

# A DEMOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

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# 1. Introduction

When a congregation or a synod looks at statistics and demographics as part of their strategic planning process, there is a balance that must be found.

On the one hand, a congregation would be remiss to dismiss strategic planning entirely. You cannot read Scripture and conclude planning is a bad thing. Scripture tells us God himself has a plan.<sup>1</sup> Scripture gives practical insights into what types of things can help or hinder plans.<sup>2</sup> Scripture encourages us to make plans and then prayerfully commit them to the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

We plan so that we might be faithful stewards of the treasures God has entrusted to us, the greatest of which is his gospel. We plan because Scripture teaches that God uses us, his Church, in his saving work. *“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”*<sup>4</sup> We plan, never in an attempt to achieve personal glory, but in our effort to bear our crosses, in gratitude to him who bore *the* cross.<sup>5</sup> We look at statistics and demographics as part of our planning because having good information about the current reality is helpful in making good decisions. Thus, we use our reason (which the explanation of the First Article says is a gift from our heavenly Father) as we plan ministry.

So, to dismiss the importance of strategic planning would not be congruent with Scripture.

On the other hand, Scripture warns against making a plan into an idol. St. James writes, *“You ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.”*<sup>6</sup> Notice that James tells us we “ought to say” what we will do in the future. He *encourages* planning. However, he

provides two caveats. First, like our Savior in Gethsemane, we should add, *“Yet not my will, but yours be done.”*<sup>7</sup> Second, we should not let our plans become a boast.

In Scripture, a boast is worse than bragging. Bragging is telling others of your accomplishments to draw attention to yourself. But your “boast” is that which makes you feel safe and secure. The *only* thing we need to give us a sense of security is the fact that we have a Savior God who has proven his love time and time again. We only “boast” in him. Therefore, God says, *“Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches.”*<sup>8</sup> There is nothing inherently wrong with being wise or strong or rich. Those can be good things! However, they become spiritually detrimental if you elevate wisdom or strength or wealth to the level of Christ, so that they are what give you your security, more than he. God could have just as easily added, “Let not the planner boast in his plans.”

What *does* make us feel secure? God went on, *“But let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth.”*<sup>9</sup> The kindness and righteousness of Christ is our security. Confident that he is on our side, we know that everything will work out for our eternal good.

That attitude puts planning in its proper place. We don’t plan so that we might feel better about our future. We plan as an essential part of our effort to give God our best, thanking him for all his mercies.

This report is an attempt to find that balance.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Jeremiah 29:11 – “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Proverbs 15:22 - Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 16:3 - Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20

<sup>5</sup> Luke 14:27-33

<sup>6</sup> James 4:15,16

<sup>7</sup> Luke 22:42

<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 9:24

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 29:24

## 2. Background

Several years ago, the Conference of Presidents (COP) was having an ongoing discussion about WELS' demographics. They heard from congregational leaders, both pastors and laypeople, who were concerned about a "greying" taking place within their church. There was also a concern expressed by some that it was getting harder to retain or reach young adults, those belonging to the Millennial generation.

At that same time, the Commission on Congregational Counseling (CCC) was regularly fielding calls from rural congregations, mostly in the Midwest, concerned about how much longer they could stay open. We called it the "50/60 challenge" – congregations which had an average Sunday worship attendance of 50 people or fewer and an average age of 60 or more.

The decision was made to roll those issues together – 1) the aging of WELS, 2) retention of young members/Millennials, and 3) the decline of rural churches – having the CCC examine them all through a comprehensive statistical and demographic study. This study had multiple goals.

- We wanted to quantify the "greying" of WELS congregations. How old are we? Is this greying a reason for serious concern?
- We wanted to examine the decline in overall WELS membership over the past decades. What were the causes for that?
- We wanted to zero in on the Millennial generation. Was the expressed concern – that WELS did not reach or retain that generation – valid?
- We wanted to quantify the challenge facing rural congregations. How many were facing the 50/60 challenge?
- We wanted to look at other Christian church bodies. Are the challenges WELS is facing unique to us or something that is more pervasive?
- We wanted to look for demographic trends that might help WELS Congregational Services (formerly

known as the Congregation & Ministry Support Group) plan their efforts to help congregations with their various ministries.

To meet those goals, the following took place:

- In 2015 and 2016, WELS congregations were asked to provide demographic information as part of their end-of-year statistical report. We requested congregations count (or at least estimate) how many members they had in each of these age groups:
  - 0 to 5 / birth through kindergarten
  - 6 to 11 / elementary school
  - 12 to 17 / middle & high-school
  - 18 to 24 / college & grad school
  - 25 to 34 / young adults
  - 35 to 44 / adults
  - 45 to 54 / middle-aged adults
  - 55 to 64 / senior adults
  - 65 to 74 / retirement-aged adults
  - 75 to 84 / elderly adults
  - 85+ / aged adults
- Working with the Ministry of Christian Giving, we compiled the statistical reports from 1956 through 2016 into a database.
- We began compiling statistics of other Christian church bodies.
- We "mapped" WELS congregations by population density, identifying whether churches were highly rural, rural, suburban, urban, or densely populated.
- We commissioned a study on the religious views of Millennials.

### 3. The Data Collected

#### *Demographic reports*

In 2015, 78% of WELS congregations submitted demographic information, breaking down their membership into the categories listed above. We asked for that data again in 2016, and 83% of congregation supplied it that year. Altogether, 92% of WELS congregations provided that demographic information in at least one year. The remaining 101 congregations comprise 2% of the population of WELS. We asked those congregations to provide an estimate of their average age. Using comps from the same district – matching population density, age of the congregation, membership size of the congregation, etc. – we projected the demographic breakdown within those congregations.

In the future, demographic information will be collected in years evenly divisible by 5, e.g. 2020, 2025, etc.

#### *Statistical reports*

Each year congregations are asked to provide statistical data about membership, ministrations, and finances. That is merged with additional data provided by WELS, such as Congregational Mission Offerings (CMO) remittance. The annual statistical report shares this information, including summary columns, e.g. total gains, total losses, per communicant giving.

To read the statistical report accurately, one must understand how the data is collected and reported. Congregations are asked to break down gains and losses into different categories. For example, with gains, they are asked to list how many children were baptized, how many adults were confirmed, how many professions of faith there were, and how many transfers in took place. For losses, they are asked to list the number of deaths and transfers out, how many members joined other Christian churches, and how many removals took place. The reporting form then calculates what the congregation's current membership should be, based on the differential between total gains and total losses. *However*, the reporter can enter in total baptized and

communicant membership and override the calculations.

Therefore, there are congregations that do not provide any individual gain/loss data at all, but simply enter in the current total membership. Moreover, when congregations don't provide statistical information in a year, the data from the most recent year in which they did fill out a statistical report is pulled forward.

This results in statistical anomalies within the report. For example, when you add up the individual columns for total gains and total losses from 1986 to the present, it shows WELS gaining members in 28 out of 30 years. However, when you look at the total membership numbers, the reality is that WELS *lost* members in 25 out of 30 years. In going through those reports year-by-year, we concluded that congregations are more likely to submit complete data in years where membership increased, and less likely to submit complete data in years when membership declined. The result is that in any year, typically gains are slightly over-reported and losses are under-reported.

For example, consider the most recent statistical report (2016). When you look at the "total gain or loss" column, it shows a loss of 1,961 communicant members. That number is calculated by totaling up all the different types of communicant gains and subtracting all the different types of communicant losses. However, communicant membership totals indicate that the real loss was 3,365 members in 2016, 71.6% *higher* than what is reported in "total gains or losses."

Therefore, it should be stated that a responsible use of this data is to focus on long-term trends of stability or change, rather than short-term variations and deltas. Moreover, as you read the report, please note the terminology. Sometimes we will reference *reported* gains or losses. Other times we will reference *estimated actual* gains and losses, calculated by applying the reported percentages of gains and losses to the WELS population as a whole.

## 4. WELS Membership – The Last Half Century

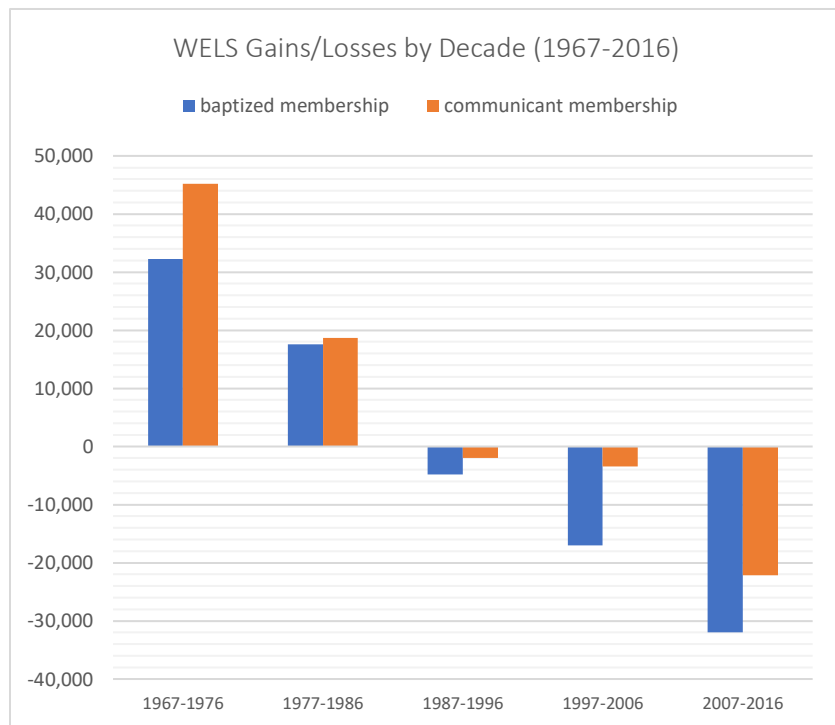
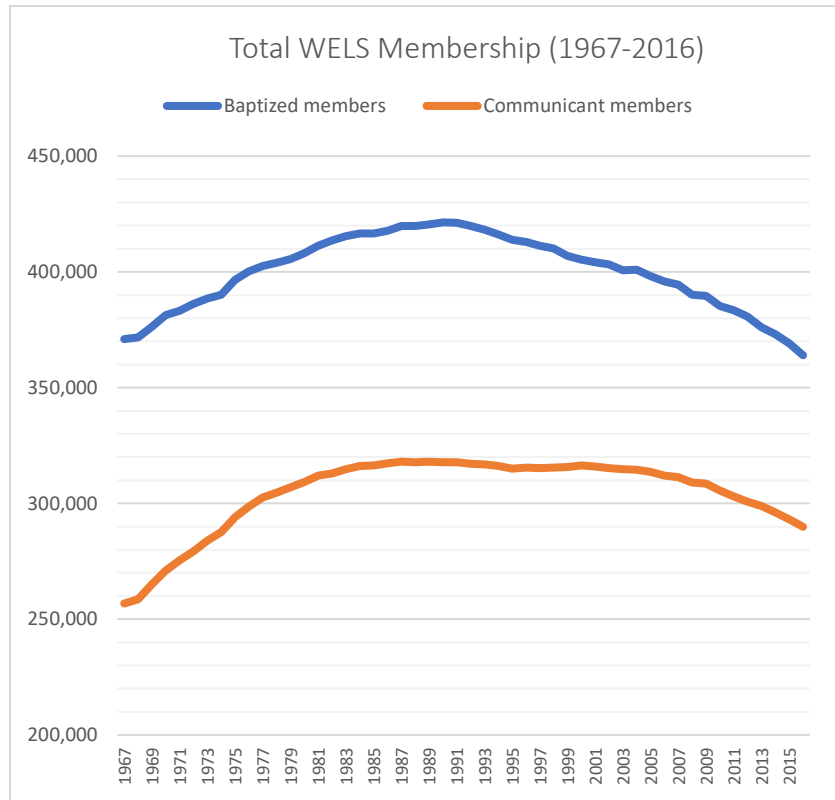
The last fifty years divide neatly into two halves for WELS.

In the first twenty-five years (1967 through 1991), WELS baptized membership grew by 50,141 people, a 13.5% increase. In that same span, WELS communicant membership grew by 60,994 people, a 23.8% increase.

Communicant membership peaked in 1987 at 318,037. (It was 289,863 in 2016.) Baptized membership peaked shortly after, in 1990, at 421,396 souls. (It was 363,997 in 2016.)

In the last twenty-five years (1992 through 2016), WELS' baptized membership has decreased by 55,942 people, a 13.3% drop. In that same span, WELS communicant membership has declined by 27,145 people, an 8.6% decrease.

You see a shift beginning about four decades ago. In the early 1970's WELS was working toward the goal of "Every State by 78." In the decade that followed (1977 through 1986), WELS was still growing, but the rate of growth had markedly declined. In the decade from 1987 to 1996, WELS membership was flat. From 1997 to 2006, while communicant membership stayed relatively flat, there was a large decline in baptized



membership. And in the past decade, there have been large declines in both communicant and baptized membership.

