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Demography and Mission in the LCMS: A Response to *Journal of Lutheran Mission*, December 2016

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Abstract: This essay offers both methodological and missiological responses to demographic studies published in the December 2016 issue of the *Journal of Lutheran Mission*. Central to those studies was the correlation between membership in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) and birth rates among white Americans, both to explain declining LCMS membership and as the basis for “pronatalist” recommendations to reverse that trend. But the correlation deserves to be scrutinized, and the arguments proposed must be examined critically. In particular, LCMS choices and policies about mission must focus on seeking and saving the lost, not on denominational survival.

The LCMS, like many other Protestant denominations in the United States, has been declining in membership for decades, after a membership peak in the 1970s. The causes, implications, and meaning of that decline have also been long debated, and the statistical data have occasionally been mined for evidence in support of (or in opposition to) a range of theological, missiological, liturgical, and even political proposals. Some have taken the Synod’s membership losses as *prima facie* evidence that confessional Lutherans lack evangelistic zeal. Others have blamed the waning numbers on theological disunity or liturgical confusion.

In an effort to understand what drives the statistical trends, the Synod’s Office of National Mission commissioned studies from demographers George Hawley and Ryan C. MacPherson. The December 2016 issue of the *Journal of Lutheran Mission*



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(JLM) is devoted to the publication of these studies. The Hawley study as published includes two parts, “A District-Level Examination of Demographic Trends and Membership Trends within LCMS Districts” and a much longer piece entitled “The LCMS in the Face of Demographic and Social Change: A Social Science Perspective.” The MacPherson study is entitled “Generational Generosity: Handing Down Our Faith to Our Children and Our Children’s Children.” Already prior to publication, some version of the conclusions of the studies was informing public pronouncements and policy choices of the Synod’s leadership,¹ and for that reason it is to be applauded that the studies themselves are now available for wider study and discussion.

This short paper is intended as a contribution to that discussion. In what follows I propose to do two things. First, it is necessary to highlight some significant implications of both the data and the recommendations attached to them, because these studies are currently being used to shape policies and priorities of the LCMS and therefore need to be more widely understood and discussed. I think it is appropriate to raise a few methodological considerations that may temper our acceptance and use of the studies’ results. I am not a demographer, and I may be wrong in my understanding of the data and methodology—but, of course, the studies are not written only for professional demographers; and if I am wrong in my doubts, it will nevertheless be helpful if my misunderstandings can be corrected. And secondly, I will offer some theological and missiological analysis in response to the studies and the direction in which they point us.

Demographic and Statistical Considerations

It is not my purpose here to offer a technical review of the data and methodology of the studies in this Special Issue of JLM. Such a review might be necessary, but should be left to those with the scientific and statistical expertise appropriate to the task.² The non-expert may be occasionally either distracted or impressed by some technical jargon in the studies,³ but in general the studies are clearly aimed at an audience of non-specialists and thus invite reflection and response from non-specialists.

There can be little argument with the data, since both Hawley and MacPherson seem to have taken care to draw on the best numerical demographic data available, both from the U. S. Census Bureau and from the Association of Religious Data Archives. In other words, these studies are not simply sifting the self-reported figures from the LCMS and its districts and congregations, which may or may not be reliable. However, analyzing data at the synod, district, and county level may not provide the necessary level of detail. District or synod statistics easily mask significant variables at the congregational level. The scale of analysis provided in these studies cannot help us distinguish between a congregation that is thriving and

another that is in some stage of decline or death. In the present studies, those two congregations look exactly the same if they are located in the same district and county; their very different statistics are aggregated and correlated with a county-wide birth rate. The crucial details that distinguish the two disappear. One must keep in mind, when reflecting on the LCMS membership statistics at the synod or district level, that it is very easy to miss entirely important particularities of thriving or failing congregations.

Accepting the basic accuracy but limited detail of the data, one initial impression of the analysis in these studies is that they might exhibit some kind of confirmation bias. Simply put, you find what you are looking for. If you ask systematic theologians to consider the contemporary situation in the LCMS, you are likely to get answers that point to doctrinal issues; and if you commission demographers to study membership trends, you can expect that they will discover that those trends are driven by demographic factors. Hawley states plainly at the outset:

This paper was created with the expectation that family formation patterns within these various districts are predictors of the denomination's health—that is, in places with high rates of marriage and childbirth, the LCMS is suffering a less severe decline. The forthcoming results provide confirmation of this suspicion, with some caveats. (2)

Of course, it could be argued that if one sets out with the expectation of finding a correlation between family formation patterns and LCMS membership, it is not surprising that one finds evidence to confirm such a correlation. This does not make the conclusion invalid, but it should prompt the reader to ask what could have been found if the study had proceeded with different expectations.

