



STATISTICAL SUMMARY

2021

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Introduction

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has asked congregations to provide statistical information every year. Why?

Reasons to Rejoice

Statistical analysis inevitably provides reason to rejoice. You see that in Scripture. The first statistical report in Scripture is found in chapter 1 of the aptly named book of Numbers. The Lord directs Moses to take a census of the men fit for military service. *“The total number was 603,550.”*¹ So, adding in younger males, women, and children, the population of Israel would have been north of two million. Do you remember what the Lord had promised Abraham over five centuries prior? *“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you.”*² God had kept his Word. The nation rejoiced.

Why bother with statistics? The first reason is that statistics can be another way we recognize the goodness and faithfulness of God. He keeps his Word. Even if statistical analysis identifies some challenges, it always also gives reason to rejoice.

For example, in 2021, the Lord of the Church, through the efforts of WELS congregations, pulled almost 6,500 individuals into our church body: adult confirmations, children of adult confirmations, affirmations of faith. Now add in the 3,000 children that were born to WELS members and made members of Christ’s Church through baptism. That means 2.8% of WELS’ current total membership were people God brought into our church body just last year. We thank God for these new brothers and sisters! We thank God for the encouragement we receive by their common confession of faith.

When you look at the statistics, are there challenges? Of course. That is true in the synod and in your congregation. But there are also reasons to thank God.

Stewarding God’s Blessings

A second reason WELS does statistical analysis is that it helps us plan our corporate efforts. This is something that every congregation does. A church decides to add a new service because the numbers show they are beyond 80% full at every current service. A congregation has tracked the results of their traditional vacation Bible school versus their summer soccer camp. They found the soccer camp provided a better opportunity to build bridges to the lost and unchurched in the community. So, they put their time and finances into that ministry tactic.

This is vital. In St. Luke’s gospel, Jesus talks about the “faithful and wise manager.”³ It takes faith to steward the vast resources our gracious God has provided us. Spirit-wrought faith is why we are able to understand that every dollar and every second and every talent ultimately belongs to God. By faith we recognize that we are to manage those blessings to God’s glory. Stewardship takes faith.

But stewardship also takes wisdom—a sanctified shrewdness, discernment, and prudence. This requires information. One cannot make shrewd management decisions without good information. Imagine the Roman house manager who purchased three bushels of grain without first asking about the price, only to find that merchant was charging double the market rate. That steward was not demonstrating wisdom in his service to his master. So, we use God’s gift of reason to look at all the information that enables

¹ Numbers 1:46

² Genesis 12:2

³ Luke 12:42

us to make wise decisions in our stewardship of God's blessings. Congregations do this. The synod does this.

For example, this report will discuss the sharp decline in WELS' birthrate, down 40% from just five years ago. In time that will likely impact enrollment in our Lutheran schools. There is part of us that would like to ignore that inconvenient information. But ignoring information is not being a "faithful and wise manager" for the Lord. So, instead we look at that data and ask, "What does this mean?" We use God's gift of reason to plan for the future. And with God's gift of faith, we trust in Christ to care for his Church in whatever way he deems best. We leave the results of our planned efforts entirely up to the Spirit.

Thank You

So, thank you so much for the information you provide in that annual statistical report. It is *not* only Congregational Services that uses that data. Every area of ministry looks at that information as they plan our collective ministry. (If you want to watch a video from various synod leaders explaining how that data is used, you can find it here: <https://vimeo.com/492211436>.)

This Statistical Summary

For decades, WELS has published an annual statistical report—the raw data supplied by congregations. That is available at

<https://welscongregationalservices.net/stats/>.

The data comes in two formats.

The PDF statistical report is formatted to print in an easy-to-read document. Congregations are grouped by circuits, one circuit per two-page spread. 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 data without consolidation in a Microsoft Excel file that is easy to search or sort. For example, you can sort churches by age (year organized) or total membership or worship attendance—any of the columns.

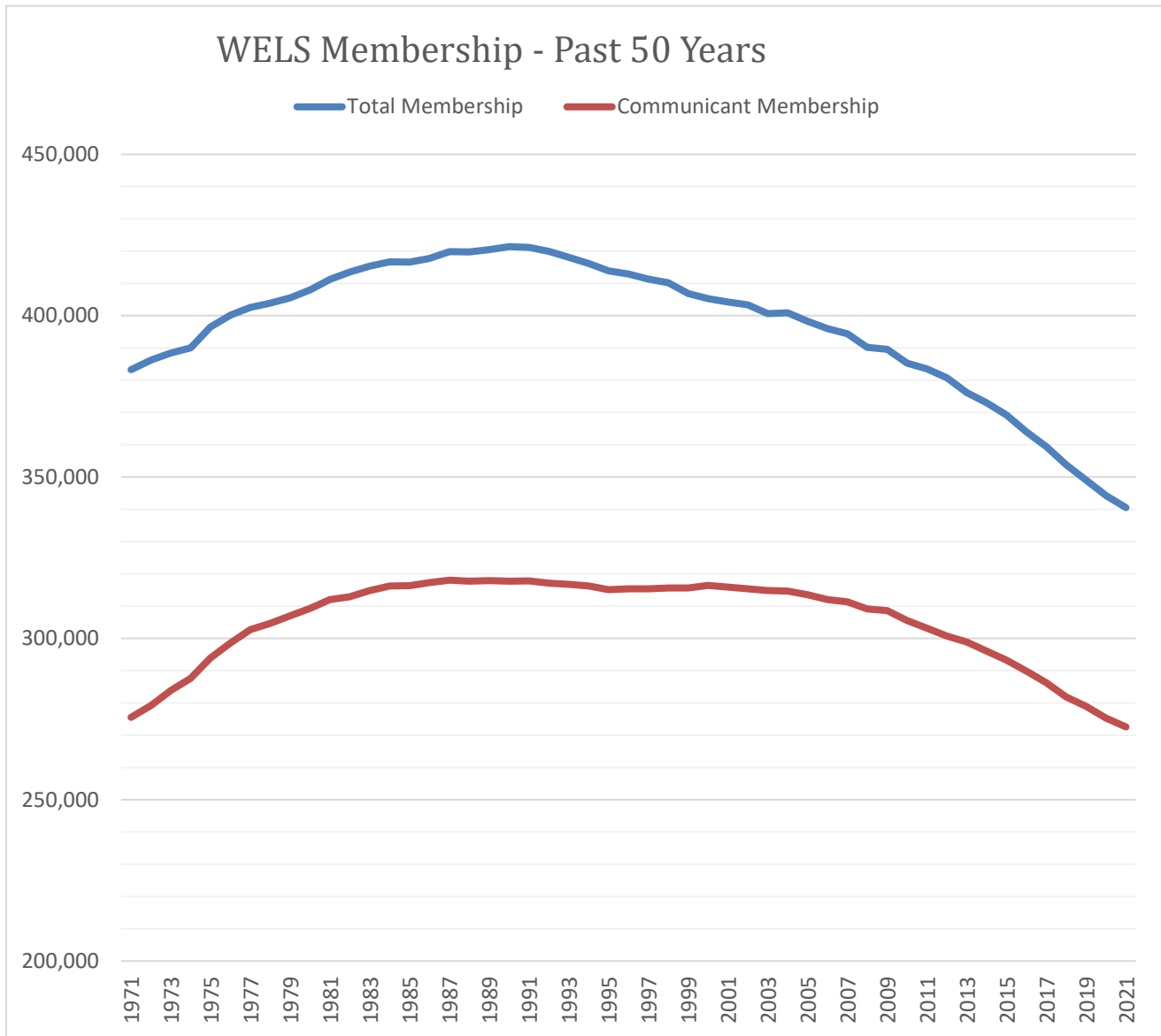
This statistical summary is meant to put the data from 2021 into a broader context. In some cases, we will provide analysis of those longer-term trends.

Just as with 2020, we need to be a little careful with the data from 2021. While 2021 did not have the lockdowns that were prevalent in 2020, in some parts of the country, things were not entirely back to normal. It will be a year or two before we can know for certain the long-term impact of COVID-19 on our congregations.

