

**Evangelical Lutheran Synod Commission on
Congregations at Critical Mass
- Comprehensive Report**

Date: January 2023

ELS Congregations at Critical Mass Comprehensive Report - 2022

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Background

In response to the trend of declining membership within the ELS, the ELS Board of Trustees (BoT) asked ELS President Obenberger to convene a Commission of Congregations at Critical Mass (CCCM) to study the matter.

The CCCM is asked to review the situation which many of the ELS congregations are facing as their membership declines to a point where the congregation is not being able to support regular pastoral service. The Commission is tasked with exploring valid options identifying how congregations might address their various issues with the help of synodical assistance, which may include limited monetary support. It will also advise the BoT how the synod might provide realistic and meaningful assistance to such congregations.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this commission is to:

- Characterize the Synod's membership trend,
- Identify reasons why congregations are declining in membership, and
- Recommend a range of possible responses and or solutions.

The objective of this commission is to:

- Outline a range of tools and training that can be applied in congregations in appropriate circumstances.

Commission Members

The following is the list of members that have contributed to the work of the commission.

Rev. Edward Bryant, CCCM Chairman

Mr. Mark Perlwitz, CCCM Secretary

Rev. David J. Webber

Rev. Lawrence Wentzlaff

Rev. Luke Ulrich

Rev. Bradley Kerkow (Ex Officio)

Executive Summary

The President' Commission on Congregations at Critical Mass consisted of a group of men with diverse experience and skillsets.

The main objective of the commission is to identify resources that can be made available to assist congregations at critical mass to continue serving people with the gospel of Christ and if possible, to grow.

The recommendations of the commission will be for the synod to:

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- a. Make resources available that such congregations may not be able to provide on their own.
- b. Provide guidance to congregations to realistically assess and address their situations.

To do this, the commission studied the data available on the congregations and the reasons for decline.

The commission makes the following recommendations to the synod in convention in 2023

- I. Provide ways and means for congregations to install basic resources for congregational outreach, and publicize the same. These would be “turn key” products available with or without synod subsidy.
 - a. Presence on the web and in social media. (Includes revision of Communication Director’s job description to include content available to congregations.)
 - b. Music Resources for worship.
 - c. Publications
 - d. Personal Evangelism Resources
 - e. Video Streaming Resources
- II. Provide Congregational Counseling to assist congregations to grapple with their situation.
 - a. A “Triage team” utilizing the Evangelism-Missions Counselor, the Circuit Visitor, the Alternate Visitor, and other trained individuals.
 - b. The Triage team will help the congregation identify a path to ...
 - i. Congregational Redevelopment
 - ii. Merging
 - iii. Closing (and reopening)
 - iv. Perseverance in reduced circumstances
 - c. All congregations will be encouraged to evaluate and address their circumstances; however we recognize that some will choose to do nothing and decline accordingly.
- III. Overall, the emphasis will be upon the importance of personal evangelism over corporate evangelism.

Key Biblical Principles That Guide Our Response to Membership Decline

Key Biblical Principles

- Primary Element of The Faith
- The Will of God
- The Means of Bringing about God’s Will
- Faithfulness
- Role of other means, e.g., aptness to teach, cultural awareness, communication.
- Care of Congregations
- Outreach & Evangelism
- Breadth of Responsibility. E.g., is there a responsibility to serve a flock that will never grow, humanly speaking? What is the responsibility of the Christians in a locale?
- Rebuke vs. Encourage. What does the Bible Say?

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Analysis and Observations

The following sections present information regarding the current membership trend in the ELS and other church bodies, the methodology for identifying ELS congregations that are at critical mass, a list of key factors involved in membership decline, and the identification of ELS congregations that are considered at critical mass.

ELS Membership and Membership Trend Summary

This comprehensive report included a statistical study which analyzed data from multiple sources to quantify the membership trends in the Synod and compare those trends with other sources.

This study evaluates the following sources of data:

- Statistical Data from the ELS Parochial Report
- Reported trends from the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS)
- Church Membership Studies by Research Organizations
- The Commission on Churches at Critical Mass Congregational Study

The observations and conclusions from the statistical portion of this report are presented in Appendix VI are further summarized as follows:

Membership

- There has been a trend of declining membership not only in the ELS and WELS, but also in other religious bodies. This appears to be a cultural dynamic where many are leaving organized religion.

Other Sources of Statistical Data

- Major research organizations such as the Pew Research Center, and Gallup have published studies that confirm the observations of the ELS and the WELS. They also confirm that the membership decline is not isolated to just the ELS, Lutherans, or Christians in general, but all religious groups are experiencing significant membership decline.

Offerings

- The average budget for home purposes (for all congregations in the Synod) is generally growing (with notable exceptions) with the cost-of-living rate. However, the average budget began to be reduced in 2020 and has significantly reduced in 2021 (by -17%) suggesting that budget cutting has been necessary as a result of the multiple causes of membership decline. However, without direct evidence of offering receipts, this conclusion is a subjective interpretation.

CCCM Congregational Survey

- The Congregational Survey reveals that a significant number of the congregations have experienced a decline in membership to the point where they are either struggling to meet expenses or are no longer meeting expenses.
- Age demographics show that 40% of our members are older than 60 years of age. The younger generations are falling away.

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- A significant number of congregations have a church council that does not meet regularly and most congregations indicate that they don't have Evangelism Boards, and don't have a defined outreach and evangelism plan.
- These struggles for churches to maintain operation have not been well recognized or communicated.

CCCM Circuit Visitor Survey Observations

- The CCCM identified potential "At-Risk" congregations in all circuits except circuit 9.
- While there are no current plans to deal with membership decline in the circuits, the Circuit Visitors are also looking for guidance on how best to proceed.
- The responses to knowledge of available synodical resources vary greatly and suggest that further communication with the Circuit Visitors is necessary.

For further detail and explanation, please refer to the Statistical Analysis contained in Appendix VI .

CCCM Congregational Survey Information

The CCCM created a survey to gain insight into key questions about the health of the congregation. This survey was distributed to all congregations in the Synod. The response from the congregational survey indicated the following:

- Of the 53 "Critical Mass" congregations with an average attendance < 30 souls;
 - 12 responding congregations indicated that they were at risk
 - 10 "Critical Mass" congregations indicated that they were not at risk
 - 31 "Critical Mass" congregations did not respond to the survey
- Four congregations not on the list of 53 also indicated they were at risk of closure

Recent Closings

During the initial work of the CCCM, there were 7 congregations that closed.

- St. Paul, Escondido, CA closed in January 2021
- Christ Lutheran, Princeton, MN (Independent but served by the ELS) closed in July 2021
- St. Matthew, Myrtle Creek, OR closed in Sept 2021
- Our Redeemer, Yelm WA closed in 2022
- Immanuel, Riceville IA closed in March 2022
- Our Savior, Amherst Junction, WI closed in 2022
- Grace, Piedmont, MO closed in 2022

Identification of ELS Congregations at Critical Mass

The criteria used to identify congregations at critical mass is that they have an average attendance below 30 souls, but is more specifically when a congregation is no longer able to financially meet their expenses. It should be noted that these congregations have been identified as being at "critical mass" purely through statistical analysis. Congregational counseling is recommended to confirm whether this initial assessment is valid.

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Current List of Congregations Considered to be at Critical Mass

Church City	State	Congregation Name
Fort Mohave	AZ	Family of God
Irvine	CA	Faith
Windsor	CA	Christ
Bishop	CA	Our Savior
Lakeland - Our Savior	FL	Our Savior
Lakeland - Peace	FL	Peace
Scarville (Center Luth)	IA	Center
Forest City	IA	Forest
Waukon	IA	King of Grace
Lake Mills-Lime Creek	IA	Lime Creek
Lake Mills	IA	Lake Mills
Ames	IA	Bethany
Northwood- First Shell Rock	IA	First Shell Rock
Northwood- Somber	IA	Somber
Indianola	IA	Good Shepherd
Calmar	IA	Trinity
Charles City	IA	Cross
Thompson	IA	Zion
Thornton	IA	Richland
Lincoln	IL	Grace
Portage	IN	Hope
Brewster	MA	Trinity
Holland	MI	Lord of Life
Suttons Bay	MI	First
Crookston	MN	Grace
Trail Mt Olive	MN	Nazareth
Manchester	MN	Manchester
Ulen	MN	Calvary
Grygla	MN	St. Petri
Cape Girardeau	MO	Scriptural
Bowling Green	OH	Abiding Word
Weston	OH	Grace
Hillsboro	OR	Reformation
Redmond	OR	Grace
Klamath Falls	OR	Christ
St. Helens	OR	Ascension
North Bend	OR	Resurrection
Medford	OR	Faith
Grants Pass	OR	Our Savior
The Dalles	OR	Bethany
Sutherlin	OR	Christ
Hood River	OR	Concordia
Irwin	PA	Zion
Lakewood	WA	Lakewood

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Church City	State	Congregation Name
Mt. Vernon	WA	St. Luke
Omro	WI	Messiah
Iola	WI	Redeemer
Madison-Grace	WI	Grace
Eau Claire-Ascension	WI	Ascension
Eau Claire-Pinehurst	WI	Pinehurst
Elderon	WI	Our Savior's
Portage	WI	St. Paul's
Wisconsin Dells	WI	Newport

Rural Revitalization Ad Hoc Committee Report

The following is a report from the Ad Hoc Committee on Rural Revitalization which is relevant to small town ELS congregations which may be considered at risk of closure.

Ad Hoc Committee on Rural Revitalization – Draft of Report for Synod – 3-18-20

Our Purpose:

To gather and brainstorm ways in which our ELS churches—especially in rural areas—may better carry out Gospel Outreach & Evangelism, and that they might continue to thrive, ministering Word and Sacrament to people in need of it. We will gather resources and work to bring a report on our findings to the 2020 ELS Convention, which will include actionable ideas for our Synod and our congregations to take and implement for themselves.

Actionable Ideas Presented:

1. "Adopting Churches" – Can our churches look for ways and opportunities in which we can revitalize some of our existing churches that seem to be in decline? With this in mind, and knowing that funding is limited, how could some of our Synod's larger congregations, that possess greater human, material, & spiritual resources, be willing to "adopt" a congregation (perhaps in the circuit or region) in order to assist with the needs of that smaller/struggling congregation? In a sense it would be like a congregation "daughtering" a congregation—though instead of it being a new mission start, it is a revitalization effort of an existing church—thus "adopting" (or "fostering") a church in need of revitalization.

We believe that there would be many opportunities and benefits for both congregations in this process of joining together. Benefits would not just be a financial benefit for the church being revitalized, but getting volunteers to go help on a church work-day, or to help with a VBS, or having more human and material resources for a planned outreach program/event. Involvement in such a way, would help the larger church's spiritual growth, as members are encouraged toward having a mission-mindset and offering prayers on behalf of the revitalizing church. There are certainly other untold benefits and blessings that they would receive, through these acts of love that they are showing for their neighbors.

There could also be places where the people & pastor of the revitalizing (smaller) church might offer beneficial things for the larger church (i.e. pastors swapping pulpits for a mission festival, members with specialized skills, etc.). Thus, it might be viewed more as a "partnership" rather than some sort of "parent-child" relationship. Could the Synod, or one of her boards, or the EMC, serve as the "Adoption

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Agency" assisting in putting these churches together? Further discussion and careful consideration would be required on how to handle logistical questions (such as large distances between our churches); as well as other areas of sensitivity (such as poor prior histories between churches); as well as navigating appropriate expectations of each of the churches that would be participating in such a revitalizing partnership.

2. "Health Insurance Issues"— We understand that providing adequate health insurance is a big financial obstacle for our rural churches. Congregations should continue to look into different options for appropriate health insurance. For instance, in some places, pastors and their families might qualify for assistance from state programs. There are supplemental programs as well as alternative programs (i.e. "Medishare"). That could be options. Some active Pastors might have health benefits provided already through Government programs (i.e. Medicare, or from prior military service). Some pastors are single. Some pastor's wives might be employed and are able to provide the family with health insurance benefits. Is there a way for our Synod to have a better idea of what the Pastors' health insurance needs are, to assist the Synod President and Circuit Visitors as they arrange call lists for congregations that are struggling to cover the high costs of health insurance?

The Synod could develop and provide a list of options and ideas for congregations and pastors who are exploring different health insurance options. The individual congregations, working with their pastor, could then work together to determine the best option for them. (As far as we know this is a resource that does not exist in our synod.)

3. "Combining Congregations" - Rural congregations in areas of declining population may have to consider combining efforts with other area ELS (and WELS) congregations, and seek to share a pastor. This may not allow a pastor to be on site as much as before. There are other things that may cause churches to resist this (i.e. pride, jealousy, past difficult histories with other area churches, etc.). The Pastor along with help from Synodical officials (i.e. Synod President, Circuit Visitor, EMC) could work with the congregations involved to help produce an amicable relationship between the congregations. There may also be opportunities for the congregations involved to look at combining together in a new location that might have better opportunities for growth and outreach.

