



STATISTICAL SUMMARY & ANALYSIS

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2022

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Introduction

Faith & Wisdom

Jesus asked, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager . . . ?”¹ A manager doesn’t own the business. Instead, he manages that which belongs to his master in ways that benefit the master. Jesus says to serve as a manager in his kingdom requires two characteristics: faithfulness and wisdom.

It takes faith to steward the vast resources our gracious God has provided us. The faith-filled manager understands that the growth of the Church, both spiritual and statistical, is the work of the Spirit. We strive to proclaim the gospel as best we can to as many as we can. We leave the results of that proclamation to the Lord of the Church. Stewardship takes faith, a Third Article gift. “The Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in *the true faith*.”²

However, Jesus also said good management requires wisdom—a sanctified shrewdness and discernment, a First Article gift. “I believe that God created me and all that exists, and that he gave me . . . *my mind and all my abilities*.”³

Faithfulness and wisdom—*both* are needed in the management of our congregations and synod. The God who gave us the gift of faith would have us trust the efficacy and sufficiency of Scripture and boldly and joyfully serve as Christ’s witnesses, believing that “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”⁴ The God who gave us the gift of reason would have us use it to assess our context and community, appraise how ministry efforts are going, identify both challenges and opportunities, and plan for the

future. Keeping records and examining statistics is often part of this wise management.

Thank You

Every congregation examines certain data in their effort to wisely steward God’s blessings. WELS does the same. So, thank you for the information you provide in that annual statistical report. Every ministry group looks at that information as they plan our collective ministry: Ministerial Education, Home Missions, World Missions, Congregational Services. (Various synod leaders explain how that data is used here:

<https://vimeo.com/492211436>.)

This Statistical Summary

WELS publishes an annual statistical report—<https://welscongregationalservices.net/stats/>. The data comes in two formats.

The PDF statistical report is formatted for print. Congregations are grouped by circuits and conferences. Some information is consolidated. That PDF also contains a report of congregations by state, a list of our world missions, a list of capital projects, etc.

The digital report provides all congregational data without consolidation in an MSExcel file that is easy to search or sort.

This statistical summary and analysis is meant to put the data from 2022 into a broader context. In some cases, analysis of those longer-term trends is provided. That is simply meant to provide information for church and synodical leaders as they plan their ministry efforts.

¹ Luke 12:42

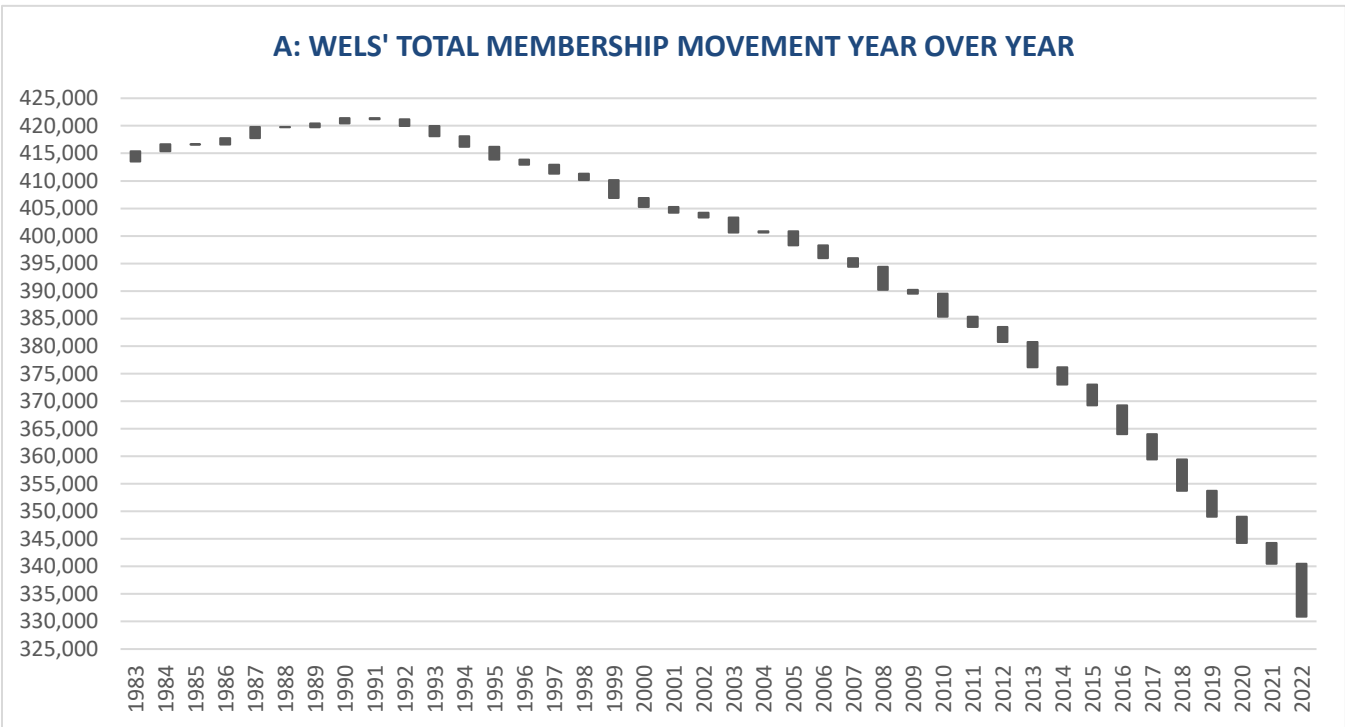
² Small Catechism

³ Ibid

⁴ Matthew 28:20

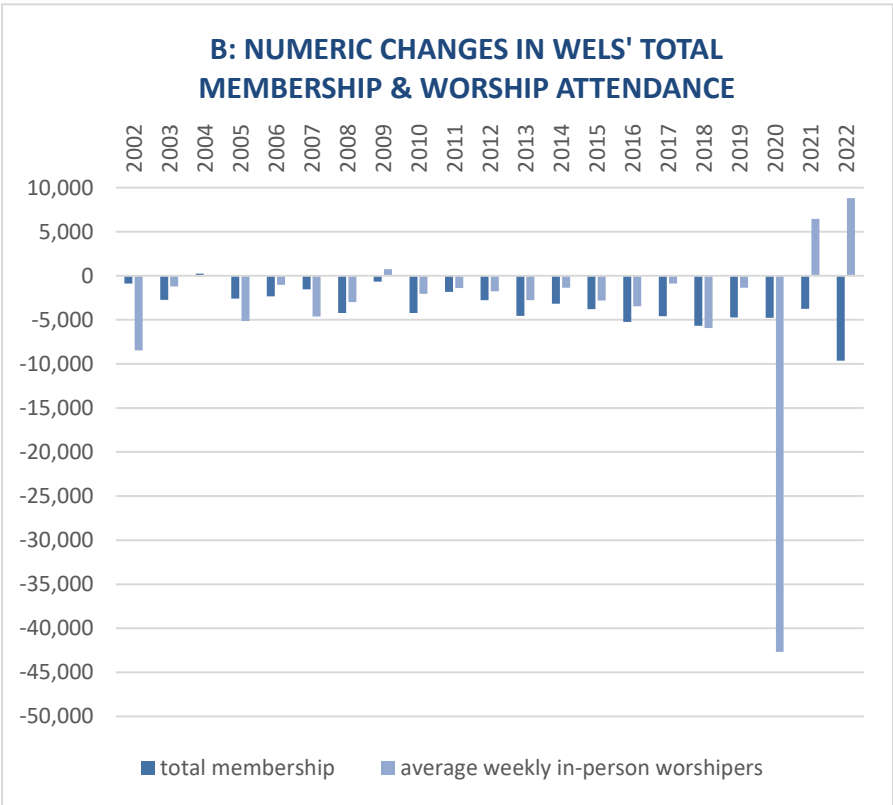
WELS Membership

A Post-COVID Sorting



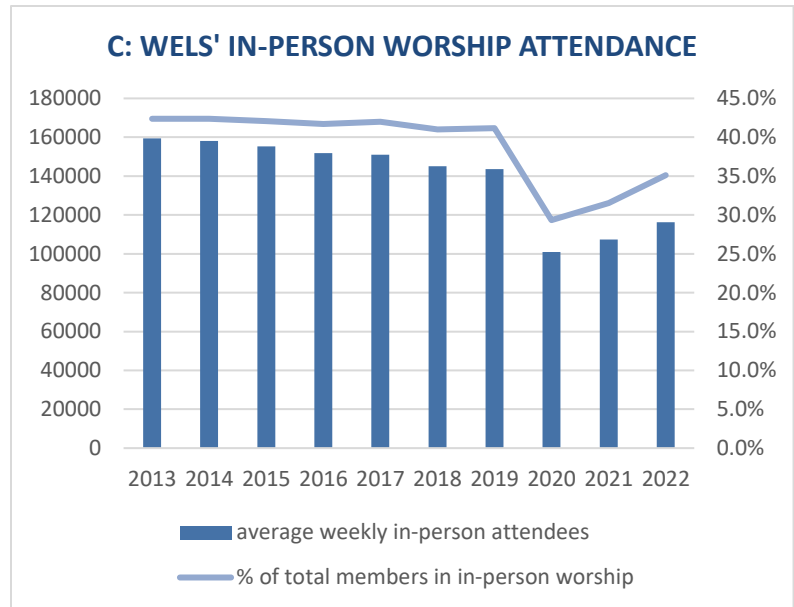
In 2022, WELS' total membership declined from 340,511 to 330,879, a 9,632-member decrease. The 2.83% decline is the largest one-year drop in WELS' history. It is 2.5 times more losses than WELS experienced in 2021. (Graph A shows the annual starting and ending membership totals for WELS over the past half century.)

Interestingly, in 2022, WELS had 8,824 more people gather on average for in-person weekly worship than in 2021. That represents an increase of 8.21%, the largest one-year jump in WELS' history. (See Graph B.)



So, in the same year WELS lost its highest number of members, it gained almost the same number of in-person worshippers. What is going on? There seems to be a post-COVID sorting taking place in our congregations.

2020 was the year of COVID lockdowns. In some states, those lockdowns continued well into 2021. WELS' average in-person worship attendance plummeted from 143,670 in 2019 to 100,999 in 2020. That is a 29.7% drop amounting to almost 43,000 souls. As the lockdowns were eased, some quickly returned to in-person worship. In-person worship attendance rebounded somewhat in 2021. However, other members did not return. Perhaps they still had health concerns. Perhaps they preferred the convenience of watching services online. So, in later 2021 and 2022 many congregations intensified their shepherding work, elder care, delinquency follow-ups, etc. They perhaps called or visited members who had not yet returned. These efforts had a positive effect, evidenced by the large jump in in-person worship attendance last year. However, in these shepherding efforts, congregations also found that during COVID some people walked away from church for good. Moreover, congregations found that many of the people they attempted to contact post-COVID were already gone even *before* COVID. So, the same shepherding work that encouraged people to return to in-person worship also identified many back-door losses.



It seems very possible this post-COVID sorting will continue in the immediate future. I.e., As congregations continue zealous shepherding work, in-person worship will continue trending upward, while total membership will trend downward. This is ultimately healthy. Shepherding work always is. It will mean the percent of members in in-person worship will rise. In 2022, it was 35.1%. That is up from 29.3% just two years prior. Prior to COVID, it was about 42% of WELS members who gathered weekly for in-person worship. This sorting will give congregations (and synod) a better idea of true membership size.

It should be noted that 2022 was the first time that, in the “Ministrations” tab of the statistical report, congregations could provide an estimate of how many people they believed watched services online each week. The total estimate for all WELS congregations was 22,238. (Many churches left this field blank.) It is challenging to know for certain how much of a livestream or online video viewers watch. Moreover, anecdotally, congregations have different objectives for putting their service online. For some, it is primarily for outreach. The church hopes it provides a front door for non-members. For other congregations, it is primarily to serve home-bound members and members who work on the weekend or who are traveling. Still other congregations have accepted that some members will now split their worship between in-person and at home. As online engagement is tracked in future years, it will be important for congregations to honestly assess the impacts, both positive and negative, of this strategy.

Types of Gains and Losses; the Impact on Membership

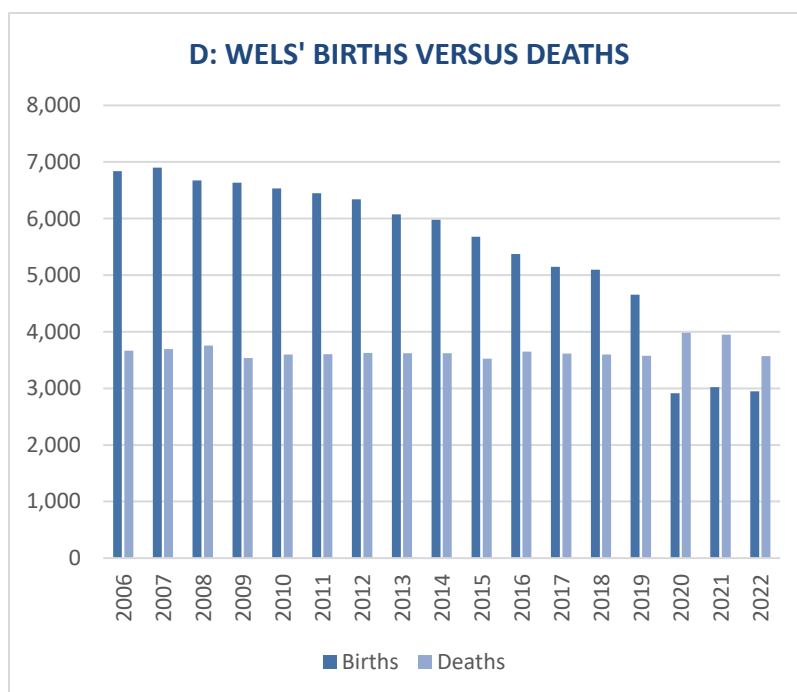
Church gains and losses can be grouped into three categories.

- *Lifecycle Gains and Losses* – This would include births and deaths. (Technically, a newborn becomes a member of a church upon their baptism. However, not all infant baptisms result in membership. Thus, the statistical report tracks *both* births to WELS members and infant baptisms.)
- *Spiritual Gains and Losses* – These are individuals new to WELS or who quit WELS. Spiritual gains would include adult confirmations, affirmations of faith, and children of those two groups. Spiritual losses would include all types of back-door losses: members who quit church completely, members who quit their WELS church to join another Christian church not of our fellowship, members who move away without contacting their church, etc.
- *WELS Movement* – These include transfers in and transfers out. They affect congregational membership. On a synodwide scale, they cancel each other out.

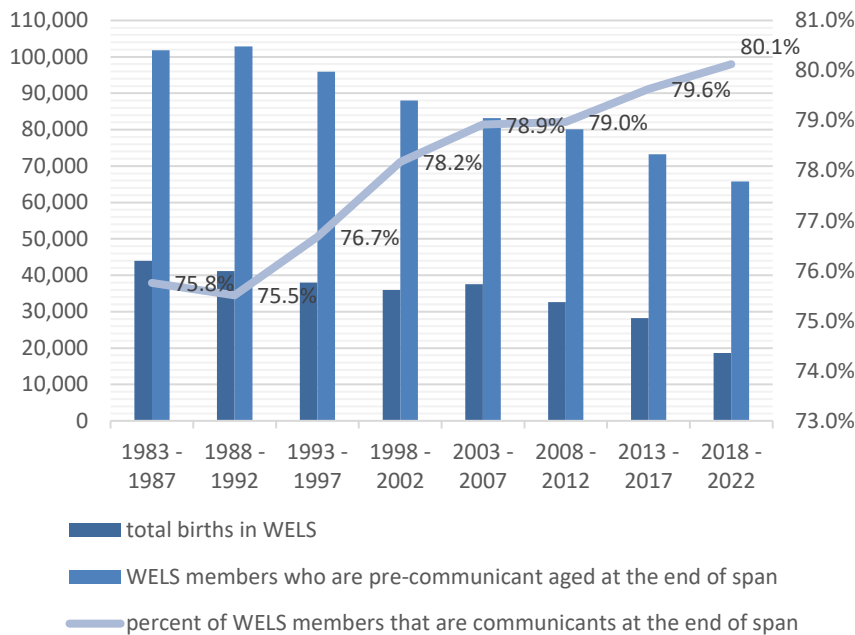
Spiritual gains and losses were first tracked in earnest in WELS in the 1980s. Since that time, WELS typically would have net annual spiritual losses. However, WELS would have net annual lifecycle gains. In the decade of the 80s, the net lifecycle gains were so large, they more than offset the net spiritual losses. For example, in 1987, WELS had a net spiritual loss of approximately 2,700 souls. However, WELS had a net lifecycle gain of approximately 4,700. Thus, WELS grew that year from about 418,000 souls to 420,000 souls that year.

In more recent decades, there were some good signs in spiritual gains and losses. From 1999 to 2004, WELS had over 4,000 adult confirmations in every year except one. That had only happened one other year since that data was tracked. Certain types of backdoor losses were trending down. For example, in the 90s, the WELS averaged about 4,150 adults annually quitting WELS to join another Christian denomination. In the 00s, that dropped to 3,850 annually. In the 2010s, it dropped again, to 2,490 annually. So, decade over decade, the gap between spiritual gains and losses was growing smaller. Net spiritual losses were declining.

However, at the same time, WELS' birth rate began to decline. At first, this was gradual. In the 90s, WELS averaged about 7,600 births annually. In the 00s, it fell to 7,300. However, in the 2010s, it



E: WELS' BIRTHS & PRE-COMMUNICANT MEMBERSHIP IN FIVE-YEAR SPANS



fell to an annual average of about 5,700. Now, in the past three years, it has dropped down to close to 3,000 annual births.