With that caveat, let us take a look at 2021 in WELS.

WELS Membership

Total and Communicant Membership



The reported total WELS membership at the end of 2021 was 340,511, with 272,555 of those being communicant members. From 2020 to 2021, total WELS membership decreased by 1.1% (down 3,733 souls). In that year, communicant membership decreased 1.0% (down 2,704). While losses, they are the smallest losses WELS has experienced in the past six years.

In the past five years (from 2017 to 2021), total WELS membership has decreased 6.5% (down 23,486). In that same period, communicant membership has decreased 6.0% (down 17,308).

In the past ten years (from 2012 to 2021), total WELS membership has decreased 12.2% (down 42,995). In that same period, WELS communicant membership decreased 10.1% (down 30,575).

The highest WELS total membership was 421,396 in 1990. WELS total membership has declined 19.2% since then, down 80,885 souls.

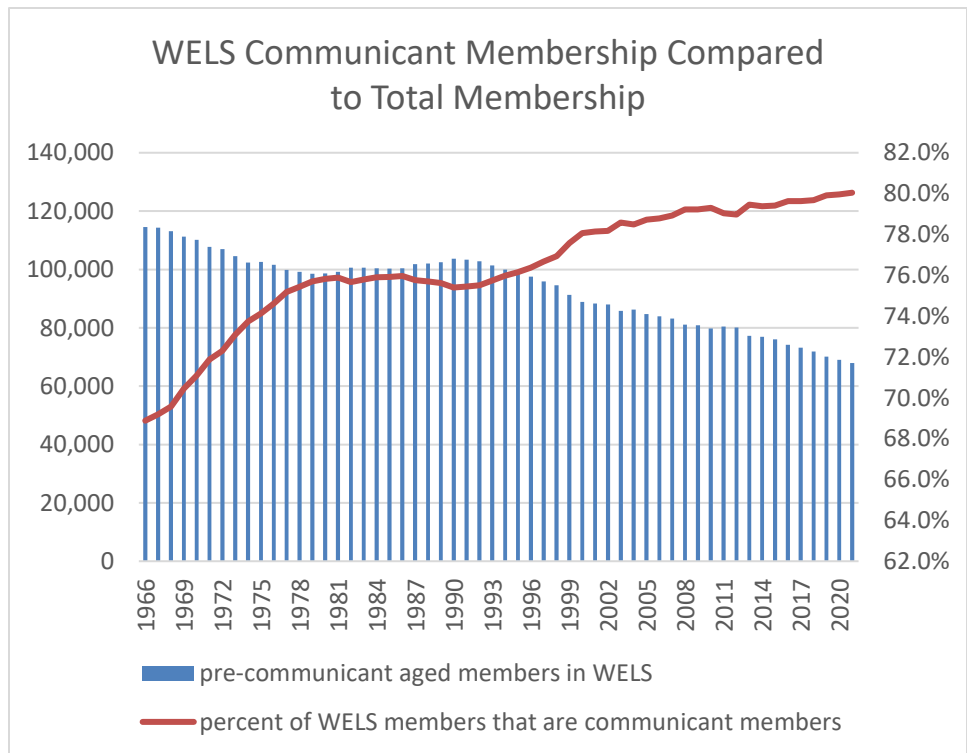
As has been reported in previous statistical summaries, the decline in membership totals in WELS parallels that of most other Christian denominations in America. For example, in 1990, the membership in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) was 2,602,849. As of 2019, LCMS membership was 1,968,641, a decline of 24.4%. The LCMS is down 29.4% from 1970 when they had their largest membership. The “nones,” i.e., Americans who claim no religious affiliation, have been the fast-growing religious group in America for some time now.⁴ In a 2020 report, Gallup reported “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time.” It is now only 47% of U.S. adults that belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque. That’s down 20 points since the turn of the century.⁵

This simply illustrates that the challenge before our congregations is not just tactical. It is cultural. America has become a post-Christian nation.

Shifts In Communicant and Total Membership

It is also worth noting the shift in makeup of WELS membership. In 1966, 31.1% of WELS’ total membership consisted of youths from newborn through 8th grade. At the time of largest total membership for WELS in 1990, that had fallen to 24.5%. Currently, 20% of WELS members fall into that age category. 80% are communicant members. A big part of this shift is due to the decline in births.

This has the potential eventually to affect enrollment at WELS schools. WELS has 12,420 fewer infants, toddlers, and grade school-age children today than just a decade ago, a decline of 15.5%.



⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>

⁵ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

Forecasting

In 2019, in one of the synod convention keynote addresses, a forecast of WELS membership was shared. At that time, based on well-established underlying trends, it was projected that in one generation (by 2039), WELS would have between 75,000 and 123,000 fewer members (with a remaining total membership between 279,000 and 231,000).

The data from recent years seems to reinforce a membership forecast right in the middle of that range. However, it is challenging to update the forecast due to the still-uncertain impact of COVID-19. There are both positive and negative signs.

An example of a positive sign—we noted that total membership decreased by 3,733 in 2021. But in 2020, the membership decline was 4,770. In 2018, it was 5,673. So, in two years, WELS total membership losses decreased by almost 2,000 people, a 34.2% decrease. Is this positive trend—that we lose *fewer* members each year—going to continue? We certainly pray so.

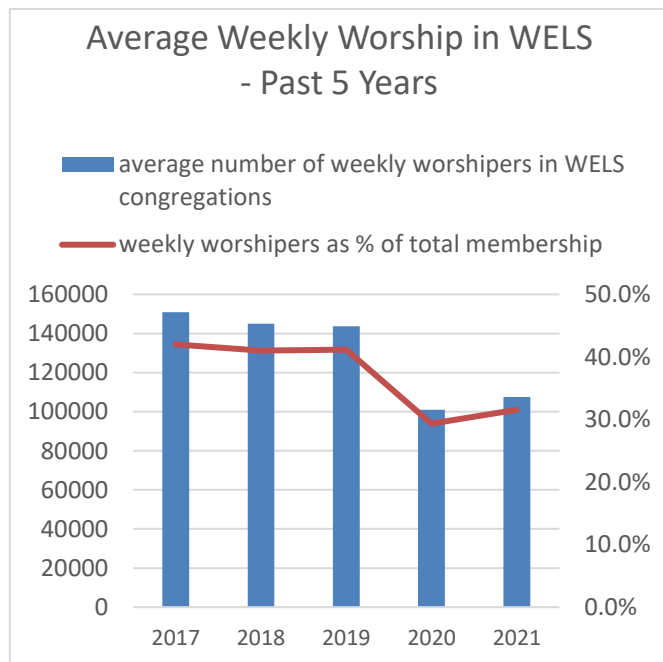
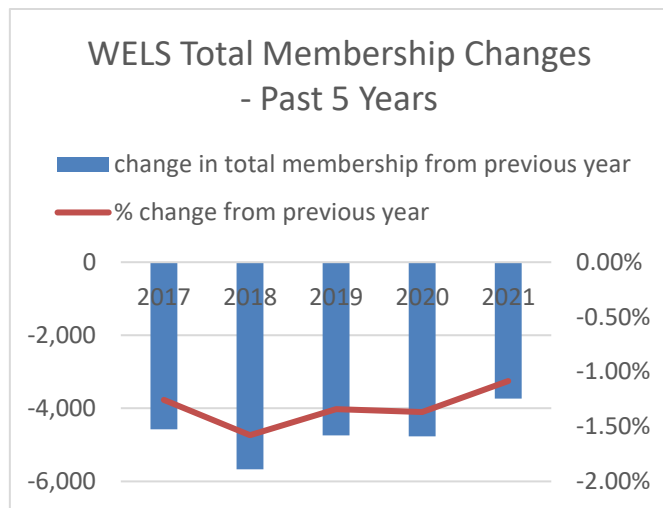
An example of a negative sign—worship attendance did not bounce back anywhere close to pre-COVID levels. In 2019, in an average week, 143,670 people would worship in a WELS congregation. In 2020, when many state governments implemented restrictions on public gatherings, that dropped to 100,999. In 2021, there was a bounce to 107,441. That is still down 36,229 (25.2%) from pre-COVID attendance.