There should be a concern for the Pastor and his personal workload between multiple churches that are joining together. Calls to serve multiple parishes have been known to be very demanding of a Pastor and his family. Congregations that are seeking to join together in a multiple congregation situation, should seek to assist the Pastor with his work, especially in administrative and other non-ministry tasks (i.e. hire a secretary to produce newsletters and bulletins, etc.). This way, he can maintain an appropriate workload balance between the different congregations.

In rural parishes, especially where a pastor is considering retirement, the synod could consider assigning and providing financial support for a vicar to join him. The vicar would receive solid training from an experienced pastor in the rural setting and could pursue evangelism and outreach opportunities in the community under the direction of the Pastor. Potentially he could succeed the retiring pastor in the parish. Asking a retired, or "vacancy," pastor to assist for a short-term commitment would also allow the pastor to focus efforts on outreach and evangelism efforts in their areas.

4. "State of Rural ELCA Churches" – It seems that there might be many ELCA churches in rural areas that have held onto confessional, conservative Lutheranism. Are there ways that we can encourage them?

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Perhaps even offer resources and help as they consider how much the ELCA has changed in the past decades into liberalism? Or as rural congregations are being ignored or even shut down by ELCA leadership—how might we offer to share God’s Word with these people who need the Gospel? We acknowledge that it would be a very large step for entire congregations to join the ELS—but there have been cases of this in the past. Inquiries for help and service are made of our pastors and of the president. Is there anything we might be able to do/be prepared to do in such situations? In the least, we should be wary of opportunities where there are conservative Lutherans within communities that desire to remain faithful, and yet their spiritual needs are not being met by the ELCA. We are not advocating proselytizing, but if their churches are drastically changing long-held beliefs or closing, we should see this as a potential opportunity to reach out to such people and share the Gospel with them.

God continues to bless our churches with opportunities—even in rural areas that seem to otherwise be in decline! We should join together in praying that we can recognize the different opportunities that are placed before us and that God would bless our efforts as we continue to share His Word with our neighbors.

Submitted by: Ad Hoc Committee on Rural Revitalization
Rev. Peter Faugstad
Rev. Andrew Soule
Rev. Luke Ulrich
Rev. Larry Wentzlaff (previous ELS Evangelism & Missions Counselor)

Commission’s Identification of Key Factors Driving Membership Decline

The key factors for congregations declining and at critical mass are varied, and identification of a congregation’s specific factors is a task best completed on a case-by-case basis.

- **The age of apostacy:** The influence of government/secular/materialist schools, social media tilted against faith, corrupt churches preaching a false or watered-down gospel, the influence of the apostate themselves.
- **Change in community demographics:** e.g., families moving away from the rural communities.
- **Lack of financial resources**
- **Lack of worship resources (e.g. musicians)**
- **Insufficient time, talent, and effort on the part of members or pastor** to do anything other than “station keeping,” maintaining some sort of status quo.
- **Pastoral Exhaustion**
- **Lack of basic congregational plan: Congregational objectives and ways to meet them through the efforts of the congregation members and officers as well as the pastor**
- **Lack of personal evangelism**

Conclusions and Recommendations

A congregational counseling approach is needed to better assess a specific congregation’s driving factors in membership decline. This involves a congregation completing a self-assessment to aid in their recognition of their risk of closure. The congregation must then decide which of the four pathways described below should be followed.

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Principal Considerations

- I. While it is natural to first address the need to grow, and to recommend ways and means to encourage congregational growth, that is not the first requirement.
 - a. What is first needed is that a congregation assess, accept, and comprehend that they are in crisis, as indicated by a combination of the following.
 - i. Year-over-year decline in attendance.
 - ii. Demographically homogeneous (e.g. “all old people”).
 - iii. Ratio of membership to attendance (> 1:3, for example).
 - iv. Insufficient revenue to support the ministry of the gospel.¹
 - b. Reasons for congregations declining and at critical mass are varied, and identification of the reasons is something best done on a case-by-case basis.
 - i. The age of apostasy: The influence of government/secular/materialist schools, social media tilted against faith, corrupt churches preaching a false or watered-down gospel, the influence of the apostate themselves.
 - ii. Change in demographics, e.g., families moving away from the rural communities.
 - iii. Lack of financial resources
 - iv. Lack of worship resources, e.g. musicians.
 - v. Insufficient time, talent, and effort on the part of members or pastor to do anything other than “station keeping,” maintaining some sort of status quo.
 - vi. Pastoral exhaustion.
 - vii. Lack of basic plan: Congregational Objectives and ways to meet them by the efforts of the congregation members and officers as well as the pastor.
 - viii. Lack of personal evangelism.

RESOURCE: [Congregational Counseling and Triage to assist congregations in “brotherly review” or visitation.](#)

- c. Upon rigorous self-examination and recognizing that they are a congregation in crisis, there are fundamentally four pathways open for a congregation.²
 - i. **CONGREGATIONAL REDEVELOPMENT** The congregation accepts the significant responsibility and challenge to undertake a path of Congregational Redevelopment in worship, catechesis,³ and outreach consisting of dedication to personal evangelism.⁴

¹ Some congregations may have legacies that permit them to remain open while by every other measure they are moribund.

² We are indebted to Pastor Jonathan Hein, of the WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling for his insights and for sharing what they have found to be the best approach or the best practices for addressing this problem.

³ “Catechesis” is the purposeful instruction of the congregation in the Word of God.

⁴ Pastor Hein and his colleagues have concluded that programs of corporate outreach are not useful. He points to research from Pew, Barna, and others that reveals that “church shoppers” are virtually nonexistent. Hein and his colleagues carry this so far as in some cases to recommend that such corporate outreach programs be terminated because they displace the practice of personal evangelism. A commitment to personal evangelism is the *sine qua non* for congregational redevelopment.

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- ii. **MERGING** There are different kinds of mergers, such as two (or more) congregations merging at a third location, such as Myrtle Creek and Sutherlin merging and relocating at Roseburg; or one congregation joining with another to strengthen it, or peer congregations merging at one or the other location.
- iii. **CLOSING & REOPENING** A congregation may close, collect its assets and other resources and either open in a new location or donate its resources to enable a new mission start elsewhere.
- iv. **REVERT TO PREACHING STATION OR CIRCUIT STOP** Some congregations may do none of the above. If not, the likelihood is that they will consume the resources of other congregations. As the slide into apostasy continues, however, this may be the only way to serve faithful and contributing groups of believers.

RESOURCE: Congregational Counseling via EMC, Circuit Visitors, Alternate Circuit Visitors, and Trained Individuals to assist in Congregational Redevelopment.

- II. IF a congregation accepts the responsibility to undertake a program of Congregational Redevelopment, resources will be available to assist them in their undertaking.⁵ The CCCM committee recommends first the program of congregational counseling and then that the following resources be made available. The resources are subordinate to the need for congregational self-assessment.

The tendency is to shift the emphasis away from sound worship, edifying catechesis and personal evangelism to corporate outreach programs which require less personal responsibility.⁶

- a. **Congregational Development Assistance (Triage)**
- b. Personal Evangelism Resources
- c. Catechetical Resources
 - i. Likely the limitation is a mindset and not a lack of resources.
- d. Music and Worship
- e. Materials Customized for the Congregation and Community
- f. Web Resources Customized for the Congregation and Community (Includes other uses of information technology, including prospect management, email and text communication, etc.)
- g. Video system definition, installation and troubleshooting.

RESOURCES: Each of these resources is to be defined in turn.

⁵ The resources available in the “CCCM Package” or otherwise developed will, of course, be available to all the congregations in the synod, however identifying a congregation officially in a state of Congregational Redevelopment may help to prioritize distribution.

⁶ This is reminiscent of when every school was told they needed to “do computers” and they became an end in themselves instead of a tool. In the same way, some may think that we have done great things for the gospel because of cutting-edge live streaming capabilities that may displace attention to sound worship, catechesis, and personal evangelism.

Appendix I – Congregational Counseling -or-Triage Strategy

Definition of triage | tri·age | \ trē-'āzh

1.
 - a. the sorting of and allocation of treatment to patients and especially battle and disaster victims according to a system of priorities designed to maximize the number of survivors
 - b. the sorting of patients (as in an emergency room) according to the urgency of their need for care
2. the assigning of priority order to projects on the basis of where funds and other resources can be best used, are most needed, or are most likely to achieve success^{7]}

I. Resource Name and Description

Congregational Counseling

CCCM Congregational Counseling (for lack of a better term) will be offered to congregations to (1) Evaluate their situation, (2) If in a critical situation, request help in choosing the best path forward, (3) Obtain congregational counsel to pursue their way forward.

II. How does this help congregations at critical mass?

First and foremost, a congregation can assess their circumstances in view of God’s word and the particular challenges and opportunities they face. Hopefully they then will be apprised of options, rather than just “status quo or close.”

III. Detailed explanation

- A. Self-Study: A self-evaluative instrument (questionnaire) will be composed. Through the General Pastoral Conference, from circuit visitors, the President’s office, The Lutheran Sentinel, and the convention (essay?), congregations will be urged to confer and answer the questions as honestly and as fully as possible. This may be synonymous with the self-examination pastors and congregations are asked to do prior to a visitation.

RESOURCES: Committee of Circuit Visitors + BHO members + EMC, in consultation with the Commission on Congregational Counseling of WELS meets once or twice to develop the questionnaire.

- B. After completing the self-evaluation congregation may either proceed with a normal visitation and/or request help specifically in considering options.
 - a. Resources to Equip Congregations with “Infrastructure of Outreach”
 - i. Musical and Worship Resources

⁷ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/triage>. Accessed July 2, 2022.

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- ii. Website and IT Resources
- iii. Customized Publicity & Information Materials
- iv. Video and Audio Capture and Distribution
- v. Other

RESOURCES: Developed Pursuant to our CCCM “Package”

- b. Plan forward (Congregations in Crisis)
 - i. Congregational Redevelopment: If the congregation accepts the significant responsibility and challenge, the CV facilitates a Congregational Redevelopment Team to work with the congregation. See “III, C” below.
 - ii. Merging: The CV will work with congregations suitable for merger to reach the optimum merger plan.
 - iii. Closing & Reopening: The CV will work with the congregation to close and liquidate before all assets are depleted, so that either the same flock can reopen elsewhere, or the assets be contributed in a place where they can see hope of a viable congregation.
 - iv. Circuit Stop / Preaching Station: Especially in this time of apostasy, the CV will assist in planning so that the souls in the congregation are not set adrift. This may include commuting to other churches, video, circuit riders, etc. Every effort should be made to avoid crippling other congregations in the process by the demands placed on them.

RESOURCES: Circuit Visitors and Alternate Circuit Visitors (ACVs) receive training to conduct visitations with the addition of leading congregations to assess their path forward, short of a formal strategic plan.

RESOURCES: Retired pastors in each circuit be encouraged to be available to fill in for CV’s and ACV’s so they can conduct visitations.

- C. Congregational Redevelopment: The congregation accepts the significant responsibility and challenge to undertake a path of Congregational Redevelopment in worship, catechesis, and outreach consisting of dedication to personal evangelism. They work together with the EMC, CV, ACV, and other trained individuals in the synod to develop the plan of redevelopment. The congregation will have a financial stake in this.

RESOURCES: Training for responsible individuals, coverage to free up CV, ACV, and trained individuals, if needed.

IV. What action is needed by the synod to make this available? (suggested)

- A. Inclusion of Alternate Circuit Visitors (ACV) in the Circuit Visitor (CV) conference at least for training in this.
- B. Appropriate funds as noted above to cover CV’s and ACV’s.
- C. Encourage Self-Study

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D. Coordination with WELS Congregation Counseling Commission

V. What action is needed by the congregation to make use of this resource?

- A. Begin with the self-study.
- B. Upon completion of the self-study, consult with the CV about a visitation.
- C. Congregation not in crisis? Follow the visitation, including recommendations for improving the Infrastructure of Outreach.
- D. Congregation in crisis? Consider the four options.
- E. Provide funding for “Infrastructure of Outreach,” Expenses of Visitation, Expenses of Congregational Development, as appropriate.

VI. What, specifically, can the congregation expect to receive from the synod?

- A. A self-study instrument
- B. Trained Circuit Visitor
- C. Evangelism Missions Counselor
- D. CCCM Package of “Infrastructure of Outreach”
- E. Congregational Counseling Team
- F. Minimal financial support for needed congregational efforts.

Appendix II - Music and Worship Resources

I. Resource Name and Description

Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary Digital Music and Worship Resources

II. How does this help congregations at critical mass?

An increasing number of Evangelical Lutheran Synod congregations, especially smaller congregations, are finding themselves without an organist or pianist to accompany their services. In such a situation, a congregation can implement a system of using digital music for liturgy and hymns that does not have a weekly cost and that only has an initial startup cost of between \$250 and \$650, depending on the needs of the congregation and the size of its sanctuary.

