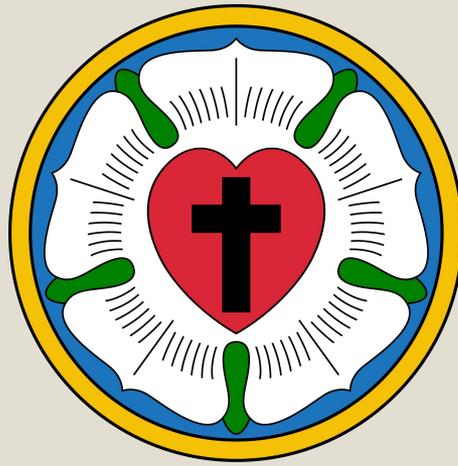


WELS National Conference on  
Lutheran Leadership 2026



# **THE GREAT COMMISSION IN LUTHERAN SCHOOLS: Nurture, Outreach, and School Growth**

Rev. Dr. Ken Fisher & Mr. Landon Zacharyasz

# WELCOME

## Mount Olive Lutheran School in Appleton

- Poised for growth
- "Where teachers share the same faith and values as parents."



## Enrollment Priority Groups

- Mount Olive member families
- Other WELS member families
- Other Christian church families
- Non-Christian families
- Unchurched families



## What would your priorities be?

- Jesus-first mentality
- Protect School Culture
- Avoid overburdening teachers
- Reach more people with the Gospel



## What questions needed to be asked?

- What role should the pastor play in determining a family's enrollment status?
- Who takes responsibility for connecting families to the church?
- Are we a school of the church, for the church, or with the church, and where is that articulated?
- Is a non-Christian family a "better" outreach opportunity than a Christian family from a non-denominational church?
- How does this affect tuition structures and continued enrollment?

