

Funding a Lutheran School for Long Term Sustainability

The goal of this project was to develop a third source funding plan with attention given to alumni, supporting members of three partner congregations, and other individuals that want to aid in Lutheran elementary school education and to work towards long-term financial support for the educational ministry of Word of Life Lutheran School beyond the budget of the school. Word of Life Lutheran School's board members spearheaded the efforts to grow a SPAM Committee (Students, Parents, And Marketing) with special attention given to the Retention of students and families in the school, Recognizing achievements of students and faculty, Recruiting new students to the school, and Raising Funds for school ministry support.

The area of raising funds has been the lowest on attention through the past two years. An incorrect assumption has been that as long as we had the students, the funds would be there through congregation support and tuition income. We are seeing the reality of this untrue perception. Our efforts now are stepping forward with an annual giving campaign, intentional efforts to reach out to foundations and corporate support for tuition assistance and technology funding, and reaching into the untapped alumni of Word of Life to give former students and families the opportunity to see ways they may participate in sustaining the ministry of Word of Life Lutheran School in the city of St. Louis.

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History

Word of Life Lutheran School transitioned from being two, single congregation schools to a three church association school in 1974. What two congregational schools were trying to do independently became a stronger ministry with the support of three unified congregations in school ministry. The historical operation of a Lutheran school was to offer a top quality education with Christian instruction for congregation families as well as those in the community. Over the last 15 years, the competitions of not only the parochial schools within common neighborhoods but now the charter school system are providing an educational alternative to a failing public school system. With a healthy economy of the 1990's and early 2000's, families funding the cost of "private" education and congregational investment were a bit stronger than in the more recent years. With the economic turn over the last 10 years, enrollment at Word of Life Lutheran School has been in a decline with rising tuition costs being a deterrent for families to stay in the city parochial schools.

Privately funded foundations and interested partners are joining in efforts to solidify funding resources with tuition assistance to families who qualify and desire to enroll in the parochial schools within the city of St. Louis. The need continues to be there even beyond those families that qualify as being in the category of highest need. Having resources and funding beyond these agencies and the congregations of our school association is a challenge that Word of Life is addressing with the annual fund plan identified in the project focus. Word of Life Lutheran School has not conducted any form of annual funding or connection with alumni as a resource for financially supporting the ministry that they grew from as a child.

Project Focus

With enrollment in decline and schools being forced to close both in the Lutheran and Catholic schools in the city of St. Louis, Word of Life Lutheran School is working to be a

“school of choice” amidst a competing educational environment. We must maintain a cost of education for families that is not so far out of their reach that we no longer are considered an option. Our SPAM (Students, Parents, And Marketing) Committee was developed to address areas to promote our school in a more effective manner including our 4 R’s of Promoting Word of Life: Retention, Recruitment, Raise Funds, and Recognition.

Each of these areas has a tie to cost of education. We have yet to bring significant attention as to how to “Raise Funds” to assist with the retention of students, provide for a recruitment tool through scholarship assistance, and have supporting funds for the purchase of educational material and updates in educational tools to enhance student learning. My project was designed to develop a third source funding plan with attention given to alumni, supporting members of three partner congregations, and other individuals that want to provide financial aid to Lutheran elementary school education. Financial support has been received for grant programs, scholarship support, and special funding of projects in the past six years. The desire to develop funding arms that support the educational ministry beyond the budget of the school have moved from a “*need to for the future*” to a “*must*” if there is going to be a future for Lutheran Christian education offered by Word of Life Lutheran School.

Methods and Process

Following the onsite conferring with my Van Lunen consultant as well as phone call follow up time, a plan was developed that incorporated six solicitation strategies that would evolve over the year. The strategies included: personal solicitation, events solicitation, telephone solicitation, foundation grants, business gifts, and mail solicitation. Immediate work with the annual fund committee was disrupted with a “shift” in attention from funding future areas of the school to the necessity of offsetting the immediate deficit created by losing 20 students prior to the start of the school year to a newly opened charter school.

Initial thoughts were that this ended the hopes of a successful appeal when, in all truthfulness, it was a springboard to identify potential donors and those invested in the

ministry of the school. A specific face to face appeal was made to all three congregations at seven worship services (August 2010). This was followed by a letter appeal to all congregation members (September 2010). The communication identified the need of the school and touched the hearts of many to support this specific challenge the school was facing. A second letter was mailed in January 2011 addressing how far we had come in meeting the goal of \$43,000. Regular updates appeared monthly in the church newsletters to note the progress since August. The annual fund theme focus was titled the **3rd and 4th Generation Fund**. This was selected as Word of Life Lutheran School has educated two generations of students with plans to continue on for the children and grandchildren of these recent graduates. Now that we had a handle on the deficit created by the students who departed Word of Life, attention could now shift to the coming year and the annual fund plan.

