

Chapter One

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Honors

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### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to study the role of education in today's society, specifically the education given through a parochial elementary school in an urban setting. This project aims to expose the challenges presented to such schools, as well as examine possible solutions to those challenges. In this regard, the project will study the school as an institution, but will also narrow in on the personal effects of education on individual students.

In the current age of urbanization, many social problems come along with increased populations of the poor, marginalized, or underprivileged. Some think that the solution to these problems comes through education. If this is true, then the well-being of the nation's future rests on the performance of teachers, administrators, and schools of various kinds. The better educators can understand and reach those being educated, the brighter the vision of future society. As if studying an entire planet from one small sample, this project will explore the realm of parochial education in an urban setting from one particular specimen: Trinity First Lutheran School of Minneapolis, MN.

### **The Organization**

Trinity First Lutheran School (TFLS) was founded in 1859 by Trinity First Lutheran Church, a congregation of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, making it the oldest Lutheran elementary school in Minnesota. Trinity First Lutheran Church was started in 1856 when missionary Ferdinand Sievers came to Minneapolis to work among the Chippewa natives and the German immigrants. TFLS was created when the newly formed congregation passed a resolution that “the pastor teach school” (Doepke & Doepke, 2009, p. 1).

Throughout its 150-year history, TFLS has seen many changes. The school has been lead by 19 different principals and has been housed in four different dedicated buildings (Doepke &

Doepke, 2009). Many of the changes at the school reflect the changes of the geographic area. While the student body was entirely caucasian until the 1960s, white students are now the minority, as African American, Chinese, Native American, and other nationalities fill the classrooms. To date, the school has educated about 10,000 students (Mariucci Video Productions, n.d.).

Officially stated, “The mission of Trinity First School is to provide a Christ-centered foundation for life through academics, athletics and the arts” (Trinity First Lutheran School, n.d., para. 1). In providing this foundation, the school places emphasis on building strong relationships with not only the students, but with the students' families as well. One example of this focus is the weekly family worship services that were held at the school until recently (S. Wippich, personal communication, November 23, 2009). Because many of these families will move multiple times to different homes, and the children will transfer to a handful of schools, it is important for TFLS to provide as strong a base as possible, providing some degree of structure to otherwise unorganized living situations.

Unlike some private educational institutions, Trinity First Lutheran School does not limit its enrollment to top academic achievers. In fact, the school is very proud of their special education program, called the Tree House, for students with learning disabilities. Some of these students have diagnosed learning handicaps, while others have discipline or social issues that keep them from performing well in a traditional classroom environment. For many students, the goal of the special education program is to help them develop skills so that they can leave the program and integrate back into regular classroom settings (S. Wippich, personal communication, November 23, 2009). This special education program allows many students to

receive a great deal of one-on-one assistance, meaning they get even greater attention than that already possible in the small class sizes offered at TFLS.

Even though many students are benefitted by the Tree House program, TFLS is also not limited to students with learning disabilities. TFLS prides itself in catering to the needs and gifts of students of all kinds. This is no small feat for an institution with so small a staff and so few resources (at least when compared to the public schools in the area).

Unfortunately, because many of the students come from unhealthy family situations and poor or marginalized households, they are more prone to make inappropriate life decisions (S. Wippich, personal communication, November 23, 2009). Seeing this problem, TFLS has responded accordingly. While a great deal of emphasis is placed upon academic study, liberal arts, and preparation for higher education, the school aims to develop more than just the students' "book smarts." According to their website, "The goal of it's [sic] teachers is to help the students develop their total potential by cultivating their talents and skills for responsible living as an individual and as a member of Christ's family and our society" (Trinity First Lutheran School, n.d., para. 1). In the simplest sense and at the lowest level, TFLS hopes to keep kids "off the streets" and in a productive occupation.

At its start, TFLS was funded almost entirely by the church. The first families paid very little tuition. Just as the population around the area changed throughout time, the economic state changed as well. Closing only for a few years during the Great Depression, the school has managed to stay afloat financially, now mostly through personal donors rather than the church (Doepke & Doepke, 2009). TFLS is very serious about making sure that tuition costs never come in the way of a child's enrollment.

### **History and Background of the Issue/Phenomenon**

Trinity First Lutheran School is unique in its response to the issue of education in that it can say it was there from the beginning. The very birth of the school was a result of the formation of Minneapolis and the lack of educational institutions. Since then, TFLS has stayed true to their cause, adapting their educating methods to meet the needs of the community.

