

Education—An Invitation to Restricted Mission Fields

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The signs read, “Concordia International School Kabul, founded in 2021,” and “Welcome to Concordia International School Pyongyang, est. 2035.” Incredible! Improbable? Intentional?

In 2015, such schools are a fictional illustration. And yet, our Lord works in implausible ways.

The highly regarded reputation of Lutheran education has opened doors for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) to start schools in several countries that do not issue missionary visas to foreigners. Within the last two decades, the LCMS has founded an international school in the People’s Republic of China and a second international school in Vietnam. These two schools have been chartered to teach an American curriculum to students who hold foreign passports. In many cases, they are children of executives from multi-national companies who have been stationed in Asia.

Traditionally, Lutheran schools have been supported by the local congregation as a means of instructing and strengthening children in the Christian faith. As congregations were formed, often parochial schools were subsequently founded. In fact, the LCMS sponsors the largest number of Protestant schools in the United States. Education is one of the core ministries of the LCMS. Historically, foreign LCMS mission efforts included educational ministries, first in India, and following in Papua New Guinea, Hong Kong, Japan, and elsewhere. Today, Lutheran education may precede modern mission work in countries with restricted missionary access.

Remarkably, Concordia International School Shanghai, established in 1998, enjoys more freedom of religious expression than publicly funded tertiary schools across the United States. Teachers who openly follow Jesus Christ as their Lord staff the school, which educates 1,200 children from roughly thirty nations. Head of School, Gregg Pinick, celebrates Concordia Shanghai, as it is known, as a “platform for ministry.”

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In the 1990s, the city of Shanghai planned to attract foreign companies to invest in business ventures. In addition to tax-free zones and city planning, the New Pudong District of Shanghai recognized that foreign companies would require international schools for their deployed staff. The educational quality of Hong Kong International School and Lutheran schools in the United States paved the way for the LCMS to start a new school, an openly Christian school in China.

The start of Concordia International School Shanghai included a community center, which was started with a grant from Wheat Ridge Ministries. Today, the Community Center Shanghai includes centers in three of Shanghai's districts, where the majority of expatriates live. Culture classes, relocation and adjustment tips, as well as counseling services, are offered to meet the needs of thousands of Shanghai's foreigners. Additionally, the district government where Concordia International School Shanghai is located built a Protestant church and a Catholic church to meet the needs of the families enrolled at Concordia. All of these—the original Community Center Shanghai, a Protestant church, and a Catholic church—are located within a one-city-block radius of Concordia Shanghai's campus.

For more than fifteen years, students at Concordia Shanghai have learned about Jesus Christ. And through interactions with the Concordia Shanghai community, a growing number of Chinese citizens have also recognized Christ's love. By working at Concordia Shanghai, a growing number of Chinese staff have learned about Jesus and now profess faith in Him. Concordia Shanghai's teachers and students regularly participate in service activities within Shanghai and in developing provinces. A leader in the local police department noted the school culture as one that "gives and does not take." The Christian witness of loving one's neighbor is tangible.

It is important to consider, "Why would a country that doesn't recognize Christian denominations authorize a Lutheran school to be established and operate?" The invitation to start these schools was not strong-armed or a result of bribery. The relationships of many Lutherans serving in Asia have borne fruit. The Christian witness of loving one's neighbor has not gone unnoticed. In fact, it is because of this witness that Lutheran schools have been allowed to start. Make no mistake, the local and national governments intentionally approved these Lutheran schools.¹

Vietnam and the United States established diplomatic relations within just the last twenty years. The LCMS began working in 1995 with the Vietnamese government's National Institute of Nutrition to provide humanitarian assistance. The 2015–2016 school year marks the fifth year for Concordia International School Hanoi. Head of School, Steve Winkelman, observed, "For the LCMS to have registered and begun operating a school in Vietnam, is nothing short of a miracle, given the limited amount of time that the United States and Vietnam have cooperated."

The founding of Concordia Hanoi is also a testimony to the Christian witness

and relationships that have been built over the past two decades. The school's charter has been expanded to include student enrollment of up to 20% local Vietnamese passport holders. A permanent campus is currently under construction, which, when finished, will allow enrollment of 750 students from preschool through high school. Concordia International School Hanoi is not a clandestine project; rather, the school provides a holistic education through teachers who bear witness to the Light of the world.

Our Lord has softened the hearts of leaders in authority in China and Vietnam to trust and embrace LCMS administrators to open schools of high quality. Only twenty years ago, these Lutheran schools would have seemed impossible. God has worked through the course of history to open doors for Lutheran education. He continues to be actively at work through the faithful service of His children.

There is a Chinese proverb that reasons, "If you are planning for a year, sow rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; if you are planning for a lifetime, educate people." In terms of God's mission in restrictive countries, planning for eternity can grow out of the faith-filled, intentional start of Lutheran schools. "For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Rom 10:13, ESV).

Endnotes

¹ The Lutheran Church–Hong Kong Synod, partner church of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, has received Chinese government approval for and opened international schools in Shenzhen and Foshan.