Conversations began in February with the Lutheran Foundation president as to the specific needs that Word of Life Lutheran School would have with the announced closing of two Lutheran schools in the city. Tuition assistance needs were now going to be even greater for the incoming population of students to Word of Life from these other city schools. Word of Life school board approved a transitional tuition plan for these incoming students. My meeting with the foundation president resulted in establishing a plan for a grant proposal to support and fund the financial “gap” for students entering Word of Life Lutheran School from the closing city Lutheran schools.

Word of Life arranged for the acquisition of three SMART boards from a closing Lutheran school. These boards are being transitioned as part of a grant to our Lutheran city school technology support. Additional funding through government stimulus dollars will cover the cost of the installation of these boards, the purchase of one full board, and part of another. Word of Life funds from undesignated gifts will cover the remaining amount. A request was submitted to the Parent Teacher League (PTL) of Word of Life offering them the opportunity to purchase an additional SMART board for the school. Sharing with the Lutheran Foundation board the technological steps that have taken place at Word of Life

since 2007, I made an additional request for supporting the next phase of the technology plan at the school.

Project Results

The year began with enthusiasm that seemed to be stunted by the departure of 20 students, enough that would have filled an entire classroom at Word of Life. The generous financial response by the parishioners of the three association congregations and friends of the school turned the tide. The appeal for covering the deficit has netted over \$35,000. This open door has now bridged conversations with donors who have expressed interest in what Word of Life is doing and how they value this ministry. I believe that the true value of the school and the challenges of the school both had not been identified in ways of *doing something about it* in the past. There were even individuals that had little to no connection to school that made a commitment to supporting a passionate need identified by the school.

The marketing team from the SPAM Committee addressing the “raising funds” has communicated the desire to move forward on two major events, but have yet to get either one off the ground. There were conversations of beginning a Spring/Easter run/walk in the neighborhood surrounding the school with pledges supporting the annual fund for the school as well as a fall dinner auction. This committee needs an action person willing to step forward and make these events move from paper and conversations to action. The business partner relationships are nurtured each year through participation in a school advertisement booklet prepared for Word of Life Lutheran School’s hosting of a fall volleyball tournament and winter basketball tournament. These business partners will be invited to be guests at our fall friends’ event.

The fall friends’ dinner banquet is on the calendar for October 2011. This special evening is designed to celebrate the blessings of the school and invite individuals willing to continue the support and blessings that can overflow from the school. A template for the event is in the works with special guest speakers, music by the students, and personal testimonies from individuals that have been impacted by Lutheran education and

specifically Word of Life Lutheran School. This will be followed up by a phone-a-thon engaging alumni in an opportunity to support their alma mater. Utilizing the new online software of eTapestry will aid in organization of data from donors, develop goals and targets for fundraising from the various strategies, and enhance our communication with all related parties to the school including alumni, parents, former staff, friends of the school, congregational members, and business partners in the community.

The relationship developed with the Lutheran Foundation has opened the door for support both in the immediate school year as well as into the future. The transitional fund developed to aid transferring students coming to Word of Life from closing city Lutheran schools has some longevity to it with the beginning being the fall of 2011 and continuing until these students graduate in eight years. The funding grant in the amount of \$16,000 for transitional tuition assistance is up for review at an August 1st deadline and notification of acceptance will take place in September.

A grant is being written for \$10,000 towards the purchase of 3 additional SMART Boards to outfit each of the classrooms with a SMART board for the fall of 2011. This, too, is part of the bridging the students into well-equipped classrooms from the closing city Lutheran schools.

Personal Reflections

There is still concern as to how much time is going to be set aside by volunteers to engineer these efforts versus time from me away from the building. Due to staffing constraints, this time has not been freed up for this coming school year. A better balance of time is necessary for me to put the amount of attention into the funding of our school and rest confidently that the day to day matters will get the attention that they need as well. With looking back a year ago, the generated third source funds have topped \$60,000 to support tuition assistance and technology resources. Part of the development plan constructed with Don Distelberg of the Timothy Group had projected a goal of \$75,000 for year one. We aren't too far off of that number. To God be the glory! These blessings from Him through others have helped to motivate and energize me for great things yet to come in the city of St. Louis for Word of Life Lutheran School.