III. Detailed Explanation

Free mp3 audio recordings for all of the liturgical settings in the Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary, and free mp3 audio recordings for almost all of the hymns in ELH, are currently available, and can be downloaded from the synod website at els.org/resources/worship/music-for-liturgy-and-hymns Recordings of the remaining hymns will soon also be available.

The system recommended for churches without a live organist does not require that the church's organ have MIDI inputs, or that an organ be used at all. Instead, this system involves the purchase of a large Bluetooth speaker, and a small Amazon Kindle tablet – or an equivalent tablet or device – through which commands can be given to the speaker for music to be played. An Amazon Kindle tablet is recommended, since it has a strong Bluetooth signal and is inexpensive, costing between \$50 and \$100. It is strongly recommended that a congregation purchase a tablet that will be used only for this purpose. If the church has an Internet connection – for downloading the files from the synod website into the tablet -- it should never be necessary to remove the tablet from the church. The Bluetooth technology that would allow the speaker to be used in this way is a wireless connection that does not itself involve or require an internet connection.

The files for the liturgical settings and hymns from ELH can all be pre-loaded from the Internet onto the tablet, or they can be downloaded onto the table on an ongoing basis as needed. But during a service the files should definitely not be played through a Wi-Fi router from the webpage where they are stored, but from the hard drive of the tablet. Putting together the music for an upcoming Sunday is as simple as copying and pasting the liturgy and hymn files from the tablet hard drive into a folder in the tablet, designated for that particular Sunday.

The files for the various liturgical rites are pre-numbered so that everything will be in the correct order. There are gaps in that numbering at the places in the service where hymns, chant tones, and other music can be inserted. Once these additional files have been copied and pasted into the folder for a certain Sunday, they can be renamed and numbered according to where they would be played in the sequence of the service.

This system is simple enough to use that a 10-year-old child can be (and has been) trained to operate it in his congregation.

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Several speaker options from the JBL Party Box series, which have been determined through testing and comparisons to work well for this purpose, are recommended. Depending on the size and power of the speaker, these cost anywhere between \$200 and \$550. They are very easy to set up and use, and have a clear, strong sound. It is important that a speaker not be too small, because then it would not be sufficient for leading the singing of the congregation. There are cheaper options from brands such as W-King, Onn, and Ion, which could also be used, depending on the cost limitations and needs of a congregation. All of these speakers can be purchased at stores such as BestBuy, Costco, Walmart, and amazon.com.

In a perfect world every congregation would have a skilled organist to accompany services. However, in the imperfect world in which we live, congregations can still continue to worship liturgically, in the full musical tradition of the Lutheran Church, and in particular with resources that match the ELS's hymnal, by using this digital music.

Pastor Paul Webber of West Jordan, Utah, is available for consultation and advice, and can answer questions from pastors or congregational leaders who are considering pursuing this. In fact, anyone who is interested in using this system is strongly encouraged to speak with him first, before purchasing anything. His contact information is: email, westjordanlutherans@gmail.com; cell phone, 801-569-1111.

Appendix III - Website and IT Resources

- I. **Resource Name & Description:** Having an online presence is important for all churches in the 21st century. A church website and social media serve as a “front door” to their church. For many first-time guests and visitors—and potential future members of the church, the church’s online presence is the first contact they will have with that church. Making a good first impression for those seeking a church is important. We believe that our churches are valuable and are sharing the most valuable thing that can be shared. Having a functioning—albeit simple—website can communicate a great deal of information to those who are searching. An online presence is also a helpful tool for members of that church, as a next step (“for more information,” “to get connected,” “check out more,” etc.) as they carry out personal evangelism. To help our churches, even those who do not have resources within the congregation to produce or keep up websites and social media accounts, we are providing a list of potential web designers and advisors who have worked with the ELS/WELS and will work with congregations to create, replace, or improve, their websites. We want to give churches a listing of people and companies that can help them get and maintain an online presence.
- II. **How Does it help congregations at Critical Mass?** Congregations that are committed to congregational redevelopment should see the importance of having an attractive, up-to-date website that provides (at least) basic information about their church. Most people today, who are searching for a church, will look to the internet and check out church options online before stepping foot on the church property. To have opportunities to meet new people and to have guests coming to church, we should see the church website as a valuable resource and tool. Also, for the members who are carrying out personal evangelism, having a helpful church website for more information and to get in touch with their pastor is a place they can simply and easily direct people to. Having a website or online presence will not automatically bring people in. But it is a helpful tool and resource that mission-minded congregations will want to have and use. We should have an expectation for every church to have some sort of online presence that provides basic information about that church.
- III. **Detailed Explanation:** To have a listing of companies/individuals that have indicated their willingness to create, replace, or improve church websites. Included in this list will be their contact information, pricing information, services offered, and sample websites. We can leave it up to the individual congregations to decide which would web-designer they would like to go with. They would be welcome to shop around to find which would best suit their individual needs.
- IV. **What Action Is Needed by the Synod to make this resource available?** Make this list available to all ELS Churches and promote it through our various synodical means (i.e., President’s office, Circuit Visitors, CCCM Report, etc.). Additionally, if we could determine a source of funding to assist the congregations with the cost of these websites—either through a grant request, or through the special funding of our EMC—we could expect more participation. We are hoping that every congregation would eventually have a web presence—even if very basic—a single page or two.

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- V. What action is needed by the congregation to make use of this resources?** We need an individual from the congregation to be willing to follow up with the individuals/companies from the list, and to work with them, providing content that should be included on the web page (i.e., photos, service/church information, etc.). The EMC or Communication Director could have other resources handy that could be shared and used by the Congregations on their websites (i.e., Sentinel, Peace Devotions, What we Believe, etc.)
- VI. What, specifically, can the congregation expect to receive from the synod?** We would provide the list of web-designers/companies. Also, ideally, the synod would provide financial assistance. We would also assist with additional website resources (see above).

NOTE: As far as using technology for Prospect Management, Email & Text Communications, etc. I feel that this is outside of the current scope. How can we encourage our pastors of being willing to have and use tools that they might not have used in the past—via, email or text messages? Encouraging Pastors to have a plan in place for follow-up of Prospects is essential. How this looks and functions—including how it makes use of technology—can vary greatly. I believe a general encouragement for our pastors who rightly desire to “become all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22) would simultaneously encourage pastors to learn and use text messaging and other simple technology to reach out and connect with their members and prospects. This however, would vary greatly. (Any ideas or suggestions from the group on how to follow up with this?)

Listing of Web-Designers/Web-Design Companies gathered so far (still compiling/ standardizing some information from these people/companies):

- **Web City Services –Dawn Widmayer**
- **Ty Leyrer – Otto Media Group**
- **Emma Hislop**
- **Lemon Pie Design – Amory Stephenson**
- **Basically Digital LLC – Becky Atkinson**
- **Ecclesiastical Creations — Stephanie Wentzlaff**
- **Topside Design — Laura Bernarde**
- **Twelve-Two Creative**

Appendix IV – Customized Materials

I. Resource Name and Description: Customized Materials and Resources

A repository with customized publicity and information materials is made available for congregations at critical mass who are wanting to undergo congregational redevelopment.

I. How does this help congregations at critical mass?

This will provide high quality publicity materials to a congregation with most of the legwork already done (e.g. graphics, layout, etc.). The congregation would simply add their personalized data or have a professional assist them.

II. Detailed explanation

- a. “Do you have a Pastor?” Campaign. Will include customizable brochures and a series of videos for use on social media.
- b. “We’re Glad You Asked” brochures with relevant topics and easy to read, attractive appearance.

III. What action is needed by the synod to make this available? (suggested)

- a. BHO has a grant and is developing the “Do you have a Pastor?” materials.
- b. BHO is currently reworking the “We’re Glad You Asked” brochures with updated topics and a refreshed look.
- c. Once completed the BHO needs to make these resources readily available online and in hard copy versions.

IV. What action is needed by the congregation to make use of this resource?

- a. Pastors and congregational outreach coordinators will need to be proactive in utilizing these resources.
- b. For certain critical mass congregations, the Synod could hire a graphic designer to customize brochures and other materials for each congregation in consultation with the pastor.

V. What, specifically, can the congregation expect to receive from the synod?

- a. Notifications of brochure and other resource availability
- b. Aid from a graphic designer to assist with the customization of materials.

Appendix V – Video System Resources

I. Resource Name and Description

Low-Cost Video System Proposal: A low-cost video system (< \$1,000) could be installed in congregations at critical mass which will allow the congregation to record and/or live-stream divine services and/or bible classes to their communities, members, and shut-ins. This represents a one-way communication approach with those in the community that do not have a church home and can be reached via online methodologies.

II. How does it help congregations at critical mass?

The feedback received by this proposal author from some churches that have implemented a video system is that a video system allows visitors to “check-out” a church before they attend in-person. This capability helps reduce the fear of attending a church for the first time and provides insight into what occurs during a church service and the hearing of the Gospel message of Christ’s love for sinners.

III. Detailed Explanation

- a. While statistics have not been gathered by the BHO on the effectiveness of video systems within the ELS (although Brad may have more feedback from mission congregations), the proposal author has talked to several churches (4-5?) that broadcast video and asked about their experience with having more visitors as a result of their broadcasting. Anecdotally, most indicate that it has been helpful and, in some cases, has led to gaining new members.
- b. Broadcasting divine services should be accompanied in combination with other forms of outreach (Facebook “promotions”, personal evangelism approaches) to improve community awareness of the local church.
- c. The video system approach is a good method for non-members to “attend” remotely.
 - i. A video system allows these non-members to get a feel for the church without experiencing the awkwardness of meeting strangers or feeling out-of-place the first time they attend in person.
 - ii. However, it should be noted that a video system is a one-way communication method that does not allow for building personal relationships through direct interaction with a prospect and does not allow for an interactive conversation to occur unless the non-member initiates contact with the church.

IV. What action is needed by the synod to make this resource available?

- a. The Synod can provide additional funding or potentially use currently available EMC funding to purchase a low-cost video system that can be “installed” and operated by an individual in the congregation that has some computer literacy.

V. What action is needed by the congregation to make use of this resource?

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- a. The congregation will need to identify a person(s) to operate the system. This means that there are members with some level of computer literacy within the congregation.
 - i. Congregations located in communities with businesses that are significant users of computing resources have individuals that are more fluent in using computers.
 - ii. Congregations with members that are older or in more rural areas may not have someone with a basic computer skillset.
- b. The congregation will need to determine how they wish to broadcast the video; livestream only (no archival, no video editing), or record and distribute (edit video, upload to YouTube or Vimeo).
- c. The congregation will need to identify a person(s) to operate the system, edit the video, upload to the storage location, and potentially make use of a congregational Facebook page to “distribute” the recorded video.
- d. Podcasting is also possible and requires very little additional knowledge to create, no additional cost to implement or distribute.
- e.

VI. What, specifically, can the congregation expect to receive from the synod?

- a. The congregation can expect to receive guidance on the video system equipment list, camera placement, video editing software options, video editing software recommendations, and limited training and support.
- b. The congregation can expect to receive some limited funding to offset the cost of installation.
- c. The congregation can expect to receive feedback on initial video recordings to help them improve their online impression and recording techniques.

Appendix VI – Statistical Analysis of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Statistical Analysis Introduction

The purpose of this Evangelical Lutheran Synod Statistical Study is to gain insight into the current state of membership and other statistics which are negatively impacting the congregations of the synod.

This statistical study was created by Commission on Churches at Critical Mass (CCCM) and endeavors to examine the reasons behind the decline in membership and identify tools that would be useful to congregations as they seek to counter the reasons for decline and continue to share the love of Jesus Christ with their communities.

The wider use of this report is to provide a statistical view of the current state of the ELS in order to support future action planning throughout the various synodical boards and committees that find this information useful in their duties to support congregations with the challenges they are facing.

This study evaluates the following sources of data:

- Statistical Data from the ELS Parochial Report
- Reported trends in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS)
- Church Membership Studies by research organizations
- The Commission on Churches at Critical Mass Congregational Survey
- The Commission on Churches at Critical Mass Circuit Visitor Survey

The criteria used to identify congregations at critical mass is that they have an average attendance below 30 souls, but critical mass is more specifically defined as when a congregation is no longer able to financially meet their expenses. This “critical mass” terminology is used in several sections of this report.

In each section, observations and analysis are characterized based on the data presented in that section. These section observations are then summarized at the end of this report.

