

Lutheran Mission Matters

Winner of
Concordia Historical Institute's
2017 Award of Commendation



Inbox

TO: Rev. Dr. Victor Raj
Editor, Lutheran Mission Matters

FROM: Rev. Heath R. Curtis
Coordinator for Stewardship, LCMS Office of National Mission

Dear Editor,

In the eight years of the Obama administration, the US went from being 78% Christian to 71%. The last time the LCMS saw a year to year gain in baptized membership, the Supreme Court was deciding *Bush v. Gore* and A. L. Barry sat behind the desk in Kirkwood. The ELCA, UMC, UCC, and Presbyterians are faring even worse. These facts and the questions they raise are what led the Stewardship Ministry of the LCMS' Office of National Mission to commission two scholars to study the demographic and cultural context of the Missouri Synod.

I want to thank Prof. William Schumacher for his essay offering his analysis of these demographic reports which were published in the Dec. 2016 issue of the *Journal of Lutheran Mission*; and I also thank you for publishing it. In this letter I hope to offer some clarifications that will further the efforts of your readers as they make plans for the future of their ministries in the challenging cultural landscape of today's America.

First, Prof. Schumacher raises questions and concerns about the methodologies of Dr. MacPherson (Bethany College) and Dr. Hawley (University of Alabama). Specifically, he mentioned the critique offered by Mrs. Rebeka Cook. We were gratified to see so much professional interest in this data, and MacPherson and Hawley offered very helpful replies to Mrs. Cook in the March 2017 issues of JLM which also go to the heart of Prof. Schumacher's comments; that issue of JLM can be viewed at <https://blogs.lcms.org/2017/journal-of-lutheran-mission-march-2017>.

Second, as a follow up to the question of the validity of the data, analysis, and conclusions of these researchers, folks should be aware that Dr. Hawley's latest peer-reviewed book, which began to percolate in his mind as he worked on our data, has just been published. The title says it all: *Demography, Culture, and the Decline of America's Christian Denominations* (Lexington Books). I'm sure your readers would benefit from a review of this volume in your pages: setting LCMS demographics in this wider context is both eye-opening and encouraging!

Third, Prof. Schumacher seems to be struggling under the misconception that our researchers, or leaders in the Synod, are saying that the LCMS can procreate its way into being a growing denomination again. Alas, the news of our researchers is so much more dire than that. Dr. Hawley reports that the LCMS already has a higher than average percentage of large families among the membership of the church who are in the child-bearing years. However, the number of folks aged 18–29 in 2014 was so small (11% of the Synod as opposed to 20% of America), that the Synod simply cannot emerge from demographic decline via natural growth in the short to medium term (1 to 2 decades). Not to mention that encouraging family formation (or evangelism for that matter) to “save the Synod” would be wrong headed and ineffective to boot. Rather, these numbers and analysis are in the reports to demonstrate just how “baked in” the LCMS decline in membership is: we are reaping the results of decisions made decades ago and there is no changing the past.

Speaking of evangelism, I am afraid I must report that the numbers are also stark in that regard. Since Dr. MacPherson notes that the LCMS already has an adult conversion rate that compares favorably with our peer denominations (indeed, we have a better “conversion rate” than the Southern Baptist Convention and for several years now we’ve had more adult conversions per year than infant baptisms!), we are not likely to see the kind of truly unprecedented growth in evangelism we would need to become a growing denomination in the short to medium term. Our conversion rate would actually have to far exceed that of the Mormon Church’s efforts for this to be true - and the massive amounts of energy and resources they plow into evangelism is a byword among the nations.

Two other data points in Hawley’s report deserve notice here as well: the MO Synod happens to be concentrated in parts of the country that are depopulating. In the growing parts of the country, the Missouri Synod is indeed growing, but at a rate below the growth of the overall population. In other words, even where MO Synod congregations are increasing in membership, they are not increasing at a rate that keeps up with the community around them.

Prof. Schumacher is certainly correct in noting that all of the above analysis in stated from a secular perspective, that is, looking at the Church as a merely human organization - we have not even factored in our belief that the Spirit works “when and where He pleases” for conversion through the means of grace. That caveat is always welcome in these discussions. At the same time, leaders in the Church since Paul have found it beneficial to make use of “First Article Gifts” and secular wisdom. The bottom line of the demographic research conducted by MacPherson and Hawley is this: unless the Lord chooses to perform a miracle, the LCMS, along with the ELCA, the Methodists, the UCC, the Presbyterians, etc., will almost certainly continue to decline in membership for two or three decades.

