



WELS

Christ's Love, Our Calling.

for the
Generations
to come

WELS CONGREGATIONAL SERVICES

the Promise

The Lord said, “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.” GENESIS 17:7

A PROMISE NEEDED THEN

Abraham needed to hear those words. He had been 75 years old when God asked him to move to an unknown land. The Lord also had promised that Abraham’s wife, Sarah, would give him descendants as numerous as the sands on the seashore.

That was over a generation ago. Abraham was now 99. Sarah was pressing 90. She remained childless, barren her entire life. In those intervening years Abraham had slipped into sin regularly. Most notably, in his desperation to have descendants, he fathered an illegitimate child with a woman other than his wife.

So the Lord came to Abraham again to reiterate the promise he had made a generation earlier. Even more, the Lord

established “an everlasting covenant” with Abraham—a binding contract to show unconditional grace to Abraham and his descendants.

Abraham knew that the Lord would not abandon him nor his children nor his grandchildren. The Lord would be the God of the generations to come.

A PROMISE NEEDED NOW

Is that not what every believing parent wants most for his or her children? We want our children to be happy and do well in life. But more than anything else, we want our children to remain close to the God of free and faithful grace. We want them to stand firm in the faith that we handed down to them, a faith perhaps handed down to us from our parents.

That is why we need to hear the Lord's promise today. In many WELS congregations, listen closely and you hear the fearful concerns.

"We have lost so many members. Will my church be here for my grandchildren?"

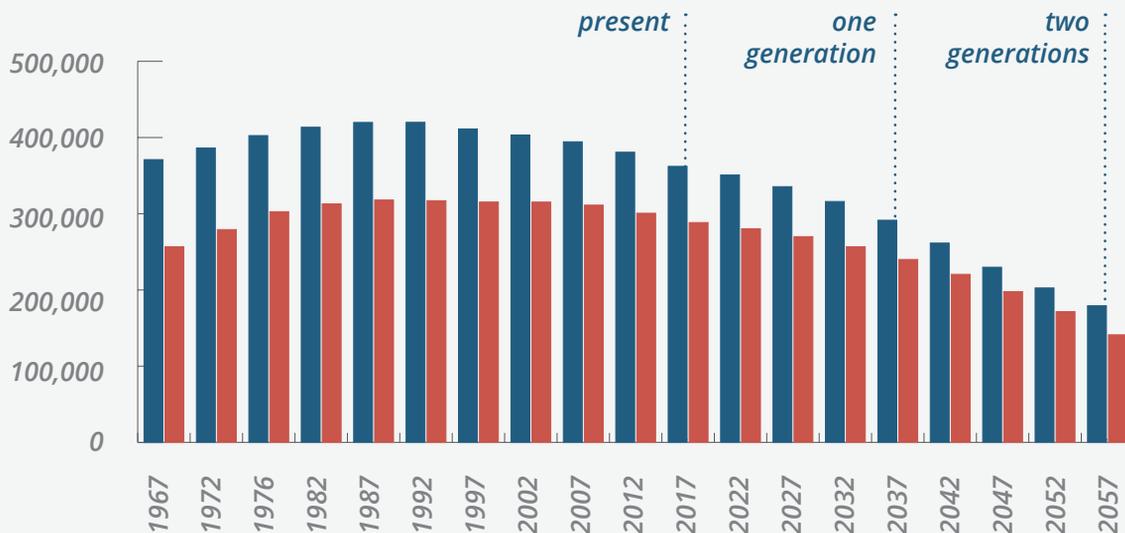
"We used to have four services. Now we barely need two. How much longer can we survive?"

"Where will the future generations hear God's Word taught truthfully and not twisted?"

It is not surprising questions like these are becoming more common. For the first 140 years of WELS' existence, the synod's membership grew steadily. However, since the early '90s, WELS membership has been in decline. More concerning, the rate of that decline has been increasing in recent years.