Statistical Analysis Executive Summary

This statistical report gathers and examines various sources of information to gain important insight into the trends currently occurring within our synod. There are three primary sources used to collect data of interest:

- The ELS Parochial Report (Statistical Report) of 2021 - This report is used to study:
 - Membership and ministry data within the congregations
 - Quantify the COVID-19 pandemic impacts upon the congregations and the synod
- CCCM Surveys to Congregations and Circuit Visitors – The survey results investigate:
 - Self-identified risk of closure
 - Congregational administrative operations
 - Outreach, evangelism, and strategic planning
 - Local church demographics (e.g. age, religious background, digital presence (website, social media), etc.)
 - Ability to financially support the pastor

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- Facility appearance
- Circuit Visitor visibility into the circuit's congregation
- External research organization reporting on church membership trends in the United States.

The following sections in this report will provide statistical and graphical data along with observations and analysis.

In summary this report communicates that a significant number of churches report the following challenges:

- Synodical membership continues to decline similar to other church body trends.
- The average congregational budgets for "Home Use" have begun to significantly decline since 2020.
- The Congregational Survey reveals that a significant number of the congregations have experienced a decline in membership to the point where they are either struggling to meet expenses or are no longer meeting expenses.
- The outreach and evangelism efforts are struggling due to; lack of a documented outreach plan, lack of functioning councils and boards, no strategic plan to guide the congregation's work.
- Five survey questions were asked to assess if a congregation was at "high-risk" of closure. Upon reviewing the survey responses, it was found that 62/72 or 86% of the survey-responding congregations had at least one response indicating high-risk of closure.

There is also a significant blessing observed in the trend of congregational contributions to the synod. While in the year 2020, where the contributions fell by 3.4% in this time period still affected by COVID-19, the contributions received in 2021 recovered. The 2021 contributions were at their largest value since 2014.

The recommendations associated with the statistical analysis are incorporated in the overall Conclusions and Recommendations section of this report.

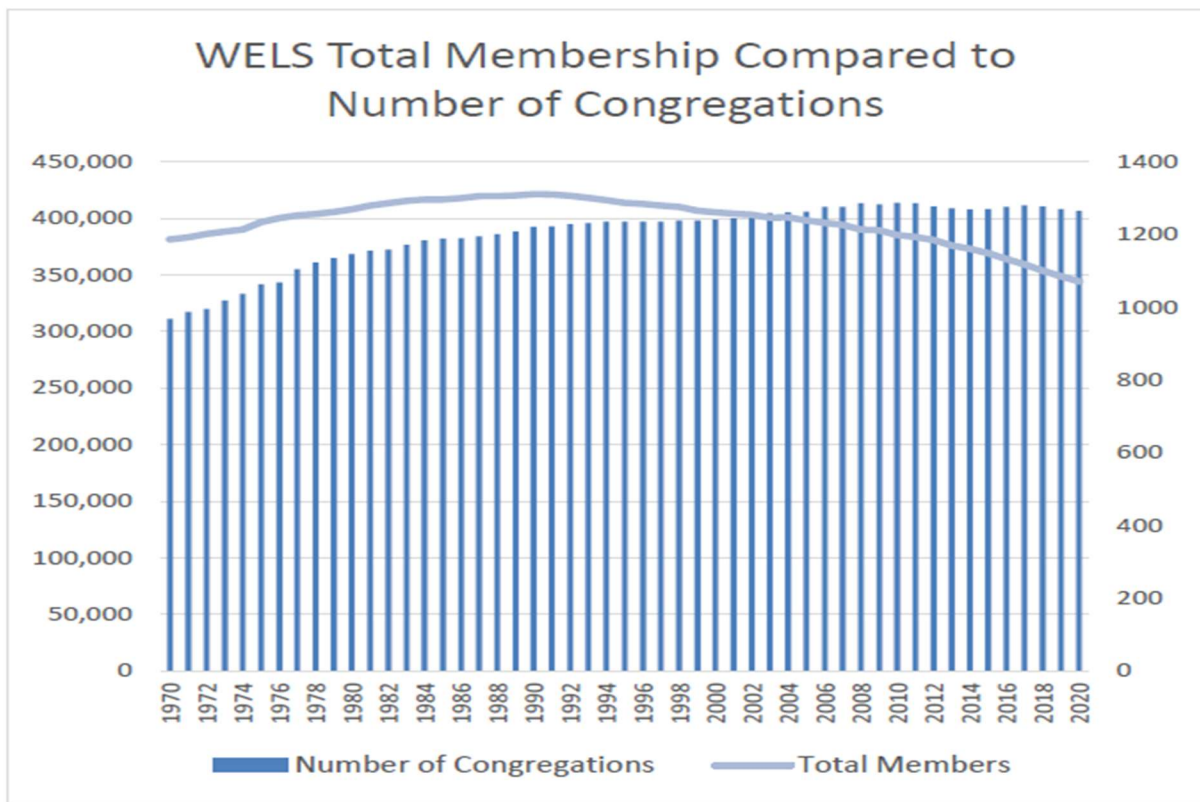
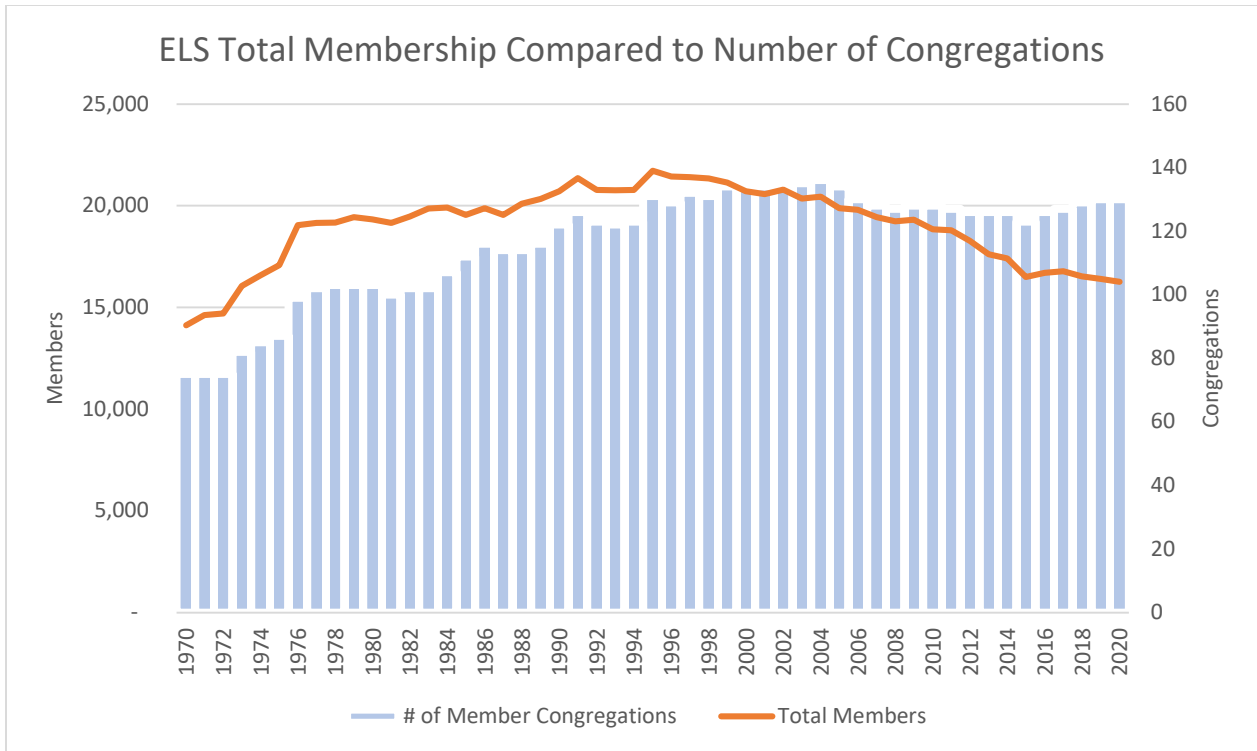
[Analysis of the ELS Parochial Report \(Statistical Data\)](#)

The ELS statistical analysis is an examination of the statistics collected from all congregations in the synod and to provide insight into what the statistics are indicating.

[Congregation Membership in the ELS](#)

As of 2021, the ELS has 131 member congregations (including 2 congregations the ELS serves, but have not yet become a member). In 2022, the synod experienced another 4 closures which will reduce the count to 127 once the 2022 Parochial Report is published in Q1CY2023. The number of member congregations had been relatively stable for the past 4-5 years prior to the 2019 COVID pandemic. The synod reached its greatest number of member congregations in 2004 at 136.

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Source: WELS Statistical Summary for 2021

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It should also be noted that during the initial work of the CCCM, seven congregations closed.

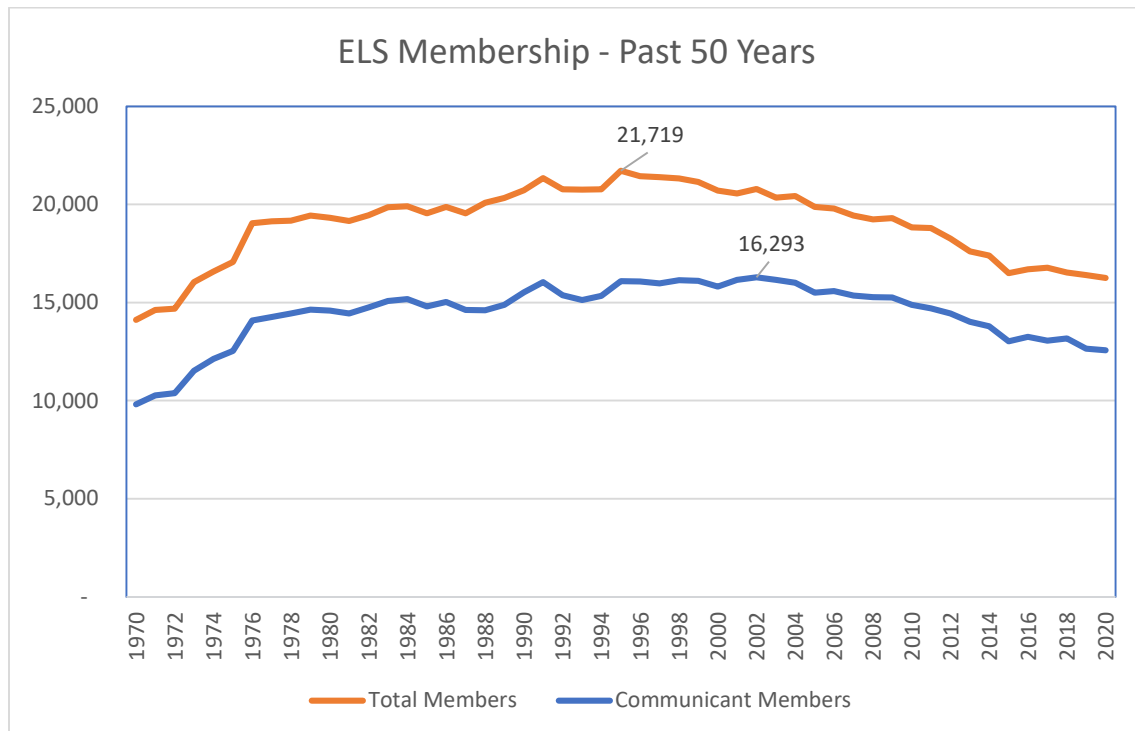
- St. Paul, Escondido, CA closed in January 2021
- Christ Lutheran, Princeton, MN (Independent but served by the ELS) closed in July 2021
- St. Matthew, Myrtle Creek, OR closed in Sept 2021
- Our Redeemer, Yelm WA closed in 2022
- Immanuel, Riceville IA closed in March 2022
- Our Savior, Amherst Junction, WI closed in 2022
- Grace, Piedmont, MO closed in 2022

Congregation Membership Observations and Conclusions

- The ELS membership trend over time is consistent with the trend observed in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). The ELS membership peaked in 1995 at 21,719, whereas the WELS membership peaked in 1990 at 421,396.
- Gallop’s data (shown later in this statistical report) confirms that the decrease in church membership is occurring broadly in many different religions.

Membership Trends in ELS Congregations

At the end of 2020, the ELS total membership is currently 16,246 souls in our 130 member congregations. The total membership between 2020 and 2019 decreased by 152 and represents a loss of 0.9%. The communicant membership between these years decreased by 81 and represents a loss of 0.6%.

