**Educating in Changing Times:**

**Seeking a Right Way—Preparing for *Schooling at Home***

Jonas Sauder—April 21, 2020

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God,

**to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance**. Ezra 8:21

Our schools closed abruptly in March due to the coronavirus epidemic. Students stayed home. Ready or not, parents suddenly began a form of homeschooling. Most schools scrambled to prepare weekly pickup/dropoff lessons. Teachers attempted to adjust lessons, streamlining where possible and shifting lessons online where possible. These commendable accommodations may serve to bring the current term to an acceptable closure.

Looking ahead to another term demands serious planning. Current realities, directives, and trajectories portend, among other things, the increasing likelihood of repeated, extended school closures or new limitations on how they can operate. If our schools can open in August in some way, we know they can readily be shut again. This unprecedented reality means that our school boards, working with their staffs, must discern, develop, and prepare a *way* for our little ones to be educated that fits the realities of the times. We must plan a sustainable *way* to support the education of our children that does not involve their gathering in school buildings for classes taught by teachers.

I began teaching in 1971, in an era when new Christian schools were opening nationwide at the rate of three per day. This movement reflected a huge shift of Christians from public schools to church or patron sponsored Christian schools. (Prior to that most of our people, including myself, attended public schools). The major impetus behind this movement was the desire to remove children from the rapidly deteriorating setting in the public schools—both in the moral atmosphere and curriculum content—and also the desire to provide a truly Christian education for our children. The majority of conservative Anabaptist churches followed this movement, opening their own schools. Within a decade new curriculum publishers arose that developed Christian curriculum for these schools. A *way* of schooling developed that has served us for 50 years. That changed in March.

We must adapt. We must seek a right *way* that fits the times. One that looks farther ahead than a few months or a year. One that anticipates radical changes foreshadowed by the trajectory of the last month. A *way* that can survive potential losses of

1. the freedom to gather our pupils in the classrooms of our schools for teaching
2. the possibility of teachers to interact with and support pupils
3. the availability or use of technology
4. the financial capability to afford schooling as we’ve known it

We already have active school boards that direct our schools on behalf of our church congregations or groups of patrons. They have been providing buildings, curriculum and teachers. This work represents something dear to us Anabaptists—mutual aid. We work together as the body of Christ to support our families who are rearing children by arranging for teachers with the gift of teaching to bless the whole body. To continue this support, our boards must discern a *way* that adapts to current realities: *our children may need to school at home.*

We cannot simply tell our parents that they are on their own and must now figure out how to home school. Rather, we must be prepared to provide for *schooling at home*. (I’m using this term to distinguish it from “home schooling,” which basically means that parents take responsibility for all aspects of schooling from choosing curriculum to instruction to overseeing testing—the complete program, without board support.) Some school families may in fact be quite willing to assume the responsibility of home schooling and/or enrolling their children in some type of homeschool plus or distance learning program. But many won’t. They will continue to seek the church body’s mutual aid support supplied through the established boards for their children’s schooling.

*Schooling at Home* must attempt to continue that support. School boards and their hired staff (perhaps a smaller staff) must develop a model that fits their local circumstances. They will still provide for their people’s schooling. But rather than the schooling happening with the children gathered together in classrooms with teachers, pupils will remain in their homes if necessary. It will still be school—but it will be *school at home.* The school (board/staff) will design and provide the materials for a workable program of study. They will develop ways in which it can be taught/learned, and also provide, to the best of their ability, multiple types of support, oversight, involvement, and evaluation.

A *schooling at home plan* should include…

1. The curriculum materials: books & supplies
2. Overall plan and schedule to follow, including directions and materials for activities.
3. Carefully thought out and developed support for parents
4. Communication with families/students in the home however possible with phone and other technology or in-person visits.
5. Regular dropoff/pickup of materials for ongoing work and for evaluation.

One logical approach would be to choose a curriculum from a publisher such as Christian Light, which has a fairly complete self-study curriculum available. Or to cobble together a workable set of materials from a variety of publishers. The curriculum can then be purchased and distributed with the school providing support as it is able, along with record keeping. While many families may find this quite workable and easiest for them, many other parents will be very frustrated with the *amount* or *type* of teaching that readily available curriculums require them to provide for their children. (What has developed to become our “traditional curriculum” of the last 50 years is designed to be administered by committed teachers who have the “luxury” of complete school days to teach pupils in classrooms.)

We must have a model that works for *schooling at home* long term if necessary. We must be prepared to shift back and forth between schooling at school and *schooling at home*. We must remember that it’s easier for teachers to adapt to teaching children returning from a *schooling at home* setting & program than it is for parents to suddenly begin teaching children accustomed to a classroom setting & program. We need to plan our model *as if* our school boards/teachers will be providing *schooling at home* rather than at school. That may mean having both a **Plan A** for schooling as usual (what was used in Fall 2019) and also a **Plan B** all ready to go if necessary for *schooling at home.* Or it might mean having a **Plan C** that fits both. Having only a Plan A is no longer an option.

