

Lutheran Mission Matters



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Next Steps for LCMS Multiplication: Two Actions to Reignite a Gospel Movement

Michael W. Newman

Abstract: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) experienced two robust periods of growth in its history. During the late 1800s and from the late 1930s to the early 1960s, the LCMS saw significant expansion. Two common threads of ministry action during these seasons of growth were the planting of new churches and the development of new Lutheran church bodies around the world. This essay will examine the history of LCMS Kingdom multiplication and propose two solutions consistent with our history that will address our current decline. The solutions will help energize efforts to bring the important message of grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone to an increasingly secularized and searching culture, and to new generations as we approach the two hundredth anniversary of the LCMS in 2047.

Be Fruitful and Multiply

Starting new churches is one of the best ways to reach new people with the Good News of Jesus. A 2018 study by the Pinetops Foundation, called *The Great Opportunity: The American Church in 2050*, reinforced the fact that planting churches is essential to seeing new people receive the gift of new life in Christ:

New church plants on average are more effective at reaching the lost than long-established churches. Based on recent Lifeway research, we know that the average well-trained, equipped church plant will grow to an average of 250 weekly participants within four years. Of those, 42 percent, or almost half of the congregation, will come from the previously unchurched—many of those the previously unaffiliated as well. New church plants are perhaps the most effective method for reaching the unchurched.¹



*Rev. Michael W. Newman is President of the Texas District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He has written several books including *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church*, *Hope When Your Heart Breaks: Navigating Grief and Loss*, and *Creciendo en la Adversidad: Viviendo a través de las tormentas de la vida*. Michael lives in San Antonio, Texas and helps encourage faithful and bold ministry in a culture that desperately needs Jesus. You can find more of his books at www.mnewman.org. mnewman@txlcms.org*

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Lethargy in multiplication, however, has gripped the American church. *The Great Opportunity* points out that “*Church planting in the US will need to double to triple from current rates* to address population growth and anticipated church closures of older congregations. The American church needs to plant more than 215,000 churches in the next 30 years to maintain status quo, and to meet the needs of the unaffiliated an additional 60,000 churches.”²

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God’s will to see His Kingdom be fruitful and multiply is very clear. Acts 6:7a says, “And the word of God continued to *increase*, and the number of the disciples *multiplied* greatly in Jerusalem” (emphasis added). Acts 12:24 recounts, “But the word of God *increased* and *multiplied*” (emphasis added). These verbs are the same verbs used by the Septuagint in Genesis 1:28 when God commanded the first man and woman to “be fruitful and multiply.” God’s intent was not merely biological multiplication. He desired Kingdom growth. Malachi 2:15 articulates that fact when the prophet stated that one of God’s intended outcomes of marriage was the procreation of “godly offspring.” Being fruitful and multiplying is wrapped in God’s love for all people and His desire to receive disciples into His eternal Kingdom.

Kingdom increase and multiplication are also God’s gift. God desires all people to be saved (1 Tm 2:4). He has given us a living Word (Heb 4:12) that accomplishes His purpose (Is 55:11). Baptism pours out salvation (1 Pt 3:21), and the Lord’s Supper delivers the forgiveness of sins (Mt 26:28). The Savior who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth includes us in the beautiful blessing of proclaiming His Good News of salvation to all people, making disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching.

But the LCMS has been fading in increase and multiplication for nearly four decades. This is in stark contrast to the church multiplication track record of the LCMS during most of its history. For its first 120 years, the LCMS exhibited a healthy church planting temperature. An analysis of the LCMS trends in starting new congregations and preaching stations reveals some profound insights and direction for the future of the church body. Let’s take a look.

LCMS Church Multiplication Trends

By the end of 1847, the year of the LCMS’s formation, the LCMS reported 37 congregations and preaching stations. This number included congregations not yet chartered as member churches but preparing to be chartered. Eight years later in 1855, the LCMS reported 136 congregations. Over the period of eight years, every existing congregation, on average, gave birth to nearly three new faith communities. A remarkable procreation rate had begun.