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Fourth, Prof. Schumacher makes the self-evidently valid point that the LCMS is not coextensive with the Bride of Christ, His Church. The Lord will save His elect in spite of our failings, by His grace alone, and with or without the Missouri Synod: on that we certainly agree!

Yet I confess that I am unashamedly interested in the health and well being of the Missouri Synod: her congregations, schools, universities, seminaries, missionaries, and domestic and international infrastructure for ministry. It is precisely the *LCMS as a denomination* that sent Prof. Schumacher to do his mission work in Botswana and that continues to support missionaries around the world; it is the *LCMS as a denomination* that owns and oversees the universities and seminaries that train and certify our church workers. I want all of the ministries that make up the MO Synod to thrive precisely because we have been gifted with a wonderfully clear confession of the Gospel in all its articles! We desire “all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” and we desire to be a part of the Lord’s work in this regard! I want the congregations I serve to thrive for the same reason I want Concordia Seminary, where Prof. Schumacher serves, to thrive: because the Lutheran Confession of the Faith is the God-pleasing, life-giving, and soul-saving message of Jesus Christ.

Of course, your readers are also interested in the health of their ministries within the LCMS, as are all leaders at the congregational, district, and Synod level. Different parts of ONM are responding to the demographic and cultural reality around us in different ways (see especially the work of Every One His Witness and Re:vitality from the Evangelism Ministry of the Office of National Mission). But as the Coordinator for Stewardship, my focus is first and foremost on the following.

Encouraging pastors and congregations and district leaders. We are living through a rough time for the Church at large in America. If your congregation, circuit, and district are shrinking despite your best efforts: you are not alone, you are not crazy, and you are not (necessarily) a “bad” pastor, congregation, district president, or district. All 35 districts are contracting in membership. It's something the whole Synod and all of American Christianity are facing for a host of complicated reasons. Our reports can help you understand what is going on, but you need to be ready to...

Learn about your context and make a plan. Where do you serve? An area in decline or experiencing growth? Your plans, expectations, and goals need to match that context. In the Stewardship office we help congregational and school leaders understand the world around them, encourage a faithful response, and make a plan for ministry that fits their specific context.

I have a special concern for Synodwide institutions. There will be areas of growth in particular cities, regions, and even districts as we move through the next two decades. But if our researchers' hypothesis holds true (as it is so far), the Synod as a whole will not experience growth. This needs to be factored into the plans of the large institutions that serve the whole Synod.

My 2017 calendar is already full up with presentations to institutions, circuits, boards of directors, pastors' conferences, etc. In these presentations I review the demographic data facing the Synod and all of American Christianity with a focus on understanding and planning for the future we are likely to face, under the Lord's gracious will. I am now scheduling speaking events for mid 2018. If your readers would like to have me come out and go through this data in person and talk about what is going on with the Synod to meet these challenges with confidence in the Lord and excitement in the Gospel: I can be reached at heath.curtis@lcms.org.

Sincerely,

Rev. Heath R. Curtis

Pastor – Trinity & Zion Lutheran Churches, Worden & Carpenter, IL
Coordinator for Stewardship – LCMS Office of National Mission

Response

Mission and Denominational Decline

After I offered a few comments (available here: http://www.lsfm.global/uploads/files/LMM_5-17_Schumacher.pdf) in response to the December 2016 Special Issue of the Journal of Lutheran Mission (*JLM*) (available here: <https://blogs.lcms.org/2016/journal-of-lutheran-mission-december-2016>), the conversation about demographic studies of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and their relation to mission and evangelism has continued. In particular, Rev. Heath Curtis, a pastor in southern Illinois and the LCMS Coordinator for Stewardship, has written a direct response to my comments (available here: <https://blogs.lcms.org/2017/synod-demographic-studies-offer-insight-despite-critiques>), and his response helpfully clarifies some points. Those who are interested in the topic and the discussion should also read the helpful contribution of Rebeka Cook and the additional material from the authors of the original reports in the Dec. 2016 *JLM* (all available here: <https://blogs.lcms.org/2017/journal-of-lutheran-mission-march-2017>).

I had not expected to write further on the subject, since I think my original comments and concerns were sufficiently clear. But I will offer just one or two

remarks to Rev. Curtis, since he singled me out in his blog post on the LCMS website.

