

Heartland Lutheran opens year with 75 students, most ever



The Rev. Kurt Busskohl works in his office during the first period of the day Thursday at Heartland Lutheran High School. (Independent/Scott Kingsley)



The Rev. Kurt Busskohl looks through keys to unlock the classroom for his first religion class of the year Thursday at Heartland Lutheran High School. Busskohl is a first-year principal and religion teacher at the school. (Independent/Scott Kingsley)

By Harold Reutter
harold.reutter@theindependent.com

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Heartland Lutheran High School began the 2009-10 school year on Thursday with its largest enrollment ever, 75 students.

Shortly before the first bell of the school year rang, most of those students were standing or sitting in the school's commons area, chatting and laughing.

Also in the commons was most of the school staff, including the Rev. Kurt Busskohl, who is starting his first year as principal and religion teacher at Heartland Lutheran.

Busskohl stood holding a Bible, which is consistent with one of the three roles he sees for himself this year at Heartland Lutheran: being a pastor.

When the bell sounded, Busskohl gently called out to everyone, "Go to the gym." Students and staff immediately went through the double doors, with the teenagers seating themselves on bleachers for the opening devotional.

"The Lord be with you," Busskohl said to the students.

"And also with you," the young people responded, with Busskohl then wishing the students a blessed morning.

After introducing himself, Busskohl had each of the teachers and other staff members introduce themselves.

School counselor Jacquelyn Zehender looked for a couple of students who still needed to receive their class schedules. She handed out one schedule but didn't spot the other student in the seated assemblage.

But before things progressed much further, it seemed as though all 74 students in the bleachers were simultaneously pointing at the double-wide gym doors, where the 75th and final student of the day was arriving for school.

As his Scripture verse for the devotional, Busskohl chose John 18:13, which said that the tax collector, "standing far off," would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his chest and asked God to be merciful to him.

Busskohl asked the students to consider how they pray to God. He asked whether they thank God that they "are not like others" because their behavior is superior in a number of ways. He asked them to ponder whether they believe God sees them as great simply because they're Christians.

"That's faith in yourself, not faith in God," Busskohl said.

The pastor noted that Christians know they are justified solely through Christ Jesus, not through any goodness of their own. The devotional ended with the pastor leading the students and staff in reciting the Lord's Prayer.

With that, everybody dispersed from the gym to get to their first-period class.

Busskohl, though, went to his office, where he put on his principal's hat.

"We have good news, bad news," Busskohl said while seated at his desk. The good news is that, because of the school's enrollment, Heartland Lutheran needs some additional textbooks. The bad news is that the school must also find the money to pay for them.

Although Heartland Lutheran is a private, parochial school, there is still plenty of paperwork to fill out for the Nebraska Department of Education so the school can maintain its status as an approved institution.

The school is required to have a certain percentage of instructors teaching subjects in their endorsed areas, and it is required to have classes beyond the core classes of English, math, social studies and science, to name just two of the many mandates it must meet.

In addition to sending out information about the school, Busskohl's computer also receives lots of incoming e-mail. Right now, he's getting lots of information about how schools should deal with H1N1 flu.

The principal said the flu alerts remind him of when he was in grade school and students received vaccinations at school to protect them against polio.

Looking forward to when he would be wearing his teacher's hat, Busskohl said the religion class for juniors and seniors will examine world religions, churches and various denominations, nondenominational Christian churches, cults and how a Christian lives in a "post-modern world" with a culture that has issues such as homosexuality, abortion, drug and alcohol abuse and physical abuse.

"How do you deal with that?" he asked rhetorically. "We try to find direction from the Bible."

Next year's juniors and seniors will study Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod doctrine, which Busskohl said is "based on the truth of the Holy Scripture."

Freshmen and sophomores will study the New Testament this year, the Old Testament next year.

When Busskohl entered his first religion class of the year, he wore more of a "teacher" hat than "religion teacher" hat. Most of the class period was spent outlining the school handbook, which gives the rules about dress code, backpacks, cell phones, etc., that any school -- public or parochial -- needs to keep running smoothly.

There were some comments, though, that Busskohl would only have made at a parochial school. For example, he told the students he had accepted a pastoral call to be at Heartland Lutheran. As a result, he said, students could contact him about any issue 24/7.