

# Commission on Congregational Counseling

2023 Supplemental BORAM Report (Floor Committee #11)

## Our Calling

The Commission on Congregational Counseling assists WELS congregations in assessing and evaluating ministry, reviewing biblical teachings and principles that impact mission efforts, developing plans to adjust and expand those efforts in appropriate ways, and carrying out their plans over time. The Commission on Congregational Counseling serves under the Conference of Presidents, providing a means for district presidents to offer encouragement and support to their congregations.

The Commission on Congregational Counseling is the commission within Congregational Services that offers the most boots-on-the-ground-type of help to congregations. (The Commission on Lutheran Schools does the same for schools and early childhood ministries.) Trained congregational counselors work onsite with congregations, utilizing one of the programs described below.

The onsite work done by the Commission on Congregational Counseling and the Commission on Lutheran Schools plays a role in shaping the work of the other commissions. By identifying common challenges and issues within our churches and schools, the other commissions work to produce resources or programs that help congregations meet those challenges and mitigate those issues.

## Our Current Situation

### *CCC Programs*

The Commission on Congregational Counseling offers several programs that help churches with strategic planning, tactical planning, and plan management. Congregations that request to enroll in one of these programs are assigned a congregational counselor. If the congregation includes a Lutheran elementary school and/or some early childhood ministry, typically a two-person team is assigned.

#### *Self-Assessment and Adjustment Program (SAA)*

The SAA program allows for a thorough assessment of a congregation's community and current ministry. It includes demographic analysis and ethnographic interviews, SWOT analysis of current ministry efforts, and a pulse survey of the congregation. During the program, an assigned congregational counselor leads the congregation in a day-long Bible study about various aspects of congregational ministry: worship, outreach, discipleship, youth ministry, fellowship, stewardship, etc. The congregation also identifies healthy and unhealthy aspects of congregational culture. They prioritize goals for the upcoming years. Finally, the members of the congregation brainstorm ways they could adjust or expand their local ministry.



### *AXIS Program*

The AXIS program builds upon the SAA program. AXIS helps congregations produce a long-range plan aimed at ministry revitalization or redevelopment. The assigned CCC counselor helps the congregation define and commit to mission, clarify core values, and envision a desired future. He works with the various teams and leadership groups within the congregation to produce the long-range goals and annual objectives that help move the congregation in that direction. Those leaders also map out all the necessary ministry systems called for in the plan. At the end of AXIS, the congregation has a roadmap for the next three to five years of their existence.



### *Ministry Organization and Staffing Evaluation (MOSE)*

The SAA and AXIS programs help congregations with strategic and tactical planning. The MOSE program then helps congregations determine what is needed in the way of human resources to carry out those plans. The assigned congregational counselor helps the congregation determine what parts of the plan can be realistically fulfilled by volunteers and build a process to recruit and train them. Thus, the MOSE program also helps congregations in ascertaining the correct size and responsibilities of staff (both called workers and hired) to fulfill the ministry plan. A component of MOSE includes appraising the functionality of organizational structures and governance. The final part of the MOSE program includes leadership training for action planning and plan management, so that the congregation's goals and objectives are acted upon in a timely manner.



### *Merging for Mission Program (M4M)*

Church mergers are becoming more common in WELS. The M4M program brings together multiple congregations that are considering merging in some way, or perhaps simply doing some joint ministry together. The program begins with an exploratory meeting of congregations located in geographic proximity that simply want to consider all the options. In that meeting the assigned congregational counselor explains the various options and considerations for mergers. If any congregations in that exploratory meeting are interested in taking further steps, the assigned counselor helps them work through the necessary analysis, planning, and training to allow for a smooth merge.



### *Program enrollment*

In the past biennium, approximately seventy congregations were served by one of these programs. Some of the programs (SAA and portions of the M4M) can be run by parish pastors who have been trained to facilitate them. Others (AXIS and MOSE) take 60 to 120 hours for the facilitator. Therefore, they are conducted by Congregational Services staff.