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In the sixty years that followed, congregations continued to be fruitful and multiply at a healthy rate. Below, listed in ten-year increments, is the total number of faith communities in the LCMS at the start of the ten-year period, the net gain over the decade, and the number of congregations it took, from the start of that period to the end of that period, to give birth to one new faith community during that ten-year span. These statistics take into account congregations that closed and preaching stations that dissolved. The decade-by-decade numbers do not provide precise information about how many congregations or missionaries were responsible for the expansion. The statistics simply indicate the trajectory of growth and provide a valuable glimpse into the overall church multiplication activity of the LCMS during these time periods.³

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1865

254 total congregations in the LCMS

A gain of 118 since 1855

It took 1.15 congregations to start one additional faith community.

1875

704 total

A gain of 450

Each congregation started nearly 2 new faith communities.

The 1885 statistical yearbook of the LCMS—the first year it was published—included chartered congregations, those about to charter, and “preaching stations” in the statistical totals of LCMS faith communities. These categories show the mission development of the LCMS and are reflected below.

1885

1,739 total congregations and preaching stations

A gain of 1,035

It took 1.47 congregations to start one additional faith community.

1895

2,514 total

A gain of 775

It took 2.24 congregations to start one additional faith community.

1905

3343 total

A gain of 829

It took 3.03 congregations to start one additional faith community.

1916 (There were no statistics available in 1915.)

4,171 total

A gain of 828

It took 4.03 congregations to start one additional faith community.

In its first seventy years, it took, on average, just under two LCMS churches to start one new LCMS congregation. During that time period, the LCMS experienced a net gain of just over 59 churches per year, growing from 12 congregations at its founding to 4,171 churches and preaching stations in 1916. Reaching new communities and starting new faith communities was a normal part of holistic ministry for LCMS churches. The people and pastors of the church always asked, “Where do we need to bring the Gospel next?” They answered with devoted energy and efforts to reach new communities with the unique and life-transforming message of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone based on Scripture alone. And the Word did not return empty, but prospered in that for which it was sent (Is 55:10–11).

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Challenging Times

The early 1900s saw seemingly insurmountable challenges erupt for the church. A worldwide flu pandemic ended 50 million lives around the world. Anti-German sentiment abruptly discontinued the LCMS’s mode of discipleship and evangelistic outreach in the United States. Immigration laws changed and the economy began to falter. The post-World War I years of the twentieth century saw church multiplication begin to wane in the LCMS. It took an increasing number of congregations to start one new faith community:

1925

4,431 total congregations and preaching stations in the LCMS

A gain of 260 in the decade

It took 16.04 congregations to start one new faith community.

1935

5,029 total

A gain of 598

It took 7.4 congregations to start one new faith community.

By 1945, preaching stations were no longer being listed in the LCMS statistical yearbook, and so the statistics below capture the change with a slight adjustment in the total number of congregations to take into account the altered statistical tabulation method.

1945

4,268 total congregations

A gain of 433 congregations over the 1935 number of 3,835

It took 8.85 congregations to start one new faith community.

Throughout these years, the Missouri Synod remained undaunted in its mission and outreach focus. Leaders prayerfully devoted themselves to being a church for the purpose of God's mission. And God, in His grace, opened new doors for the LCMS to bless others with the Good News of Jesus. The LCMS transitioned from being an outreach to German-speaking immigrants to a uniquely American church and outreach movement. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, the ministry multiplication rate showed great promise. Even with more than 5,000 congregations, churches were still committed to giving birth to new churches.

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1955

5,130 total

A gain of 862

It took 4.95 congregations to start one new faith community.

1965

5,948 total

A gain of 818

It took 6.27 congregations to start one new faith community.

