



STATISTICAL SUMMARY

2020

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Introduction: Statistics

No one knows for sure who coined the phrase, but it was popularized by Mark Twain in his *Chapters from My Autobiography*. “There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.” The meaning of the saying is self-evident. Like untruths, statistics can be used to mislead. Statistics can be even more powerful than a lie because statistics convey truth (provided the numbers are not made up). In good statistical work, the numbers are accurate. However, those accurate numbers can then be twisted or misrepresented for any variety of reasons.

One might ask, “So, why bother with statistics at all?” Well, the problem really is not with statistics. The problem is our Old Adam can take that which is good and useful and use it for evil. But there are good and righteous reasons to utilize statistics.

Statistics: Resulting in praise

Scripture is full of statistics. The first statistical report in Scripture is found in chapter 1 of the aptly named book of Numbers. The Lord directs Moses to take a census of the men fit for military service. “*The total number was 603,550.*”¹ Adding in younger males, women, and children, the population of Israel would have been north of two million. Do you remember what the Lord had promised Abraham over five centuries prior? “*I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you.*”² God had kept his Word. The nation rejoiced.

Why bother with statistics? The first reason is that statistics can be another way we recognize the goodness and faithfulness of God. He keeps his Word.

Baptisms. Adult confirmations. These are individuals who have crossed over from death to life. That is what God has promised will happen when his means of grace are utilized. God keeps his Word.

Deaths. Burials. These are not individuals who have been cut down. They have been raised to the highest of heights. The resurrection promises us that these are individuals who have received the crown. And God keeps his Word.

How many did you average in worship last year? “We’re getting smaller. It was only about 40 people.” Actually, that is breathtaking—40 people confessing their sins! Jesus said angels start to sing when just one sinner repents. You averaged 40. Praise God for the work done in those 40 and through those 40!

Even the statistics that might seem “bad” at face value can result in praise when we view them in light of God’s grace. For example, ten WELS congregations closed in 2020. Well, visible churches close eventually. Only the Holy Christian Church is going to last forever. But added together, those churches represent 632 years of gospel ministry efforts. Throw a small rock into a pond, and the ripples keep going, seemingly indefinitely. What eternal ripples shall we see in God’s kingdom as a result of the grace proclaimed in those congregations for six-plus centuries? As I contemplate that thought, I simply must praise the Lord of the Church for the work done in those churches over the years.

Statistics: Enabling faithful stewardship

There is another reason, just as important, to utilize statistics. Scripture tells us, “*The earth is the LORD’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.*”³ God doesn’t just get ten percent of

¹ Numbers 1:46

² Genesis 12:2

³ Psalm 24:1

my income. He owns every dollar and even the wallet some of those dollars are carried in. The Lord doesn't want you to give him some of your time. Every second we are alive is a gift from him, and we are to use each second to his glory. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God."⁴

Managing all the blessings God provides—money, time, talents—is what we often call stewardship. St. Peter writes, "Each of you should use whatever gifts you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."⁵ The word translated "stewards" there has the sense of "house manager," the servant who would run the affairs of the estate on behalf of the owner of the estate. God owns everything. However, in his grace, he has asked us to manage that which he owns for his glory and to accomplish his purpose.

You cannot make good management decisions without good information. Imagine the Roman house manager who purchased three bushels of grain without first asking about the price, only to find that merchant was charging double the market rate. Was that steward faithfully serving his master?

Or imagine a congregation spends thousands of dollars every year doing mass mailings to the community. Yet, no one ever visits the congregation because of those mailings. Is it good stewardship to continue to spend money on that effort? Or, if that strategy seems to be making little impact, might it be wiser to put those financial resources into a different effort? Jesus asked, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager?"⁶ Stewardship is the intersection of God's Third Article gift of faith with God's First Article gifts of intellect and reason: faithful and wise. In grateful faith, we want to give God our

best. That requires us to think about what the "best" is in our ministry context. Statistics can help to a degree. I will say it again. Good decisions cannot be made without good information.

Statistics: Distinguishing between our work and God's work

When St. Peter confessed his conviction that Jesus was the promised Christ, Jesus responded, "On this rock I will build my church."⁷ "I will . . ."—first-person pronoun. The growth of the Church has always been Christ's work.

Jesus does that work through us. Christ has given us his gospel, the rock-solid truth that because of the work of the incarnate Son of God we have forgiveness and eternal life. Jesus promises us that gospel is sufficient and effective in doing whatever he wills. "My word . . . will not return to me empty."⁸ He confers to us the awesome responsibility to share that gospel with everyone we can. Then through that gospel ministry, Jesus does what only he can do: making that which is dead alive.

That distinction needs to be crystal clear in our heads if we are going to avoid turning statistics into something even worse than "damned lies." We can track what we are doing with the gospel: to feed our members, to reach the lost, to pursue the straying. It is *good* to count those things because we count that which is important. And our gospel efforts are important. However, what the Lord of the Church does with those efforts is entirely up to him. "I will build my church."

If we lose sight of what is our responsibility and what is Christ's responsibility, statistics will do one of two awful things. They will make us sinfully proud if the numbers are good. Or they

⁴ 1 Corinthians 10:31

⁵ 1 Peter 4:10

⁶ Luke 12:42

⁷ Matthew 16:18

⁸ Isaiah 55:11

will fill us with despair if they are not. But if we use statistics well—at the nexus of our faith and reason—they will result in us praising God for what he has done through our efforts. And they will result in us practicing better stewardship of the many resources our generous God has entrusted to us.

Congregational Services, the Statistical Summary, and COVID-19

For decades, WELS' statistical report was overseen by WELS Ministry of Christian Giving. In 2020, much of the responsibility for collecting and analyzing the data was moved to WELS Congregational Services. (Both groups serve under the Conference of Presidents.) The Ministry of Christian Giving still is the agency that collects offering data and imports it into the statistical report. Congregational Services collects data about membership, ministrations, etc. Congregational Services is also the group that conducts the data validation (looking for and correcting apparent data errors), as well as performing basic analysis of the data.

This pivot made 2020 a good time to update the statistical report. In making the update, we started with this underlying philosophy: any data point we ask for, we need to use in our planning. In other words, we didn't want to ask congregations to provide data simply because we were curious. We only wanted to ask for data that would help those in synod leadership plan ministry efforts on behalf of our church body. (If you would like to watch a video from various synod leaders explaining how that data is used, you can find it here:

<https://vimeo.com/492211436>. Suffice it to say, every area of ministry—Ministerial Education, World and Home Missions, and Congregational

Services—utilizes the data provided in the statistical report.)