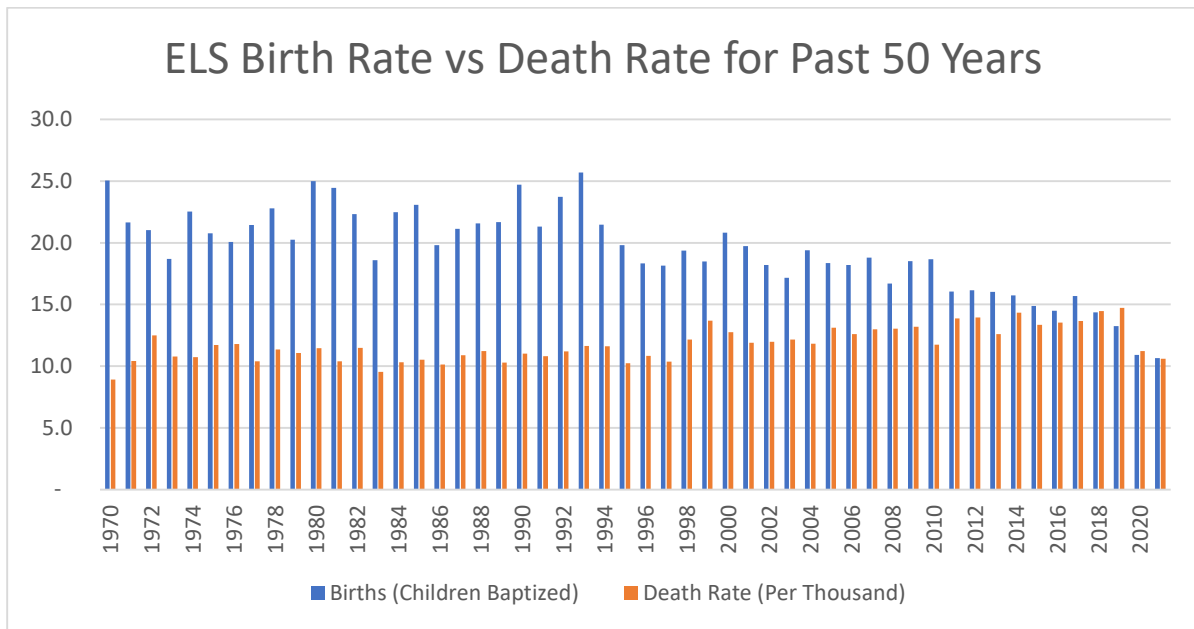


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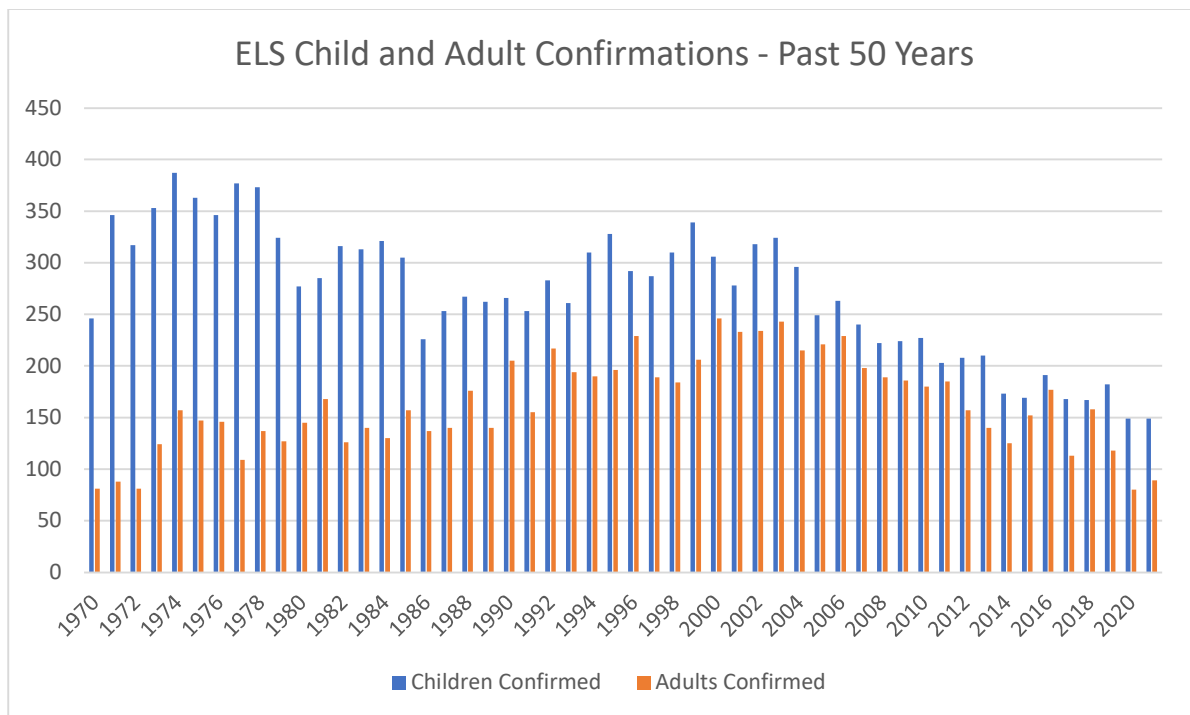
In the past five years (from 2015 to 2020), total membership decreased by 243 or 1.5% and communicant membership decreased by 244 or 3.5%.

In the past ten years (from 2010 to 2020), total membership decreased by 2,588 or 13.7% and communicant membership decreased by 2,321 or 15.6%.

The ELS total membership peaked in 1995 at 21,719 souls and has declined by 5,473 or 25.2%. The communicant membership was at its highest in 2002 at 16,293 and has declined by 3,727 or 22.9% since the peak.



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Membership Observations and Conclusions

- The ELS Membership trend over time is consistent with the observations from the WELS 2021 Statistical Report. The WELS Membership Peaks in 1990 at 421,396. The ELS Membership peaks in 1995 at 21,719.
- The ELS total membership has declined more rapidly than the communicant membership. This suggests that the number of youth (children in 8th grade or younger) has declined in our congregations more quickly than communicant members. The reason for this will be discussed in the following bullets.
- The ELS birth rate historically exceeds the death rate until 2018 when the death rate began to exceed the birth rate. The primary reason for this is that the average size of the typical family is smaller than post-World War II families and is reflected in our nation's demographics and our synod's demographics. Even though the ELS death rate has declined in 2020, the birth rate is even lower. However, the 2021 data (last available) shows another shift where the birth rate is slightly higher than the death rate (10.7 births/thousand vs 10.6 deaths/thousand).
- ELS Confirmations are also declining and follow the same general trend as the declines observed in birth rates and the total membership data.

COVID-19 Pandemic Related Membership Challenges

In 2019, a number of ELS congregations temporarily closed during the various peaks experienced in the COVID-19 pandemic, and was done so in an effort to support the state government's emergency declarations to limit the size of gatherings so as to reduce the COVID transmission and protect the health of individuals.

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The result of these temporary closures had an impact on offerings, yet many congregations were blessed by members' faithful giving resulting from congregations finding alternative ways to provide offerings to the congregation.

However, the more critical impact of the pandemic and these temporary closures is the reduced average attendance resulting in an increased concern for the spiritual well-being of the membership. As COVID-19 infection rates reduced in 2020 and 2021, yet the average attendance rates have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

ELS Pre and Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Synod Average Attendance

Year	Sunday Avg Attendance/ Congregation (Total Membership / # Congr)
2018	56
2019*	55
2020*	34
2021	35

Note: The asterisked years indicate when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak.

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COVID-19 Observations and Conclusions

This table shows a 36% reduction in average attendance from 2019 to 2021. This reduction in average attendance presents additional challenges in the following ways:

- Operational Solvency – Survival of smaller congregations less equipped to weather the financial storm of significant reductions in offerings.
- Potential shift in ministry focus to gathering the flock versus reaching the lost in the community driven by government-required and employer-required quarantines.
- Financial Survival Mode - The reduction in offerings (data presented in the “Offerings” section of this report) experienced has the potential to shift financial priorities within the congregations to focus on funding continuing operations (fixed expenses) and less focus on outreach and evangelism activities.
- Differing views within congregations regarding COVID protocol has been reported within the synod as creating challenges in maintaining healthy fellowship.

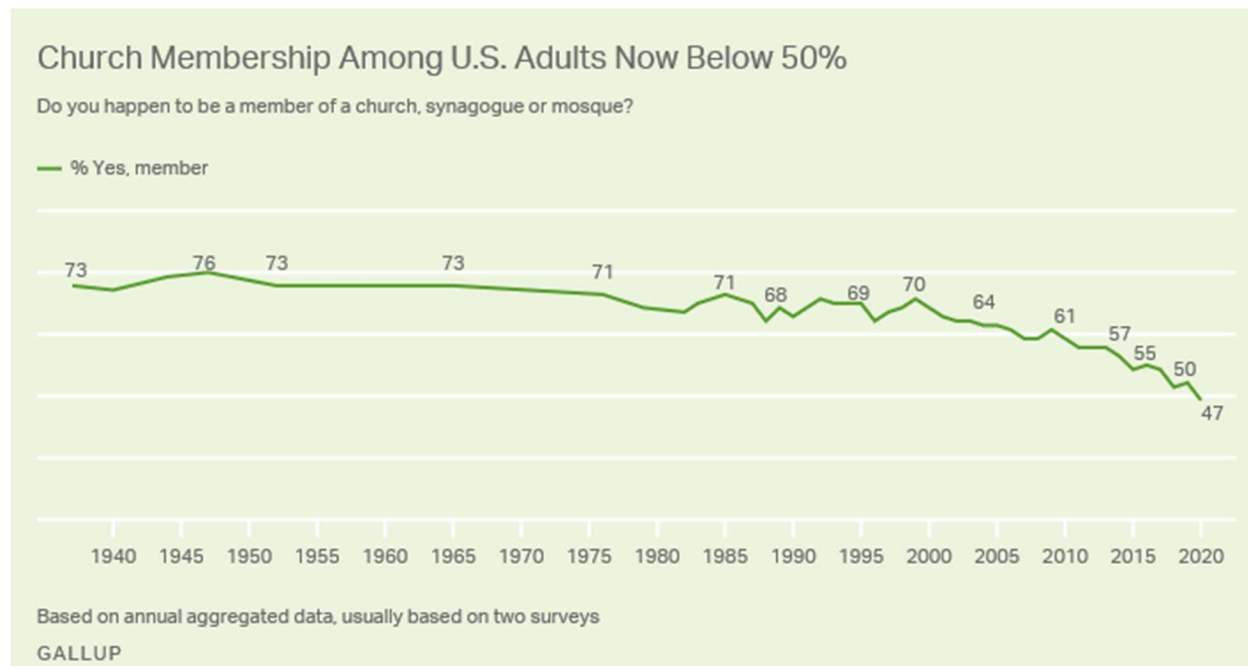
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Church Membership Studies by Research Organizations

The following section contains research and analysis on church membership from non-church related organizations.

Gallup Poll on Church Membership

This first set of data comes from a Gallup poll published in March 2021.



Source: Gallup article "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time" published March 29, 2021.

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

Gallup's Conclusions

Gallup reports that Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year (2020), dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999.

U.S. church membership was 73% when Gallup first measured it in 1937 and remained near 70% for the next six decades, before beginning a steady decline around the turn of the 21st century.

The decline in church membership is primarily a function of the increasing number of Americans who express no religious preference. Over the past two decades, the percentage of Americans who do not identify with any religion has grown from 8% in 1998-2000 to 13% in 2008-2010 and 21% over the past three years.

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Pew Research Center Study

This next set of data comes from the Pew Research organization and was based on a study published already in 2019 describing the decline in Christian church membership and the increase in the religiously unaffiliated often referred to as “Nones”.

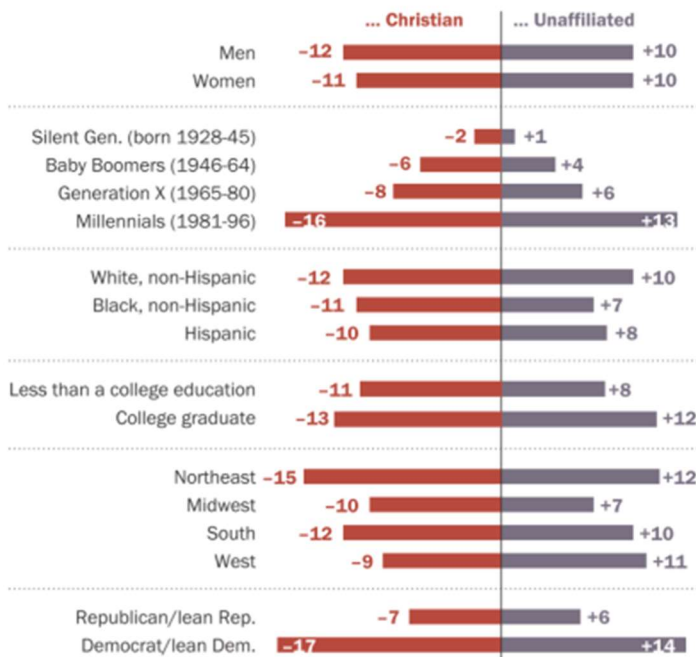
Pew Research Center’s Conclusions

The data suggests that Christians are declining not just as a share of the U.S. adult population, but also in absolute numbers. In 2009, there were approximately 233 million adults in the U.S., according to the Census Bureau. Pew Research Center’s RDD surveys conducted at the time indicated that 77% of them were Christian, which means that by this measure, there were approximately 178 million Christian adults in the U.S. in 2009.