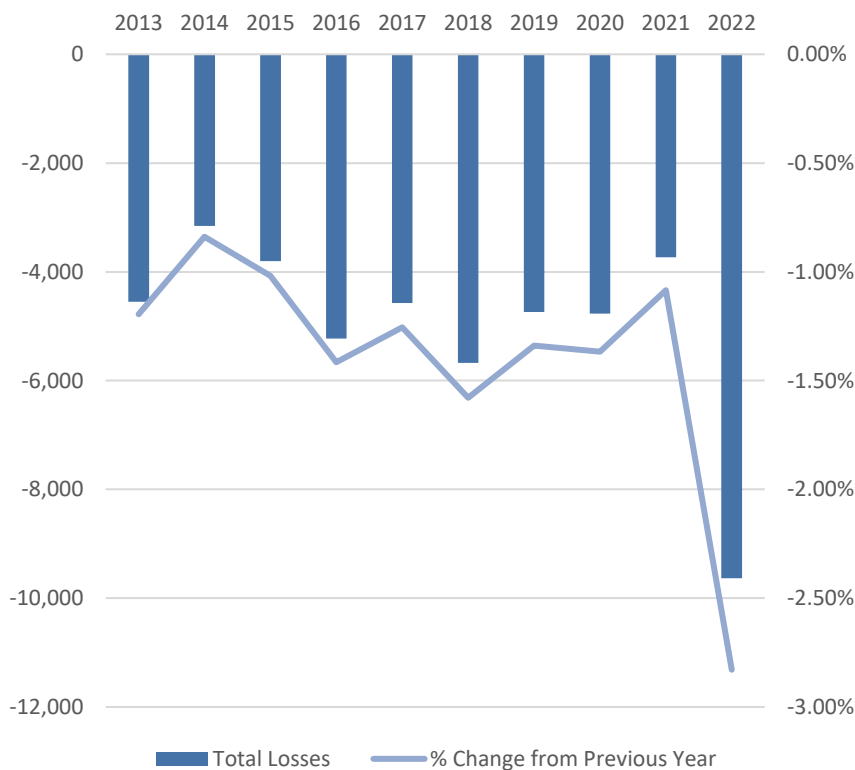
This decline in WELS' birth rate has naturally led to an aging of the synod, altering the makeup of baptized membership to communicant membership. Graph E captures this. The decline in total births parallels a decline in the total number of members who are pre-communicant aged.

To summarize, for decades WELS had net spiritual losses, but they were offset to some degree by net lifecycle gains. However, those net lifecycle gains have been shrinking for decades. Recently, the lifecycle trend has flipped, with WELS having more deaths annually than births for each of the past three years.

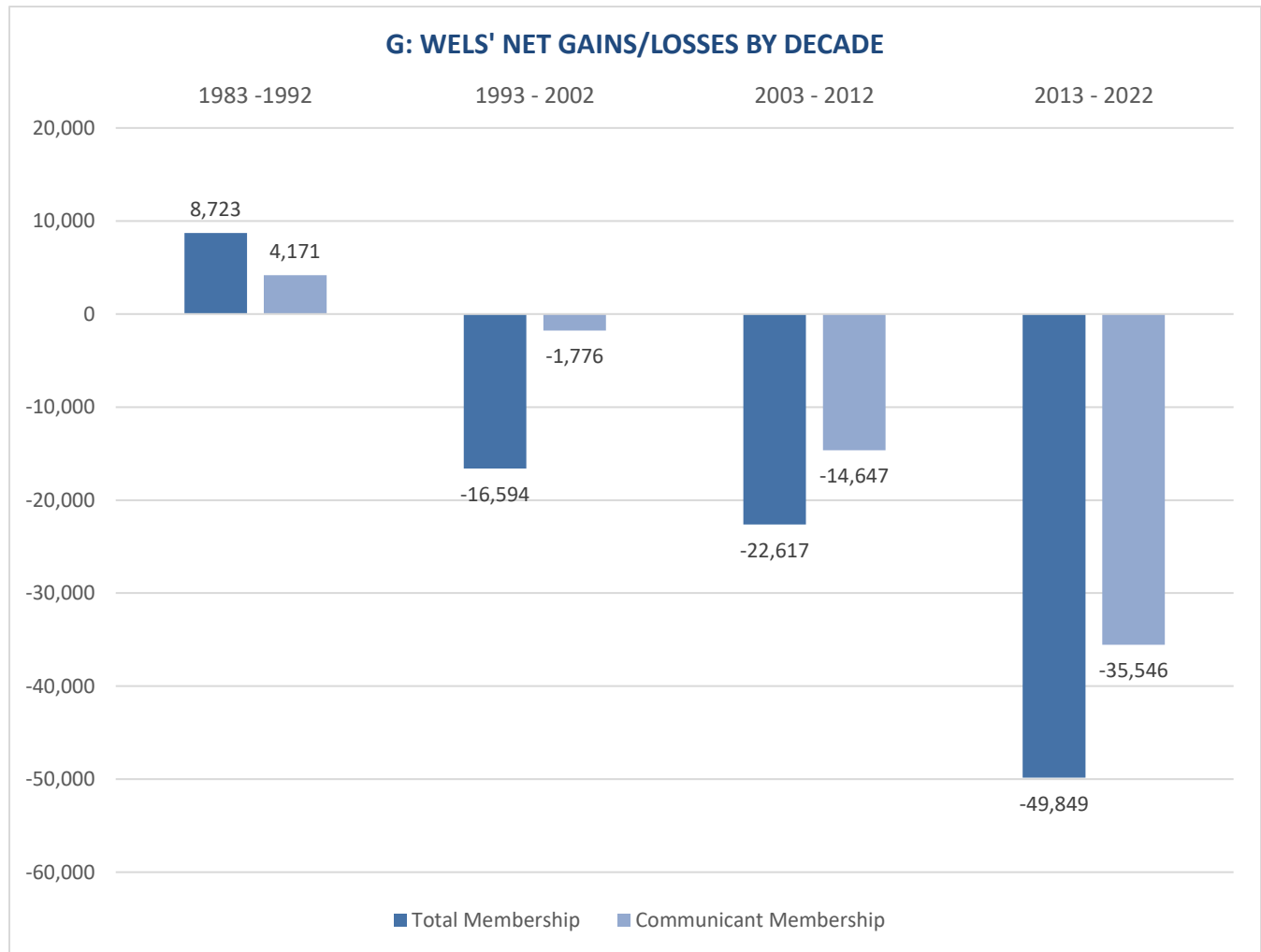
This will be challenging to reverse. The WELS members belonging to Gen X (who are 43 to 58 years old) have exited child-bearing years, being replaced by WELS members of the Millennial generation and Gen Z. Millennials have fewer children than previous generations, in part, because as a group, Millennials have their first child later in life than previous generations. And WELS has fewer Millennials than Gen Xers.

And while there was a period of time where the gap between spiritual losses and gains was closing, we said that COVID reversed that trend.

F: WELS' TOTAL LOSSES - PAST DECADE

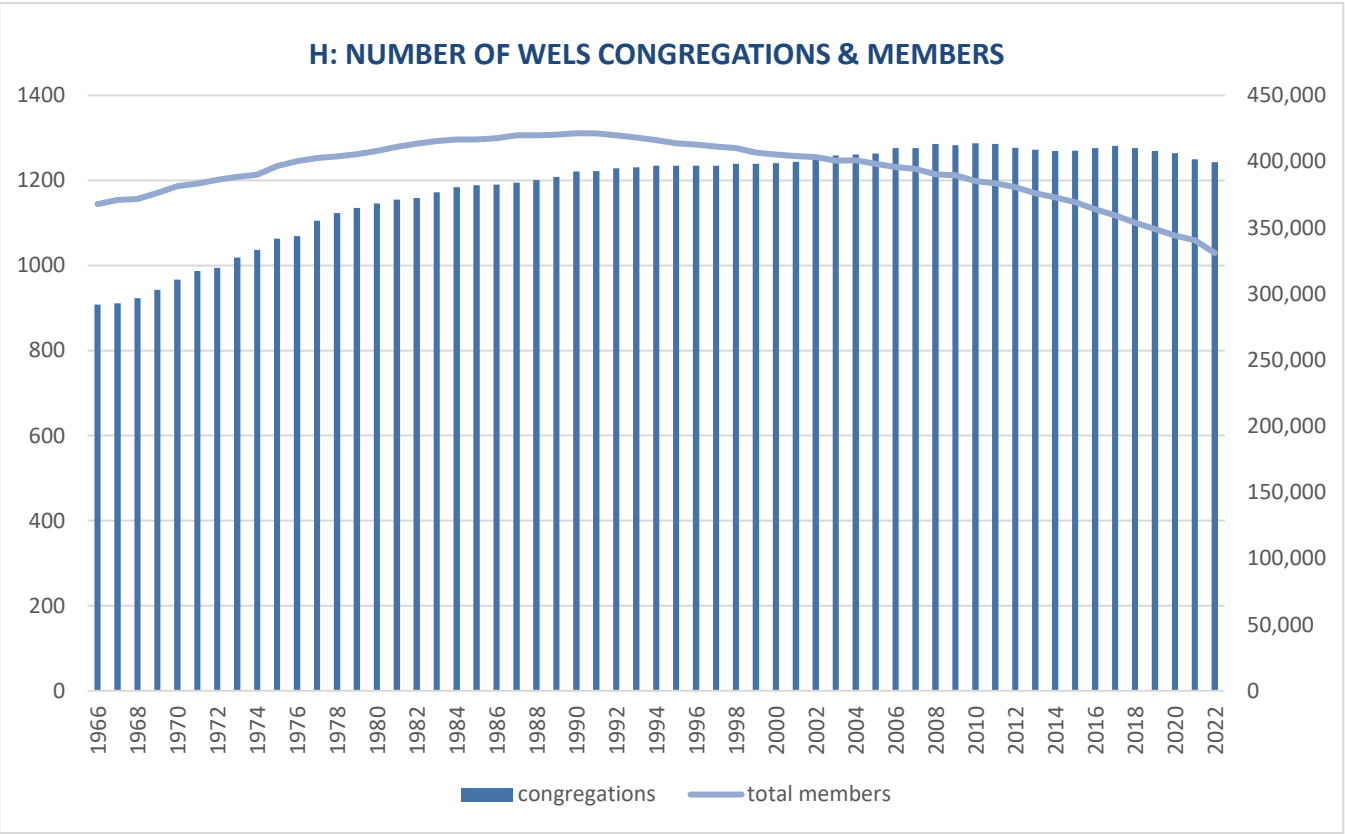


Understanding all this helps explain Graph G, which illustrates that in the most recent decade, WELS decreased by almost 50,000 souls (a loss of 13.25% in total membership). WELS decreased by over 35,500 communicants (a loss of 11.63% in communicant membership). That is the result of the combination of the birth rate, which was already falling in the previous decade, completely crashing in the most recent decade, and the post-COVID sorting that has been occurring since 2020.



Congregations

WELS had 12 congregations close in 2022. WELS Board for Home Missions started 5 new congregations. Thus, WELS had 7 fewer congregations at the end of 2022 than at the end of 2021. That marks the fifth year in a row that WELS had fewer congregations than the previous year.



This is simply an extension of the membership decline. When a church has little debt, it can go from 400 members to 100 members with little impact. However, when the church goes from 100 members to 40 or fewer members, it faces more of an existential challenge.

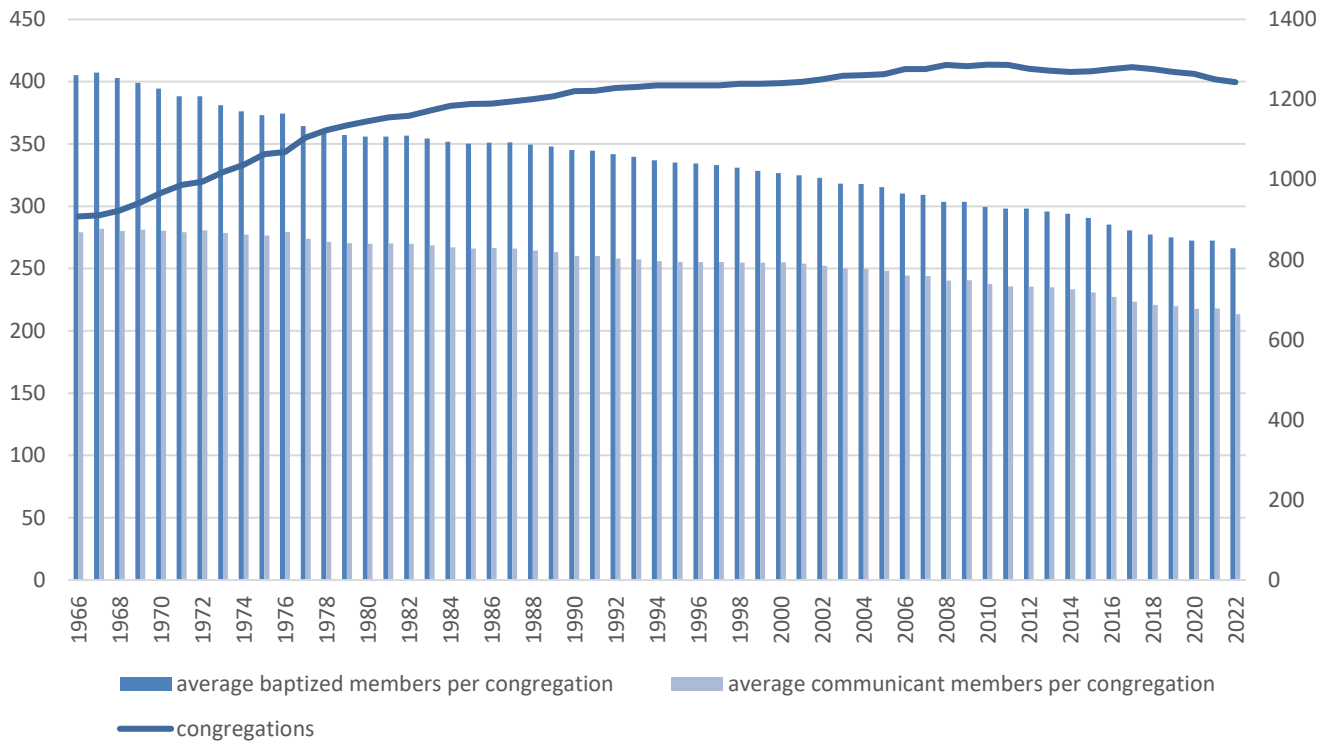
Congregational closures are still not close to the rate of net membership losses. The twelve closures in 2022 represent 0.96% of all WELS churches. Meanwhile, WELS membership declined 2.83%. Since 2000, only once has the percent of WELS churches closing been larger than the percent of WELS members lost (2009). The net effect: the average size of congregations has declined over the past half century, particular when it comes to baptized membership.

Graph I provides the average membership in a WELS congregation, i.e. the total membership of WELS divided by the total number of congregations.

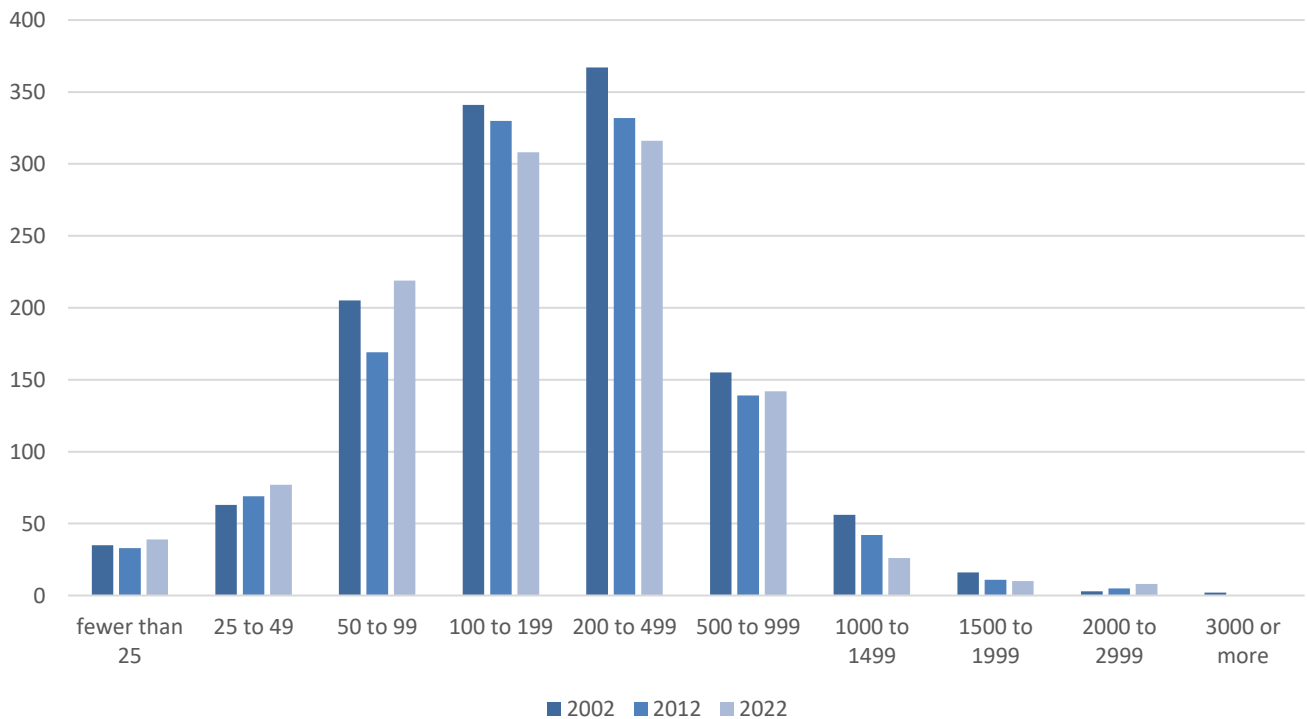
Graph J show the shift of WELS congregations in various total membership categories.

Graphs K and L show those shifts in terms of worship attendance categories.