It should be noted that the fundamental correlation that lies at the heart of these studies—a connection between declining birth rates and the decline in LCMS membership—is actually not very strong. Hawley states that the Pearson's R coefficient for correlation between LCMS membership change and the white birth rate as 0.50, which (if I understand his own explanation correctly) falls at the lower limit of a "moderate" correlation (4). This may suggest that we should not be overly confident about the conclusions or recommendations that develop from this moderate correlation.

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And apart from the lingering question about that basic correlation, there is an even more important question about causality. However, correlation does not prove causation. Even a stronger correlation than the one that is documented would not

provide evidence that the declining birth rates *caused* declining membership. The direction of causality might even run in the opposite direction, as Hawley hints when he admits that “the decline in church membership and religious faith may be driving down marriage and fertility rates” (20). Other factors entirely, which are not examined in the studies, could be playing the decisive role in both trends. The data provided, and the methods of analysis applied, simply do not establish “cause” of events or trends. But this important distinction seems to be glossed over repeatedly in the studies. Hawley explains, “This paper examines one of the most important *causes* of the LCMS’s decline: low fertility among its adherents” (7, emphasis added), but his assumption may beg the question by assuming causation that remains to be proven. MacPherson asserts that “One factor has overpowered all other factors in the synod’s numerical decline: a plummeting birth rate” (87), when the evidence of correlation does not support such dogmatic certainty. Similar assertions that birth rates cause changes in LCMS membership are repeated frequently. MacPherson also quotes the “conclusion” of the LCMS president, “The single most significant factor *causing* our decline has been that fact that we have largely adopted the prevailing cultural attitudes toward marriage and reproduction. Our young people are marrying later, if at all, and are having far fewer children” (88, emphasis added).⁴ But such a statement remains a bare assertion, not a fact, because it cannot be proven by the data or methods employed here.

The focus on birth rates and family formation is central throughout the studies, and this focus points us repeatedly and emphatically to the question of how to increase fertility of LCMS women. But that focus itself is based on the assumption that “LCMS affiliation tends to be an inherited trait” (4). That assumption was probably a useful starting point in the past (note the study’s aside that the relationship between birth rates and LCMS adherence was higher in the 1970s than in more recent data). But it is no longer a valid assumption, because religion is no longer an inherited trait. There is significant recent research that suggests religious affiliation is no longer an inherited trait in the same way. On the contrary, more than half of Americans today have changed their religious affiliation.⁵ The assumption that people will remain in the religious tradition into which they are born cannot form the core of our thinking about how to bring the Gospel to unbelievers.

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The dubious assumption that religious affiliation is (still today) primarily an inherited trait is connected to another dubious assumption in the studies: namely that

the LCMS is—and will remain—identified with a particular ethnic group. In contemporary America, “our” ethnic group has a generally low birth rate; as a result, the LCMS does not benefit from the relatively high birth rate in America as a whole, because immigrants have higher birth rates than the general population (9). The German roots of LCMS history are obvious and well-known, but there is no reason to celebrate such ethnic identification or to use it as a basis for planning and policies. The Hawley study seems to do exactly that when it suggests that LCMS efforts should be concentrated mostly in counties populated by white German Americans (perhaps especially if they are rural and middle class). If we accept it as normal that the LCMS is a tribal church body for “people like us,” we will prioritize familiar places and people⁶ in our outreach efforts, at the expense of those we do not know well. We will privilege (perhaps unconsciously) those practices or structures that serve to reinforce or perpetuate a German American ethnic identity, when we should instead look for ways to remove cultural obstacles that make it needlessly difficult for people to find their way into our churches.

Women readers (and not only women) may be forgiven for detecting a patronizing view of women throughout the studies. Consistently, women are valued primarily as fertility units, rather than for their intelligence, education, skills, wisdom, faith, discernment, etc. And lower fertility rates are generally seen as resulting from women’s attitudes and choices, which run counter to an imagined “ideal”⁷. One may, without caricature, summarize the view of women and their education in these studies thus: *The overeducated white women of the LCMS are responsible for the denomination’s numerical decline. Our women get too much education*⁸, *which leads them to want to work professionally,*⁹ *raises their aspirations for material prosperity,*¹⁰ *burdens them with student debt,*¹¹ *makes them too persnickety in their choice of husbands,*¹² *and delays their proper Christian work of child-bearing.*¹³ The argument always tends in the direction of maximizing fertility, and other contributions of women to society and to the church are simply not considered: “the later a woman chooses to become a mother, the fewer children she will be physically capable of bearing” (25).