Meanwhile, the number of religiously unaffiliated adults in the U.S. grew by almost 30 million over this period.

Broad-based declines in share of Americans who say they are Christian

Percentage-point change between 2009 and 2018/2019 in the share who identify as ...

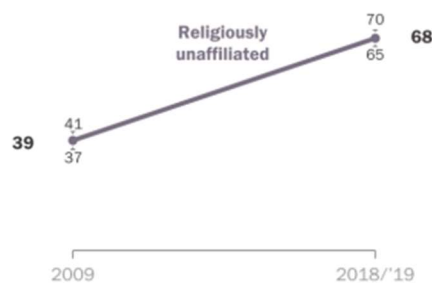
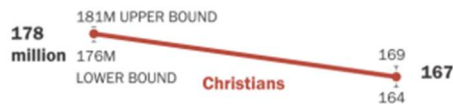


Source: Aggregated Pew Research Center political surveys conducted 2009 and January 2018-July 2019 on the telephone.
 In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

In U.S., number of religious ‘nones’ has grown by nearly 30 million over past decade

Estimated number of U.S. adults, in millions



Source: Aggregated Pew Research Center political surveys conducted 2009 and January 2018-July 2019 on the telephone. Population figures calculated from U.S. Census estimates of the adult population.
 In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Pew Research Center Study Published October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

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Offering Trends Within the ELS

The ELS Parochial Report, the synod’s statistical report, records congregational finances based on congregational budgets. It does not historically capture offerings received by individual congregations. Therefore, there is not an objective way to assess if congregations throughout the synod are meeting their financial obligations or at risk of closure.

If it can be assumed that a given congregation adjusts their budget in response to reduced attendance or reduced offerings, then there would be an observed trend in the recent years which aligns with the membership decline data. However, if the congregation is surviving off of previously gathered savings (deficit spending), that would not be detected by simply looking at the total budget amount.

The following table shows the change in the Average Budget for Home Purposes for the congregations in the synod.

Year	Average Budget for Home Purposes (Total / # Congr)	Avg Budget Change from Prior Year	Total Synod Budget Contributions Received	Synod Receipts Change from Prior Year
2014	\$ 108,463		\$ 729,620.03	
2015	\$ 110,300	1.7%	\$ 743,652.77	1.92%
2016	\$ 106,199	-3.7%	\$ 763,315.14	2.64%
2017	\$ 107,659	1.4%	\$ 768,372.92	0.66%
2018	\$ 110,436	2.6%	\$ 770,068.32	0.22%
2019	\$ 115,031	4.2%	\$ 821,888.83	6.73%
2020	\$ 110,798	-3.7%	\$ 793,889.08	-3.41%
2021	\$ 91,753	-17.2%	\$ 823,656.98	3.75%

Offering Trend Observations and Conclusions

- This table shows that the average budget for home purposes is generally growing (with notable exceptions) with the cost-of-living rate.
- The average budget began to be reduced in 2020 and has significantly reduced in 2021 suggesting that budget cutting has been necessary as a result of the multiple causes of membership decline including but not solely due to COVID-19 impacts. However, without additional data, this conclusion is a subjective interpretation.
- Financial Survival Mode Concern - The implications of the reduction in offerings within an individual congregation raise the concern of a potential shift in financial priorities within the congregations to focus on funding continuing operations (fixed expenses) and focus less on outreach and evangelism activities.
- Contributions to the Synodical Budget – Based on data from the ELS Business Administrator, contributions by member congregations were down in 2020 (likely related to COVID-19 offering impacts), but recovered in 2021 to its largest value since 2014 (only the 8-year span was investigated). This is a significant positive observation, but occurs at the same time where the data suggests some congregations in the synod are still struggling.

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CCCM Congregational Survey Results

The CCCM developed and distributed a survey to all congregations in the synod. The objective of the survey was to take the first step into understanding the following aspects of congregational operation and congregational demographics. These aspects include:

- Self-identified risk of closure
- Congregational administrative operations
- Outreach, evangelism, and strategic planning
- Local church demographics (e.g. age, religious background, digital presence (website, social media), etc.)
- Ability to financially support the pastor
- Facility appearance
- Circuit Visitor visibility into the circuit's congregation

The CCCM sent a survey to all the congregations in the synod (131 congregations – 3 Decommissions = 128 congregations in 2022 when the survey was distributed). There were 72 congregations that responded to the survey out of the 128 total number of congregations resulting in a response rate of 56.3%.

The survey questions were developed to enable pastors in each congregation of the synod to be able to answer them quickly without having to dig through information. The questions were organized two categories of responses, straight-forward yes/no questions and demographic type questions that were answered based on the pastor's observations about his membership. The survey results are described in two parts; Part 1 provides statistics on the Yes/No data, Part 2 provides graphical and tabular results for the demographic data.

Congregational Survey – Part 1: Yes/No Response Data

The congregational survey asked 23 questions of which 21 asked for a Yes/No Response. Several of these questions were "Risk Indicating" questions and are identified in the survey results data by a red highlighting in the following table. There also were other questions that identified "Serious Concern" and are highlighted in yellow in the following table.

The following table provides captures the response to each Yes/No Question. Tabular data begins on the next page where it is formatted in landscape mode.

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CCCM Congregational Survey Response (Note: **Red** questions indicate potential high risk, **yellow** questions indicate potential serious concern)

#	Question	Question Significance	Synod-Wide Overall Response (% of Respondents)	Response of Congr @ Critical Mass (% of Respondents)	Observed Trend
1	Do you believe your congregation is at risk of discontinuing its ministry?	Indicator of urgency to address underlying causes of being "at Risk"	Yes: 22% No: 76% Don't Know: 2%	Yes: 55% No: 45%	16 congregations indicate risk of closure.
2	Are the congregation's offerings meeting its expenses?	Indicator of urgency to address underlying causes of being "at Risk"	Yes: 83% No: 15% Don't Know: 2%	Yes: 64% No: 32% Don't Know: 4%	11 reporting congregations are not meeting expenses.
3	Has the congregation taken advantage of the ELS Evangelism and Missions Counselor as a resource?	This is an indicator of missing an opportunity for obtaining BHO assistance in developing strategic and evangelism plans.	Yes: 60% No: 40%	Yes: 64% No: 36%	The benefit of EMC consulting appears to be under-utilized since its beginning in Oct 2014.
4	Has the congregation developed a strategic plan to guide future work?	This may suggest that a specific action plan has not been developed to seek the lost and grow the Kingdom.	Yes: 22% No: 78%	Yes: 9% No: 91%	Below Critical Mass congregations typically do not have a strategic plan to guide their work.
5a	Does the congregation have a formal church council?	This question suggests that the success of the ministry may be solely reliant on the work of the pastor and he may not be getting assistance from the congregation.	Yes: 85% No: 15%	Yes: 82% No: 18%	The lack of functioning church councils suggests a serious concern regarding the administration of the work of the church.
5b	Does the council meet regularly?	This question suggests that the success of the ministry may be solely reliant on the work of the pastor and he may not be getting assistance from the congregation.	Yes: 74% No: 19% N/A: 7%	Yes: 59% No: 36%	Below Critical Mass congregational councils typically don't meet regularly. This data identifies a concern regarding whether the assigned responsibilities

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#	Question	Question Significance	Synod-Wide Overall Response (% of Respondents)	Response of Congr @ Critical Mass (% of Respondents)	Observed Trend
					of the boards are being carried out.
6	Does the congregation have a documented outreach and evangelism plan?	This question identifies if an action plan exists to build relationships and share the Gospel in the community.	Yes: 22% No: 78%	Yes: 5% No: 95%	Below Critical Mass congregations typically do not have a documented plan to share the Gospel.
7	Is the congregation's pastor bi-vocational?	This question identifies if the congregation's ministry is hampered by requiring the pastor to be bi-vocational.	Yes: 11% No: 88% Vacant: 1%	Yes: 18% No: 77% Vacant: 5%	8 survey-responding congregations have a bi-vocational pastor.
8a	Do you have any Bethany Lutheran College graduates?	The intent of this question is to understand if there are members that are more likely to understand the mission of the Church and provide assistance.	Yes: 69% No: 31%	Yes: 45% No: 55%	Below Critical Mass congregations are less likely to have BLC grads in their membership.
8b	If so, how many members are BLC grads?	This question is intended to quantify how large a trained core group within the congregation is available to provide assistance.	Min #: 0 Max #: 300	Min #: 0 Max #: 4	Outside of Mankato, MN, few congregations are blessed with BLC graduates as members.

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#	Question	Question Significance	Synod-Wide Overall Response (% of Respondents)	Response of Congr @ Critical Mass (% of Respondents)	Observed Trend
9	If you were to guess, how many (or what percentage) of the membership are: a. Lutheran transplants? b. Converts from a different Christian denomination? c. Converts from a different religion or from no religion? d. Raised in the congregation?	This question is intended to understand the faith background of the members. As a synod, are we converting the lost or are we nurturing the next generation?	A pareto chart is needed to show the distribution for a, b, c, and d.	A pareto chart is needed to show the distribution for a, b, c, and d.	Refer to the graphical data in the following section of this report.
10	What are the age demographics in your congregation? a) Primarily below 35 years of age, b) Primarily between 35 and 60 years of age, c) Primarily above 60 years of age	This question is to assess the age demographic across the synod. These age brackets have different spiritual needs and abilities to serve the work of the church.	A pareto chart is needed to show the distribution for a, b, c, and d.	A pareto chart is needed to show the distribution for a, b, c, and d.	Refer to the graphical data in the following section of this report.
11	Does the congregation have a website?	This question is intended to understand if there is an online presence in the community (One aspect of Outreach).	Yes: 90% No: 10%	Yes: 82% No: 18%	The majority of congregations have a website.
13a	How regularly is the website updated?	This question gauges the appearance of an active, lively church. Infrequent posting leaves a negative impression on the visitor.	More than once /week: 7% Weekly: 43% Monthly: 15% Longer Than	More than once /week: 5% Weekly: 14% Monthly: 41% Longer Than	Below Critical Mass congregations do not update their website as frequently.

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#	Question	Question Significance	Synod-Wide Overall Response (% of Respondents)	Response of Congr @ Critical Mass (% of Respondents)	Observed Trend
			Monthly: 25% N/A: 10%	Monthly: 23% N/A: 18%	
12	Does the congregation utilize Facebook or other social media?	This question is intended to understand if there is a social media presence in the community (A second aspect of Outreach that also has Evangelism potential).	Yes: 88% No: 12%	Yes: 73% No: 27%	Below Critical Mass congregations are less likely to use social media as the rest of the synod.
13b	How regularly are new posts made on your social media?	This question gauges the appearance of an active, lively church. Infrequent posting leaves a negative impression on the visitor.	More than once /week: 44% Weekly: 25% Monthly: 11% Longer Than Monthly: 6% N/A: 11% Blank: 2%	More than once /week: 45% Weekly: 23% Monthly: 5% Longer Than Monthly: 0% N/A: 27% Blank: 0%	Below Critical Mass congregations are less likely to use social media as the rest of the synod.
14	Does the congregation have an Evangelism Committee or a Board for Gospel Outreach?	This question assesses whether the pastor has assistance from the congregation in defining and carrying out Outreach and Evangelism activities.	Yes: 39% No: 61%	Yes: 27% No: 73%	44 of the 72 responding congregations indicate they do not have a board or committee associated with Gospel outreach. This indicates the potential lack of focus on reaching the lost within communities of many congregations.

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#	Question	Question Significance	Synod-Wide Overall Response (% of Respondents)	Response of Congr @ Critical Mass (% of Respondents)	Observed Trend
15	If your pastor was called away/retired/or transferred to heaven, would the congregation be able to pay a replacement?	This question gauges the congregation's ability to support the work of the pastor (are they good stewards given their size?)	Yes: 83% No: 15% Don't Know: 2%	Yes: 64% No: 32% Don't Know: 4%	11 of 72 responding congregations are not able to pay a replacement pastor. This is a strong indicator that these congregations are likely in crisis mode.
21	Are there partnering opportunities that might be possible with other congregations (in circuit, etc.)?	This question identifies if several churches within a circuit could share costs and effort to fuel Outreach and Evangelism actions.	Yes: 60% No: 40%	Yes: 57% No: 43%	Partnering opportunities exist in many areas to support circuit or regional outreach and evangelism activities.
22	Do your facilities look appealing, well maintained and inviting to a prospective visitor and reflect a love of the church and the value of what takes place within the church?	This question assesses the potential that facilities may be discouraging visitors from attending.	Yes: 85% No: 15%	Yes: 77% No: 18% Both? 5%	10 congregations indicate that their facility is in need of updates. Below Critical Mass congregations acknowledge a higher likelihood of facilities in need of updating.

