

Lutheran Mission Matters

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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.

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