-one and explaining what we do and believe “as difficult as it is sometimes, they respect that more than just expecting them to know” (Site 4).

It is also important to educate the parents on what to do when they bring their child to church and how to keep them quiet. Site 3’s director tells her parents to bring some snacks into church and something to color. She also found that there was a need for childcare during the services so that the parents could focus and listen to God’s Word. In her area, most of the people had very little church background or the church background was very different from our Lutheran traditions. She also noticed the attitudes of numerous parents that if their children did not like church or if they felt their kids were not safe and having fun then they weren’t even going to try a particular church. So out of seeing this need for what the parents were looking for during a church service, both that the parents needed to focus on the worship service to be educated and that they wanted their children to be safe and having fun in church, her congregation started children’s church. Children’s church takes place in a classroom that goes on while the church service is going on in the main church building. In children’s church, which is available for children 3 years old and up to 2nd grade, they are sitting in their chairs that are set up like church pews in rows. They do not do worksheets, coloring, or go there to play but to learn about the different parts of the service. They will turn on what the pastor is saying

during the sermon and the teachers will give a little sermonette about what the pastor is talking about and will guide the children through the songs and liturgy.

We go through it so that they get used to it but they still have a chance then to [get up and move around] if they are a little anxious. It is still a little more calm for them and the parents still get a chance to hear what pastor has to say and hear God's Word. So, it's kind of the best for both worlds for us. (Site 3 director)

The purpose is to help train and educate the children about the different parts of the service while the parents are being educated by the pastor on God's Word and also are able to learn about how to be in church. After the service the parents come and get their children. She has found that the parents are very receptive to the whole process.

Non-WELS staff. Not only is it important to educate the parents and children but to also have a staff that is educated in what we teach. It is important to have all who have contact with the parents and children knowledge of the WELS teachings and also for them to know the importance of their words and actions of how they play a part in connecting the families to the congregation and Jesus. The director at Site 2 has a lot of experience with working with staff that were not raised Lutherans and who are new Lutherans. Out of the twenty-five staff and employees, only three are called WELS teachers. It is a requirement for the lead teachers to be a member of the church but all staff and employees are constantly encouraged to come to church. She says it is important to project being as positive as you can as a director. Their pastor speaks with the staff and employees and encourages them as well. "That's all we can do. God does his work. And also, just making sure the teachers do the same as you, encouraging the parents."

Chapel service. One of the baseline sites has chapel once a month with the whole school but only one session of preschoolers is able to attend. Another baseline site used to have weekly chapel services at 8:30 a.m. to begin their day. This chapel service was moved to 9 a.m. because parents would not stay even though they had been invited because they had to get to work, and children would arrive late and disrupt the chapel service.

All three successful site programs have chapel services once a week. Parents are always invited to attend. The directors of the top sites feel that frequent chapel services are another way to get parents inside the church and for pastors to build relationships with the parents and children. One site streams the service online so that the parents can watch it live and it is also posted on their website so it can be viewed later. Another of the successful sites not only has weekly services but the pastor meets with every class once a week and also makes weekly visits to the youngest of students, the two and three-year-olds and does a little devotion with them.

Pastor involvement. One resonating difference between the successful sites and the baseline sites is the presence of the pastor. The three baseline sites all say that their pastor is not active with the school and does not have a strong relationship with the children or parents. The top three successful sites all have a very present and active pastor both with the children and the parents.

The baseline sites all lack the interaction from the pastor that the successful sites are receiving. The director at Site 4 wishes the pastor could be a part of the school more but knows that he is busy and feels it is just not possible for him to be more involved. She sees hot lunches and a child's birthday as opportunities for the pastor to interact and get

to know the children better. Even for their entertainment and social nights for the parents “it is hard to get pastor over here to get him to be a part of that too.” This is one thing that sticks out in her mind that they do not do well as a ministry. The principal at this site agrees with the director and has spoken to the pastor about how they could connect him to the school a little bit more. He feels that it is unfortunate the pastor’s office is in his house and that he is a busy guy and feels that standing in the hallway to greet or say goodbye to the students and parents is not a “wise use of his time.” The principal feels that the pastor has a good, magnetic personality, and that if he was around more he is a likeable person and could make connections with the parents. To him it is important to find a “natural way to get him to talk with parents” so that the parents know he is the person they should turn to if they had a religious question. “I guess I’d like him to be that guy for us. So, I guess that is one thing we have talked about that we want to do better, realistically connect pastor to the church and here better.”

The director at Site 5 also is struggling to get the pastor to be available and involved with the school and views this as something that is not working for the program right now. The pastor teaches catechism to the older students at the other end of the building and will sometimes stop by to talk with her. When he stops in he will say hi to the preschoolers, so “at least he is a face.” She would like to see him in attendance at pick-up time when the parents are all waiting together, and also at the mom’s night or dad’s night. She says he comes to their family night to do the devotion but that it is a struggle for him to make relationships and meet new people. She feels he also misses out on the opportunity to mingle with parents at Christmastime because he needs to go and be with his own children that are in high school and college.

Site 6 also has the lack of pastor involvement although they have a church deaconess that does a worship service for the children once a month and is “supposed to track” potential parents and greet them. The pastor does not meet the children and parents because it is “not his strong suit.” They had a second pastor who was more of a school pastor. The pastor that remained at the church holds a worship service once a month and is very good at it, according to the director, but she says he feels that he has too much on his plate and says “I just can’t do everything!” Only one session of the preschoolers sees him for the worship service and “other than that I wouldn’t say they see him a lot.” According to the director the opportunities are there for the pastor to mingle with the children and parents. She says she invites him to other events like the fall show and end of the year picnic.

On the other side of the spectrum, are the top sites and their very present pastors. The pastors of the top three sites all have a daily presence in the schools. Besides chapel that they have once a week, the pastors are present in the classrooms for drop-in visits and other times during the day to make connections with the students. The director from Site 1 says that their pastor stops by the classrooms in the mornings to say hi to the preschoolers who affectionately call him “Pastor Ticklebug,” and he will sit down and read them a story. He also “makes the effort to walk the building and come out at recess and play with the kids. He always has tried to make that connection... with the kids. He’s not that big scary pastor that everyone has to stay away from.” He takes the time to get to know the families and works with them to bring them into the church “slowly but surely.”

The same goes for the pastor at the second site. “Our pastor is here every morning, almost every morning. He comes in during either pick-up or drop-off hour.”

The director says that he is a regular figure at the school. Anytime she or the other teachers have concerns or think that they should use his advice, she encourages the parents of the students to speak with the pastor or with the permission of the parents give their number to the pastor to give them a call. She says that the pastor calls the parents and follows through. "He is very much present. The kids know him and the parents know him. So it's really good."