The statistical report always included a “key findings” page. Congregational Services intends to continue that practice. Every year you will find the raw numbers in the print report and digital report. The print report summarizes key data points in an easy-to-read format. The digital report provides all data in an Excel file that is easy to search or sort. However, we will also be providing this Statistical Summary annually. It is an attempt to provide a brief interpretation of the data. Why provide that? Again, 1) so we have another reason to praise God for his goodness to us; and 2) so we have the information necessary to practice faithful stewardship.

We have to be careful in assessing this past year. COVID-19 made 2020 extremely unusual. Many congregations were closed for weeks or months because of statewide health orders. Many had (and still have) members who didn't want to gather in a large group, even if it was allowed, because of health concerns. Then there was the influx of money: Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans, which many congregations utilized; stimulus checks, which most WELS members received.

It makes it very difficult to assess the statistics from 2020. Are the good changes (a decrease in back-door losses) or bad changes (a plummet of in-person worship) long range, or simply one-year anomalies brought about by the weirdness of the year? Time will tell. But it means we must be careful about drawing too strong of conclusions in this year's summary.

With that caveat, let us take a look at 2020 in WELS.

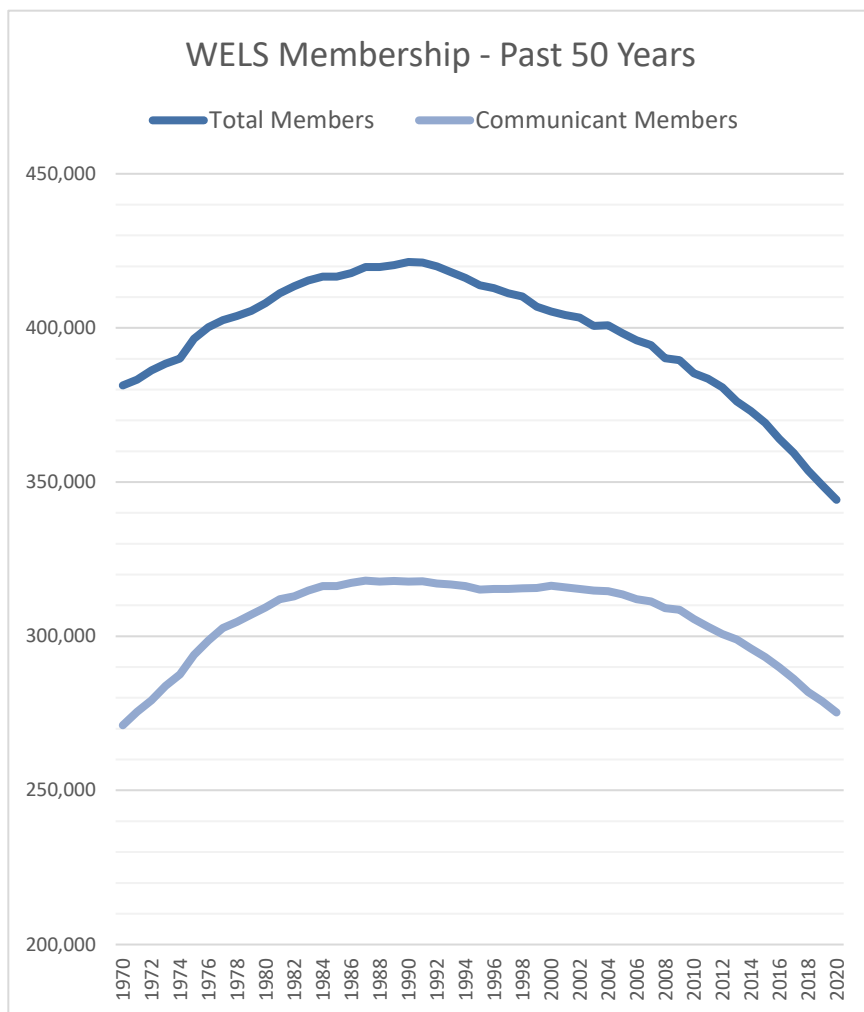
WELS Membership

Total and communicant membership

The reported total WELS membership at the end of 2020 was 344,244, with 275,259 of those being communicant members. From 2019 to 2020, total WELS membership decreased by 1.4 percent (down 4,770 souls). In that year, communicant membership decreased 1.3 percent (down 3,642).

In the past five years (from 2015 to 2020), total WELS membership has decreased 6.8 percent (down 24,977). In that same period, communicant membership has decreased 6.1 percent (down 17,969).

In the past ten years (from 2010 to 2020), total WELS membership has decreased 10.7 percent (down 41,077). In that same period, WELS communicant membership decreased 9.9 percent (down 30,299).

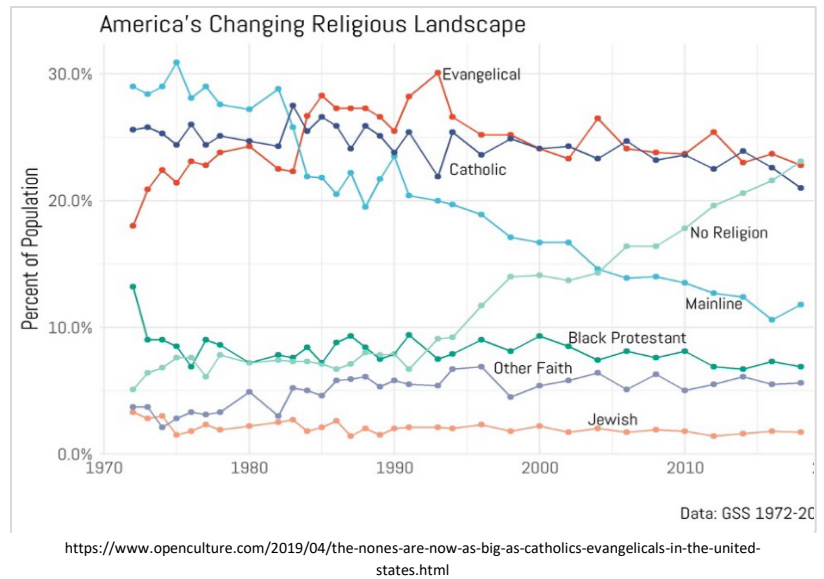


WELS' highest total membership was 421,396 in 1990. WELS' total membership has declined 18.3 percent since then, down 77,152 souls.

