

# Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School

East St. Louis, IL

Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School is a project of the Mission Board of the Southern Illinois District – Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. After several years of feasibility study by a District Task Force, it was determined that a parochial elementary school in East St. Louis would provide many opportunities for teaching the Christian faith to the un-churched. Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School opened for the first day on August 19, 2003, with classes for Kindergarten and Pre-Kindergarten. Only three students attended that first day, but as the school year progressed, the Holy Spirit brought seventeen students from fourteen families to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. He also brought overflowing joy and excitement about the future of a Lutheran mission school in East St. Louis.

Grade One was opened for the 2004-2005 school year, with enrollment raised to 35. Grade Two was added for the 2005-2006 school year, and enrollment increased to 49. Interest from the community has blossomed as the word about Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School has been spread. The families who enroll their children are very appreciative for the opportunity. The future is very positive.

Christian education and mission work are two long-standing priorities in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. There are 2,000+ Lutheran educational institutions, where young people are taught the basics of the Christian faith from the Bible. They are trained in the application of those principles for daily living and witness. Lutheran schools have proven to be extremely effective for faith development.

The LCMS has also sponsored missionaries for many years in places around the world. The Word of God has been spread by trained ministers to people of all cultures, including those in North America and abroad. Through caring missionaries supported by organizations, churches have been established where there previously were none, and people's lives have been forever changed.

Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School in East St. Louis is a merger of these two efforts, education and mission work. This Lutheran school has been established for the purpose of doing mission work. From the beginning, every decision about the school, from curriculum and programs to tuition and staff, has been made with a mission focus. Through the daily instruction of the children and building relationships with their families, the Christian faith will be spread.

## **Mission Statement**

The Mission of Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School is to offer a quality, Christ-centered education in a safe school community while helping each child reach his or her greatest potential and prepare for a Christ-like adult life.

## **Vision**

Most families in the East St. Louis and Washington Park communities have little to provide hope for a better future. Most neighborhoods are cluttered with abandoned, burned-out homes. Empty lots are strewn with garbage and over-grown with unkempt foliage. There are few possibilities for employment in the area, and shopping is limited to dirty corner stores surrounded by suspicious characters. Parents either let their young children run unattended throughout the neighborhood or keep them locked in the house for their own safety. Life in this community is dark and bleak. People in this environment are caught in a cycle of dependency, which afflicts generation after generation. They are dependent on handouts from the government, from social services, or from passers-by. They have little knowledge, and even less motivation, to break the cycle. It is in this setting that Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School hopes to provide a light and hope for a better future.

The difficulties of the local school district are well-documented. The lives of school children are often characterized by low levels of achievement and fear of violence in and around schools. 88% of the students are from low-income families. The high school graduation rate is only 55%. Less than 20% of the students meet or exceed grade level in standardized testing. (Information provided by East St. Louis School District and 2001 Illinois District Report Card.)

Few educational choices exist in East St. Louis. One parochial school on the far eastern edge and several small private home-schools are the only choices for parents within this moderate-size city. Because of severe financial restraints, families do not consider parochial education a realistic option. One of the challenges for Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School is to provide high-quality education while making it affordable to the residents of this community.

The successful start of a Lutheran School in an urban setting will serve as a model of Christian outreach and community service for use in other urban settings around the country.

The vision is for:

- A school that emphasizes the Good News of Jesus, where God's Word, the Bible, is taught and lived. The entire curriculum and school program is being developed within the framework of faith development for children. Through daily devotions, study, prayer, and worship, the faith lives of the students will grow as they learn to trust in God. It is important to maintain the learning relationship through eight or more years of elementary school so that faith has the greatest opportunity to grow and develop.
- A school that nurtures and develops the entire child in mind, body, and soul. The students learn basic academic skills at a challenging pace, and all are expected to achieve at or above grade level. They also receive instruction and are held accountable in important character-building traits. They are taught to be polite, to be responsible with their possessions and their surroundings, and to be respectful of the rights of others. The curriculum and policies of the school have been developed in order to provide students with education that will help to break the cycle of dependency which permeates this community.
- A school that provides a safe haven for children and their families. Parents and extended family members are intentionally brought into relationship with the school in order to emphasize the importance of total involvement in the education of the child. Parents are also held accountable in attending conferences, meetings, worship, paying tuition, and assisting with homework.
- A school that employs teachers and administrators who are in Christian ministry to the children, their families, and the community. Applicants for teaching positions are carefully screened to ensure a positive fit with the mission of the school.
- A school that includes:
  - Classes for children aged three through at least Grade Eight. Grade Three will be opened in Fall 2006, Grade Four in Fall 2007, and so on until Grade Eight is complete.
  - Instruction in the basic curriculum areas, as well as fine arts, performing arts, physical education, technology, and foreign language.
  - Moderate to small student to teacher ratios. Class size will be limited to eighteen students so the most effective learning can take place.
  - Care for students before and after school hours.

