

status report #6

Trends in religious-affiliated child care

by Roger Neugebauer

In "Status Report #5 on Religious-Affiliated Child Care" in the September 2005 issue of *Exchange*, I observed that "early childhood programs in religious buildings in the United States are becoming more prevalent, more organized, and more evangelical." These trends are continuing, while at the same time these programs are increasingly encountering the challenges facing the overall early childhood community.

Growing numbers

The number of centers in religious institutions continues to grow. Mike Wilson, of the Wilson Marketing Group, the premier manager of center databases, reports dramatic gains in the supply of early childhood programs 1992 through 2008 in religious settings:

Protestant programs 76.4% increase
Catholic programs 52.6% increase
Jewish programs 47.7% increase

The increases have not been uniform and across the board. In communities where religious institutions established early childhood programs early on, there have not been continuing increases in new programs. For example:

■ Nina Chatin, the Director of the Department of Early Childhood

Education for the Community Foundation for Jewish Education of Metropolitan Chicago reports that the number of synagogues offering early childhood services has remained steady over the past five years.

■ Judy Christian, Director of the Children's Ministry for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, indicates that the most significant growth in centers in LCMS churches is now occurring outside of the original Midwest base of the denomination, in states such as Texas, Florida, Nevada, and Arizona, as the church expands to new places.

This latter example points to a continuing trend. Center development follows the concentration of denominations geographically. As you can see from Table I, the distribution of religious-affiliated centers pretty much follows the prevalence of churches.

In recent years, one factor that has started to impact programs provided by religious institutions is the new wave of state Pre-K programs.

■ Mary Lou Allen, from the Early Childhood Department of the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education, reports that in

many communities Jewish programs are starting to lose enrollments to Pre-K programs. As a reaction her office has distributed nationwide a position statement, "Universal Pre-K: What Does it Mean for Early Childhood Jewish Education?"

■ Gayle Denny from the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association observes that Lutheran programs are being impacted by increasing competition from Pre-K programs. Centers are finding it necessary to be on the cutting edge of quality in order to compete.

On the other hand, religious-affiliated centers are much more likely to state subsidies. Some denominations have been involved for decades in serving subsidized children from low-income families. Beth Dolack from Catholic Charities of Chicago, reports that not only have centers in their diocese been participants in state programs, but they have also been active in advocacy at the state level.

In other denominations, involvement with state programs is relatively new. D'Arcy Maher from the Association of Christian Schools International, indicates that a recent trend among Evangelical programs is their willing-

ness to actively participate in public funding. She indicates that the key factor is whether the subsidy guidelines in their state allow them to participate in public programs without compromising their spiritual mission. If Evangelical schools are not part of the early care solution for immigrant and low income families, she observes, they will become irrelevant or narrow in their base.

No two programs alike

While it is tempting to lump all programs into one type, it must be said that there are as many differences between religious programs, and even between programs in the same denomination, as there are between religious and non-religious programs. Some programs focus on serving only church members, while others serve all families; as noted above, some accept public subsidies, others do not; some

receive considerable financial support from their churches, others do not. Likewise, while religious education is playing an increasing role in religiously-affiliated early childhood programs, there are still great variations:

- Matt McKay, an Early Childhood Pastor at Trinity Church in Cedar Hill, Texas, indicates that Assemblies of God early childhood schools typically include religious education or Bible studies as the central part of their curriculums.
- Nancy Bossov, Director of the Early Childhood Department for the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, reports that the educational goals of Jewish programs in the New York area vary widely in both in terms of their religious and educational components.

- Judy Christian reports that a recent trend in her denomination is for child care centers to be built before a church, with the idea that the religious program of the school will attract enough new members to start a new church. In these centers four out of five of the children may be non-Lutheran at the outset.

The curriculums of the religious-affiliated programs vary greatly as well:

- Matt McKay reports that nearly all Assemblies of God programs utilize the Abeka curriculum which includes a non-denominational Bible study component.
- According to Judy Christian, while the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has a preschool curriculum, many programs integrate this with secular curriculums such as High/Scope.
- Mary Lou Allen indicates that the 1,300 Jewish early childhood centers in the United States all interpret the religious aspect of the programs differently with most integrating the Jewish education component into High/Scope, Reggio, or Bank Street curriculums.
- Both D'Arcy Maher, working with Evangelical schools, and Nancy Bossov, consulting with Jewish schools, indicates that a major shift in program emphases is to be more focused on working with children in the context of their families, to support parents in raising their children.

Diverging paths on accreditation

When NAEYC accreditation was launched, it was uncommon for religious-affiliated programs to seek accreditation. They "answered to a higher authority" was a typical attitude.

Table I — Religious-Affiliated Center for Top 20 Metro Areas

Metro Area	Protestant Centers	Catholic Centers	Jewish Centers
New York	361	316	240
Los Angeles	794	85	91
Chicago	547	298	43
DC/Baltimore	579	135	44
San Francisco/Oakland	402	56	35
Philadelphia	451	136	31
Boston	286	123	45
Detroit/Ann Arbor	440	101	13
Dallas/Ft. Worth	626	61	11
Houston	571	58	5
Atlanta	358	11	9
Miami/Ft. Lauderdale	446	103	65
Seattle/Tacoma	290	31	6
Phoenix	176	28	10
Cleveland/Akron	444	109	21
Minneapolis/St. Paul	384	98	12
San Diego	221	35	18
St. Louis	355	103	8
Denver/Boulder	221	36	12
Pittsburgh	164	118	9

Source: Wilson Marketing Group

In the past ten years this changed as increasing numbers of these programs pursued the validation of NAEYC accreditation.

However, when NAEYC changed its accreditation system, some denominations struggled with whether or not to continue in this system:

- Julie Ramski from the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago indicates that while they recommend that programs pursue NAEYC accreditation, it will be a challenge for small programs to participate due to the high cost.
- Nina Chatin reports that centers in her jurisdiction who were previously accredited by NAEYC find the paperwork involved in the new program a waste of time.

Whether or not related to the challenges of the new NAEYC accreditation standards or not, some denominations are rolling out their own accreditation systems. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America recently launched an accreditation system and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod updated its system.

Working together

While denominations are getting more organized internally, there is little inter-denomination communication. The one organization which brought denominations together, the Ecumenical Child Care Network, closed its doors in 2004. In conducting the interviews for this article, there appeared to be considerable sentiment to opening up dialogue among denominations. *Exchange* hopes that this report can start a conversation leading to some form of working together as religious-affiliated programs, despite their significant differences, do have many basic challenges in common.

Note: In researching this trend report we attempted to interview early childhood leaders from as many denominations as possible. However, there are many denominations where we were unable to track down the right person. We would appreciate it if readers would share with us contacts in denominations not referred to in this report so we can update it and post the updated version on our web site. Send contact information to:
info@childcareexchange.com.