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#	Question	Question Significance	Synod-Wide Overall Response (% of Respondents)	Response of Congr @ Critical Mass (% of Respondents)	Observed Trend
23	Does the congregation use a hymnal? If so, which one?	This question gauges the usage of a given hymnary.	Yes: 96% - ELH: 68% - TLH: 14% - ELH & TLH: 2% - TLH & CW: 2% - CW: 9% - LCMS: 1% No: 4%	Yes: 100% - ELH: 68% - TLH: 22% - ELH & TLH: 5% - TLH & CW: 0% - CW: 0% - LCMS: 5% No: 0%	19 of 72 responding congregations do not use the ELH.

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Congregational Survey – Observations from Part 1 Yes/No Questions

The purpose of these questions is to gain initial insight into the reasons and significance of the challenges that ELS congregations are facing (and also many churches throughout Christianity) as our culture becomes more hostile to the Christianity and a greater share of the U.S. population becomes dechurched or have no religion. This data is intended to identify areas of concern so that it can facilitate the identification of action plans to help congregations that are facing challenges.

Questions Which Identifying High Risk of Closure

- **Q1: Are you at risk of closure?** – This question was developed to understand if some congregations were aware that their ministry is at risk of closure. There are other questions in this survey that help identify the risk of closure through asking the same question in different ways. The survey results for this question indicates that there are 16 congregations or 22% of the 72 survey-responding congregations that are at risk of closure. There are another 56 congregations who did not respond to the survey and may or may not be objectively aware of their risk.
- **Q2: Meeting Congregational Budget** – The response data indicates 15% of all congregations and 32% of congregations at critical mass are not meeting their expenses with another 4% that “don’t know”. This question was asked to understand how many congregations in the synod are at a critical point in their ability to continue operations. There are 11 congregations that are already not meeting their expenses, there are likely more congregations that are struggling to do so and are trending toward not meeting their expenses.
- **Q6: Documented Outreach and Evangelism Plan?** – Survey results indicate that 78% of all congregations and 95% of critical mass congregations do not have a document plan to share the Gospel. This question was asked because having an intentional plan and effort to actively share the Gospel has been very useful in reaching the lost throughout the ages. This data suggests that our congregations need to develop specific outreach and evangelism plans.
- **Q14: Does the congregation have an Evangelism Committee or a Board for Gospel Outreach?** Survey responses indicate 61% of all congregations and 73% of critical mass congregations do not have a committee or a board developing outreach and evangelism plans. This trend is related to Q6 response as well. This data suggests that congregations must be more intentional planning and actively working to lead others to Christ.
- **Q15: If your pastor was called away/retired/or transferred to heaven, would the congregation be able to pay a replacement?** – The survey results indicate 15% of all congregations and 32% of critical mass congregations would not be able to afford to replace their pastor should he leave. This question gauges the congregation's ability to support the work of the pastor (are they good stewards given their size?). The 11 congregations responding “No” to this question suggests that they at high level of risk of closure should they have a pastoral vacancy.

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Questions Which Identify Serious Concern

- **Q4: Has the congregation developed a strategic plan to guide future work?** The response data indicates that 78% of all congregations and 91% of congregations deemed to be at critical mass do not have a strategic plan to guide their work. A strategic plan is a leadership tool to help congregations self-examine their current state and then create a path forward identifying actions that lead a congregation toward their goals. The lack of any type of plan or coordinated effort to achieve the congregation's goals creates a situation can foster a lack of focus and a lack of membership engagement. The survey results indicate that this important tool appears to be under-utilized by the congregations in the synod.
- **Q5a: Does the congregation have a formal church council?** The responses indicate that 11 of the 72 congregations that responded to the survey do not have a council. This response suggests that the pastor is likely responsible for non-ministry duties and may have some limited support. This is not a healthy allocation of responsibilities as recognized by the early church, and congregations in this situation are encouraged to find approaches and individuals to help lead the congregation so that it may continue to be faithful to the ministry in that location.
- **Q5b: Does the church council meet regularly?** – Survey results indicate that 19% of all congregations and 36% of critical mass congregations do not have a church council that meets regularly. Active church councils and boards doing their assigned work is necessary to support the ministry. This response indicates that a number of congregations are struggling to effectively lead their congregations.
- **Q7: Is the congregation's pastor bi-vocational?** The responses indicate that there are 8 congregations in the synod where the pastor is bi-vocational. Bi-vocational pastors are part-time ministers to their congregation and the community. This situation limits the ministry to the members of the congregation and hampers sharing the Gospel in the local community. Having a bi-vocational pastor is not an effective way to grow the church-at-large and is not recommended. The congregation must consider a plan to get to a full-time pastor, consider potentially merging with other ELS churches that may be in their circuit, or other strategies that the allows the pastor, whom God has called, to be more active in serving a congregation and seeking the lost.
- **Q11: Does the congregation have a website?** A large majority of the congregations have a website which is helpful in providing a means for the community be aware of the existence, purpose, ministry of the church. Also, the majority of the congregations have a social media presence to reach non-members within their community. Social media is also used to direct the community to the congregation's website for further information.
- **Q22: Do your facilities look appealing, well maintained and inviting to a prospective visitor and reflect a love of the church and the value of what takes place within the church?** Ten congregations indicated that their facilities are in need of updates. This question assesses the potential that facilities may be discouraging visitors from attending. The survey response suggests that congregation identify affordable ways to improve the aesthetics of their facilities so that they become more appealing.

Upon reviewing the survey responses, it was found that 62/72 or 86% of the congregations had at least one response indicating high-risk of closure.

Congregational Survey – Part 2: Demographic Data

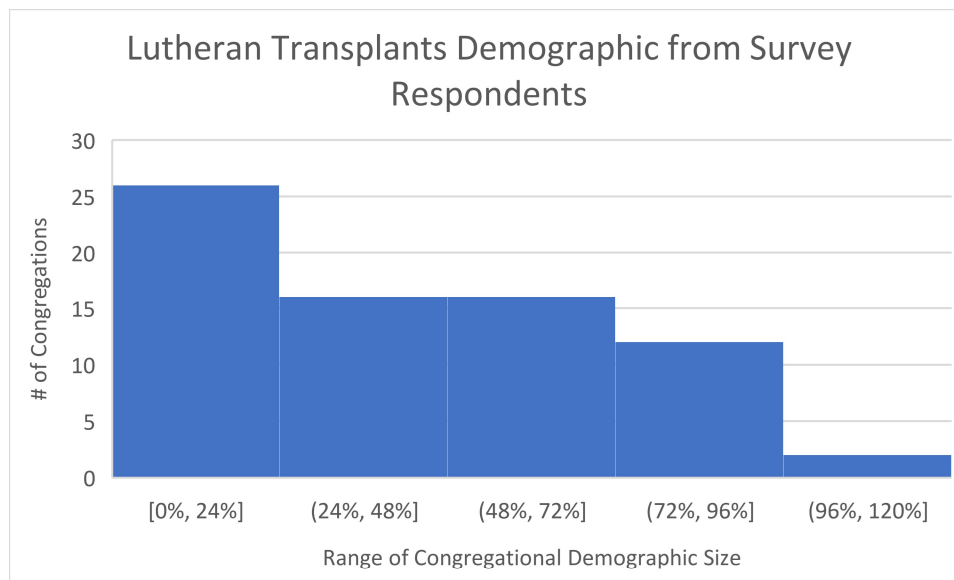
The graphical data associated with the CCCM Congregational survey (range data) captures the demographics of religious background and also member age within the 72 congregations that responded to the Congregational Survey.

This data is portrayed in histogram format. A histogram groups the data into smaller ranges and provides the count associated with each range.

Religious Background Demographics

The first set of histograms (Survey questions 9a through 9d) show the Number of Congregations (Count) for each range of membership religious background demographic. There is a histogram for each demographic type defined in the congregational survey (e.g., Lutheran Transplant, Christian Convert, Convert from No or Different Religion, Raised within the Church).

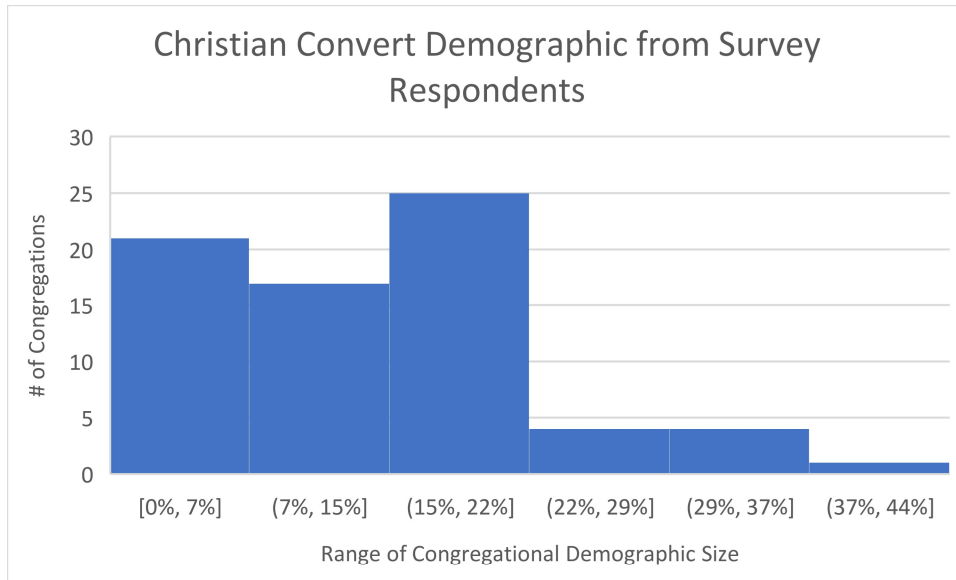
Question 9a: Lutheran Transplant Membership Composition



The graph above groups the percentage of Lutheran transplants within ELS congregations into 5 ranges of membership composition. The largest count shows approximately 26 congregations have a Lutheran transplant membership demographic that ranges from 0% to 21% of their congregations. However, this graph also shows that 44 congregations of the 72 congregations responding to the survey have more than a quarter of their members as existing Lutherans transplanted from other locations. This suggests that fewer members are being converted from other religions. Another realization is that having more members with a Lutheran background suggests a greater understanding of Lutheran doctrine within the congregation which is helpful for fellowship and service within the congregation.

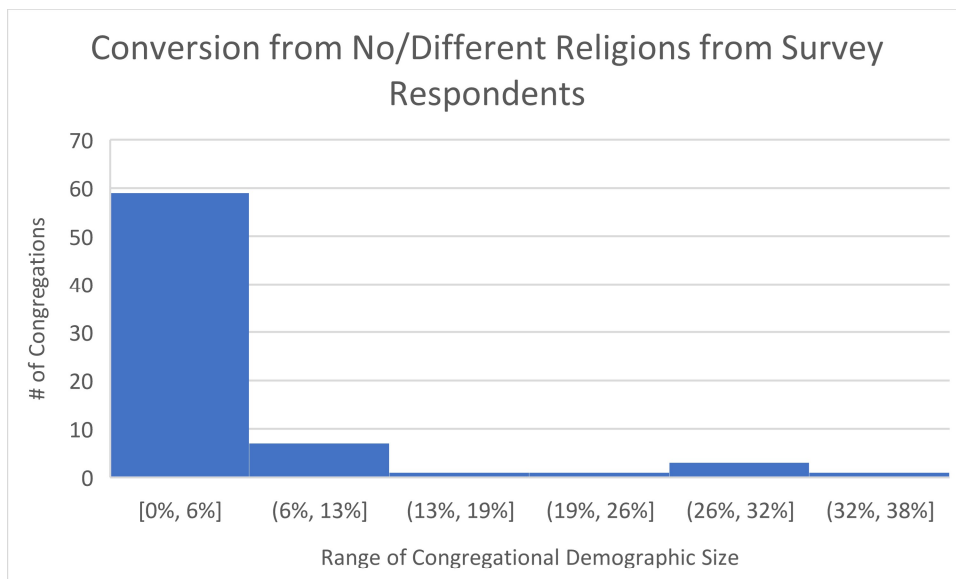
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Question 9b: Christian Convert Membership Composition



This graph shows that the majority of ELS Congregations are made of up 3 membership groupings that are less than 22%. This indicates that the number of Christian converts from another Christian religion is less than a quarter of the total membership in survey responding congregations.

