

Introducing Children to the Church
by Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

A Growing Picture of Spiritual Reality

I almost assume that every teacher in our General Church school system has some great success stories to tell about times when she or he experienced the joy of being a New Church teacher. Let me share just one of mine. On the first day of 3rd and 4th grade religion this year, I asked the students to recall a happy memory of theirs, when they shared a fun time with a friend or someone in their family. One boy talked about a biking trip he'd gone on with his dad. Another student remembered a time when she and a few friends were laughing hysterically over some silly turn of events. The rest had their own short stories to tell.

Then I asked them to tell me what they thought the Lord was doing at that time. Puzzled expressions came my way—the kind where you can almost see the wheels turning inside their heads. After a pause, one girl tentatively suggested, “Smiling?” Another student said, “Watching over us?” Then I explained that He was not only watching what was going on but was also causing them to feel happy inside, to care about having fun with those people. He was even protecting them very carefully from evil spirits who would try to ruin their fun. In other words, He was doing many things for the students, “behind the scenes,” to allow them to have those memorable experiences.

Well, this led to some fascinating, in-depth questions about how the Lord could be in all those places at once, where the evil spirits might have gone (apparently to “bug someone else”), and more. The point is that their minds were engaged! Each child was earnestly considering what he or she knew or didn't know about the Lord and how He operates. I believe that they were all feeling content and happy to be there. I've taught other lessons, with that same class, when some of the students apparently had no higher goal in mind than poking at their classmates— with fingers or words. But, of course, that doesn't take away the beauty of what can happen in a New Church school. Little by little, these children have the opportunity to learn things from the Lord's Word; gradually a picture can form in their minds about who the Lord is and how He works. In addition to math, reading, science and other subjects, students in a New Church school are exposed to a reality which relatively few people in this world get to see.

Essential Goals

One of my favorite teachings in the Writings says that there are three essentials of the church. These are “an acknowledgment of the Divinity of the Lord, an acknowledgment of the holiness of the Word, and the life that is called charity” (*Divine Providence* 259:3; *Apocalypse Revealed* 491). For me, those three essentials translate into three activities that we should be involved in as a church, namely worshipping the Lord, instructing people from His Word, and supporting each other in living a charitable life.

The reason I bring this up is that New Church education has these same goals. It is one of the ways in which children can be introduced into the worship of the Lord, taught in structured ways from His Word, and encouraged to live a charitable life (in the classroom and, hopefully, beyond). If we had to choose among those three activities, I believe most people would say that

the primary aim of our schools is to teach from the Word. Yet we also realize that part of the process of cementing those truths in young minds involves connecting what our students learn to the way they act. This is in keeping with another number which says, “the Word teaches how people must live so that they may receive love and faith from the Lord” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10761).

Something We Do Well

Along slightly more practical lines, it is also a long-held dream of New Church education that the children who go through our schools will choose to become active in the New Church as adults. This has happened for generations and even today, when a smaller percentage seem to be choosing to “sign on the dotted line,” so to speak, the dream becomes a reality for many. We can trust that a great number of the children in our classrooms today will become part of the New Church in the years to come.

There is another way that New Church education can work toward the future health of the New Church on earth—by advertising our schools as a valuable program for people who have not previously had contact with the New Church. Here in the Glenview New Church we’re exploring ways, as others have done, to make our school a more solid part of our outreach package. It fits in very well with the philosophy of outreach we’ve chosen to follow here; much of our energy is devoted toward putting on programs which would be of benefit to people in our congregation *and* to people in our surrounding community. Our school is something which benefits the people who are already in our church, and it has tremendous potential to serve people in the wider Glenview community.

Nevertheless, even if it turns out that relatively few people outside our church choose our schools for their children, and even if some of the students who are in our schools choose not to join the church as adults, that still doesn’t negate the magic that can happen within the school walls. The Lord is at work in so many ways with those students, structuring their minds with the truths we teach them. Whatever their choices in life, I believe the Lord will be able to lead them more effectively because of the years they have spent in our system. When I think of these ideas, I am led to rejoice that there is a strong infrastructure in our church to accomplish the worthy goals of New Church education. Because of this, many more children, for years to come, will be more fully introduced to the Lord and to the life He calls us all to live.