A Startling Change

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the distractions of theological arguments, doctrinal waywardness, and ministry fear began to strangle church multiplication momentum in the LCMS. Combined with complex social and cultural shifts during

this era, the intense focus needed on attending to the truth of the Scriptures and rightfully reinforcing this truth had the unintentional impact of “birth control” in a church body that was hurting and afraid.⁴

In addition, church planting began to shift from being the grass-roots responsibility of every congregation to becoming a programmatic emphasis of LCMS districts using “expertly trained” missionaries who could get the job done. Over time, multiplication momentum weakened, congregations continued to age, and new outreach was severely curtailed. The result was a precipitous slide in church multiplication. The decline was unprecedented in the history of the Missouri Synod. The numbers tell the challenging story:

1975

6,160 total congregations and preaching stations

A gain of 212 in the decade

It took 28.06 congregations to start one new faith community.

1985

6,236 total

A gain of 76

It took 81.05 congregations to start one new faith community.

1995

6,175 total

A decline of 61

Any churches started did not offset churches closed.

2005

6,144 total

A decline of 31

Any churches started did not offset churches closed.

2015

6,101 total

A decline of 43

Any churches started did not offset churches closed.

2017

6,046 total

A decline of 55

Any churches started did not offset churches closed.

(For a summary, see Figure 1, Gain/Loss Efficiency Decadal Ratio.)

Many factors contribute to a church’s decline, but one key factor in the deterioration of the LCMS over the past forty years has been the decrease in church

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multiplication. Not starting new faith communities has become a pervasive habit in the LCMS. The mindset that propelled church workers and laypeople to multiply ministry has faded from consciousness.⁵

But there is hope! With our risen Savior Jesus and His Church, there is always hope. The Word of God is living and active (Heb 4:12). The Word of God does not return empty (Is 55:11). The gates of hell will not prevail against the advance of Christ's Church (Mt 16:18). God desires all people to be saved (1 Tm 2:4). Jesus has called His followers to go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to all creation (Mk 16:15).

Many factors contribute to a church's decline, but one key factor in the deterioration of the LCMS over the past forty years has been the decrease in church multiplication. Not starting new faith communities has become a pervasive habit in the LCMS.

Allow me to propose two actions that may reignite a Gospel movement in the LCMS.

Two Proposed Actions

Action One: Twenty Percent of LCMS Congregations Team Up to Plant Churches.

At its 67th regular convention in July of 2019, the LCMS adopted a bold resolution "To Encourage the Planting of Churches":

Resolved, That the Synod in convention reaffirms its first mission priority to "plant, sustain, and revitalize Lutheran churches" (2013 Res. 3-06A); and be it further

Resolved, That congregations and circuits be encouraged and supported by their respective districts to investigate and identify new mission plants; and be it further

Resolved, That congregations, circuits, and district leaders be encouraged to think strategically and plan collaboratively when establishing these new mission plants; and be it further

Resolved, That congregations and circuits be encouraged to make use of [Office of National Mission (ONM)] resources in the establishment of these new mission plants; and be it further

Resolved, That the ONM, in partnership with the districts, issue a report telling the stories of new mission plants prior to the 2022 Synod convention; and be it finally

Resolved, That the congregations and workers of the Synod regularly pray that the Lord of the Harvest would bless these efforts and enlarge His Kingdom.⁶

The synod in convention has resolved not to be hearers of the Word only and so deceive ourselves, but to be doers of the Word (Jas 1:22). How might this be accomplished during a season of fatigue and decline in the LCMS?

Twenty Percent of LCMS Congregations Team Up to Plant Churches.

What if 20% of the congregations in the LCMS seriously and tenaciously committed themselves to multiply Gospel ministry?

What if those 1,200 congregations joined together in teams of three to start two new preaching stations/new churches every decade?

Let's add up the numbers: 400 congregational teams make the commitment to start just two new faith communities every decade—one every five years. The result would be 800 new missions by 2029. With the current decline of just under 500 churches over a ten-year period (481 congregations and mission stations closed between 2009–2018, according to LCMS Rosters and Statistics), *the first effort of just 20% of the congregations of the LCMS would turn the congregational decline in the LCMS around.* But wait, there's more!