# Risen Lutheran School in Milwaukee

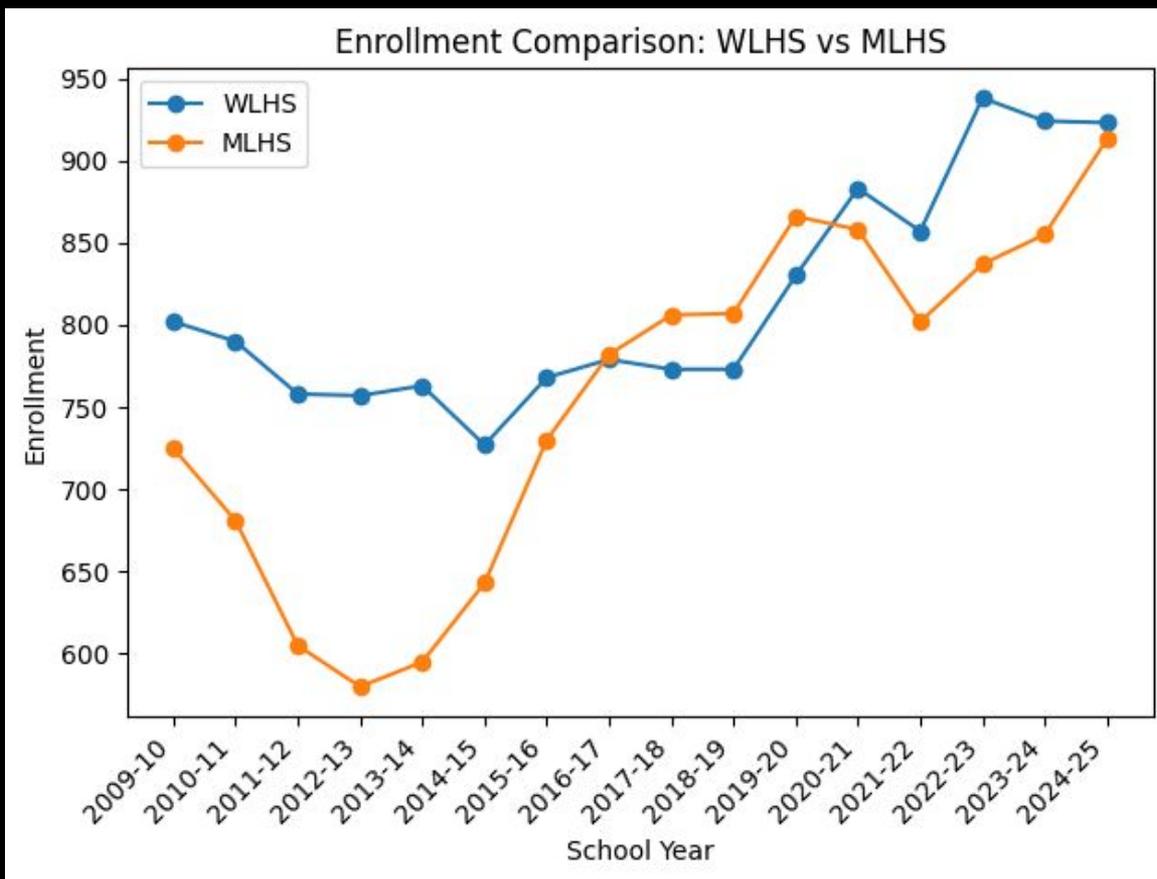


KF



# Wisconsin Lutheran High School in Milwaukee





**Why is the topic personal and timely?**

"Christian education (LES/ECM) remains one of WELS' greatest mission opportunities, yet the system is increasingly disconnected from long-term congregational attachment."

Key Finding (#6) in WELS *Christ Through Us: SITUATIONAL ASSESSMENT* delivered at 2025 Synod Convention

**Why is the topic personal and timely?**

## SCHOOL ENROLLMENT IS GROWING, BUT...

"Over the past two decades, WELS enrollment has fallen by nearly a quarter, while 'other Christian' enrollment has student increased 145% and mission prospect enrollment 246%. In some regions, WELS children are now the minority in their own schools." (p. 9)

"...while the WELS school system is numerically healthy, it is not producing proportional evangelism gains, nor is school enrollment a reliable indicator of long-term retention." (p. 10)

*Christ Through Us: SITUATIONAL ASSESSMENT*

**Why is the topic personal and timely?**

## FOR EXAMPLE IN ECMs:

- 25 churches accounted for nearly 50% of all ECM-driven adult confirmations (162).
- The "Rest" (380 Ministries) recorded 186 adult confirmations combined.
- Zero confirmations: 68.4% of all churches with an ECM reported zero adult confirmations from the ministry in 2024.

*WELS Statistical Report 2024*

**Why is the topic personal and timely?**

## MOST ADULT CONFIRMATIONS FROM ECM

1. St. John, Mukwonago, WI: 16
2. Grace, Tucson, AZ: 13
3. Refuge, Raleigh, NC: 10
4. Star of Bethlehem, New Berlin, WI: 9
5. St. Paul's, Fort Atkinson, WI: 8
6. Risen Savior, Lakewood Ranch, FL: 8
7. Mt. Calvary, Waukesha, WI: 8
8. Immanuel, Greenville, WI: 7
9. St. Paul, Bangor, WI: 7
10. Martin Luther, Oshkosh, WI: 6

*WELS Statistical Report 2024*

**Why is the topic personal and timely?**

## FOR EXAMPLE IN LESs:

- 25 churches (4.6%) accounted for 214 adult confirmations (40% of the total LES harvest).
- The "Rest" (512 Schools) together recorded 317 adult confirmations.
- 268 schools (50%) had no adult confirmations connected to their LES.

*WELS Statistical Report 2024*

**Why is the topic personal and timely?**

## MOST ADULT CONFIRMATIONS FROM LES CONNECTION:

1. Immanuel, Manitowoc, WI: 17
2. Riverview, Appleton, WI: 15
3. Risen Savior, Lakewood Ranch, FL: 14
4. Living Promise, Morristown, TN: 14
5. New Hope, West Melbourne, FL: 11
6. Peace, Sun Prairie, WI: 11
7. St. Paul, East Troy, WI: 10
8. Good Shepherd, West Bend, WI: 9
9. Trinity, Caledonia, WI: 9
10. Mt. Calvary, Waukesha, WI: 9