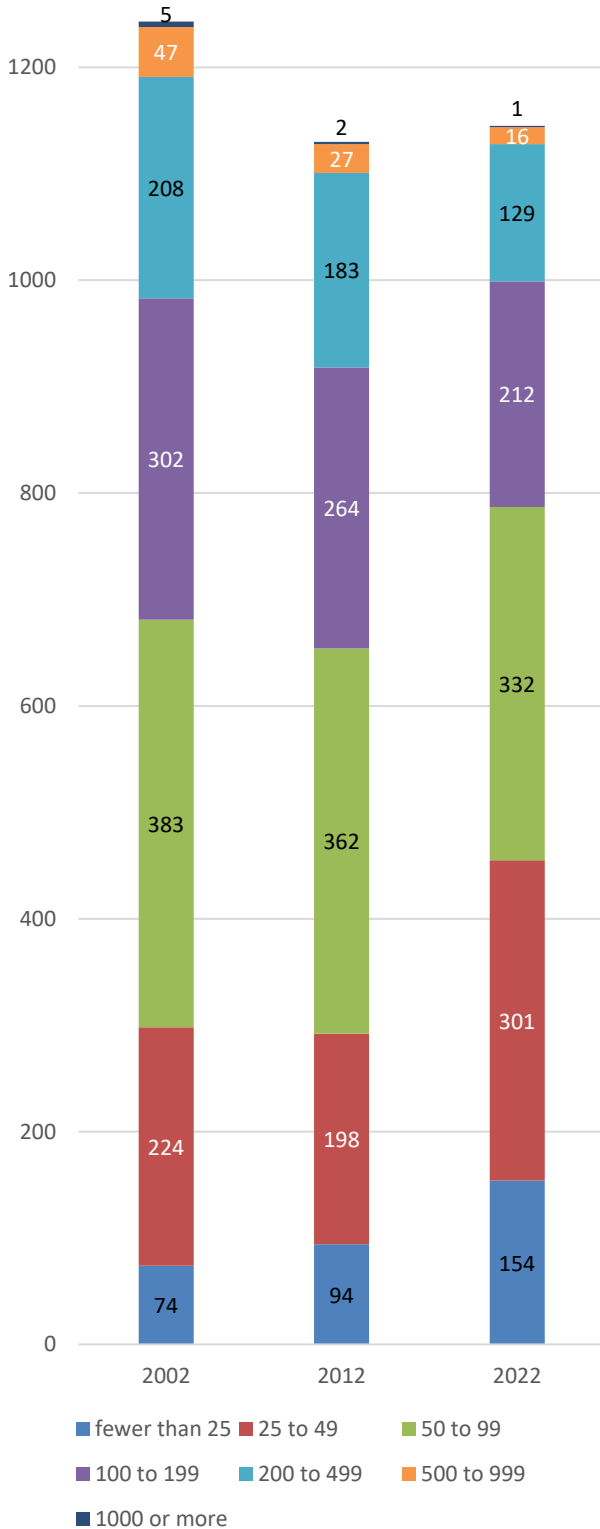
I: AVERAGE MEMBERSHIP IN WELS CONGREGATIONS



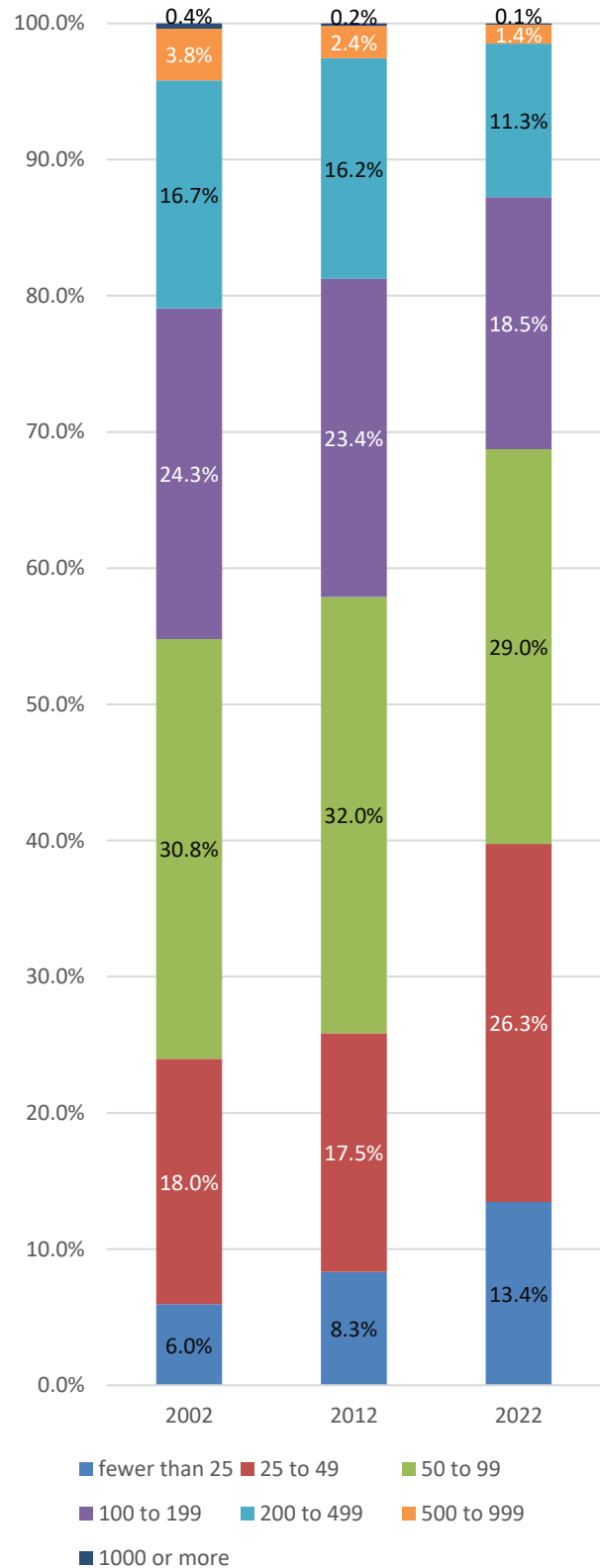
J: WELS CONGREGATIONS BY TOTAL MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES



K: # OF WELS CONGREGATIONS IN WORSHIP ATTENDANCE CATEGORIES



L: % OF WELS CONGREGATIONS IN WORSHIP ATTENDANCE CATEGORIES



Demographics

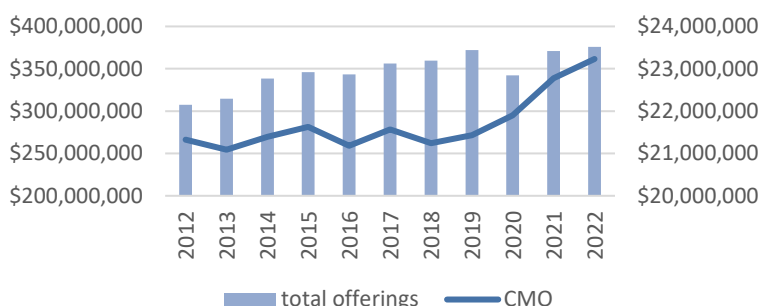
In years evenly divisible by 5, WELS asks congregations to provide estimates of membership grouped into different age brackets and ethnic categories. Thus, that information was last requested in 2020 and will not be asked again until the completion of the year 2025. To see the data submitted in 2020, please refer to the Statistical Summary for that year. It can be found at <https://welscongregationalservices.net/stats/>.

Offerings

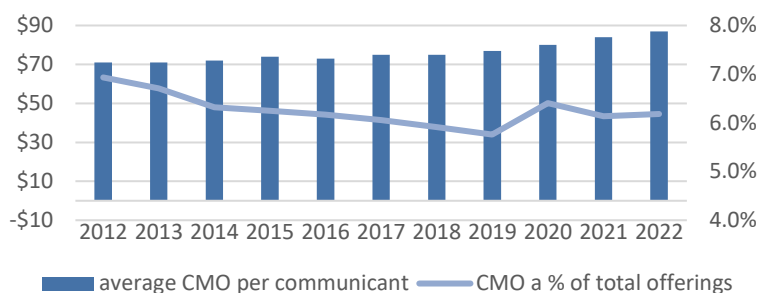
“... your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”⁵ We thank God for the generosity of his people. 2022 saw a 2% increase in Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO), from \$22,775,271 in 2021 to \$23,230,908 in 2022. Per communicant giving for CMO rose from \$84 to \$87, a 3.6% increase. Total offerings in WELS rose 1.2%, from \$371,103,043 in 2021 to \$375,688,050 in 2022. Per communicant giving for total offerings rose from \$1,362 to \$1,419, a 4% increase.

Per communicant giving and overall giving remains at historic levels. It is remarkable how the Spirit moved the saints of WELS to support gospel ministry in recent years, which contained a fair amount of economic uncertainty.

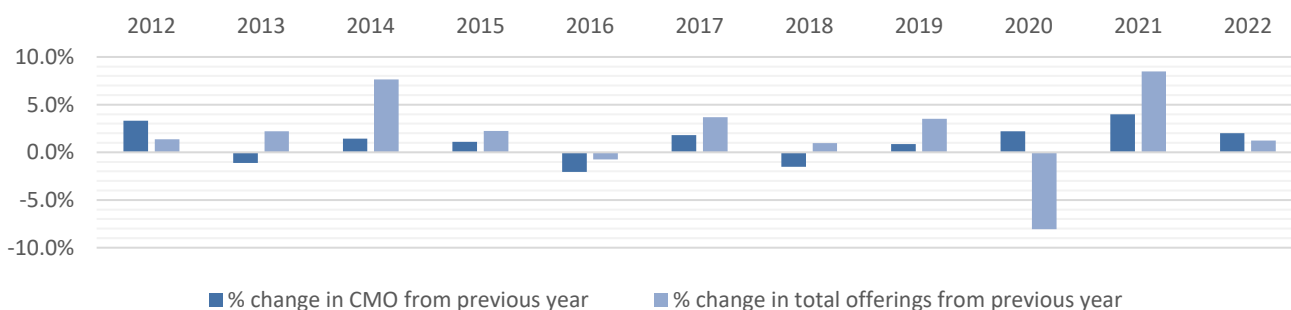
M: WELS' TOTAL OFFERINGS / CMO



N: CMO PER WELS COMMUNICANT / CMO AS % OF TOTAL OFFERINGS



O: % CHANGE IN WELS' OFFERINGS FROM PREVIOUS YEAR



⁵ 2 Corinthians 9:11

Looking Ahead: Addressing the Challenges

The 2022 Question

2022 raises a question. When WELS began losing members (1991), it was typically tenths of a percent. It was not until 2008 that total losses exceeded 1% of total membership. Since then, it has exceeded 1% 11 out of 15 years. 2018 was the first year total losses exceeded 1.5% of total membership. In 2021, total losses were down a bit, to only 1.1% of total membership. But now in 2022, it is 2.8%. The question: Is 2022 simply an anomaly or part of a trend in larger annual losses? If it is a trend upward, how long can that continue? When might losses level off? What would that take?

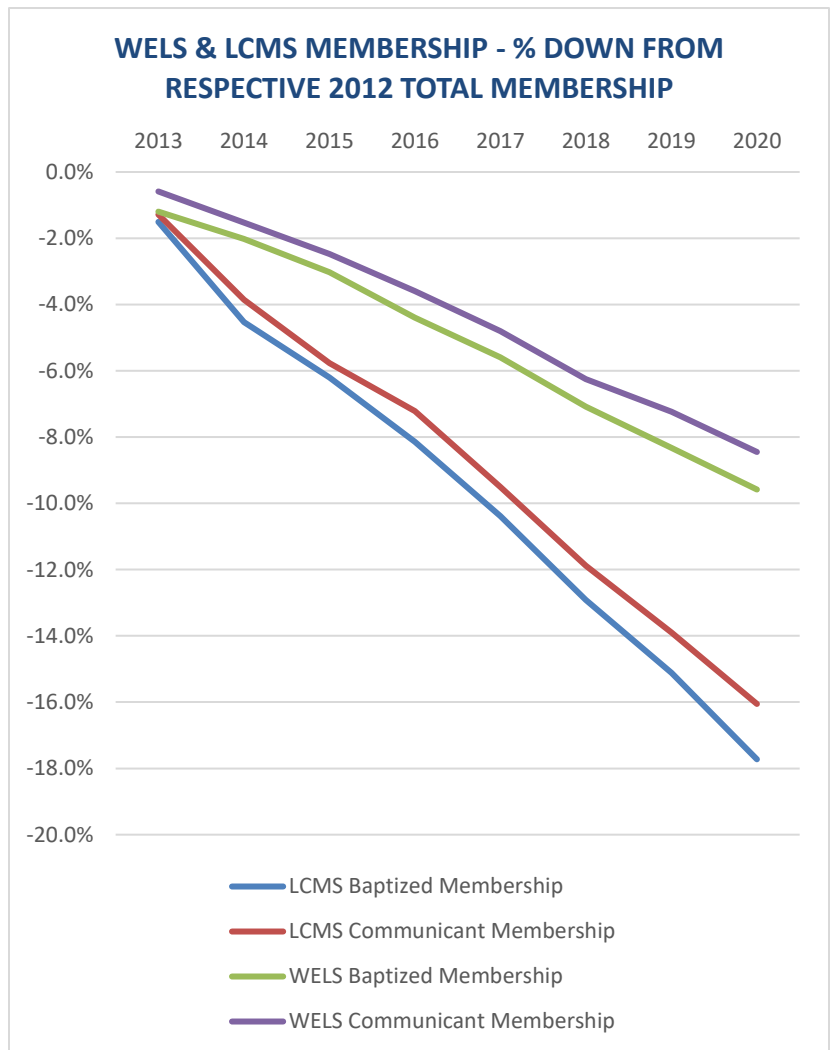
A loss of 10,000 members in one year and 50,000 members in one decade is striking. Consider Graph G, which demonstrates that in the decade that spans 1993 to 2002, WELS lost 16,594 members. In 2003 to 2012, the WELS lost 22,617 members, 36.3% more losses than the previous decade. However, in 2013 to 2022, WELS lost 49,849 members, which is 120% more losses than the previous decade.

If trends in birthrate, adult confirmations, back door losses, and deaths continue unabated, net losses over the next decade would again increase somewhere between 30% to 50%. That is substantially less than the 120% increase in losses WELS experienced in the most recent decade. However, it translates to losses between 60,000 and 70,000 members over the next ten years.

Why does that matter? Here are four reasons.

First, the primary concern is for individuals who have strayed from regular contact with the means of grace. If these losses were all due to deaths of WELS members, that would be to their gain. However, many of these losses are people who have walked away from church completely.

Second, on a congregational level, eventually these losses make certain congregational ministries challenging: Sunday school, teen group, simply finding enough volunteers to maintain the property.



Thirdly, also on the congregational/school level, it means the ratio of called workers to lay members continues to shrink. This means support for the called worker needs to increasingly come from something other than normal offerings: tuition, school choice dollars, an endowment. That presents its own set of challenges.

Fourthly, on the synodical level, the work we do jointly—Ministerial Education, World Missions, Home Missions—relies on a strong backbone of WELS members/congregations to support that work. As that backbone erodes, it challenges our ability to do that joint work in the same way and to the same extent.

Again, without some sort of change that impacts these trends, losses will continue at a high rate. So, let us consider what “some sort of change” might potentially look like. The following are what you will hear proposed as strategies to address the challenges outlined in the previous pages. Let us attempt to examine the potential impact of each strategy considering current data.

Pro-Natalist Strategy

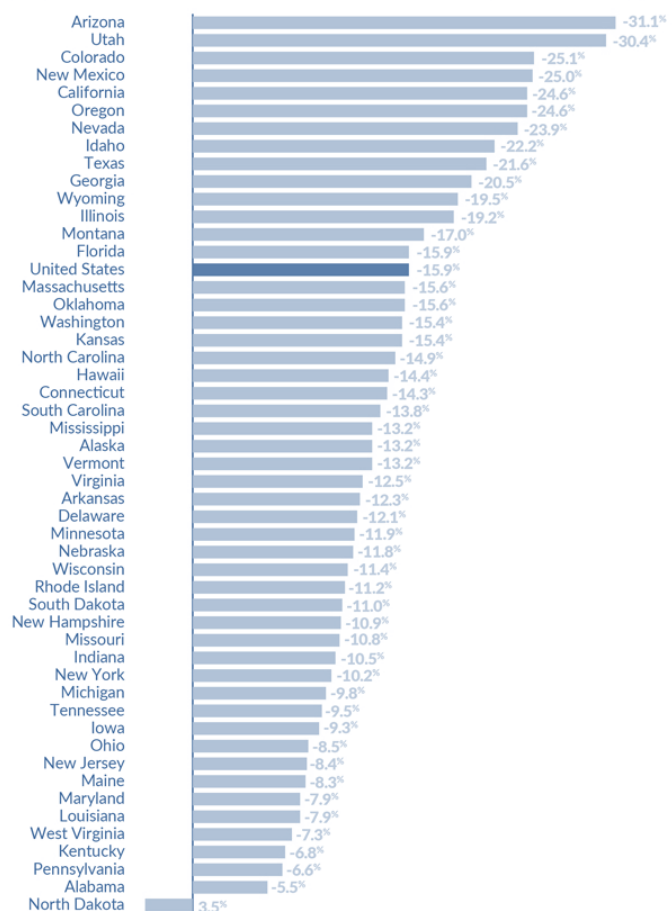
There are those who would suggest, “We simply need to encourage young people to have more children.” However, we must be realistic about the potential impact of pro-natalist strategies.

We have stipulated that WELS has fewer members in the younger generations. That means to return to a birthrate similar to a decade ago (about 6,500 births annually) would require child-bearing aged couples in WELS today to have, not the same amount, but *more* children than WELS couples had a decade ago. Moreover, in the last half-decade, deaths and births within WELS have essentially offset each other. Therefore, if the hope was to offset spiritual losses through increased births, the current birthrate would need to increase by over 300% immediately.

This is not to suggest that pro-natalist strategies should not be discussed. They should simply because, “Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him.”⁶ This is simply meant to set realistic expectations for how big an impact those strategies, on their own, would have.