The success of Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School will be measured by a number of factors. The number of students enrolled in each class as well as their academic progress as measured by standardized tests will be an important indicator. Relationships with parents will be maintained in order to solicit their

involvement in the school and to monitor their needs and concerns. It is also a goal to encourage un-churched families to join Unity Lutheran Church, and those with the most potential are being targeted and given special attention by church members. The Bridge Builders ministry has been developed to match church members with school families who have no church home. These “mentors” invite school families to worship, meet them and guide them through the service, and keep in contact to help with other needs.

The beginning stages of Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School have been an exciting journey of service and faith. There have been many memorable experiences and relationships developed. The students and their families have been very responsive, and it has been a joy to be involved with them and witness their enthusiasm. The future is certainly bright, with many more opportunities to witness and teach in the long years ahead.

## **History**

### **2000**

Mar. Feasibility Plan complete.

### **2001**

Nov. Business Plan complete.

### **2002**

July 1 Principal begins service.

Aug. Development Plan complete.

Sept. Renovation of Unity church basement begins.

### **2003**

Feb. First Board of Directors Meeting.

April First two teachers hired.

May First student enrolled.

Aug. 19 First day of school – three students enrolled.

Sept. Renovation of Unity church basement complete. Includes new windows, new ceilings, refinished doors, removal of two walls, new floor tile, new light fixtures, replacement of door glass, new furnace and air conditioning.

Oct. 1 15 students enrolled.

Oct. New fire alarm system installed.

### **2004**

Feb. 1 17 students enrolled.

May First Grade teacher hired.

June ASK Committee is formed for development assistance. Development consultant hired.

Aug. 17 First day of classes for Year Two.

Oct. First Annual Fund Drive begins.

### **2005**

May Second Grade teacher hired.

May Final enrollment for Year Two is 35.

July Annual Fund complete, goal is surpassed.

Aug. 16 First day of classes for Year Three. 51 students enrolled.

### **2006**

Aug. Opened Grade Three. 62 students enrolled.

### **2007**

Aug. Opened Grade Four. 71 students enrolled.

Oct. Time To Build Capital Campaign begins.

### **2008**

Feb. Dr. Stallworth becomes Pastor of Unity.

Aug. Opened Grade Five. 88 students enrolled.

## 2009

- July Lease of Hawthorne Building begins.  
400 volunteers help with renovation.
- Aug. Opened Grade Six. 117 students.  
Grade Six Teacher, Mr. Mark Belli  
Grade Five Teacher. Mrs. Lillie Hardieway.  
Dedication Service for New Unity School Building, August 30.

## 2010

- Aug. Opened Grade Seven, Teacher, Rev. Aaron Dickerson, also Assistant Principal.  
Opened 3-year-old Pre-Kindergarten, Teacher Charlene Dickerson.  
Enrollment stands at 157 students.
- Nov. 14 Shamaurie Andrews is baptized.

## 2011

- June Rev. Dickerson becomes Principal.  
Mr. Paul Miller becomes Development Director.
- Aug. Opened Grade Eight. Mr. Joel Gilbert, Teacher.  
Ms. Maggie Beverly, part-time upper grades.
- Sept. 22 computers installed in lab.
- Nov. Promethean Boards installed in all classrooms.

## 2012

- May First Eighth Grade Graduation Ceremony. Yippee! Praise God! (May 24<sup>th</sup>)  
Class of 2012
- |               |                   |                |                   |
|---------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Diamond Doss  | Arielle Hampton   | Desmond Porter | Brendan Walker    |
| Michael Perry | Joshua Latta      | Derrell Cook   | Jaria Hardaway    |
| Qiarra Blue   | Shamaurie Andrews | Elijah Culbert | Darnisha Peterson |
| D'Marco Neal  | Justin Brunt      |                |                   |
- Aug. Kevin Williams, Grade 8, and Christopher Lingel, Grade 6.
- 2013
- May Library complete and ready for total access.
- May Second Graduation. Class of 2013
- |                       |              |              |                 |
|-----------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Justice Banks         | Cody Jackson | Darris Cosby | Jashira Bolden  |
| Tysheyanna Montgomery | Geria Watson | Maya Evans   | Dwauna Paulette |

## Parent Comments

Parents of the students were asked to respond to this question – “What do you like best about Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School?”

“Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School is like an oasis in the middle of a desert. Thanks be to God for the blessing He has bestowed upon this community! My child her Kindergarten year at ULCES and has grown tremendously in her knowledge of the Lord.”

“I am pleased to say that I am a satisfied and proud parent at ULCES. The teachers and principal are great, my kids are learning a lot, and the staff members always have open arms when you need to speak with them about your children.”