*WELS Statistical Report 2024*

**Why is the topic personal and timely?**



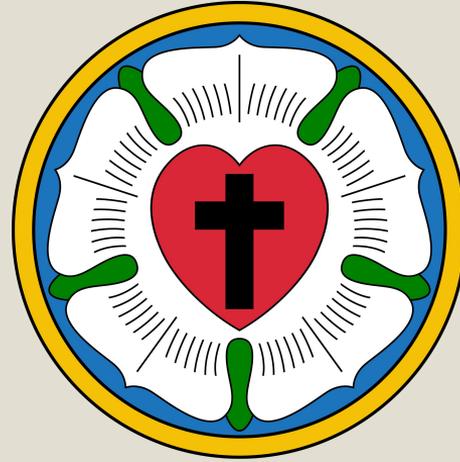
**Why is the topic personal and timely?**



**Why is the topic personal and timely?**

**Why is the topic personal  
and timely FOR YOU?**

**CRITICAL  
QUESTION**



How do we pursue growth that fulfills the Great Commission (both nurture & outreach) without losing what makes us Lutheran?

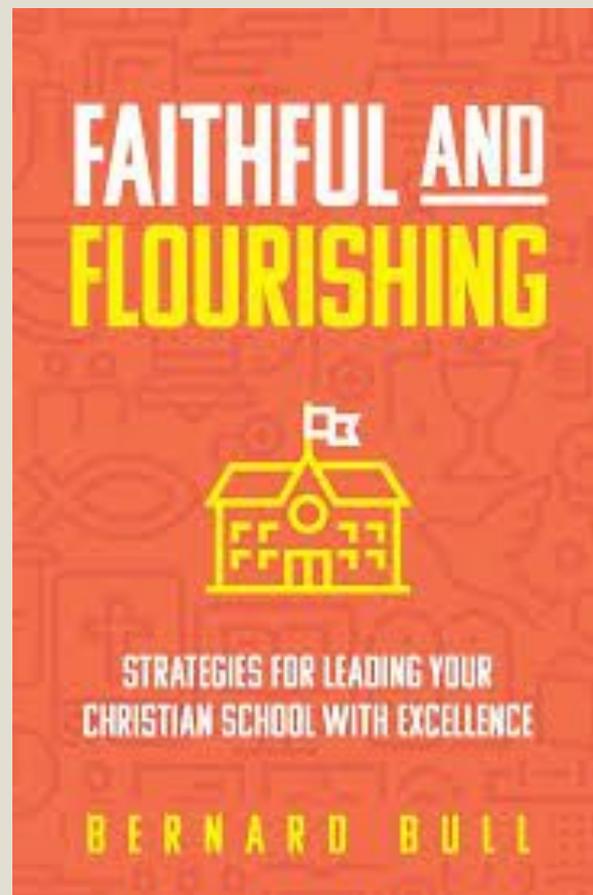
# Faithful and Flourishing — Core Ideas

A mission-centered leadership framework for Christian schools

Calls leaders beyond management to intentional discipleship

Emphasizes clear, lived-out Christian identity

Describes different models of schools shaped by mission alignment



<b>Remnant</b>	<b>Religiously Diverse</b>	<b>Critical Mass</b>	<b>Covenant</b>
<b>Mission-drifted</b>	Mission-centered	Mission-centered	Mission-exclusive
<b>Christian identity is muted</b>	Clear Christian teaching	60-70% mission-aligned	Confessional identity
<b>Private-school appeal</b>	Open to many beliefs	Culture shaped by students	Christians only

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- 1. Which type of school ministry do you serve in?**
- 2. Are you satisfied with the type of school ministry you serve in?**

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**WHY GROWTH  
MATTERS?**

*Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*

*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

**Matthew 18:18-20 (NIV)**

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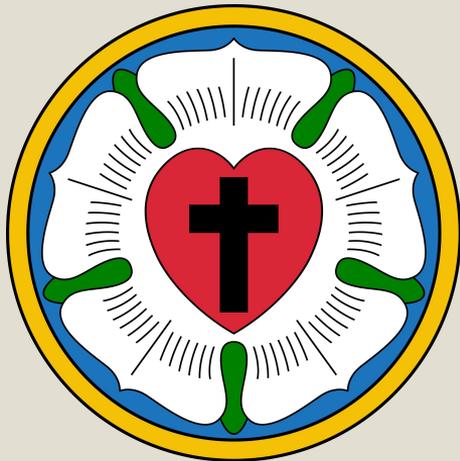