Some of this can be attributed to the rise of “virtual church.” However, most congregational studies suggest that the majority of those people who attended in person prior to COVID but are doing so no longer have simply left the church (whether or not they have officially announced that intention to congregational leadership).

FORECAST RANGE: MEMBERS



The above is a slide from a 2019 synod convention keynote. The “down” is from 2019 membership numbers.



Types of Gains and Losses

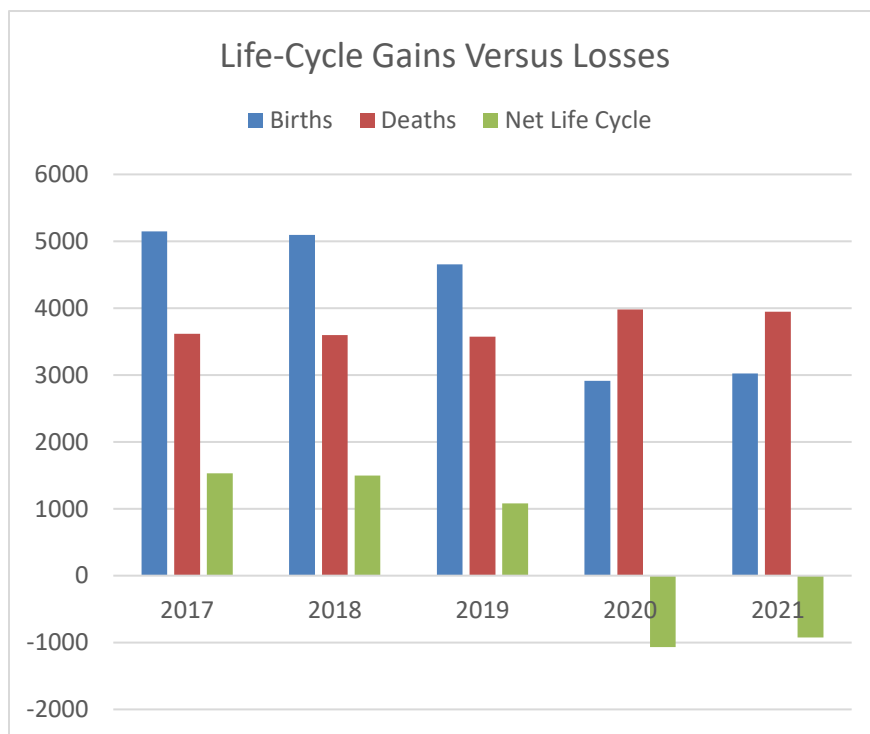
The statistical report breaks down congregational gains and losses into three broad categories.

- **Movement** – Here, gains include all transfers-in. Losses include all transfers-out. These types of gains and losses affect a congregation’s total membership. They do not really affect total WELS membership much.
- **Life Cycle** – Here, gains are births to WELS members. Losses are deaths of WELS members. Life-cycle gains and losses *do* affect both congregational membership and total WELS membership.
- **Spiritual** – The gains in this category are all individuals who are new to WELS in North America, pulled in through some sort of mission effort: adult confirmation, affirmation of faith, children of those two groups. (The print report calls these “new to WELS” and “lost from WELS.”) The losses in this category are individuals who dropped out of WELS membership for some reason: they were excommunicated; they joined another Christian church not of our fellowship; they were released or removed from membership; etc. Spiritual gains and losses *do* affect both congregational membership and total WELS membership. (NOTE: By calling these “spiritual” losses, we are not implying that all those who left WELS are spiritually lost, i.e., unbelievers. Nor are we implying that none of these individuals were believers until they became WELS. We simply mean that these individuals joined WELS or left WELS for some spiritually-based reason.)

Life-Cycle Gains and Losses

There were a reported 3,947 deaths of WELS members in 2021, representing 1.2% of WELS members. It is very close to the total deaths of 2020, which represented the biggest one-year increase in deaths in 35 years.

There were a reported 3,021 births to WELS households in 2021. It was shared in last year’s statistical summary that the 2020 birth rate reflected a 37% decline in births from 2019. We noted that if this large decline was not a one-year anomaly, it would suggest a “new normal” for births within WELS. That appears to be the case.



The WELS members belonging to Gen X (who are 42 to 57 years old) have almost completely exited child-bearing years, being replaced by WELS members of the Millennial generation (who are 26 to 41 years old). Millennials have fewer children than previous generations, in part, because as a group, Millennials have their first child later in life than previous generations. However, WELS also has fewer Millennials than GenXers.

How does this compare to the overall declining American birthrate? The U.S. birth rate has fallen about 20% since 2007.⁶ In 2007, WELS had approximately 6,900 births. 2021's births would thus represent a 56% decline from 2007. This *does not* mean that WELS couples today have fewer children than the average American couple. It would more likely suggest that in previous generations WELS households had a birth rate that was higher than average.

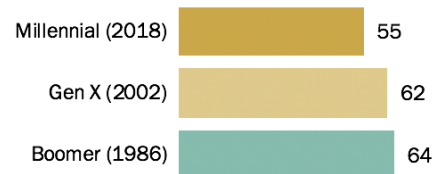
Spiritual Gains and Losses

In 2021, WELS had 3,084 reported adult confirmations. That is 26.4% higher than 2020 (2,539 adult confirmations). In 2021, WELS had 1,663 reported professions of faith. That is 36.2% higher than 2020 (1,221 professions of faith). Those spiritual gains amount to 4,747 new communicant WELS members. It was reported that those adult confirmations and professions of faith also resulted in the gaining of 1,772 children. That is 67% higher than 2020 (1,061 children of those groups). Thus, in 2021, there were a total of 6,519 new people being served in WELS congregations, often as the result of some ministry effort: evangelism and witnessing.

In 2021, WELS had a reported 1,586 members who left WELS to join a Christian denomination not of our fellowship. There were a reported 2,849 releases and 2,619 removals. All of those are up from 2020. This is not surprising. In 2020, member retention/delinquency work in congregations was challenging, as many people were avoiding physical assembling for worship (in some months, by government requirement) out

Millennials are less likely to have given birth at this stage of life than their predecessors

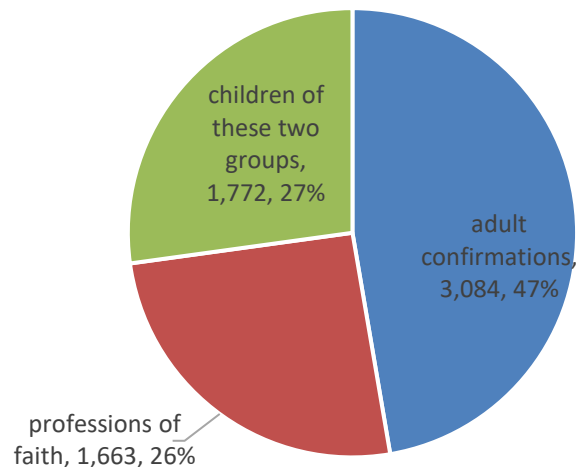
% of 22- to 37-year-old women who have had a live birth



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1986, 2002 and 2018 Current Population Survey Fertility Supplement (IPUMS). "As Millennials Near 40, They're Approaching Family Life Differently Than Previous Generations"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

