

West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod Review Report

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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The West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod Review took place September 24 and September 25, 2008. The review was conducted by representatives from the churchwide organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in cooperation with the synod.¹ Evening meetings were held on each of the two nights in congregations across the synod. The meetings were held in Wheeling, Charleston, Fairmont, Martinsburg, and Petersburg in West Virginia. A meeting was also held in Oakland, Maryland. Both lay and clergy were invited to the meetings and the questions were distributed before hand to all congregations in the synod. Approximately 60 people attended the meetings with some congregations submitting answers to the questions in writing.

Background

The West Virginia-Western Maryland synod includes 64 active congregations and one developing congregation. In terms of the number of congregations, the synod ranks 61 out of 65 in the ELCA. Six synod in the ELCA have over 250 congregations while 10 synods have less than 100. The average number of congregations in a typical ELCA synod is 162.

Of the 64 active congregations in the West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod, 53 are in West Virginia and eleven are in Maryland. Seven of the congregations in the synod were begun before 1800. The oldest congregation in the synod was founded in 1765. The largest proportion of congregations in the synod were begun between 1850 and 1899. Table 1 shows the congregations in the synod by year of origin.

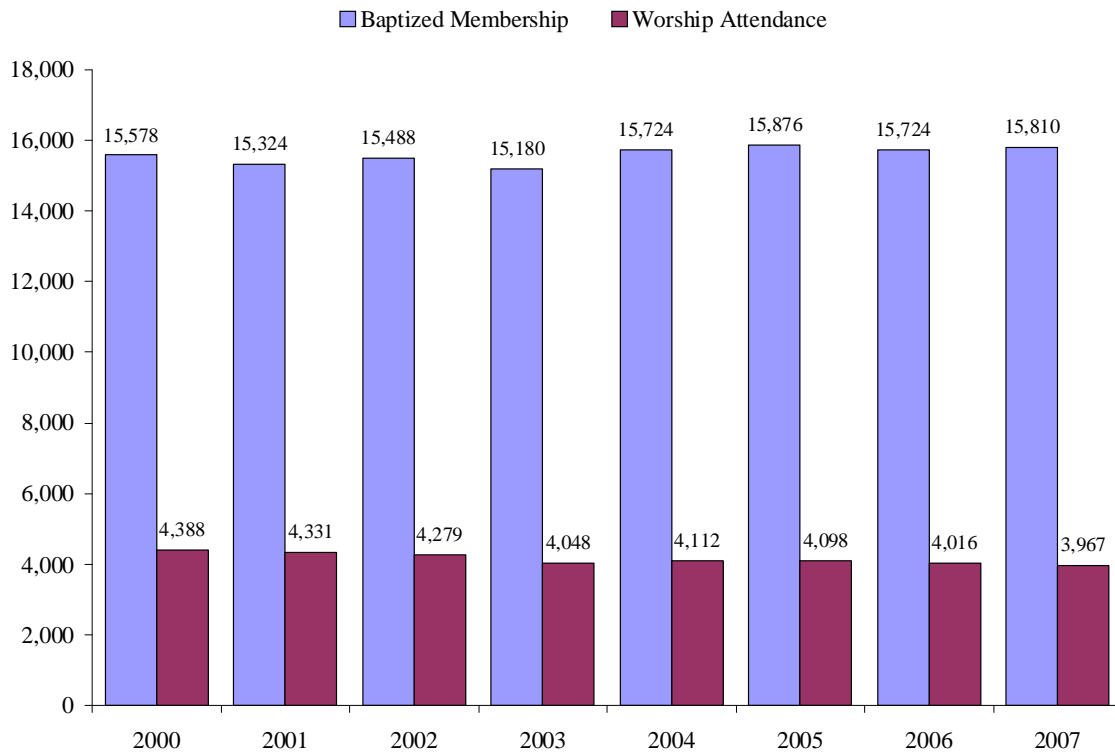
Table 1: Year of Origin for the Congregations in the West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod

Years of Origin	Number of Congregations	Percent of Congregations
1765 to 1799	7	11%
1800 to 1849	9	14%
1850 to 1899	23	36%
1900 to 1949	15	23%
1950 to 1979	9	14%
1980 to 1999	0	0%
2000 or later	1	1%
forming	1	1%
Total	65	100%

¹ The representatives from the churchwide organization for the synod review meetings were Else Thompson from Human Resources, Kenneth Inskeep from Research and Evaluation, and Craig Settlege from Synodical Relations.