The director at the third site follows the sentiments of the other top sites. "Pastor does a really good job of being a presence in the mornings. He doesn't do it every day but often enough so that people know who he is and that he is the pastor. He will try to be around at pick-up or drop-of." As the director, she is able to work as a team with the pastor to reach different families and parents who have questions.

A lot of times I'll tell him, so and so has been asking a lot of questions and they arrive around such and such a time, so then it is more organic for me to introduce him to them without having me take them down to his office because then it can be intimidating. It makes them more comfortable because they already have a comfortable rapport with me and then it is easier to transfer and introduce him to them. Pastor and I get to kind of be a tag team with this stuff, which makes it so easy. (Site 3 director)

The director encourages the parents that have questions to check out the Bible basics class the pastor teaches. During the classes childcare is included which allows the parents to focus on the class. The pastor has a good relationship with the children as well. Besides the weekly chapel, he plays with the children at recess and teaches catechism and Latin to the middle schoolers.

Intentional strategies to connect families to Jesus and the congregation. The baseline interviewees seem to leave the mentioning of the church and congregation up to chance. They only mention the church and congregation if the parents happen to ask. Otherwise, during the first contact with inquiring families the focus is on the program basics of cost, days, and what is taught.

The baseline interviewees all mentioned that first and foremost they try to find out what the interested families want to know. For the most part, they say the families want to know the cost and what kind of program they run. If the families want more information they are usually invited to come and see the school. One interviewee sends the families their brochure with information. Another gives out her email address and phone number to inquiring families. Only one interviewee mentioned the school as being connected with the church, and it was left up to the chance that the family would read their handbook. The interviewee mentioned that in their handbook it explains precisely what their purpose “and objectives are in connection with the church” (Site 4). And if the parents ask if they have to become members of the church she responds that they don’t have to do anything except to be there when their kids sing in the church. She pointed to the handbook and commented, “but here is what we teach and preach” (Site 4).

The baseline programs mainly take what they do for advertising and consider that their intentional strategies to connect families to Jesus and the congregations. In addition to their advertising strategies they try to get current parents or congregation members to make connections with prospective parents and witness to them about the school and church (Site 4). Another way this interviewee connects the families is by using the children she teaches to spread the Word to the parents. Her enthusiasm is shared with the

students to go and tell their families at home about their Bible lesson and that singing their Bible songs wherever they go is spreading God's Word for others to hear.

One director says that "just letting them (the parents) know we are here and that there is Sunday School, what the church services are, that's the main thing" (Site 6) they do to connect the families as well as having the kids sing in church three times a year. She also gives their secretary, who is the church deaconess, a list of anybody she deems as a potential/possible family. It is the job of the deaconess to find and greet these families. Before they had a deaconess they had a second pastor who would try to get to know the kids and greet them but since his departure the duties have fallen on the deaconess.

Another baseline director says she tries to do a lot of event type programs to connect the families to Jesus and the congregation. She holds a family night right away in September and tries to get congregation members to engage themselves "in some kind of relationship with the other parents" (Site 5) since many of the congregation members no longer have children in the preschool. She has also celebrated Grandparents Day in November, as well as a cookie exchange event in December. Her school also has a Christmas service with which the preschool is involved. She also has a Mom's Night and then a Dad's Night; separate because of multiple split families and also so that the other spouse can stay home with the other children. On those nights she gives a little devotion or has the principal greet the parents in the church before she brings the children down to perform. The principal will show a DVD of the school and talk to the parents about Christian education. When the principal is finished, she brings the children into the church to put on a short program for the parents with the preschoolers performing a play

or some songs they had recently learned. Then they sing a song with the parents, she reads them a story, and they go back to the classroom for a snack and a craft.

The top three sites' approaches to where to begin when first introducing interested families in their early childhood programs set them apart from the three baseline sites. The ministry outreach is immediately felt and is a driving point for the top programs. The way that they introduce their programs and incorporate the church and congregation is both intentional and prominent from the moment the director answers the phone or the interested families step onto the grounds for a tour. The top three programs approach is more direct when it comes to discussing the connection of the school to the church and congregation. The top school's director slowly begins approaching parents to get to know them through discussions but makes a point to "right away tell them that our church and school are one, we are connected" (Site 1). She tries to feel where people are coming from before having them visit and then will have them come for a day or two to see what their program is like. Once she has a feel for the family she asks them if they would like to take a BIC class. She makes sure to let them know that it doesn't mean they have to become a member. Instead, she suggests they take the class "so you know what your children are being taught, we would really like you to go through this class." She says that "it sometimes works and sometimes doesn't. More often than not it does. I try to not make it a really pushy thing." (Site 1)

The second director goes about the introduction in a tour type of way. She gives the inquiring families a foundation of what they teach and "we make sure we let them know it's faith based and how that is the most important thing" (Site 2). She not only discusses what her program does with the students all day long and the different activities

they do with the program but also how they incorporate the children and families into their congregational programs.

The third director makes it a point to start all of her tours in the church and tells the families, “This is the sanctuary, this is where we have worship. We have church on Sunday mornings at 10 a.m. I don’t know if you are looking for a church or not, we’d love to have you visit.” (Site 3) Then she takes them down to view each of the classrooms, whether or not they are looking for a specific program (i.e. infant/toddler room, preschool, kindergarten, etc). She explains to them what happens in the elementary school and the middle school, giving the families a tour of the whole entire campus but always starting with the church first.

The top three programs all make statements connecting the families to the congregation and church on their initial visits and conversations. They make sure to invite the parents to come to their worship services and visit if they would like. They state it in a non-threatening way as a “visit” and each in their own way try not to push this onto the parents. They also make the ties from the school to the church by describing how their programs specifically connect their children and families to the different activities and programs of the church.

When looking at the top ECLCs there are three themes that appear based on the intentional approaches they take to connect families to Jesus and the associated church. These themes are similar to the themes found in the section Attracting the Unchurched: (1) They try to be encouraging rather than pushy. (2) They encourage on multiple occasions throughout the year and (3) they are focused on being personal with each family.

One director really puts the emphasis on not pushing the parents but instead encouraging them to come to church. Even though she has the preschool children sing in church once a month with the rest of the school (preschool through eighth grade) and the parents are invited to come and hear the children sing each time, she insists that she is

Not real pushy... So I kind of make it again non-threatening inviting them to join us and they might just come those Sundays at first but it sometimes turns into more. Sunday School is a big thing to invite them to. And they kind of ease their way in. (Site 1)

Another director states that it is their goal to do the best that they can to bring the families to their faith by “inviting them and not forcing it on them or pushing it, but inviting them and encouraging them to come and join us for worship” (Site 2).