Nearly All States Sustain Large Fertility Rate Declines

Change in 2020 general fertility rate from 2001 to 2010 annual averages



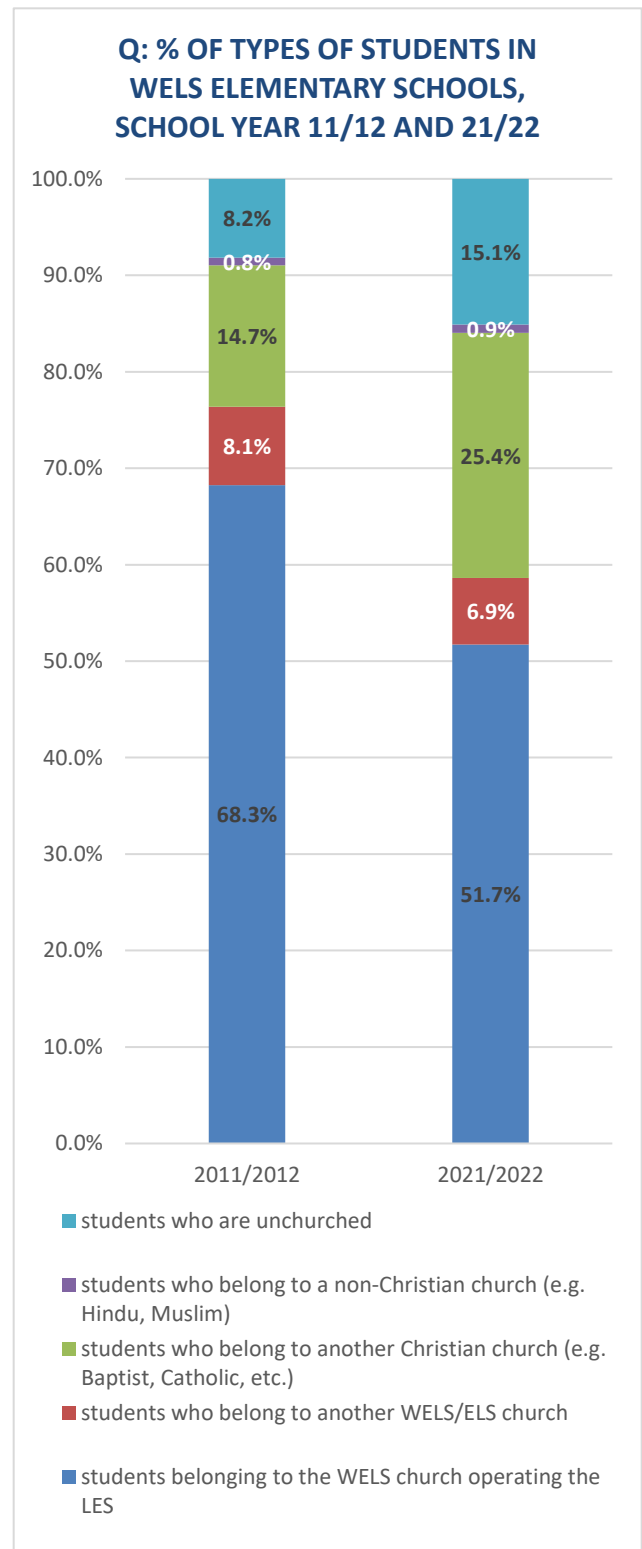
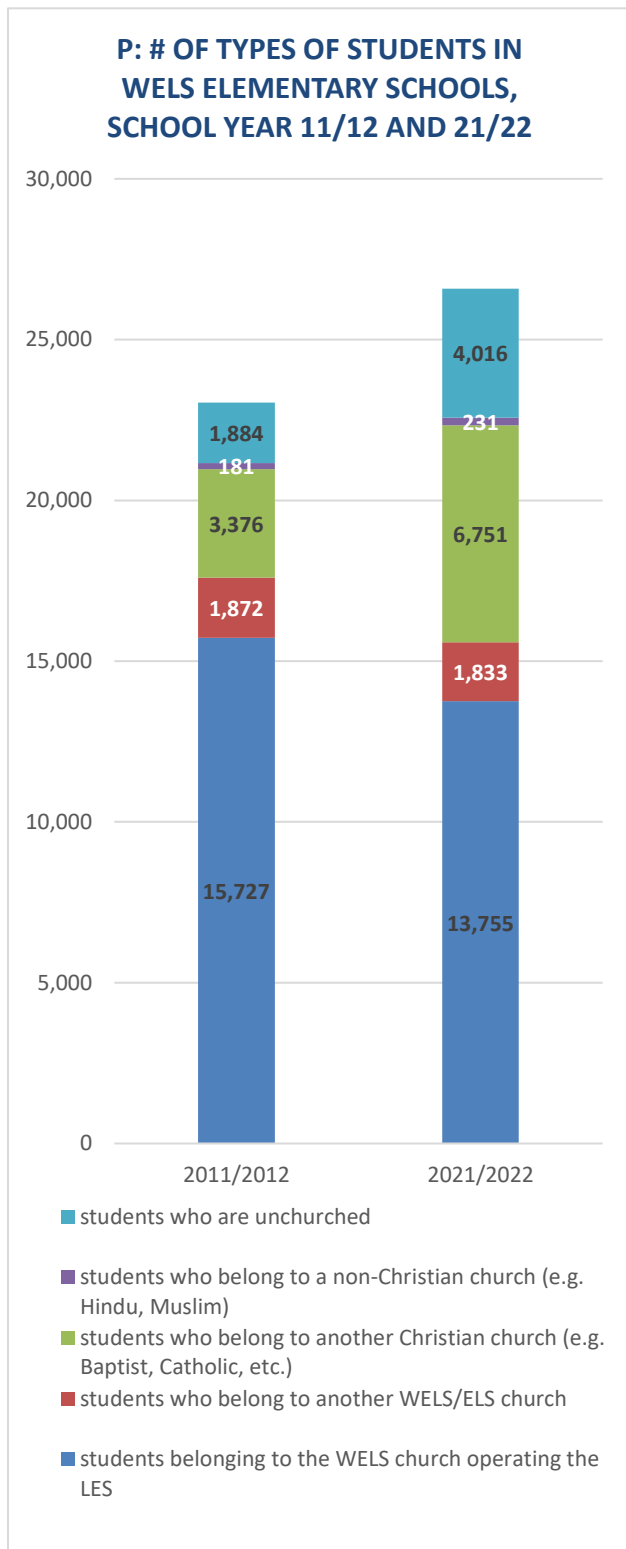
Source: Pew calculations of data from CDC National Center for Health Statistics reports. Rates reflect births per 1,000 women ages 15-44.

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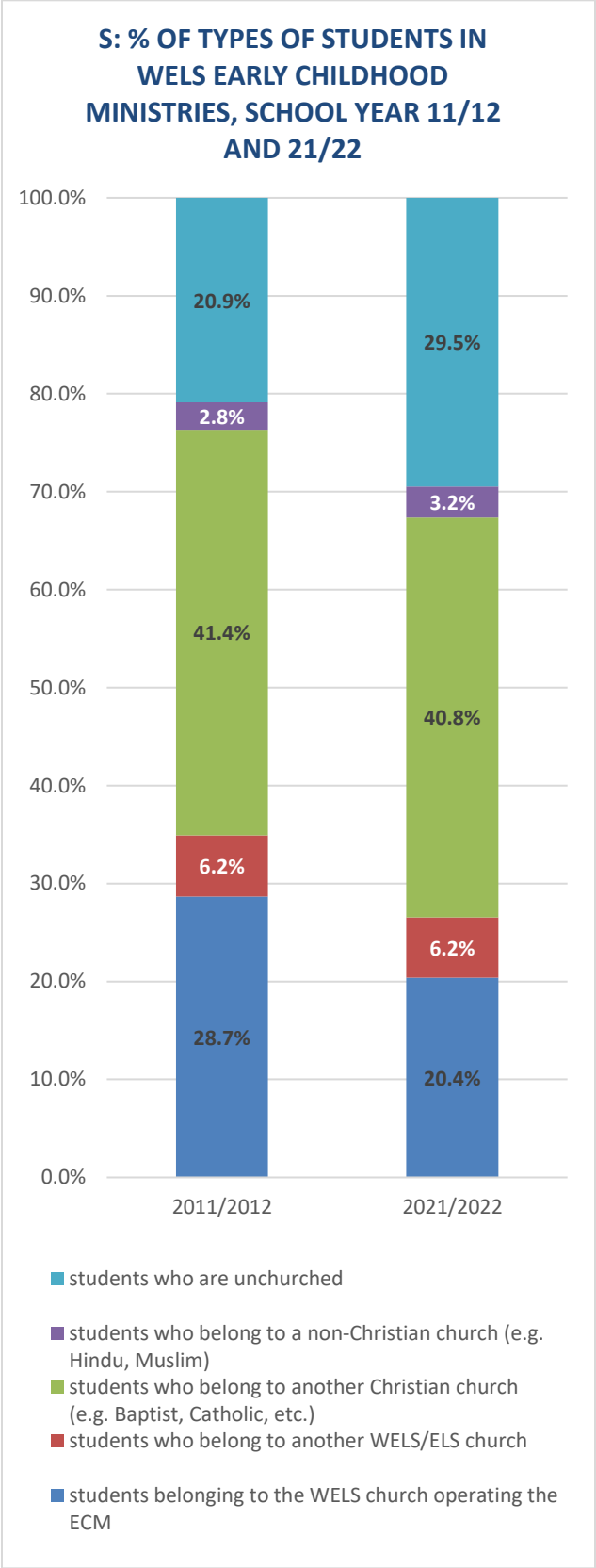
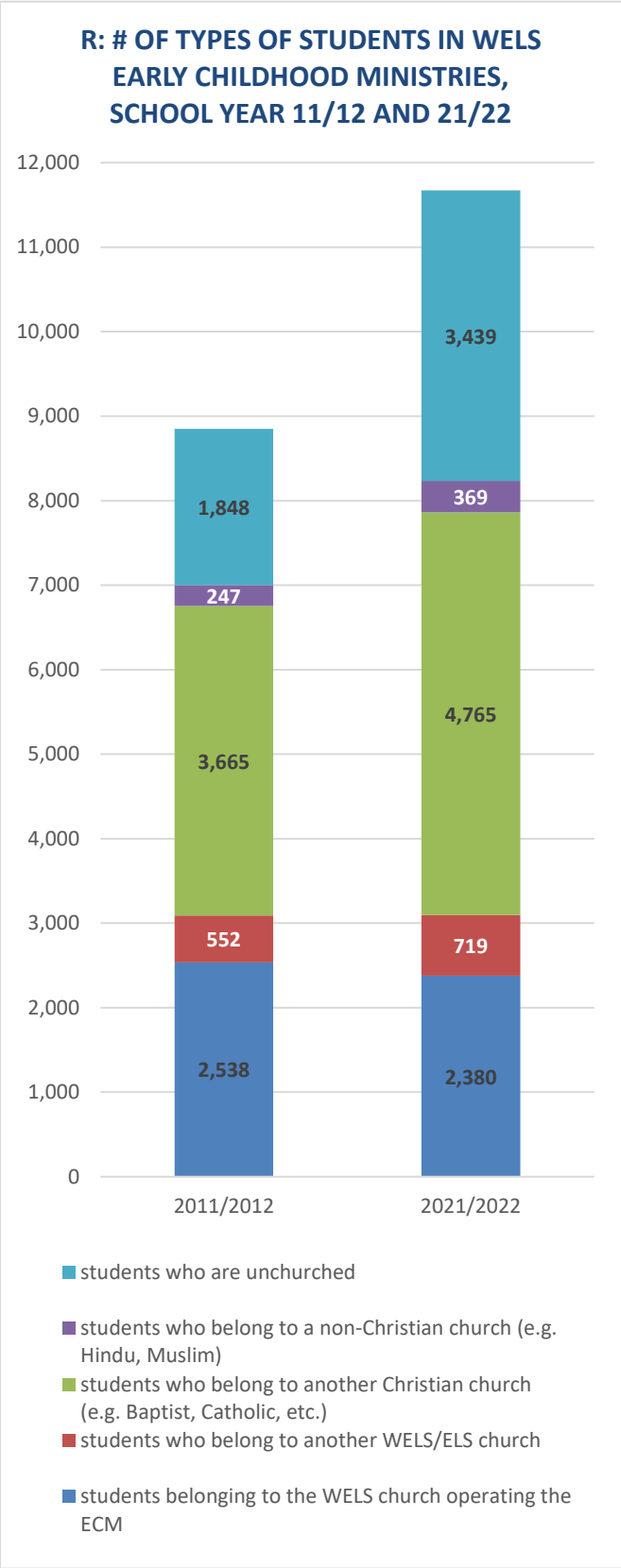
⁶ Psalm 127:3.

Youth Education as Outreach Strategy

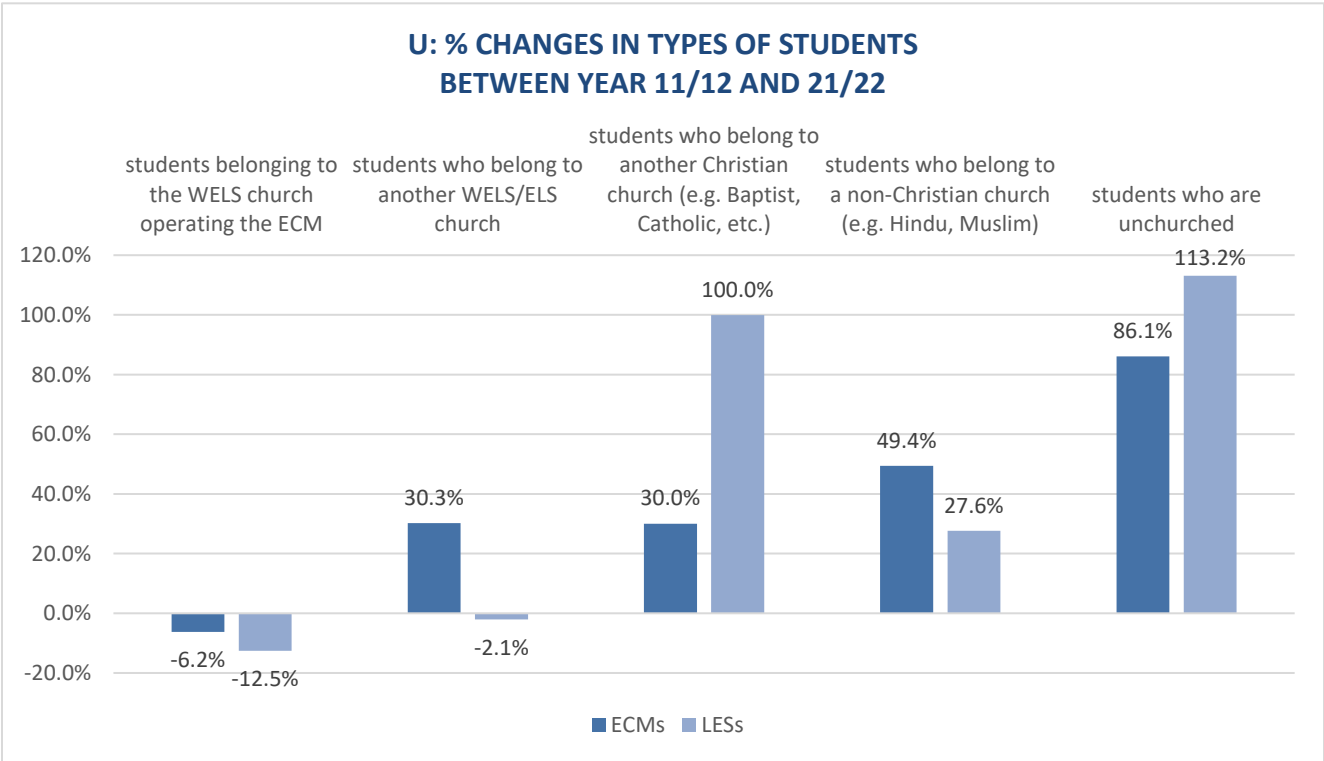
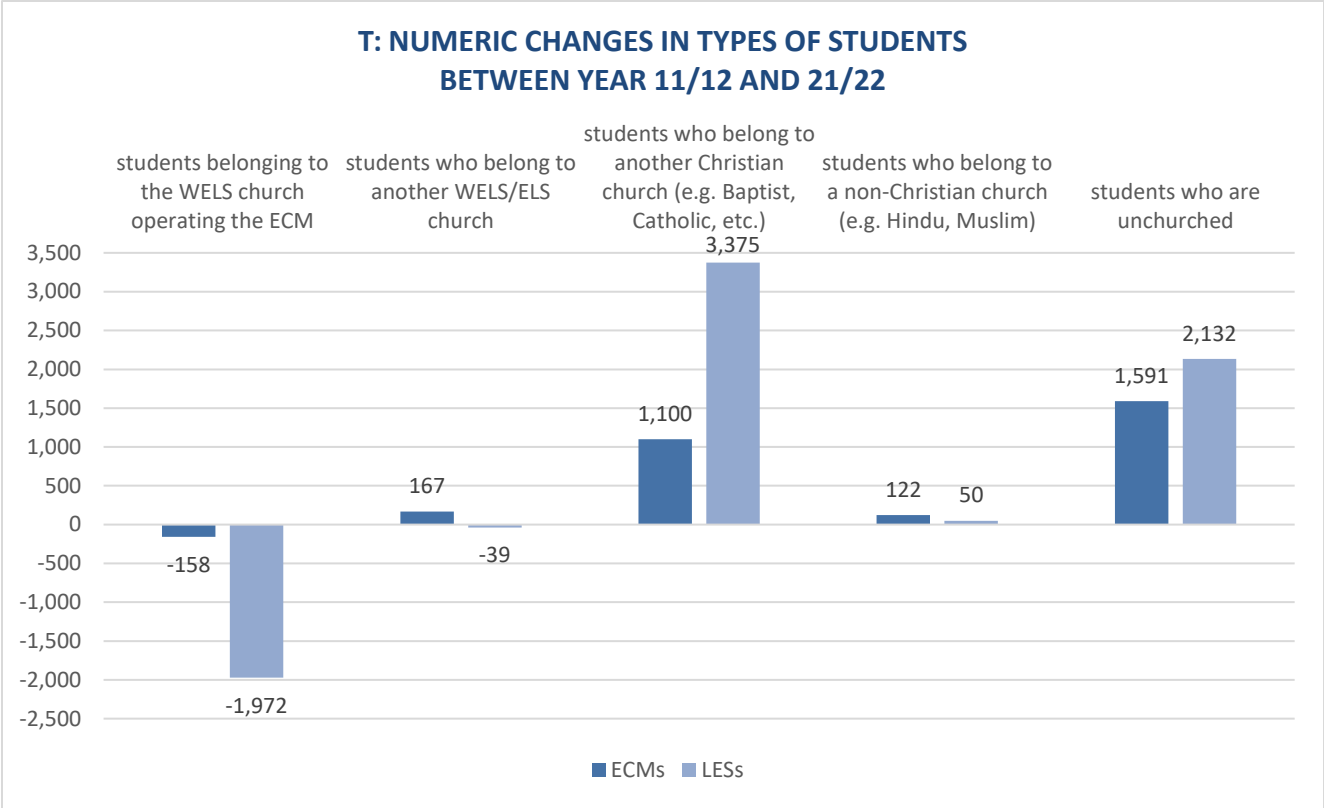
The following graphs compare both the totals and percentages of various types of students enrolled in our Lutheran elementary schools in two years separated by one decade.