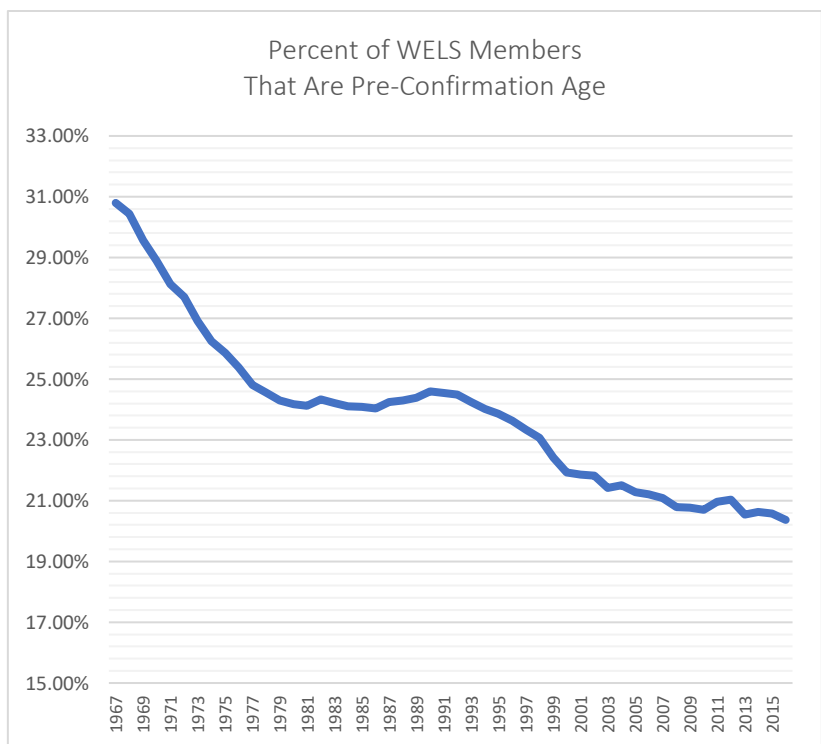
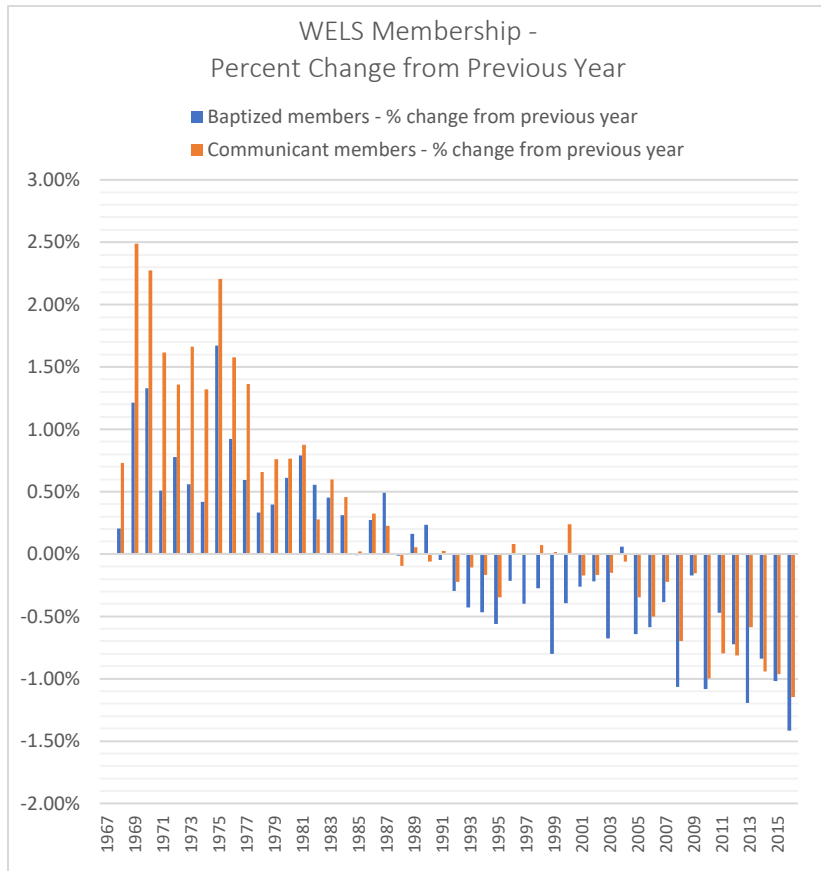
This illustrates a potential challenge. Over the past twenty-five years the rate of losses has stayed relatively steady. However, that means on a percentage basis, WELS loses more and more people each year.

Consider the last twenty years. Here is the average percent of WELS members lost per year, grouped by five-year intervals.

1997-2001	-0.41% per year
2002-2006	-0.43% per year
2007-2011	-0.64% per year
2012-2016	-1.04% per year

WELS lost 1.41% of its baptized membership and 1.15% of its communicant membership in 2016, the highest losses in both categories ever.

Simply put, the rate of decline has been increasing for two decades. Adding to the challenge is that one big source of losses – deaths – is projected to rise as the overall WELS population ages. You see the population shift in the fact that baptized membership is declining more quickly than communicant membership. The percent of WELS members that are pre-confirmation age will soon dip below 20%. Conversely, 11.35% of WELS membership is over the age of 75.



## 5. Main Factors in WELS' Statistical Decline

WELS' statistical decline can be accounted for by considering four primary factors.

*First, WELS families aren't having as many children as they once were.*

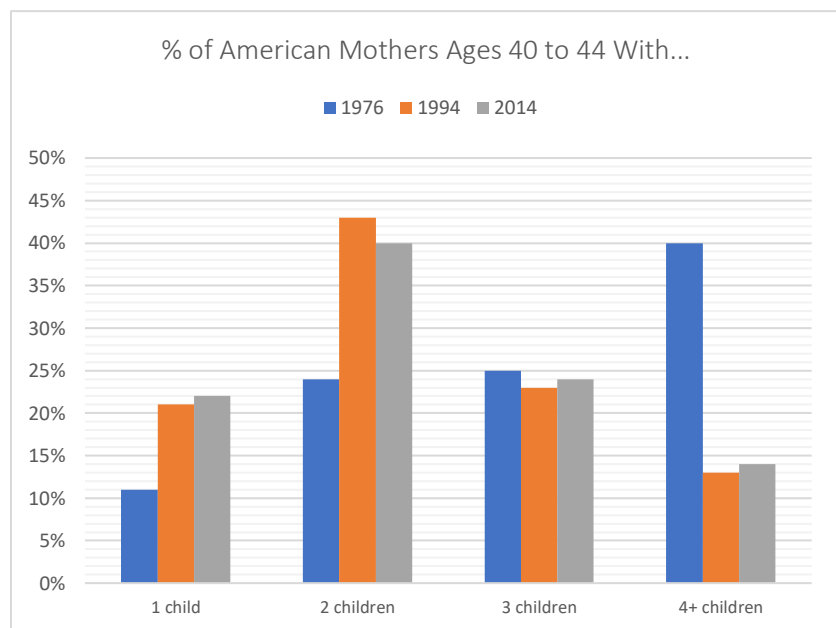
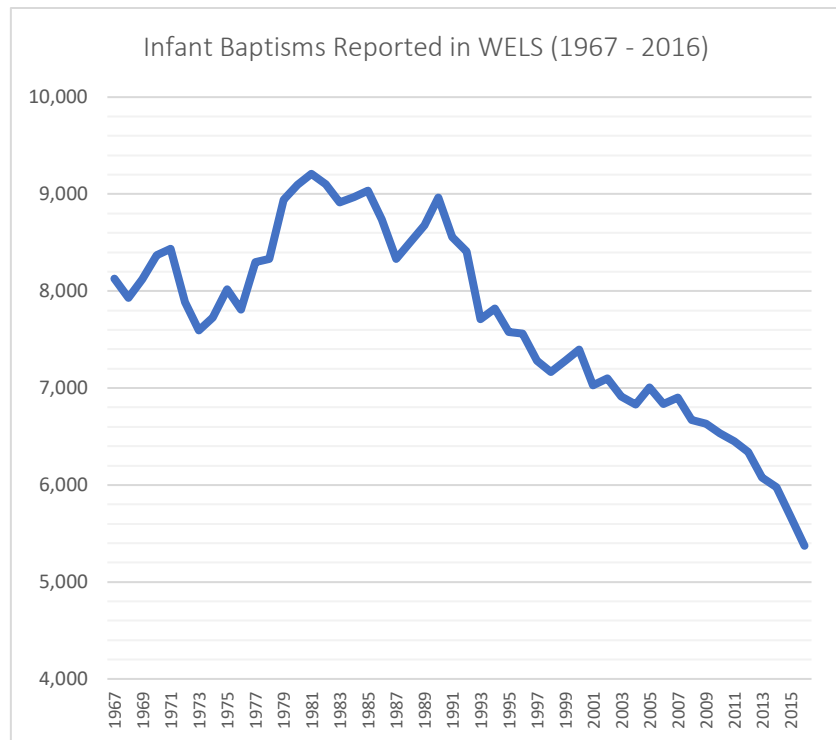
This is reflected in the decline in infant baptisms.

This trend reflects what is happening in American society. The average age for a first marriage in America is currently 27 for women and 29 for men. That is up from 23 and 26 in 1990. It was 22 and 20 in 1960.<sup>10</sup>

Since couples are getting married older (and often spending the early years of marriage focusing on careers), birth rates have gone down. Birth rates among American women ages 20 to 29 years old hit historic lows recently.<sup>11</sup>

Having large families has become out of vogue. In 1976, approximately 40% of women in their early 40s had given birth to four or more children. In 2014, it was only 14% of such women who had given birth to four or more children.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, many Millennials, now the largest generation in America, have rejected having children as a life goal. According to the Cassandra Report, about 1 in 3 Millennials would prefer not to have children.<sup>13</sup> Thus, you



<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/03/getting-married-later-is-great-for-college-educated-women/274040/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/49796/2000203-Millennial-Childbearing-and-the-Recession-appendix.pdf>

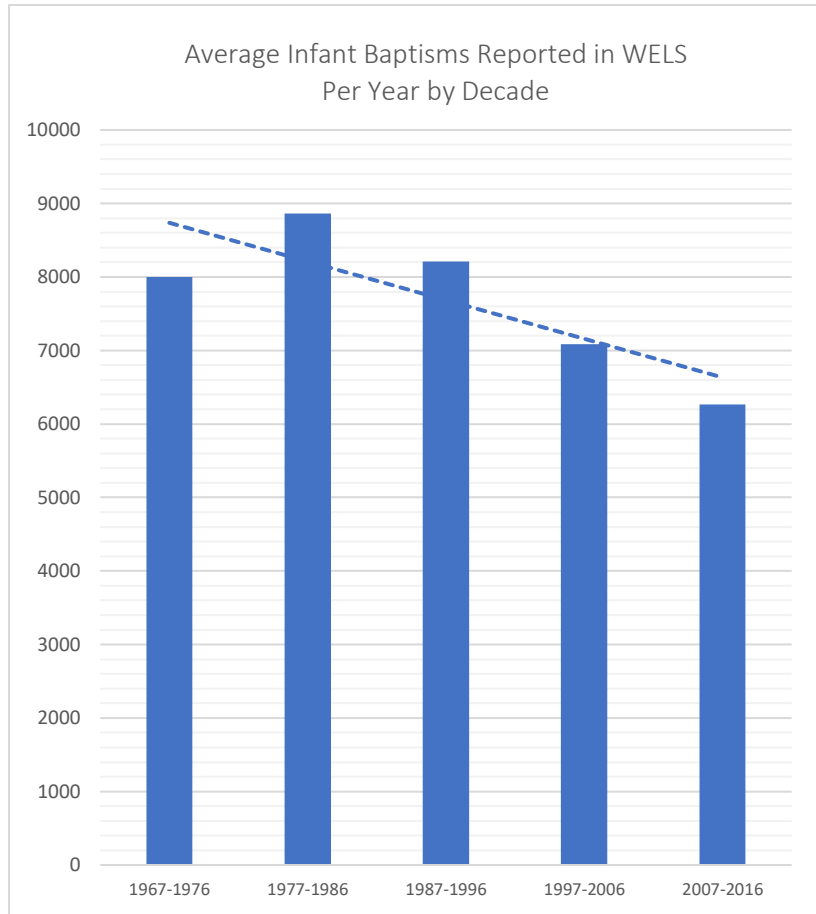
<sup>12</sup> <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/05/07/family-size-among-mothers/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://cassandra.co>



have fewer people having children. Those who do have children have smaller families than in previous decades.

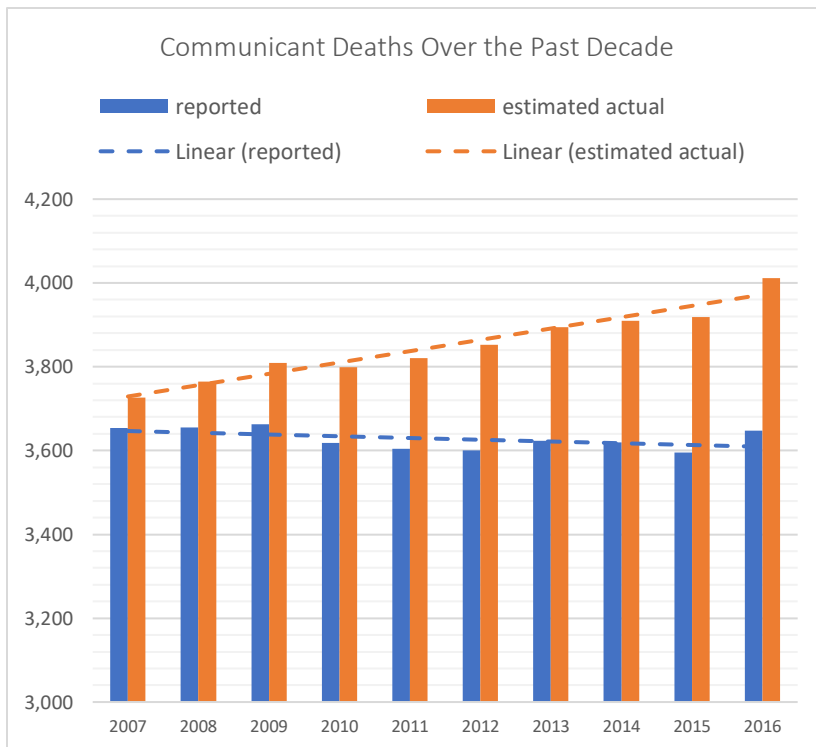
WELS has paralleled this trend to a degree. Over the last 50 years, WELS has had 384,233 infant baptisms. In our highest decade during that period, WELS averaged 8,864 infant baptisms per year (1977 through 1986). In our lowest decade during that period, we averaged 6,264 baptisms per year. If WELS had been able to maintain that higher average, it would have meant close to an additional 59,000 infant baptisms over the past 50 years. (That does *not* mean WELS would have that many additional members, as we obviously do not retain 100% of our youth. It simply illustrates that the decline in infant baptisms has played a large role in WELS' overall statistical decline.)



*Second, the rate of deaths among WELS members is increasing.*

Someone inevitably is going to object, "The communicant deaths reported in the statistical report are always about the same year-to-year. How can you say deaths are increasing?"