New to WELS in 2021



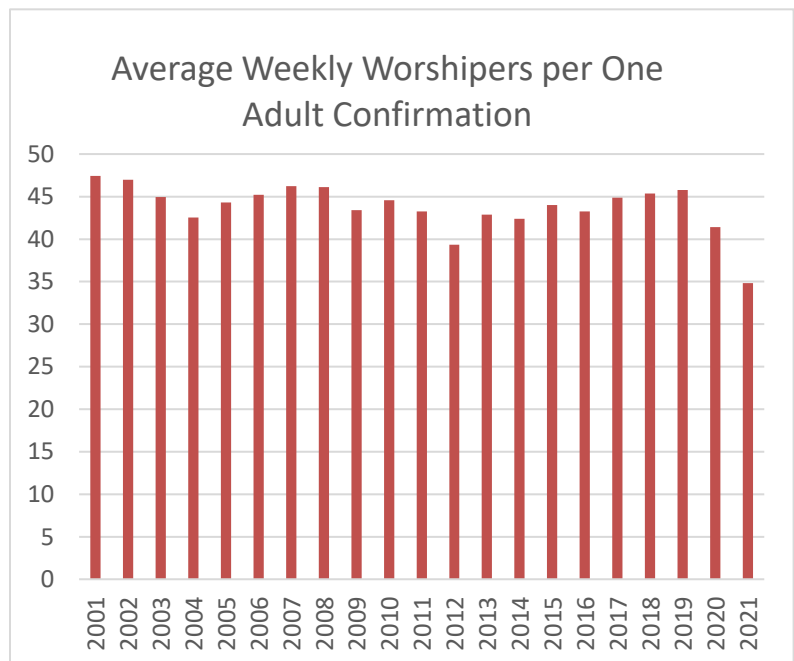
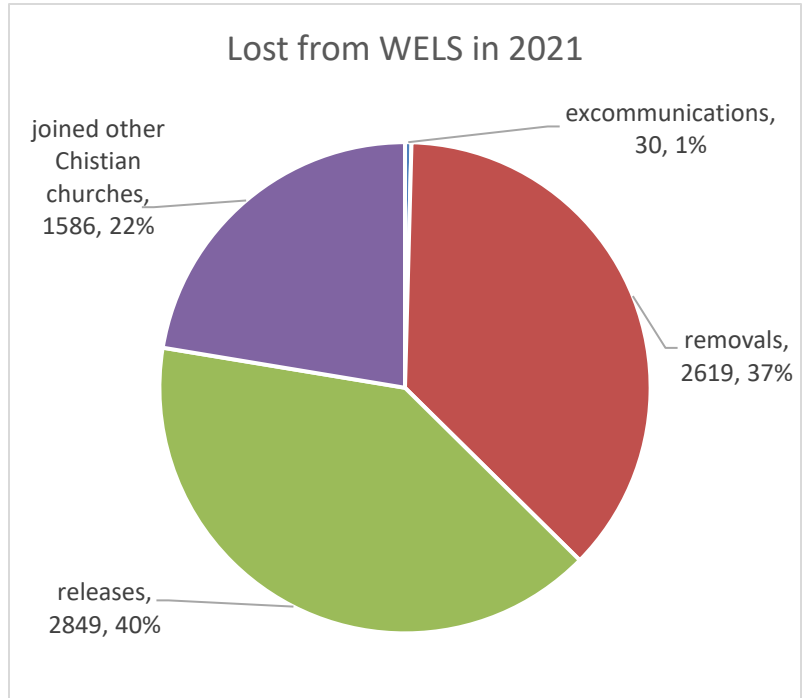
⁶ <https://www.prb.org/resources/why-is-the-u-s-birth-rate-declining/>

of pandemic concerns. This comes to a total of 7,084 communicant members who were lost from WELS in 2021. (Note: The data about children of adult confirmations and professions of faith was first asked in 2020. We do not have breakdowns of children who were “lost from WELS” as a result of their parents being removed or released from membership.)

To put this in context, for the past three decades these types of “back door” losses hovered around 8,000 annually. In the early 1990s, a few years approached 9,000. The 7,084 losses of 2021 are the lowest since 1986, with the exception of 2012 (6,902) and 2020 (5,936, which as explained is likely COVID related). So, in 2021, we saw a trend up in spiritual gains and a trend down in spiritual losses. WELS is still upside down, but the gap there is narrowing. This explains how, even with WELS now upside down on life-cycle gains/losses, the total net losses in 2021 was almost 1,000 fewer than in 2020.

The question remains as to whether this narrowing of the gap in spiritual gains/losses is going to be sustained and/or narrowed even further, or if COVID-related retention/delinquency issues are still playing out and “back door” losses move back to their historic norms in upcoming years. We certainly pray for the former.

Another positive sign in the spiritual gains/losses data is the ratio of weekly worshipers in WELS to adult confirmations. When that ratio is low, it might suggest a congregation relies more on personal witnessing/evangelism (e.g., an “each-one-reach-one” approach) more than corporate outreach efforts (e.g., advertising). (For example, the WELS congregation with the most adult confirmations in 2021 had 1 adult confirmation for every 5.4 people in worship: 241 weekly worshipers divided by 45 adult confirmations. It is a congregation that leans heavily on members to engage in personal



witnessing.) In Congregational Services, we strongly believe that as America becomes increasingly post-Christian, corporate outreach will be increasingly less impactful. In 2021, there was one adult confirmation for every 35 people in weekly worship (107,441 in weekly worship divided by 3,084 adult confirmations). That is the best ratio, by far, that WELS has had. Part of that, obviously, is that worship attendance is well below pre-pandemic levels. That can be seen positively too. WELS congregations are confirming similar levels of adults even with substantially fewer in weekly worship.

The forecast from a 2019 synod convention keynote was referenced earlier. That keynote also provided some targets that would potentially lead to membership stability. One was getting that adult confirmation to weekly worshiper ratio to 1:29. Historically, that number has been in the mid-40s. The other was to reduce communicant member back door losses by 20%, from the historic 8,000 annually to closer to 6,400. 2021 saw us move in that direction. That 1:35 ratio is not yet 1:29, but it a big step in the right direction. The 7,084 is not a 20% reduction in communicant back door losses. But it is an 11% reduction from the averages of the past two decades. Again, this would seem to correlate with the total membership losses being at 1.08% in 2021. (It averaged 1.39% in the previous five years, with the highest being 1.58% in 2018.) If WELS had the same birth rate in 2021 as we did recently (in 2007—6,901 births), even with the increase in deaths, WELS' total membership in 2021 would have grown slightly.

So, by God's grace, there are some reasons for cautious optimism. It will remain to be seen if these positive trends—trends down in spiritual losses, positive movement in the ratio of adult confirmations to worshipers, etc.—continue. Let us work like that depends entirely on our efforts, and trust that it depends entirely on the Holy Spirit.

Gains and Losses: Potential Implications for Membership and Enrollment

There are two potential long-term implications for this.

The first, obviously, relates to WELS membership. We just said that there are recent positive trends in spiritual gains/losses that we hope continue. If they do, it reduces the rate of decline, even with deaths of WELS members outpacing births to WELS households. (The decline would not stabilize until we got closer to the targets mentioned above.) If those positive trends in spiritual gains/losses do not continue, but instead revert back to pre-pandemic averages, it would mean WELS would then be upside down on *both* life-cycle gains and losses *and* spiritual gains and losses. That would move the change in total membership over -2% annually.

Perhaps the bigger implication in these gains/losses statistics is for enrollment in our schools. Approximately 75% of the students enrolled in our Lutheran elementary schools are members in WELS congregations. The other 25% are students whose parents are not churched and thus good prospects (about 16% of our LES enrollment) or who are "other churched," (9% of our LES enrollment), i.e., the parents and children are active in a Christian congregation not in fellowship with WELS. That 75% number is skewed by the fact that WELS has a number of huge schools where the vast majority of students are non-members. In the average WELS LES, it is closer to 90% of students who are baptized members of the congregation. We said that births within WELS are down approximately 40% in the past 5 years. That 40% reduction is not evenly spread throughout all WELS congregations, but an average. Even so, a reduction in births that large would inevitably lead to something of a reduction in that 90% of the typical LES enrollment. It will take a few years, but eventually that reduction in WELS children will become evident in

the lower grades. It would then matriculate upward into middle school and high school. (As congregations do long-range planning, it is useful to look at the birth/baptismal rate trends in recent years. What does that potentially mean for your enrollment in the next decade?)