Here is the same comparison made for our WELS early childhood ministries (ECMs), such as preschools.



Graph T illustrates the numeric changes in those various “types of students” categories over the past decade. Graph U provides what that represents in terms of percentages of growth or decline.

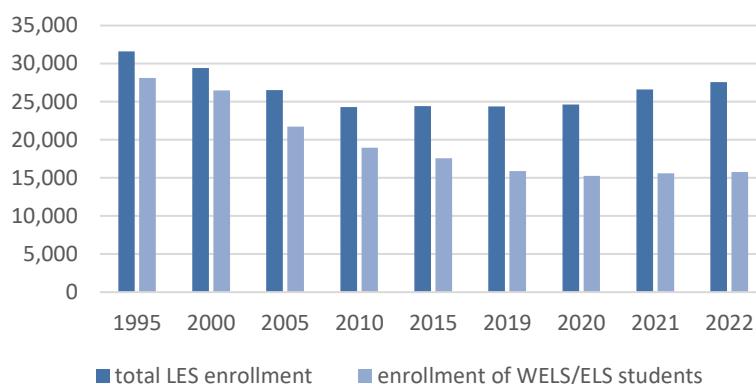


This is information that is probably known by most WELS members. Multiple events in recent years have increased outside interest in private education. A recent study by the Cato Institute demonstrated that most private schools were seeing enrollment rise, even as the American population of school-aged children declines.⁷ So, in one decade, WELS enrollment rose 15.4% in Lutheran elementary schools. Yet, the makeup of the enrollment by WELS students declined by almost 2000 students, a 12.5% drop.

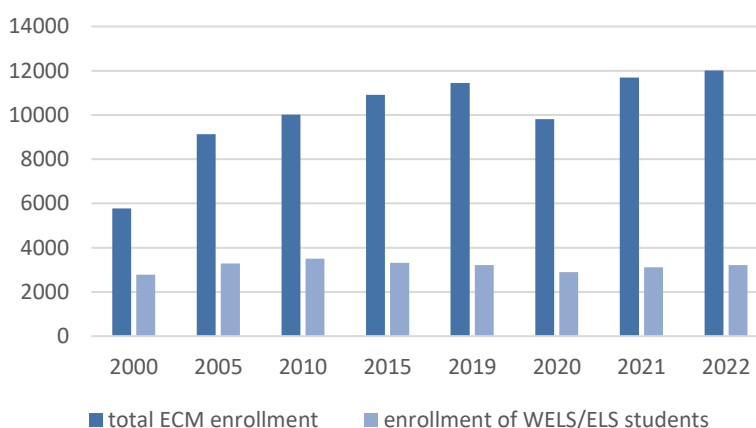
Our Lutheran elementary schools, early childhood ministries, and area Lutheran high schools (ALHSes) are all growing in enrollment. When you combine enrollment in those three ministries, it is the largest number of students in WELS' educational system in history, 46,601. However, in most of WELS' schools, that growth is *not* coming from WELS or Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) members. Growth consists *primarily* of students whose parent(s) profess to be members of a Christian church not in fellowship with WELS and *secondarily* of students whose parent(s) are unchurched.

When you look at Graph E, which shows the decline in the birth rate being especially sharp in the last three years, it is inevitable that this trend will continue. Growth within the WELS educational system has the potential to continue, as long as the desire for private education remains high. However, that growth will come largely from non-WELS member enrollment. It is likely that in some

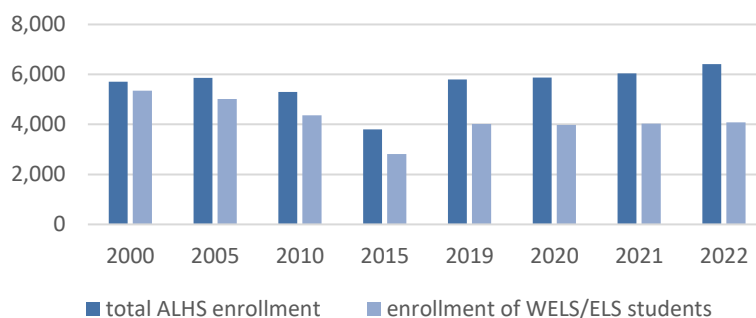
V: COMPARISON OF TOTAL WELS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENROLLMENT TO ENROLLMENT OF MEMBERS



W: COMPARISON OF TOTAL WELS ECM ENROLLMENT TO ENROLLMENT OF MEMBERS



X: COMPARISON OF TOTAL WELS AREA LUTHERAN HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT TO ENROLLMENT OF MEMBERS



⁷ <https://www.cato.org/survey-reports/survey-55-percent-private-schools-see-enrollment-rise>

WELS schools, WELS students will comprise a minority of the total enrollment. (This is already the case in a few schools.)

As school enrollments approach the point where there are as many or more non-WELS/ELS students as WELS/ELS students, school leadership will have to grapple with key questions. How, if at all, does this affect the curriculum? (E.g., Is fifth-grade religion taught the same way in a classroom that is 90% WELS students as it is in a classroom that is 50% non-WELS students?) How, if at all, does this affect school culture? How does this shift affect the financial model of the school?

However, this shift would also seem to present mission opportunities. The Commission on Lutheran School's enrollment database tracks "mission prospects." Those include the students (and, obviously, their parents) who are unchurched or who belong to a non-Christian church. There are almost 9,200 such students enrolled in WELS' youth educational ministries.

It is worthy of discussion about when to consider "other Christian" students (and, obviously, their parents) as mission prospects. There currently are almost 13,800 such students in WELS' youth educational ministries. Anecdotally, WELS school leadership will share that they know many of these to be nominal members of the church to which they profess to belong. If 20% of those who claim to belong to another Christian church are being dishonest (perhaps to avoid being "pressured" into joining the WELS church), that would be another 2,800 "mission prospects."

It is estimated that 70% of American children under the age of 18 live with two parents.⁸ That means in our WELS education system, when you include the non-WELS parents, there are projected to be about 20,000 mission prospects. Again, the opportunity is there. The challenge is capitalizing on it.

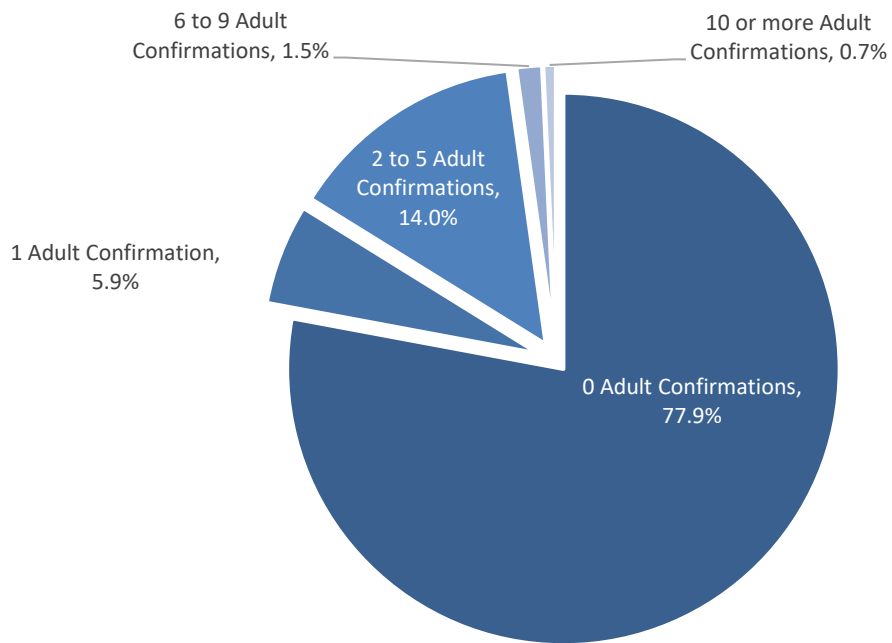
Table Y shows the total reported number of adult confirmations that have occurred as a result of outreach within an early childhood ministry or Lutheran elementary school over the last five years. It also provides the percentage of early childhood ministries and Lutheran elementary schools that fall into various categories.

Y: EDUCATIONAL MINISTRIES IN VARIOUS TOTAL ADULT CONFIRMATION CATEGORIES

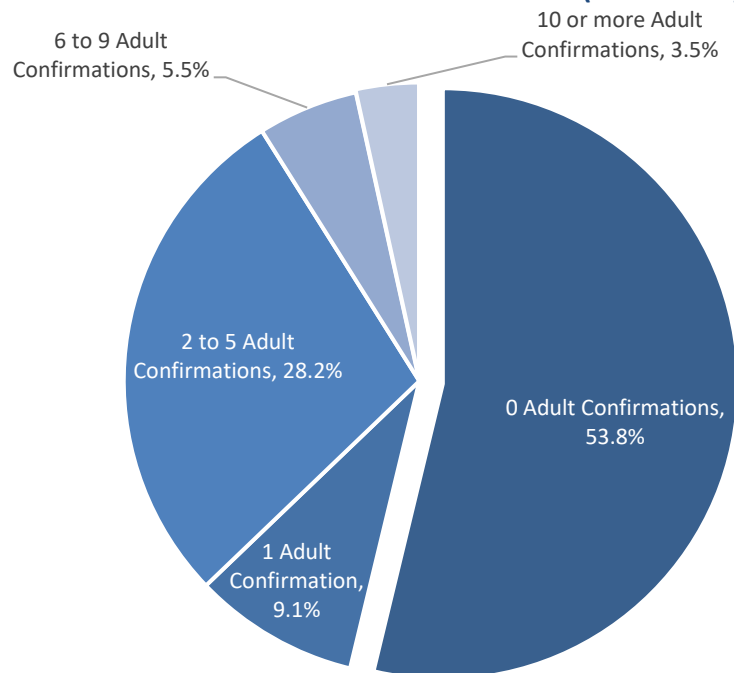
Year	Education Ministries		0 Adult Confirmations				1 Adult Confirmation				2 to 5 Adult Confirmations				6 to 9 Adult Confirmations				10 or more Adult Confirmations			
	ECM	LES	ECM	ECM%	LES	LES%	ECM	ECM%	LES	LES%	ECM	ECM%	LES	LES%	ECM	ECM%	LES	LES%	ECM	ECM%	LES	LES%
2018	343	284	252	73.5%	147	51.8%	16	4.7%	26	9.2%	65	19.0%	90	31.7%	6	1.7%	11	3.9%	4	1.2%	10	3.5%
2019	373	289	285	76.4%	158	54.7%	21	5.6%	30	10.4%	60	16.1%	78	27.0%	5	1.3%	17	5.9%	2	0.5%	6	2.1%
2020	371	282	293	79.0%	165	58.5%	24	6.5%	25	8.9%	49	13.2%	72	25.5%	4	1.1%	15	5.3%	1	0.3%	5	1.8%
2021	363	282	296	81.5%	148	52.5%	22	6.1%	25	8.9%	36	9.9%	80	28.4%	7	1.9%	18	6.4%	2	0.6%	11	3.9%
2022	362	284	287	79.3%	146	51.4%	24	6.6%	23	8.1%	42	11.6%	81	28.5%	5	1.4%	17	6.0%	4	1.1%	17	6.0%

⁸ <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/living-arrangements-of-children.html#:~:text=3%2C%202022%20%E2%80%94%20According%20to%20a,with%20a%20parent%20in%202019.>

Z: % OF EARLY CHILDHOOD MINISTRIES IN VARIOUS AVERAGE ANNUAL ADULT CONFIRMATION CATEGORIES (2018-2022)



AA: % OF LUTHERAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN VARIOUS AVERAGE ANNUAL ADULT CONFIRMATION CATEGORIES (2018-2022)

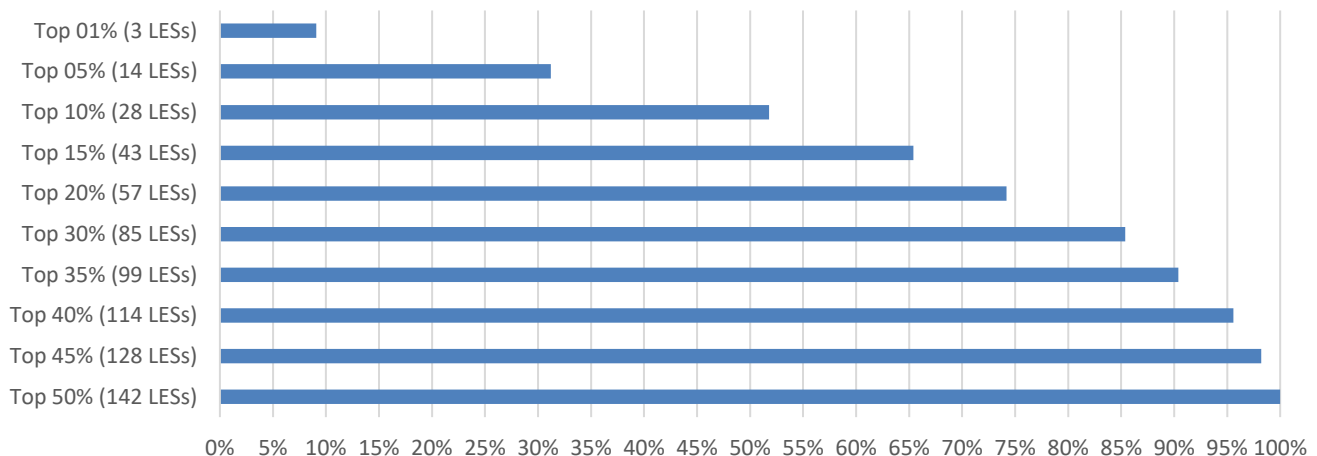


As graphs Z and AA demonstrate, in an average year almost 4 out of 5 WELS early childhood ministries have zero adult confirmations. Just over half of Lutheran elementary schools have zero adult confirmations. The silver lining: there *are* examples of both where the Lord of the Church is blessing their harvest strategy. (A “harvest strategy” is the effort to share the gospel with unchurched parents of students and the ways in which parents are encouraged to pursue church membership.)

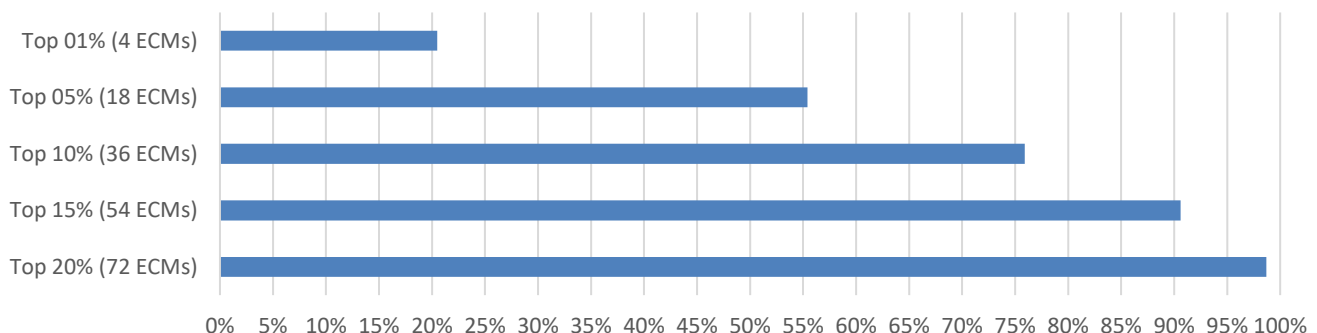
Graphs BB and CC illustrate that reality. 570 adult confirmations in 2022 resulted from outreach to non-WELS parents who had a child enrolled in one of WELS’ 284 Lutheran elementary schools. About a third of those 570 adult confirmations came from the “top 5%,” i.e., the 14 schools with the most adult confirmations that resulted from a harvest strategy. So, almost 75% of those LES-related adult confirmations came from just 20% of our schools.

The same holds true in WELS’ early childhood ministries. 224 adult confirmations in 2022 resulted from outreach to non-WELS parents who had a child enrolled in one of WELS’ 362 early childhood ministries. 20% of those came from the top 1%, i.e., the 4 ministries with the most adult confirmations that resulted from a harvest strategy. 55% of those ECM-related adult confirmations came from just 5% of our ECMs.

BB. WHERE DID THE 570 ADULT CONFIRMATIONS IN WELS' 284 LUTHERAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS COME FROM? (2022)



CC. WHERE DID THE 224 ADULT CONFIRMATIONS IN WELS' 362 EARLY CHILDHOOD MINISTRIES COME FROM? (2022)

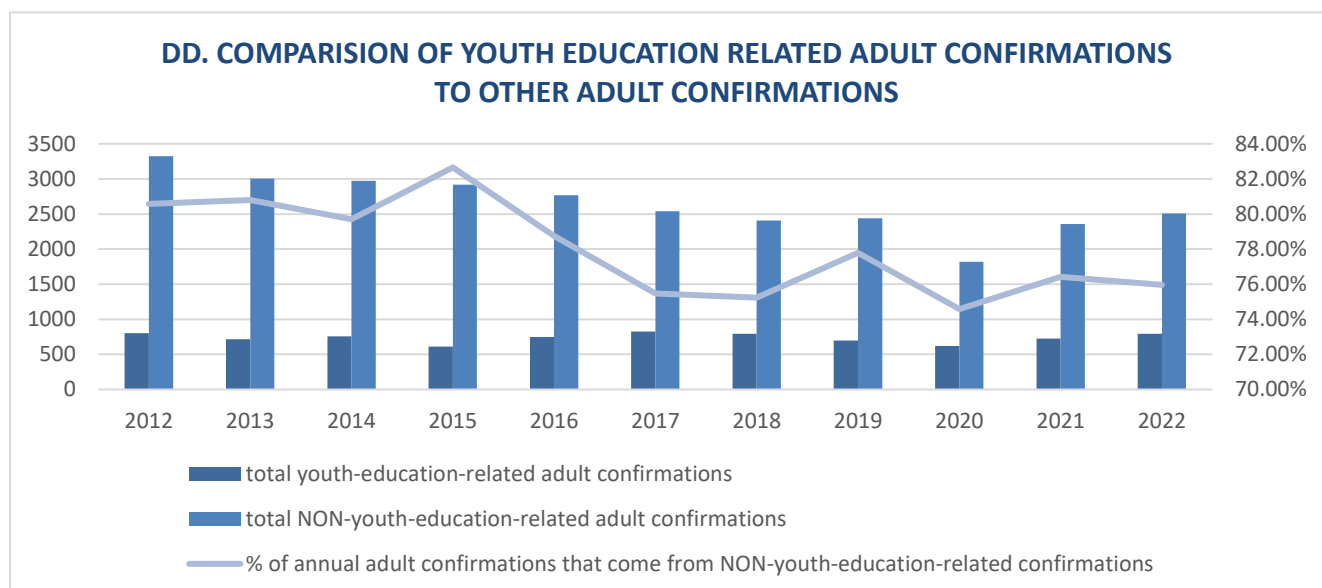


One caveat: in all of WELS' statistical reporting, the greatest data dissonance is between churches and schools reporting adult confirmations. The number of total adult confirmations is reported in January when churches submit their annual statistics. The number of adult confirmations that result from a harvest strategy in an LES or ECM is reported when they submit their statistics at a different time in the year. At times there are large differences that have to be reporting errors. In the upcoming year, WELS Congregational Services is going to look into the data dissonance in reporting of adult confirmations.