Encouraging on multiple occasions throughout the year is another way that the top ECLCs connect their families to Jesus and the congregation. One director has little passage books (a simple trifold flyer) the school puts together that discusses the church, what the church teaches, what a Lutheran member is and who is Martin Luther. This book is handed out at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. The books are a reminder about their church because “sometimes you can mention it in the beginning but it doesn’t sink in, so you try again in the middle and then you try again at the end and just remind them that we are here.” (Site 2) Her pastor continues encouraging the families all the way through the year and even at graduation the director and pastor view the graduation ceremony as an outreach opportunity because the parents are there and the pastor shares the Gospel with them and encourages them not to be strangers, “Just because your child graduated, don’t make us strangers. Continue to come back.” (Site 2)

The director also informs the parents in newsletters about congregation events, trying to include the school in them as much as possible, “yes, everything our congregation does we try to incorporate our school.” (Site 2) The parents are invited to events the congregation has put together like game nights and the Lutheran Women’s Missionary Society rally. For the church’s spring picnic, they incorporate the preschoolers by having them sing a little and then invite the children and families to have lunch with the congregation. The incorporating goes both ways. The school invites the congregation to everything that the children do,

So when we do our musical, our graduation, our friendship Sundays, we invite our congregation to come and join them, to come and watch, because that gives them an opportunity to meet some of our families and maybe they can make a connection that we (as directors/teachers) didn’t make. (Site 2)

Another strategy the top directors use to connect the families to Jesus and the associated church is by focusing on being personal with each family.

But I just think again, the *personal* touch. Taking the time to make the people feel that *you* care about them. That is the biggest thing that I have found to be effective. When they walk in that door, make them feel welcome, make them feel that you genuinely care about them, which we do. (Site 1)

Not only do the directors strive to have a personal relationship with the parents but also to show the parents that they have personal relationships with their children because that is one of the first connections the directors have with the parents is their child. “If you could get their child to not just want to come to church and they go home and, ‘Mommy,

Mommy, Mrs. ___ is teaching Sunday School' or 'Our teachers are there!'" (Site 2) the parents can see the positive connection that the teachers have with their children.

The top ECLCs make deliberate choices to encourage their families to come to church throughout the year. They also continue to encourage families that have started coming to church and don't give up on them. They advise other directors not to

Feel disheartened if they [the families] don't come to church but never give up. It is nice to see a family come to Christ through you, basically, because by you encouraging them they finally came to church. It's God's work that did it, but you helped it grow. It's great to see that and it's nothing more of a joy than to see a family come to Christ. It is awesome. (Site 2)

Summary of most successful strategies. A recurring theme among the interviewees as a strategy that works best is making a connection and relationship with the parents and children. All of their other suggestions and ideas stem from the desire to build relationships and a good rapport with the families. These include but are not limited to Pastry for Parents, coordinating a pumpkin patch or rummage sale, Friendship Sundays, Christmas pageants, harvest fests, and Family Nights. The top strategy is "getting to know the parents just as best as you possibly can [and] having the most personable relationship that you can with the parents" (Site 3). The more personable the better, "I think when people get a sense of who you are by the face-to-face [contact], they are more easily to trust you than by just sending something out" (Site 4). "The best thing you can do is be good with all your students and their families... I think the best is when we make connections and when the parents make connections" (Site 6). The director

from Site 1 felt like one of her best strategies to building a relationship with the parents is incorporating them in activities with their children to make them feel involved.

Having a personal relationship with the families means knowing who the parents are, where they work, what is going on in their lives and what is going on at home. The director at Site 3 feels that knowing these things is a huge part of her ministry and a very important part “of what we do here. It is an easy way for me to minister to their children. It’s an easy way for me to figure out how to best serve their kids” (Site 3). The relationships start by loving and nurturing the children. The director at Site 2 feels that every year they are progressively becoming more successful because you can see the love the teachers have for the children.

That’s one of the biggest things, having teachers who love doing it. It’s like planting the seed and watching it grow and nurturing it. And that is what we do with our families. I always tell my teachers, the seeds are planted, these babies are the seeds, we not only have to nurture them but we have to do it with the whole family and you do the best you can. I feel that those are the best ways to get the parents in the doors and to share the Gospel with them is by inviting them and making an abundance amount of opportunities for them to come through your doors. Not having a separation between them dropping just off their kid but connecting with them. (Site 2)

By having the close relationships with the families, the directors are then able to have intentional conversations with the parents to invite them to church,

If I know they are really great prospects because I have talked with them and they say, “oh, I should really get to church.” I put them in my preschool class. I put

them right away in my class. Because I want to be able to have those little conversations, I want to look for those opportunities. I want to jump on top of that quick little comment. I want to be there if there is a tough day or a great day, or if there is this problem or this success. So I can be there with a quick little insert or not and “oh, we could do this, or we could do that” and it is very kind of purposeful and thoughtful on how we run those things so that we can set that up and kind of guide some of those steps to, “oh, it’s funny that you should mention that because...” you know to give them the opportunity to make it as natural and less intimidating as possible. (Site 3)

Once the relationships are made they need to be continually nourished. The director from Site 2 says that it is great to invite the parents to come to church, to have those relationships with them, and then for them to come to church. She goes on to state that the ministry does not stop there, you have to talk to the parents about their experiences at church and continue having communication with them otherwise it becomes ineffective. By the same token, she also feels if you are too repetitive you can push them away, so it is about balance.

Along with the directors, teachers, and pastors getting to know the families, having the congregation build relationships with the school families is also important. Site 2 has a lot of congregational events that the school is included in and vice versa, the congregation is invited to attend everything that the school does, from their musical to their graduation. The director sees this as an opportunity for the congregation to meet some of the families and make a connection that they as called workers might not make.

Therefore, the strategies that the directors see as having the best results are simple ones, mainly having positive relationships with the families. As the director from Site 1 put it, “pretty much what we are doing are simple things... Nothing extraordinary, nothing big but are just simple, connecting. It’s those connections that make the difference. One at a time.”

Ineffective strategies. While most of the interviewees focused on ineffective strategies for bringing families into the school, which included putting an ad in the newspaper, handing out flyers, and sending out postcards, a few gave some insight into strategies that they feel were ineffective for connecting families to the church. The principal of Site 4 said that running a Vacation Bible School as an outreach seemed unrealistic. While he said it was still a valuable thing to do, many parents look at it as a free babysitting service. A few of the directors mentioned singing in church, that it gets some of the people in church but that it is not what gets people to stick around. Some tried singing in church but found that it did not go well. The director from Site 6 said that “singing isn’t super effective” along with the director from Site 3 who has the preschoolers sing only for the Christmas program and at graduation because of the crazy spectacle it can become when preschoolers and new-to-the-church parents are in attendance. She had parents with cameras all over the place, parents who would army crawl in front of her to take pictures of their children and parents who were “thinking that it is night at the Apollo.” Instead they try to keep the church service a church service and the focus where it should be, on Christ.