“One of the things I like most about Unity is the kids have learned so much more than ‘curriculum.’ They have learned godly morals and how to be well-rounded godly children. God has blessed me and my family by sending my son to Unity.”

“At Unity, the children Belong To Jesus at a very young age. As Unity grows, they grow, remembering they belong to Jesus Christ. Most of all, they never start the day unless they pray!”

### **Funding Operating Costs**

The funding model for the school takes the economic realities of East St. Louis into consideration. Families with students enrolled in school and the people of the community will be challenged to support the school as much as they are able through tuition, fees, and fundraising. Every family pays tuition based on a sliding scale, and all families are required to participate in fundraisers.

These resources, by themselves, will not be sufficient to completely fund the school. In order to maintain the school’s operating budget, resources will be needed from outside the community. Funding is being received from the District mission budget and from donations from congregations, schools, and individuals. Several grant applications have also been made to various foundations. In addition to the school’s Board of Directors, a committee has been formed to assist in raising funds for the operation of the school. A Development Consultant has been hired to organize and lead the committee. A solid foundation for financial support is being established, with over 800 individuals and 180 organizations making donations.

Ultimately, the funding for Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School is based on trust in the promises of God. Faithfulness to the mission and vision of the school and prayer support have already been critical in this area. God will provide the necessary resources to continue the ministry of outreach to children and their parents through Unity.

### **Staff**

The teaching staff at of Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School will be vital to the success of the mission school. Teachers and administrators will need to be well-qualified to meet the unique challenges in starting and maintaining a Lutheran school in an urban environment. Most importantly, they will need to have a passion for teaching the Gospel to children who come from families who are largely un-churched and disadvantaged.

In order to maintain the mission focus of our school, priority is given to commissioned LCMS ministers. Those who are not commissioned should be members of an LCMS congregation. Should a teacher be hired who is not a member of LCMS, that teacher will be given instruction in the Christian faith from an LCMS perspective.

The first Principal was called by the District Mission Board in February 2002. Mr. Paul Miller was involved with the District Task Force from the beginning. He has 28 years of experience in Lutheran education, including nineteen years on the south side of Chicago. The first two teachers, Ms. Sarah Harm and Ms. Colette Tisdale, were both highly skilled educators who had made a commitment to the mission of Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School. They were joined by Mrs. Christie Price, who was a recent graduate of Concordia University River Forest and had interest and experience in mission work. Our Second Grade Teacher, Ms. Fonya Banks, is also a graduate of Concordia University River Forest and had nine years of experience to her credit. These first staff members laid a solid foundation for fulfilling the vision of a successful mission school.

### **Building Expansion**

Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School was initially located in the basement of Unity Lutheran Church, 4200 Caseyville Avenue, East St. Louis, IL. The District Task Force considered several options for the location of the mission school. It was decided that in order to be most effective in mission outreach, the school should be located at the same site as a Lutheran congregation. Unity Lutheran Church

is the only Lutheran congregation in East St. Louis, and space was available there to start the school. In addition to gym and kitchen areas, there were sufficient classrooms for Pre-Kindergarten through Grade Two. Extensive renovation, including new windows, ceilings, light fixtures, furnace and air-conditioning, fire alarm, and exterior doors, was necessary to prepare the school for students. The renovation costs were \$50,000, which has been completed and paid.

As grades were added each year and the school grew, existing space became inadequate for school purposes. After three years of searching, planning, and prayer, Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School moved into a new home in summer 2009. The former Hawthorne Elementary School is being leased from the East St. Louis Public Schools for a period of ten years, after which time the building will be purchased. During the summer of 2009, 400 volunteers cleaned, painted, and restored the building for occupation. Features of the new facility include:

- Built in 1981
- 36 classrooms
- Library
- Gymnasium
- Cafetorium
- Playground
- Parking
- Office complex

Funding for the renovation and lease was secured through the Time To Build Capital Campaign. Individuals and organizations were asked to make special gifts and pledges to provide financial support. Grant funding was also requested.

### **Summary**

Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School has many of the characteristics of traditional Lutheran elementary schools. It is a school where dedicated, caring, Christian educators daily devote themselves to teaching children the Good News of the Gospel according to the doctrines of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. It is a school where children are educated, encouraged, and prepared for life-long service in Christ’s Kingdom. It is a school where families feel welcome and are expected to participate in the education of their children.

Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School is also very unique. It is the first LCMS elementary school intentionally established in an urban setting with the goal of doing mission work. As the school was being planned, every decision was made with the mission focus in mind. All school policies are aimed at accomplishing the mission goals. Surveys of the progress of the school and families being served indicate that the mission purposes of the original plan are being accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is a tremendous need for the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ in the community of East St. Louis, and Unity Lutheran Christian Elementary School is meeting the need.

For more information, visit our school website at [www.unityesl.org](http://www.unityesl.org).