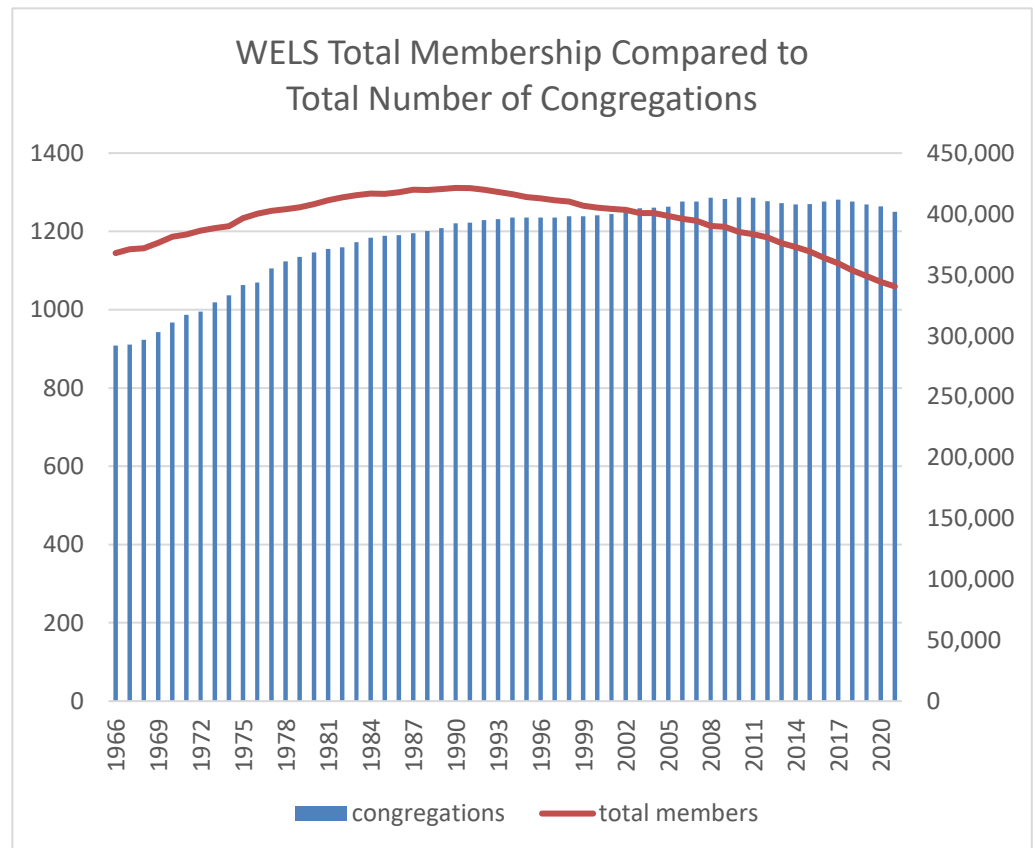
The declining birth rate in WELS doesn't necessarily mean an equivalent reduction in enrollment, only a probable reduction of WELS member children who make up that enrollment. According to 2021-2022 school statistics, enrollment in WELS elementary schools is up 8%. It is even higher than that in early childhood ministries.⁷ Part of that bump is simply due to the fact that enrollment was suppressed to some degree in 2020-2021, when many schools were required to go virtual. But another part of that bump is due to parents increasingly looking at private education because they have concerns with public education for a variety of reasons. So, it is possible that ten years from now WELS LES enrollment is similar to what it is today (approximately 26,600 students). But if that were to happen, it seems almost inevitable that the makeup of the schools would include a higher percentage of unchurched and other-churched students. It is also possible that the decline in the WELS birth rate is simply too large to be countered by unchurched and other-churched children, and enrollment trends down in time.

Congregations

Total Congregations

WELS had 14 fewer congregations at the end of 2021 than at the end of 2020. (That is the net change: existing congregational closures versus new mission openings.) That marks the fourth year in a row that WELS had fewer congregations than the previous year. In the past decade, WELS lost congregations in eight out of ten years.

This seems to simply be an extension of the membership decline. When a church has little debt, it can go

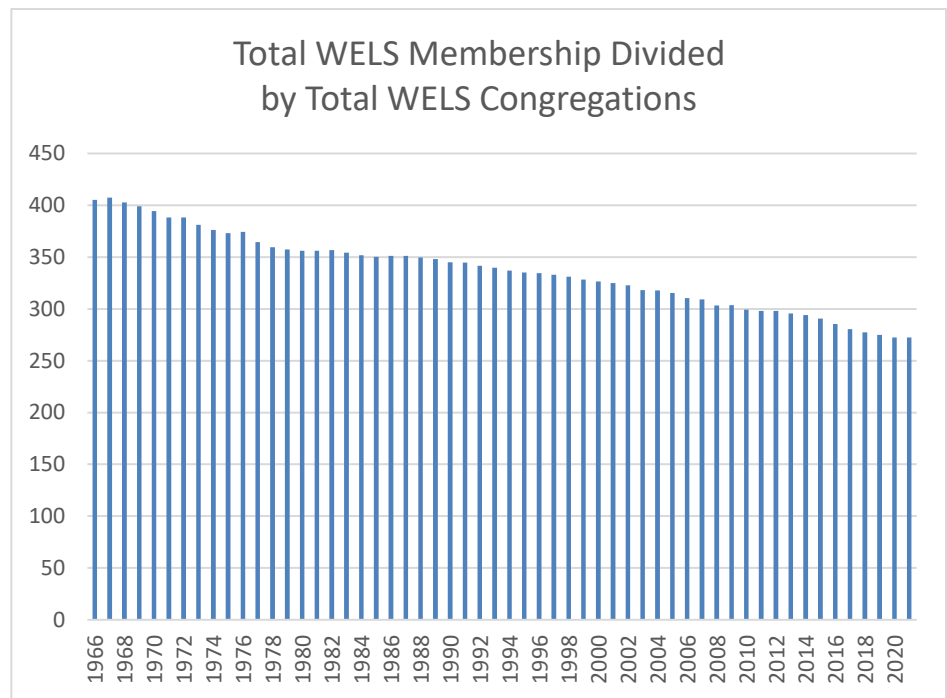


⁷ <https://wels.net/increased-school-enrollments-offer-new-opportunities-for-outreach/>

from 400 members to 100 members with little impact. When the congregation goes from 100 to 40 or fewer members, it is more of an existential challenge.

That said, there are also examples of extremely small congregations that have the financial resources that would enable them to stay open. Perhaps members have remembered the congregation in their estate. So, even though the congregation has a weekly worship attendance in the teens and plate offerings that are below operational costs, they can subsidize on savings indefinitely.

This creates a strategic challenge. At the end of 2021, WELS had 340,511 total members in 1,250



congregations. WELS was its largest in 1990, when it had 421,396 members. But WELS only had 1,221 congregations then. So, in three decades, WELS has added about 30 churches while losing about 80,000 members. When you divide total members by total congregations, you get 345 in 1990 and 272 in 2021. If WELS had the same member to congregation ratio as in 1990 today, WELS' 340,511 members would exist in 987 congregations, 263 fewer than today. Obviously, there is nothing that dictates the ratio of members to congregations. It simply helps explain the pastoral vacancy challenge. Even with the church closures of recent years, WELS has a congregational footprint larger than it was at the height of WELS membership. Yet there are fewer members (and thus fewer potential called workers).

Congregational Worship Attendance Shifts

We see this shift in congregational worship patterns. In 2001, WELS had 59 congregations that worshiped 501 or more. Those 59 equated to 5% of all WELS congregations at that time. By 2011, there were only 29 congregations that worshiped 501 or more, representing 3% of WELS congregations. Currently, there are 12 churches that worship 501 or more.

The number of WELS congregations that worship between 201 and 500 per week has decreased from 208 congregations in 2001 to 107 congregations in 2021.