When TFLS was started, society seemed to hold religious and secular education hand-in-hand more so than does today's society. A large portion of the original curriculum at TFLS was focused on Lutheran instruction. With the church pastor then serving as the principal and sole teacher, this religious focus was clearly evident. As Katherine Doepke, congregational president of Trinity First Lutheran Church and former student at TFLS recalls, "In the early years the purpose of the school was to teach the Scriptures (that led to Confirmation and becoming church members) and to immerse them in Lutheran doctrine. Now, the focus has changed to outreach into the neighborhood by offering a solid Christian-based curriculum to all children" (Doepke & Doepke, 2009, p. 26).

As the other schools in the area and around the country changed, so did TFLS. An increased number of teachers allowed for more specialized education by grade, replacing the old "one-room schoolhouse" configuration. Later, computers and modern technology would enter the school, preparing students to work and live in the technology-driven world around them.

TFLS also saw itself adapting as the community around it changed. TFLS is located in the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis, a community notable for its incredible diversity. As caucasians left the area, their places were taken by non-white immigrants. These immigrants brought a mix of social challenges with them. According to a 2000 census by the U.S. Census Bureau, 31.9% of families in the Phillips neighborhood are considered below the poverty line (Phillips Neighborhood Network, n.d.). The same census reveals that 40.6% of Phillips children

are living in that poverty. The financial need, family history, and overall background of TFLS's students changed as a direct result of the change in the surrounding population.

Amidst all these changes, TFLS has not changed in its determination to teach children the message of the Christian faith. When asking the students about their favorite parts of TFLS, they will often say something about enjoying the freedom to “talk about God” (Mariucci Video Productions, n.d.). This center on Christian education is the ultimate strength of TFLS and the component of their work in education that sets them apart from public or non-religious private schools. TFLS addresses a very desperate need in its students by strengthening not only their mind, but their heart as well. This spiritual growth is crucial to the development of the rest of the students' lives.

### **Scope of the Project**

In order to best understand all of the issues presented to such a school and the school's responses, all areas of the institution will be explored. With so few staff members, the role of each one is critical to the operation of the school as a whole. A form of job shadowing will allow for observation and interaction with all staff members. Unlike in the beginning when one pastor could operate the school by himself, today's TFLS requires teachers, administrators, office workers, volunteers, and cooperation with other organizations to function properly. Each one of these parties is met with unique challenges to their educating efforts. By becoming involved with all those involved, a holistic view of the institution, its problems, and its solutions will be achieved.

To study the effects of education on individual students, interaction with students is an obvious necessity. While in-class time will allow for observation of students in a highly structured learning environment, before and after-school programs will grant access into other

areas of the students' lives. The scope of this area of the project is limited in that only effects openly evident at the institution will be studied. There will be no attempts to observe students in their home environments or anywhere outside of TFLS. Also, highly personal or confidential information will not be requested from the students. Available for study will be the information freely given by the students or staff of TFLS. As a result, some inferences about home life of students may be somewhat speculative, however, it is assumed that enough data will be presented in the school setting that strong deductions can be made.

### **Importance of the Project**

As mentioned, Trinity First Lutheran School continues to meet the needs of society by adapting to reach students and the community. Before efforts can be altered in any way, the needs must be first understood. This is done through research and analysis of the current state of the community and the effects, both positive and negative, of TFLS's efforts. The data collected for this project is intended to help the school identify areas that need attention.

The benefits this project offers the school will be the most easily evident. If the institution can use the findings of this project to better itself, then there will also be benefits to the students, to the community, and to society at large. The effects will be less perceptible on the larger scale, and they will not appear immediately, but successful results of this project could cause changes in the lives of the students involved, and those around them now and in the future.

Aside from the possible positive effects on the institution, its students, and their environments, this project could also be advantageous to other schools in similar situations. TFLS is unique because of its extreme conditions. Again, it is the oldest Lutheran school in Minnesota and is located in arguably one of the most diverse communities in the state. Because of these extremes, the data resulting from this project could also be somewhat extreme. Other

schools like TFLS who find themselves facing the same issues to any degree, may be able to make use of TFLS's learning experience through this project.

### **Definition of Terms**

Parochial school – According to The New Oxford American Dictionary, a parochial school is “a private school supported by a particular church or parish.” As a result, parochial schools pair “secular” education with faith-based instruction.

Lutheran Classroom Teacher – Lutheran Classroom Teacher (LCT) is a certification granted by universities of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. LCT certification shows that an educator is trained in the religious beliefs of the synod and is prepared to teach the faith in a classroom setting.

Director of Christian Education – Director of Christian Education (DCE) is a certification granted by universities of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Someone certified as a DCE is prepared to work in a parish, parochial school, or other faith-based institution. With a focus on religious education, a DCE's role could vary from youth work to formal education of various kinds.

References

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