What if half of the 800 newly birthed missions joined with the original 1,200 in a commitment to team up in sets of three to start two new ministries between 2030–2039? The result would be 1,066 new mission stations by 2039 (1,200 congregations plus 400 new missions, divided by three, equals 533 church planting groups. Two new starts per decade equals 1,066 new faith communities.). Once again, that modest effort of 20% of congregations joining with just half of the newly planted faith communities offsets the current rate of losses in the LCMS, thereby injecting even more health into the Church. But let's push farther.

What if the same pattern took hold between 2040 and 2049? That would mean 710 teams of three would launch 1,420 new missions during the decade. Even if the number of closing congregations doubled to 1,000 during that time period, the new mission development would overtake and offset the losses AND many new people would be receiving the precious gift of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

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prayerful, self-sacrificial, soul-winning collaboration. True, the overall membership of the LCMS might not grow. The new churches may be smaller than the ones that close. But the Gospel would be proclaimed! New people would be reached as we stretch into new communities.

The rate of multiplication would look like this:

2019

6,000 congregations in the LCMS

1,200 congregations band together in threes to start 800 new faith communities over the decade. 500 existing congregations close.

2029

6,300 total congregations and preaching stations

A gain of 300 in the decade

It took 20 congregations to start one new faith community.

2039

6,866 total congregations and preaching stations (1,066 were added, but 500 closed)

A gain of 566 in the decade

It took 11.13 congregations to start one new faith community.

2049

7,286 total congregations and preaching stations (1,420 were added, but 1,000 closed)

A gain of 420 in the decade

It took 16.35 congregations to start one new faith community.

Notice the trend. Notice the church multiplication rate. Notice the number of new people reached with the Gospel (see Figures 2 and 3, LCMS Growth Percentage and LCMS Decadal Growth Ratio).

The big question is: Will 20% of the congregations in the LCMS have the resolve to actively pursue collaborative church multiplication?

And what if *more* than 20% of LCMS congregations resolved to reach into new communities, new demographic groups, and new cultures with the intent to share the Gospel and start new congregations? What if these church planting collaboration groups started *more* than two new faith communities every decade?

From a small number of committed congregations, many new people could receive the opportunity to hear the Gospel and experience the beauty of Christ's Church.

It will require Gospel-passion from laypeople and clergy alike. It will require the use of both simple models of outreach and more involved systems for planting churches. It will call for a focus on outreach efforts that reach both larger and smaller

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groups. It will necessitate innovative approaches to new cultures, new demographic groups, and new neighbors. It will take time and commitment. But it is not impossible. In fact, it is what the Gospel does! Commenting on the eternal Gospel mentioned in Revelation 14:6, Dr. C. F. W. Walther noted that Luther did not proclaim a “temporal, transitory message of vain human doctrine . . . but an *eternal* Gospel, the pure, clear, unalterable, and imperishable Word of the Most High. [Luther’s] calling was not to give this bread of life to the little parish in Wittenberg, but ‘to every nation and tribe and tongue and people.’”⁷

Action Two: The LCMS Starts a New Church Body in the Third Largest Mission Field in the World.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has demonstrated biblical Kingdom multiplication for nearly 175 years:

- Believers reached out to new people. By God’s grace, through the Word and Sacraments, disciples made new disciples.
- Churches planted new churches; sometimes a single congregation heroically and faithfully birthed multiple new churches in many communities.
- Districts of the Synod launched new districts. For example, the Southern District gave birth to both the Texas and Florida-Georgia districts, as missionaries were sent to new places in order to expand the reach of the Gospel.
- AND, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod started new church bodies around the world.

Resolution 2-01 from the 2019 LCMS convention was titled, “To Thank God for 125 Years of International Mission through The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.” That resolution articulated one facet of LCMS church multiplication: “WHEREAS, The planting of churches and raising up of pastors and church workers has resulted in the formation of 35+ partner church bodies. . .”