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**Matthew 18:18-20 (NIV)**



# Martin Luther's Medieval View of the Great Commission

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

**Acts 1:8 (NIV)**

# The Great Invitation verses the Great Commission

Old Testament (Temple)	New Testament (Gospel)
Centripetal (Center-Seeking)	Centrifugal (Center-Fleeing)
Inward (→Center←)	Outward (←Center→)
Key command: <i>"Come and See"</i>	Key Command: <i>"Go and tell"</i>
Stationary (Zion/Jerusalem)	Mobile (Judea→Samaria→to Earth)
Attraction	Expansion

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Attraction	Expansion

LHS in 1903

Dr. Martin Luther  
In 1500s

WELS in 1970s

WLHS in 1960s

WELS in 1860s

A group of people in white robes are walking along a path that leads towards a bright, glowing light in the distance. The scene is set against a backdrop of a cloudy sky, with the light creating a strong lens flare effect. The overall atmosphere is one of hope and aspiration.

The goal is not  
bigger  
schools—it's  
bigger heaven.

# WHY GROWTH MATTERS?

It is about  
*faithfulness*, not  
*ambition*.

**WHY GROWTH IS  
RISKY?**

# Defining Growth

- More students in classrooms
- More families in buildings

**Growth is more than numbers. God doesn't need large enrollments.**

**Mission Drift** – adding students or programs without a clear Lutheran anchor

**Cultural Dilution** – fewer families understanding what “Lutheran” means

**Faculty Fatigue** – more students, less time, more complex family dynamics

**Financial Burden** – growth requiring staffing and resources before funding aligns

**Teacher Availability** – growth outpacing the supply of Lutheran educators

**Relational Distance** - Harder to maintain personal shepherding relationships

*For nearly eighty years, Grace Lutheran School in Alfalfa, Wisconsin, had been the quiet pride of Grace Lutheran Church. Pastors Feldmann and Krueger taught chapel. Teachers prayed with students. The Schroeders, Albrechts, and Meyers filled the classrooms with children baptized at Grace's own font.*

*Then the school board voted to "lean into outreach." They hired a marketing firm. They added a STEM lab. Enrollment jumped from 140 to 310 in four years. Families from River City Church, New Life Fellowship, and no church at all poured in. Tuition revenue soared. The halls buzzed.*

*But chapel changed.*

*Pastor Feldmann still preached Christ—but he noticed he stopped using words like confession, absolution, repentance, and order of creation. The sermons became warmer, safer, more broadly Christian. Teachers quietly asked how to handle gender identity, marriage, and family when parents now believed very different things. The official answer became, “Be gracious. Don’t create barriers.”*

*They couldn’t find enough Lutheran teachers anymore. So they hired Ms. Parker, a kind former public-school English teacher who “loved Jesus,” and Mr. Diaz, who said faith was “personal.” Both were well-liked.*

*Most families were thrilled. Their kids were safe, loved, and getting a great education.*

*But the Schroeders left. So did the Albrechts. Then a few more. Offerings to Grace Church slipped. Tuition covered the budget now, not the congregation.*

*At a congregational meeting, Elder Tom Rausch finally asked, "Do we have a Lutheran school that welcomes outsiders... or a Christian school that remembers it used to be Lutheran?"*

*The room went silent. Outside, the parking lot was full. Inside, the question remained.*