WELS MEMBERSHIP—PAST, PRESENT, & FUTURE

■ Souls ■ Communicants



IF CURRENT TRENDS CONTINUE IN WELS...

TODAY

360,000
MEMBERS

1,272
CONGREGATIONS

IN 20 YEARS (*one generation*)

WELS will lose
↓73,000
MEMBERS

WELS will lose
↓250-300
CONGREGATIONS

IN 40 YEARS (*two generations*)

WELS will be down to
175,000
MEMBERS
*(of which only 134,000 are
communicant members)*

WELS will be down to
500
CONGREGATIONS
NATIONWIDE

Here is the reality. Currently, WELS has about 360,000 members in 1,272 congregations. If the current rate of decline continues unabated, in 20 years—just one generation—WELS will lose more than 73,000 members and between 250 and 300 congregations. In two generations (40 years), WELS would be down to approximately 175,000 members—**53 percent down from our current total.** Only 134,000 of those would be communicant members. The synod might have only 500 congregations nationwide by that time.

Abraham was fearful about the spiritual state of future generations. When we hear those numbers, there is a temptation for us to grow fearful for the same reason. That is why our God comes to us through his Word and sacraments again and again to reaffirm his covenant of grace.

He will be the God of our children and our children's children. To make that possible, God the Father sent his Child through the line of Abraham. Jesus Christ's death and resurrection is the proof that God's everlasting covenant cannot be broken.

Here is more reality. God will continue to forgive and strengthen. He will both justify and glorify. That promise is true for us. It will remain true for the generations to come.

SECURE IN THAT PROMISE

Secure in that promise, we throw ourselves into zealous gospel ministry. It would be a misunderstanding of that promise to interpret it to mean that every WELS congregation will remain in existence until Jesus comes again. Rather, we understand that it means that as we do all we can to proclaim the life-giving gospel with a dying world, Christ is among us in grace and power. He has promised to bless those gospel efforts in a way that serves his kingdom and gathers the elect.

That is where WELS Congregational Services comes in. Congregational Services exists to help congregations engage in faithful and fruitful ministry so that WELS might be a place where that everlasting covenant is proclaimed, both now and to future generations.

the Problem

CHALLENGES FOR OUR CONGREGATIONS AND OUR SYNOD

The challenges you see in our individual congregations affect our synod. When you think about the ministry of WELS, what typically comes to mind—sending missionaries into our nation and around the world; training future pastors and teachers and staff ministers; and producing major resources, like a catechism or hymnal? Indeed, those are the most important efforts of our synod—to do what would be difficult for individual congregations to do on their own.

However, the ability to do all those things is predicated upon WELS having strong congregations that can support those joint efforts. It is not unlike the need to have strong core muscles. To make powerful movements with your legs or arms,

the limbs need to be leveraged against a strong core of abdominal and back muscles. Those are the muscles that provide stability. Likewise, to make strong ministerial efforts in missions or worker training, we need the stability of a strong core of congregations.

If WELS were to lose tens of thousands of members, that affects our ability to send out missionaries both stateside and around the world. If WELS closes hundreds of churches, that has massive implications for our worker training system.

The challenges facing WELS are not unique. America has become a post-Christian nation. The majority of Christian church bodies have been in decline for approximately 40 years.

To help our congregations and our church body, in 2015 WELS Congregational Services began an intensive two-year study of our

membership trends to try to identify the sources of our statistical decline. There are several:

More deaths. The median age in WELS is almost 43, more than five years older than the national median. The number of member deaths in WELS has been rising for a while. If the current trend holds, soon about 5,000 members will go to heaven each year.

Fewer births. In the 1960s it was common for families to have three or four children. Today, two is the norm. A significant percentage of millennials have stated their desire to have no children. At one point, WELS had more than 8,000 infant baptisms per year. It is currently trending below 5,000.