The LCMS has actively started new Lutheran church bodies in different places and cultures, among people of different languages and customs, at opportune times and for the purpose of seeing the Gospel reach new people so that more might confess the name of Jesus and receive the gifts of forgiveness and eternal life.

According to my research, at least ten of those 35+ partner churches were started from scratch by the LCMS through missionary outreach to new places and cultures around the world⁸:

Africa:

- The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ghana: started in 1958, became a partner church in 1971

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Asia:

- The Lutheran Church—Hong Kong Synod: started in 1915, post-1949 became an independent synod
- India Evangelical Lutheran Church: started in 1894, became a partner church in 1959
- Japan Lutheran Church: started in 1948, became a partner church in 1968
- The Lutheran Church in Korea: started in 1958, became a partner church in 1971
- Gutnius Lutheran Church (New Guinea): started in 1948
- The Lutheran Church in the Philippines: started in 1946, became a partner church in 1971
- Lanka Lutheran Church: started in 1927, became a partner church in 2001

South America:

- Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil (IELB): started in 1900, became a district of the LCMS in 1904, became a partner church in 1980

North America:

- Lutheran Church-Canada: started in 1854, became an autonomous partner church in 1988

What is even more encouraging is that the new church bodies started by the LCMS have continued the pattern of multiplication. Disciples are making new disciples. Congregations are planting new congregations. Partner churches are even starting new partner churches! The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil (IELB) started the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Portugal in 1959. LCMS fellowship with this new body was established in 2019. The IELB is now in the process of starting a new Lutheran body in Mozambique. God's Word multiplies!⁹

Where is the next place the LCMS should consider starting a new church body? Where is there a need to reach a new culture in new ways?

What about the third largest mission field in the world behind China and India, the United States of America?

What if the LCMS recognized that, like any long-standing entity, its reach has narrowed? The Missouri Synod has a limited

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connection with new generations. The Missouri Synod is very mono-ethnic. It has structures, costs, and preferences that create barriers to the emerging “new nation” that is developing within the United States. Is it time to send missionaries to launch a new church body in the US? Is it the right season in history to give birth to a new biblical and confessional voice that can speak Christ-centered, grace-focused, sacramental-rejoicing, and Scripture-founded words into the spiritual conversation happening in America today?

I’m not talking about division; I’m talking about multiplication. Might the launch of a new movement, rooted in and founded upon Reformation theology, be just what is needed to reinvigorate the multiplication legacy of the LCMS—and the Lutheran Church in Western civilization?

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Picture it:

- A younger, more diverse and nimble church in which Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession (“Order in the Church,” “rite vocatus”) is unencumbered by European educational structures and Western accreditation requirements. Envision a church that has the option to use the older models of pastoral formation and certification, but also has the ability to be faithful to the Confessions while making use of new technology and new systems that accomplish faithful pastoral formation and sending for greater Gospel outreach.
- A church that is able to practice Article VII of the Augsburg Confession (definition of the Church and true unity of the Church) outside of a Western, European, sixteenth-century overlay, free to use the best of what God has provided in external forms and ceremonies throughout the years, while at the same time incorporating other biblical paradigms that honor God and speak to an emerging generation.
- A church that can meet the chaotic fallenness of today’s culture with sound proclamation of Law and Gospel, applying Article IV of the Augsburg Confession (Justification) without being afraid of the “new” sins of this generation.

What if the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod did what it has always done: send missionaries to start a new church body in order to reach a new nation—even the new and emerging “nation” developing in the US?

Doers of the Word

The apostle John exhorted Christians in the first century: “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn 3:18).

Can we in the LCMS “remember our first love” and “do what we did at first” (Rev 2:4–5)? Do we have the resolve to take action, to be doers of the Word, to show love in deed and in truth? God has formed the LCMS to be a beautiful church. The LCMS is filled with generous, prayerful, devoted, gifted, and mission-hearted people of God. Together, can we step out in faith to take action?

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Might we consider two points of action?

- Action One: 20% of LCMS Congregations Team Up to Plant Churches.
- Action Two: The LCMS Starts a New Church Body in the Third Largest Mission Field in the World.