A few of the directors went back to connections with the parents, and the lack of connection as being a top strategy that does not work. When working with parents and

encouraging them to come to church, after they have attended, the director from Site 2 says that it is important to follow up with how their experience went and to continue the conversation of church with the family, “if you don’t continue it, it becomes ineffective.” The principal from Site 4 mentioned that unfortunately, one of their strategies they have been using for a long time is their default strategy of hoping the parents will like them as teachers and will naturally want to become part of the church without them having to do anything or saying anything else, “I think if you actually say it out loud you see how silly that is. I think that is what a lot of people do, just be a school and then when they are in your doors they will naturally want to make them be a part of the church.” The director from Site 6 also mentioned that failed connections and its importance on getting the families into the church, “I think if you didn’t make an effort to help them connect with other people, then it doesn’t work.” The director from Site 3 echoes these sentiments,

Not making an effort. As simple as it sounds... It’s those little things, making that extra effort, it’s going to show. And I think that is something that we don’t have the luxury of doing. We are in a mission congregation and setting. You have to. No ifs ands or buts. You always have to make the effort. I think sometimes in the Midwest and non-mission areas, you get caught up in the fact that, I’ll get to it later. You can’t. You have to take advantage of every opportunity when it is there because it may not present itself. And I think those strategies are ineffective, “oh it will happen again.” No, it may not... Finally, when you are in a mission setting, anything that you do to reach out to people and make a connection with them will work, it may not work that day, that week, that month, but it will make an

impression on them in some way at some point, and at some point you will come back to it. (Site 3)

Observation Analysis and Findings

A review of the observations made on-site show that each school is a quality program in its own right. Each early childhood center met the expectations one would have for a WELS preschool encompassing a clean and orderly facility, Christian symbolism throughout the classroom and building, and a warm and friendly environment created through personal connections from the directors and staff.

Facilities. The facilities observed at each ECLC were the outside of the building, the entryway and flow to the classroom, and inside the classroom. The facilities were at least adequate, if not better, in each school. From the outside of the center buildings, there is nothing of substance that would set apart the top sites from the baseline sites apart. The buildings were well maintained with the name of the schools written on the buildings. The environment on the inside of the buildings set the two groups apart a fraction. While both groups had synod, church, and school information present in the forms of posters and bulletin boards, outside the classroom, none of the sites had displays in the classroom advertising congregational events, and the baseline groups tended to have cluttered and unsightly displays.

At Site 1, a big painted wall mural with the mission statement was one of the first items that catch the eye when entering the building. Against one of the walls was a table with a trifold about the school “Come Meet Our Family!” On this table, there was a lot of information about the school, including a FAQ sheet, singing schedule, small trifold flyer, this month’s school calendar, a school binder of information, Meditations (a WELS

publication), church and school information, and the preschool teacher's personal business card. There was a big wooden bulletin board, almost the length of the wall that was slotted so that information containers could be hung from them. This bulletin board was streamlined, very tidy, and professional looking. It contained lots of information from the church and synod. Some of the information provided included: paper information on church history, more Meditations, MLC In Focus magazines, VBS flyers, Video Game Tournament entry form, Martin Luther Service Association (for seniors), two different copies of the church's bulletins, church schedule with worship times/services and meetings, school trifold flyer, Thrivent Giving Program, WLCFS information, a small trifold on The Great Exchange, Membership Report, Food Stamp Program information, and the pastor's business card. Site 1 also had a visible and clearly labeled directory map showing the church, school, preschool, handicap ramp, secretary's office, and pastor's office. Our synod high schools and colleges were represented in posters on the wall as well as a VBS poster with a handwritten message to "Join us on Sunday morning" with service and Sunday School times listed.

Upon entering Site 2, it was light and bright like Site 1 with lots of natural light. Across from the large secretary's desk is an eye catching full wall mural of children with Jesus. Next to the mural were two tidy bulletin boards with pictures and names of the staff. There was a wall of information by the front door containing the information that has to be posted in a licensed center. Another bulletin board contained school information like the school calendar, preschool poster, and a newsletter for the preschool. Outside the classrooms are pictures that the children made. There was also another bulletin board with information pertaining to the individual classroom.

The first thing a parent would see as they enter the school at Site 3, would be a large colorful bulletin board with school information: school news, fire drill record, fundraiser information, items that parents can bring in to help the school, a school schedule, and a school calendar. On the left was a tuition box by the front doors and easily visible as parents are exiting the building. There were three other large, but tidy, bulletin boards in the school hallway. The hallway was long and bright with natural light and very clean. The bulletin board near the narthex which is the far end of the school's main entrance but closest to the church's entrance, includes the school newsletter, a student spotlight section, classroom news and reminders, things needed for the upcoming summer camp, a LWMS newsletter, a VBS sign up for helpers, a signup sheet for Sunday snacks, and a schedule for church cleaning, greeters, and ushers. While the principal's office is across the hall from the director's office, the pastor's office is near the narthex.

When the parents walk in the building to Site 4, there was a hallway with lockers on the right side and five bulletin boards in a row on the left. The first bulletin board was dark and had only a few things posted: Bible Information Class information, a church calendar, and birthdays. The second bulletin board was labeled as the "Parent Connection" board with information scattered over a bright red background. Each piece of information was posted in a different manner, some pinned on all four corners, some hanging by one corner, and posted at different heights on the board; some information was close together and some was randomly placed farther apart from the other pages. The information that was listed on this board were: speech therapy poster, weather wardrobe guidelines, school closings for snow, school newsletter, MLC breaking ground picture, summer camp poster (not Christian), and health guidelines. The third bulletin board

displayed four of the children's work. The fourth bulletin board was skinny and had hot lunch information with a calendar. The fifth bulletin board had faded background paper with faded spots where posters used to hang. This bulletin board was labeled "Youth" at the top. On it was a poster for Camp Phillip, an MLC and WLC poster, a What About Jesus? poster, and coupons for youth activities. Farther down the hallway where there is open wall (no lockers) the walls were covered in different teacher-made posters with the ABCs on them.