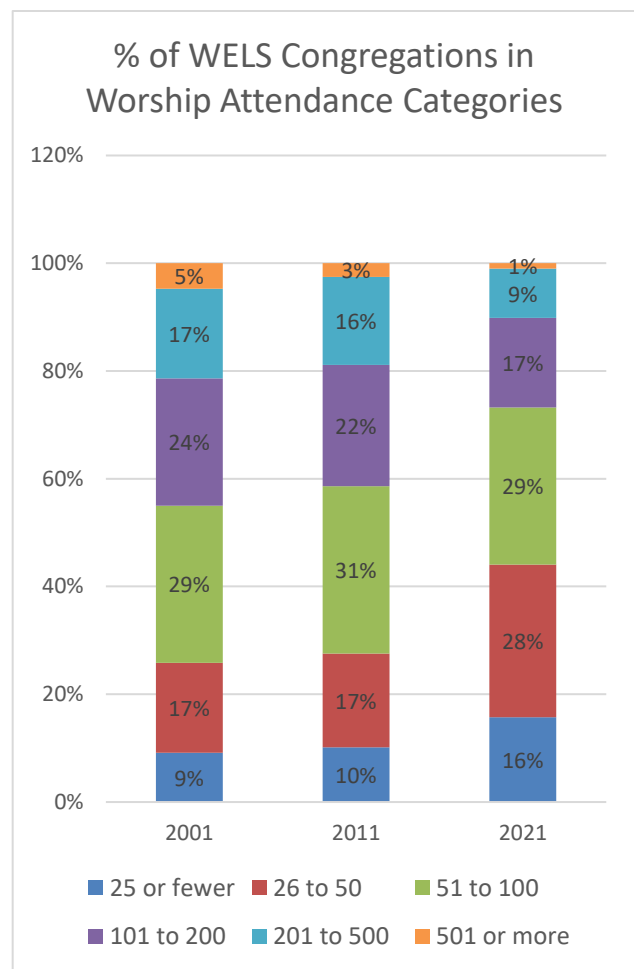
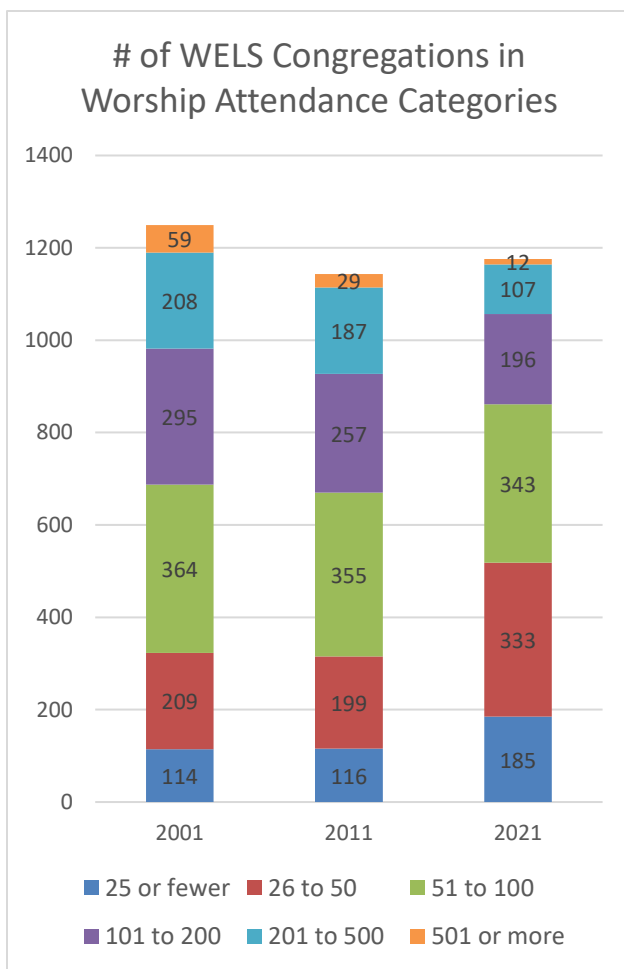
At the other end of the spectrum, the number of congregations that worship 25 or fewer has gone up, drastically in the past decade. In 2001, there were 114 congregations in that attendance category (9% of all WELS congregations). In 2011, it was 116 congregations (10%). But in 2021, that attendance category jumped to 185 congregations (16% of all WELS congregations).

The same holds true for churches worshipping 26 to 50. In 2001, that was 209 congregations (17% of total WELS congregations). Currently, it is 333 congregations (28%).

So, currently, 44% of WELS congregations worship 50 or fewer people on an average week. That is up from 26% in 2001. Currently, 73% worship 100 or fewer people on an average week. That is up from 55% in 2001. Currently, 10% worship 201 or more. That is down from 22% in 2001.

Again, this is not to imply there is anything wrong with having a smaller worship attendance than one generation ago! It is simply an explanation of some of the “pinch” we are feeling with vacancies. And forecasting the future number of congregations is substantially more difficult than forecasting total membership. Will the trend in churches closing each year continue upward? If so, how many of those congregations that have worship attendance in the low 20s or teens will merge with others or simply close? Or, if they have the funds, will they want to remain open and independent, even with those membership levels?

Fortunately, there is One who knows the answer to those questions. He is in perfect control of his Church. But he does give us the privilege and responsibility of wrestling with this information as we attempt to steward his gifts to the best of our abilities.



Note: “Congregations” in the above graphs combine the attendance from a multisite campuses into one reporting “congregation.” That is how data is submitted in the statistical report: with the mother campus reporting all data. For example, some of the congregations that report having 500 or more in attendance are actually multiple congregational campuses with smaller attendances grouped into one reporting unit.

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://welscongregationalervices.net/stats/>.

Offerings

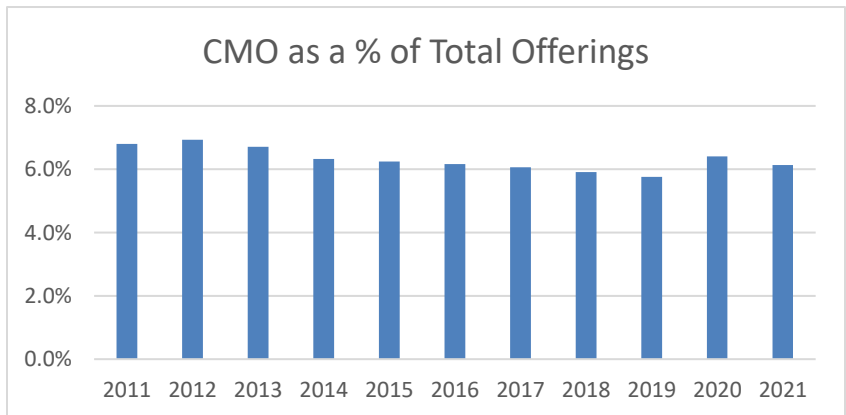
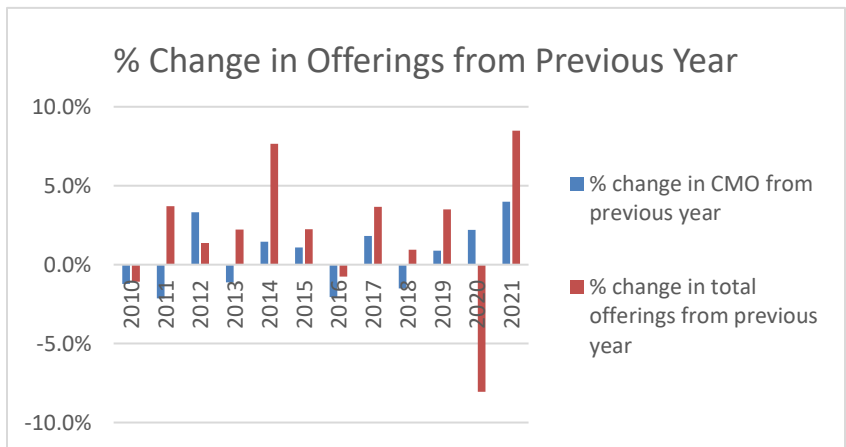
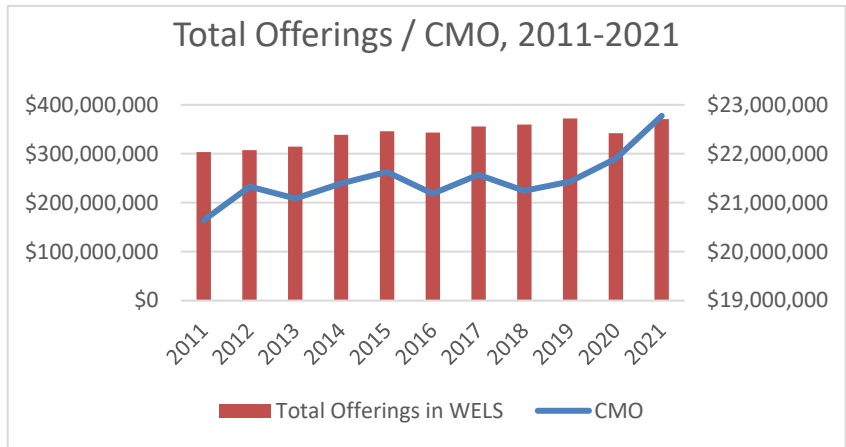
We thank God for the generosity of his people! 2021 saw a 4% increase in Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO) from the previous year (\$22,775,271 in 2021, up from \$21,902,528 in 2020).