First of all, even if the reports of communicant deaths were accurate, if the number of communicant deaths stays steady year-after-year, that would mean as overall communicant membership declines, those deaths constitute a larger percentage of the overall WELS population. The percentage of WELS communicant members

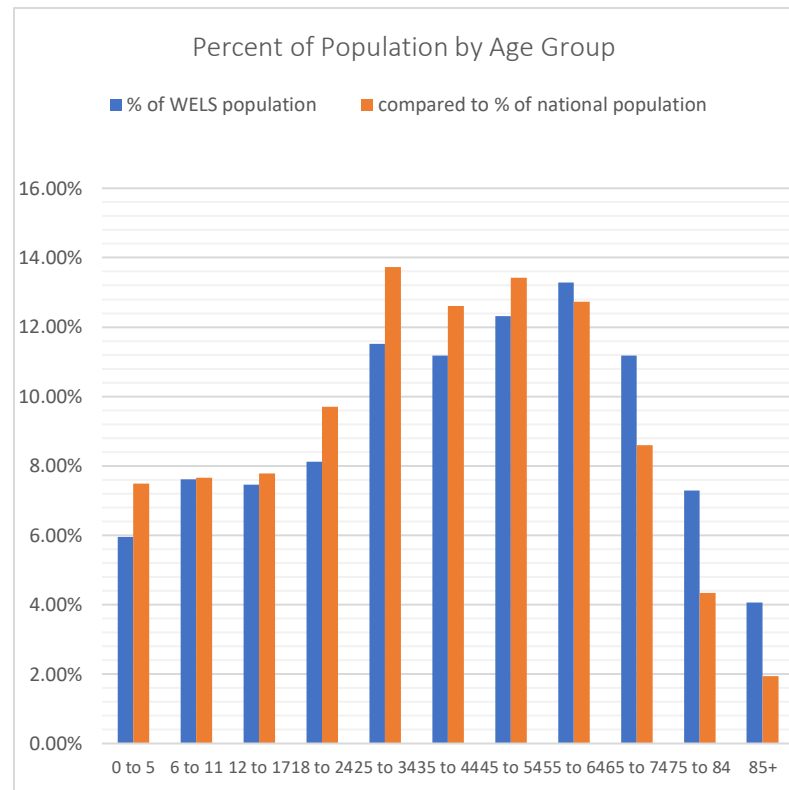
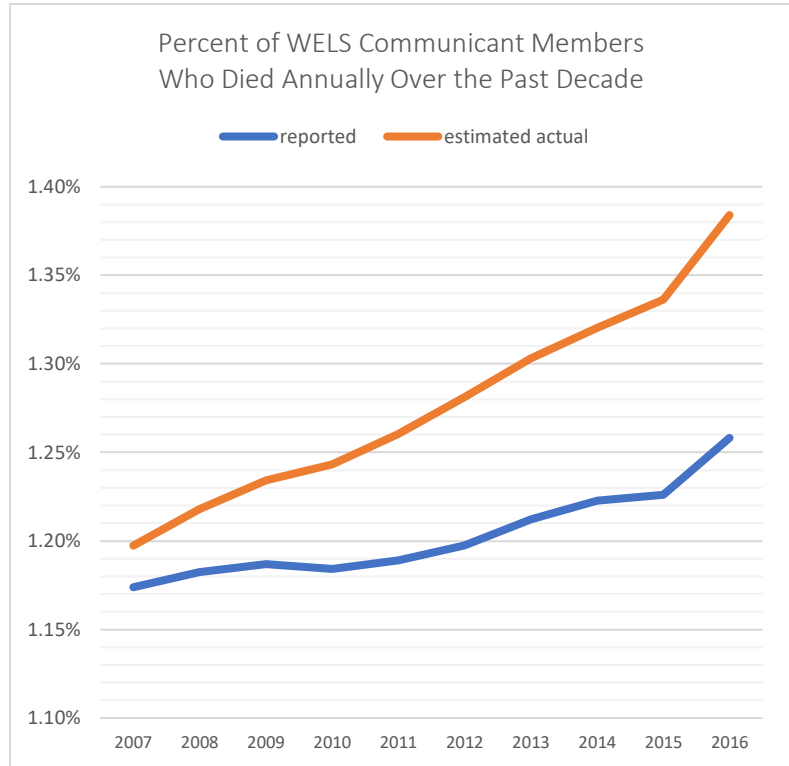


going to heaven annually is rising steadily.

However, remember two things mentioned in Part 3 of this report. First, the rate at which WELS is losing members is increasing annually. Second, losses (including deaths) are underreported. When you adjust for that, looking at the percent of losses that are due to communicant deaths and using that percentage to project the actual number of communicant deaths, the rate at which WELS communicant members are going to heaven is increasing even more rapidly.

This matches up well with what we found in the demographic data that WELS congregations have submitted over the last two years. Those reports show that 11.35% of WELS members are 75 years old or older (ca. 39,500 people). That percentage is almost double that of the American population for that age group. 4.06% of WELS members are 85 or older, over 14,000 individuals. For the reported communicant deaths to be accurate, WELS members would have to live about 5 years longer than average. However, our estimated numbers align with the IRS actuarial tables, suggesting they are closer to accurate.<sup>14</sup>

A further challenge is that, given the demographic breakdown of WELS, communicant deaths will continue to rise steadily for two decades. The average number of communicant deaths from 2009 through 2016 was 3,689 annually. We believe that between now and 2037, WELS will average about 4,600 communicant deaths annually.



<sup>14</sup> <https://www.irs.gov/retirement-plans/actuarial-tables>

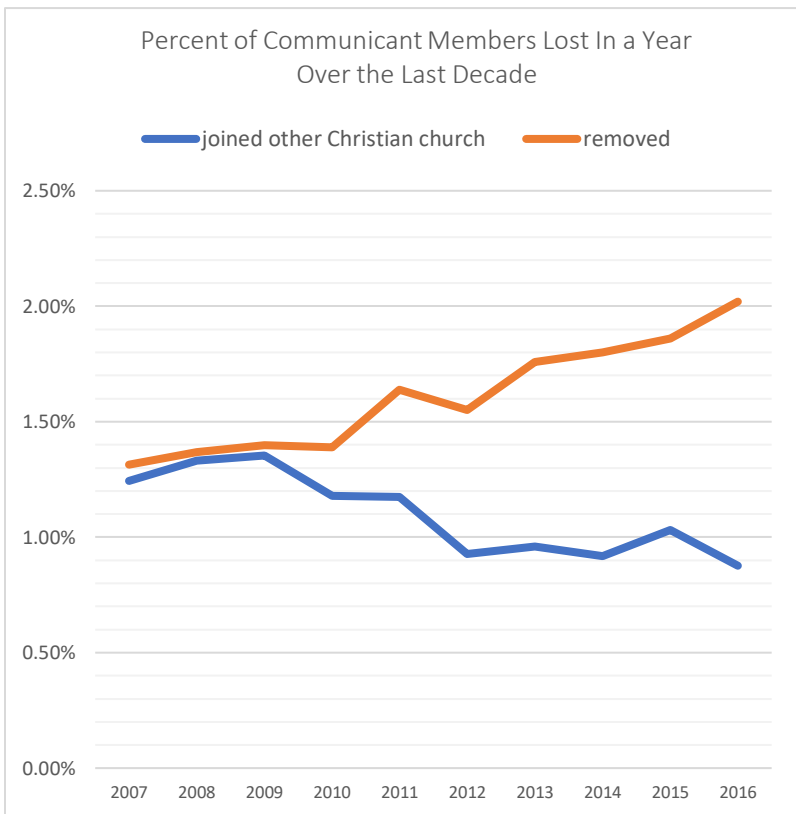
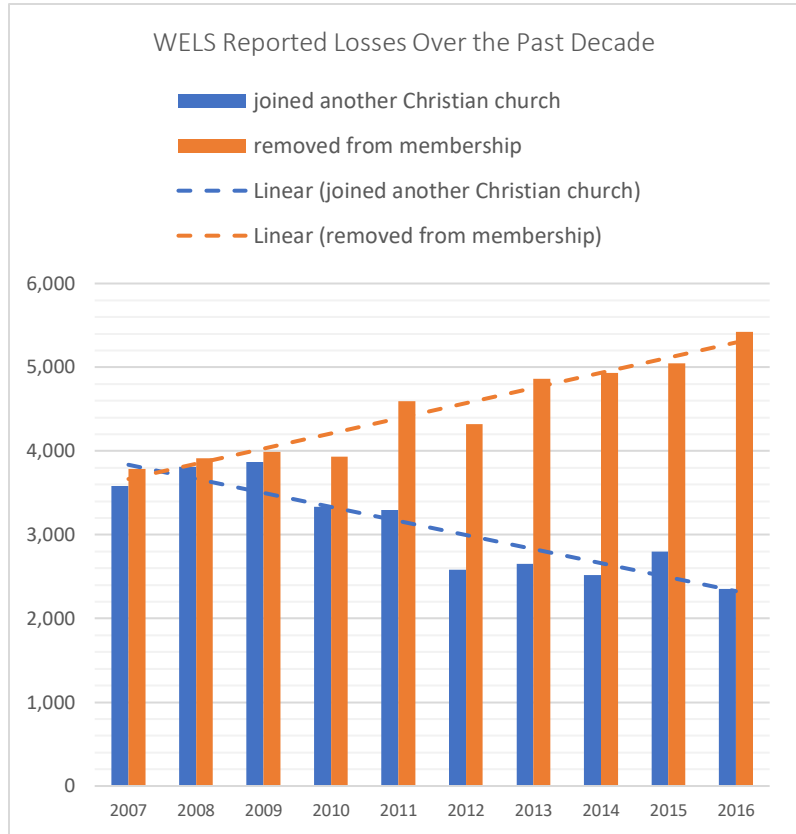
*Third, it has grown increasingly difficult to retain members, especially younger members.*

Since 1986, WELS has lost a reported 240,006 members either through removal/excommunication or from those members joining other Christian churches. These are sometimes referred to as “back door losses.” The estimated total of actual losses for those categories is closer to 259,000.

Focusing on the last decade, you see that reported losses to other Christian church bodies are trending down substantially. In the Church Militant, it is impossible to avoid these types of losses completely. There will be individuals who leave their WELS congregation for another Christian church. It might be that they disagree with an aspect of WELS confession of faith/doctrinal statements. It might be that they are prioritizing something else above sound doctrine. However, we give thanks to God that these losses are trending down.

Removals, however, are trending up. Removals are also an unavoidable type of loss. Moreover, some removals are good. For example, excommunications are a loving extension of church discipline.

However, most removals are not excommunications, but WELS members who simply “drift away.” The congregation may lose track of those individuals’ contact information. Or the congregation may remove the individuals from membership for self-exclusion.



As the number of removals rises at the same time total communicant membership declines, it means that we are losing a larger percentage of members through removal each year. In 2016, WELS lost 2.02% of its communicant members by removal.

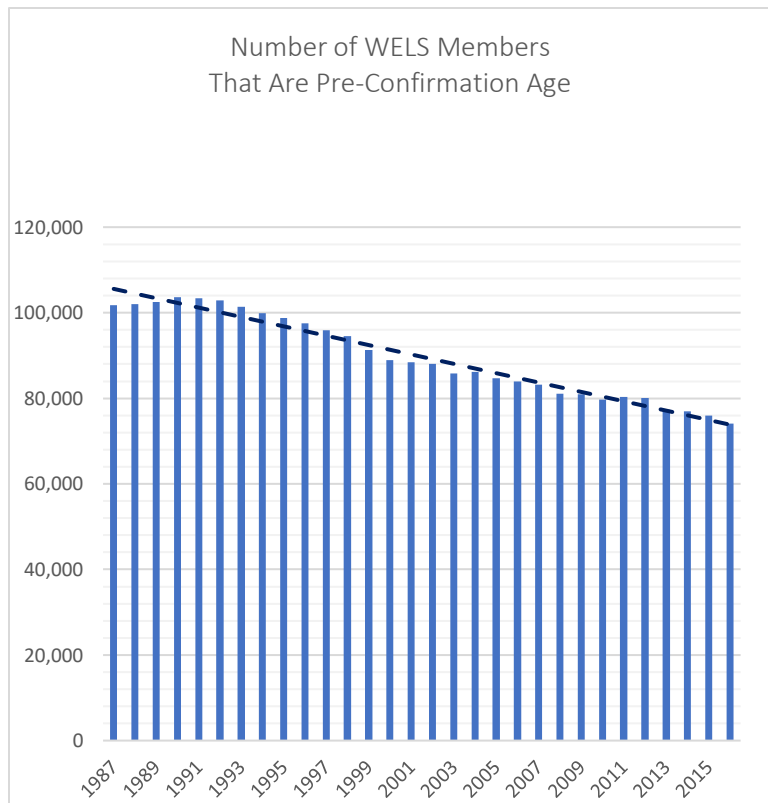
A further challenge is that these back-door losses come disproportionately from younger generations. There have been multiple surveys conducted over the past three decades trying to assess how well WELS retains youths post-confirmation. We were also able to rely on data gathered in our working with WELS congregations. However, ultimately, the losses of younger members are perhaps best scene in the demographic study.

For example, from 2005 through 2010 there were 40,580 baptisms in WELS, children who would be ages 6 to 11 at the end of 2016. Yet, the demographic survey showed WELS had 20,730 members in that demographic at the end of 2016, a decline of 34.66%.

That percent decline increases in high-school and college years to just over 47%. It peaks with the Millennial generation at approximately 54%. After that, the percent decline stays flat. I.e. There isn't substantial additional losses from people within demographic groups once you get beyond age 34.