When the parents enter Site 5, straight ahead of them is a "Welcome to our School" painted on the wall above a trophy case. To the left of the main doors, a small table was set up with school information. There was a small poster board on the table with pictures and the school motto on it. In front of the board, lying on the table, were a preschool flyer, a school flyer, and a DVD with school pictures and information. To the right of the main doors was a bulletin board that was heavily cluttered with overlapping papers. Some of the documents were: ongoing project to support the church and school, a school cleaning list, a copy of the school newsletter, a flyer for an upcoming concert by a Christian band, immunization program certificate of achievement, fine arts camp information (unrelated to the school), GPA/Eligibility report with a list of the names of the students with lots of their personal information (their rank in school, year in school, ID number, GPA, and who received high honors and honors), football and basketball games dates, pages with many names in different colors, a Michigan Lutheran Seminary poster that took up a lot of space and was covered up on the edges with overlapping papers, two different reports on news from the Dominican Republic, another poster for the Christian band's concert, and a Parents in Prayer flyer that was hidden at the bottom

of the board. On the outside of the preschool door was a large sign “It’s Been a Whale of a Year in Preschool!” and around this were whale cutouts with the children’s names and a quote of their favorite part of preschool. The rest of the door was filled with pictures of the director with her own children and grandchildren. Across from the preschool room was another bulletin board that was tidy in presenting the “I AM” display. Closer to the narthex there were shadow portraits of the preschool children.

Outside of the classroom at Site 6 and surrounding the door were different posters and flyers: preschool forms, handbooks, poster for a no nut classroom allergy, and child safety posters. On the door to the classroom was a kids’ camp child care for the summer poster. Farther away from the door but could be seen when parents are walking out was a bulletin board for the preschool. The bulletin board was heavily cluttered and the background paper was very busy with contrasting designs and colors. The documents that were hanging were overlapping each other so that a lot of the information could not be read unless you were to push back the top pages. The information that was found on this board were: teacher’s license (covered by papers and coupons), school newsletters (but these were pinned on top of each other), a school DVD, a field trip document, snacks list for parents to know their day to bring in the snack, a schedule for each of the classes and who should be there, and two different calendars. The area where the children put their backpacks was decorated with child artwork above the rack to hang their backpacks. Many of the artworks are overlapping each other.

The displays inside the classroom were warm and inviting to the parents for the top sites and most of the baseline sites. The atmosphere was aided by displays of the children’s work, lots of natural light, space for learning and playing, clean and organized

appearance, and minimal bulletin boards found inside the classroom. There were no bulletin boards inside the classroom at Site 1 but there was a Morning Message that the parents read with their child when they first came into the room. The room was spacious and neat with different areas for learning and playing, and ample amount of natural light that came in through the windows. The classroom of Site 2 was not as large as Site 1 but it too was clean and organized. It was bright inside the classroom with natural light and bright colors from the wall paint and displays. The first thing that greets a person entering the room was a wall of crosses in different sizes and colors. The room was divided into the different sections of work and play with a large supply of books along the back wall neatly organized in sections with containers so the children would know where to return the book once it had been used. The teachers at Site 2 wore polos with the school's name on it as well as badges. The teachers at Site 3 also wore badges. The preschool rooms were large with big windows that let natural light shine in. There were posters of Bible verses on the walls but no other information for parents, instead the information was outside the classroom on bulletin boards. There once again was ample space for play and learning at Site 3, and the facilities appeared to be clean and organized.

Site 4 reflects the observations found at the top sites. The classroom was bright and open with windows along one wall, the blinds were open and natural light filled the room. In between the large windows was the word wall bulletin board. The remaining three walls were covered by either a bulletin board or white board. One white board was clean with two pictures of presidents and parts of a story. There was a spring bulletin board with plant sections and pictures of butterflies that the students had made. On another wall, the birthday months took up a whole bulletin board the size of the wall. The

front of the classroom had a calendar, days of the week, letter Zz, and 100s chart along with a smaller whiteboard with pictures of potted plants. There was a big square carpet on the floor with a piano used as a barrier for the space and the reading/quiet corner. Above the quiet corner on the bulletin board were posters of shapes. In the back of the classroom was the director's corner with cabinets and a desk. Site 5 had no bulletin boards inside the classroom but there were Biblical posters along with the ABCs and numbers hung on the wall. Information required by licensing and a few forms for parents were taped on the wall next to the door. There was a lot of natural light here as well along with a clean and organized appearance with space for learning and playing. Site 6 was a large room and had the capacity to have natural light with windows all along one side of the rectangular room but not too much light was coming in because of the blinds and items blocking the windows. Crowded furniture, high shelving that was filled to the brim with items, and what little wall space there was in the room was covered with faded posters left the room feeling not as warm and welcoming. There were two bulletin boards near the door, one with licensing required documents and the other with information for the parents on faded paper.

Christian symbolism. The Christian atmosphere was evident at all six sites from the displays on the walls that expressed trust in God, advertisements for church organizations and activities, and encouragement for children and families to become part of God's family. All sites had forms of Christian symbolism throughout their facilities, both outside and inside the classroom.

The moment you stepped into the school building of Site 1 you were met with a reminder of what type of school you were entering, one that holds Christ above all else.

There was a big painted wall mural with the mission statement of making disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity “to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service, all to the glory of God.” In their neatly organized information section there were many church and Biblical documents (some examples are noted in the above section). When you first walk into the school building of Site 2 there was a floor to ceiling painted wall mural of children with Jesus and the name of the school over the top of the mural. Across this on the opposite wall there was a bulletin board with a Bible passage at the top, and all the children’s handprints making up a globe in the center of the bulletin board. Site 4 had WELS school posters hanging as well as a “What About Jesus?” poster displayed along with a large poster in the center of the hallway with a condensed version of the school’s mission statement. Outside the classroom of Site 5 was a large bulletin board with the words “I AM” and pictures of God’s creation, each containing a Bible passage describing who our almighty God is and what he has done. There was also a school book poster with “Jesus is Always with Us” written on it. As the parents leave the classroom they would see a banner over the doorway in the hallway that read “Love One Another” and a poster “Questions, Turn to God” on the left of the doors.

When you first enter the classroom of Site 2, parents and children see a wall covered in colorful crosses in all different sizes with the Bible passage “Rejoice in the LORD always” displayed. Site 3 also had prominent displays of posters of Bible verses on the walls inside the classroom. Posters with positive affirmations like “Each of us matters to God” were visible in the classroom of Site 5 along with a poster that read “Love One Another.”

Personal connections. One resonating commonality among all six sites were the personal connections that the directors made with parents and children. All staff observed (from the secretaries, principals and classroom aides, to the other faculty from the upper grades, and pastors) were warm, friendly, and inviting in words and actions which showed that they truly cared about each individual that came into their presence. Communication between parents and staff of the ECLC was noted and observed to be often to frequent for all of the sites, some with daily folders and all with some form of frequent newsletter. The majority of the staff would greet the children and parents by name as they entered the school and would hold conversations with each of them. At times the greetings were given in the parents' and child's native language. One director showed warmth and hospitality when talking to parents and children by laughing with them and giving high-fives to the children. Another director created a welcoming atmosphere by smiling and joking with the parents and children, making sure to give time and attention to each of them. Most of the time the conversations were about the day or night before and some were the exchange of information about how the child's morning was going thus far (a normal and important exchange of information in an early childhood setting). The staff was able to communicate with the parents about the children freely. The directors would also acknowledge and speak with any siblings that came into the classroom. One child's siblings were so happy in the classroom that they did not want to leave the classroom and threw a fit. The children were happy when arriving at school besides the very few whose first day it was and another who was having a hard time separating from the parent. In both cases, the staff were able to comfort and soothe the upset child. Several children would hug the directors as they entered the classroom.