However, that doesn't greatly alter the fact that most adult confirmations that result from a harvest strategy within an LES or ECM occur in a small percentage of those educational ministries. Again, this presents an opportunity. *If* it were possible to identify key components of those more fruitful harvest strategies and implement them more broadly, and *if* the Holy Spirit were to bless those efforts in some additional educational ministries, *then* it would be possible to increase the number of spiritual gains that come out of early childhood ministries and elementary schools. (Note: WELS' area Lutheran high schools don't report adult confirmations, only baptisms, because area Lutheran high schools belong to federations consisting of multiple congregations. If a non-WELS student attending an ALHS and his parent(s) decided to join WELS, it would be through one of those congregations, who would then report those confirmations.)

If the Lord is going to increasingly bring unchurched and de-churched students and parents to our educational ministries, let us view these individuals as a precious gift. They are a mission field God has dropped right into our laps. Let us then do everything within our power to attempt to connect them to our church body, so that they might be part of a Christian community and have a shepherd for their souls.

Graph DD demonstrates two key points. While we established that unchurched families in WELS' youth educational ministries doubled in the past decade, almost no increase occurred in the amount of unchurched families who joined WELS through harvest strategies. We are not currently capitalizing on the increased opportunity. Second, more than three-quarters of adult confirmations in WELS come from outreach efforts *other* than youth-education-related strategies. In the past decade, total youth-education-related confirmations in WELS averaged about 735 annually. In that same decade, the total of all other adult confirmations averaged about 2,640 annually. It is a fallacy that outreach requires a congregation to operate a youth education ministry like an LES or ECM. That leads to the next strategy.

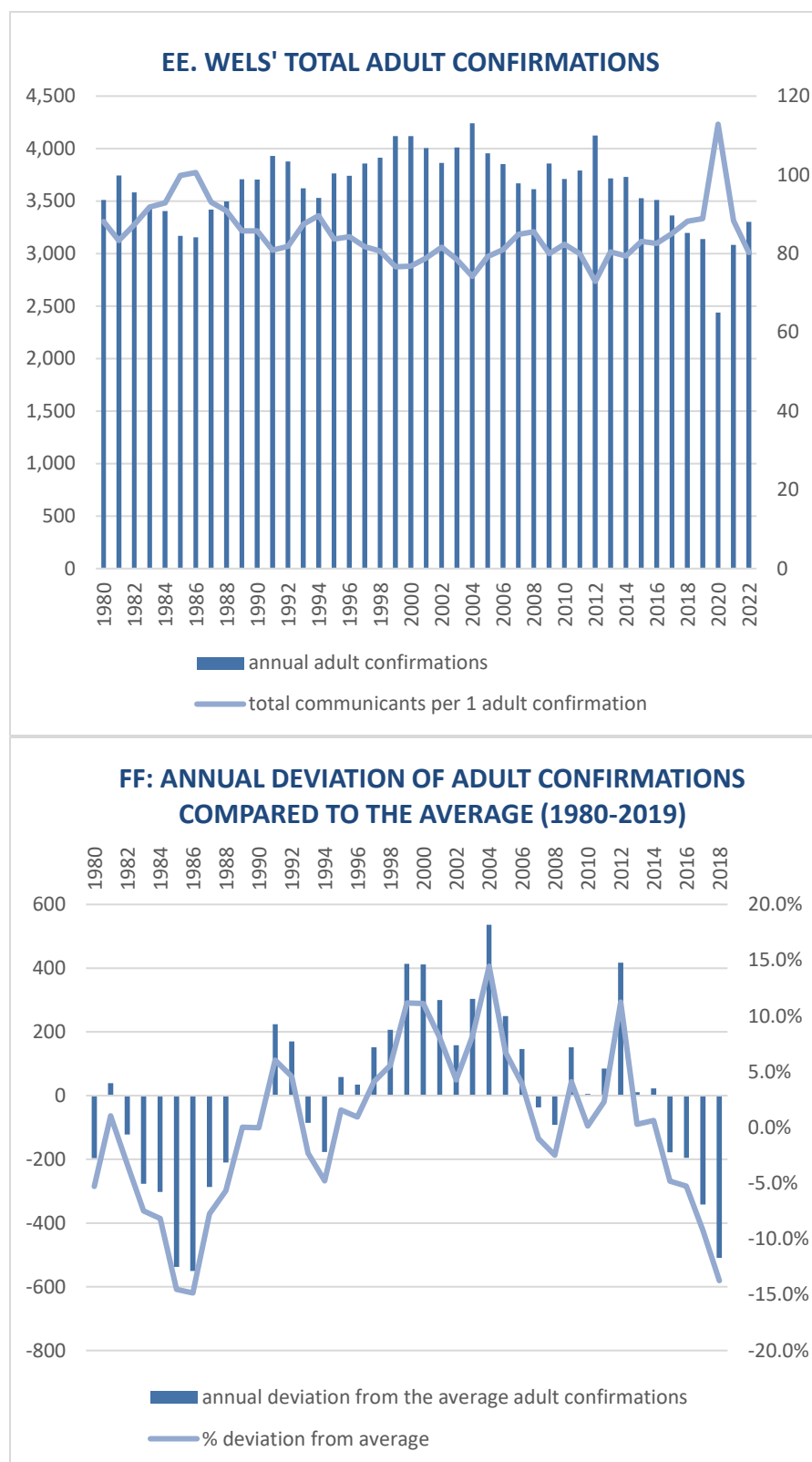


A Strategy of Personal Outreach

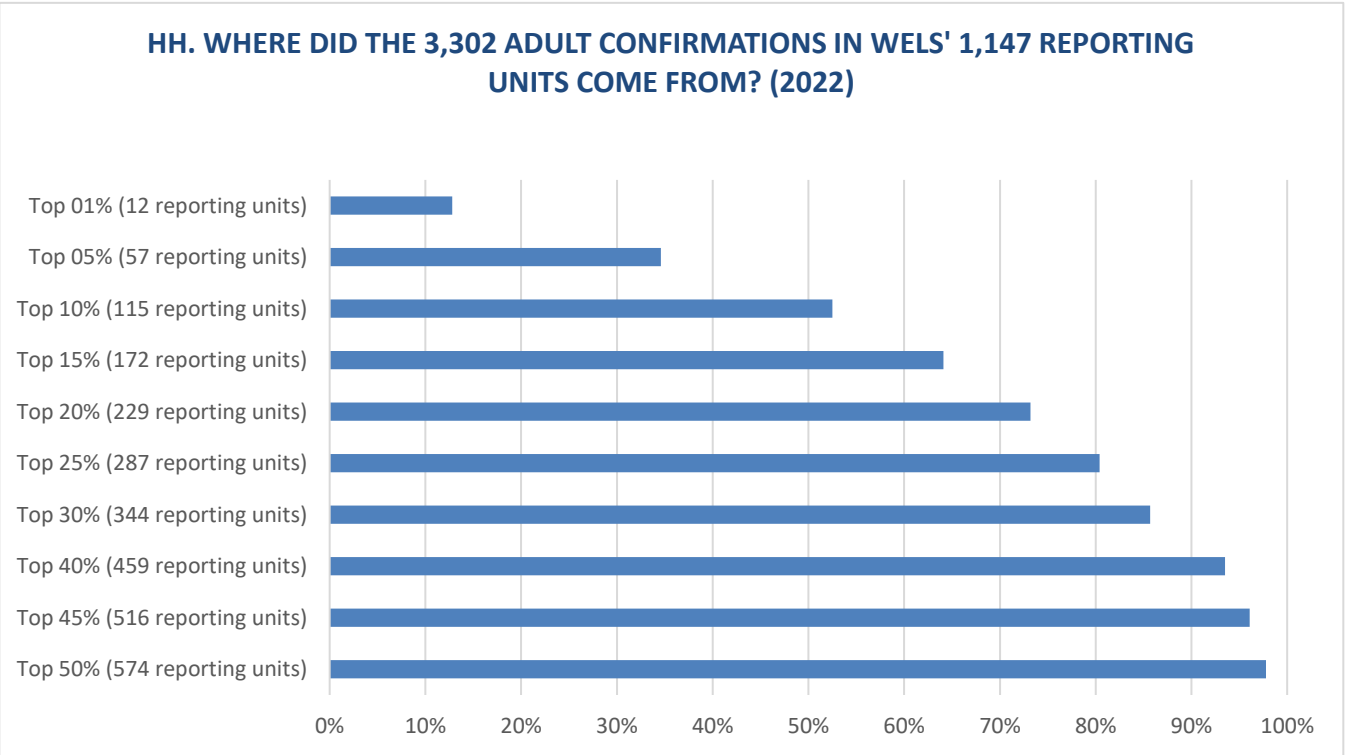
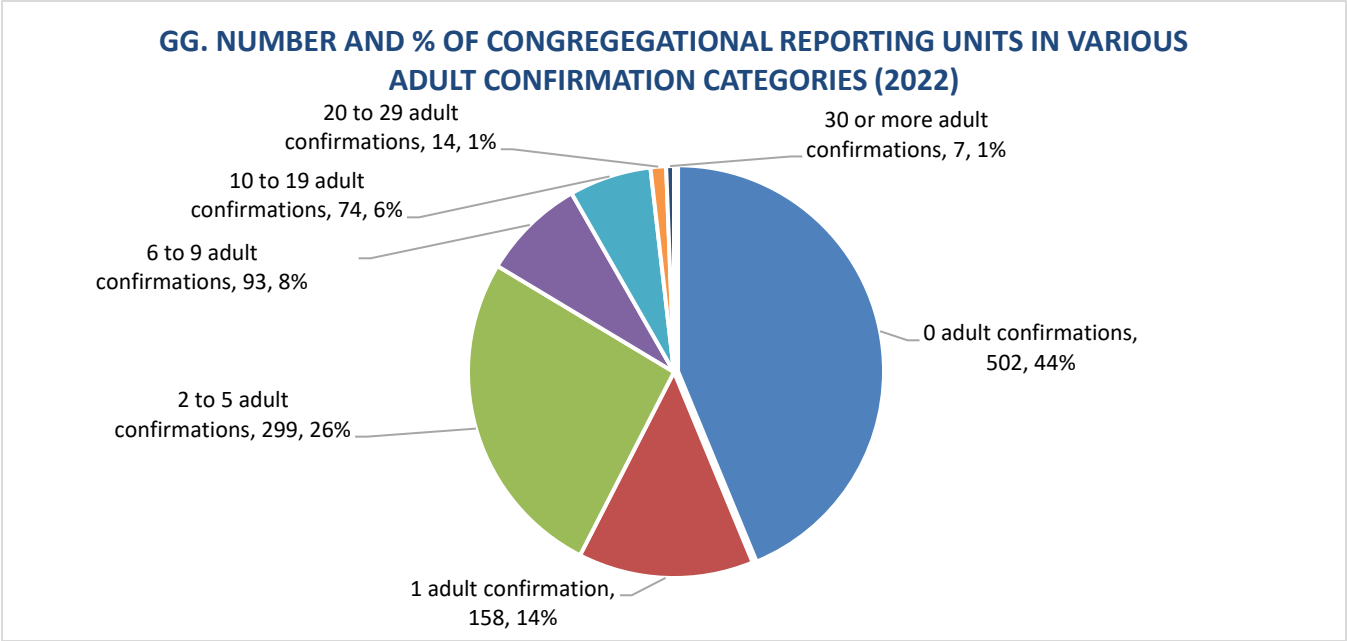
For as long as spiritual gains within WELS have been tracked, adult confirmations have remained relatively stable. Consider the years 1980 to 2019 (i.e., prior to COVID). In that span, WELS averaged 3,706 adult confirmations annually. In those four decades the annual totals deviated, at most, about 15% in either direction. In other words, an “up year” isn’t that much greater than the average and a “down year” isn’t that much worse than the average.

There seems to be the most opportunity here. If the Lord blessed outreach efforts so that in one year they deviated 50% above the average, that would mean more than 1,800 additional adult confirmations.

Total adult confirmations in WELS follow a similar pattern to what we saw in youth-education-related adult confirmations. The top 10% of congregational reporting units accounted for over half of the total adult confirmations in WELS. (A “reporting unit” consists of congregations that report statistics together. This includes some dual-parish situations. Increasingly, it refers to multi-site ministries, where there are multiple properties operating under one governance and sharing one budget.)



A study of the adult confirmation trends in WELS gives some reason for hope. Historically, more than half of WELS' congregational reporting units would have zero adult confirmations each year. That has been trending downward. In 2022, it was 43.8% of reporting units that had zero adult confirmations. Historically, only about 5% of congregational reporting units would have double-digit adult confirmations each year. In 2022, 8.3% of congregational reporting units (95 total congregations) had 10 or more adult confirmations. 21 reporting units had 20 or more adult confirmations.



It raises the question, “Is there a commonality among congregations that the Lord has blessed with large numbers of spiritual gains?” Primarily, one: the congregations with extremely large spiritual gains tend to have a very large total membership.

Chart II illustrates this. It lists the ten congregational reporting units that reported the highest number of adult confirmations in 2022. Note that six out of ten rank in the top 5% of WELS congregations for total membership, including four of the top ten largest churches. The smallest congregation on that list has 457 members, almost three times the size of the current median membership in WELS.

This is not surprising, for two reasons.

The first reason relates to those in the community who might be “church shopping.” The number of “church shoppers” (i.e., unchurched adults who are actively looking for a Christian church to join) has plummeted in the last generation. In 1980, about 1 in 3 unchurched in Americans were church shopping. In 2020, it was closer to 1 in 20. However, 5% of the unchurched population in a decent-sized community still accounts for a fair number of people. Some of those “church shoppers” are perhaps “shopping” for what truly matters—God’s Word taught truthfully, and his sacraments used rightly. They find that in WELS. However, there are also shoppers who would not know to look for the one thing needful and are instead looking for other programs that are often easier for larger churches to offer.

The second reason it is not surprising that the churches with the largest adult confirmations would themselves be large is the functioning of the universal priesthood. The larger the congregation, the more likely that congregation has a good number of members who are willing to share their faith with friends, neighbors, and family. A larger congregation has more members to invite unchurched acquaintances to join them for a Christmas Eve or Easter service.

This should *not* be interpreted to mean that only large churches can have a good number of spiritual gains! That is inaccurate.

Chart JJ (next page) provides the top ten WELS congregational reporting units with the highest ratio of adult confirmations to in-person worshipers. (It focuses on churches that had an average in-person worship attendance equal to or greater than 30.) Note that half of those congregations are among the bottom 25% of WELS total membership. The largest congregation on that list has 188 total members, only slightly above WELS’ median total membership. Yet, half of those congregations had double-digit adult

II. THE TEN WELS CONGREGATIONAL REPORTING UNITS WITH THE MOST ADULT CONFIRMATIONS IN 2022

REPORTING UNIT	ADULT CONFIRMATIONS	TOTAL MEMBERSHIP	WELS RANK: TOTAL MEMBERSHIP	MEMBERS PER ADULT CONFIRMATION
St. Peter – Appleton, WI	84	2,914	1	35
NorthCross – Lakeville, MN	46	1,078	37	23
St. John – Mukwonago, WI	33	1,280	24	39
St. Mark – Leesburg, FL	33	457	208	14
St. Mark – De Pere, WI	32	2,705	3	85
Immanuel – Greenville, WI	30	2,722	2	91
St. Andrew – Middleton, WI	30	887	66	30
St. Paul’s – New Ulm, MN	28	2,160	7	77
Faith – Sharpsburg, GA	28	641	126	23
Redeemer – Tucson, AZ	27	510	180	19
In top 5% of WELS total membership				

confirmations, putting them in the top 8% of all congregational reporting units. All ten are within the top 16% of congregational reporting units when it comes to adult confirmations.

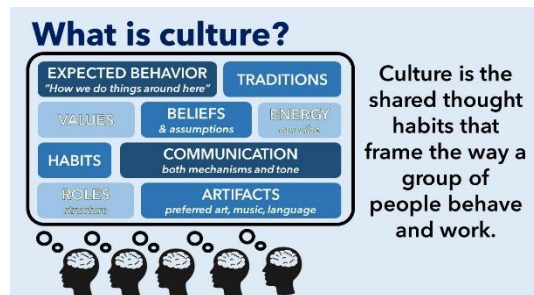
JJ. THE TEN WELS CONGREGATIONAL REPORTING UNITS WITH THE HIGHEST RATIO OF ADULT CONFIRMATIONS TO IN-PERSON WORSHIPERS (ATTENDANCE =>30) IN 2022						
REPORTING UNIT	ADULT CONFIRMATIONS	WEEKLY IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE (=>30)	RATIO OF 1 ADULT CONFIRMATION TO IN-PERSON WORSHIPERS	TOTAL MEMBERSHIP	WELS RANK: TOTAL MEMBERSHIP	MEMBERS PER ADULT CONFIRMATION
Intown - Atlanta, GA	9	31	3	83	885	9
Risen Savior - Mansfield, OH	8	30	4	48	1,032	6
The Way - Fredericksburg, VA	16	67	4	138	665	9
The Vine - Joplin, MO	9	39	4	44	1,048	5
Divine Savior - Delray Beach, FL	25	120	5	188	535	8
Hope - Tigard, OR	6	30	5	36	1,074	6
Illumine - Rock Hill, SC	14	70	5	118	731	8
Good Shepherd - Deltona, FL	16	82	5	229	438	14
Living Hope - Chattanooga, TN	10	52	5	93	837	9
May River - Bluffton, SC	7	37	5	64	971	9
In bottom 25% of WELS membership						

In the statistical reporting form, it is not asked that congregations provide their evangelism/outreach strategy. However, the high ratio of adult confirmations to in-person worshipers, combined with the lower overall membership, would perhaps suggest congregations leaning into a strategy that focuses more on personal evangelism/witnessing than corporate outreach or marketing. Again, there are very few Americans who are church shopping anymore. Therefore congregations, particularly smaller and medium-sized ones, that rely on attractional outreach are going to find those strategies increasingly ineffective. What is needed is members engaging with the unchurched individual God brings into their sphere of influence. This has the potential to be highly impactful.