**What would you do next?**

**Mission Drift** – adding students or programs without a clear Lutheran anchor

**Cultural Dilution** – fewer families understanding what “Lutheran” means

**Faculty Fatigue** – more students, less time, more complex family dynamics

**Financial Burden** – growth requiring staffing and resources before funding aligns

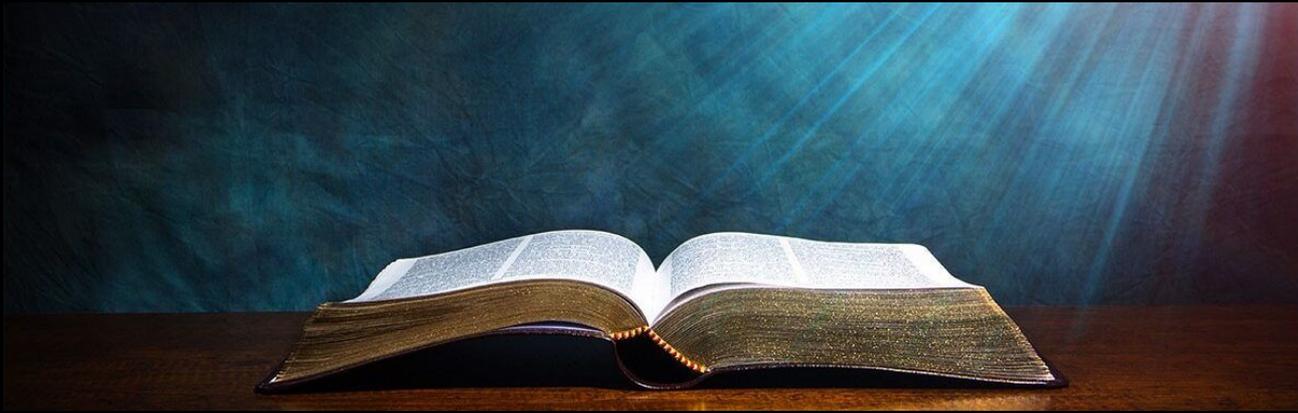
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This story is not a warning against outreach. It's a picture of what can happen when **growth outruns clarity.**

**WHAT MAKES A  
LUTHERAN SCHOOL  
*LUTHERAN?***





**It is more than  
Lutheran doctrine  
and traditions.**

# 7 ASPECTS OF A FAITHFUL “GREAT COMMISSION” SCHOOL

## Critical aspects:

1. The Lutheran confession and conduct of the leadership;
2. The Lutheran confession, conduct and scholarship of the faculty;
3. The distinctively Lutheran curriculum;
4. The shared Lutheran confession informs policies, practices, rituals, activities, and decisions;
5. There is tangible evidence of a strong, healthy connection (accountability and support) with the congregation(s) and Synod
6. The Lutheran confession and conduct of the students;
7. Avoids mission drift by being consistent with its founding purpose and mission.

Adapted from *Faithful and Flourishing: Strategies for Leading Your Christian School with Excellence* by Bernard Bull







**GOAL: Disciples of Christ with a lifelong connection to Means of Grace**



**Identity requires Clarity**

# WLHS' Statement of Faith

## STATEMENT OF FAITH

In Christian compassion, WLHS is committed to providing counseling and spiritual care to students who are struggling to adhere to the Scriptural positions we hold. As a school-based ministry, we have the privilege and charge of assuring the repentant that Christ died to earn forgiveness for all sins no matter what particular weakness one is struggling with or violation of God's will one may have committed (I Corinthians 6:11).

We believe that the Bible is fully inspired by God and without error; therefore, it is the source of and final authority in all matters of doctrine and practice of the Christian faith and life (2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:20,21). The Bible provides the basis for instruction at Wisconsin Lutheran High School (WLHS).

The Bible teaches that every human being inherits a sinful nature from his or her parents and that no one is capable of meeting God's standard of perfection in their thoughts, words, or deeds. All have fallen short of God's glory and deserve his condemnation. In his love and grace to humankind, however, God sent his only son Jesus Christ to live perfectly under his law and to die sacrificially on the cross which he accepted as payment for our sin-debt. Those who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ's saving work and his resurrection from the dead three days later have salvation from their sins and eternal life in heaven (Romans 3:23,24).

Christian love compels us to be compassionate toward all people and to care for the soul of every student with eternity in mind. Concern for their spiritual welfare includes teaching biblical truth in an uncompromising way and confronting students in love when they embrace beliefs and practices that violate God's will even if society approves (Ephesians 4:15).

We believe that God immutably creates humans as distinctly and biologically male and female. These two complementary sexes are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26,27). WLHS seeks to honor God's creation in our work and lives.

We believe that God established the institution of marriage and family for the benefit of all humankind and is foundational to a well-ordered society. As such it should be respected, defended, and perpetuated. We believe that God's design for marriage is between one man and one woman and that his gift of sexual relations is God-pleasing only within this marital relationship. All sexual activity outside this biblical definition of marriage is in contradiction to God's Word and his intention for the institution of family (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:4,5; I Corinthians 6:9,10).