Document Analysis and Findings

When reviewing the documents from each ECLC: policy handbooks, registration forms, newsletters, and bulletins, special notice was given to any inclusions or comments on the church, pastor, baptism, and invitations to attend worship services.

Policy handbook. A policy handbook is given to every parent of a child that attends a preschool. Inside the handbook is valuable information of rules, policies, philosophies, goals, and objectives the preschool follows and gives the parent an outline of what to expect during the year. Parents keep this book on hand and can review it or look up their questions before contacting the teacher if they have further questions. Three of the policy handbooks had the church's name on the front cover along with the school's name. Two more of the schools had the name of the church on the front because the school shares the name of the church but it did not specifically say "Name" Lutheran Church and School. One of the baseline schools did not have the church's name on the front and the preschool has a completely different name than the church. It is not until the fourth page under the philosophy of education, that the name of the church is given.

Some form of contact information is given from each school. Site 1 only gives contact information for the preschool but no other names or contact information is given. Site 2 gives school contact information but it also gives the names of the pastor and director; the pastor at this time was acting as principal. The remaining four schools, one top school and the three baseline schools, all had pastor, principal, and director contact information listed in the policy handbook.

Five of the six schools had some form of statement that connected the school to the church. Site 3 stated right away in their introductory section that the school is "an arm

of the ministry of” the church. Site 1 stated in their mission statement that the preschool has a two-fold purpose in mind: to assist members of the church and sister congregations in following Christ’s command to “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4), and the second purpose is “to evangelize to unchurched families, witnessing to them about God’s plan for salvation. In the philosophy of education portion of Site 4’s policy handbook they wrote that the preschool is “an extension and under the guides of” the church. Near the back of Site 5’s handbook and in a more obscure section of Tuition and Fees, the preschool makes connections with the church by stating, “the preschool program is an education agency of” the church. Site 2 only lists on of the responsibilities of the pastor as being the “liaison between school and church.” Site 6 did not make any outwardly statements connecting the school and the church.

Two of the baseline schools included information about church organizations and one had an invitation for families to join them for worship. Site 4 stated in the attendance section that the families of the preschool are encouraged to “join our church family on Sunday mornings for worship.” Then the parents are directed to speak with the pastor for more information about their church or membership opportunities. This section also says that the children will be singing in church on several occasions and that the children are strongly encouraged to “attend at least those dates.” On the last page of Site 5’s handbook, it includes some information about the church ministry by listing church services, Bible classes, the parent/teacher organization, youth group, Pioneers group, VBS, and Sunday School, but no times or other information is given about these parts of the ministry. Two of the baseline preschools require or encourage the nonmember families to attend adult information class. Site 5 requires that the parents must attend

adult information class within the first year of having their child enrolled at the school. Site 6 encourages parents that are not WELS members to attend the adult information classes to learn more about “our doctrine, teachings, and practices.”

Registration forms. Registration forms must be filled out prior to the child entering the school. It is a time for directors to get valuable information both from a legal standpoint and from a “get-to-know-your-child” better standpoint. Five of the six preschools had space on their registration forms asking if the family had a home church. Site 1 went as far as to ask this question three times, one pertaining to the child, and then asking separately for the father and mother if they attend church and Bible study regularly. Four of the six registration forms asked if the child was baptized. Site 3 did not ask if a child was baptized and Site 2 did not ask for a home church or if the child was baptized.

Two of the preschools addressed taking adult information classes if they were not members of the WELS. Site one stated, “would you be willing to attend a series of classes on the doctrines and teachings of the WELS Lutheran Church?” with the following portion in parenthesis: “Attendance does NOT obligate you to become a member, nor are they required for preschool admittance.” Site 2 also stated that parents without membership at the church are “strongly encouraged” to attend four sessions of their Bible Information Class.

On the registration forms two of the preschools took the opportunity to include information about the church ministry. Site 4’s documents read under Christian fellowship activities, “we seek to connect our school families with opportunities to grow in Jesus” and listed information on the minister of family and youth (the principal’s

additional job) along with an invitation to join them for Sunday School (with the time printed), Reformation Fall Festival, Christmas and Easter for Kids, and VBS for the summer. Site 5 also included times of worship and Sunday School on the tri-fold that goes with the registration forms. The tri-fold also included full information on the director with phone numbers for the pastor and principal.

Newsletters. Newsletters are a way for the director to get information out quickly to the parents and keep them up to date with what is going on in the classroom and congregation. All of the preschools had a school newsletter and three had a newsletter just for the preschool. Only one newsletter, the one from Site 2, had contact information for the preschool on the front. None of the other newsletters had contact information for the school, church, pastor, principal, or director. Most of the school newsletters had very little information pertaining to the preschool and were geared more towards the elementary and middle school.

There were very few congregational events listed or invitations to join worship. Site 1 had congregation events listed to celebrate the kindergarten and eighth grade graduation as well as celebrating on another Sunday for the Confirmands. Site 2, while it did not have any congregational events listed in its newsletter, did have a large section on the front of the newsletter dedicated to a Bible lesson/devotion and at the bottom of this section was an invitation to “join us for worship at” church with the date (Sundays) and time. On the back of the newsletter was another portion of space inviting families to join them for Sunday worship with times for Sunday School and the worship service included. Site 3 provided one congregational event for a family night event with dinner and prayer service. Site 4 did not have any congregational events but it did have a statement about

the children singing for the coming Sunday service. Site 5's school newsletter mentioned the congregational event of celebrating the Ascension of our Lord with a special service and an invitation of "please join us." Site 6's school newsletter had a specific message for members of the church to attend a meeting after church. There was also an invitation for anyone interested in seeing the area Lutheran high school's musical production. On the back of the newsletter was information that the monthly women's Bible study had been changed to a different date but no place or time was included. In the preschool newsletter for this site there was a mention of a Good Friday service and the time it started but it was there primarily to remind the parents that there was school until the service started.

Bulletin. The bulletin is viewed by the congregation members. When looking at these bulletins specific attention was paid if the bulletin contained the name and contact information for the preschool, contact information for the director, if any school events were included, and if an invitation was presented to the congregation to join in on the preschool event.