What would this mean for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as it approaches its two hundredth anniversary in 2047?

- By 2047, the LCMS will be active in Gospel outreach and comprise more than 7,000 congregations and preaching stations.
- By 2047, the LCMS will have nearly 4,500 mission-outreaching congregations with more than 2,800 faith communities that are actively planting new churches and reaching new people with the Gospel. This planting and outreach will feature the leadership of the new American immigrant population flourishing in the US. These congregations will start nearly 2,000 new faith communities by 2057.
- By 2047, declining and plateaued congregations, numbering around 2,800, will comprise only 38% of the LCMS. They will be strong in prayer and devotion as they lift up outreach into new areas and among new people. The 2,000 congregations that closed since 2019 will have been encouraged to leave a legacy of prayer, encouragement, and financial resources that help fuel a new LCMS Gospel movement.
- By 2047, the LCMS will have launched a new church body in the United States. This solidly biblical and Lutheran mission endeavor will comprise leaders from new generations and cultures who reach new generations and cultures in the United States with vibrant and meaningful practices, training

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systems, language, and focal areas—all rooted in the singular message of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

This vision does not mean that the LCMS will be perfect. The Missouri Synod will still have its flaws and quibbles. But what if we fell at the feet of our Savior in humble repentance, asked God to vanquish our fear, controlled our disagreements with collegial discourse, and decided to “know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2)?

My prayer these days is: “Make [us] to know your ways, O LORD; teach [us] your paths!” (Ps 25:4).

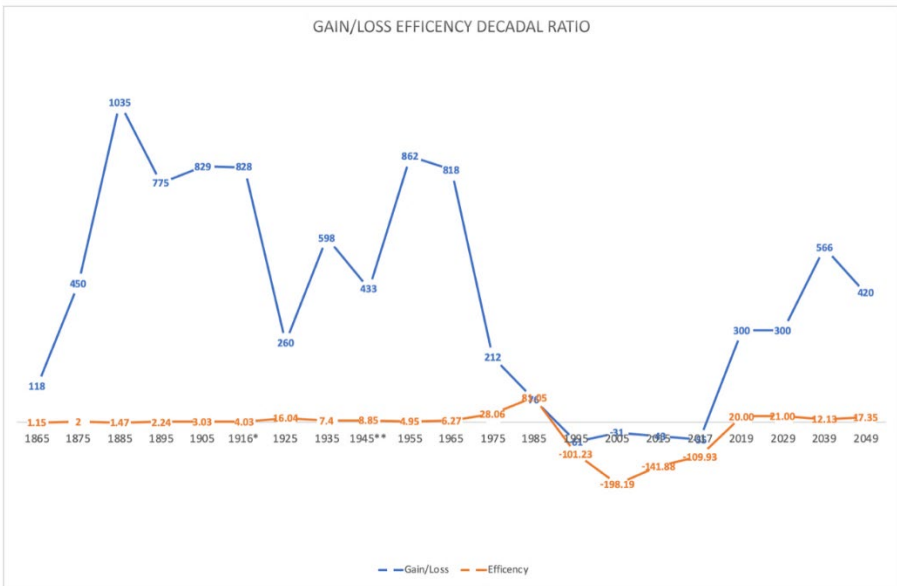


Figure 1. Created by Steven Misch.



Figure 2. Created by Steven Misch.