Obviously, WELS will gain members and lose members from those various demographic groups for a variety of reasons and at a variety of times. But the numbers seem to suggest that, typically, if someone is going to leave WELS, it

WELS Demographic Groups from Baptismal Years to End of 2016		
<b>Ages 6 to 11</b>		
baptized 2005 through 2010		40,580
WELS members ages 6 to 11 at end of 2016		26,514
	% change	-34.66%
<b>Ages 12 to 17</b>		
baptized 1999 through 2005		49,101
WELS members ages 12 to 17 at end of 2016		25,984
	% change	-47.08%
<b>Ages 18 to 24</b>		
baptized 1992 through 1998		53,520
WELS members ages 18 to 24 at end of 2016		28,237
	% change	-47.24%
<b>Ages 25 to 34</b>		
baptized 1982 to 1991		87,789
WELS members ages 25 to 34 at end of 2016		40,101
	% change	-54.32%
<b>Ages 35 to 44</b>		
baptisms 1972 to 1981		82,917
WELS members ages 35 to 44 at end of 2016		38,906
	% change	-53.08%



will occur before they are in their mid-30s. This parallels very closely what previous surveys have found, except the challenge seems to have grown. Approximately 20 years ago, it was estimated that WELS lost about 40% to 45% of its youth confirmands by the time they finished college. Today, it appears to be closer to 50%.

It should also be noted that in the demographic study, we are looking at membership numbers, not measuring membership activity. In the congregations that have worked with the CCC, a common concern is that while the congregation may still have a good number of young adult members, many of them are in a state of delinquency.

When you combine the disproportionate loss of younger members with the lower birth rates in recent decades, it is easy to see why the number of WELS members that are pre-confirmation age has been in decline. In the late 60's, approximately 30% of WELS members were under the age of 14. Today, it's a little over 20%.

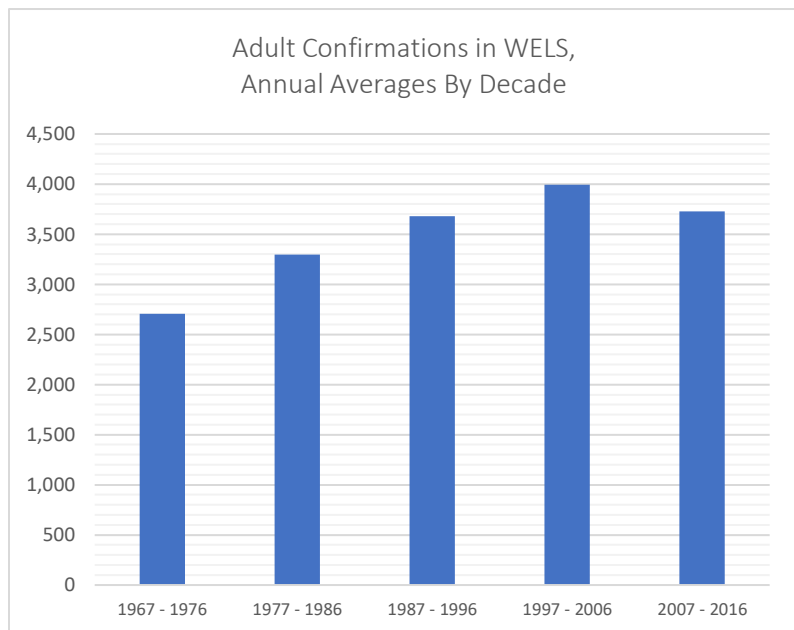
#### *Fourth, more recently, adult confirmations are trending down.*

If births/baptisms are declining and deaths are rising, the only way for WELS *not* to decline statistically is to offset those losses through adult confirmations. Adult confirmations occur when adults go through a period of doctrinal instruction (a Bible Information Class, or BIC) and then join a WELS congregation.

When you look at adult confirmations over the past half-century, it has been a steady trend up. In that time period, WELS has gained just over 174,000 members through adult confirmations, a huge blessing.

When looking at individual years, we see that peaks in adult confirmations typically occur during or immediately after periods of mission expansion. For example, we see adult confirmations rise in the late 70's and early 80's, corresponding with the Board for Home Missions' *Every State in '78* campaign. We see them peak again in the late 90's and early 00's, a time when finances allowed WELS to open large numbers of new churches annually. E.g. Approximately 100 new missions between 1990 and 2000.

However, for the past decade, adult confirmations have been trending down. In the last five years, they've been trending down sharply. E.g. WELS confirmed 600 fewer adults in 2016 than in 2012, a decline of 15%.



These need to be viewed in a balanced way. On the one hand, only the Holy Spirit, working through the Word, can move someone to see their need for a Savior and the benefits of joining a Christian church. Thus, ultimately, adult confirmation numbers are out of our control. On the other hand, since believers are the way that God shares the Word with the world, it is good and right that we examine our outreach efforts to see if we are doing all we can to share the gospel.

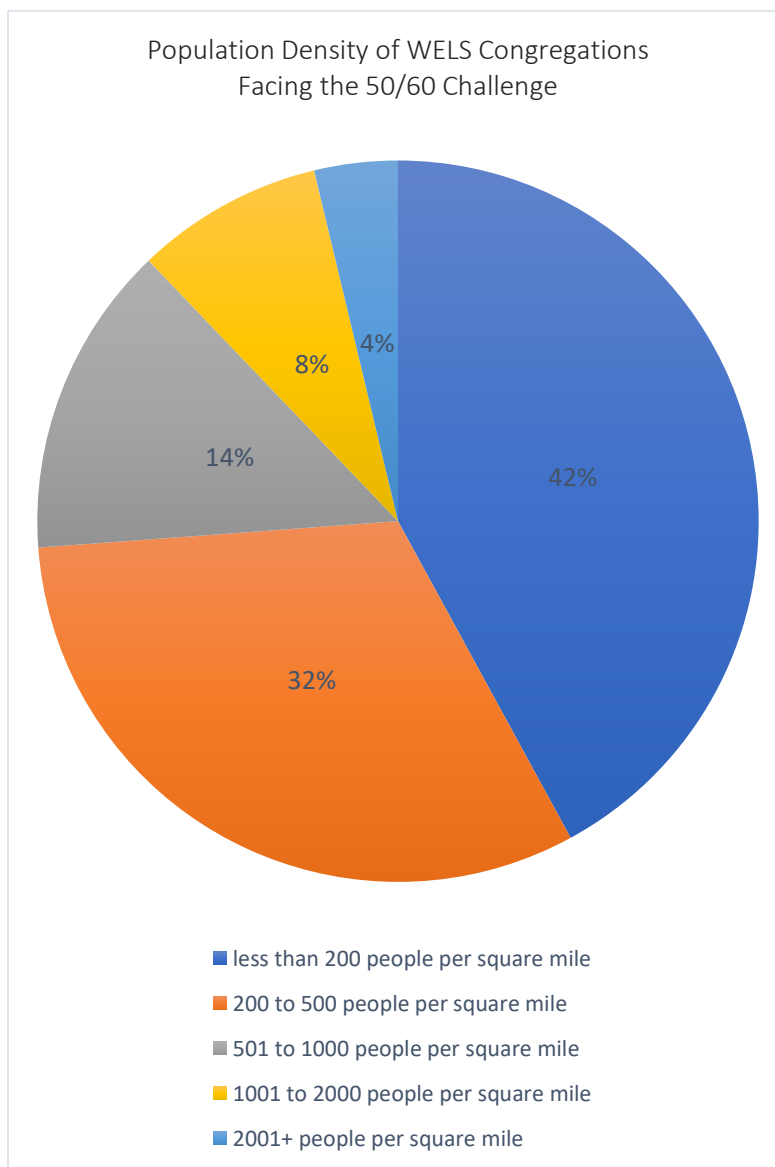
## 6. Congregations Facing the 50/60 Challenge

Another goal of our demographic study was to attempt to determine how many WELS congregations are facing what we call the *50/60 challenge*. This is when a congregation has an average weekly worship attendance of 50 or fewer, and an average membership age of 60 or older. To identify these congregations, we compared the demographic report (which provided a congregation's average membership age) and the statistical report (which lists average weekly church attendance). We confirmed there are approximately 110 congregations that fit the parameters of the *50/60 Challenge*. We believe approximately another 40 congregations will fit those parameters within the next two years.

We then studied where those congregations are located, looking at population density reports provided by the most recent US Census. As we expected, most of the churches facing the *50/60 Challenge* are in rural areas.

Many of these are the farm churches that for decades were the backbone of our church body, scattered mostly throughout the Midwest. They are often only 7 to 10 miles apart from each other. Back when these congregations were founded, many members came to church by horse and buggy, and that was the limit of how far it was reasonable to travel.

The challenge is self-evident. As the membership in these congregations dwindle, it becomes harder for them to remain open. Moreover, for the congregations in highly-rural areas, there is not a large mission field from which to draw new members. For some, it might be possible for the congregations to continue by merging with other WELS nearby congregations. This requires planning, as well as a willingness on the part of members to be open to what may be necessary to continue gospel proclamation in their general vicinity.

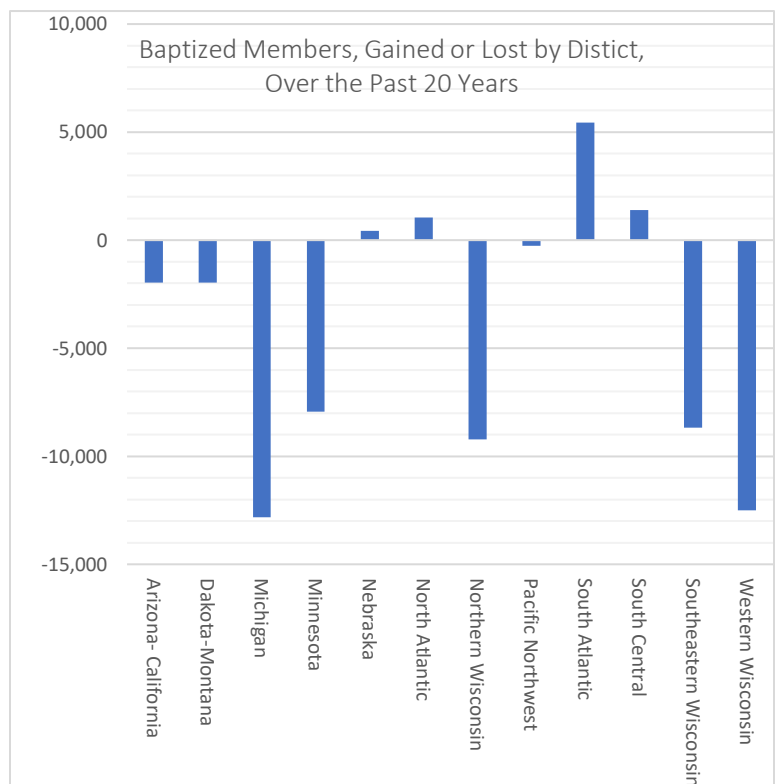
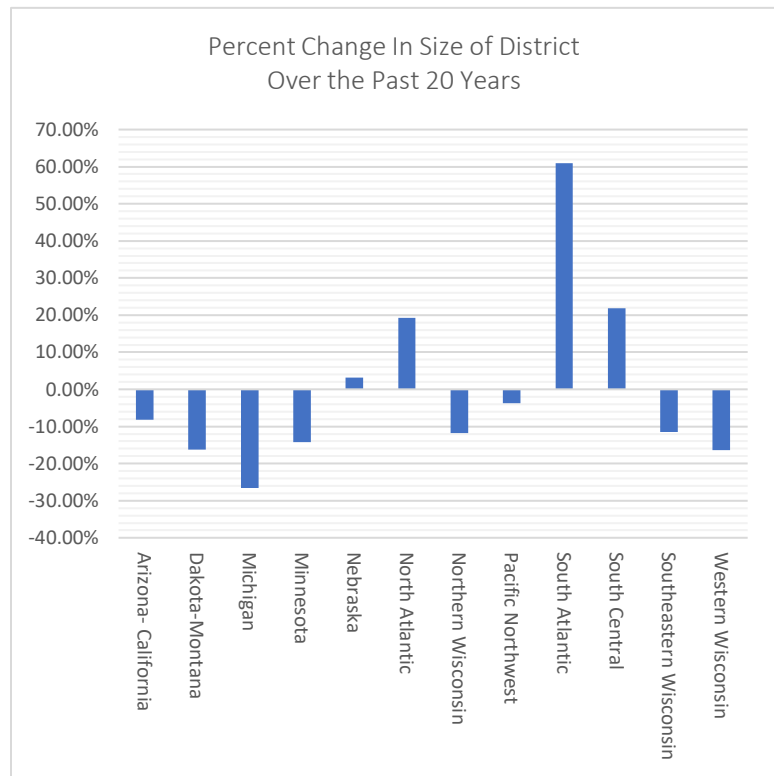


## 7. District Variations / Adult Confirmation Ratios

The statistical decline facing WELS overall has hit the districts in varying degrees. Over the past 20 years, four districts have grown larger, compared to eight that have declined. There are multiple causes for the variations. It is helpful to understand the causes and how much they do or do not factor.

The shifting American population plays a role. When you look at the districts that have grown, they tend to include states that have seen large population expansions over the past twenty years. Eg. Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida in the South Atlantic district; Texas in the South Central district; Colorado in the Nebraska district. There are anomalies however. For example, the North Atlantic district has grown 19% in the past 20 years, a time when the Northeast has experienced a population exodus.

Some have speculated that the growth of the saltwater districts is due largely to a migration of WELS members. However, when we examine the transfers-in / transfers-out ratios for all districts, it is clear that is not a major factor. Even in districts that have large numbers of “snowbird” members (individuals who live in the Midwest for most of the year, but move to a warmer climate for the winter), that constitutes a very small percentage of those districts’ growth.



A much larger factor is the differential in death of communicants. With the exception of the Southeastern Wisconsin District, the Midwestern districts tend to be among the older districts. Add to that fact how much larger those Midwestern districts are than the saltwater districts, and it translates to hundreds more deaths annually.

Another large factor is the differential in adult confirmations. We mentioned that many of the growing districts contain states that have had large population increases. While that has not meant substantial growth through WELS transfers, it has meant a larger “prospect pool,” people new to the area looking for various desired services: their new grocery store, new doctor, new church, etc. When WELS congregations in those areas identify and evangelize those newcomers, it seems that bears blessings. Those “newcomer” opportunities are not as great in states with plateaued or declining populations.