An alarming bias against higher education makes an appearance, especially toward women (who, after all, do not need a professional education for their Christian fertility duties), but it may apply also to men. The suggestion that the Concordia University System be reorganized to focus primarily on vocational training for middle-class jobs as quickly as possible should be viewed with either alarm or amusement—but it is a logical corollary of the sustained focus on having more babies: “The earlier a young person completes his or her education and has established a career, the better that person’s long-term fertility prospects” (81). By this theory, education in the liberal arts tradition needlessly delays procreation and leads to jobs that pay too little for a man to support his (growing) family on his income alone. While higher salaries and wages (at least for men) might be a policy

for which the LCMS could lobby and advocate at state and national levels, the priority is placed on raising *clergy* salaries to ensure that pastors and other (male) church workers can support their wives and children on that salary alone (105).

Missiological Analysis and Response

If we turn from questions of the demographic data and analysis provided in these studies and undertake a different kind of analysis from a theological and missiological perspective, it is difficult to know where to start. The reason is that the reports, though comprising a special issue of the *Journal of Lutheran Mission*, actually have almost nothing to do with *mission* at all. These studies, with all the data, literature review, and analysis, are ultimately all about us and our denomination. A study of “LCMS adherents” (where they live, how old they are, factors that affect their fertility rates, etc.) *cannot* be the basis for understanding how we can effectively bring the Gospel to others. A program that aims directly at denominational survival is not a program that embraces or embodies the mission of God.

Of course, from time to time, the authors note that the LCMS should also take some steps to bring new members into the church from outside, but such comments are few and cursory, and the literature cited is not current.¹⁴ As anyone seriously involved in the mission of the church knows acutely, there is a fundamental difference between “increasing fertility,” “retaining members,” and “making disciples.” Some careful attention to the former may be needed as we walk together as a church body, but our Lord commissions us to busy ourselves with the latter until He returns.

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The studies here considered exhibit the difficulty of keeping that proper focus on leading others to become followers of Jesus (just as we ourselves are being led to follow that same Jesus) when the scale of our attention is exclusively denominational. While the studies constantly refer to “LCMS adherents,” the fact is that almost no one “joins” the LCMS or a district of the LCMS. People join congregations, if/when/because they hear there the Gospel by which the Holy Spirit calls, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps them in the true faith. In a congregation, we confess and are forgiven; we taste and see that the Lord is good; we rub shoulders with other sinner-saints who encourage us, forgive us, teach us (and we them). For most of us, the denomination *per se* is simply not the locus of our faith formation.

The studies in the JLM Special Issue generally miss this fact, and as a result the view they offer (even if technically accurate) is inevitably and disastrously incomplete. This is a point at which the limitations of the data collide with the realities of the church: the data are analyzed at the level of districts and counties,¹⁵ but even such a picture is too coarse to let us see the crucial, local specifics that have to be at the center of effective local responses to the mission challenges that confront the church today. This certainly does not mean that the high-level statistical analysis of aggregate district and national data is invalid, but only that such data and analysis cannot be sufficient either to understand a specific local community or to guide a specific local ministry. The LCMS as a denomination does not reach the lost. People who do not know or trust Jesus will probably not hear the Gospel from a district office. Local congregations, in all their bewildering variety and individual uniqueness, are the primary agents in communicating Christ to their neighbors so that they, too, may hear the Gospel promise and be drawn into a life of faith in Jesus. Research that aims at helping non-Christians to hear the Gospel must focus on congregations, not on the denomination.

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The JLM studies not only focus on the denomination, they are designed and presented as data and recommendations to ensure the *survival* of the denomination. “Encouraging marriage and parenthood in the context of marriage is critical for the *survival of the church*” (37, emphasis added). If true, that is an alarming warning. But it is true, even humanly speaking, only if the survival of *the church* is equated with the survival of *the LCMS* or any other denomination or institution. Something like that equation lurks in the background of many statements in this Special Issue.¹⁶ But the equation is not true. The LCMS, or any other denomination, is not coterminous with the kingdom of God. It is no good quoting biblical promises about the permanence of Christ’s Church in order to prop up unconditional confidence in the human institution called the LCMS. Christ’s Church was alive and well in the world long before the LCMS was founded in 1847, and it will endure even if the LCMS disappears everywhere except in a few dusty files in the archives. The Lord’s promise of the indomitable, hell-defying survival of the Christian Church is no assurance of the permanence of our denomination. The “survival of the Church” depends on the Lord’s own word and promise, not on our fertility, and not on any strategy of ours to shore up our organization.