It is worth noting that total membership has declined more quickly than communicant membership. That has potential implications for Lutheran elementary schools. In 1970, WELS had 110,202 members that were not yet confirmed, i.e. children 8th grade and younger. Those youth comprised 28.9 percent of WELS' total membership. In 2000, WELS had 88,893 members 8th grade and younger, comprising 21.9 percent of WELS' total membership. At the end of 2020, WELS had 68,985 members 8th grade and younger, comprising 20 percent of WELS' total membership. This would also suggest a rising median age within WELS. (See the Demographics section of this summary.)

The decline in WELS' membership parallels that of most other Christian denominations in America. For example, in 1990, the membership of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) was 2,602,849. As of 2019, LCMS's membership was 1,968,641, a decline of 24.4 percent. The LCMS is down 29.4 percent from

1970 when it had its largest membership. The rise of secularism in America has led to each generation becoming less religious than the previous and substantially less interested in church membership. The “nones,” i.e., individuals who claim no religious affiliation, have been the fast-growing religious group in America for some time now.⁹ In a 2020 report, Gallup reported “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time.” It is now only 47 percent of U.S. adults that belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque. That’s down 20 points since the turn of the century.¹⁰

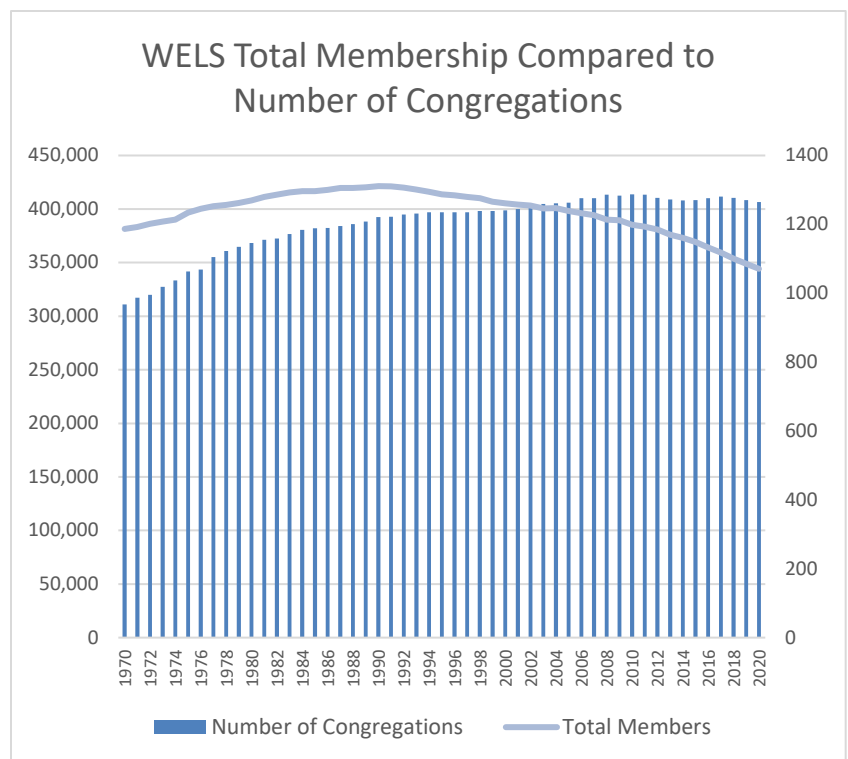


This simply illustrates that the challenge before our congregations is not just tactical. It is cultural. America has become a post-Christian nation.

Congregations

WELS had 5 fewer congregations at the end of 2020 than at the end of 2019. That is the net change: existing congregational closures versus new mission openings. That is actually quite remarkable given the impact on COVID. Church closures across denominations were extremely high.

2020 was the third year in a row that WELS had fewer congregations than the previous year. In the past decade, WELS lost congregations in seven out of ten years. This is simply an extension of the membership decline. When a church has little debt, it can go from 400 members to 100 members with little impact. When the congregation goes from 100 to 40 or fewer members, it is more of an existential challenge.



⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>

¹⁰ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

For example, in 1967, WELS had 371,048 members in 911 congregations, for an average of 407 members per congregation (the highest average in WELS history). In 2020, WELS had 344,244 members in 1,265 congregations, for an average of 272 members per congregation.

Types of gains and losses

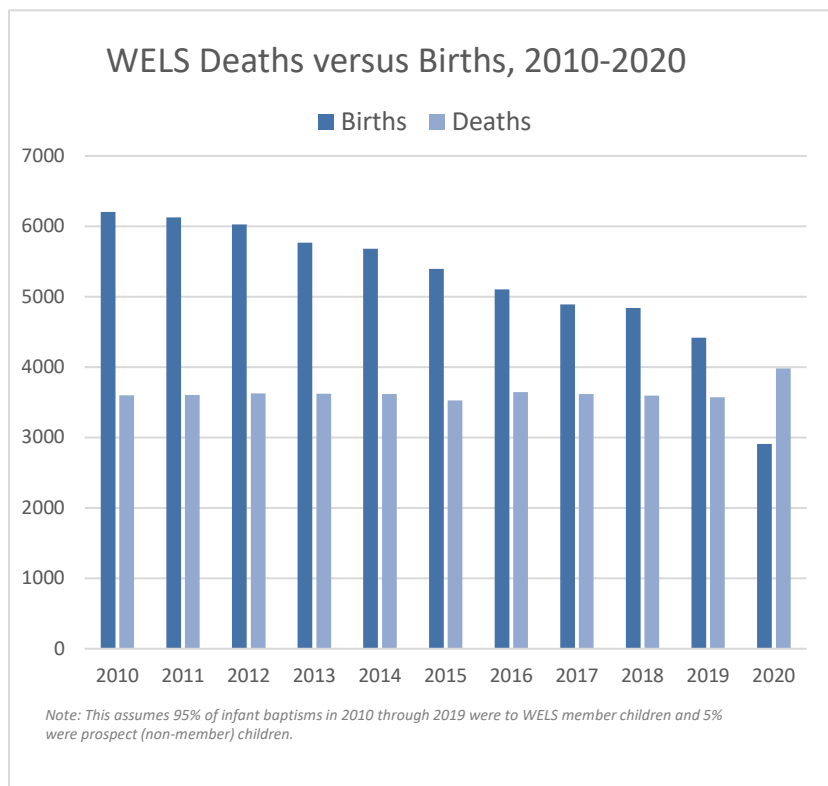
Part of the overhaul of the statistical report included grouping gains and losses into three categories.