We commit to respect, defend and protect the sanctity of human life. We believe that life begins at conception and that willfully terminating a life, with limited exceptions, by any means is a sin against God's commandment: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13; Matthew 5:21).

WLHS does not allow public promotion of or recruitment to lifestyles and practices contrary to the previous statements.

Wisconsin Lutheran High School (WLHS) is owned and supported by a conference of 49 Lutheran congregations in the greater Milwaukee area, all of which belong to and are united in fellowship with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). As such WLHS operates under the auspices of the WELS and is in full agreement with its doctrines and practices. An explanation of WELS doctrinal beliefs is available at <https://wels.net/about-wels/what-we-believe/this-we-believe/>.

# Harvest Strategies

- an organized, written plan
- built collaboratively by church and school leaders
- intentionally connecting non-member families to Word and congregational life
- grounded in Word-first commitments and relational pathways

**It's rarely ideas -  
it's ownership and time.**

**Who "owns" outreach in your setting?**

**What's one small consistent step your ministry could take to improve outreach?**

**AND THE  
SURVEY SAYS...**

Total responses: 64

ECM/LES Combo: 43.8%

ALHS/Prep: 42.2%

LES: 12.5%

ECM: 1.6%

## Key Takeaways

- Nearly three out of four schools describe themselves as growing or poised for growth
- Most leaders see their schools as balancing outreach and nurture
- Alignment between church and school leadership is common, but misalignment is a key friction point

The primary barrier is not resistance to mission, but clarity and alignment.

The data suggests willingness is present; clarity is not always.

# PRACTICAL STEPS FOR LEADERS

Where's  
the  
Magic  
Bullet?



# LIVING THE MISSION: A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

## A. Exhibit Healthy Leadership & Clarify Vision

- **Align Leadership:** Ensure the Pastor and Principal are strictly on the same page regarding the school's direction.
- **Clarify Shared Identity:** Define exactly what the institution aims to be. Ask the hard question: *"What do we want to be when we grow up?"*
- **Audit Foundation Statements (MVO):** Review mission and vision statements to ensure they are distinctively Lutheran and articulate the necessary tension between academic excellence and spiritual formation as well as nurture and outreach.
- **Engage the Faculty:** Move beyond the "what" and "how"—have teachers clearly articulate the school's "why."

## B. Equip Faculty for Ministry Duality

- **Balance Nurture and Outreach:** Help teachers understand the value of—and the distinction between—internal discipleship (nurture) and external evangelism (outreach), and how to excel at both.
- **Build Theological and Practical Confidence:** Provide professional development, devotions, and mentoring that empower staff to handle spiritual topics with confidence.
- **Foster Spiritual Growth:** Institute regular faculty Bible studies led jointly by the Principal and Pastor to model unity and spiritual depth.

## C. Build Structures that Support the Great Commission

- **Onboard Families Intentionality:** Create an orientation process for new families that clearly explains Lutheran beliefs and the school's spiritual ethos.
- **Focus Chapel Worship:** Ensure chapel themes clearly teach the distinction between Law and Gospel.
- **Strengthen Partnerships:** Build active bridges between pastors, teachers, and parents, as well as with conference churches and sister congregations.
- **Define the Public Strategy:** articulate a clear marketing, PR, and advertising strategy that reflects the mission.
- **Implement a "Harvest Strategy":** Create and follow a written plan for follow-up and discipleship (moving families from the school into the church community).

## **D. Evaluate Growth Decisions with 3 Questions:**

- Does it support the Great Commission?
- Does it strengthen our Lutheran identity?
- Does it serve both nurture and outreach?

# Faithful Growth: Our Shared Call

- **Growth is necessary — and it carries risk**
- **Faithfulness to Christ is non-negotiable**
- **Growth measured by maturity, not just size (Eph. 4:15–16)**
- **Not just taller trees — but deeper roots**
- **Shared clarity among church & school leaders, teachers, and members**
- **Rooted in Christ → reaching farther with the Gospel**

***“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work..”***

**Ephesians 4:15-16 (NIV)**

# CLOSING PRAYER

# REFERENCE LIST

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**That's  
it,  
folks!**

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