And what if our aim is not “the survival of the Church”? The New Testament view seems to be that the question of our “survival” has been settled—in a startling and wonderful way. We have already *died* and the only life we have is *Christ* (Rom 6:8; 2 Cor 5:14; Col 3:3; Gal 2:20). Now we want others to share that same life in Christ too. The question now is, with the question of our survival settled, what our

posture in the world would look like if we (as a denomination, or a district, or even a congregation) stop worrying so much about our own survival and start worrying much more about the survival of people around us who do not yet know and trust Jesus. What decisions will we make differently than we do now? For that matter, how would we *use* differently what we have and what we know—including what we know about demographics? For example, to return to just one point that was touched on previously, perhaps our real demographic problem is not that too many of our women have too much education and too few babies, but that we simply do not have enough of those women who *do* have more babies: the poor, the uneducated, non-white, non-Anglo women (and men).

If we want to document decline, we should look at ourselves. If we want to seek and save the lost, we should look at them—and at Christ, because He is in that business (Lk 19:10).

In the end, one finishes the whole “special issue” with a gaping, unanswered question: *What about the lost?* The copious data and capable methodology presented in these helpful studies do not provide us with an answer to this question. Answers we must seek elsewhere, if it is a question we ask seriously. If we want to document decline, we should look at ourselves. If we want to seek and save the lost, we should look at them—and at Christ, because He is in that business (Lk 19:10).

Endnotes

¹ LCMS President Matthew C. Harrison alludes to this in his introductory note, and Rev. Heath R. Curtis, the LCMS Coordinator for Stewardship, suggests the same thing in his remarks.

² For an excellent and helpful critical review of the studies from a more technical perspective, to which I am gratefully indebted, see Rebeka Cook, “Limits of Interpretation in the *Journal of Lutheran Mission* December 2016 Edition,” in *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 4:1 (March 2017), iv–vii, as well as the authors’ responses to Cook in the same issue, viii–xiii. Cook’s substantive review is presented as a “letter to the editor” and is not, for some reason, listed in the issue’s table of contents.

³ Examples of this include “simple bivariate regression” (5), cohort-component projection analysis” (29), “Pearson’s R correlation coefficient” (45), “dichotomous variable” (47), and “ecological inference fallacy” (49)—terms that are sometimes provided with cursory explanations, but sometimes not.

⁴ MacPherson cites LCMS president Matthew Harrison frequently (at least seven times in his article), and always with agreement. Since Harrison’s remarks are supposed to be conclusions based on the research, rather than mere assertions of his own opinion, MacPherson’s use of his words to bolster his argument may, in the end, be circular.

⁵ Cf. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York, 2010), especially their Chapter 5: “Switching, Matching, and Mixing.”

⁶ Note Hawley's identification of thirteen "core" LCMS states, in which at least 1% of the population are already LCMS adherents (46).

⁷ "The ideal family from the church's perspective is likely one in which a family has a sole breadwinner and another parent at home, solely responsible for raising children." (80) "Ideally, we want people to wait until they have found a suitable partner to get married, *and no longer*." (81, emphasis added)

⁸ "While [the LCMS] should not discourage education *per se*, it should encourage adherents to pursue an education that will provide the skills needed to support a family and incur a minimal amount of debt." (81)

⁹ "For a woman who desires a very lucrative or personally fulfilling career, the costs of children may not be worth the benefits." (16)

¹⁰ "[A] college degree may also increase one's material aspirations and thus make the financial loss associated with raising children less palatable." (17)

¹¹ "Another study found that student debt is putting downward pressure on both marriage and fertility, and that this effect was especially pronounced for women . . . every \$1,000 increase in student debt decreases female fertility by 0.13 children in the ten years following graduation." (27)

¹² "Women with a great deal of resources will extend the period of their lives in which they search for the most economically attractive men available to them." (16)

¹³ "Unfortunately, a woman's decision to put off family formation until she has accomplished a laundry list of other goals may cause her to never start a family." (81)

¹⁴ The section about "church marketing" comments that "Yellow Page advertising is one of the more common forms of church outreach" (35)—based on a study from 1989! If that is still true of our congregations today, it may partially explain why we are often disconnected from our communities.

¹⁵ Hawley points out the difficulties posed by analysis even at the county/district level, since district boundaries do not always follow state or county boundaries, making it hard to accurately map the various sets of data (2).

¹⁶ Rev. Heath Curtis suggests, but does not directly state, an equation of the LCMS with "the Church" in his introduction to the issue. The same idea may explain why there are occasional indications that LCMS adherents are important largely as *financial* assets of the denomination (e.g., 12, 31, 36, 96).