Back-door losses. In the last generation, WELS has lost almost a quarter million members out the back door. They either quit church altogether or left WELS to join another Christian church. Moreover, these back-door losses came disproportionately from younger WELS members. As WELS young adults head off to college, the secular humanistic worldview espoused there is challenging their faith.

Low adult confirmation ratios.

Annually, WELS has 1 adult confirmation for every 83 communicant members. A ratio that low does not allow us to make up for the annual losses.

If WELS were to lose tens of thousands of members, that affects our ability to send out missionaries both stateside and around the world. If WELS closes hundreds of churches, that has massive implications for our worker training system.

the Plan

OUR FIVE-YEAR STRATEGY

To turn around the statistical decline, we need to open the front door and shut the back door. In other words, we need to attempt to pull in more members, while simultaneously doing a better job at retaining current members. Here are some of the initiatives underway in Congregational Services as part of our five-year strategic plan.

- We are producing resources to help congregations retain and gain members from the **millennial generation and Generation Z**. These two largest generations in America have largely walked away from church.
- We are **constructing multiple synodwide outreach campaigns**. The first will be **C18**, which has the goal of reaching one million people with the gospel during the Christmas season.
- We are assembling programs aimed at **strengthening the family**, including family devotional life. Multiple studies have demonstrated that a strong family devotional life is the biggest factor in influencing children to continue to go to church when they move out of their parents' home.
- We are **consulting with rural congregations** to help them revitalize their ministry. In some cases, this includes the option of merging with other WELS congregations as part of a multi-site endeavor.
- We are aiding congregations in assessing their community and planning ministry accordingly. This includes **creating cross-cultural outreach efforts** if the demographics demonstrate that to be viable.

- We are generating a **comprehensive evangelism curriculum** so that congregations have every resource they need to train their members to witness to unchurched friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers. Our goal is nothing less than cultural change, so that personal witnessing is normal for all WELS members.
- We are creating **worship resources**, including a new hymnal, that will help congregations achieve the next level of excellence in their worship. These resources will also demonstrate appropriate liturgical flexibility.
- We are coaching congregations to set up a zealous **program addressing delinquency**. This has proven to substantially lower back-door losses.
- We are implementing a **“harvest strategy” in all WELS early childhood education centers and elementary schools**. The harvest strategy lays out a systematic process to welcome non-member families into the congregation.

“The Telling the Next Generation workshop has had an incredible impact on the early childhood ministry of Apostles. We walked away with a detailed ministry plan and a refreshed focus to boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus to children and their families. Our meetings and future planning have become more streamlined as we go forward with our agreed upon outreach and evangelism goals. Telling the Next Generation has empowered our ministry team spiritually with the gospel and has provided the practical lessons we needed to position our early childhood ministry as an outreach arm to our community.”

REV. JAY BICKELHAUPT
Apostles Lutheran Church
Billings, Montana

*To turn around the
statistical decline,
we need to open the
front door and shut
the back door.*



- We are coordinating the effort to make better use of **apologetics in our schools**. Apologetics prepares our young people to face the humanistic worldview they will encounter at a secular college or university or in the workforce.
- We are training congregations to better utilize **compassion ministry**—ministry to the blind, developmentally disabled, imprisoned, etc. Not only do we want to serve these people with the gospel, but there are also outreach benefits. Studies have demonstrated that about half of the people looking for a church home will only consider a congregation that operates some sort of compassion ministry.
- We are striving to have all churches engage in **strategic planning** on an ongoing basis, assessing congregational strengths and weaknesses and setting **annual ministry objectives**.

“We were blessed to have the Commission on Congregational Counseling (CCC) lead our congregation through the Self-Assessment and Adjustment program in 2015. With the assistance of our counselor, we were able to identify the things that our congregation was doing well and the things that we could be doing better. But, unlike many conferences or programs where you go home feeling guilty for all the areas of ministry where you are missing the mark, the CCC also provided resources and follow-up support to implement suggested plans for our congregation.”