- Movement—Here, gains include all transfers-in. Losses include all transfers-out. These types of gains and losses affect a congregation’s total membership. They *do not* affect WELS membership.
- Life-cycle—Here, gains are births to WELS members. Losses are deaths of WELS members. Life-cycle gains and losses *do* affect both congregational membership and total WELS membership.
- Spiritual—The gains in this category are all individuals who are new to WELS in North America, pulled in through some sort of mission effort: adult confirmation, affirmation of faith, children of those two groups. The losses in this category are individuals who dropped out of WELS membership for some reason: they were excommunicated; they joined another Christian church not of our fellowship; they were released or removed from membership; etc. Spiritual gains and losses *do* affect both congregational membership and total WELS membership. (NOTE: By calling these “spiritual” losses, we are not implying that all those who left WELS are spiritually lost, i.e., unbelievers. Nor are we implying that none of these individuals were believers until they became WELS. We simply mean that these individuals joined WELS or left WELS for some spiritually-based reason.)

Life-cycle gains and losses

There were a reported 3,981 deaths of WELS members in 2020, representing 1.2 percent of WELS members. That represents an 11.4 percent increase in deaths of WELS members from 2019. That is the biggest one-year increase in deaths in 35 years. One could speculate about whether this increase correlates to the fact that COVID-19 was most dangerous to the elderly. It would be impossible to know this. It could simply be that the number of WELS members age 75 and older increased substantially in just the last 4 years. The American life expectancy is 78.5 years.

There were a reported 2,911 births among WELS families in 2020. If



accurate, it would reflect a 37 percent decline in births from 2019. It would mean that since 2013 (when WELS had over 6,000 births), the total number of annual births has been more than cut in half.

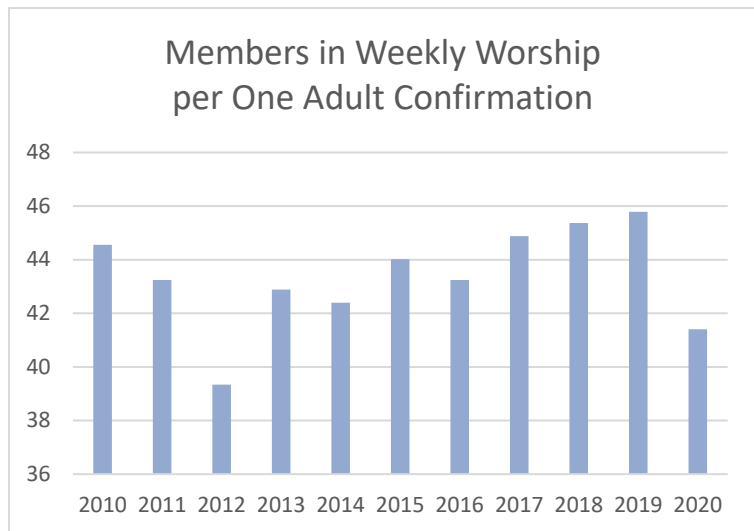
Within WELS, total births have been trending down for two decades, but it has never had anything close to that large of a one-year decline. It could be that large decline is a one-year anomaly. However, if births stay below 3,000 in 2021, we can conclude it is more likely a reflection of the fact that WELS members belonging to Gen X (who are 41- to 56-years-old) have almost completely exited child-bearing years, being replaced by WELS members of the Millennial generation. Not only do Millennials have fewer children than previous generations, but WELS has fewer Millennials than GenXers. Those two factors combined make this an issue to watch, as it will potentially have implications for our Lutheran elementary schools.

It also would have implications for long-term WELS membership. Just one decade ago (2010), WELS had 3,000 more births than it did deaths. In 2020, WELS had 1,000 more deaths than it did births. If A) WELS members in the Silent Generation (born before 1954) go to their heavenly home in increasing numbers in the next few years, and B) WELS birth rate stays low, life-cycle net-losses will be significant. This is the hardest type of gain/loss to address. There is nothing one can do about death. *“A person’s days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed.”*¹¹ And while we certainly will continue to teach the younger generations in WELS that *“children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him,”*¹² it is unlikely that young families within WELS will have the large number of children that were more common when WELS’ makeup consisted of more rural/farm families.

Spiritual gains and losses

In 2020, WELS had 2,439 reported adult confirmations and 1,221 reported professions of faith. That amounts to 3,660 new communicant WELS members. That is approximately 700 fewer spiritual-type communicant gains than any previous year. However, again, the pandemic made it an unusual year. Certain activities key to a good evangelism program were challenging, e.g., worship-visitor follow up.

Interestingly for 2020, when you look at the ratio of adult confirmations to in-person worshipers, the ratio is 1:41. In other words, for every 41 people in weekly worship, WELS congregations gained one new person. That is the best ratio since 2012, when it was 1:39. The average ratio over the past two decades is 1:46.



Moreover, in 2020, the number of congregations that went from zero adult confirmations the previous year to having at least one adult confirmation was the highest increase ever. Anecdotally, it seems this can be attributed to a number of things: non-members seeking comfort and solace in a challenging year; non-