**Schooling at Home**

A successful *schooling at home* program should enable children, with the school’s direction and support, and under their parents’ supervision, to grow in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. They will mature in *ways* that will serve them to live fruitful lives.

But the program should also accomplish something much more profound. If pursued well, it will instill a pattern of learning by cultivating a tradition that fits naturally with the home. By its very nature, it will not only provide for a *way* for the children to learn, but it will also prepare the parents to continue in the same *way* if the school for whatever reason is no longer able to function in support. If the school’s ability to support the home stops as abruptly as our schools closed in March 2020, the parents should not be left helpless. They needn’t wonder how to do or what to do. They can use the materials they currently have on hand and the methods they have been using to follow the established tradition of *home* learning as circumstances allow. The operating Plan B *schooling at home* program would become by default a Plan D—a *right way* for our parents and their *little ones* if they must indeed proceed without the availability of support from the school.

**For Such a Time as This**

When they discerned a war spirit pervading the colonies in the 1740’s, Pennsylvania Mennonites responded by arranging for the *Martyrs Mirror* to be translated from Dutch to German to make it accessible to their German-speaking youth. They wanted each home to have these stories so their children could apprehend the testimony that their “defenseless” forefathers left behind as they lived under duress in Europe in centuries past.

Fifteen men at the Ephrata Cloister labored three years to translate and print the 1500 page tome, the largest single volume to be printed in America in colonial days. The import of the task can be sensed in these words explaining the need for the project:

"As the flames of war appear to mount higher, no man can tell whether the cross and persecution of the defenseless Christians will not soon come, and it is therefore of importance to prepare ourselves for such circumstances with patience and resignation, and to use all available means that can encourage steadfastness and strengthen faith. Our whole community has manifested a unanimous desire for a German translation of the Bloody Theater of Tieleman Jansz van Braght, especially since in this community there is a very great number of newcomers, for which we consider it to be of greatest importance that they should become acquainted with the trustworthy witnesses who have walked in the way of truth, and sacrificed their lives for it."

Years ago, as he gave a public address, I witnessed John Ruth hold a six pound *Martyrs Mirror* in his hands and say something like this,

“One must take this book into his hands and feel the heft of it

to get a sense of the urgency our forefathers felt in their day.”

This is our day. The urgency upon us is not our inability to tackle the task. Pennsylvania Mennonites in the 1740’s did not have the skills to take on this huge task. They could finance the work, but they had to find skilled translators, equipped printers and a willing publisher. They found them at the Ephrata Cloister. And three years was relatively fast in their day. It was fast enough.

But not for us. We learned overnight in March that something other than a Plan A is needed. Our options for opening next term on the elementary level include…

1. Prepare and open with a Plan C: some hybrid that can adapt equally to school at school or *school at home*, with the flexibility to quickly switch back and forth. Since any hybrid has significant limitations, a Plan C’s frustrations, whatever they are, must be balanced in favor of parents, with teachers bearing the greater challenge, since education is, after all, their field of work.
2. Open with Plan A, with a newly prepared plan B ready to go at a moment’s notice. This means having a Plan B made and materials on hand.
3. Opening with a Plan B, being taught at school. Being designed from the ground up as a plan for *schooling at home,* this would be radically different, requiring retooling our thinking and methodologies in numerous ways. We may need to do this whether or not we wish to.
4. If school cannot convene in school, begin with Plan B in the homes for however long is necessary. If necessary, Plan B becomes Plan D (see above).

The perceived need in our forefathers’ day was material (a book) to help their youth to apprehend their heritage. We have the materials we need for our purposes.

The need of our hour is for us, in the spirit of mutual aid, to have a schooling program that

1. Can adequately provide for *schooling at home* if necessary,
2. At the same time, by its very nature, it must help prepare our parents to take up much of the work that has traditionally happened inside our classrooms, to whatever degree it may become necessary to do so.

May the realities we face and the way of schooling we must pursue serve to turn the hearts of our parents to their children and the hearts of our children to their parents. May the isolations, deprivations, frustrations, limitations and requirements that arise in our times serve as catalysts to refresh rather than distress our families in regard to schooling.

I’ve often been impressed, in reading Exodus 31: 2-6, at how God prepares people for the need of the hour: See, I have called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, To devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, And in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber, to work in all manner of workmanship. And I, behold, I have given with him Aholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan: and in the hearts of all that are wise hearted I have put wisdom, that they may make all that I have commanded thee.

When the Lord’s work requires some fresh initiative, He already has people prepared. (Ephrata had its cloister with translators and printers.) We need to “look out among ourselves” for the Bezaleel’s and Aholiab’s among us today, in whose wise hearts God has put the wisdom needed for this hour, and call them to the task. I’ll offer some seed thoughts on another document for a Plan B. May God give you each the grace and wisdom to prayerfully find a *way* for your local setting. The Teacher, Who is the Way, will guide you in a *right way.*