Site 1 had just pastor contact information and no mention of the school on the front of the bulletin. The preschool was mentioned near the back to inform the congregation that the school was enrolling for the next school year. Site 2 had contact information for both the pastor and director on the front of the bulletin. It also included the name of the church and school on the front. In the announcements section, they had school information and a request for the congregation to put two events in their calendars. Site 3 had only the pastor's contact information. On the announcements page, they included a school event with a request for help moving the classrooms around. There was also information about other items happening at the school (middle school age).

In the bulletin for Site 4 there was contact information for the pastor, principal, and director. In the calendar of upcoming events for the week, the preschool entertainment night was included. Along with the bulletin there was a congregational newsletter and there was a section on the preschool with figures on enrollment numbers and a note about the entertainment night (no time of when it was taking place), and information on when the last day of school would be. No contact information for the principal or director for Site 5. The bulletin did not mention the name of the school. On the calendar in the back it did have the school play listed with “pot luck following.” The mention of the play was the only time the school was noted within the entire bulletin. Site 6 had the pastor and principal contact information on the front and the director’s contact information on the inside in the section about the preschool being open for enrolling. There was no other information about other school events happening.

Summary

This chapter focused on the information received and learned from the on-site visits. From the Interview, Observation, and Document Reviews, the top sites stand out with their intentional and prominent ministry outreach to connect the families to Jesus and their congregations.

Chapter V: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This study answers the research questions, “What policies or procedures are instrumental in assisting the ECLC to achieve its outreach goal to connect parents and children to Jesus and the associated church?” This final chapter is a summary of the results analyzing the data found at the ECLC sites. Conclusions are drawn and recommendations made for ECLCs and their congregations to follow as well as recommendations for further research.

Summary of the Results

The top three sites and baseline programs all believed that personal connections that the directors made with parents and children are key to connecting the families to Jesus and the congregation. They felt that the connections are what make the difference, and not just superficial relationships but relationships that go much deeper with time.

What sets the top three sites apart from the baseline programs that lead to success are their intentional and prominent outreach ministry strategies to connect the parents and children to Jesus and their associated church. Their good educational practices, organization of their documents, tidiness of their facilities, and appearance of Christian symbolism in their buildings and classrooms, all lead the families into their ECLC programs so that the most important work of their ministry can begin. From their initial tours of their facilities, to their documents, to their welcoming atmosphere in their classrooms, their focus is on bringing these families to know their Savior. Personal connections and Gospel invitations by the director and/or teachers are the keys to communicating the Gospel in ways that connect with the families and give the Holy

Spirit the opportunity to work in their hearts. The top sites frequently invite their children and families to church and congregation events. They seek out those that are unchurched or who are in need of spiritual guidance. They do not push but remain open and gently keep encouraging them. The presence of the pastors from the top sites also set apart the top sites from the baseline sites. They were all very present and active both with the children and the parents.

The baseline programs practice incidental evangelism. They leave the mentioning of the church and congregation up to chance. They miss the opportunity to start connecting the parents and children to Jesus and the congregation from the very beginning. Even after a family had joined their program the directors infrequently invited the families to church or other congregational events; some feeling that they would be too forward and pushy if they would say anything. The absence of pastors was strongly felt at all of the baseline sites, and these three directors were eager for their pastors to support them in their ministries.

Conclusions

Although each of the centers meet the criteria of what one would expect of a WELS preschool, these, of themselves, are insufficient for Gospel ministry. While having good educational practices and clean and maintained facilities are important for enrolling students, and wall decorations are important for communicating a Christian culture, these, in and of themselves, are insufficient to connect the Gospel to the lives of children and parents. In his essay, *Of Snakes and Doves: Using Our Heads and Following Christ's Heart in Evangelism*, Daniel Leyrer emphasizes the draw of a Christian school environment where the parents feel safe in placing their children in the school's care,

especially an ECLC, “The growth of the number of early childhood schools in our church body is testimony to something evangelists have known for years. Nothing attracts the unchurched to our churches more than quality care and education for their children” (p. 6) and from this, it gives the congregation and school family “the opportunity to place the gospel on young hearts.” These factors instead are the first steps of getting families in the doors of a school and church so that the congregation and school have the opportunities to reach out to these families and it gives the Holy Spirit the opportunity and time to work in their hearts. The Commission on Lutheran Schools (2001) stated,

As parents enroll their children in an early childhood ministry, the congregation can offer opportunities for worship, personal contact, and the invitation to become part of a Christian congregation that brings people into the arms of Jesus. Doors are opened to families with baptized and unbaptized children. The congregation gains the opportunity to present the message of salvation and to lead parents and children to receive the blessings of Christ through baptism. They can provide spiritual nurture opportunities so that each believer can grow in his/her faith. (p. 2)

The interview and observation reviews confirm the previous findings in the literature review that the personal connections and Gospel invitations by the director and/or teachers are the keys to communicating the Gospel in ways that connect with people. All of the directors and their staff were warm and inviting to parents and children and spoke in their interviews about connecting with the families. The top site directors strategically placed importance on these connections and conversations by frequently inviting the families to church, talking about their Savior with them, and seeking out

those who needed a church home or spiritual guidance. This follows Jesus' example of coming "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). The pastors of the top sites also stood out in their repeated visits and personal connections with not only the children but also the parents. They were more than just a name or face; they became someone the children admired and a spiritual leader that the parents could turn to.

Recommendations

WELS ECM leaders should meet with their fellow faculty, staff, and pastors to make a plan of what outreach strategies they would like to implement. Outreach ministry needs to be intentional and a prominent part of their everyday affairs.

Recommendation 1: Create a warm and inviting, mission-focused facility.

Together they should examine their programs that are already in place and ponder on these questions: Do the documents, especially registration documents, reflect the mission goals? If not, what changes need to take place? Things to think of including would be a space to find out if the family has a home church and if their child is baptized. After getting to know the families then inquire about the home church in person; some may put it down that they have a home church but never actually go to church. Does the program reflect the best educational practices known in early childhood? Professional development may be needed to refresh and stay up to date on current best practices in the early childhood field. Remember that parents are looking for a quality educational program for their child and this is one of the reasons they will inquire of the preschool program. Is the facility clean, well maintained, and pleasing to the eye? All efforts should be made to have a clean facility to not become a hindrance or stumbling block of any kind that may prevent a family from choosing the program as their choice of educational

setting for their child. Create a warm and inviting atmosphere from the moment a family steps into the building. Displays should be bright and updated frequently (no faded paper). They should be neatly organized and offer information not only about the school but about the congregation as well; such as current events taking place, and also spiritual information like trifold of frequently asked Bible questions, or information that will connect them to their Savior. Does the center have Christian symbolism that reflects the mission purpose and goals? The top sites all had large murals of Jesus or their mission statement boldly displayed along with Bible passages, crosses, and positive Christian encouragement posters and bulletin boards throughout their building and classrooms. By asking these questions and following through by setting a timeline of when each step will be completed, and removing any physical hindrance, this will create the best program to bring people into the center so that the Holy Spirit has the opportunity to work on their hearts.