Moreover, most new missions opened by WELS Board for Home Missions over the past twenty years have been in those districts where the overall population was growing. In a “new start” situation, naturally, evangelism is the dominant ministry effort. Because there are few members, there are not many hospital or home-bound visits to be made. Lay members’ service tends to be focused on FRAN evangelism. (FRAN stands for friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors. In FRAN evangelism, Christians identify people in those four groups to witness to, as well as inviting those people to church.) So, in a new mission start the pastor and laity can both dedicate large amounts of time and effort to evangelism. It would seem the Holy Spirit then blesses this.

This can be illustrated in the ratio of communicant members to adult confirmations. For example, over the past 20 years, the South Atlantic District has averaged a ratio of 20 to 1. In other words, in an average year, South Atlantic District congregations will gain one adult confirmand for every 20 communicant members. Again, that district has the advantage of many new missions being planted in growing population centers. In those congregations, the primary service of members is FRAN evangelism. Compare that to the Midwestern districts, where other gospel efforts can consume time and resources, and where congregations may be located in plateaued or declining population centers. There, the ratio of communicant members to adult confirmations will be higher.

Therefore, the adult confirmation variation must be looked at in a balanced fashion, for two reasons.

District	Average Age
North Atlantic	38.3
South Central	40.4
Southeastern Wisconsin	41.2
Nebraska	42.0
Dakota-Montana	42.7
South Atlantic	43.1
Northern Wisconsin	43.4
Pacific Northwest	43.7
Minnesota	43.8
Arizona-California	44.1
Western Wisconsin	44.4
Michigan	44.6

Communicant members per adult confirmation (average over past 20 years)	
South Atlantic	20
South Central	38
Arizona- California	38
Pacific Northwest	40
Nebraska	57
North Atlantic	61
Southeastern Wisconsin	83
Michigan	88
Dakota-Montana	114
Northern Wisconsin	120
Western Wisconsin	132
Minnesota	138



First, as said previously, adult confirmations are the work of the Holy Spirit. Christians are responsible for the groundwork of getting into the community through outreach efforts, especially FRAN evangelism. But only the Spirit can move someone to see their need for a Savior and the benefits of joining a Christian church. It would be dangerous to assume that if a congregation does A, B, and C, adult confirmations will always follow. *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”*<sup>15</sup> There are examples of congregations doing aggressive outreach work in growing communities, with little visible fruit. To these believers Christ Jesus still says, *“Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your master’s happiness!”*<sup>16</sup> Such work still glorifies Christ. For when he comes again and gathers people from those communities on his left with the goats, he can say, *“I sent witnesses. You did not listen.”* It will be even more obvious that his judgment is justified. Laboring with the Word in our community is never in vain!

Related to that, the second reason we need to be balanced in how we view adult confirmations is that there are few strict correlations. As mentioned, a church located in a growing population center may have a large prospect pool. However, there are examples of the Lord producing adult confirmations through the outreach efforts of churches located in areas with plateaued or even declining populations. As mentioned, new missions have an “advantage” in the sense that they can devote a high amount of resources (human and financial) to outreach. However, there are examples of the Lord producing adult confirmations through the outreach efforts of old, established churches that are consumed with other ministries too. Therefore, we do not want to use our circumstances as an excuse to avoid evangelism. *“It won’t do any good. A church in our situation can’t reach new people.”* No! We sow the seed as often and as far as we can, without any regard to what we think about the fertility of the soil. We let the Holy Spirit produce the fruit that he sees fit.

What is a very consistent correlation between evangelism efforts and adult confirmations is when the evangelism efforts heavily utilize FRAN outreach. When congregations train members for FRAN evangelism, typically it bears fruit to a higher degree than any other type of outreach effort: mailings, canvassing, preschool, advertising, etc. Why is this? It would seem there are two reasons.

First, FRAN outreach will typically include a gospel witness effort. A newspaper ad can invite someone to visit your congregation. It probably will not proclaim law and gospel. But when a member of your church shares Christ with a friend or relative or neighbor, that is exactly what happens. And God’s Word is powerful.

Secondly, more than any other type of outreach, FRAN outreach removes an obstacle that many prospects have to their visiting your congregation – the fear of not knowing anyone. If they come because of FRAN outreach, the prospect *does* know someone.

All this simply suggests that moving forward, part of WELS’ strategy might be to encourage congregations to make FRAN evangelism as major a thrust of their ministry efforts as humanly possible.

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<sup>15</sup> John 3:8

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 25:21

## 8. The Ubiquitous Nature of These Challenges

When you hear numbers like this, it can be easy to grow discouraged. Don't. Christ is still risen. He still sits on his throne, ruling over everything for the benefit of his Church. Through Word and sacrament, he still abides with us. Moreover, the challenges we face are what Christ himself said we should expect.

### *Life in the End Times*

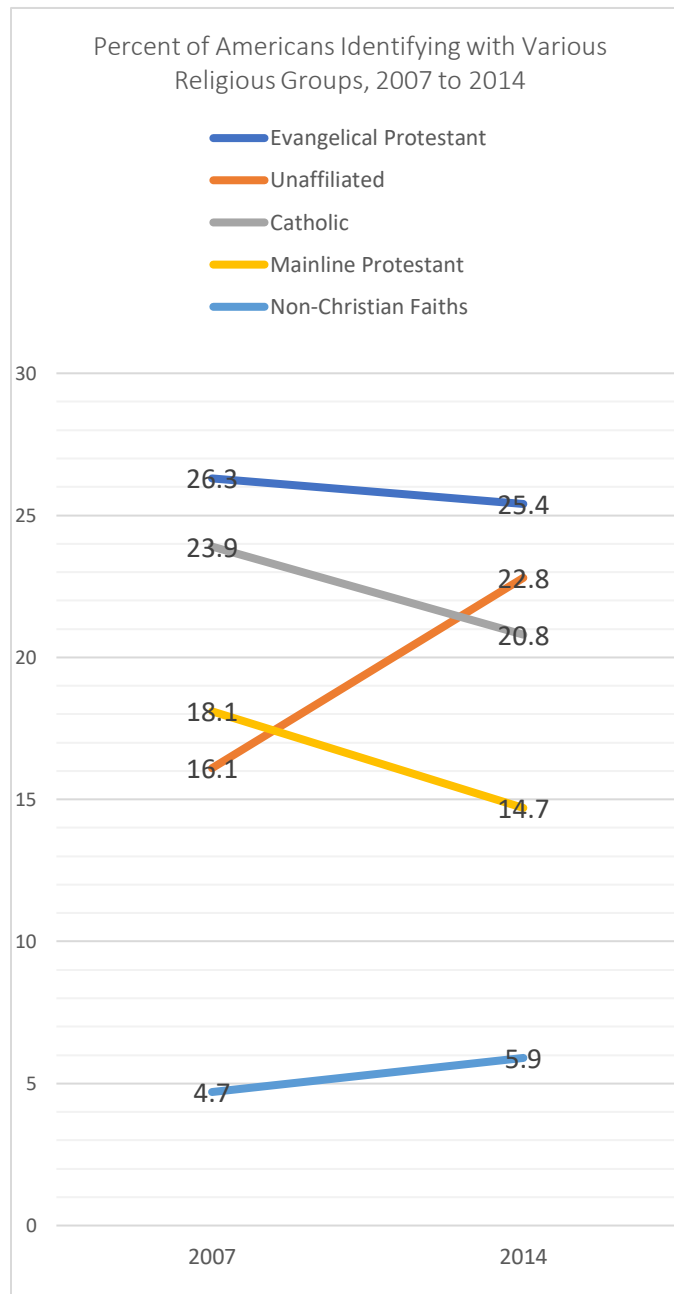
In Luke 18, Jesus tells us the story of a widow who petitioned a judge for her cause persistently and eventually received justice. Jesus told the parable to encourage unremitting prayer. However, after the parable ends, Jesus wistfully asks, *"When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"*<sup>17</sup> Jesus, in his state of humiliation, is wondering if there will be anyone praying when he comes again on Judgment Day, i.e. any believers remaining. Jesus knew what would happen in these End Times. He promised us, *"The love of most will grow cold."*<sup>18</sup>

You see it when you study Church history. The Christian churches started by Saint Paul and the other apostles are largely gone. Christians in that part of the world grew weary of the gospel, and so God took it away and gave it to others. We are about to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Go into a German church on a Sunday morning. It is almost empty. In the last century, German Lutherans grew tired of the gospel, and so God took it away and gave it to others.

Scripture tells us that this is the pattern of the End Times. After centuries of religious freedom in which Americans could worship Christ without any fear of persecution, it seems that most Americans have grown tired of the gospel too.

### *Christianity in America*

The percent of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has grown every year for the past three decades. Among the Millennials, who are now the largest generation in America, it is close to 4 out of 10 individuals who want nothing to do with church.<sup>19</sup>



<sup>17</sup> Luke 18:8

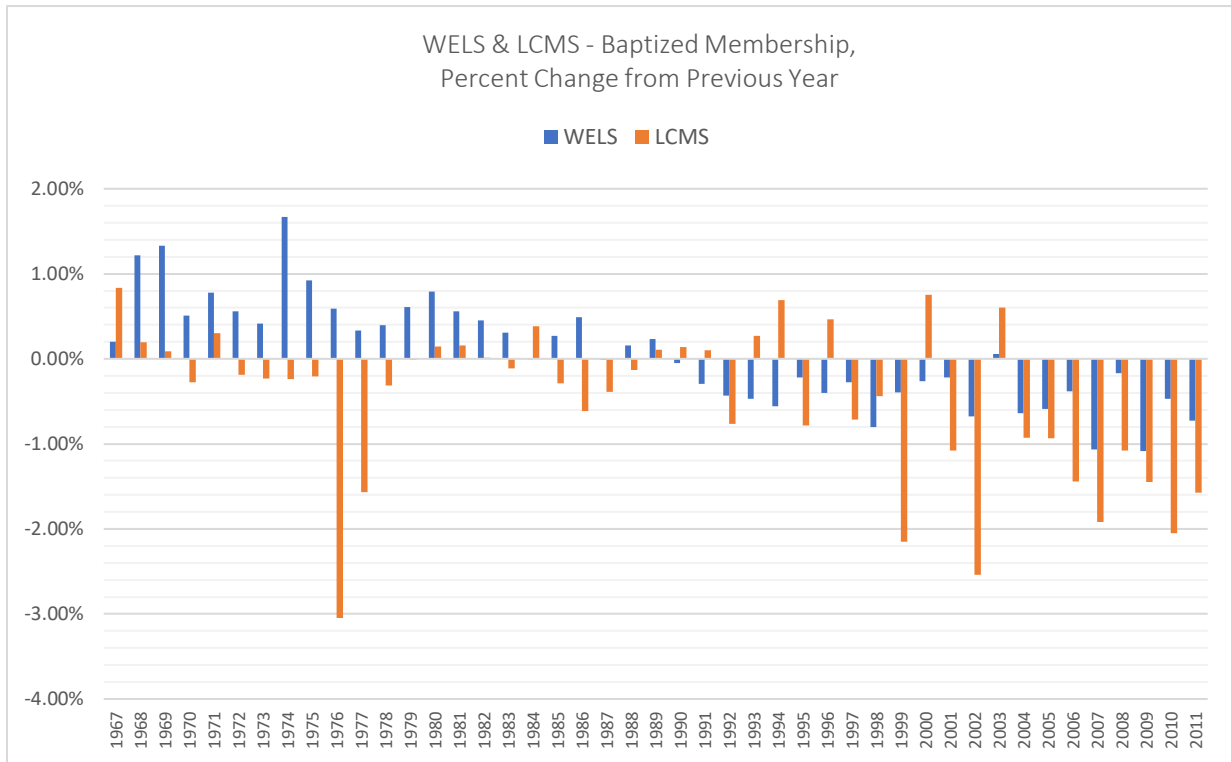
<sup>18</sup> Matthew 24:12

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

Among those Americans who *do* adhere to a church body, participation has been declining for a half-century. A recent study found that while about 40% of Americans claim they go to church, in actuality, less than 20% attend regularly.<sup>20</sup> 4 out of 5 Americans would rather stay home on Sundays.

This growing disinterest in religion has been devastating to Christian church bodies. So, what is happening to WELS is not unique.

We saw earlier that WELS' communicant membership is down 9% from our historic high. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is down 15.3% from its historic high. The LCMS loses a higher percentage of its membership annually than WELS, with rare exception.



This denominational decline is not unique to Lutheranism. The largest Presbyterian church body in America has lost almost half of its members from its historic high in the late 60's. The same is true for the Episcopal Church. The Methodist Church is down 33%. The Reformed Church in America is down over 60%.<sup>21</sup> Southern Baptists, often considered one of the most mission-minded denominations, experienced explosive growth in the 60's, 70's, and 80's, growing by about 46% in that time.<sup>22</sup> However, it has lost members for ten straight years. Recently, their average weekly worship attendance dropped 7% in one year.<sup>23</sup>

The reality is that virtually all Christian groups – Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, Catholics – are in statistical slides. What religious groups are growing? Non-Christian church bodies have increased annually for almost two decades. Muslims, for example, have more than doubled in just seven years, from 0.4% of the population to 0.9%. Hindus have almost doubled, from 0.4% to 0.7%.

However, the most rapidly rising grouping in America is the “unaffiliated.” From 2007 to 2014, the number of Americans who identify as atheist almost doubled (from 1.6% of the population to 3.1%). The same holds true for agnostics. The largest increase is with Americans who identify their religious affiliation as “nothing

<sup>20</sup> <http://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-are-all-christian-denominations-in-decline>

<sup>23</sup> <http://s3.amazonaws.com/lifewayblogs/wp-content/uploads/sites/66/2017/06/08100243/ACP2016-combined.pdf>

in particular.” Currently, almost one quarter of Americans identify as a “none,” an increase of about 10% in less than a decade.

Simply put, it would seem America has become a post-Christian society. Substantially fewer people identify themselves as being “religious” than a generation ago, and a majority of the loss of religious adherents has come in just the past decade. Among those who do call themselves religious, participation in church activity has declined precipitously in the last three decades.