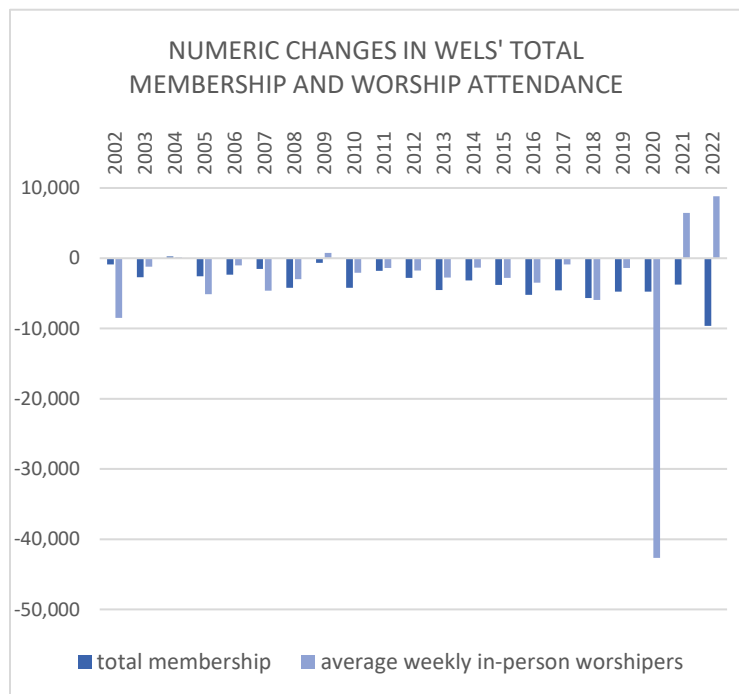
Work began this past year to make certain pivots in the program that will expand their bandwidth, increasing the number of facilitators and congregations served annually. That will be discussed further in this report.

## Situational Analysis

As mentioned in the 2023 BORAM, Congregational Services works with WELS Ministry of Christian Giving in the production of WELS annual statistical report. The Commission on Congregational Counseling is the group responsible for determining what membership and ministrations data to request from congregations. Congregational Counseling is also the group that does the annual statistical summary. This situational analysis not only serves to help the other commissions as they plan their work, but it also provides relevant information for other areas of ministry. The following are some items of note.

### Post-COVID Trends

2022 was an interesting year statistically for WELS. The synod declined from 340,511 members to 330,879 members. That loss of 9,632 members (a decline of 2.8%) is the largest single year decline in total membership in WELS history by a large margin. However, in-person worship rose from an average of 107,441 weekly to 116,265 weekly. Those 8,824 souls represent an 8.2% increase for in-person worship, the largest one-year increase in WELS history by a wide margin. Moreover, total spiritual gains in 2022 (adult confirmations, affirmations of faith, and children of those two groups) was the highest it has been since 2016, at almost 6,800 souls.



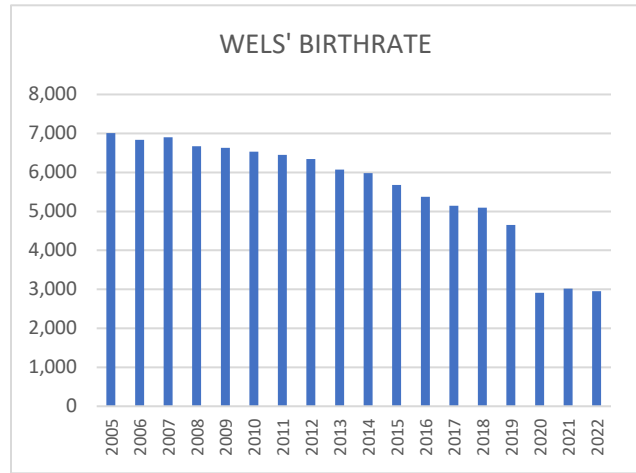
When one looks at where all those losses came from, it appears what is happening is that many WELS congregations are doing zealous post-COVID shepherding work. They are pursuing the members who never returned after COVID. They are calling through membership rosters to encourage members to return to in-person worship. Many churches are identifying members who are “gone.” They quit the church either during COVID or, in many cases, long before, and this shepherding work is now identifying that. So, it seems there is a large-scale cleaning of rosters. This is healthy; shepherding work always is.

Weekly in-person worship attendance pre-COVID was 143,670 (2019). So, while in-person worship attendance improved greatly in 2022, it is still 27,405 souls behind where it was in 2019. 2022 was the first year the statistical report form asked congregations to provide “estimated average weekly online worshippers.” The number reported was 22,328, smaller than the gap between in-person worship in 2019 and 2022. Therefore, it is not simply that some WELS members now view service online instead of attending in person.

It will be worth watching how this plays out in the next two to three years.

### *The Collapse of the Birthrate and the Implications*

There were 2,950 children born to WELS members in 2022. That is the second time in three years the number has dropped below 3,000. It was less than a decade ago that WELS had over twice that (6,074 births in 2013). This is part of a long-established trend. In the 80s, WELS' birthrate was typically over 8,000. In the 90's it fell into the 7,000 range and stayed there until 2006. From 2006 to 2013, the birthrate was always in the 6,000s. 2014 through 2018, it was in the 5,000s. The last four years were sharp drops: 4,653 in 2019; 2,911 in 2020; 3,021 in 2021; and 2,950 in 2022.