¹¹ Job 14:5

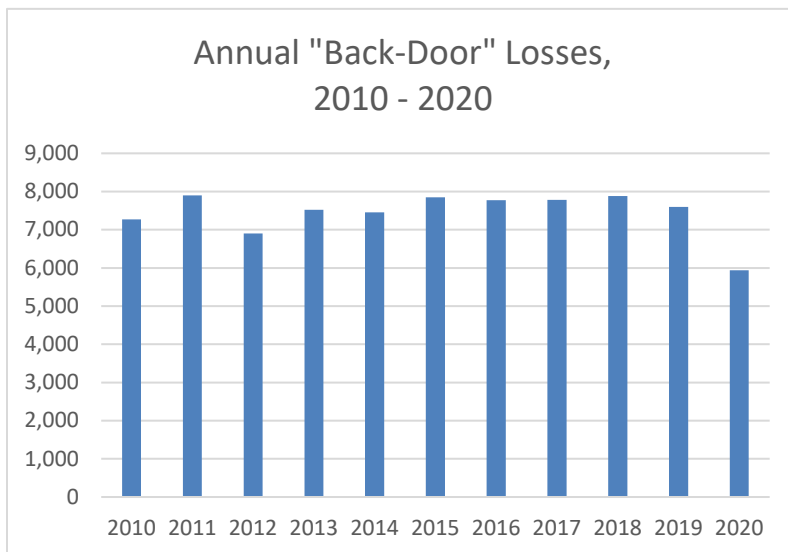
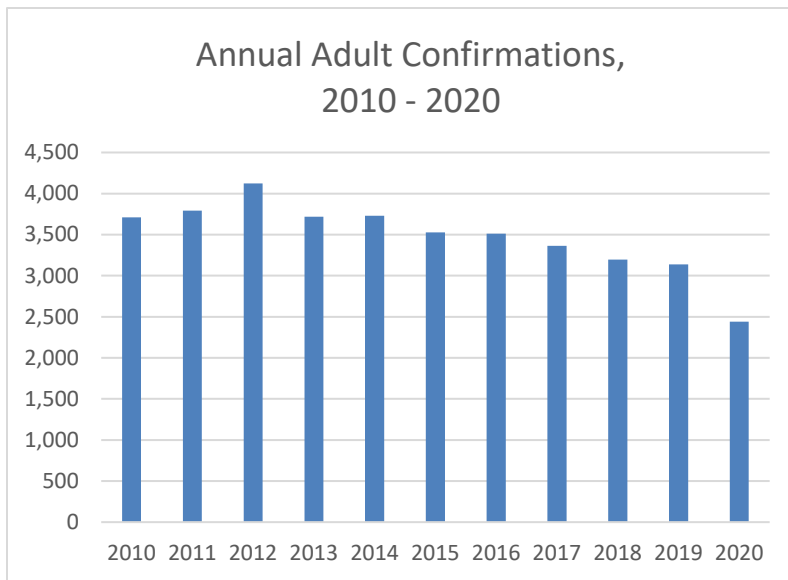
¹² Psalm 127:3

member parents looking for options for in-person schooling; etc. The bottom line: while we pray many COVID trends reverse, that ratio is one we pray we can maintain.

While spiritual gains were down, so were spiritual losses, by a slightly wider margin. In 2020, WELS lost 5,936 members to removal, joining other Christian churches, etc. In 2019, WELS lost 7,595 members in those categories. That is a 22 percent decline in back-door losses. Again, we should not make too much out of 2020 numbers. It could simply be that elder work was challenging to do during COVID-19. However, it is another trend we pray continues.

Let us not only pray but also zealously work so these trends in spiritual gains and losses continue. At the 2019 synod convention, Congregational Services shared some statistical forecasts. It was reported that if WELS could reach an adult confirmand to worshiper ratio of 1:29 and reduce back-door losses by 20 percent, WELS membership would likely stabilize. We cut back-door losses by more than 20 percent in 2020. We made a strong move in the right direction

when it came to the ratio of adult confirmations to worshipers. Again, much of this was because of COVID-19, not in spite of it. However, it gives us a target to attempt to maintain, as life returns “back to normal.” While there is little we can do about life-cycle gains and losses, we *can* all try and invite our unchurched friends and neighbors to church. We *can* quickly and lovingly pursue those members who are pulling away from the means of grace. If we could maintain a good ratio of worshipers to adult confirmations (for example, through friendship evangelism) and cut down on back-door losses (for example, through zealous elder work), that would be a blessing.



COVID Impact

Impact on worship attendance

One tab of the statistical report asked congregations to share how COVID-19 had impacted them. For example, most states prohibited gatherings for a period. At the time that the 2020 statistical report was being filled out, in-person worship had resumed in most states (though typically with restrictions.)

So the percentages below probably no longer hold. They are shared simply to illustrate the challenge COVID-19 presented to congregations.

What percent of your pre-COVID-19 attendance has returned to your in-person services on a typical weekend?	
not yet reopened	3% of WELS churches
<10%	0.1% of WELS churches
10-20%	1.6% of WELS churches
21-30%	3.2% of WELS churches
31-40%	6.7% of WELS churches
41-50%	13.4% of WELS churches
51-60%	18.0% of WELS churches
61-70%	19.7% of WELS churches
71-80%	17.4% of WELS churches
81-90%	9.1% of WELS churches
91-100%	6.9% of WELS churches
> 100%	0.9% of WELS churches

It was reported for 2020 that 100,999 WELS members attended worship in an average week, representing 29.3 percent of total WELS membership. (Congregations were asked to report in-person attendance data only for the weeks in 2020 that they were open for in-person worship.) In 2019, it was reported that 143,670 WELS members attended worship in an average week, representing 41.1 percent of total WELS membership. That 12-point drop reflects what WELS congregations reported in the COVID tab. At the time when statistical reports were being submitted, WELS churches were worshipping at 64 percent of their pre-COVID attendance on average. In other words, even if congregations were open for in-person worship, not all members returned, for a variety of reasons.

This decline was across the board: small, medium, and large congregations. In 2019, WELS had four congregations that averaged over 1,000 members in worship each week. There were zero in 2020. In 2019, WELS had 27 congregations that worshiped more than 500 members each week on average. In 2020, that fell to 9 congregations. In 2019, there were 1,074 congregations that worshiped fewer than 200 in an average week (84.6 percent of WELS congregations). In 2020, that number increased to 1,160 (91.6

percent of WELS congregations). In 2019, 813 congregations had an average worship attendance of less than 100 (64 percent). In 2020, that increased to 957 congregations (75.7 percent).

Obviously, much of this is a one-year anomaly due to COVID-19. There will be a rebound in 2021. The question is, how big will that rebound be? While it was a blessing to be spiritually fed during lockdowns through virtual worship, we pray WELS members continue to cherish the blessing of the physical assembly of the saints, rather than making virtual worship their “new norm.” It will be important for pastors, elders, other church leaders, and all members to encourage one another toward physically gathering for worship.

Impact on offerings

Another question asked about the impact on offerings.