Consider this hypothetical. WELS had 116,000 people gather for weekly in-person worship in 2022. 80% of WELS members are communicants, meaning about 93,000 of those who gathered are high-school aged or older. Imagine only 40% of those communicant members (37,200 individuals) intentionalized building relationships with the unchurched/unbelieving individuals God brought into their sphere of influence. “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”⁹ Those 37,200 WELS members did that, looking for times to visit with those unchurched/unbelieving individuals. Those WELS members turned the conversation spiritual at times the Lord provided. Those WELS members invited these unchurched/unbelieving to join them for some service,

⁹ Hebrews 13:2

perhaps Christmas Eve or Easter. Imagine only 40% of those unchurched/unbelieving individuals who are invited said yes, perhaps only to appease their friend, the WELS member. (Studies show it is closer to 80% of unchurched people who will accept an invitation to a Christmas Eve service if it comes from a friend.) That 40% amounts to approximately 15,000 visitors. Now imagine the church follows up on those guests. A pastor encourages them—strenuously—to enroll in the next Bible Information Class. The member who



invited that prospect assures the prospect that they will attend, too, so the prospect isn't all by himself. Imagine that 40% of those prospects eventually join the church. So, to summarize this illustration: it is only 40% of regularly attending WELS members who adopt this strategy of personal witnessing, and only 40% of those they eventually invite to church say yes, and only 40% of those people end up joining. The result is about 6,000 adult confirmations. When you add in the "others" (e.g., children of those adult confirmations) it is closer to 8,000 spiritual gains. That would completely close the gap between spiritual gains and losses.



Obviously, the results of such efforts are entirely up to the Holy Spirit. And "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."¹⁰ The illustration above is *not* meant to say, "If we do this, *then* this is guaranteed to happen." It is meant to say that the Holy Spirit does his work through us. So, there needs to be one more "if." And *if* we broadly embraced a strategy of personal witnessing, and if the Holy Spirit decided to bless it even moderately, *then* it would be extremely impactful on our congregations and church body.



A shift to an outreach strategy that focuses less on corporate efforts/marketing and more on personal witnessing, where every active member takes ownership of the mission of evangelism, provides the best opportunity to address the statistical decline in our congregations. It will likely require a shift in congregational culture. In Congregational Services, we typically define "culture" as the shared thought habits of a group of people (like a congregation) that frame the way that group of people behave and work.



The congregation where members view evangelism as something that they support with their prayers and offerings has a different culture than a congregation where members

¹⁰ John 3:8

view evangelism as something that Christ calls and equips every believer to do, as he provides the opportunity.

The congregation where members view the mission field as something *only* and *always* “over there”—a new home mission in another state, a world mission somewhere across the ocean—has a different culture than a congregation where members view the mission field as the people who live across the street from them.

The congregation where members believe their community is full of unchurched people who are just itching to join a “good church” has a different culture than a congregation where members understand most unchurched Americans now believe belonging to a congregation is of no practical value. The first congregation believes the unchurched will come to us. The second understands we will have to pursue the lost, which ultimately is part of the mission of the Church.

(NOTE: WELS Congregational Services offers an on-site program called *Everyone Outreach* that attempts to bring all members together for a weekend and shape a more mission-minded congregational culture. Go to everyoneoutreach.com for more information.)



Earlier, the question was asked, “Is there a commonality among congregations that the Lord has blessed with large numbers of spiritual gains?” We noted that the congregations that have extremely large numbers of spiritual gains are larger. But we also noted that plenty of congregations with memberships under 250, both missions and non-missions, are blessed with good numbers of spiritual gains. However, beyond that, look at any grouping of congregations and you see there is no panacea, no one tactic that works much better than all others. The Lord of the Church is blessing the efforts of WELS congregations who have lot of young families . . . and those who are 98% communicant members with an average age close to 70. The Lord of the Church is blessing congregations that worship utilizing primarily piano and guitar . . . and those who primarily utilize the pipe organ. The Lord of the Church is blessing efforts in suburban areas . . . and in urban areas . . . and in rural areas.

May the Spirit, working through his gospel, move every WELS member to realize that God brings unbelievers and unchurched individuals into our sphere of influence, so that we might serve as the ambassadors that Christ has made us to be.

A New-Start Strategy: Why 100 in 10?

It is noteworthy that of the ten congregations listed on Chart JJ, eight are subsidized mission congregations of WELS Board for Home Missions. This is *not* to suggest that mission congregations are the only types of middle- to small-sized congregations that can achieve large number of spiritual gains. It simply highlights the point about a strategy of personal witnessing. That is inculcated in the culture of a new mission. And the Lord is blessing that effort.

In WELS’ 2021 synod convention, our church body approved WELS Board for Home Missions’ 100 missions in 10 years initiative. Why?



Hopefully, the primary reason was simply to better attempt to fulfill Jesus' directive to "be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."¹¹ It is *his* church bought with *his* blood. We are privileged he allows us to be part of his mission, to share the gospel with all people in all locations. For that reason alone, we should attempt to start as many home missions as possible. However, there are also good strategic reasons to push this effort.

Home mission congregations tend to model a culture that is laser focused on evangelism. It is something that is constantly talked about. It is a task most members embrace. And the Lord has blessed those efforts.

Chart KK compares adult confirmations in mission congregations to those in non-mission congregations. It demonstrates that WELS-wide, more than 4 out of 5 adult confirmations come from non-mission congregations. Of the 25 congregations that had the highest total number of adult confirmations in 2022, 20 of them were established congregations. In 2022, the average adult confirmations in mission congregations was 5. In non-mission congregations it was 3, a differential of 2. If we exclude all congregations that had no adult confirmations (both non-missions and missions), the average number of adult confirmations in mission congregations is then 7, and 5 in non-mission congregations, still a differential of 2.

However, let us focus on a more apples-to-apples comparison. Let us remove those massive WELS congregations from the equation and focus *only* on congregations that have a total membership equal to or less than 250, i.e., smaller churches, like a mission. When we exclude congregations that had zero adult confirmations, mission congregations still average 7 adult confirmations, while the average in non-mission congregations is 3, for a differential of 4. So, in an apples-to-apples comparison, mission congregations have an adult confirmation rate more than double of non-missions.

Moreover, starting home mission congregations in portions of the country that are growing aids in WELS member retention. If one looks at the home missions started in the last half-century, a fair number were in in the Midwest where it is harder to assess their impact; but the majority were in parts of the country where there was no other WELS presence. As WELS individuals move, they have a WELS congregation they can attend.

Let us assume that a third of WELS people who move to an area without a WELS church eventually quit WELS completely. (That is conservative.) When you look at transfer into mission churches in outlying districts over the past half-century, that would amount to a massive amount of losses. When you look at

KK. COMPARISON OF ADULT CONFIRMATIONS IN MISSION CONGREGATIONS AND NON-MISSION CONGREGATIONS	
Mission Congregations	Non-Mission Congregations
<i>Top 25 in Total Adult Confirmations</i>	
5	20
<i>Top 25 in Total Adult Confirmations with a Total Membership =< 250</i>	
14	11
<i>Average Number of Adult Confirmations</i>	
5	3
<i>Average Number of Adult Confirmations Excluding Churches that Had Zero</i>	
7	5
<i>Average Number of Adult Confirmations with a Total Membership =<250 Excluding Churches that Had Zero</i>	
7	3
<i>Total Adult Confirmations In Group (3302 total)</i>	
554 (16.8%)	2748 (83.2%)
<i>Total Adult Confirmations in Group with Total Membership =<250 (1,197 total)</i>	
444 (37.1%)	753 (62.9%)

¹¹ Acts 1:8

transfers into mission churches in the outlying districts *and* the adult confirmations of those mission churches, if those missions had not been started, WELS would currently have 60,000 to 80,000 fewer members.

What is the take-away? There are strong strategic reasons to start as many new churches as possible. However, we cannot think that starting new missions will, by itself, address the statistical decline within WELS. Even with that apples-to-apples comparison (churches with a total membership of less than 250 that have at least one adult confirmation), the majority (62.9%) of adult confirmations in WELS come from non-mission congregations. This is not surprising. Mission congregations comprise less than 9% of all WELS congregations.

100-in-10 and *Everyone Outreach* are two sides of the same coin. We should commit ourselves to starting as many home missions as possible, for the reasons outlined above. However, let us not settle for 100 churches being laser focused on evangelism. Let us have 1,000 churches that view themselves as a home mission, with members committed to their responsibility to take the gospel to the lost that God brings into their sphere of influence.

Anecdotally, some have asked, “Is it even feasible to start these new churches when we have pastoral shortages?” That leads to the next topic.

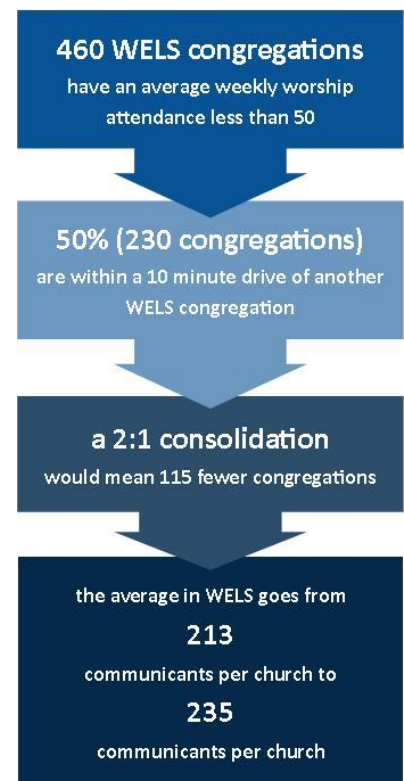
A Consolidation Strategy: The Potential of Greater Critical Mass

A little over a decade ago, some WELS congregations began exploring multi-site ministry. This is different than a dual parish situation, where two churches share a pastor but remain independent. In a multi-site ministry, the congregations become one entity: one governance, one budget, and typically one name. The one church simply operates on multiple sites.

In more recent years, this has evolved to the next step—consolidation, where multiple churches merge into one. A recent *WELS Connection* told the story of Living Hope Lutheran Church in West Allis, Wis., which is a merger of three WELS congregations that were located within two miles of each other.

Graph K (page 10) demonstrates that in 2022, WELS had almost 460 congregations with an average weekly worship attendance under 50. (154 of those congregations had a weekly average under 25.) Using missioninsite.com, we know that a little more than half of those congregations (about 230) are within a ten-minute drive of another WELS congregation, many in a similar worship attendance situation. If those congregations were to consolidate at a 2:1 ratio, it would mean 115 fewer congregations. In some cases, the geographic proximity is so close, consolidation could occur at a higher ratio.

One might ask, “Why do that? The more congregations the better.” But in our shared effort in WELS to proclaim the gospel, is the total number of congregations what really matters? Or is it the ability to do



zealous ministry? Could consolidation help some congregations achieve a sort of “critical mass” that might potentially assist ministry efforts?

Imagine three WELS congregations in close proximity. Each has a sanctuary that can seat about 120. Each has a weekly worship attendance in the low 30s, which means the church is about 25% full. Now imagine those three congregations consolidate at one location. Worship attendance is now in the 90s, meaning the sanctuary is over 70% full. Does it enable the church to better do certain things—youth group, a choir, simply singing during worship? Does it help with the evangelism efforts when a guest walks into a church that is mostly full versus mostly empty?

If nothing else, that consolidation allows the same number of people to be served by one pastor instead of requiring three pastors, one for each. In 2022 WELS had almost exactly the same number of active pastors as it did in 1990. Yet, at the end of 2022 WELS had almost 91,000 fewer members than it did in 1990. So, part of the reason for the current pastoral shortage is the proliferation of excellent non-parish ministries that utilize pastors. However, another reason for the pastoral shortage is that while total WELS membership has contracted, the congregational infrastructure within the synod has grown. At the end of 2022, WELS had 22 more congregations than it did in 1990.

LL. COMPARISON OF WELS STATS, 1990 TO 2022

Year	1990	2022
Total WELS Members	421,396	330,879
Average Weekly Worshipers	193,747	116,265
Total Pastors	1,361	1,359
Total Congregations	1,221	1,243
Weekly Worshipers / Parish Pastor	163:1	92:1

The current pastoral vacancy rate stands at approximately 140. That 2:1 consolidation rate of those churches that are in that ten-minute proximity would almost eliminate it. (A church body does not want a vacancy rate of zero.) However, ultimately, the reason to consider a strategy of consolidation *isn't* primarily to help with the pastoral vacancy situation. The real consideration is if consolidation creates congregations with a larger critical mass, enabling them to better carry out certain ministry efforts.

A strategy of consolidation is also worth considering in some of our Lutheran elementary schools, when smaller schools are in close enough proximity. Earlier, we touched on the potential of using youth education for outreach. We mentioned the increased desire for private elementary education. However, research shows that few “school shopping” parents view a classroom with multiple grades as ideal. Consolidation of schools might enable them to offer more in the way of extra-curriculars. It would make it easier for teachers, who now must prepare classes for one grade, not multiple grades.

There is a common obstacle to this strategy—an understandable sentimental attachment to location. Believers appreciate the place where, week after week, they heard the gospel preached to them. A Christian parent rightly respects the font where their child or grandchild was baptized. Overcoming that understandable attachment will require time and the Spirit-wrought understanding that the “the end” is Christ’s glory and mission. Church facilities are a means to the end. Thus, a strategy of consolidation will

also take something of a culture shift, away from the mindset of “the more churches the better” to the mindset of “the more ministry the better.”

A Cross-Cultural Strategy

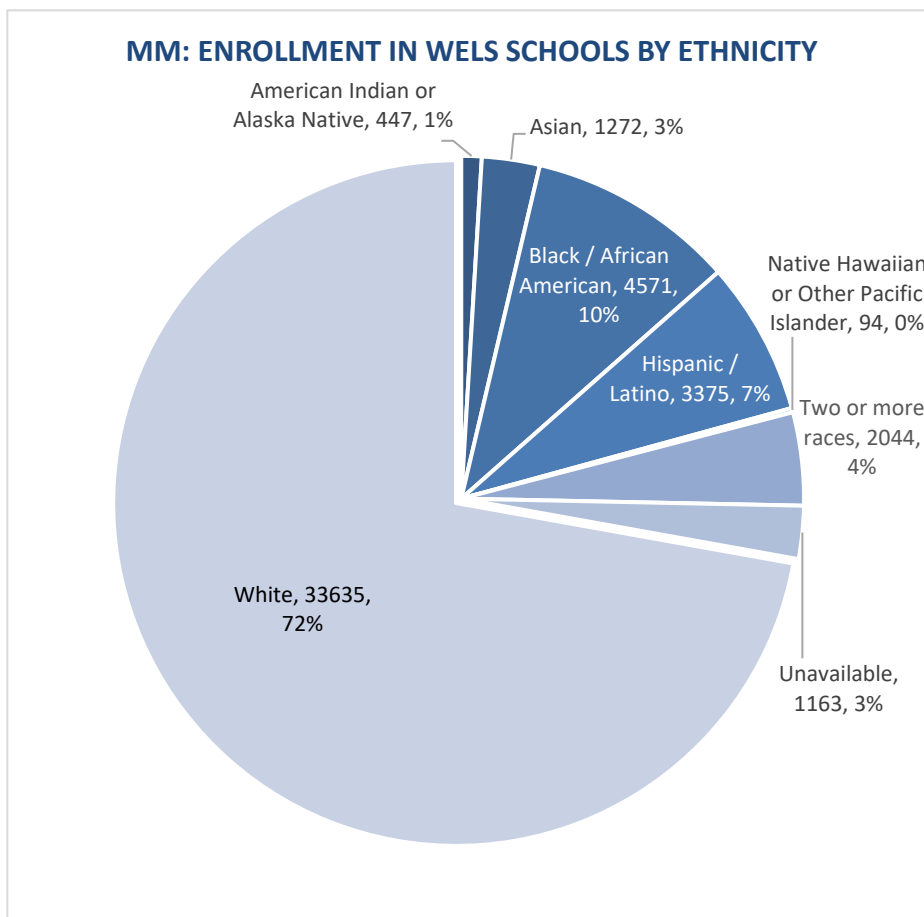
“Contrary to popular opinion, the church is not dying in America; it is alive and well, but it is alive and well among the immigrant and ethnic minority communities and not among the majority white churches in the United States.”¹²

Dr. Rah’s claim is backed up by data. For example, the 2020 U.S. Religion Census, conducted every 10 years by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, found that while mainline denominations contracted sharply in the past decade, the Catholic Church in the U.S. grew 3.4% over the last decade, from 59 million to 61 million. That growth was made up primarily of Hispanic immigrants. “If you took away the Hispanic population from the Catholic Church, it would look as bad as mainline denominations.”¹³

Most minority groups participate in church at a higher-than-average rate. Pew Research Center’s Religious

Landscape Study found that among all white Americans, 34% claimed to attend religious services once a week, with another 32% claiming they attended once or twice a month. Among Latino Americans, it rose 39% claiming to attend every week and 35% claiming once or twice a month. Among black Americans, it rose to 47% claiming to attend church once per week and 36% claiming to attend once or twice a month.¹⁴

More recently, the Barna Group studied which generations are returning to in-person worship post COVID. Interestingly, the biggest bounce came from Millennials. Barna attributes it to increased attendance by non-



¹² Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 15.