Figure 1 shows the baptized membership and worship attendance of the congregations in the synod from 2000 to 2007.

Figure 1: Baptized Membership and Worship Attendance in the West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod from 2000 to 2007



The average size of a congregation in the synod in 2007 was 243 baptized members. The average size of a congregation in the ELCA is 454. In terms of average worship attendance, the average size of a congregation in the synod in 2007 was 61 compared to 131 in the ELCA as a whole. Fifteen congregations average 25 or fewer in worship with half the congregations having 50 or fewer in worship. (See Figure 2.)

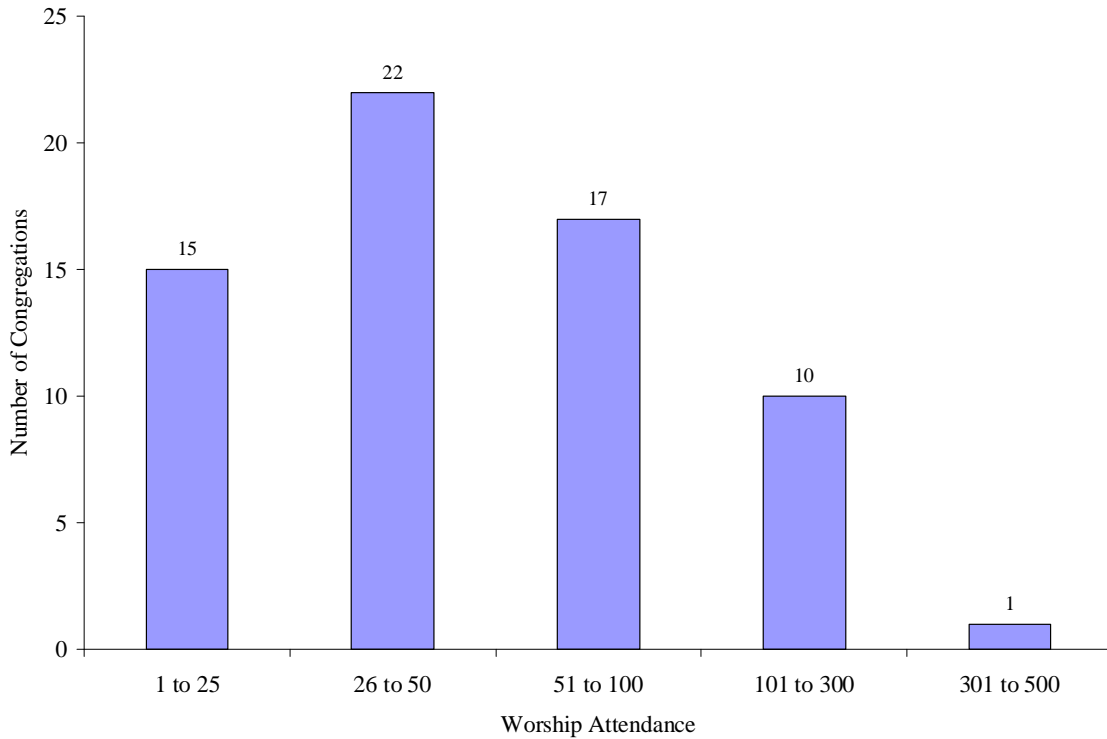
In the synod, about 26 percent of the baptized members regularly attend worship. In the ELCA as a whole, about 29 percent of baptized members regularly attend worship.

The vast majority of the members of the congregations in the synod are white with less than 1 percent of baptized members being people of color or language other than English. About 95 percent of the population of the territory of the synod is white.

There is population growth within the territory of the synod, but it is very modest and not evenly distributed throughout the synod. In 1990, the population of the territory of the synod was 1,821,527. In 2000, the population of the territory increased slightly to 1,838,190. The estimated population of

the territory of the synod in 2007 is 1,851,871.² Most of the growth in the synod is in the Eastern Panhandle around Martinsburg.

Figure 2: Number of Congregations in the Synod by Worship Attendance in 2007



Overall income for the population of the territory of the synod is relatively low. The estimated per capita income for 2007 was \$20,197, compared to \$25,495 for the United States as a whole.³ Based on these per capita figures, the typical baptized member of the synod gives (in undesignated and designated giving) about 2 percent of their income to their congregation. This is typical of the baptized membership of the ELCA as a whole.