In my earlier comments, I suggested that demographic data about the membership of the Synod at the denominational level is of only limited use in making informed decisions and plans about mission and evangelism. I wrote that I thought (and I still think) this is true for at least two reasons. First, denominational data tends to mask or blur the vital specifics of local congregations and their communities, and in America people choose to join (or not to join) congregations, not denominations. And second, even a complete picture of ourselves cannot be the key to connecting lost people with the Savior who gave Himself for them. In other words, for purposes of mission and evangelism, I argue that our focus must be local and our attention must be on those outside the faith rather than on ourselves.

By way of response, Rev. Curtis stresses two points that I think merit some further comment. For one thing, he takes some exception to my desire to focus on congregations rather than the denomination. He emphasizes his interest in and commitment to the LCMS as a denomination, because of its clear confession of the Gospel in all its articles. Happily, we are entirely agreed on this point! But Rev. Curtis goes on to assert that the LCMS *as a denomination* is essential for supporting missionaries and institutions such as seminaries, and at this point I think the question becomes more complex than his assertions suggest.

Today, it is too simplistic to claim that the Synod *as a denomination* supports missionaries, or funds theological education at the seminaries.

Career international missionaries are required to raise most or all of their financial needs through the Office of International Mission program of Network Supported Missionaries. This makes the support of missionaries depend on a direct connection between congregations and a particular missionary—the missionary's salary and financial support does not come out of the Synod's general operating budget (as it did when I served as a missionary in Botswana).

Something similar is true of our seminaries. A very small portion (roughly one percent) of the operating budget of Concordia Seminary comes in the form of direct subsidy from the LCMS, i.e., from the Synod "as a denomination"; that figure was about 44% in 1970. More than half of support for the seminary today comes from direct, generous gifts from congregations and individuals. For clarity, in other words, we should probably speak of both missionaries and the seminaries as being supported by faithful and willing *members* of the Synod, rather than by the Synod itself "as a denomination."

This should not be understood to suggest that the Synod as such is unimportant or irrelevant. What the "LCMS as a denomination" actually does, as Rev. Curtis mentions, is "own and oversee" the institutions, and control the selection and approval of missionaries. The Synod's direct denominational subsidy for seminaries is small, but the Synod in convention is firmly in control of governance of the institution through election of members of the governing Board

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of Regents. The Synod is a mechanism by which each of us seeks to be held accountable by all of us for our doctrine and practice. Every pastor, every congregation, every institution, and every leader needs the advice, the counsel, and the encouragement of the others to be and remain faithful in our confession and witness.

But we should not imagine that the LCMS denominational structure is essential as a centralized funding mechanism for ministry—indeed, the past few decades have shown convincingly that the national denominational structure is much less effective for such a purpose than it used to be. (The reasons for this trend, and the implications for our work together, would be a very interesting discussion—especially in light of the fact that financial giving in congregations has actually *risen*, despite a general decline in membership and attendance, while giving to the Synod’s denominational work has dropped.)

The second point to which I would like to offer a comment is when Rev. Curtis explains how he, in his capacity as Coordinator for Stewardship with the LCMS Office of National Mission, wants to apply and use the demographic data that has been assembled. He emphasizes that he wants to encourage pastors, congregations, and leaders of the LCMS by helping them understand that declining membership is not (necessarily) evidence of their failure. They should not feel bad about themselves when they are confronted by steady drops in membership and attendance, since “it’s something the whole Synod and all of American Christianity are facing for a host of complicated reasons.”

Okay, fine: pastor and congregations should not feel bad. (Unless, of course, you actually *are* a bad pastor, an unwelcoming congregation, or a lazy and unfaithful leader—then, by all means, feel bad about yourself to the point of genuine repentance and turn to Christ alone for forgiveness and new life.) But now that we have agreed that we do not need to feel bad about ourselves, can we please talk about something else more urgent and more interesting?

How do we feel about *other people* who do not know Christ, and who are trying to make their way in life without Him? *Mission* is not about us—not about our success or failure, not about how we feel about ourselves. Mission is about seeking and saving the lost, and that is what God is up to in the world. It is about the people who are not hearing the promises of God. It is not about our valid excuses or our insight into what is going on among us. Mission is not about the people who are in the pews and are thus included in our membership reports and demographic analysis: it is about the people who live around us but are *not* in our data because they are *not* hearing the gospel. Feeling bad about ourselves is beside the point; we do not need to look at data about ourselves to concoct scientific reasons why we are the way we are. God give us a heart that breaks for those who are missing out on the comfort, hope, and joy of life in Christ.

William W. Schumacher
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