Recommendation 2: Intentionalize a personal relationship with children and caregivers. Now that more of the physical aspects have been assessed and planned, the focus as a group will be on how to strengthen and maintain the personal connections and relationships with each child, their parent, and their families. As a director and teacher, how will you carve out daily time to connect? It can be as simple as intentionally saying hello to the parent, calling them by name, and asking them how their job is going. For a sibling, knowing their name and being able to talk to them about something that interests them, or for a younger one maybe early childhood milestone they have recently achieved such as crawling, saying their first words, or for an older sibling what they are studying in the upper grades, losing their first tooth, or an afterschool activity that they are passionate

about. Each day is an opportunity to learn a little bit about them and gain their trust.

When the trust is there this study has shown that it is easier for the parents to turn to the director when they need help or guidance and for the director to then share the loving Gospel message with them and in turn invite them once again to church.

Recommendation 3: Implement a comprehensive harvest strategy. Along with planning for daily intentional interactions with parents and children, a center should also make a plan to be intentional about inviting them to church and other congregational events. It does not need to be pushy and frequent to the point of them not listening anymore but gently keep encouraging the parents and intentionally seek out opportunities to invite them to church. The top directors lead by example and invited new families who felt uncomfortable coming to a service to sit by their own family. All staff, secretaries, aides in the classroom, and all the way to janitorial staff should be welcoming to children and parents. With a smile, greet them with a genuine “How are you today?” Pastors should take note the importance this study has placed on their presence. From the literature review, to the interviews, to the observations, they all pointed to the pastor being more than just a familiar face and being truly part of the ECM. Pastors should plan intentional ways for them to connect with the children and parents, whether stopping by the classroom, holding chapel services or devotions with the preschoolers, playing with them at recess, and being present and friendly with the parents either at drop-off or pick-up. Just as the teachers are making the one-on-one personal connections, the pastors are challenged to do the same. Before the families sit on the church pews, they will get to know their child’s teacher and the pastor. The pastor will be the smiling face that makes coming to church for the first time in a long time or the very first time, not so scary. The

pastor's friendliness will gain the trust of the families so that they can ask the harder questions of the Bible that they have pondered and the pastor's knowledge and wisdom will lead them to Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to do his work.

Recommendation 4: Shamelessly encourage a relationship with Jesus Christ and the church. After this core group, WELS ECM leaders (faculty, staff, and pastors), has met together it is time to meet with the Board of Education and heads of the congregation, such as Elders or Trustees, to get them on board with the intentional plan of reaching out to the preschool families to bring them into the loving family of Christ. All of your additional plans and actions will stem from this intentional purpose of connecting with the children and families. Make a plan of intentional opportunities to connect the congregation to the school families. Set up events with many examples found in this study, to bridge the gap between school and church. And then have a congregational meeting and let them in on what this outreach mission is all about. The meeting could take place during a Sunday School class or take place over several weeks, giving a few suggestions during announcements after church has ended, or possibly even built into a sermon series based on Jesus command of going and making disciples. His words are for each and every believer, and what better way than practicing it within our own school and church body. Remind the congregation to be friendly to any new faces they may see sitting in the pews or at the congregation and school events, and if they see a preschool family to go up and introduce themselves and make their acquaintance. This is a great place for the director and pastors to step in and help find congregation members or families that would be great to pair up with a new preschool family to build a relationship. Let the congregational members know that you are purposefully pairing

them with this family to be a friendly face and help them in any way to make a connection with your church.

Most of all, have courage when speaking to the families about Jesus and inviting them to come to church or a congregational event, for it is not you who speaks but the Holy Spirit through you. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” Joshua 1:9. Do not be afraid of rejection, you may get a lot of it, but gently keep encouraging each family and each individual that crosses your path like a sculptor chiseling little by little, and very gently to not gouge a large crack, until they have reached their goal. “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord” 2 Timothy 1:7-8a. And remember, although these strategies may seem simple, they will have a lasting impact, as the director from Site 1 said, “pretty much what we are doing are simple things... Nothing extraordinary, nothing big but are just simple, connecting. It’s those connections that make the difference. One at a time.”

One recommendation for further research would be to replicate this study. Another would be to revisit the six schools and see how their ministries are growing and if there have been changes in the top or baseline schools that have had positive/negative impacts. Another recommendation is to broaden the study by including a broader spectrum of WELS ECMs to increase generalizability.

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Appendix A: Phone Call/Email

Hello Director _____,

My name is Maria Ginés and I am a graduate student of MLC. I am completing the Master's program with a thesis. I am using a case study approach to investigate the Early Childhood Ministries in the WELS in achieving their outreach goal of connecting the families to Jesus and the congregation. From the 2011-2012 WELS Early Childhood Ministries statistics, you have been chosen to participate in this study. You, your school, and your congregation will be kept confidential. You will have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

As a participant in the study I would like to come and visit your school. I will interview you about the policies and procedures you have in place in terms of building relationships with the parents and helping the parents connect to the congregation. I would also like to look at any policy handbooks you have as well as registration forms.

It is my prayer that with this information I will be able to help other ECLCs in the WELS help their families make lasting connections to Jesus and the congregations.

If yes: Thank you so much for being willing to participate! The first thing we need to do is set a time for me to come to your school.

If no: Thank you so much for your time. May the Lord continue to bless you and your ministry!

Appendix B: Interview Questions

- Tell me about the strategies you use when introducing your program and the congregation to inquiring parents.
- What, if anything, do you do to specifically attract the unchurched?
- How do you identify the church affiliation, if any, of the families who enroll?
- What intentional strategies do you have in place to connect families to Jesus and the congregation?
- In your experience what strategies are having the best results?
- Which seem to be ineffective?

Appendix C: Observation Checklist

- Communication between parents and staff of ECLC
 - 1 Limited 2 Often 3 Frequent
- Staff communicating to parents about their children
 - 1 Limited 2 Often 3 Frequent
- Nature or content of the communication
- Warm atmosphere between staff and parents
- Children happy when the parents leave
- Parents are invited to church/Sunday school
 - Weekly to Monthly
- Displays in classroom: warm and inviting to parents?
- Displays in classroom advertising congregation events
- Information going out to parents in newsletters about congregation events
 - 1 Limited 2 Often 3 Frequent
- Pastor is or is not present
 - How often is pastor present?
 - What is pastor doing?
- Descriptive Narrative