2021 also saw a correction of an odd phenomenon from the previous year. In 2020, total offerings went down while CMO went up. That had never happened before. But in 2021, along with the 4% increase in CMO, total offerings rose 8.5%. (CMO generally follows total offerings. In the past decade, CMO typically comprises between 6% and 7% of total offerings.)

After dipping 1.4% in 2020, offerings given for local ministry (i.e., within a congregation) rebounded 7.8% in 2021, from \$306,791,097 to \$330,778,055.

Per communicant giving is also at a historic level. It was \$1,362 in 2021, up from \$1,243 in 2020, a 9.6% increase.

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 turmoil and employment upheaval.



Snapshot Comparison: The 65-Year-Old Member

It can be helpful to look at statistics spanning a longer period of time. That can provide insights into changes within our church body as well as the changing religious culture of the nation. So, imagine you are a 65-year-old WELS member, born in late 1956.

That was arguably the height of Christian engagement in America. Sociologists believe that during Eisenhower’s presidency (1953 to 1961), America’s average weekly church attendance reached its highest point ever.

1956 was also the year when WELS was closest in size as it is today. So, if you are a 65-year-old WELS member, for the first half of your life, you saw WELS grow. WELS’ peak membership was in 1990, when you were 34. For the second half of your life, the past 32 years, WELS membership has been in decline (along with just about every Christian denomination in America). Thus, this chart compares snapshots of those three years: 1956, 1990, and 2021.

The data here simply reinforces what we have seen in earlier parts of this summary.

One example would be the aging of WELS. We see that reflected in the growing number of members that are communicant age.

Another example would be in the congregational footprint for WELS.

Even with recent church closures, that footprint is larger than it was in 1990, when WELS had 81,000 more members.

It is interesting to note that there is almost exactly the same amount of active parish pastors today than in 1990. Yet, while there were vacancies in 1990, the percentage is higher today. What is the explanation?

- Part of it is that there are 29 more congregations today than in 1990.
- Part of it is the number of pastors serving in larger congregations has risen. In 1990, it was still relatively rare for a larger congregation to have more than two pastors. Today, some large congregations have four or five pastors on staff. This is done to better serve the needs of members.
- Part of it is that the vacancy rate also includes vacancies in non-parish ministries. Non-parish pastoral ministries include pastors who teach in our ministerial education system (ca. 62), pastors

Year	1956	1990	2021
Total Membership	339,106	421,396	340,511
Communicant Membership	228,129	317,720	272,555
Percent of Members Who Are Communicants	67.3%	75.4%	80.0%
Average Weekly Worshipers	166,162	193,747	107,441
Total Congregations	841	1,221	1,250
Number of Congregations Subsidized by Synod (%)	200 (23.8%)	187 (15.3%)	95 (7.6%)
Total Members Divided by Total Congregations	403	345	272
Active Parish Pastors	695	1,185	1,189
Active Pastors Serving Outside a Parish	109	176	199
Total Pastors	804	1,361	1,388
Percent of Pastors Serving in Non-Parish Ministries	13.6%	12.9%	14.3%
Total Members / Parish Pastors	488	356	286
Weekly Worshipers / Parish Pastors	239	163	90

Worship attendance for 1956 is an estimate. At that time, WELS recorded communion attendance, not worship attendance. The estimate assumes a 49% attendance rate, which is slightly lower than what it was when WELS began tracking weekly attendance. So, this is a conservative estimate.

who serve in world missions (ca. 42), pastors who teach in area Lutheran high schools (ca. 35), pastors who work in WELS-affiliated ministries (ca. 30), pastors who work in leadership roles at WELS Center for Mission and Ministry (12), pastors who work as Ministry of Christian Giving counselors (10), etc.

The shift in members and worshipers per parish pastor is startling. However, it reflects the reality that in the past two generations American Christianity has collapsed. (In 2020, the number of Americans who belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque fell to 47%, the first-time religious participants have been a minority of the population since that data was tracked.⁸)

So, part of the challenge before us is logistical. The 65-year-old looks at WELS, and he sees a synod that has added over 400 congregations since the day he was born. Yet, currently, total membership is only 1,400 people higher.

As mentioned previously, if WELS had the same member to congregation ratio today as it had in 1990, WELS' 340,511 members would exist in 987 congregations, 263 fewer than today. The vacancy problem would be rectified, even with the expected uptick in retirements in future years. (We wouldn't want to have zero vacancies. That presents its own challenges.)

That information does not make any solution easily identifiable. Those smaller congregations are filled with brothers and sisters in Christ, some of whom have had generations of their family belong to the same church. Moreover, some of those smaller congregations are in strategically important areas, and if they closed it would be hard for WELS to re-establish a presence there. For example, consider the North Atlantic district. There are some smaller congregations in the North Atlantic. But they are not near one another. If they close, there is often not another church in fellowship with WELS nearby. Moreover, many of those congregations are on property that would be hard for Home Missions to afford today, simply because of real estate costs in that part of the country.

So, again, part of the challenge before us is logistical. These are issues for us to pray about, to discuss, and to plan for. That is part of the purpose of a statistical summary like this—to hopefully provide a clearer picture of reality as that discussion and planning takes place.

However, the biggest challenge before us remains what it has been since the Garden. *"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."*⁹ Fortunately, the One who is the head over the Church has the ability to make the blind to see.

So, over half of America is now unchurched? Excellent! That is simply a bigger mission field for the 340,511 missionaries within WELS. Cultural Christianity is dead? Perfect. It means those of us who know Christ can more easily identify those who do not. In 65 years, the numbers have changed. The mission has not. It does not matter if you are 5 or 65. If the Holy Spirit lives in you, then Christ's promise to you applies. *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses . . ."*¹⁰ This is an opportunity for the Church to be the Church.

⁸ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:4

¹⁰ Acts 1:8

Final Thoughts

The Impact of WELS Worldwide

This statistical summary focuses primarily on data that was submitted by stateside WELS congregations. However, let us also rejoice and praise God for all the ministry that WELS does beyond the United States. In the final pages of the PDF version of the statistical report, you will find the many dozens of nations where WELS is doing gospel ministry. There are hundreds of thousands of brothers and sisters in Christ counted in those church bodies. Through our Board for World Missions and Multi-Language Productions, WELS' worldwide footprint is bigger than ever. Confessional Lutheranism is facing challenges in North America, but it is taking root in brand new locations around the world.

The Ticking Post-COVID Clock

We said that this past year the average weekly in-person worship attendance bounced back, from 100,999 in 2020 to 107,441 in 2021. We said that *still* remains over 36,000 people below the 2019 numbers (143,670).