*Not for Comfort, but for Caution*

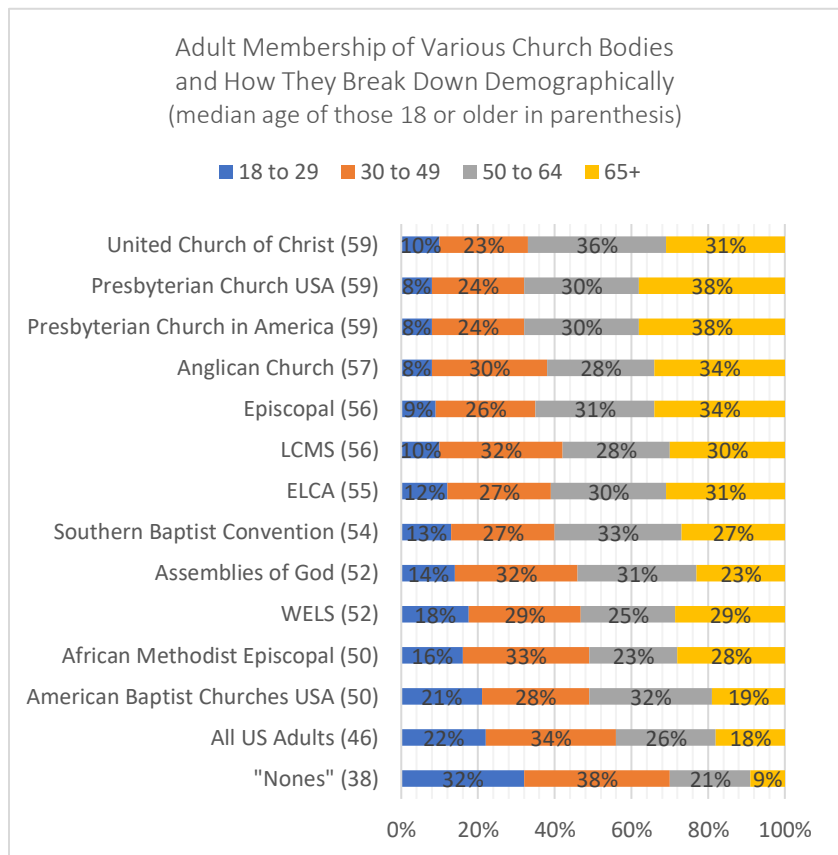
In citing the ubiquitous nature of these challenges, there is the danger of being misinterpreted, i.e. that we are citing the statistics of other church bodies as a way of comforting ourselves in the face of our own challenges. “At least we aren’t in as bad as shape as they are!” That is not why we look at other churches’ statistics.

Our comfort in the face of challenges is never found by looking at ourselves. Comfort is never achieved by comparing ourselves to others. Our comfort is found entirely in Christ’s promise, *“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*<sup>24</sup> Our comfort is found in Christ’s abiding presence, no matter what our circumstance or size. *“Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”*<sup>25</sup>

Rather, we share this information as a word of caution, lest we misdiagnose the problem and subsequently seek a false cure.

It is easy to look at our statistics and assume that WELS is doing something drastically wrong. That could lead us to look for greener grass on the other side of the fence, to look at the strategy of other church bodies and believe that if we just imitate them, things would turn around. Let us be crystal clear. There is a time and a place to look at “best practices.” (You can find many examples of “best practices” within WELS itself. More on that later.) However, when you are talking about larger groupings – synods, denominations, etc. – is the grass truly greener?

For example, take the person who laments, “WELS communicants are getting so old. What are we doing wrong?” They are correct that WELS is greying. However, so is virtually every Christian church body. The median age of WELS “adult” members (18 and older) is 52, which is younger



<sup>24</sup> Matthew 28:20

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 18:20

than the majority of Christian denominations.<sup>26</sup> The median age of WELS baptized membership is 42.6, again, younger than most other Christian church bodies.

Or consider the person who says, “WELS can’t keep its Millennials.” It is true that WELS does not retain Millennials at a rate we would like. Millennials comprise over a quarter of the American population. Yet only 19.6% of WELS members are of the Millennial generation. So when it comes to Millennials, we are behind the overall population. However, that 19.6% is almost identical to what it is among the Evangelical churches, who church “experts” will point to as doing a good job of reaching younger adults. And in the average mainline denomination, Millennials consist of only 14% of the membership. (NOTE: This is a measurement of membership, not activity. While WELS has a decent sized Millennial population, many of them are in a state of delinquency. This also is true of other Christian church bodies.)

Can we do a better job in our effort to retain Millennials? Of course. Should we be looking at “best practices” of sister churches in their efforts in this endeavor? It would be unfaithful not to do so. But is WELS substantially worse than other denominations when it comes to reaching young adults? Statistics do not support that conclusion.

### *The Holy Spirit’s Work & the Church’s Work*

Thus, it is vital that we achieve a healthy spiritual balance as we face the challenges before us, holding onto *all* the promises of God.

On the one hand, it would be a gross and evil perversion if someone were to take this information – that other Christian church bodies are in serious statistical decline – and use it to excuse inaction. *“I guess there’s not much we can do about any of this. It’s the End Times. Let’s just hang on as best we can.”* While Jesus promised that the End Times would be challenging, he also promised that, armed with the Means of Grace and his abiding presence, the Church would always have purpose and power. Motivated by the sacrifice we see in Christ’s cross, we engage in zealous ministry efforts, confident that the Holy Spirit will bless those efforts as he sees fit. To say, *“We can’t make a difference. America has become too evil,”* is to deny the power of God’s Word, which can bring life out of death.

On the other hand, it would be equally dangerous to assume that statistical growth is the inevitable result of finding the right methodology or strategy. In the church bodies listed above, there are *vastly* different ministry strategies that are utilized. Yet they are *all* struggling.

The balanced way to face this challenge is to look at all ministry and assess if we are distinguishing between the work of the Spirit and the work of the Church. We must cling tightly to the following biblical truths.

- ❖ The only thing that can build up the Church (capital C) is the gospel. It alone is *“the power of God that brings salvation.”*<sup>27</sup> And so every aspect of our ministry – worship, outreach, discipleship, elder work, youth ministry, etc. – must have sharing the message of Christ as its ultimate goal. *“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”*<sup>28</sup> This is the work of the Spirit.
- ❖ The way the gospel is unleashed is through God’s universal priesthood. Christians are to carry the light of Christ into their homes, their places of work, their neighborhoods. *“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others.”*<sup>29</sup> Laity do not consider clergy to be the gospel witnesses and themselves mere cheerleaders. Christians realize that when the Holy Spirit began to dwell within them in baptism, he set them aside not just for eternity, but also for a lofty purpose in this life. *“You will*

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<sup>26</sup> [http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/11/which-u-s-religious-groups-are-oldest-and-youngest/ft\\_16-07-15\\_rlsbyage/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/11/which-u-s-religious-groups-are-oldest-and-youngest/ft_16-07-15_rlsbyage/)

<sup>27</sup> Romans 1:16

<sup>28</sup> Romans 10:17

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 5:14-16

*receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses.*"<sup>30</sup> And so believers do not view called workers as the *doers* of all gospel ministry, but as the *equippers* who train the universal priesthood. *"Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."*<sup>31</sup> This is the work of the Church.

- ❖ The goal of our ministry efforts is simply to proclaim the gospel. How people respond to our gospel proclamation is up to the Holy Spirit. *"No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit."*<sup>32</sup> Thus, the extent of our responsibility is this: *"Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction."*<sup>33</sup> Congregational or synodical "health," therefore, is not measured by statistical growth, but by being faithful to our calling to do all we can towards that goal.

One of the catch-phrases we use in the Commission on Congregational Counseling goes like this. If we are doing all we can with the gospel, numbers don't matter. The challenges before us provide us with an opportunity to examine if we are indeed "doing all we can with the gospel." If not, and the reason is laziness or apathy, we have an opportunity to repent and rejoice in the cleansing of our baptism. If not, and the reason is disorganization or busyness, we can engage in some strategic planning, so that we might continue *"making the most of every opportunity."*<sup>34</sup>

But let us view the challenges facing not just WELS, but all American Christianity, as just that – an opportunity: to recommit ourselves to the mission Christ has given us, to trust in the power of his Word and sacraments, and to rejoice in the privilege that God has given us to play a role in his saving work.

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<sup>30</sup> Acts 1:8

<sup>31</sup> Ephesians 4:11-12

<sup>32</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:3

<sup>33</sup> 2 Timothy 4:2

<sup>34</sup> Ephesians 5:16

## 9. What We Can Do, Walking Together

WELS Congregational Services members have been examining the demographic challenges before us for approximately a year. Obviously, some of the factors contributing to WELS statistical decline are beyond our control, e.g. the rising death rate. However, there are other areas where, by God’s grace and with his aid, we might be able to increase our gospel efforts, e.g. evangelism, decreasing back door losses, etc.

Congregational Services has put together a five-year strategy that we pray helps congregations as they strive to meet these challenges. Here are some highlights.

### *Create a present-day mission emphasis.*

We mentioned how historically after periods of mission emphasis (such as the *Every State by '78* push), adult confirmations trended up. We also said an important factor in adult confirmations trending up has been an emphasis on FRAN evangelism. There is strong evidence many WELS members would be open to doing more FRAN evangelism if they had the training.

As part of the Self-Assessment and Adjustment program (SAA) offered by the CCC, congregations fill out “pulse surveys” that help the congregational counselor better understand the views of the congregation regarding ministry. With approximately 4,000 of those surveys completed, here are the results for two questions about evangelism.

*How would you rate your attempts to verbally share your faith with others?*

- *I enjoy sharing my faith and look for opportunities to do so. – 16%*
- *I try to share my faith regularly, but don’t feel very confident. – 36%*
- *Once or twice a year I might talk about Jesus with someone. – 14%*
- *I don’t try doing that. I don’t feel comfortable. – 21%*
- *Other – 13%*

*If given the opportunity to participate in training for outreach ministry, I would...*

- *Be cautiously interested – 51%*
- *Be available if asked – 19%*
- *Run the other way – 12%*
- *Sign up eagerly – 18%*

88% of WELS members responded positively when asked about receiving training for outreach ministry. And so, the Commission on Evangelism is going to create a comprehensive evangelism curriculum which congregations can utilize, offering annual evangelism training and encouragement.

We will state it again, as it cannot be stated too often. The results of increased evangelism efforts are entirely up to the Holy Spirit. However, if he would bless those efforts, it could make a substantial impact.

We talked about the ratio of communicant members to adult confirmations. Currently, the WELS average is 83 to 1. I.e. In an average year, WELS will gain 1 member by adult confirmation for every 83 communicant members. If the Holy Spirit would bless our increased efforts so that ratio was lowered, over time it would make a substantial difference. If the Holy Spirit, working through our efforts, could make that ratio 60 to 1, it would translate to over 91,000 new members over the next 20 years.

number of communicants per 1 adult confirmation	projected total adult confirmations over the next 20 years
83	63,357
60	91,203
50	112,653
40	147,093
30	211,056

Is it time for a present-day mission emphasis? Does the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation provide as good a starting point as any? There are some obvious tangents. In the Reformation, God used faithful pastors and lay people to restore the gospel to a nation that had lost it. Why not ask him to help us powerfully to prevent the gospel from slipping through the fingers of our nation? Our prayer is that the Holy Spirit would bless our increased outreach efforts according to his will.

### *Better capitalize on WELS' historic strengths.*

Part of strategic planning involves identifying what an organization does well and then trying to build upon that strength. Some areas where WELS might be able to do this especially well: youth education, compassion ministry, gospel-centered worship.

#### Early Childhood Education

WELS maintains one of the largest private school systems in the country. The greatest growth area for education in the past twenty years has been in early childhood ministries (ECMs). These ECMs not only provide the opportunity to teach children about Jesus, they also provide an excellent educational environment to prepare children for elementary school. These are blessings by themselves.

However, many congregations that started ECMs hoped that they would be a gateway for pulling new members (the parents of the ECM children) into the church. To date, for most congregations with ECMs, that has not been the case. There are approximately 400 ECMs in WELS. When you combine all the adult confirmations from the congregations that operate ECMs, approximately 80% of the adult confirmations come from 10% of those EMCs. 221 congregations with an ECM have not had an adult confirmation in the past two years. In other words, while all our ECMs do the wonderful work of sharing the gospel with children, for most congregations the ECM has not helped in gaining new members.

A common factor where the ECM *has* helped the congregation gain new members is what is often called a "harvest strategy." There is an organized system in place for regular contact between the pastor and ECM parents. There is a process of witnessing, often done in home, where the parents are shown the importance of providing not just good education to their children, but also a spiritual home.

The Commission on Lutheran Schools and Commission on Evangelism have jointly developed a program titled *Telling the Next Generation: Utilizing Our Schools for Outreach*. Among other things, it helps congregations develop a zealous harvest strategy. Our prayer is that through this program, the Holy Spirit might pull a higher percentage of the prospect parents who utilize WELS ECMs and schools into WELS membership.

#### Compassion Ministry

Through the multiple arms of the Commission on Special Ministries, WELS has established a robust compassion ministry. On a per capita basis, the number of congregations that have special ministries (for the visually or hearing impaired, for those with learning disabilities, for those in prison, etc.) is extremely high compared to other church bodies. Studies have shown these special needs individuals are underserved with the gospel. For example, one study points out that while 1 in 68 children are diagnosed with a form of autism, hardly any churches offer assistance in meeting the spiritual needs of these individuals.<sup>35</sup>

Sharing our efforts at compassion ministry with our community can benefit us in two ways. First, it can help us reach some of those underserved individuals with special needs, as well as their families. Second, it is a "draw" even to individuals who don't have special needs. According to the Barna Group, over 50% of people looking for a church home are seeking churches that offer some sort of compassion ministry. It is viewed as a tangible way of demonstrating Christian love.

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2016/september-web-exclusives/autism-friendly-church.html>



Our prayer is that by increasing the number of compassion ministries within WELS congregations and better promoting them in the communities, we might reflect Christ's love and reach more people with the gospel.