Currently, how do your congregational offerings compare to what they were pre-COVID-19?	
offerings are down more than 30%	2.6% of WELS churches
offerings are down 21-30%	5.2% of WELS churches
offerings are down 11-20%	19.7% of WELS churches
offerings are down 3-10%	7.2% of WELS churches
offerings are currently about the same	40.3% of WELS churches
offerings are up 3-10%	0.5% of WELS churches
offerings are up 11-20%	0.6% of WELS churches
offerings are up 21-30%	23.3% of WELS churches
offerings are up more than 30%	0.6% of WELS churches

There was strong correlation between congregations having offerings stay stable or going up with congregations providing multiple ways to give an offering. Churches that had (or pivoted to) some sort of electronic giving—financial transfer, online-giving platform, etc.—typically saw offerings hold steady or go up. Churches that continued to have the majority of members give via check or cash placed in an offering envelope typically saw offerings trend down.

Note that the majority of congregations that saw offerings rise saw them rise sharply, 21 percent or more. This would seem to be partially due to many congregations encouraging members to pivot to electronic giving when in-person worship was prohibited. The result was more regular giving. An unknown is what impact the various stimulus payments had on offerings, as well as the ability for congregations to receive PPP loans.

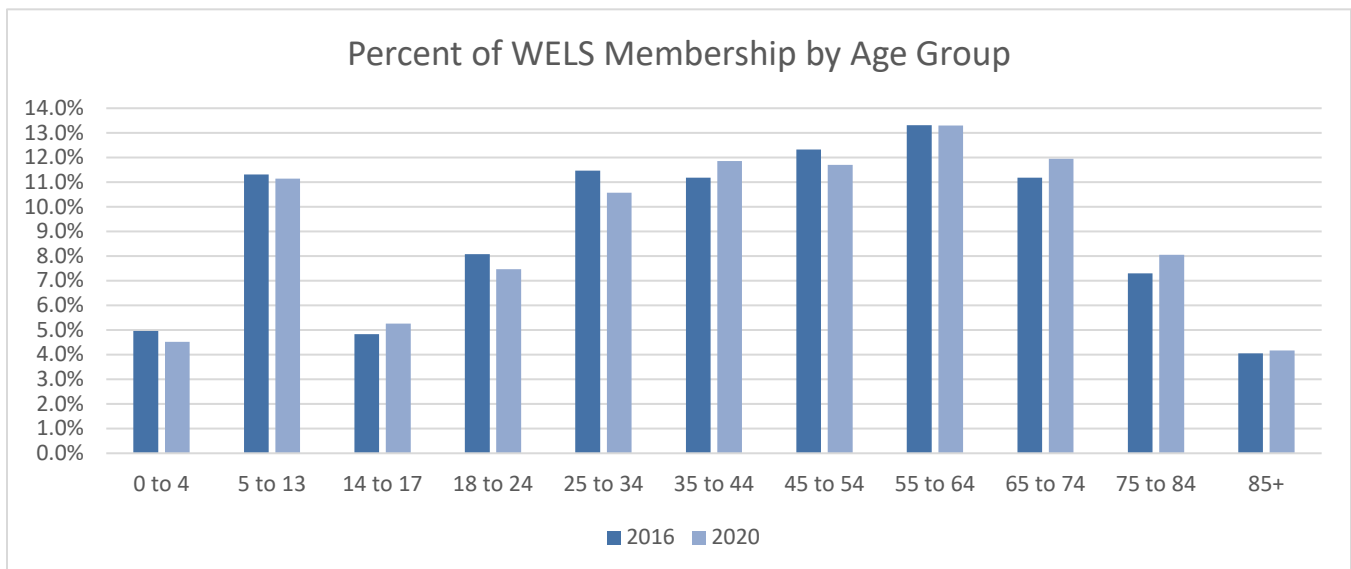
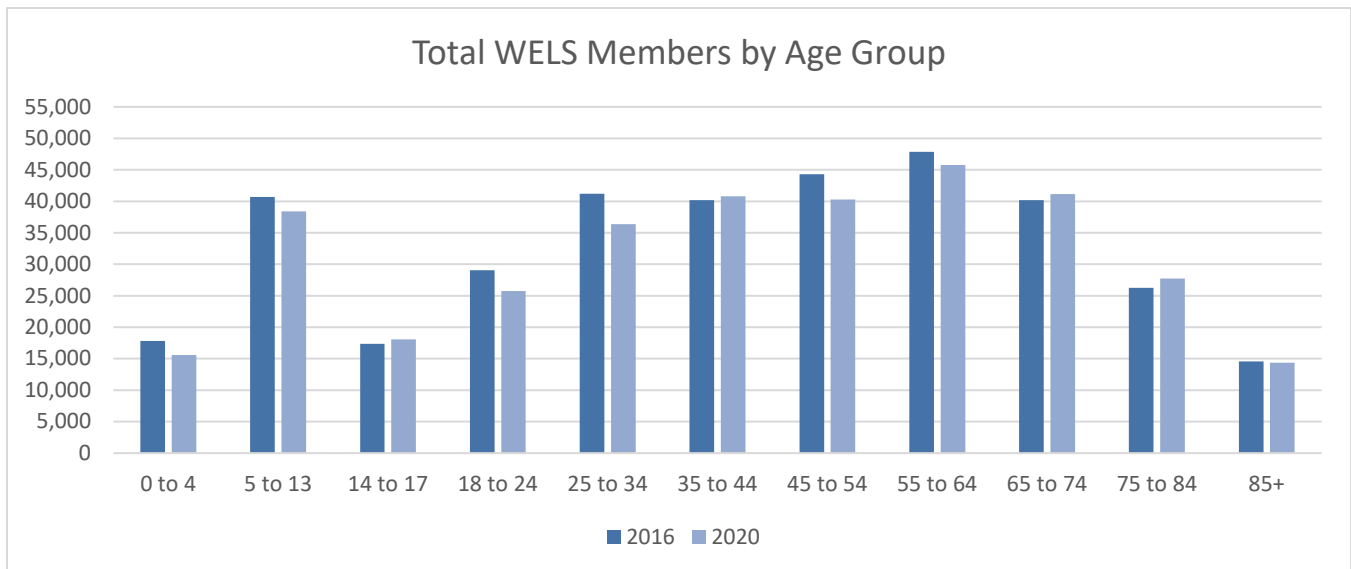
Demographics

Age groupings

For decades WELS has asked congregations to provide annually the number of members in various youth demographic categories: 0 to 4 (birth through preschool); 5 to 13 (elementary and middle school); 14 to 17 (high school). This was used by the Commission on Lutheran Schools to forecast school needs.