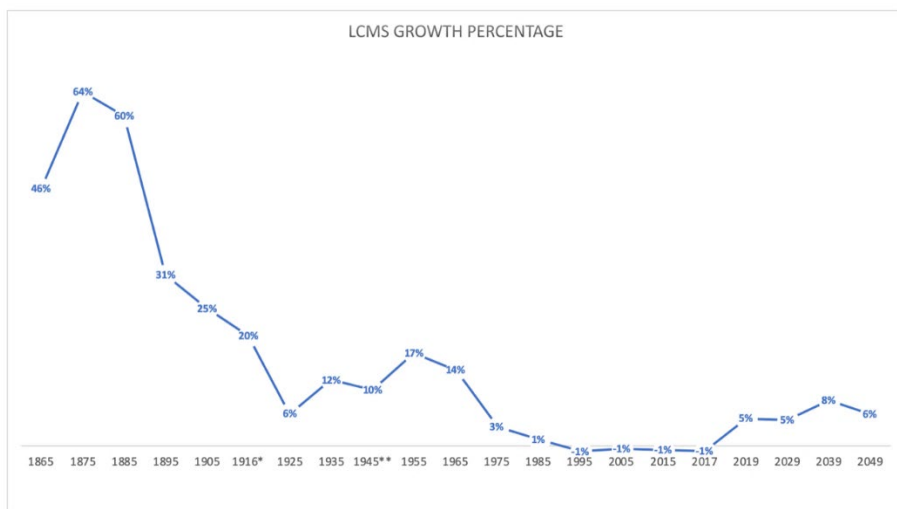


Figure 3. Created by Steven Misch.

Endnotes

¹ Pinetops Foundation, *The Great Opportunity: The American Church in 2050* (Pinetops Foundation, 2018) 33.

² *The Great Opportunity*, 10.

³ Specific factors related to the rapid growth of the LCMS can be found in my book, *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church* (Ursa Publishing, 2016), 29–41, 75–91, 171–181. Recounted in these sections are the Missouri Synod’s tenacious and innovative efforts to reach people with the Gospel. From an unstoppable love and concern for the lost to determined dedication to mission outreach and the harnessing of new technology, pastors and laypeople engaged in heroic and tireless efforts to reach people with the Good News of Jesus. Growth in the LCMS was not about gimmicks or programs. It was about confidence that the Word of God would not return empty (Is 55:11) and pressing forward to proclaim that living and active Word with as many people as possible. An example of the Gospel-sharing emphasis of the LCMS can be found in Walter Baepler’s *A Century of Grace: The History of the Missouri Synod 1847–1947*. As Baepler recounts the most recent developments in the LCMS, the emphases on mission outreach, multi-cultural ministry development, education ministry, and multi-media innovation shine brightly (275–353).

⁴ For detailed analyses of social change and the impact it had on the church during the 1960s, “The Struggle for Social Change in 1960s America: A Bibliographic Essay” (David Chalmers, *American Studies International* 30, no. 1 [April 1992]: 41–64) references a number of resources that discuss the trends of that era. *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (William O’Neill, Chicago: Time Books, 2004) unfolds the turbulent decade of the 1960s as well. An analysis of the theological struggle of the LCMS in the 1960s and 1970s can be found in *Anatomy of an Explosion* (Kurt E. Marquart, Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977, 49–66).

⁵ While blame for the decline of the LCMS has, at times, been placed on Church Growth trends and a capitulation of the church to the entertainment culture, the weakening of the LCMS is much more than an issue of shifts in worship style and programmatic methodology. Losses in the LCMS can be traced to distraction and fear. In a swirl of social change and theological challenge, the synod, to some degree, “abandoned [its] first love” (Rev 2:4). You can read more about how the LCMS balanced holding to the truth of God’s Word while at the same time propagating that Word of life in *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church* pages 105–118, 129–133, 207–212. The heroic accounts of mission sacrifice direct each of us in the LCMS today to “repent, and do the works [it] did at first” (Rev 2:5).

⁶ *Today’s Business*, Resolution 1-02, 1st ed. (2019), 48.

⁷ Herbert J. A. Bouman trans., *Editorials from Lehre und Wehre* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 104. Italics original.

⁸ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “Partner Church Bodies,” <https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/international/partner-church-bodies>.

⁹ For information on what factors are affecting the rapid growth of Christianity and Lutheranism in the Global South, see *Gospel DNA*, pages 66–72, for a summary and David Garrison’s *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources LLC, 2012) for a comprehensive analysis of factors that contribute to church planting movements around the world.