In terms of support for the synod and the churchwide offices of the ELCA (mission support), the members of the West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod do very well comparatively. The baptized membership of the synod gives about 0.2 percent of their per capita income to mission support compared to 0.1 percent for the baptized members of the ELCA as a whole. Still, both in terms of giving to congregations and to the support of the mission of the synod and the ELCA, there is considerable room for improvement. Among Southern Baptists, for example, a typical member gives over five percent of their income to their congregation.

² The figures for 1990 and 2000 are from the U.S. Census. The estimate is from Claritas, Inc.

³ Estimates are from Claritas, Inc.

Major Strengths of the Congregations in the Synod

When asked about the major strengths of the congregations in the synod, the participants in the groups and those who responded in writing noted a host of positive characteristics. Many noted that those who are involved with the congregations of the synod are people who care deeply about the church and many are long-term, rooted members of the church. They support each other especially in times of adversity and they pull together when things get tough. The members of the congregations in the synod believe they are outgoing, friendly, and welcoming, even though some suggested that many congregations in the synod are small, family based congregations that might feel less than friendly and welcoming to “outsiders.” Still, most said there was an openness to new ideas. The belief is there is good preaching and strong lay leadership.

Among many there is a sense of pride in their commitment to and their involvement in the local community. There is also some pride in the level of support the wider causes of the church including Women of the ELCA and the World Hunger Appeal.

Several mentioned the leadership of the congregations in the synod as a strength including ordained pastors and authorized lay ministers. Others spoke of many talented individuals who are willing to get involved and help out.

Major Issues Facing Congregations in the Synod

There is considerable concern among those with whom we spoke about the future. These concerns are directly related to the aging of the current membership. Some believe the new members who are joining are uncharacteristically “needy.” While the church’s mission is to serve the needy it also needs members who are well adjusted, productive members of the local community.

The people attending the meetings were very concerned about how they can continue to pay the on-going costs of providing professional leadership while also maintaining their congregation’s facilities. Some congregations, it appears, are spending down their endowments to make ends meet. Some of the smaller congregations are (or are hoping to) work with other congregations and they believe they need help and support from the synod. Too often, the perception is, under these “survival” circumstances, every congregation views every other congregation as a competitor. Working together for the mission of the church takes a back seat, if it is considered at all.

The lack of new younger members has also raised the question of change. Will changing to more contemporary forms of worship attract new members? How can the generation gaps be bridged? People talked about the difficulties in trying to develop and maintain programs for young people when there are so few young people to begin with. And, even when young people get involved they give less. Work often consumes them and because of their packed family lifestyles, they have less time to be active in church affairs. In this context, stewardship of time and money is an important and on-going issue. Even with regard to a commitment to worship many people feel a hour on Sunday morning is enough and if the service goes longer, it is unacceptably long.

There was also some conversation about areas of the synod where there are too many congregations too close together. Some believe the synod should be more proactive in helping congregations in these circumstances to consider consolidation.

Other issues mentioned include old buildings that are not handicapped accessible, lack of parking, and lack of budget for programs serving the elderly. Finally, some mentioned that people do not know how to disagree amicably. When people find themselves at odds, one side or the other takes its time and money and leaves.

People talked about the need for more people to be more active in sharing the faith. They talked about a general distrust of “outsiders” as being a significant challenge.

They also speculated that the professional leadership feels underpaid and overworked. Some clergy said they feel less like called leaders than paid help. They feel the expectation to do everything especially in smaller congregations. Professional leadership is stretched thin. Travel times to visit and care for people who are sick are especially long whenever a member is hospitalized or in need of specialized medical care. And, when pastors leave after a short time, the stability needed for effective ministry is undermined.

Major Issues Facing the Synod

Many felt they were not involved enough at the synodical level to comment or assess the major challenges for the synod. Still, most felt the bishop is very attentive to the pastors and congregations. As some put it, one of the good characteristics of a small synod is that people know each other. They know the bishop and communication is personal and direct. As noted earlier, there is strong support for the wider church, for the seminaries, and for campus ministry, even though there was a sense among some that the synod is overlooked by the ELCA at large. Some expressed the view that West Virginia is more comfortable with a conservative evangelical and fundamentalist subculture which Lutherans and the ELCA as a whole find hard to understand much less compete with.