In 2015, for the first time, WELS asked congregations to provide estimates of their total number of members for all age categories. That exercise was repeated in 2016. It was decided, moving forward, to ask for that data in every year evenly divisible by 5. Thus, congregations submitted those estimates in 2020.

The first graph shows how many WELS members there were in various age groupings, comparing 2016 to 2020. Total membership in that period declined from 359,426 to 344,244 (-4.2 percent). The second graph shares the size of those population groups as a percentage of total WELS membership.



The graphs reflect a point made earlier: births in WELS have been trending down for some time. In just four years, children 4-and-younger went from being 5.0 percent to 4.5 percent of WELS' membership.

The graphs may also be reflecting that most “back-door losses” come from two people groups: young adults (college-aged through early 30s) and middle-aged couples who have become empty nesters.

If accurate, it means in 2020 the WELS median age was 43. (By comparison, the median age in the United states was 38.5.) The median age of “adult” members (18 and older) is 52. Both medians rose about 0.3 years in the past four years. We see WELS is aging; however, it remains younger than most Evangelical and mainline denominations. (The “younger” church groups in America right now tend to be non-Christian. For example, Muslims in America have a median age around 33.)

Ethnic groupings

For the first time, in 2020 WELS asked congregations to provide estimates of local membership broken down by ethnicity. Moving forward, this data will be requested in every year evenly divisible by 5. (So, the next time will be for the 2025 statistical report.) There are practical reasons to ask for this data. For example, certain accrediting agencies require this information. There are also strategic reasons, as WELS seeks to better engage in stateside cross-cultural ministry efforts. This data will be one way of assessing the impact of those attempts.

There was great effort made on the part of WELS churches to collect this data. It must be noted that this included a fair amount of guess work. We did not ask congregations to survey members, i.e. “Would you please provide your ethnic background?” They were allowed to estimate.

The submissions went through a process of data validation, looking for apparent anomalies. For example, nine churches had 100 percent of their membership listed as “other,” which would seem to be inaccurate. Those input errors were corrected, using comparable grouping percentages of other churches within the area. But the vast majority of the 1,200+ WELS congregations put good effort into trying to tabulate membership by ethnic group, having no apparent anomalies or irregularities. (Thank you for that hard work!) It is more than enough for a confidence level that the numbers below are accurate.

The survey indicated that WELS membership breaks down as follows. (Note: the designations are the common ethnic groupings used in surveys. For example, they are the same ones used to track enrollment in our Lutheran schools.)

<i>Ethnic Grouping</i>	<i>Members (nearest hundred)</i>	<i>% of Total WELS Membership</i>
White	323,200	93.8%
Hispanic or Latino	4,800	1.4%
Black or African American	4,500	1.3%
American Indian or Alaska Native	3,800	1.1%
Two or more (Mixed Ethnic Background)	3,100	0.9%

Asian	2,700	0.8%
Other	2,000	0.6%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	300	0.1%
TOTAL	344,400	100.0%

It is perhaps worth noting the density of minority populations within WELS congregations.

<i>Ethnic Grouping</i>	<i>WELS congregations reporting having at least one member from this ethnic grouping</i>	<i>WELS congregations with 50 or more members who belong to this ethnic grouping</i>	<i>That represents _____% of total WELS members in that ethnic grouping</i>
White	1222	1028	98.7%
Hispanic or Latino	407	15	52.6%
Black or African American	437	16	41.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native	162	11	84.6%
Two or more (Mixed Ethnic Background)	270	8	27.4%
Asian	338	7	34.3%
Other	161	10	59.5%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	101	0	N/A

So, for example, 407 congregations reported having at least one Hispanic/Latino member. There are 15 congregations that reported having 50 or more members who are Hispanic/Latino. That means about half of all Hispanic/Latino members (52.6 percent) belong to one of those 15 churches. The other half of Hispanic/Latino members are spread out in the other 392 congregations that reported having at least one Hispanic/Latino member.