Some of those 36,000 learned to prefer “virtual worship” in 2020. These individuals/households may take a hybrid approach, watching the worship service at home most weeks and attending in person occasionally, for example, to receive Holy Communion. Clearly congregations have different philosophies on this. There are some who are leaning into virtual worship, contending it is simply the way culture is going. They are okay if their members choose to take this hybrid approach and have attempted to develop systems to have members connect to one another virtually so “community” is not lost. However, other congregations are stressing the importance of the saints physically gathering around Word and sacrament. They communicate to members that worshiping at home is fine when it is a necessity, for example, if one is sick or out of town for the weekend. However, it should not be viewed as a “new norm” and a legitimate option to in-person worship when it is *not* a necessity. (This was the encouragement provided by Congregational Services' *God's People Gather* resources: <https://welscongregationalservices.net/gods-people-gather/>.)

What virtually everyone agrees on is that the vast majority of Americans who stopped attending church have *not* pivoted to virtual worshiper as their new normal. They have simply left the church.¹¹ Or, more accurately, they are still members but have no desire or sense of urgency to become involved in their congregation again. Most who have written on this topic express the belief that the sentiment of those individuals will permanently harden quickly after COVID-19 becomes more endemic and life goes back to normal.

The point? There is likely a clock ticking on those 36,000 individuals.

In reality, that represents a group substantially larger than 36,000. Some of them were probably regular attenders. But within that group are also members who came every other week . . . members who came once a month. So, that 36,000 decline in worship attendance probably is closer to 50,000 men, women, and

¹¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/march/return-to-church-plateau-in-person-virtual-pew-research.html>

children who walked through the doors of a WELS church at least occasionally and do so no longer. When attendance numbers from 2019 are compared to 2021, it is about 84% of WELS congregations whose attendance is still lower than pre-COVID times.

This stresses the need for systematic member retention/delinquency work. One could make the case it should be the primary/only objective for congregations right now. *“If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?”*¹² In most WELS congregations, this will require a group larger than the normal Board of Elders. The scope of the work is simply too large. Twelve months of intensive member retention work should clarify what the reality is, i.e., who is coming back and who, in reality, is now unchurched and should be viewed more as a prospect.

Lutheran Elementary School Challenges

The logistical challenges we described with WELS’ congregational footprint certainly are present in our school system too. There are two challenges here, potentially offsetting.

First, as previously mentioned, there is increased interest in most parts of the country in private schools. Some have speculated that COVID-19 has permanently shifted enrollment, so that a higher percentage of the population will utilize private schools moving forward.¹³ About 70% of WELS schools increased their enrollment this past year, while 25% decreased and 5% stayed about the same.¹⁴ Yet, the teacher vacancy rate is as problematic as the pastoral vacancy rate. So, while schools may have the opportunity to expand, one wonders how expansion would affect the challenge being caused by the already high vacancy rate?

One also wonders if this will disproportionately affect smaller schools. Will smaller schools see the same interest from unchurched parents as larger schools? Will unchurched parents, looking for an option different than public education, be as willing to consider a school with two to four grades per classroom? The vacancy rate means lots of calls being extended. As WELS teachers receive calls, is there an inclination to lean toward calls where one has to do lesson planning for one grade instead of multiple grades? What impact, if any, will expansion of medium and larger elementary schools have on our smaller schools?

The potentially offsetting challenge is WELS birthrate falling by 40% in five years and seemingly settling at a new normal of only about 3,000 children per year born to WELS couples. That just happened in the past two years. So, it will take a few years before that drop would affect elementary enrollment.

Another more strategic challenge that is worthy of thought and discussion: the unchurched and other-churched children. Studies indicate that a large percentage of those American parents looking to move their children from public school to private school claim to have a church home. Currently, other-churched students comprise about 9% of our LES enrollment. What impact will it have if that increases greatly? The cost of educating those other-churched children is often offset by school choice dollars. The issue is not money so much. The issue is, again, staffing. Moreover, can we do better at reaching the households of the 16% of unchurched students in our elementary schools and the 33% of unchurched students in our early

¹² Matthew 18:12

¹³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertfarrington/2021/06/08/how-covid-19-boosted-private-school-enrollment-forever/?sh=213c6ec396fc>

¹⁴ <https://wels.net/increased-school-enrollments-offer-new-opportunities-for-outreach/>

childhood ministries (ECMs) with the gospel? (Congregational Services' *Telling the Next Generation* program is designed to help congregational and school leadership produce and implement an aggressive harvest strategy.)

It should be noted that steps are being taken to address the vacancy rate in our Lutheran schools and ECMs. Martin Luther College proposed offering a Competency-Based Education program to encourage people not trained at MLC to consider entering WELS' teaching ministry. WELS Conference of Presidents has endorsed that proposal.

Mergers

One thing that jumps out in that snapshot comparison of those three years—1956, 1990, and 2021—is the number of mergers that have been taken place. We said that WELS has 1,250 congregations. But it has 1,199 “reporting units.” When you look at the electronic version of the statistical report, you will see that 51 congregations do not report any data. That is because their data—members, worship attendance, baptisms, adult confirmations, etc.—are included with another congregation. Of those 51, if they were in existence in 1990, they were independent. But, for a variety of reasons, they merged with other churches. In some cases, it was born of necessity. In other cases, the leaders of the congregations simply thought it made more sense for them to do ministry together. (There is often an economy of scale that is achieved in a merger.)

When congregations merge, in some cases, both locations remain open. This is typically known as a “multi-site ministry.” In other cases, one of the locations is no longer utilized. The resources are put into one campus. This is often known as an “absorption merger.”

It used to be that most mergers were of smaller congregations. What is interesting is how in recent years, medium and ever larger congregations have merged: congregations of hundreds merging to become a very large congregation. This is clearly *not* a matter of necessity. These congregations decided that given their geographic proximity it simply made sense to conduct ministry together.

Moving forward, what role will mergers of congregations and/or schools have in addressing the logistical challenges before WELS? It is something worth further prayer and discussion.

The Possibility of Staff Ministry

A Competency-Based Education program is something being considered for WELS' staff ministry program as well. Training to become a staff minister in WELS takes about half the time as training to become a pastor, as staff ministry training does not require learning the biblical languages. How much can pivoting to Competency-Based Education in the staff ministry program reduce the training time for that position of service?

We have all heard about “The Great Resignation,” record numbers of Americans quitting their jobs and looking for something else more satisfying. Are there WELS individuals in that boat? Would they consider serving their Lord and their church as a staff minister? Could that process be quickened through a Competency-Based Education program? Is this a way to take *some* pressure off the pastoral vacancy situation? This is also perhaps worthy of prayer and discussion.

Corporate Outreach Versus Personal Witnessing

There are many groups and think-tanks that study American religious culture: the Barna Group, the Pew Research Center, Lifeway Research. They are fairly consistent in their breakdowns of unchurched Americans. They would say that in 1980, at least a quarter of unchurched Americans were actively “shopping” for a church. They wanted to be a church member and were looking for one that fit their perceived needs. Those groups would say today, it is at most 1 in 20 unchurched Americans who are “church shoppers.” Since the turn of the century, Americans are increasingly disinterested in organized religion or church membership.

In the last part of the 20th century, when that low-hanging fruit of “church shoppers” was plentiful, corporate outreach could be impactful. “Getting your name out there” was worthwhile. In the 21st century, when the vast majority of unchurched Americans have no interest in church, corporate outreach is going to be increasingly less impactful. John and Jane Doe are not likely to care that your church offers _____, because they do not care about church, period. What John and Jane Doe are still willing to do is have a conversation about faith with a neighbor or friend they trust.

Corporate outreach can certainly aid personal witnessing. However, if corporate outreach is the foundation of a congregational evangelism program, that will likely be problematic. (Congregational Services’ new *Everyone Outreach* program is designed to help shape a personal evangelism culture within a congregation.)

In Summary

We said that doing statistical work first of all leads us to thank God for his continued blessings and secondly enables us to make wiser stewardship 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*.¹⁵ 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,
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¹⁵ Zechariah 4:6