¹³ <https://religionnews.com/2022/11/11/religious-groups-with-immigrant-members-grew-fastest-over-past-decade/>

¹⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/compare/attendance-at-religious-services/by/racial-and-ethnic-composition/>

white Millennials. In their survey, they found that 45% of non-white Millennials were attending church weekly, compared to 35% of white Millennials.¹⁵

The reason to attempt cross-cultural outreach is not to turn around WELS' statistical decline but simply because our Savior asked us to share the gospel with all people. However, WELS has some unique opportunities.

First, WELS operates a large private school system. The student enrollment is substantially more diverse than WELS total membership. In 2022, 10% of the students enrolled at WELS schools were black, 7% were Latino, and 3% were Asian. WELS' total membership is 1.3% black, 1.4% Latino, and 0.8% Asian. If the Lord would bless the harvest strategies we utilize in our youth education for outreach efforts, we would pray that would reach all the people groups within our schools.

Second, WELS' size is in many ways ideal for bridging world and home mission efforts. WELS is large enough to have a robust world mission effort. When one reads the Board for World Missions' report in the *Book of Reports and Memorials*, one cannot help but marvel and rejoice at how God is blessing WELS' efforts to share the gospel all around the globe. However, WELS is also small enough to facilitate communication with congregations in ways more difficult for larger church bodies. Many WELS members have heard about the countries in which WELS conducts mission work. Conversely, thanks to congregations providing the information in the annual statistical report, the synod knows which congregations have international people groups represented in their church membership. So, WELS Joint Missions has started the new diaspora ministry program to help facilitate connections with congregations and various immigrant people-groups in North America.¹⁶

WELS has been doing North American cross-cultural ministry for more than 125 years. How do we do more of it? How might we do it better? That is worthy of prayer and discussion.

Member Retention Strategies

Just as we want to increase our outreach efforts and pray that through them the Lord would provide spiritual gains, we also hope to increase member retention efforts and pray that through them the Lord would decrease spiritual losses.

We discussed the 50,000 total member decline over the past decade. Where are the spiritual losses coming from?

The annual statistical report form has churches report types of spiritual losses. The form does *not* ask for demographic information about those spiritual losses. However, when Congregational Services works with a church and/or school to assess and plan ministry, sometimes the church will be encouraged to conduct exit studies, surveying and/or interviewing people who have quit that church in recent years. When examining the data provided in those exit studies, there seems to be three groups worthy of focus.

Youth

The loss of WELS youth is seen not just in the exit studies, but also in the annual demographic report. 2020 was the last time WELS asked congregations to provide estimates of how many members of the

¹⁵ <https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-2022/>

¹⁶ For more information about diaspora ministry - <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/jointmissions/>

congregation fell into various age categories. In that year, WELS congregations reported having 25,300 members ages 18 to 24. Those would be children born anywhere from 1996 to 2002. In those years, WELS congregations reported 50,800 births. So, WELS had half as many 18-to-24-year-olds as one might expect.

Based on exit interviews, it seems the primary reason for youth leaving WELS is simply the perception that church participation is of little importance or value. Rarely is anything tactical or stylistic mentioned. There is little, “*I would have stayed if the church _____.*” This simply means WELS youth are reflecting what one sees in Gen Z across the nation, i.e. high levels of no religious affiliation.¹⁷

What is harder to ascertain is what percentage (if any) of these youth return to WELS as they get married and have children.

Parents with children in certain transitional phases

Many WELS congregations that operate a Lutheran elementary school offer substantial tuition discounts for members. Whether intentional or not, this would seem to incentivize membership. For some WELS parents, it seems that as soon as their child(ren) are out of the school, they do not perceive there being any more reason to be a member. It is worth studying what percent of WELS parents with children enrolled in an LES are active members and what percent are only nominal members.

It appears that when children leave the home is another time some WELS parents disengage from church. It is not entirely clear why this is the case. Perhaps parents viewed it important to serve as an example while their children were home. It seems odd they would want something for their children (engagement in church) that they do not want for themselves.

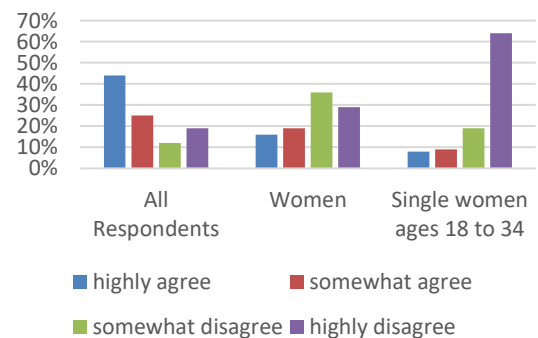
Strategies that attempt to better assimilate/disciple parents with children in Lutheran elementary schools would be worth exploring.

Single women

To be clear, the exit studies do not show that single women leave WELS at a higher rate than single men. Their exit rates are similar. What is noteworthy is that with single men, the exit surveys tend to show there is little rationale beyond the perceived lack of need for church engagement. That is also true with some of the single women who leave WELS. However, with women there are more who claim they left because they were not allowed to participate in congregational ministry in a way they perceived as meaningful. In other words, they wanted to stay but were not certain what their role was.

It is worthwhile for congregational leaders to discuss how they can better identify and utilize the ideas and gifts of women in ways that abide by Scripture principles for the respective roles of men and women.

NN: AGREE OR DISAGREE - I AM USING MY GOD-GIVEN GIFTS AND TALENTS TO SUPPORT THE MISSION OF THE CONGREGATION.



combined results of 621 individual pulse surveys

¹⁷ <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-questions-answered/>

Our Lutheran Moment

The Great Opportunity for the Church to be the Church

The collapse of American Christianity and the secularization of our culture can be viewed as a challenge. It can also be viewed as an opportunity. It is not surprising that at the same time “the rise of the nones”¹⁸ has occurred, so has the rise in depression.¹⁹ Combine that with the isolationism that took place during the pandemic leading to what some have called “an epidemic of loneliness.”²⁰

At the 2023 WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership, Pastor Jonathan Bauer gave a keynote presentation titled *Our Lutheran Moment* (found here: <https://vimeo.com/801975492>). In that keynote Pastor Bauer demonstrated that what is driving so many of the cultural movements in modern America is people pursuing righteousness (i.e., they want someone to declare that they are “right,” that they are good). The presentation demonstrates that as confessional Lutherans, we have the only thing that can satisfy that longing in a real way. “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”²¹

The collapse of American Christianity is startling. The decline of 50,000 souls in a decade is disturbing. However, the challenges before our churches should not trigger despair but determination. Now is not the time to lambast our community for walking away from church but to love our community by bringing the Church to them.²² It is the time to listen to our Savior and trust what he says.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”²³

“The Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.”²⁴

“Surely I am with you always.”²⁵

The Need for Proper Motivation

As we attempt to meet these challenges, our motivation cannot be rooted in institutionalism. Our ultimate goal is not fuller pews or healthier budgets. We cannot look at people as commodities to improve our statistics and expect the Lord of the Church to bless such self-serving efforts.

Instead, we look at all people as those whom our God loves. How much does God love them? “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.”²⁶ Jesus died for the sins of our neighbors. They need to hear

¹⁸ “Nones” are defined as people without religious affiliation. When asked on surveys to identify to which religion they belong, they check “none.” This does not mean they are necessarily atheist.

¹⁹ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/17/health/depression-rates-gallup/index.html>

²⁰ <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america>

²¹ Romans 3:21,22

²² It should be noted, this conclusion—that the challenges in American culture are a tremendous opportunity for the church—it not Pollyanna-like optimism. It has been reached by many other church bodies. See <https://www.greatopportunity.org/> or <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/decline-and-renewal-of-the-american-church-extended/> or <https://scholar.csl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1146&context=phd>.

²³ Acts 1:8

²⁴ Luke 12:12

²⁵ Matthew 28:20

²⁶ John 3:16

that. “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”²⁷ Our goal is simply to share the good news of Jesus with all that God brings into our sphere of influence. Our motivation is love—for our Savior and for all those he died to save.

This does not mean we do not hope and pray that the Spirit blesses our efforts with growth. As the Spirit blesses a congregation with growth, it likely can conduct even more ministry. A strong synod can better support those important mission efforts: starting new churches across the country, establishing new confessional Lutheran beachheads around the globe, training up the next generation of called workers. But growth is not our ultimate goal. That’s Christ’s glory. And the desire to grow is not our proper motivation. That’s Christ’s love.

*With God All Things Are Possible*²⁸

The forecasts provided in Graph 00 are not meant to be a prediction of what will happen (obviously, as there are three different forecasts). The future is known only to God. They are simply meant to illustrate what *could* happen if the Lord would bless some of the potential efforts described in the previous pages. Here are the assumptions behind those three forecasts.

STATUS QUO

- The adult confirmation rate resulting from harvest strategies in WELS’ early childhood ministries and Lutheran elementary schools stays the same. Enrollment in schools peaks in 2029, then flattens.
- Other adult confirmations continue to follow the current trends—approximately 1 adult confirmation per every 114 communicants.
- The Board for Home Missions opens an average of 5 new missions annually.
- Total spiritual losses remain at the equivalent of 5% of communicant membership for two years (post-COVID sorting) then revert to the historic averages closer to 2.8%. The demographic breakdown for those spiritual losses holds (i.e., youth are lost at a higher rate), impacting total births negatively.
- WELS’ fertility rate continues to decline from 2.2 births per woman to 2.0 over the next decade, then holds there. (The 2022 U.S. fertility rate was 1.78.)²⁹
- WELS’ deaths parallel average American actuarial norms.

MODEL A

- The adult confirmation rate resulting from harvest strategies in the top 5% of WELS’ early childhood ministries and Lutheran elementary schools is achieved in 20% of these ministries by 2035. (Enrollment in schools peaks in 2032, then flattens.) The demographic breakdown for these adult confirmations tends younger, impacting total births positively.
- Through personal evangelism efforts, the ratio of communicants to other adult confirmations improves: 80:1 by 2030; 57:1 by 2035; 40:1 by 2040 and then holding.
- The Board for Home Missions opens an average of 8 new missions annually.

²⁷ Romans 10:14

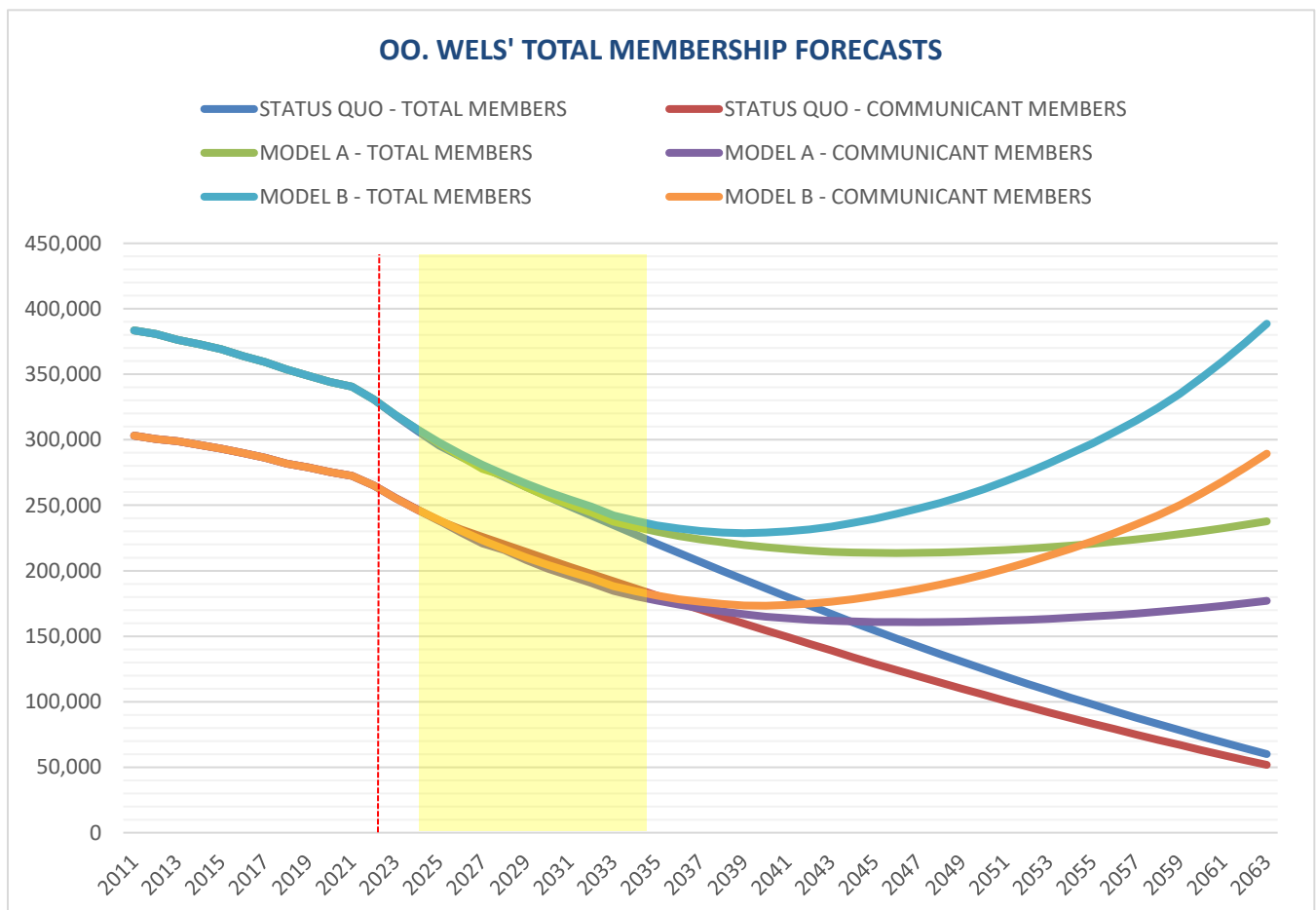
²⁸ Matthew 19:26

²⁹ “Fertility rate” is the number of children women have on average.

- Total spiritual losses remain at the equivalent of 5% of communicant membership for two years (post-COVID sorting) then revert to the historic averages closer to 2.8%. Through increased retention efforts, that is reduced to 2.3% by 2035.
- WELS' fertility rate holds at 2.2 births per woman.
- WELS' deaths parallel average American actuarial norms.

MODEL B

- The adult confirmation rate resulting from harvest strategies in the top 5% of WELS' early childhood ministries and Lutheran elementary schools is achieved in 40% of these ministries by 2035. (Enrollment in schools peaks in 2034, then flattens.) The demographic breakdown for these adult confirmations tends younger, impacting total births positively.
- Through personal evangelism efforts, the ratio of communicants to other adult confirmations improves: 74:1 by 2030; 45:1 by 2035; 30:1 by 2040; 21:1 by 2045 and then holding.
- The Board for Home Missions opens an average of 10 new missions annually.
- Total spiritual losses remain at approximately 5% of communicant membership for two years (post-COVID sorting) then revert to the historic averages closer to 2.9%. Through increased retention efforts, that is reduced to 2.4% by 2035 and to 2.0% by 2045.
- WELS' fertility rate increases to 2.3 births per woman by 2035.
- WELS' deaths parallel average American actuarial norms.



The Status Quo Model has a linear decline at a slightly less steep rate than the past decade. Over time, communicant membership makes up an increasingly larger amount of total membership.

In Model A, the declines continue at a similar rate for about a decade. They continue for another decade, but at a lower rate. Then they level off and modest growth occurs. Due to a higher number of adult confirmations coming from youth education harvest strategies, the percentage of WELS' total membership that is pre-communicant age grows slightly.

In Model B, interestingly, the decline continues at a similar rate for most of the next decade, then levels off for a decade, and then turns to growth. There is a higher number of adult confirmations coming from youth education harvest strategies. This has a compounding effect with "other adult confirmations" (ones resulting from personal witnessing strategies) as parents with young children reach out to unchurched members of that demographic. Combined with modest blessings of a pro-natalist strategy, pre-communicant-aged membership grows to about 25% of total membership, similar to the 1990s.

Again, the goal of Graph 00 is not to provide precise predications. There are many variables *not* factored into the models: the total number of churches/schools that would result from a strategy of consolidation, the impact of cross-cultural mission efforts, the ability to staff, etc. It is simply meant to illustrate that the losses experienced in the recent past would not necessarily inevitably continue. It would not take massive or immediate shifts in the various trends in gains and losses. It would take gradual improvement over time. That is up to the Spirit. However, he does his good work through us.

The yellow shaded portion of Graph 00 illustrates that gradual improvement in those trends does not change membership much in that decade. All three models are similar in that decade. But what happens in 2025 to 2035 sets up what happens next.

Christ Through Us

God . . . reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore **Christ's** ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal **through us**. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.³⁰

In 2025, WELS will celebrate its 175th anniversary. Under the theme *Christ Through Us* we will rejoice over all that Christ has accomplished in those seven generations, taking our synod from just three congregations in the greater Milwaukee area to what is now a worldwide church body. We will thank our gracious God that he chose to do those things *through us*, despite our sins, flaws, and weaknesses.

However, at that 175th anniversary, we want to do more than look backwards, praising God for past blessings and accomplishments. We also want to look



³⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:18-21

forward and commit to the Lord our plans for the future. So, 2025 will also mark the launch of WELS' next long-range plan, spanning 2025 to 2035. It too will be titled *Christ Through Us*. Like previous long-range plans, this one will contain aggressive goals for our church body. But it also calls on all of us to realize the role we play in this collective effort. Our prayer is that, with each one doing all he can with the gospel, then in 2035:

- We won't just have 100 new home mission congregations. We will have more than 1,000 congregations that operate with the evangelistic zeal of a mission church.
- We won't just think of a new mission field being a country on another continent. We'll think of a new mission field being a neighbor across the street.
- We won't just have a couple hundred new called workers. We'll have a couple hundred-thousand Lutherans acting as the priests Scripture says we are . . . the ambassadors Christ has made us to be.

The work of the Church is Christ's. But he does that work through us. As we enter the eighth generation of WELS, may he bless our work together!

In Summary

Doing statistical work leads us to thank God for his continued blessings and enables us to make wiser decisions by having more information. So, we look at the numbers, without being consumed by them. We distinguish between what we have been called to do and what only Christ can do. How will Christ's kingdom advance? Scripture answers, "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty."³¹ So, let us thank God for his mercy, which is new every morning. And let us take the task he has given us gladly, doing all we can with the gospel.

Respectfully submitted,
Jonathan Hein
Coordinator, WELS Congregational Services

³¹ Zechariah 4:6