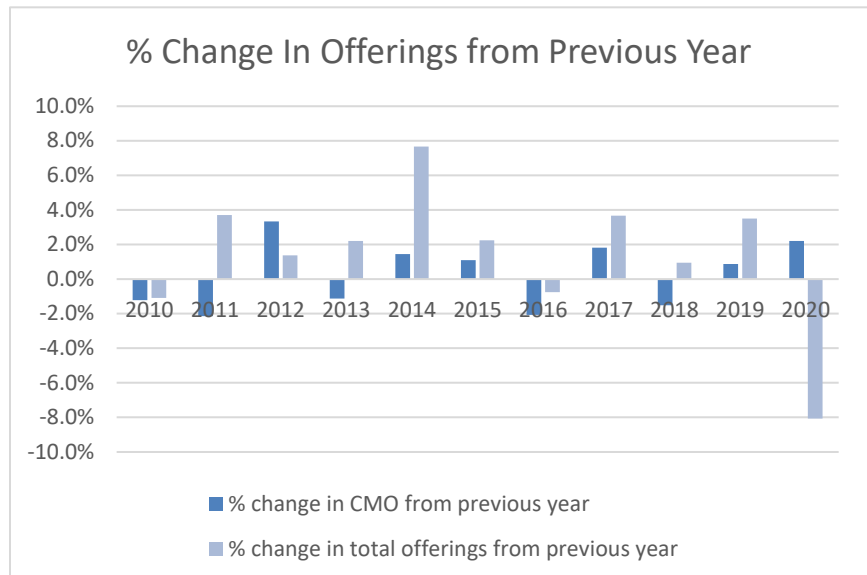
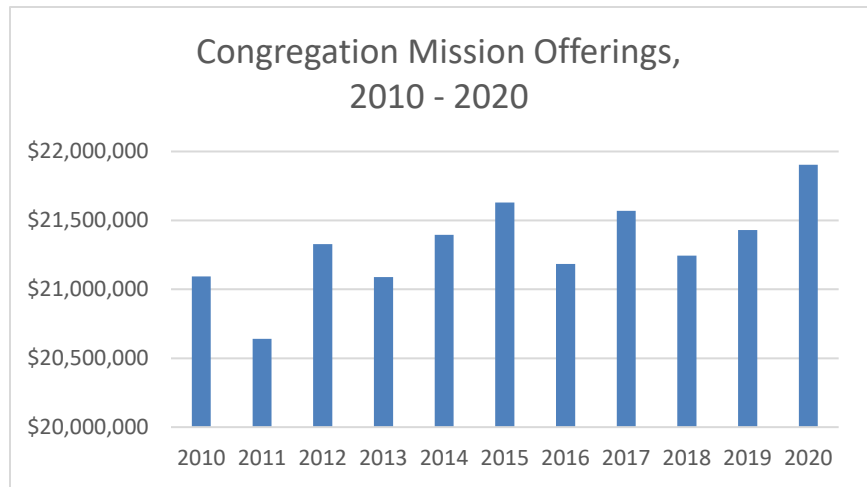
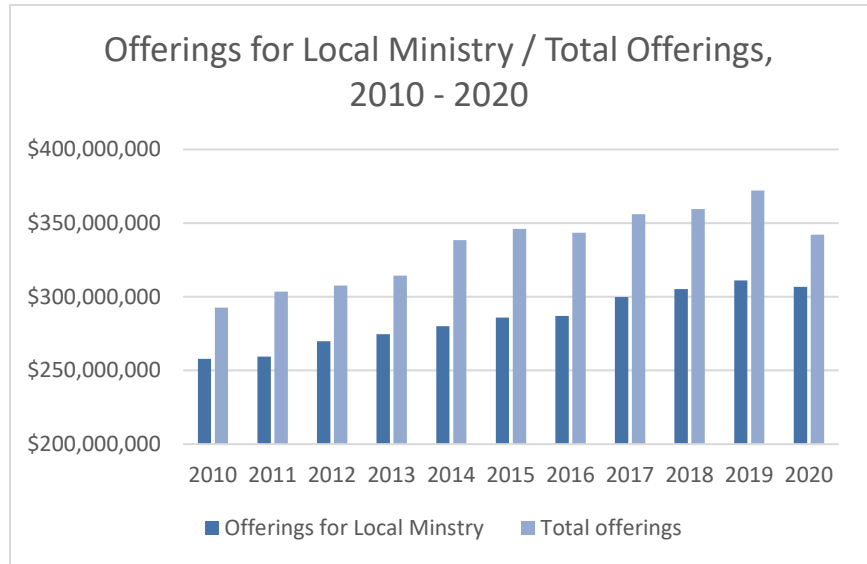
Most mainline denominations in America are less diverse than the population as a whole, in some cases substantially so. Moreover, WELS started largely in rural and suburban areas of midwestern states, locations that to this day often have little diversity. However, the low diversity rate in WELS, combined with the fact that any diversity is concentrated in a small number of congregations, merits honest discussion and prayer. Let us consider how we might better reach out with the gospel to all people groups.

Offerings

Analyzing offerings in 2020 is extremely difficult. Offerings for local ministry (i.e., given in support of congregational ministry) and total offerings (combination of offerings for local ministry, Congregation Mission Offerings, offerings to other ministries, etc.) trended down somewhat. Yet, Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO) was very strong. CMO saw the largest one-year percentage increase since 2012.

Likewise, in 2020, the average per communicant giving for CMO was the highest it has been since 2005. However, the average per communicant giving or total giving was the lowest it has been in the past four years.

As was mentioned previously, COVID-19 had an effect on many congregations' offering patterns. It is possible the various rounds of stimulus payments and PPP funds impacted offerings in 2020 in ways we cannot fully understand. Thus, we will not draw any strong conclusions based on 2020 data. Instead, we will simply pray that the Holy Spirit moves us all to generously support all forms of gospel ministry, so that the positive trend in CMO continues (enabling more worldwide gospel efforts) and support for local ministry efforts trends upward as well.



Conclusion

The common theme throughout this report: 2020 was weird. Attempting to do statistical forecasting (i.e., projecting future membership) using 2020 as the terminal data point would not be fruitful. It will be important to monitor what happens in 2021 and 2022. However, there are some things worth noting.

- It is amazing how WELS, as a whole, weathered COVID-19, especially when you look at how it ravaged other church bodies. God was extremely gracious to our church body. That said, some individual congregations are struggling. Let us love and help them in whatever ways Christ calls us to.
- While there will certainly be a bounce-back in worship attendance in 2021, it probably will not come close to the 144,000 weekly worshipers WELS had in 2019. In WELS and other church bodies, many individuals have not yet returned to in-person worship because they have either a) gotten out of the habit of attending church, or b) decided to make virtual worship their new normal. Congregations need to plan how to pursue both those groups. They probably require different tactics.
- To use 2020 terminology, we will not “flatten the curve” of the statistical decline in WELS by focusing on the birth rate or new mission starts alone. Nor, in a post-Christian nation, will corporate outreach (e.g., marketing) be as impactful as it once was. WELS needs a cultural pivot where all active members embrace the privilege of personal evangelism.
- The age demographics indicate enrollment challenges for our schools in the next few years. Combine this with the aging of the Baby Boomer and Silent Generation, whose offerings enable the subsidization of Lutheran elementary education. Congregations that wish to sustain LES ministry need a plan that addresses these demographic realities. This could include strategies such as opening up the school to non-members as an outreach opportunity, utilizing school choice programs if offered in one’s state, adjusting tuition rates, or school mergers when located in geographic proximity.
- WELS recently celebrated the 125th anniversary of the Apache mission effort. In recent decades, we have opened multiple cross-cultural home mission efforts. So, WELS has cared about and engaged in stateside cross-cultural ministry for a long time. Yet, to date, WELS has very little diversity. This needs discussion, especially with our WELS brothers and sisters who are part of minority ethnic groups. What, if anything, could we do differently or better?
- For three decades, the decline in WELS membership did not result in a decline in WELS congregations. In fact, because of efforts in Home Missions, the total number of WELS congregations grew even as total membership declined. That is changing. Church closures are becoming more common. We must consider the practical implications if the closure rate holds steady or increases over the next decade.

Final thought

We said that doing statistical work first of all leads us to thank God for his continued blessings and secondly enables us to make wiser stewardship decisions by having more information. So we look at the numbers, without being consumed by them. We distinguish between what we have been called to do and what only Christ can do. How will Christ’s kingdom advance? Scripture answers, “*Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,*” says the LORD Almighty.”¹³ So, let us thank God for his mercy, which is new every morning. And let us take the task he has given us gladly, doing all we can with the gospel.

¹³ Zephaniah 4:6