### Gospel-Centered Worship

When most people think about church, often the first thing they think about is worship. Christ-centered worship is one of the biggest strengths of confessional Lutheranism. The Commission on Worship is vested in helping our congregations build upon that strength. In 1 Corinthians 14, St. Paul tells those believers they should expect that "inquirers and unbelievers" are going to join them for worship. We want to help congregations make use of both the variety and the depth that are inherent within good liturgical worship, for the edification of life-long members and worship guests alike.

In years past, the various commissions within Congregational Services collaborated on worship/outreach programs: E12, C13, E14. These programs provided worship planning materials, outreach resources, member training, etc. The goal was to help equip WELS members to engage in FRAN evangelism, with the goal of inviting those FRAN contacts to Christmas Eve and Easter worship. In E12, together WELS congregations reached out to almost a million prospects through mass mailings, canvassing, and FRAN witnessing. We are going to produce those types of programs on an ongoing basis, making it easier for congregations to use worship as outreach.

Along those lines, we are going to produce new resources that will cut the time a pastor needs to spend in worship planning as much as possible. Our prayer is that this frees the pastor up to be out of his office, visiting those worship guests or the members who have been absent from worship.

### Focus on closing the "back door."

We mentioned that over the past thirty years, 250,000 WELS members left either to join another Christian church or by being removed from membership. We also demonstrated how this exodus occurs disproportionately among younger WELS members. The Commission on Adult Discipleship and the Commission on Youth and Family Ministry want to help churches try and address these in multiple ways.

### Addressing delinquency quickly

Two years ago, the *Peter Plan* was published. ([It can be found in the resource center of wels.net.](#)) It is a comprehensive system for dealing with delinquency. It demonstrates how to accurately track member attendance in worship. It gives suggestions of what to do when a member is absent for 4 weeks, 8 weeks, etc., up to one year. Congregations that have utilized the Peter Plan have consistently reported seeing an increase in their percentage of members in worship. Our prayer is that every congregation in WELS can adopt a similar system which allows for timely application of law and gospel to straying sheep.

### Revitalizing youth ministry

The Commission on Youth and Family Ministry has produced *Transformed*, a video-based curriculum that allows congregations to examine every aspect of youth ministry and explore new ways of meeting the spiritual needs of children. Youth ministry is also something that is high on the list of those who are looking for a church home. Our prayer is that every congregation might utilize *Transformed* in an effort to make their youth ministry as strong as possible.

Moreover, we want to better prepare our youth as they head off to college. Surveys have shown that about 88% of our youth have critical doubts about faith issues *before* they go to college. When children are sent off to public college without being prepared for the secular humanist worldview they will likely experience there, there is a potential for a spiritual crisis. We want to develop resources that better help congregations and parents inoculate their children with the truth of God's Word. Our prayer is that through this effort, the Holy Spirit would help us retain more of our college-aged members.

## Producing resources for Millennial outreach and retention

Several different WELS organizations have been studying Millennials and their worldviews. We want to bring those groups together to compile a “best practices” list in reaching this demographic. We would like this task force to develop resources that would not only help congregations to retain young adults, but also to use those young adults to reach other Millennials within the community.

## Creating stronger inter-congregation connectivity

One of the trends in Christianity today is the rising popularity of smaller churches. Many people, instead of being part of a massive organization, prefer to be part of something more intimate. Moreover, people – especially Millennials – are looking for more than “a friendly church.” They seek a church of friends. Scripture speaks of church members as more than that - as family. We are going to develop Bible studies and programs that, God-willing, lead congregation members to serve other members in the same ways and with the same intensity that they would love and serve biological family. Our prayer is that through greater connectivity with the congregation, back-door losses would be diminished.

## *Strive at strengthening the family.*

### Spiritual growth within the family

Studies have shown that the greatest factor in retaining young church members is the spiritual growth activity that takes place within the family. For example, when a father attends church regularly, the retention rate for children rises 75%. When family devotions are held regularly (It need not necessarily be daily.) the retention rate is 80% higher than average.

We want to produce resources that help train families how to grow together spiritually. *Teach [God’s Word] to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.*<sup>36</sup> Our prayer is that as more families would utilize these resources, the Holy Spirit would work through them to lead our younger members to see the need to be part of a larger spiritual family, helping with member retention.

### The blessing of children

We also want to produce resources that help congregations stress the blessing of children. Scripture does not prescribe that married couples have lots of children. However, it clearly states that children are one of the goals of marriage, and that being a Christian parent is one of life’s greatest privileges. We think it is unrealistic to expect WELS’ baptismal rate to jump drastically. We do pray that through efforts in this area, the Holy Spirit enables the decline in baptisms to level off.

## *Helping aging, rural congregations prayerfully work through their options.*

As mentioned, there are many WELS congregations that are declining in membership, yet have a sparse population/mission field around them. We will produce resources that allow circuit pastors to work with those congregations in considering their options. It might be that some merge or operate as a multi-site situation. It might be that a cluster of congregations sells off its property and then donates the proceeds to WELS Board for Home Missions (BHM), so that the district mission board might attempt a new start in proximity of where that cluster was located. These are obviously complex issues, both practically and emotionally. We want to help God’s people work through those issues in a way that gives Christ glory.

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<sup>36</sup> Deuteronomy 11:19

## *Assist congregations with self-assessment and planning.*

All these things listed above require careful planning to take place. We will help congregations in that effort. This may happen through the CCC's Self-Assessment and Adjustment program. However, the CCC is also considering ways to help congregations do this on their own or with the assistance of a circuit pastor. For example, one CCC objective for the second half of this biennium is to prepare a series of videos and materials that would walk congregations through the strategic planning process over a three-month period. Instead of having a CCC counselor on-site, a congregation could utilize these materials in a way that fits their schedule.

There are two areas where congregations have often requested help with planning that will receive special focus: cross-cultural ministry and whole-life stewardship.

### Cross-Cultural Ministry

The church bodies that are avoiding the aging trend mentioned previously tend to have one thing in common – some degree of ethnic diversity. There are different commissions and groups within WELS that look at cross-cultural ministry, including WELS Board for Home Missions, the Commission on Evangelism, etc. We would like to facilitate cooperation among them, compiling “best practices” in conducting cross-cultural ministry, and producing resources that help congregations make plans for such efforts. We want to help congregations attempt to reach individuals from “*every nation, tribe, people and language.*” Our prayer is that every congregation located in a demographic that would allow for cross-cultural ministry would go through a process of strategic planning to a) determine the feasibility of such an effort and, if feasible, b) to set three-year objectives and produce an action plan for starting that ministry.

### Whole-life Stewardship

A problem CCC's counselors consistently identify within congregations is a lack of volunteerism. To increase ministry efforts as outlined above will require an increase in volunteerism. Therefore, we will produce a whole-life stewardship curriculum with multiple classes that rotate annually. It will help members plan to use 100% of both their financial resources and their time to God's glory. Our prayer is that through these studies, the Holy Spirit would increase volunteerism within our congregations, allowing for the expansion of ministry efforts.

## Two promises

First, three times a year the members of Congregational Services will produce video updates about the progress of our efforts in achieving these prayerful goals. They will also tell you what resources are ready and where you can get them. Our prayer is that in five years, there will be a central online location that WELS churches access on a weekly basis for assistance with their ministry efforts.

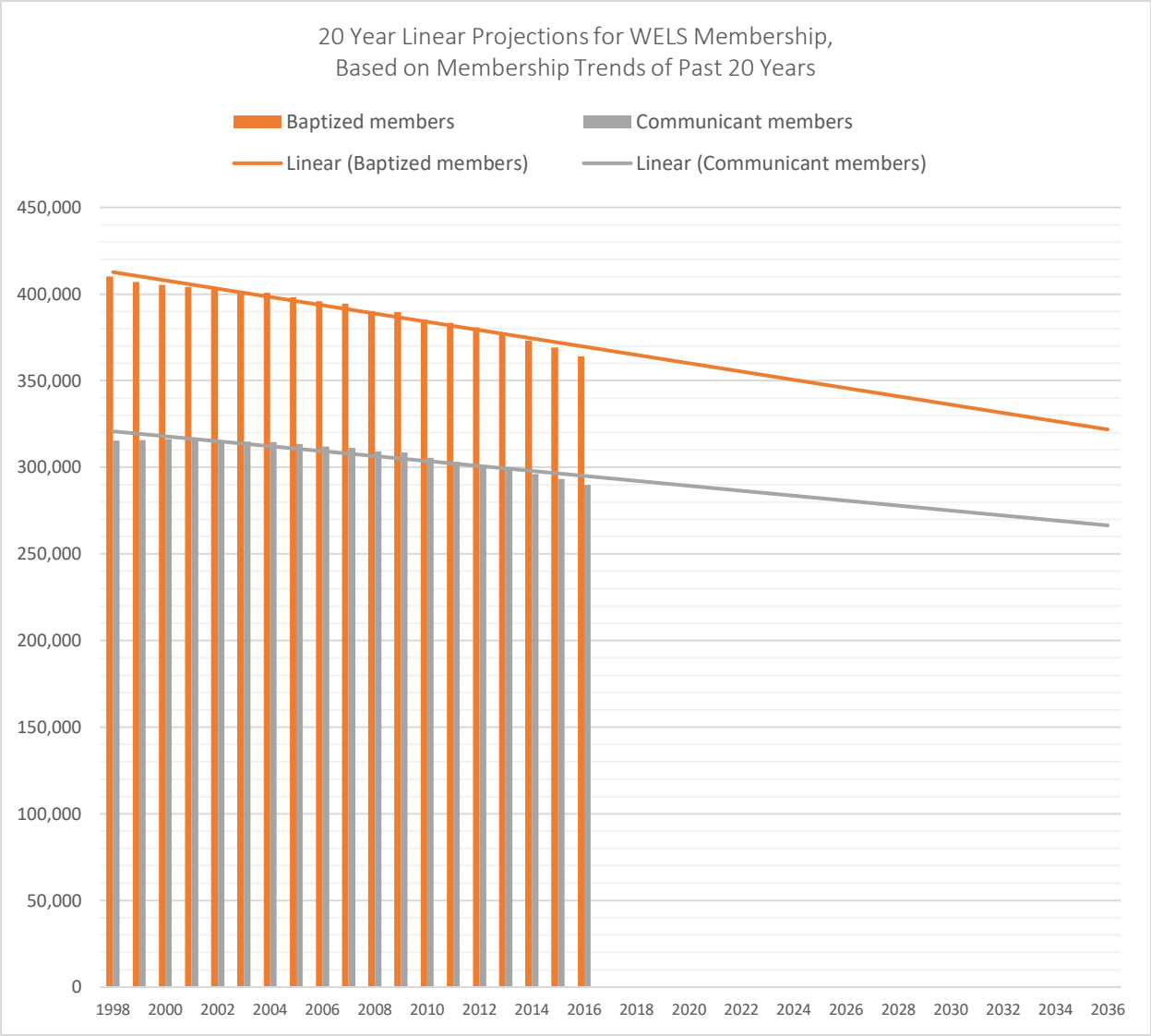
Second, as much as humanly possible, these resources will not be fee based, but available online for free. You support WELS generously through your Congregation Mission Offering (CMO). WELS Congregational Services wants to support you as you strive to carry the gospel to your people and your community with all joy and zeal.

# 10. Projections / Forecasting

Projections/forecasting is necessary for strategic planning. For this report, the only thing we will focus on is WELS membership. This is done with the understanding that these numbers will have implications in countless other areas: CMO projections, worker training numbers, etc. We entrust the consideration of those implications to the appropriate leadership groups within our church body.

## Linear projection

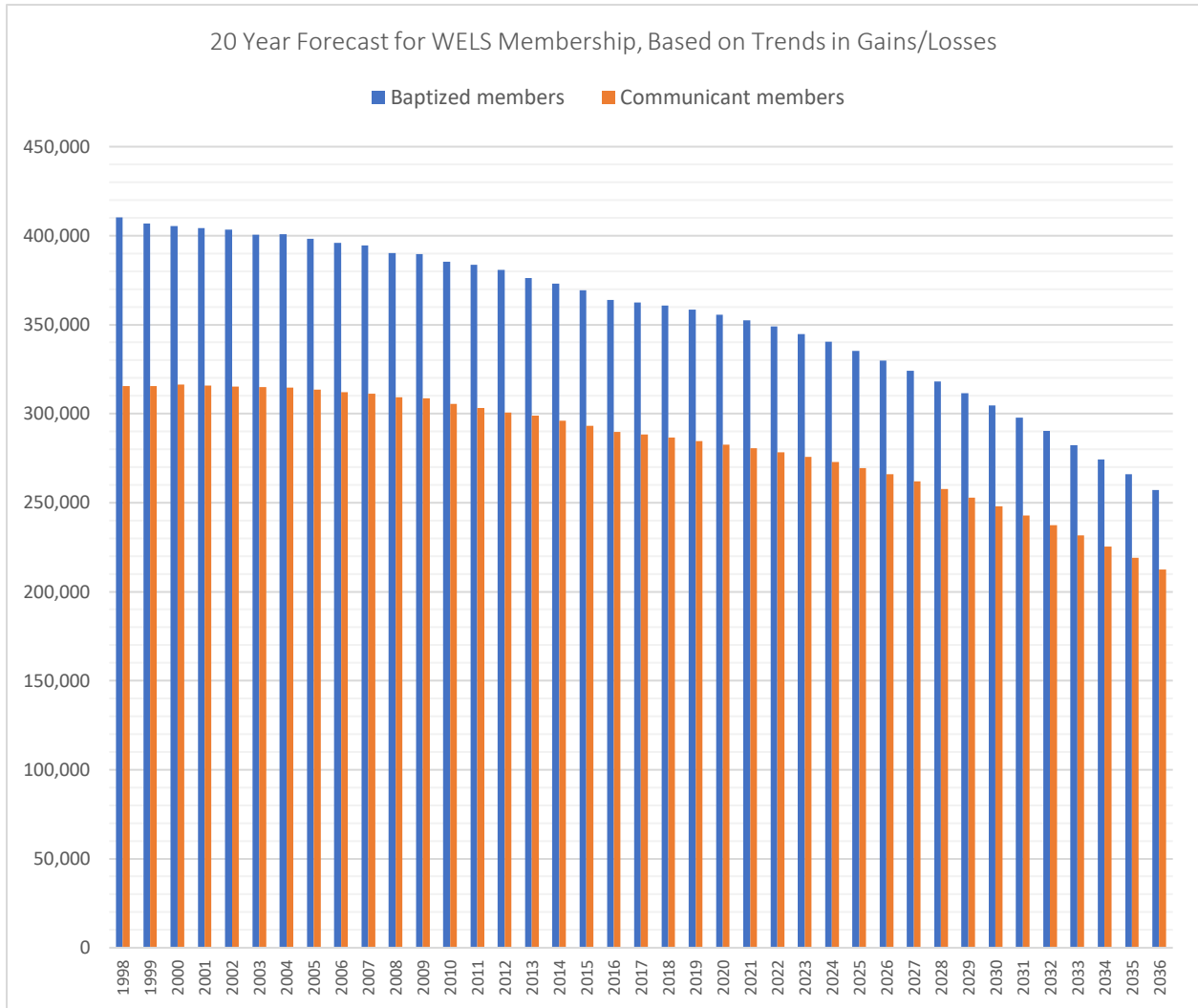
The following graph provides the linear projection of WELS membership for the next 20 years. It simply takes the total membership trends from the past 20 years and extrapolates them into the future.