This is a widespread issue. Multiple sociological studies show the birthrate across America declined fairly sharply around the time of the Great Recession (e.g., <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2010/04/06/us-birth-rate-decline-linked-to-recession/>). However, this was not a temporary dip. The American birthrate in 2020 was the lowest it has been since 1980. Institutions of higher education are planning for the “enrollment cliff,” which most project to begin in 2025. (See: <https://www.mongooseersearch.com/blog/preparing-for-the-2025-enrollment-cliff-mongoose>; <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/online-trending-now/second-demographic-cliff-adds-urgency-change>).

This will lead to new challenges for WELS. For example, enrollment in WELS Lutheran elementary schools is climbing to historic levels at the same time the birthrate has declined by over fifty percent. That means the makeup of those student bodies is shifting. As more parents are looking for alternatives to public school, our Lutheran school enrollment has higher percentages of unchurched and “other-churched” students. Certainly, this presents wonderful opportunities for evangelism. However, it does raise questions. Imagine a Lutheran elementary school of eighty students in 2010. At that time, it was ninety percent WELS students and ten percent “others.” Fast forward to 2024. The same school now has ninety students, thirty percent members and seventy percent “others.” How does that affect school culture? Does it change how our teachers prepare for classes, particularly religion? Does it affect the expectations for school services? Does the congregation have the bandwidth to execute a harvest strategy for that many non-member parents? If the church subsidizes the school operational costs (as the vast majority do in WELS), how are the financials impacted? These and other questions are on the minds and hearts of those in Congregational Services, especially those who serve in the Commission on Lutheran Schools.

### *Statistical Summary*

You can access WELS statistical data for 2022 at <https://welscongregationalservices.net/stats/>. The downloadable PDF consolidates some data and is formatted to for printing. This report also provides district and conference statistics. The MS Excel report has all data fields in sortable columns. These are always available by mid-April. The statistical summary report highlights

important trends (like those listed above). That is available by the end of May at the link provided above.

## **A Look Ahead**

### *Program Pivots*

Since their development, the onsite programs offered by Congregational Counseling have regularly been modified. Currently, the SAA program is being reworked so that it could be entirely self-conducted. The M4M program is being redeveloped so that circuit pastors could work with congregations in geographic proximity to consider how to partner in ministry or possibly even consolidate. If the circuit pastor discovers there is interest, Congregational Services will, at the invitation of the congregations, help the churches in that endeavor.

The AXIS and MOSE programs, which are more labor-intensive, are being reworked to increase efficiencies. All Congregational Services directors will be trained to conduct those programs. To enable this, a hired operations manager will provide administrative support to all the commissions. This will increase the number of churches Congregational Services can engage with annually, without pulling called workers out of churches and schools.

### *Resources in the Upcoming Biennium*

At the request of WELS Conference of Presidents, Congregational Counseling will take the lead in the production of two resources.

#### *Creating a Culture of Feedback*

This resource would provide the rationale and tools to shape congregational culture so that lay leaders are willing and able to offer loving, evangelical feedback to their pastor(s) as it relates to his ministry among them. This resource will also have adaptable models that allow lay leaders to provide feedback to each other as well. The prayer is that this resource will help church leaders follow St. Paul's exhortation. "Encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

#### *Church Governance Resources*

In the past decade, some WELS congregations have pivoted to a governance model that is more flexible than the old WELS model constitution: fewer constitutionally mandated elected positions, fewer constitutionally required meetings, etc. Other churches have attempted to govern using more of a consensus model. Still others have looked for ways to better utilize the skills of women in congregational operations in ways that are biblically appropriate. This resource will help congregations think through all those variables. It will include a Bible study, sample constitutional bylaws, and tools for district constitutional committees.

#### *Leader's Reflection Program*

In recent years, Congregational Services has focused on the importance of organization culture. Culture is the thought habits within an organization that frame how that organization thinks and acts. For a congregation to carry out gospel ministry well, it is not enough to have sound strategies

for how it will feed the flock, pursue the straying, and reach the lost. It needs healthy culture to support those strategies. Culture is shaped to a large degree by leadership. This program will help both called workers and lay leaders understand how they are shaping their church and school culture.

The first two resources will be completed in the first year of the biennium. The last will be completed in the second year.

## Conclusion

It is our privilege to work with WELS congregations. We thank the Lord of the Church for the wonderful, passionate ministry efforts that we see being conducted all around our church body. Our mindset in Congregational Counseling is *not* that we know the best way to conduct ministry in your congregation. We do not! *You* know the gifts and skill sets within your congregation. *You* understand your context, i.e., your community and the worldview of the people within it. What your assigned congregational counselor does is simply facilitate honest conversation among your leadership and members. He can ask clarifying questions that help you define the current reality. If you are thinking about some new ministry strategy or facing some new challenge, he can share how other churches in WELS have reacted in your situation. He can help you organize your goals and objectives; however, they are just that—*your* goals and objectives, *not his*. Congregational Counseling exists to support and encourage you as you plan how to serve Christ in your corner of his kingdom.

“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word” (2 Thessalonians 2:16,17).

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