Many commented positively on the “Bishop’s Road Show” which is the bishop’s blog. They believe communication could be improved, but they were also appreciative of the difficulties and the work that is being done to keep them informed. Some believe a printed newsletter might be more useful and accessible to older members. Still, the general belief was that those who want to be informed can be informed. A few suggested a focused attempt, using computer technology like message boards and blogs, to connect the synod’s younger people.

Others noted that there are good continuing education resources for pastors and lay worship leaders and financial assistance is provided. The distance traveled to events and meetings is always a challenge for the bishop as well as pastors and lay persons. The fact that the synod helps smaller congregations with mileage costs was viewed very positively.

Many noted that a major strength of the synod is its dedication to social ministry and its dedication to supporting its pastors and lay people who serve. Others believe the synod offers great opportunities for first call pastors. The number of first call pastors also provides the synod with one of its “greatest challenges.”

Those who were aware of the synod's emphasis on Healthy Congregations viewed the programming positively even though to some it felt like too little too late. For all the synods programs it is a challenge to get people involved and then to follow through consistently. Just Neighbors and Safe Guarding God's Children were also viewed positively, while others said they did not know about these programs. Several participants said their congregations had participated in the Bridge Building training, but the program was "incomplete" at the time.

Many were very positive about the work of Community Lutheran Partners and they believe the program is a good way to link congregations and members together in the synod. People said the program was well presented and informative, worthwhile, and well organized. A few, however, were critical saying they did not know much about the program or that the program only supports its "pet projects."

Those who knew about how the synod has been assisting rostered leaders with their seminary debt were very positive and committed to the program. They called it an excellent program that was definitely needed in the synod, but others said they did not know much about the program and it needs to be publicized more.

Comments on Bishop Dunkin and Maureen Corrigan were quite positive overall. The vast majority see the bishop and staff as responsive whenever they are contacted. The vast majority also believe they responded in a useful and helpful way. The bishop also gets high mark for his care for clergy colleagues.

One area that seems to need attention is the conferences and the selection process for deans. In some areas the conferences appear to be functioning while in others they are not. Also, many commented on the bishop's straightforwardness. Most appreciate it (not having to wonder about what the bishop thinks), but a few see the bishop's style as an obstacle.

Sabbaticals

Most of the group participants said the pastors of their congregation had not taken a sabbatical. Some said that most pastors do not stay past three years which they believed was an eligibility requirement. Most, however, said the members of congregations do see how a sabbatical for their pastor would be a good and productive use of his or her time. One pastor said, "the penalties and repercussions of leaving are tiresome and hard to bear." Those who were more positive about the potential of a sabbatical suggested the environment for it might be better if money was not stretched so thin and if there is someone else readily available to fill in while the regular pastor is away.

Priorities for the Synod Over the Next Three to Five Years

The participants focused on two areas with regard to priorities. First, there was considerable focus on increasing the number and level of involvement of the congregational members. This included renewed efforts to engage members with regard to their discipleship and the practice of discipleship—attending worship, being regularly involved in Bible study, stewardship practices, and so on. And, it involved more attention to evangelism and outreach specifically including the development of congregational programs for youth and young adults (both attracting new young people and

retaining those who have been raised in the church). People said there is a need to strengthen the connections between congregations and their local communities. This includes minimizing obstacles to participation for “outsiders.” Others said this would be very difficult especially if it means re-thinking long and well established practices.

In this regard, there were some who expressed a sense that some congregations distrust the synod because they see the synod as potentially promoting changes that will undermine or threaten the status quo. People do not know what to do. They do not want to change, but they can not see how they can continue without change. There is, as a result, a level of pessimism and resignation. Would it be possible to help people accept and embrace change for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel, or will they simply continue to see change as an enemy of their “tried and true” conception of the church?

Second, people believe the synod should make leadership a focus. Most believe every attempt should be made to fill vacancies with ordained pastors and those pastors should be given as much support by the bishop as possible. This includes working with congregations to help them understand the nature of a “call” with clear guidelines on managing the relationship between the members of a congregation and the pastor. Also, on-going attention should be given to encouraging people from the synod to pursue ordination and the synod should try to provide as much incentive as possible for pastors to serve, and continue serving, in the synod.