REV. MARK LUETZOW
Bethel Lutheran Church
Bay City, Michigan

our Prayer

OUR PRAYED-FOR RESULTS

As we talk about congregational or synodical health, it is important to have a balanced view. On the one hand, both statistical and spiritual growth is the work of the Holy Spirit. “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). On the other hand, we understand that the Holy Spirit does his work as believers carry the gospel into the world. “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Therefore, WELS Congregational Services strives to help congregations do all they can with the gospel, using it to reach the lost, to retain the straying, and to build up the family of God. Ultimately what drives us is not our desire to get people into WELS, but to get people into heaven.

As we work toward that goal, we pray that God would bless our increased gospel efforts both spiritually and statistically.

We pray that the Spirit would lead us to repent of any times that our ministry efforts have been less than zealous. We pray that, secure in the forgiveness that was won at the cross, we take up the mission Christ has set before us with all our strength.

We also pray that God would bless those mission efforts. Consider that currently our back-door losses are around 8,000 souls per year. Our current communicant member to adult confirmation ratio is 83 to 1.

Imagine that the Spirit were to bless our increased efforts so that five years from now those back-door losses were cut by 20 percent and the adult confirmation ratio went to 55 to 1. WELS would be stable.

In fact, in one generation we would grow about three percent.

Imagine that the Spirit would bless our efforts to the degree that five years from now our back-door losses were cut 33 percent and the adult confirmation ratio went to 45 to 1. WELS would grow over 14 percent in one generation, once again having more than 400,000 members.

Consider that currently our back-door losses are around 8,000 souls per year. Our current communicant member to adult confirmation ratio is 83 to 1.

IN ONE GENERATION,
we could grow by

3%

if BACK-DOOR LOSSES were cut by **20%** *& if*
ADULT CONFIRMATIONS =55:1



IN ONE GENERATION,
we could grow by

14%

if BACK-DOOR LOSSES were cut by **33%** *& if*
ADULT CONFIRMATIONS =45:1



Congregational Services

The LORD said, "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you **for the generations to come**, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you." Genesis 17:7

LEARN MORE

WELS Congregational Services exists to serve congregations, schools, and their leaders by providing resources, training, and personal assistance so that they might carry out gospel ministry in the most faithful way on the local level.

ABOUT US

TRAINING

MINISTRY

MODULES

TIMELY TOPICS

BLOG

Timely Topics

Servant Training
Elder Training

Subscribe to updates
Get an alert when a new resource becomes available on this site!
Name
Email

your Partnership

HOW WILL YOUR GIFTS HELP?

There are multiple ways. First, your gifts would allow Congregational Services to develop an **online resource center** to disseminate tools and training to all WELS congregations. We want to be able to provide help to congregations instantaneously. We also want these resources to be free. Your gifts will allow us to build out the resource center and populate it with tools that will help our congregations reach and retain the generations to come.

Second, your gifts would allow Congregational Services to provide **in-field help to congregations** that otherwise could not afford it. It has been proven beneficial to have an outside set of eyes look at a congregation's ministry. The Commission on Congregational

Counseling and the Commission on Lutheran Schools have individuals trained to assist congregations. However, some of the congregations that need help the most are facing great fiscal challenges. Your gifts would allow us to get "boots on the ground" in these churches.

How to help

- Use the enclosed gift envelope.
- Give online at wels.net/give.
- Contact WELS Ministry of Christian Giving at 800-827-5482 for assistance with appreciated assets or giving through your will or estate plan.



WELS Congregational Services thanks you for your generous support of our mission to serve congregations, schools, and their leaders by providing resources, training, and personal assistance so that they might carry out gospel ministry in the most faithful way on the local level.

for the
Generations
to come

Visit the Congregational Services resource site at
welscongregationalservices.net



WELS Ministry of Christian Giving
N16W23377 Stone Ridge Drive
Waukesha, WI 53188
wels.net/give
800-827-5482