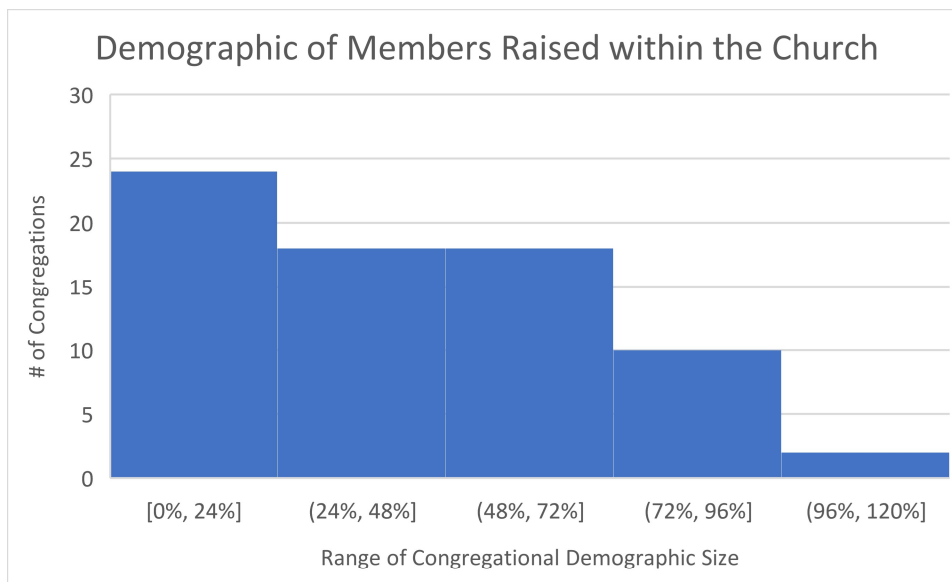
Question 9c: Converts from No/Different Religion Membership Composition



This graph shows that the vast majority of responding congregations have less than 6% of their membership that was converted from a "None" or from a non-Christian religion.

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Question 9d: Membership Raised Within the Church



This graph shows that a significant number of members were raised within their congregation (not transplants, not converts, but are sons and daughters of their congregation).

Membership Age Demographics

There are two approaches to evaluating the age demographics within the synod. The first approach is to aggregate the data from all survey respondents and look at the ELS as a single entity. The aggregated data is easiest to calculate, but will hide the fact that some congregations may have an age demographic that is heavily skewed in one direction. The second approach is to look at how common certain age groups are across the congregations in the synod. Each of these approaches provide different but interesting insights.

Aggregated Age Demographic Approach

The aggregated data for the entire synod results in membership percentages nearly equally distributed within the 3 age ranges defined in the congregational survey.

Age Range	Count	% Of Aggregated Membership
Less Than 35 Yrs of Age	3,283	30.2%
Between 35 to 60 Yrs of Age	3,296	30.3%
Greater Than 60 Yrs of Age	4,283	39.4%

In aggregate, the synod age demographics of the membership is fairly well distributed between these 3 age ranges. Having nearly a third of the membership in the youngest age bracket is encouraging for the future of the synod. The largest group is the “Greater Than 60” range which is reflective of the age range demographic within the United States where the Baby Boomer generation has predominated (but shrinking).

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While this is a readily understandable portrayal of the data, if this aggregated approach is used without looking at individual congregational demographics, then it can lead to erroneous conclusions.

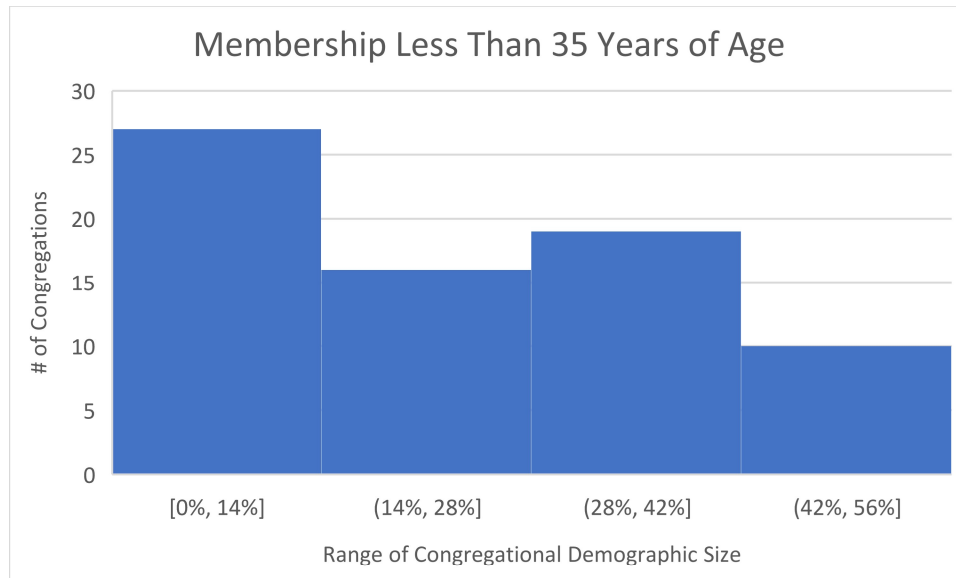
The aggregate view of this demographic data hides the fact that some congregations have an age demographic very different from the aggregated demographic shown above. Therefore, we need to look deeper at age ranges within individual congregations to better understand their composition and what that composition suggests with respect to their strategic plan.

[Congregational Age Demographic Histogram Approach](#)

In this second set of histograms, there is a histogram for each age demographic type defined in the congregational survey (e.g., Membership < 35 years of age, 35 to 60 years of age, and >60 years of age)

These histograms show that for each age demographic, the number of ELS congregations which have their membership within a given membership composition percentage range.

Question 10a: Membership Demographic for Less Than 35 Years of Age



This graph shows that 29/72 or 40% of the survey-responding congregations have this <35 age group contributing more than 28% of their total membership.

Conversely, this graph shows that 43/72 or 38% of the survey-responding congregations have this <35 age group contributing only as much as 14% of their total membership.

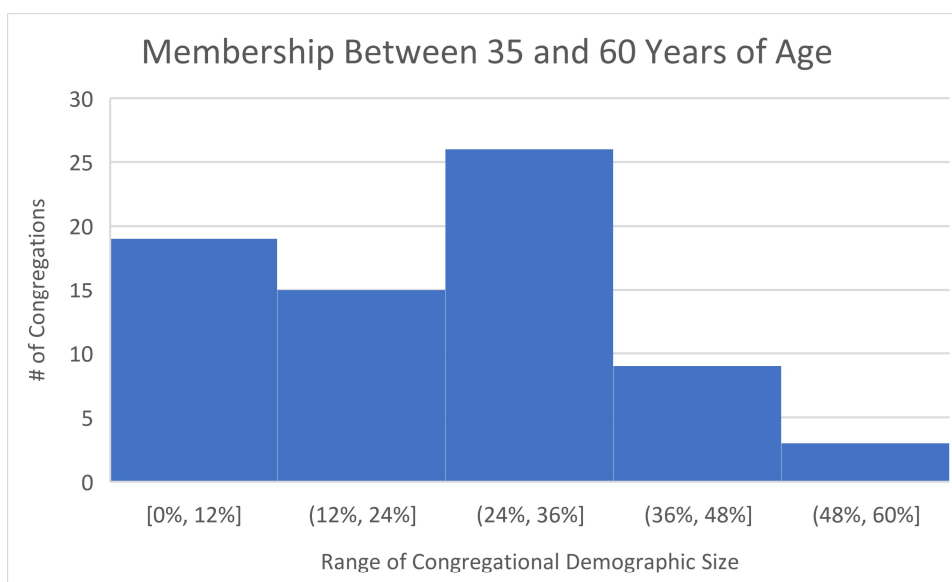
Another way to interpret this data is in tabular form as shown below.

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Membership Composition Percentage	Number of Congregations w/ this composition
0-14 %	27
14-28%	16
28 - 42%	19
42 - 56%	10

This data shows that nearly 60% of responding congregations have a membership that is comprised of less than 28% of those under 35 years old in their total membership.

Question 10b: Membership Demographic Between 35 and 60 Years of Age



This graph shows that for the age demographic between 35 and 60 years, there are 26 congregations that have a membership contribution between 24% and 36% of their total membership.

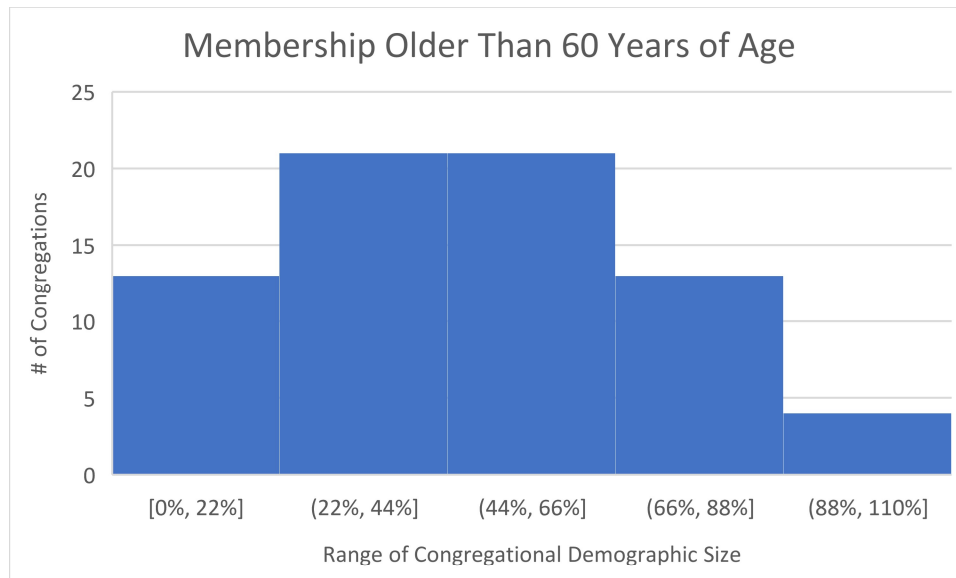
Another way to interpret this data is in tabular form as shown below.

Age Between 35 and 60 years	
Membership Composition Percentage	Number of Congregations w/ this composition
0-12 %	19
12-24%	15
24 - 36%	26
36 - 48%	9
48 - 60%	3

This data shows that 34/22 or 47% of responding congregations have a membership that is comprised of less than 24% of those between 35 and 60 years old in their total membership

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Question 10c: Membership Demographic Greater Than 60 Years of Age



Another way to interpret this data is in tabular form as shown below.

Age > 60 years	
Membership Composition Percentage	Number of Congregations w/ this composition
0-22%	13
22-44%	21
44 - 66%	21
66 - 88%	13
88 - 100%	4

This graph shows that 38 of the 72 or 53% responding congregation have a congregation where the membership of those aged 60 and above contribute to more than 44% of their total membership. In other words, they are predominately an older congregation.

Congregational Survey – Observations from Part 2 Demographics

- Religious Background Demographics
 - The majority of survey-responding congregations have a Lutheran transplant demographic of greater than 24% of their total congregational membership.
 - Converts from other Christian faiths represent less than a quarter of the typical congregational membership.
 - Converts from no religious background represent < 6% of their congregational membership.

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- Between 0-24% of members were raised within their local church (life-long members)
- Age Demographics
 - Synod-Wide or Aggregated Age Demographics indicate:
 - Nearly 40% of members are older than 60 years of age
 - Approximately 30% of members are between 35 and 60 years of age
 - Approximately 30% of members are less than 35 years of age
 - Congregational Age Demographics reveal:
 - Under 35 Age Group: 38% of the survey-responding congregations have this age group contributing only as much as 14% of their total membership.
 - Between 35-60 Age Group: 47% of responding congregations have this age group contribution less than 24% in their total membership.
 - Over 60 Age Group: 53% of the survey-responding congregations have this age group contributing more than 44% of their total membership,
 - The congregational look at age demographics shows a less-balance demographic than the aggregated view. It shows that that there are a significant number of congregations with a large percentage or even the majority of their membership above 60 years of age.

[CCCM Circuit Visitors Survey Results](#)

The CCCM sent a survey to the Circuit Visitors of the 12 circuits in the synod asking several questions that are intended to be answered without significant effort. The questions ask for either a Yes/No or short answer responses.

CCCM Circuit Visitor Survey Observations

- The CCCM identified potential “At-Risk” congregations in all circuits except circuit 9. One circuit visitor did not believe his circuit has an "at risk" congregation, but there was at least one congregation deemed “at-risk” in that circuit. This leads to the question of whether it is expected of Circuit Visitors to consider the congregational financial health when performing their oversight or are they to be only focused on ministry-related questions?
- Of the 10/12 Circuit Visitor responses, 7 have not identified a specific plan to address membership decline in their circuit.
- The responses to knowledge of available synodical resources from the BHO and other boards vary greatly and suggest that further communication with the Circuit Visitors is necessary.
- The responses to the question asking what additional resources are needed varied widely. Dealing with risk of church closure is a difficult problem, but clearly Circuit Visitors are also looking for guidance.