In this projection, in 20 years WELS would have a baptized membership of approximately 321,000 souls, an 11.8% decline. It would have a communicant membership of approximately 268,000 communicants, a 7.5% decline. A linear projection provides a “best-case scenario” if nothing were to change.

Forecast based on current trends

This graph gives the projections for WELS membership over the next 20 years based on the trends we have discussed in various gains/losses categories: the declining baptismal rate, the slightly rising rate of removals, the more rapidly rising rate of communicant deaths, and the more recent decline in adult confirmations. The projections here assume those trends in gains/losses continue unabated.



Going out ten years, to 2026, we forecast that WELS would have a baptized membership of about 329,948 souls, down 34,049 (a 9.35% decline in a decade). In 2026, WELS would have a communicant membership of 265,883, down 23,980 from current numbers (an 8.27% decline in a decade).

If these trends would continue for two decades, in 2036 WELS would have a baptized membership of 257,220, a loss of 106,777 members from WELS' current baptized membership (a 29.33% decline). At that time, WELS would have a communicant membership of 212,421 members, down 77,442 from the current membership (a 26.71% decline).

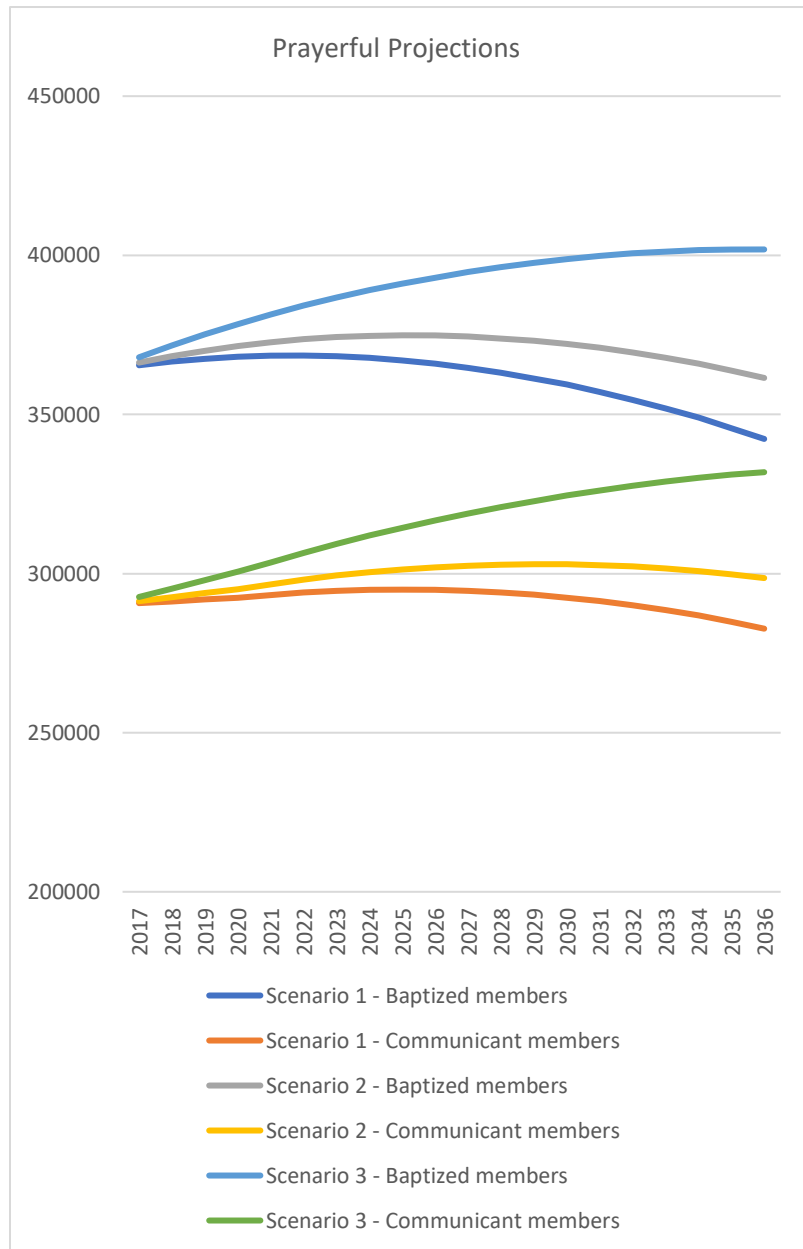
Because this forecast considers the increases and decreases of various trends, rather than just overall population, it represents a more probable forecast than the linear projection. Therefore, we simply note that that if the downward trend in adult confirmations continues while 1) birth rates remain low, 2) the death rate for WELS members rises, and 3) removals continue at around a 2% rate, it results in a prolonged period of fairly steep statistical decline.

## Prayerful Projections: What *Could* Happen

Let us say it one last time. Our only job is to proclaim the gospel as zealously as we can. The Holy Spirit produces the results when and where he sees fit. Moreover, our satisfaction in ministry comes only from serving Christ, *not* by achieving numerical success. If we work hard yet statistically we continue to decline, it still brings glory to Christ and joy to us.

However, it is not improper to pray that through our best efforts, the Holy Spirit would indeed reach more souls for Christ. The following projections are a representation of what would be feasible if that were to happen. This is no “theology of glory,” where we are trying to define “success” in worldly terms. Again, “if we’re doing all we can with the gospel, numbers don’t matter.” Rather, this is simply a snapshot of what is feasible if we were able, walking together, to increase our ministry efforts, and if the Holy Spirit saw fit to bless those efforts according to our prayers.

There are three scenarios. For each, we have left the increasing death rate and the declining birth rate untouched. What we have assumed is that through our gospel efforts, the Holy Spirit produces statistical blessings in three other areas: adult confirmations, losses to other Christian congregations, and removals.



### Scenario 1

In scenario 1, we pray that over the next 5 years, WELS’ ratio of communicant members to adult confirmations improves from 83 to 1 to 60 to 1. We pray that over the next five years, the losses of members to other Christian church bodies declines 15%. And we pray that over the next five years, the losses of members due to removals declines 20%.

If that were to happen, over the next decade, WELS would experience slight growth in most years. Eventually, the increase in communicant deaths would result in membership trending down again, though at a much slower rate.

In scenario 1, WELS would have about 342,295 baptized members in 2036, a decline of 21,702 souls (5.96% of current baptized membership). However, remember, if trends stayed static, that decline would be almost 107,000 souls, closer to a 29% loss.

In scenario 1, our communicant membership would be about 282,678 in 2036, a decline of 7,185 members (2.48%). We said that if trends stayed static, communicant membership in 2036 would be approximately 212,421, a loss of over 77,000 members (26.71%).

In summary, in scenario 1, WELS still declines statistically, but at a substantially reduced rate. As the death rate declines two decades out, WELS population would be stable under this scenario.

## **Scenario 2**

With this scenario, we are a bit more optimistic. In scenario 2, we pray that over the next 5 years, WELS' ratio of communicant members to adult confirmations improves from 83 to 1 to 55 to 1. We pray that over the next five years, the losses of members to other Christian church bodies declines 20%. And we pray that over the next five years, the losses of members due to removals declines 25%.

If those were all to occur, in 2036 WELS would have a baptized membership of 361,446. That is a loss of 2,531 souls from where we are today, 0.7%. In scenario 2, WELS communicant membership would be 298,511. That is an increase of 8,648 souls from where we are today, or 2.98%.

In summary, in scenario 2, WELS would grow over the next decade. As communicant death rates continued to rise, we'd then lose members for about a decade, but at a rate that would average only around 1200 per year. But eventually the death rate would flatten out, and WELS would grow gradually.

## **Scenario 3**

This is the "rosiest" of scenarios. However, it is not pie-in-the-sky. The numbers we have used represent improvements *less* than what we have seen occur in individual congregations. So, they are feasible. But again, it would be predicated upon a) increased gospel efforts and b) the Holy Spirit blessing those efforts with numeric success, if he saw fit.

In scenario 3, we pray that over the next 5 years, WELS' ratio of communicant members to adult confirmations improves from 83 to 1 to 45 to 1. We pray that over the next five years, the losses of members to other Christian church bodies declines 20%. And we pray that over the next five years, the losses of members due to removals declines 33%.

If the Holy Spirit were to allow that to happen, it would mean in 2036, WELS would have a baptized membership of 401,837 souls. That is 37,840 more than we have currently, representing a 10.4% increase. WELS would have 331,851 communicants. That is 41,988 more than we have currently, representing a 14.49% increase.

## **In any scenario...**

We need to understand that if none of those scenarios were realized, the Holy Spirit would *still* have blessed us in our gospel efforts. There would be untold blessings for our faith as we struggled together in the spiritual battle against the Evil One. Ministry comes with crosses, and we would be blessed to have carried some, for under the cross, we are forced to rely entirely on Christ and his strength.

We will certainly pray that the Holy Spirit blesses our efforts with the type of growth described above. But we will end every one of those prayers as our Savior taught: "*Your will be done.*"

## Epilogue: a Pentecost Parallel<sup>37</sup>

### **Acts 2:38-41**

<sup>38</sup> Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

<sup>40</sup> With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." <sup>41</sup> Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

"...about three thousand..." It seems like an odd way to summarize that day. Certainly, the Holy Spirit knows the exact number. Why not just provide it?

Because the numbers are never the most important thing. Now, numbers aren't meaningless. So, you take church attendance and publish it in the bulletin, because numbers aren't meaningless. You have a budget, because numbers aren't meaningless. Scripture says, "about three thousand," because numbers aren't meaningless. Looking at numbers can be beneficial. But the numbers are never the most important thing.

What is? "...the name of Jesus Christ..." "...the forgiveness of your sins..." "The promise... for you and your children..."

On Pentecost, God kept a promise to send his Spirit with power upon his disciples. Before that day, they were perfectly happy to sit behind closed doors, talking about Christ with fellow believers. But on that day, empowered and emboldened by the Spirit, they marched into the center of the city where their leader had been killed just weeks earlier, and they "pleaded" with the people to recognize their sin and their Savior. And "about three thousand were added to their number that day."

"About three thousand." It sounds like a lot. You can argue that it's not. Luke tells us, "There were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven."<sup>38</sup> Historians report that for the Festival of Pentecost, one of the three "traveling festivals" for devout Jews, the population of Jerusalem would swell to over a million people. These were pious, "God-fearing" individuals. Luke also tells us that the commotion of that day brought together a massive crowd. As the disciples began talking in languages they had never learned, it created a buzz. Yet of these million devout souls who were looking for a messiah, who had even witnessed a miracle, how many believed? "About three thousand." It's really not that big a number, given the circumstances. But the numbers are never the most important thing.

"About three thousand." You could also argue that is a massive number. Because you're not talking about the attendance at a baseball game or the admissions to an amusement park. You are talking about people who were snatched from the flames of hell and made heirs of the Kingdom. You're talking about three thousand souls who escaped a death worse than physical, and who gained a life that is eternal. Three thousand *saved*. That's a massive number. If only that could happen every day!

Don't you think it does? Don't you think that around the world, through the work of the Holy Christian Church, Pentecost still plays out every day? 361,000 babies are born each day around the world. If 0.8% of them are baptized, that's 3000 a day.

The reality is that while Christianity in America is in decline, in much of the world – China, India, etc. – it is advancing rapidly. And your church body plays its part in that! Look at the work that is being done through our Board for World Missions, or through "friendly counselors" to foreign church bodies, or through our

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<sup>37</sup> Some of the thoughts about the Day of Pentecost in this section come from a sermon I heard Pastor Jonathan Schroeder of Faith Lutheran in Sharpsburg, GA preach at a South Atlantic District conference. It was over a decade ago, but I still remember the wonderful message vividly.

<sup>38</sup> Acts 2:5



Multi-Language Publications. The reality is that while WELS membership numbers might be down, our church body is reaching more people with the gospel than we ever have in history. But even then, the numbers are never the most important thing. We simply give thanks to our gracious God that even in hard times, he has given us the resources and ability to take part in his saving work in substantial ways.

This report is full of numbers. That's good. Numbers aren't meaningless. "...about three thousand..." Numbers do matter. But the numbers are never the most important thing.

The goal in sharing these numbers is simply to provide information, so that by putting our collective heads together, we might be good stewards. Let us consider how our congregations and synod can give our best to the God who gave us his Best.

Let us, like those disciples on the Day of Pentecost, come out of the room where we talk about Jesus only with our fellow believers and go into our community and tell all about "*the promise... for you and your children.*"

Let us set aside all fear, all timidity. For when we were baptized, the Holy Spirit was poured out on us in abundance too.

"...about three thousand..." So, we shall always look at the numbers. We will use them to plan. But we will not worry about them. Because the numbers are never the most important thing. Instead, we will simply throw ourselves into gospel ministry with complete abandon, knowing that a time of eternal rest is coming soon.

God grant that among us all.

Respectfully submitted,

Jonathan Hein

Director, WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling