



STATISTICAL SUMMARY & ANALYSIS

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2023

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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 2023 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.

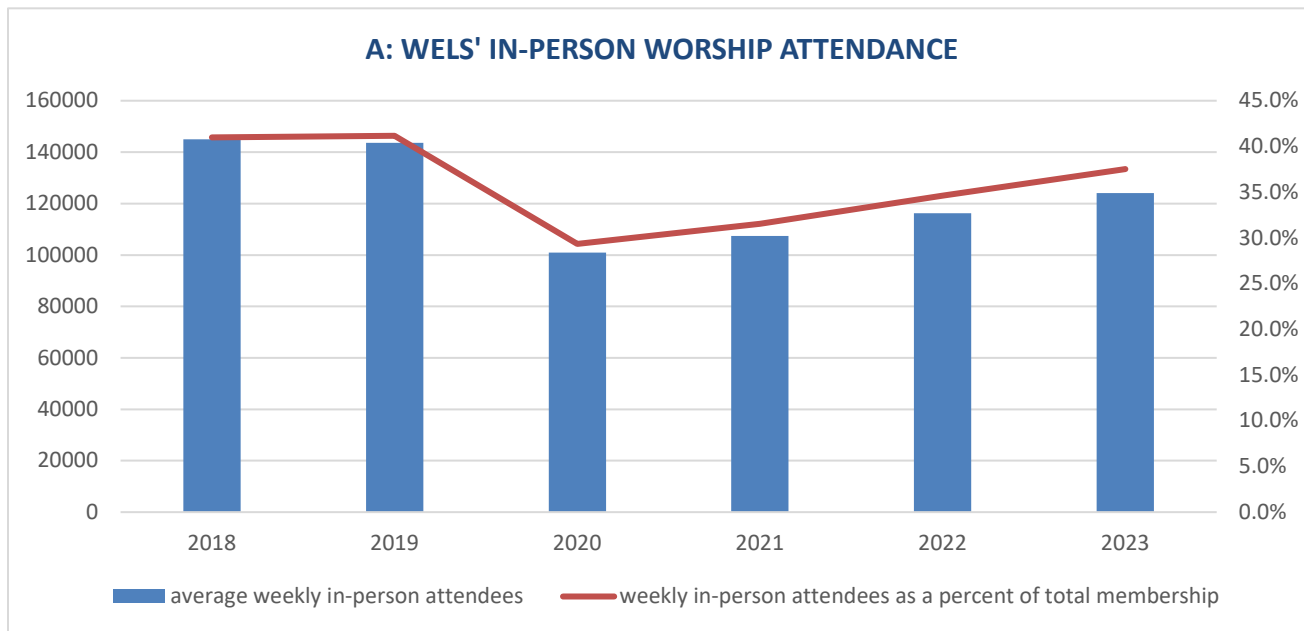
¹ Luke 12:42

² Small Catechism

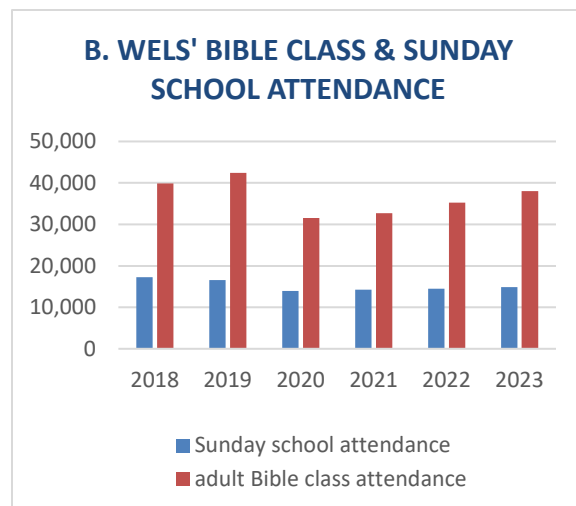
³ Ibid

⁴ Matthew 28:20

Post-COVID Rebound



In 2020, our congregations saw worship and Bible study attendance plummet. For example, from 2019 to 2020, average weekly in-person worship attendance declined by 30% (-42,300 souls). Since COVID, while WELS' total membership continues to trend down, worship and Bible study attendance have risen sharply. Since 2020, WELS total membership is down 4% (a loss of 13,600 souls), but weekly in-person worship attendance has risen 22.8% (23,000 more worshippers). Adult Bible study attendance has risen 20.6% (6,500 more) and Sunday school attendance has risen 6.5% (900 more).

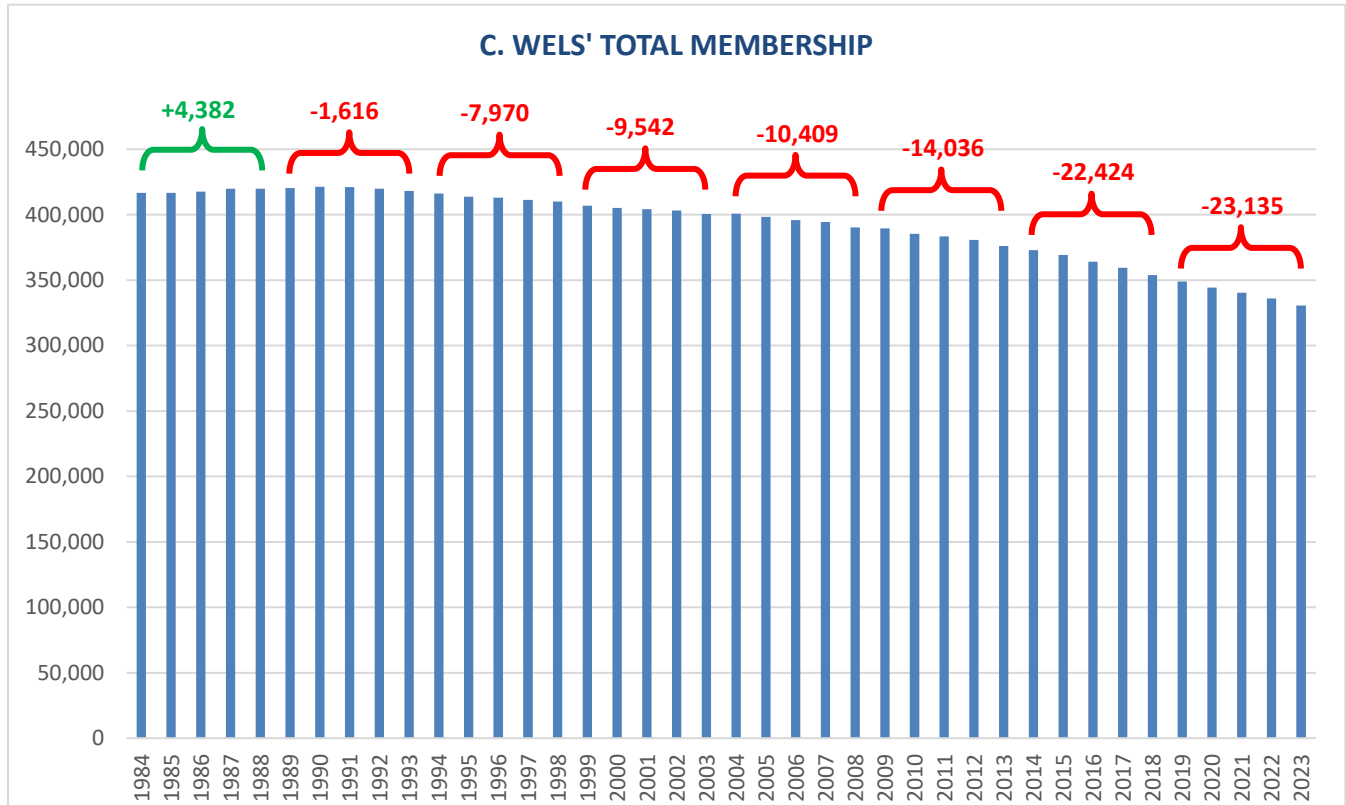


This seems to be continued post-COVID sorting, a phenomena referenced in previous statistical summaries. After COVID, when some members were slow to return to in-person worship, many congregations began intensive shepherding work. As elders and soul care teams contacted absent members, they identified some who had left the church, often prior to COVID. Thus, WELS membership continues to trend downward. However, that same shepherding work had the good effect of encouraging others to rejoin in-person worship and Bible study.

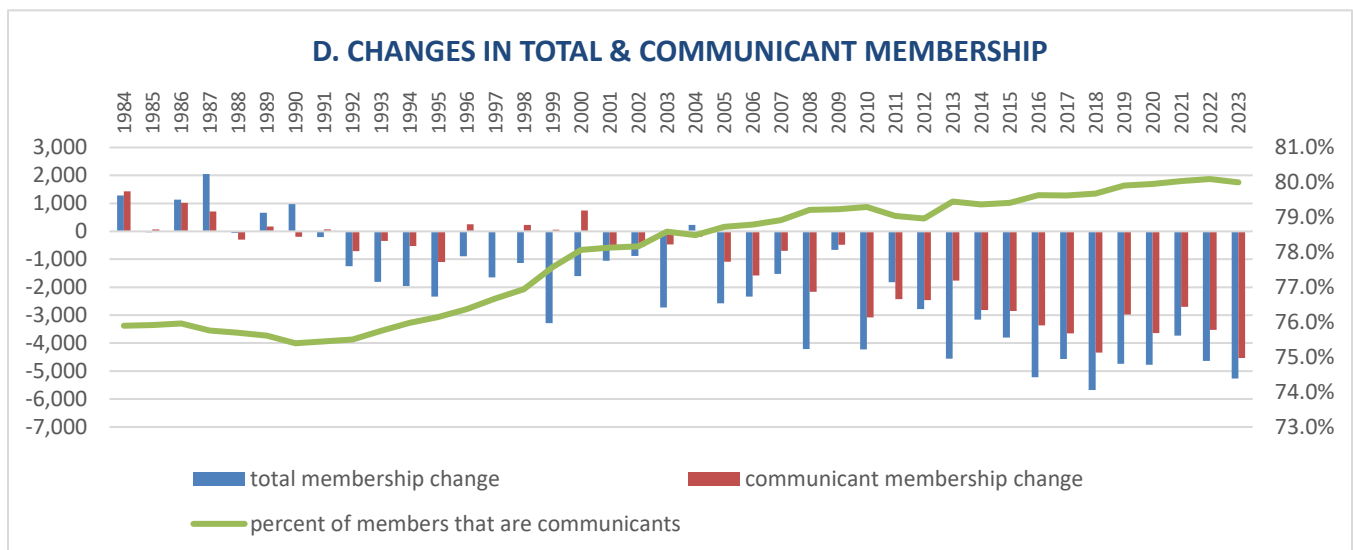
The percent of WELS members attending in-person weekly worship is close to pre-pandemic levels (41.2% in 2019; 37.5% in 2023). When you add in the estimated number of WELS members who, for various reasons, utilize the online service in a given week, it seems likely that today there are more WELS members who listen to God's Word preached weekly than in 2019. Certainly, there is still room for growth. But we thank God for the faithful shepherding efforts, which are clearly bearing fruit.

WELS' Membership

WELS' total membership declined 5,261 (1.57%) in 2023. Since WELS' peak membership in 1990, WELS has lost members in 32 out of 33 years. 2023 marks the ninth year in a row where total membership losses exceeded 1%. Graph C shows total membership and provides net gains or losses in five-year increments.

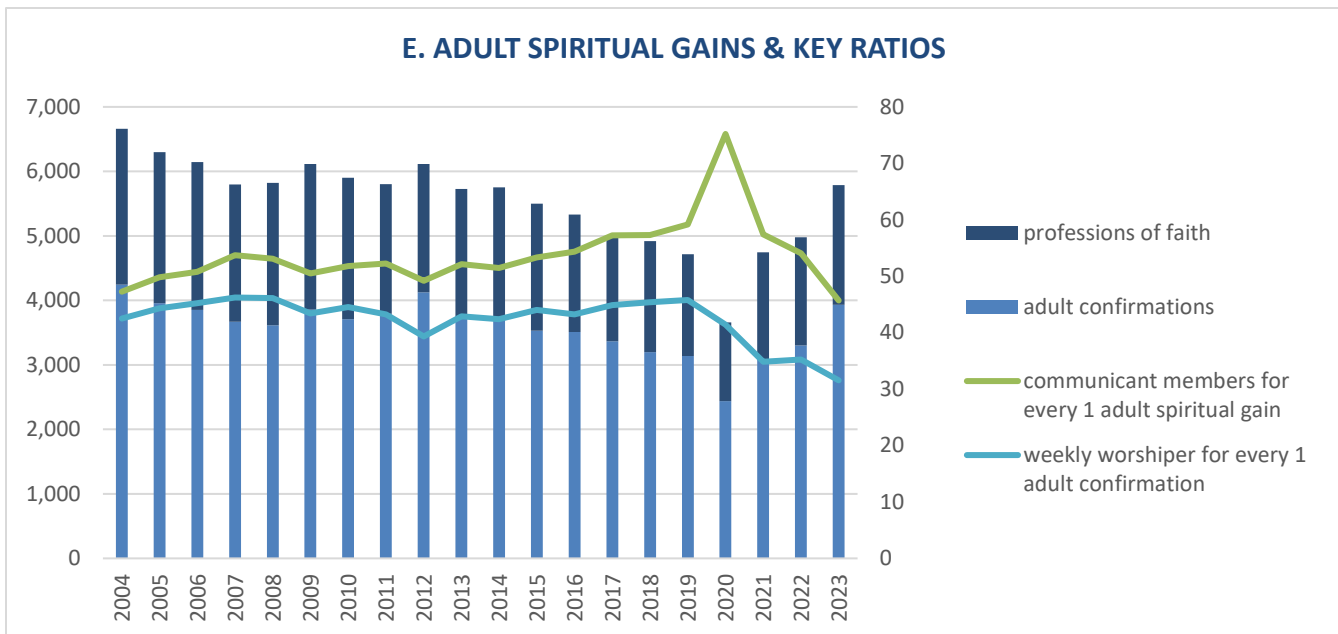


Graph D compares losses in total (baptized) and communicant membership. We note that in most years, the percentage of total members lost is greater than the percentage of communicant members lost. This has resulted in the percent of members that are communicants rising over the years.



Types of Gains and Losses

WELS congregations had a total of 3,932 adult confirmations in 2023, a 19% rise from the previous year and the third highest total in the past two decades. There were 5,788 total adult spiritual gains (adult confirmations and professions of faith), the highest number since 2012. Through the annual statistical report filled out by Lutheran schools, we track adult confirmations that result from a harvest strategy in a youth education ministry. Those trended up from 794 in 2022 to 891 in 2023, a 12% increase. In summary, across WELS, there were 630 more adult confirmations in 2023 than in 2022. 97 of those increased adult confirmations were related to a youth education ministry (15.4%). The other 533 were from some other type of evangelism effort (84.6%).

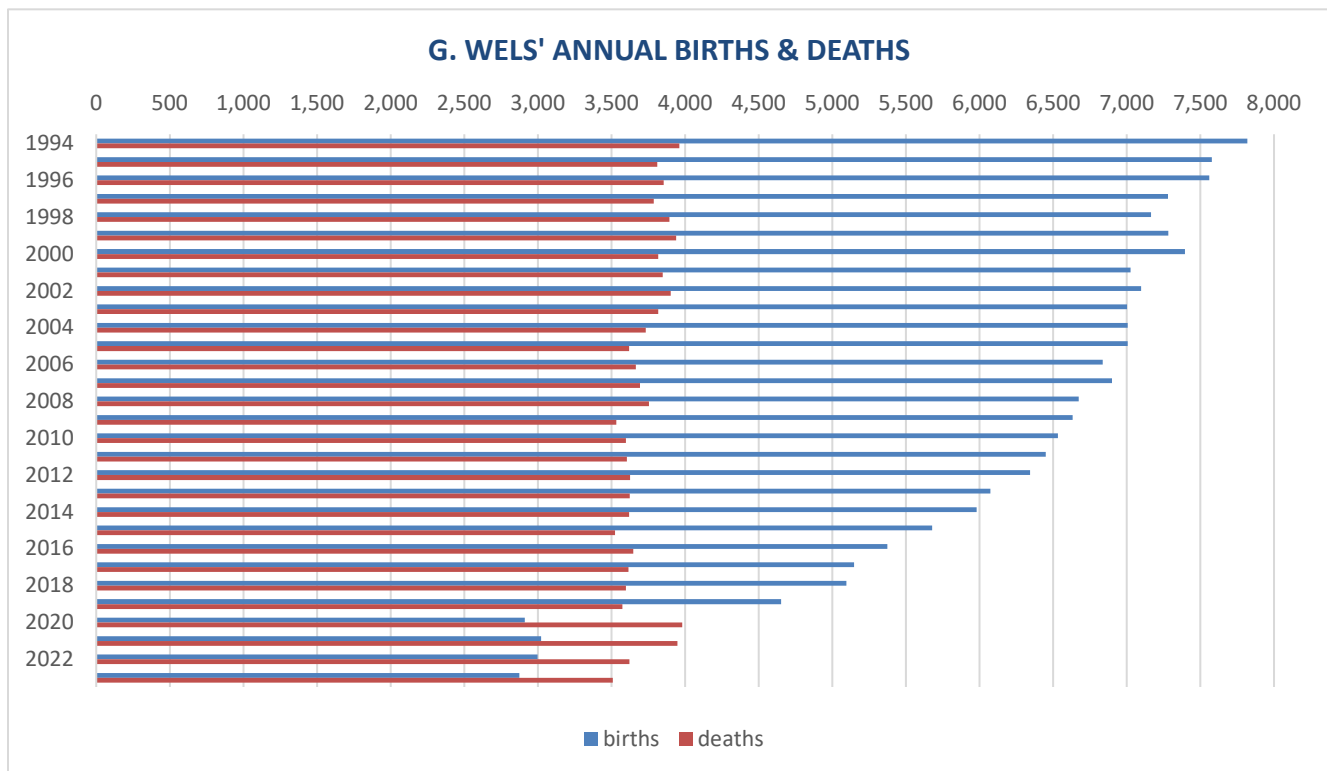
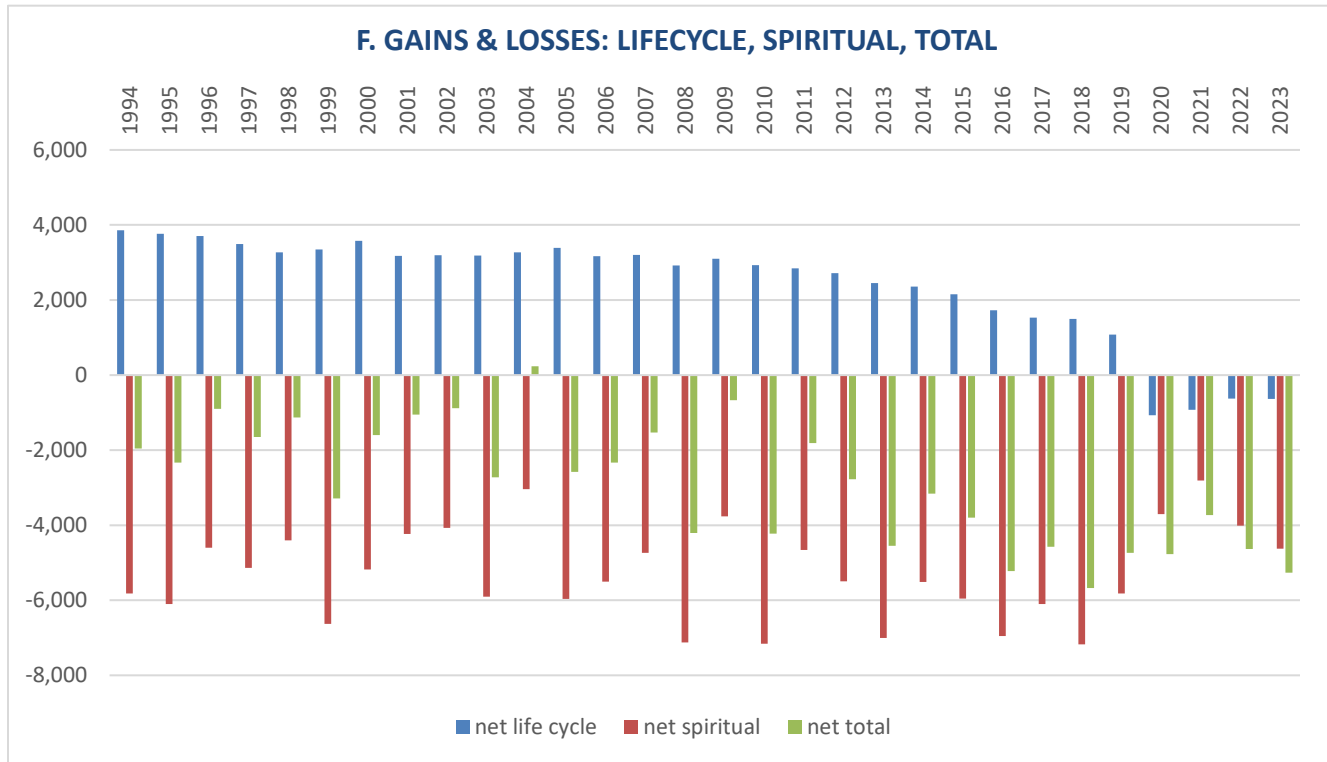


Also noteworthy is that the ratio of spiritual gains to various types of membership data points continues to decrease. For example, in 2019, there was one adult confirmation for every 45 WELS members in weekly worship. Last year that dropped to one adult confirmation for every 32 worshipers. So, an average church with a worship attendance of 150 would have had three adult confirmations in 2019, but five in 2023. Why is that ratio important? It typically correlates with congregations that stress strategies involving personal evangelism (i.e., members sharing their faith with friends, neighbors, associates, etc. and inviting them to church) over corporate outreach efforts. In previous statistical summaries, we have mentioned that lowering those ratios is key to flattening WELS membership losses.

We generally break gains and losses into two main types. The adult confirmations and professions of faith referenced above are *spiritual gains*. Removals, releases, etc. would be *spiritual losses*. WELS has almost always had more spiritual losses than spiritual gains. We note with thanksgiving that net spiritual losses have been trending down in recent years. There were 4,625 more spiritual losses than spiritual gains in 2023, but that is down 20.5% in five years.

The other type of gain/loss is *lifecycle*, which is simply births versus deaths. When WELS was growing, it was because while there were net spiritual losses, there were more net lifecycle gains. Going back as far as WELS has kept statistics, there were always more births than deaths. So, it is noteworthy that 2023 marks

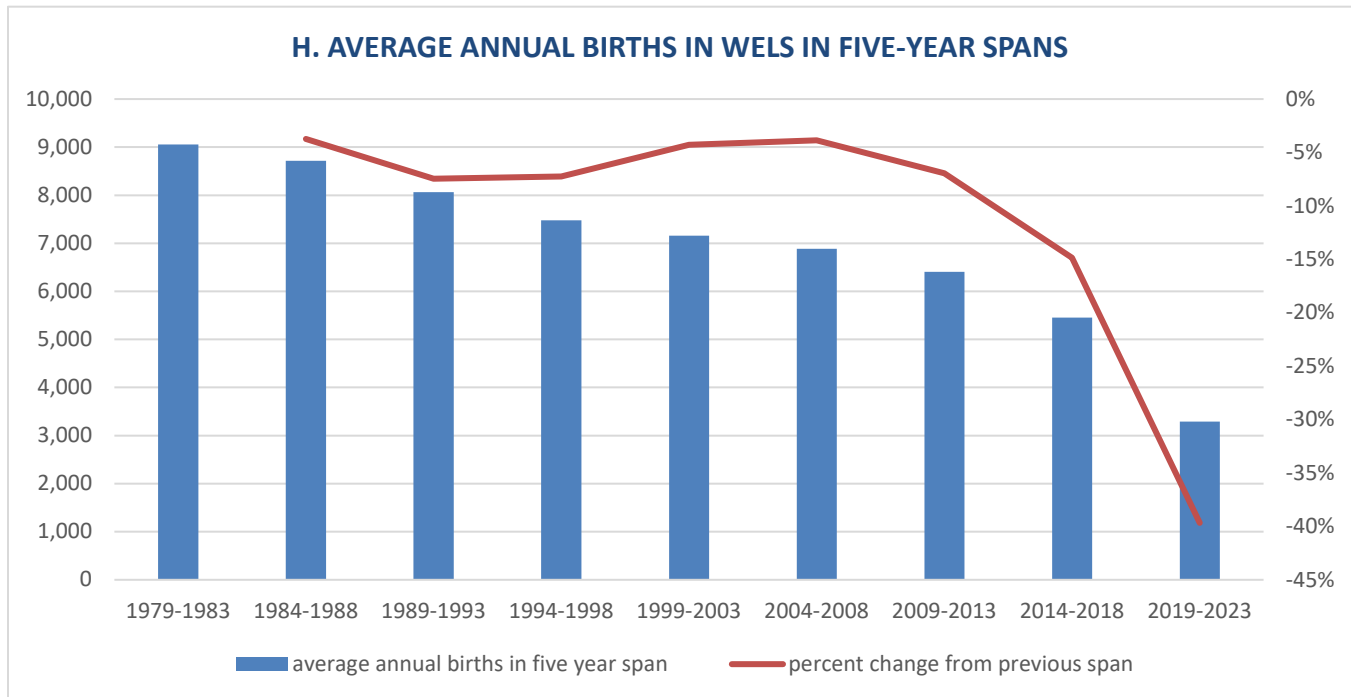
the fourth year in a row that WELS has had net lifecycle losses (-636). Five years prior, WELS had net 1,498 lifecycle gains. The bottom line is that WELS is now experiencing net losses in both categories: lifecycle and spiritual.



Birthrate & School Enrollment

Prior to the Great Recession (2007 to 2009), the birthrate in America had been slowly trending down. However, during that global financial crisis, the birthrate declined sharply. So, for years, colleges and universities have been discussing the impending “enrollment cliff,” related to the shrinking college-age population. We notice it in WELS too.

Graph G demonstrated total births and deaths in WELS year by year. Graph H shows the average annual total births in WELS in five-year spans, working backwards from 2023.

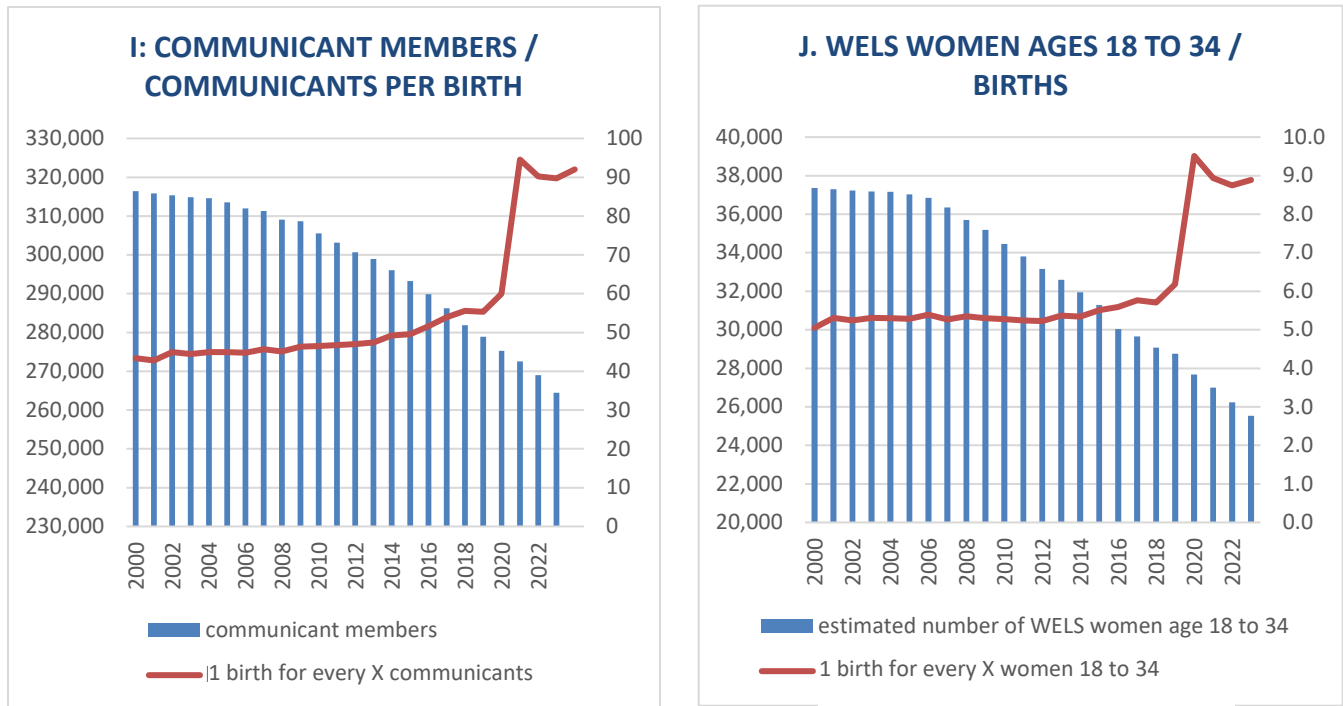


We note the birthrate trending down for decades, but at around a percentage point or less a year. For example, from 1999 to 2003, the birthrate declined an average of 0.87% annually, for a total of 4.3% decline over the five-year span. In the next five years (2004 to 2008) while the birthrate continued to decline, it slowed to an average of 0.78% annually, which comes to a 3.9% decline in the five-year span. But what happens after the Great Recession?

- From 2009 to 2013, the birthrate in WELS declined an average of 1.43% annually. This amounts to a 6.9% decline in a five-year span.
- From 2014 to 2018, the birthrate in WELS declined an average of 3.16% annually. This amounts to a 14.8% decline in a five-year span.
- From 2019 to 2023, the birthrate in WELS declined an average of 9.61% annually. This amounts to a startling 39.7% decline in a five-year span.

While the Great Recession seems to have impacted the birthrate in WELS, the larger declines in the birthrate in recent decades cannot be attributed entirely to that economic crisis. Rather, those declines better correlate to the shifting demographics in WELS.

Graph I uses data WELS tracks every year: communicant membership and births. Graph J is more of a speculative model, as it relies on some inferred data. Starting in 2015, WELS began collecting demographic data about age in years evenly divisible by five. We also have total births for all years. So, Graph J assumes that from 2000 to 2023, the number of WELS members who are 18 to 34 fell from 23.2% of WELS communicant membership to 19.0% of WELS communicant membership. Graph J also assumes that in that span, 50.8% of WELS communicant membership are women (paralleling the averages for white Americans in that timespan).



We note the similarities. In Graph I, from 2000 to 2015, the births per communicant is relatively flat. Yet, communicant membership is dropping every year in that span at an increasing rate. In Graph J, because we are focusing *only* on women in more typical childbearing years, the birthrate stays even flatter. Yet, the percentage loss of members in that demographic (i.e., WELS women ages 18 to 34) is substantially higher. From, 2000 to 2023, WELS’ communicant membership dropped 16.4%. However, WELS women ages 18 to 34 declined 31.7% in that same span.

It cannot be shocking that total births would decline as WELS’ communicant membership declines. Adding to the challenge is that the decline in communicant membership is disproportionately larger in WELS’ younger demographic groups. On top of that, there was a jump in the ratio between births and members in 2021. In 2013, there was one birth for every 5.4 WELS women ages 18 to 34. In 2023, that ratio had moved to 1 birth per every 8.9 women in that demographic. (That jump is more challenging to explain. Demographics by age group will be requested in the 2025 statistical report form. It will be interesting to see if there were higher-than-average back-door losses among young WELS members.) The jump in that ratio, combined with the continuing trend downward in communicant membership, explains the 39.7% decline in WELS’ birthrate over the past five years.

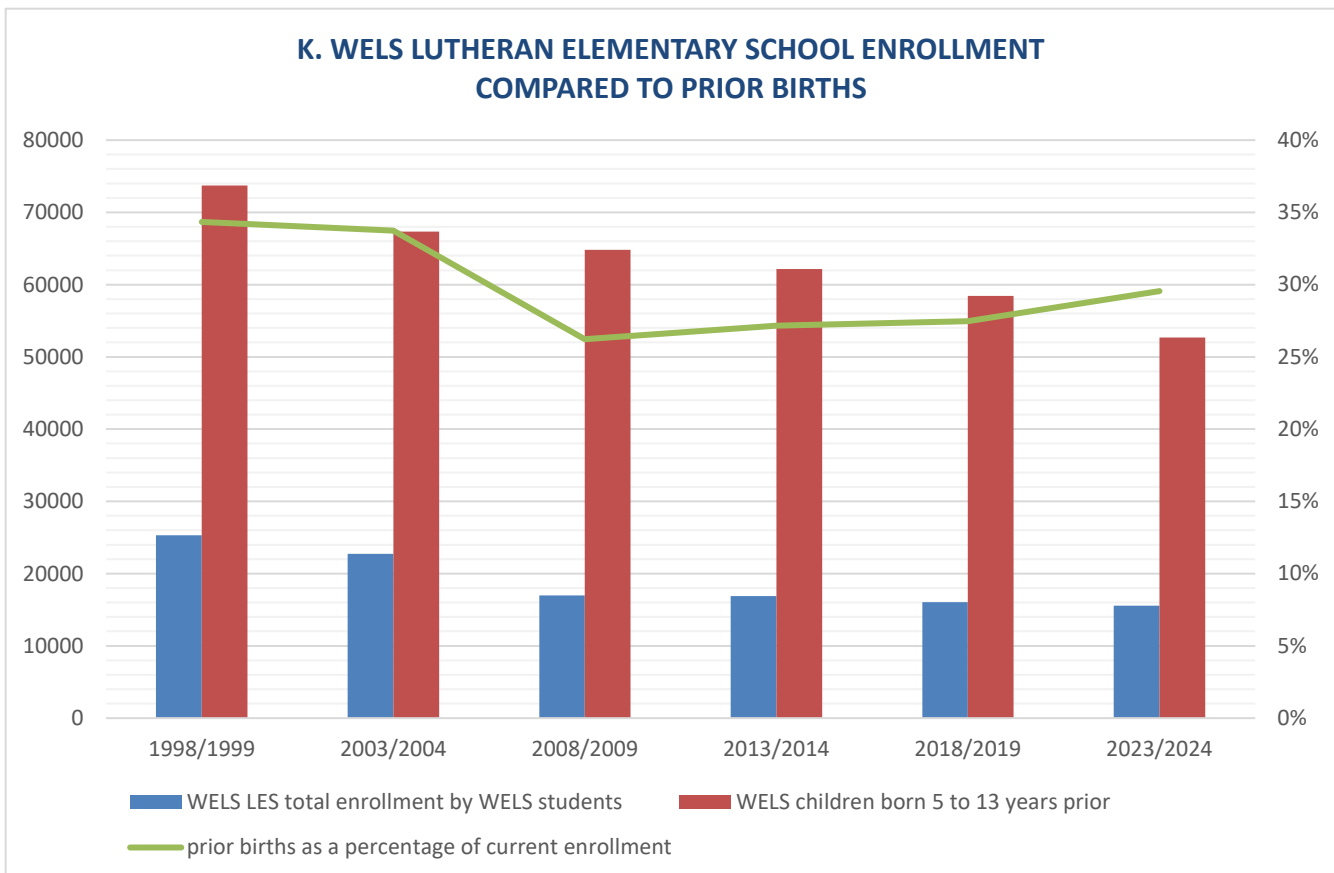
What this means is that WELS faces something of an enrollment cliff of its own. You see this reflected in enrollment statistics. Graph K provides three data points for six different years, spread five years apart.

- Total enrollment of WELS students in WELS Lutheran elementary schools.
- The total number of WELS births 5 to 13 years prior, children who would now be elementary school aged.
- What percentage of those total births are represented by enrollment.

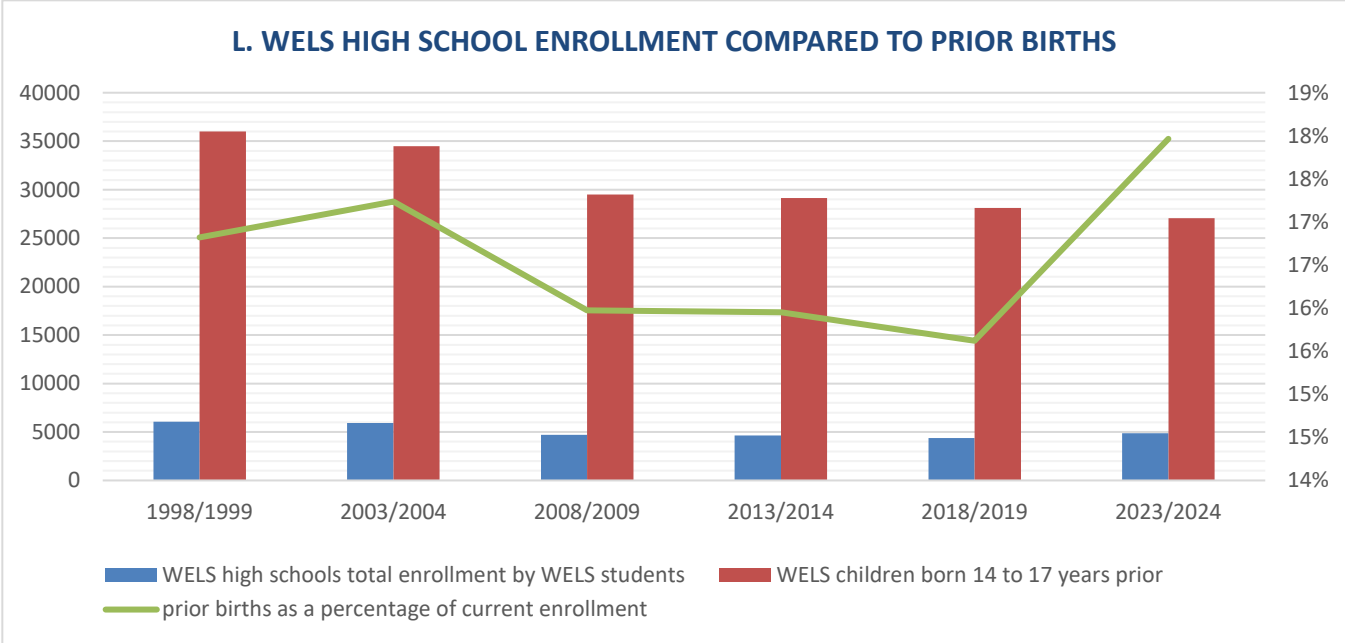
Of course, WELS gains children in ways *other* than birth. There are children who become part of WELS when their parents join through adult confirmation. Conversely, there are children who exit WELS if their parents decide to leave WELS. But those in-outs are similar. So, the percentage line does give us an idea of whether usage of WELS schools by WELS members is increasing or decreasing.

Graph K demonstrates that since 2009, enrollment of WELS students has declined by 8.4% (from 16,997 to 15,566). However, in that same time span the pool of elementary aged WELS children declined by 18.7% (from 64,812 to 52,671). Thus, the decline in enrollment *isn't* due to WELS parents being increasingly disinterested in Lutheran education but simply to WELS having fewer parents and elementary school aged children.

(NOTE: The statistical report for schools tracks total WELS student enrollment but not WELS student enrollment grade by grade. However, in congregational consultations, that is tracked. The percentage declines are higher in the lower grades. This would suggest the birth-rate decline working upward.)



Graph L looks at the same three data points, but for all WELS high schools (both area Lutheran high schools and the two preparatory schools).



We note that from 2009 to 2019, enrollment in WELS high schools by WELS students dropped from 4,715 to 4,391, a 6.9% decline. However, when comparing 2009 to this most recent year, enrollment at WELS high schools has actually risen slightly, from 4,715 to 4,858, a 3.0% increase. What happened in the past five years to cause that rebound? There seems to be a number of likely factors. First, for a number of reasons, there has been a rise in parental dissatisfaction with public education. WELS parents who were wary of the tuition at WELS high schools perhaps see that cost as an increasingly worthwhile investment. Second, there has been an expansion in WELS area Lutheran high schools. Third, more WELS high schools have become involved in some sort of state school choice program. Thus, the tuition for a WELS high school education has become more affordable to more parents.

However, it must also be noted that the decline in the potential WELS student population for high schools has *not yet* reached the elementary population levels. From 2009 to 2024, the population of WELS high school aged members declined 8.3%, while the population of WELS elementary school aged members declined 18.7%. Why the disparity? Again, it goes back to when the decline in WELS' birth rate began in earnest. With current WELS high school aged members, when you look at the average birth rate 14 to 17 years ago, it was 6,685. With current WELS elementary school aged members, when you look at the average birth rate five to 15 years ago, it was 5,644. So, the collapsed WELS birth rate is simply working its way up through grade levels.

As reported by WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools, enrollment at WELS elementary schools and area Lutheran high schools is at historic highs. This is because as those schools see continued declines in enrollment by WELS members, they see increased interest by non-members, both unchurched students and other-churched students, i.e., students from a household that professes membership in a church not in WELS' fellowship. The challenge of the enrollment cliff will be more formidable for WELS ministerial education schools, as the student body for those is almost exclusively WELS members.

Congregations

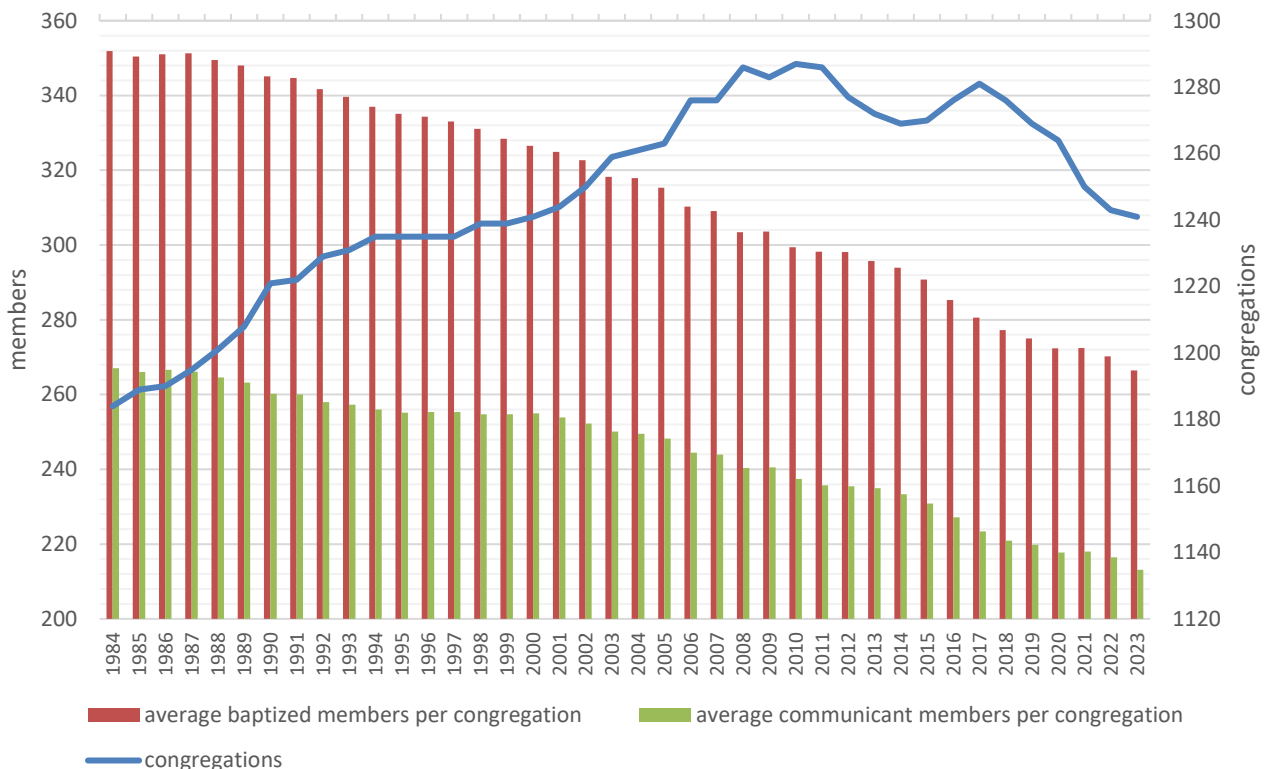
Chart M shows reported congregational openings and closings for 2023. This marks the sixth straight year WELS has had a net loss of congregations. However, the net loss of two is the smallest of those six years.

Graph N shows the total number of congregations in WELS and the average number of baptized and communicant members per congregation. We note that the most congregations WELS had was 1287 in 2010. Total congregations are down 3.6% since then. However, total membership is down 14.2% since 2010. Therefore, even with fewer congregations, the average number of members per congregation is still trending down.

M: WELS CONGREGATIONS OPENING & CLOSING IN 2023

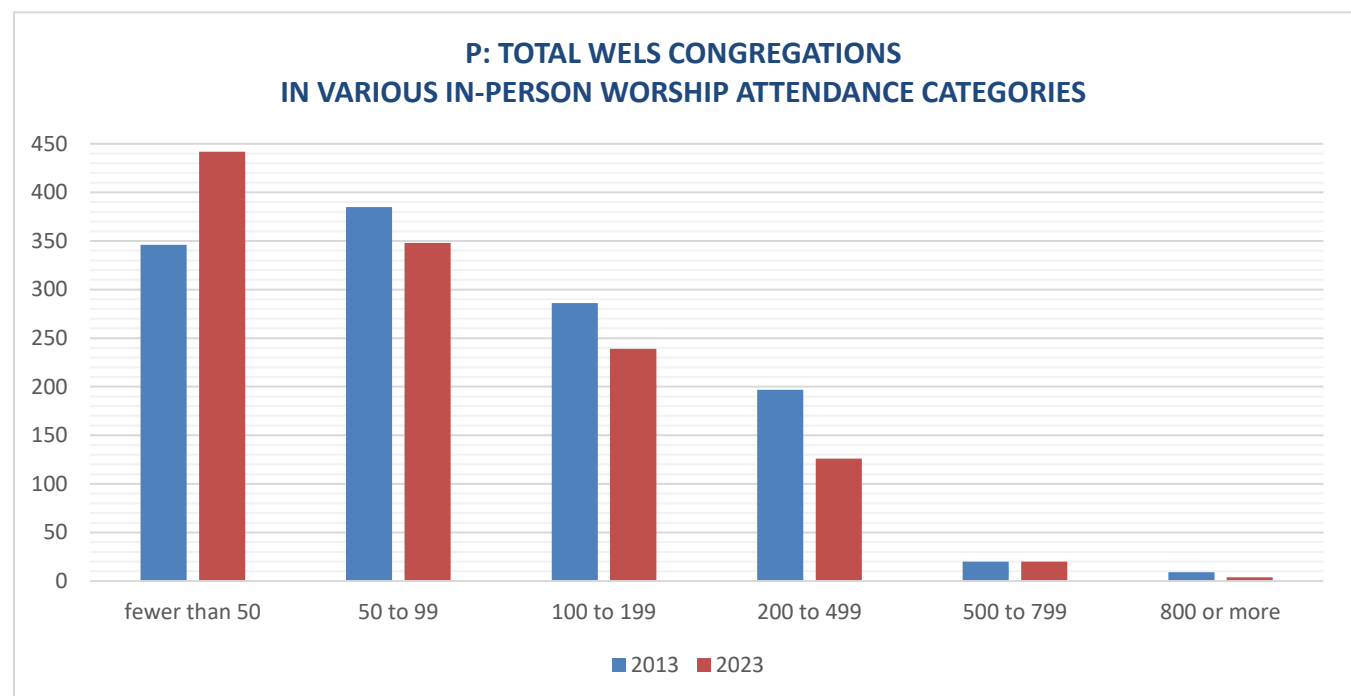
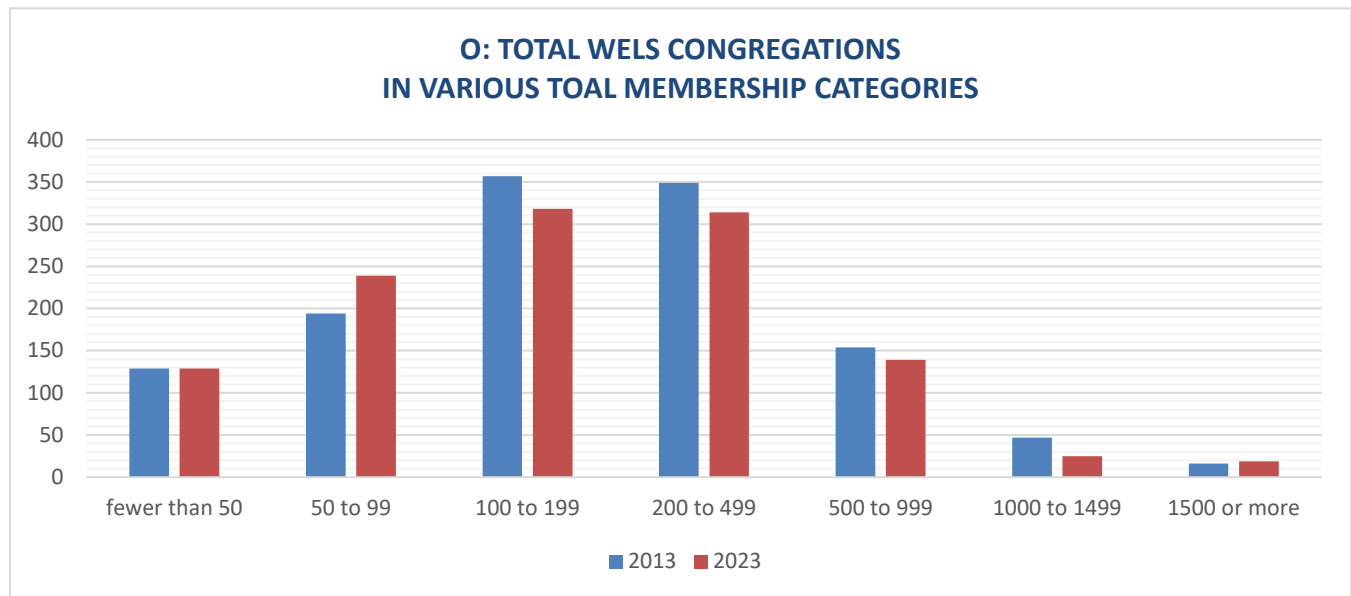
CONGREGATIONS OPENING					
Name	City	State	District	Type	Opened Date
Anchor Church	Marquette	MI	Northern Wisconsin	Home Mission	4/14/2023
New Mission	Kronenwetter	WI	Western Wisconsin	Home Mission	4/18/2023
Harbor Lutheran Church	Boston	MA	North Atlantic	Home Mission	5/16/2023
New Mission	Bentonville	AR	South Central	Home Mission	6/2/2023
New Mission	Idaho Falls	ID	Pacific Northwest	Home Mission	6/5/2023
Divine Savior Lutheran Church	Celina	TX	South Central	Home Mission	6/8/2023
Hope Lutheran Church	Deerfield	WI	Western Wisconsin	Home Mission	9/25/2023
New Mission	Panama City Beach	FL	South Atlantic	Home Mission	12/8/2023
Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church	Cincinnati	OH	Michigan	Home Mission	12/19/2023
CONGREGATIONS CLOSING					
Name	City	State	District	Type	Closed Date
St Mark Lutheran Church	Brown Deer	WI	Southeastern Wisconsin	Parish	1/1/2023
St Matthew Lutheran Church	Benton Harbor	MI	Michigan	Parish	1/29/2023
Gethsemane Lutheran Church	Milwaukee	WI	Southeastern Wisconsin	Parish	5/9/2023
Bethlehem Lutheran Church	Watertown	SD	Dakota-Montana	Parish	6/18/2023
Zion Lutheran Church	Mission	SD	Nebraska	Parish	7/24/2023
St Paul Lutheran Church	North Platte	NE	Nebraska	Parish	7/24/2023
Woodlawn Lutheran Church	West Allis	WI	Southeastern Wisconsin	Parish	7/31/2023
St Paul Lutheran Church	Oconto Falls	WI	Northern Wisconsin	Parish	11/26/2023
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church	Jacksonville	FL	South Atlantic	Parish	11/26/2023
St Matthew Lutheran Church	Pound	WI	Northern Wisconsin	Parish	12/31/2023
Lola Park Lutheran Church	Redford	MI	Michigan	Parish	12/31/2023

N: NUMBER OF WELS CONGREGATIONS & AVERAGE MEMBERSHIP

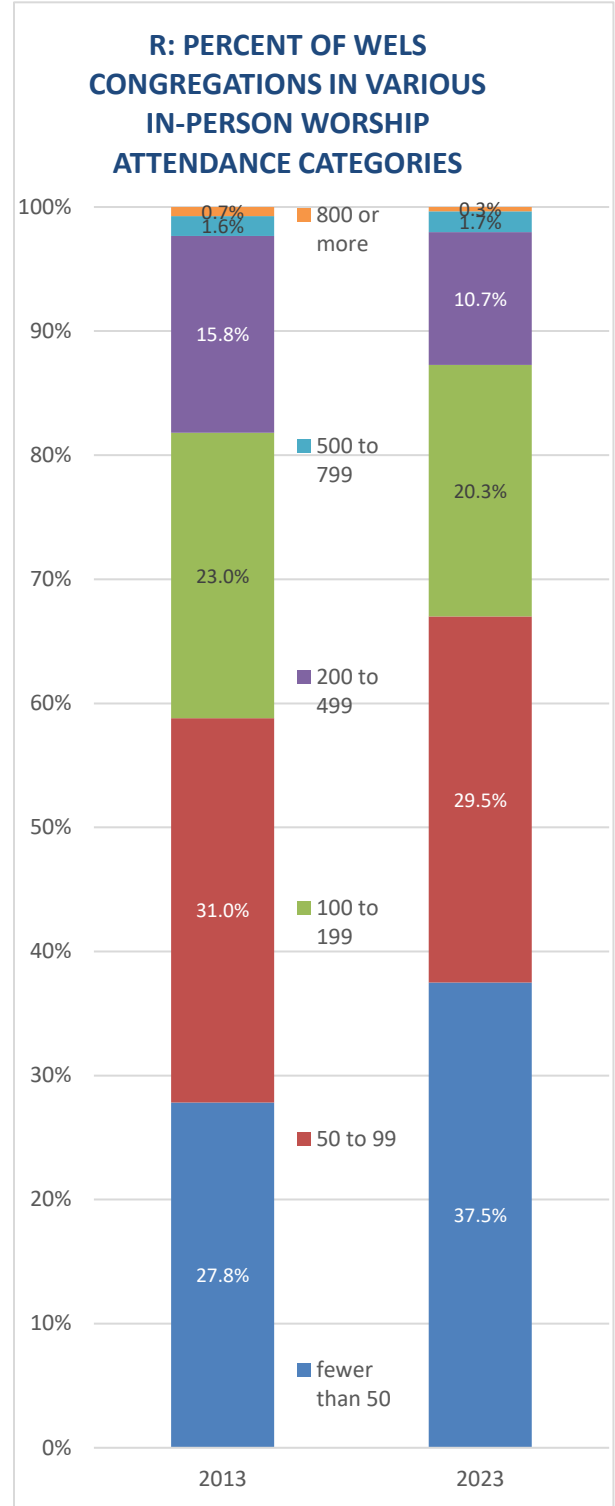
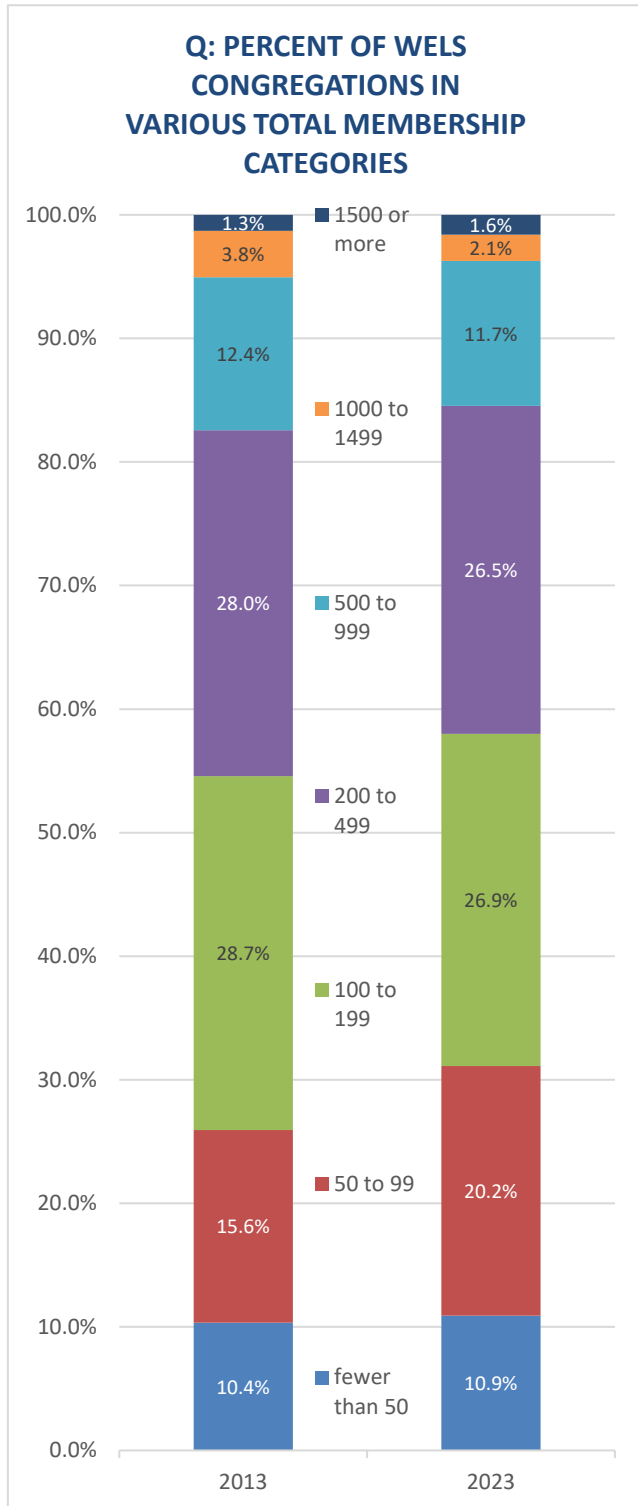


Graph O shows the total number of WELS congregations in various total (baptized) membership categories in 2013 and 2023. NOTE: In both those years multi-site congregations' total membership was reported together. So a multi-site congregation might be listed as having 600 members at the main campus and have no statistics for the second campus. Yet, the reality is that congregation has 400 members who belong to the main campus and 200 members who belong to the second campus. There is no way to break that out, so the total membership of a multi-site congregation across all campuses is what is represented in Graph O.

Graph P does the same thing for various in-person worship attendance categories. Again, in the case of multi-site congregations, the combined in-person worship attendance of all campuses belonging to that multi-site is what is represented in Graph P. We note the decline in every category except "fewer than 50."



Graph Q shows the percent of WELS congregations in various total membership categories in 2013 and 2023. Note that in both those years multi-site congregations total membership from all campuses was reported together. Graph R provides the percent of WELS congregations in various in-person worship attendance categories. Again, in the case of multi-site congregations, the total in-person worship of all the campuses belonging to the multi-site is what is represented in the graphic.

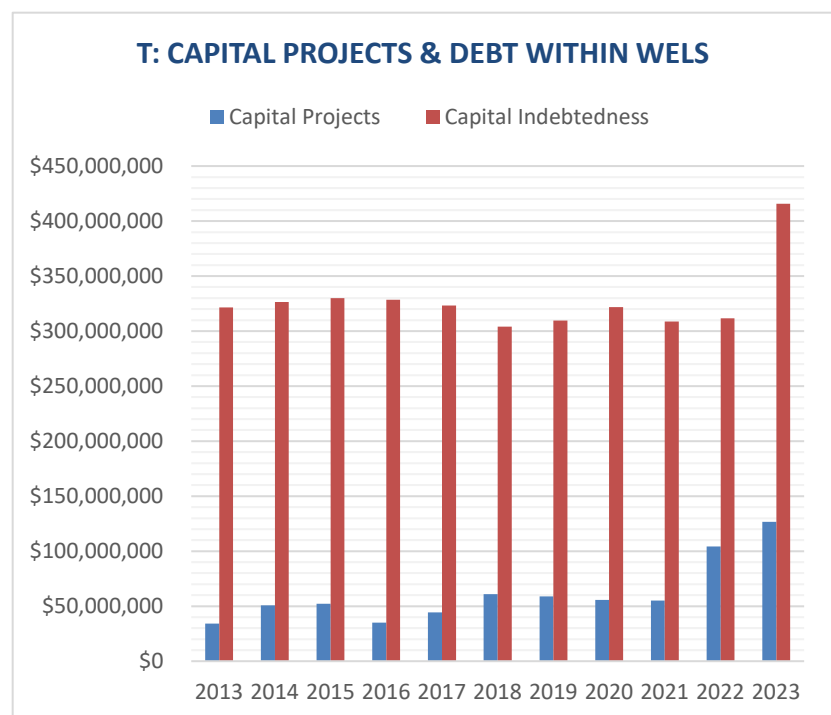
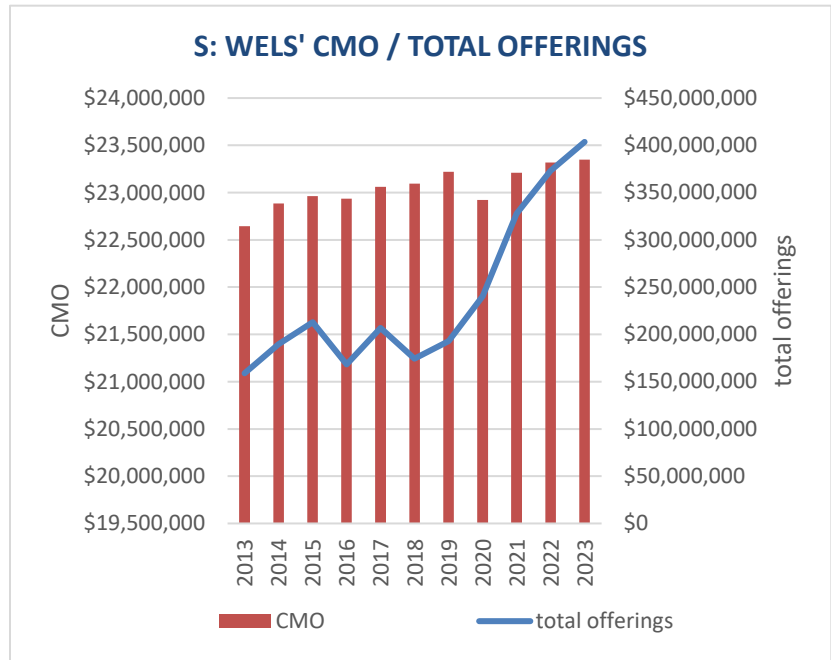


Finances

“... your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God” (1 Corinthians 9:11). We thank God for the generosity of his people in WELS. Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO), which are the backbone for all the mission efforts we undertake as a church body, rose 1.3% from \$23,230,908 in 2022 to \$23,536,202 in 2024. Per communicant giving for CMO rose from \$87 to \$89, a 2.3% increase. Total offerings in WELS rose 0.8%, from \$381,776,781 in 2022 to \$384,996,381 in 2023. Per communicant giving for total offerings rose from \$1,255 in 2022 to \$1,305 in 2023, a 4.0% increase. In 2023, the average rate of inflation was 4.1%. The fact that God’s people increased their offerings by a commensurate amount at a time of economic challenges is evidence of the Spirit’s work among us.

It is worth noting that total capital indebtedness among WELS congregations rose 33.4% last year alone. For the second year in a row, WELS congregations spent over \$100M on capital projects (\$127M in 2023). By comparison, the ten-year average is \$55M spent annually on capital projects. The ten-year average for total indebtedness is \$319M. As of 2023, it now stands at \$416M. This *does not* count the capital debt carried by WELS area Lutheran high schools, which also rose from \$48M in 2022 to \$53M in 2023, a 10.4% increase. That is, in essence, “hidden debt.” It does not appear on a congregation’s budget sheets but is debt congregations pay in federation dues and tuition over time.

We thank God for the increased ministry opportunities that have led to these capital projects. We note for prayerful consideration that currently, in aggregate, WELS has \$1,800 of debt for each communicant member, or \$3,800 in debt for each weekly worshiper.



Strategic Questions: Plentiful & Few

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”⁵

“The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.”⁶

“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?”⁷

Plentiful Opportunities

The Lord of the Church has provided WELS plentiful opportunities to serve him.

- We see these opportunities “in Jerusalem,” i.e., locally. Across America, anxiety, depression, and suicide are all rising.⁸ The people in our local communities are surrounded by brokenness. This provides bold believers an opportunity—to build relationships with the lost and the unchurched, and then be what Christ says we are, “my witnesses.” Additionally, ever-more people, perceiving public education to be increasingly challenged, are attracted to what they see as a better option in our Lutheran schools, from early childhood ministries right up to college.⁹ That creates an opportunity to serve students and parents, not just with good pedagogics, but with the love of Christ. Locally, there is great opportunity to serve others with the gospel.
- We see these opportunities “in all Judea and Samaria,” i.e., in the towns and cities a state over. In a recent synod convention, the delegates endorsed WELS Board for Home Missions’ 100 in 10 effort. Very few Christian denominations in America are holding their own or growing. They tend to have this in common; they are focused on planting new missions. Starting new congregations fits the mission Christ has handed down to us. Many areas in the country one is hundreds of miles from the nearest WELS congregation. In towns and cities a state over, a great opportunity exists to serve others with the gospel.
- We see these opportunities when we look “to the ends of the earth.” While Christianity is in a period of contraction in America, it is booming elsewhere around the world, as the Holy Spirit touches the hearts of people who have never heard the gospel.¹⁰ WELS Board for World Missions has been as aggressive and creative as any Christian entity in getting the gospel into new countries. You have heard the reports of how the Lord has blessed those efforts. WELS’ worldwide footprint has never been larger. Countless opportunities are available to serve others with the gospel around the globe.

What a privilege Christ gives to us, to participate in the work of his Church! And the harvest opportunities—in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth—are more than plentiful.

⁵ Acts 1:8

⁶ Matthew 9:37

⁷ Luke 14:28

⁸ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pam.22526>

⁹ <https://www.cato.org/survey-reports/survey-46-percent-private-schools-see-enrollment-rise>

¹⁰ <https://research.lifeway.com/2024/01/22/8-encouraging-trends-in-global-christianity-for-2024/>

Few Workers

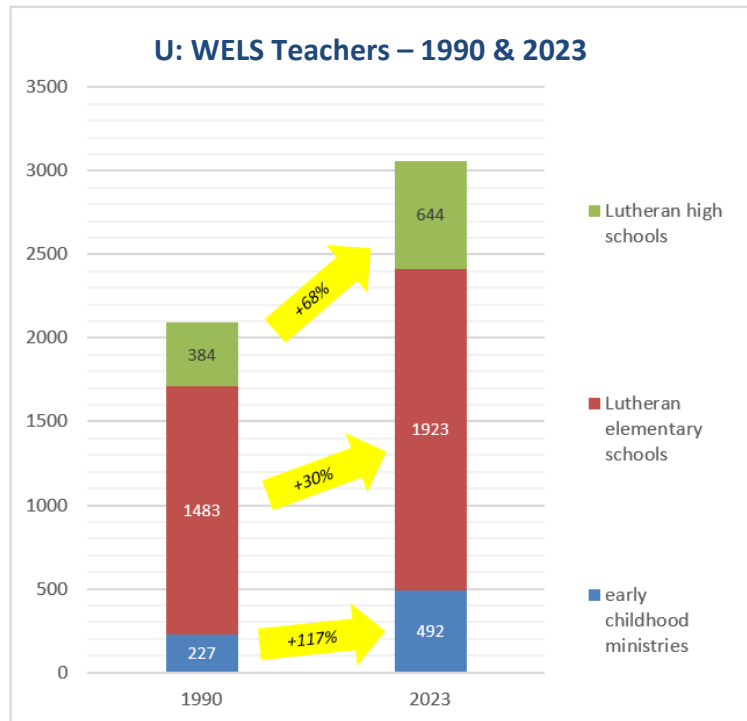
Therefore, the biggest strategic challenge before us is producing enough workers to take advantage of these opportunities. Earlier in this summary, we looked at the statistical decline of our church body. Over the past twenty years, WELS' total membership has declined almost 1% annually. In the last ten years, the average annual decline has been approximately 1.3%. However, because of the opportunities before us, the need for called workers is rising.

As of the writing of this report, the vacancy rate for teachers stands at approximately 8%, and the pastoral vacancy rate is over 10%. (Both rates will decline a few percentage points after teacher graduates from Martin Luther College and pastor graduates from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary are assigned.) Because of these vacancy rates, you will hear people talk about how many fewer called workers WELS has today compared to previous decades. However, that is not accurate.

Graph U compares the reported number of WELS teachers in 1990, WELS' peak membership year, and the start of this most recent school year. In 1990, WELS had 317,720 communicant members. In 2023, WELS congregations reported 264,498 communicant members, 53,222 fewer than in 1990 (-16.8%). Yet, WELS has 965 more teachers today than in 1990 (+46.1%).

Chart V focuses in on changes in the number of WELS teachers over the past decade. The growth rate just for WELS teachers has been 1.5% annually *at the same time* when WELS communicant membership is declining by 1.3% annually.

There is no sign of this growth in needed teachers slowing. Every year WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools asks all three types of schools to provide a forecast of teacher needs for upcoming years. In the most recent report, WELS schools estimated the number of new needed teachers will double over the next three years to 3% annually.



V: WELS' Teacher Growth Rate Over Past Decade

Year	early childhood ministries	Lutheran elementary schools	Lutheran high schools	TOTAL
2013	404	1,712	528	2,644
2018	425	1,878	519	2,822
2023	492	1,923	644	3,059
<i>Percent change over decade</i>	21.8%	12.3%	22.0%	15.7%
<i>Annual growth rate</i>	2.0%	1.2%	2.0%	1.5%

Unlike with teachers, WELS has not seen a large rise in the total number of pastors, but it has also not yet seen a drastic decline. Again, let us consider WELS' peak membership in 1990. At that time, WELS had 1,361 pastors. Currently, it is 1,355.

So, the challenge is *not* that WELS has vastly fewer workers today than in previous decades. When you add up pastors, teachers, and staff ministers, we actually have more called workers today than at any previous point in WELS history, despite our decline in total membership. (Though, with the collapse in WELS' birthrate, it will be hard to continue to grow the total number of called workers. More on this in a moment.) Rather, the challenge arises from the increase in gospel opportunities: to grow our local ministries, especially schools; to start new congregations across the country; to plant new confessional Lutheran beachheads around the world.

Let us consider some of the ancillary questions that surround these opportunities and challenges.

Recruitment Questions

In the past biennium, two separate task forces were assembled to look at the vacancy rates. (The most recent Ministry Recruitment Task Force report is included on pages 81-93 of the 2024 *Report to the Twelve Districts*.) The research and recommendations provided by those groups are worthy of our prayerful consideration. For example, recommendations focus not only on stronger recruitment strategies at our preparatory schools but also our area Lutheran high schools. Since those high schools have approximately ten times more students than the preparatory schools, a small increase in the percentage of ALHS students who decide to pursue gospel ministry would make a substantial difference.

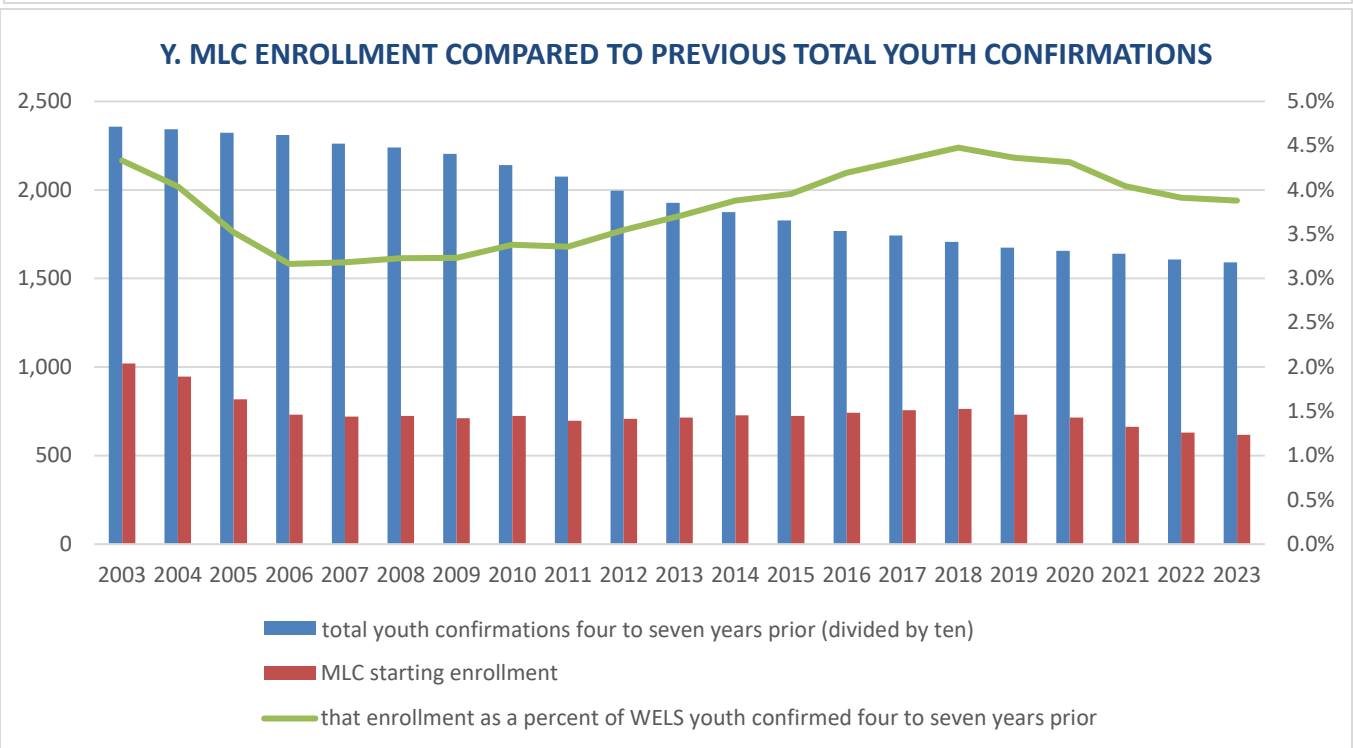
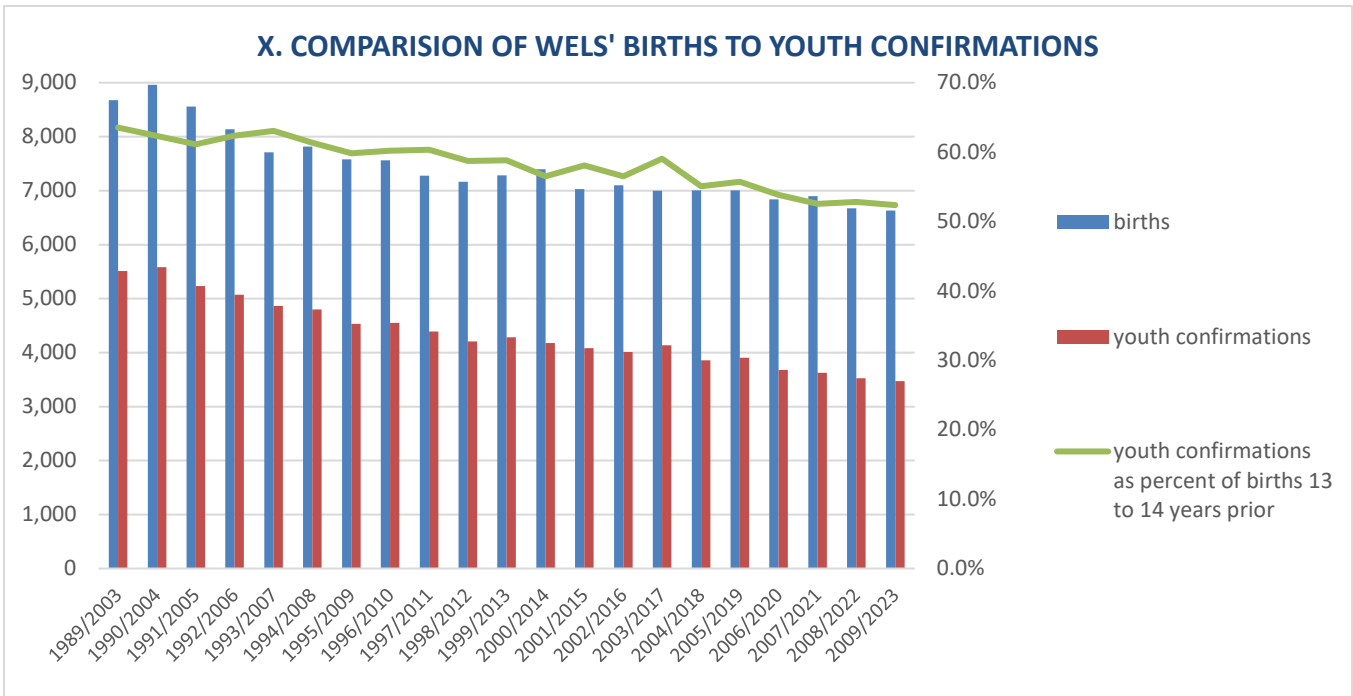
However, questions remain. Can recruitment alone help mitigate the challenge before WELS? More long term, how will the decline in WELS' birth rate affect recruitment efforts? Graph X considers the impact of the decline in birth rate on a related statistic: youth confirmations. It compares the youth confirmations in a given year to the total births 13 to 14 years prior. We note how the bars for births and youths parallel. When we extrapolate this out, it would mean we can expect that the decline in birth rate in the last decade (and the drastic decline in the past four years) will soon lead to sharp declines in youth confirmations. The only chance of mitigating against this is to have a corresponding increase of youths who are children of adult confirmations. This would require total annual adult confirmations to increase by approximately 250% over the next decade—a challenge but certainly one the Lord could enable us to meet.

Graph Y compares the starting enrollment at Martin Luther College to the total youth confirmations four to seven years prior, i.e. the approximate pool of potential MLC students. (Note that the total youth confirmations four to seven years prior has been divided by ten, so one can better compare that bar with the bar representing MLC enrollment.) The line in that graph represents what percent of that college aged pool is represented in MLC's starting enrollment. Historically, that percentage tends to correlate most closely with the vacancy situation. When there have been years that some pastoral graduates went

W. WELS Pastors – 1990 & 2023

	1990	2023	Change
Members	421,396	330,618	-21.5%
Communicants	317,720	264,498	-16.8%
Pastors	1,361	1,355	-0.4%
Churches	1,221	1,241	+1.6%
Pastors per Church	1.11	1.09	-1.8%
Members per Pastor	310	244	-21.3%
Members per Church	345	266	-22.9%

unassigned, we will see that depress the percent of young WELS members attending MLC. So, we see low years being around 3.2%, i.e., MLC's starting enrollment is about 3.2% of the total youth confirmations four to seven years prior. When the need for called workers is seen, that percent rises. We see high years being above 4%.



We definitely see the result of the current vacancy rate (which has been growing for a decade) in Graph Y. Prior to COVID, MLC's enrollment was in the mid-700s. While down from the numeric peak, that was at a record high as far as a percentage of youth confirmations four to seven years prior (e.g., 4.5% in 2018). The pandemic suppressed enrollment at the vast majority of colleges and universities. So, it is not surprising to see the same happen at MLC. It is believed that as we move beyond the pandemic and intensify recruitment efforts, that percentage will rebound. If it does, we would see MLC's enrollment trend upward in the next few years. However, long term, the challenge will be large, particularly when you compare the data from Graphs H, J, X, and Y.

To illustrate the challenge, consider 2014, the first time WELS' births dipped below 6,000. From 2014 to 2017, there were 22,178 births to WELS parents. Graph X suggests the resulting youth confirmations will be about 52% of those births. If so, that would mean from 2028 to 2031, WELS would have around 11,500 youth confirmations. The youth confirmed in those years would be college aged in 2034. If 4.5% attended MLC, that would be about 520 students. If it was more like 4.1% (the average of the last decade), that would be closer to 470 students.

Now consider the collapsed birthrate of the past four years: 11,804 births from 2020 to 2023. If youth confirmations are still about 52% of births 14 years prior, that would mean in WELS there would be approximately 6,140 youth confirmations total between 2034 to 2037. All those young people would be college age in 2040. If 4.5% attended MLC, that would be 280 students. To match the 2023 MLC enrollment (approximately 600), it seems that in 2040 we would need about one in every ten of college aged WELS members to attend MLC.

Obviously, changes in the trends or the addition of new data points could change this. For example, if adult confirmations and affirmations of faith were to rise sharply in the intervening years so that children of adult spiritual gains were greater than children of adult spiritual losses, that would positively impact youth confirmations. Or, if we were to enter into fellowship with another confessional Lutheran church body, that would obviously drastically alter the number of potential future ministers of the gospel. However, barring something like those examples, the next decade is going to bring WELS to a demographic cliff. We will be recruiting from pools of young WELS members that are growing smaller quickly.

This is *not* to suggest emphasizing recruitment is *not* with merit. To the contrary, it stresses the importance of intensifying recruitment. And this cannot simply be an institutional responsibility. The impending demographic cliff stresses the need for every WELS member to think about what they might to do encourage young people to consider gospel ministry. Recruitment will be more important than ever. The questions raised above are simply meant to suggest that to address the vacancy situation and take advantage of the ministry opportunities before us will require *more* than an intensified recruitment strategy.

Pipeline Questions

The above has been recognized, i.e., that increased recruitment of high school graduates will not generate enough called workers needed to take advantages of the gospel opportunities before us. So, various entities have looked for ways to create new pipelines into ministry.

A wonderful example is Martin Luther College's competency-based education program, newly titled the Alternative Pathway to Professional Licensure Eligibility (APPLE).

“The purpose of this program is to support the recruitment and training of elementary teachers in the WELS ministry field. The target audiences are adults wishing to retrain for teaching ministry and nontraditional students identified for training and service in unique, local contexts. This program makes any Lutheran school a potential MLC satellite location” (emphasis added).¹¹

Another example: in recent years Lutheran Schools has led an intensive effort to identify teachers who had left ministry for some reason to see if they would consider teaching again. For example, perhaps a teacher was married to a pastor who took a call to a congregation without a school. So, she had been out of teaching for the past decade. Or perhaps the teacher had simply retired. We thank the Lord of the Church that, at this time of teacher shortages, many of these teachers have been willing to jump back into the teaching ministry. So, recently we have seen that in a given year, teacher vacancies have been filled almost equally from three pipelines: MLC graduates, APPLE-type candidates, and teachers getting back into ministry.

If WELS is going to take advantage of the growing opportunities for gospel ministry, we need multiple pipelines for that training, and we need them to be as wide as possible. However, unanswered questions surrounding the “expanded pipelines” approach do exist.

Perhaps the biggest question surrounds capacity. Teachers account for about 2.5% of the American working population.¹² If you look at all WELS communicant members, approximately 180,000 are working age individuals within WELS. 1.7% are serving as teachers. 0.8% are serving as pastors. 0.07% serve as staff ministers. If we think more in terms of “active” WELS communicant members, it is about 2.4% who serve as teachers and 1.1% who serve as pastors.¹³ So the question remains. With multiple pipelines into gospel ministry, how many additional called workers can be produced within WELS? Do we eventually reach a point where all the former teachers who are willing to get back into the teaching ministry have done so? With a declining communicant population, can we keep the number of individuals for whom APPLE is a viable pipeline trending upward, or do we hit a ceiling? If so, what do we think that ceiling might be?

The pipeline discussion also leads to questions about shifting financial models for ministry. Graph Z is a model of needed called workers over the next decade. Here are the assumptions built into that model.

- 75% of WELS’ current communicants are “active” members, i.e., they might be convinced to enter gospel ministry through one of the pipelines. The other 25% are nominal members: rarely attend, do not contribute offerings or time to ministry, etc. That 75% amounts to approximately 195,000 communicants.
- The percent of WELS members falling into the “working age” category (defined as ages 22 to 70) is slightly higher than the percent of the American population falling into that category, as WELS’ median age is higher than the American median age. In 2023 in America, 62.1% of Americans fall

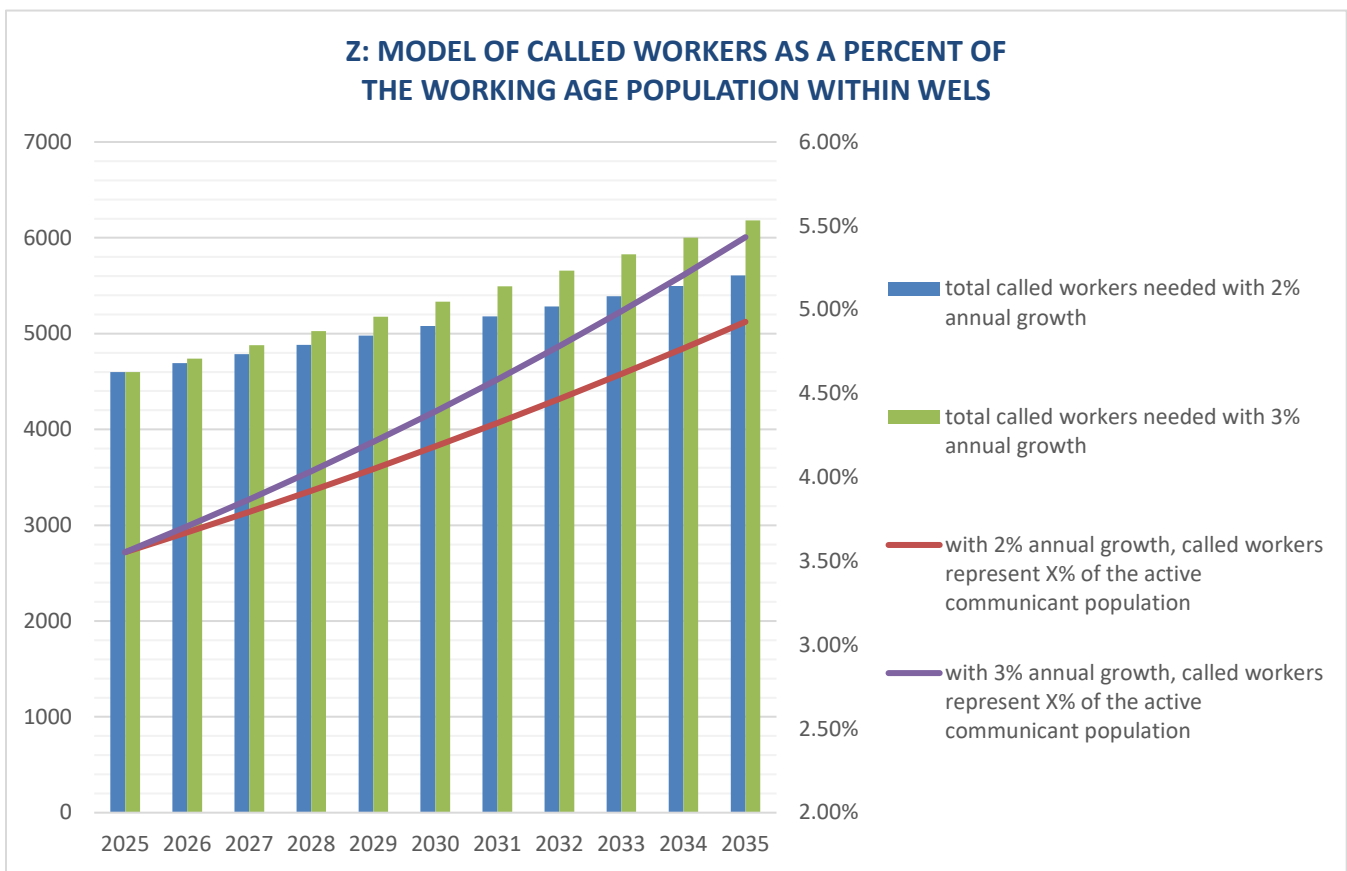
¹¹ Martin Luther College Graduate Studies & Continuing Education Report to the CECW; January 24, 2024.

¹² <https://www.weareteachers.com/how-many-teachers-are-in-the-us/>

¹³ It is challenging to identify what percent of the American population serves as pastors full time. Many American pastors are bi-vocational.

into that definition of “working age.”¹⁴ For this model, we assume WELS is four points higher, 66.1%. That would mean approximately 129,400 WELS active communicant members meet that definition of “working age.”

- In 2025, 4,700 called workers are filling needed ministry positions around WELS.
- The communicant population within WELS will decline at an average rate of 1.3% annually over the next decade (identical to the average of the past decade).
- As ministries expand, the needed called workers will rise between 2% and 3% annually. (Remember, we said that WELS schools have reported needing 3% increases in teachers in the next few years. Now add in needed increases in pastors: home mission starts, world mission opportunities. The 2% to 3% expected growth range seems reasonable.)



So, if expanding the various pipelines into gospel ministry were able to produce the need called workers, by 2035 between 4.9% and 5.4% of all active communicant members would be serving as pastors, teachers, or staff ministers. That sounds wonderful; however, it requires acknowledgement of the pivots to traditional funding models. Imagine a congregation that has 100 communicants. Can it have five full-time called workers? It could, but it would be unlikely those called workers would be compensated from congregational offerings alone. There would need to be second, third, and fourth source funding. This is already normal in many WELS congregations. Consider a Wisconsin church with multiple pastors and a

¹⁴ https://www.census.gov/popclock/data_tables.php?component=pyramid

large elementary school. That congregation probably covers operating expenses by relying on a) offerings, b) tuition, c) state school choice dollars, and d) bequests. We are simply acknowledging that if we are able to increase the number of called workers produced, increasingly their support will come from b, c, and d.

School Mission Questions

In thinking about the shortage of teachers, perhaps the biggest questions revolve around the mission of our Lutheran schools: early childhood ministries, elementary and middle schools, high schools. It is unquestionable there has been a philosophical shift over the past generation.

Historically, WELS schools were intended for use almost exclusively by WELS students. The objective was to disciple our children in Lutheran doctrine and prepare them to be productive, well-rounded citizens.¹⁵ By the end of the twentieth century, with dual income households becoming increasingly common, the demand for preschools rose. Some in WELS saw this as an opportunity. Many churches began early childhood ministries (ECMs). WELS constructed the MLC Early Childhood Learning Center to train ECM teachers.

So, the mission of our Lutheran schools was expanded—*both* discipleship *and* evangelism. Schools no longer just served member students and their parents. Our schools now also served prospect students and their parents. The evangelistic objectives: 1) proclaim the gospel to unchurched children and, when possible, their parents, and 2) build a bridge into the community by which the church might reach unchurched and, through evangelism efforts, ultimately convince those households to join the congregation. (It is noteworthy that when one looks at school manuals and policies from that time period, for many congregations the targeted prospect was exclusively unchurched households.)

Over the past two decades, the mission of our schools has expanded again. Many schools are willing to serve *any interested student and parent*, including children whose parents profess to belong to Christian congregations outside our fellowship. (“Other-churched” students were admitted already in the 1990s. It just became increasingly common in the past two decades.) Additionally, in these years a number of states adopted school voucher programs. This removed the tuition barrier at WELS schools for many non-members.

There seem to be a variety of objectives in admitting other-churched children.

- A. Identify and evangelize households that are only nominally connected to another Christian congregation.
- B. Help maintain a “critical mass” in the student body to avoid things like the need to combine grades or even school closure.
- C. Generate revenue to allow for school viability when facing congregational membership declines (and thus declines in the ability to financially support a school).

¹⁵ Prof. John Schaller, in a paper titled *The Need of Christian Education by Means of Parochial Schools*, shared his belief that Lutheran parochial schools were simply a tool to aid parents in discipling their children. “We are at once confronted by the fact that the Christian home cannot accomplish this sacred task unaided.” The point: Lutheran schools were seen exclusively as a tool for discipleship.

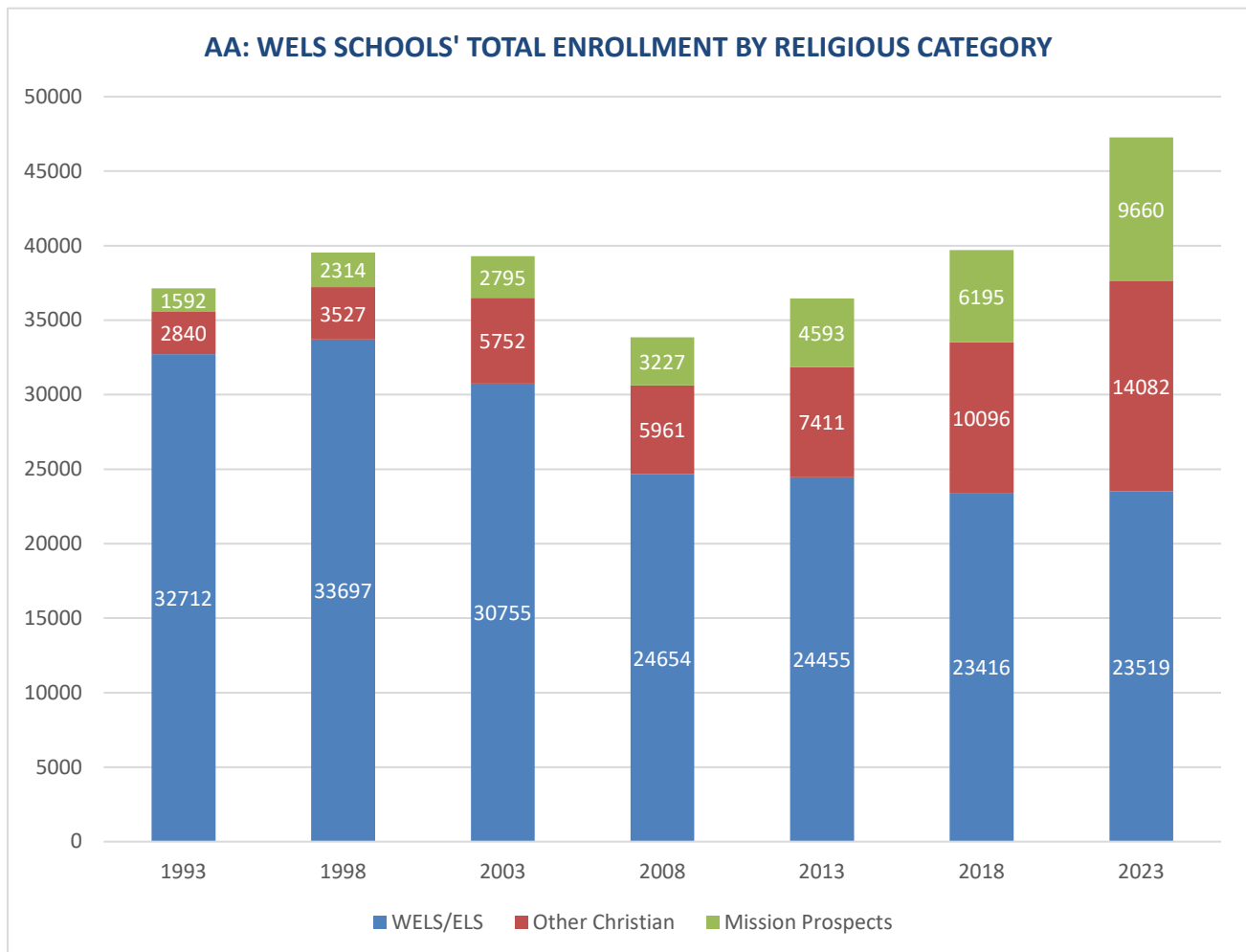
- D. Generate revenue to allow for the expansion of the school programming: building projects, addition of new programs (e.g., STEM).
- E. Generate revenue to help fund other congregational ministry efforts.

So, we can think of our students being grouped into three primary categories.

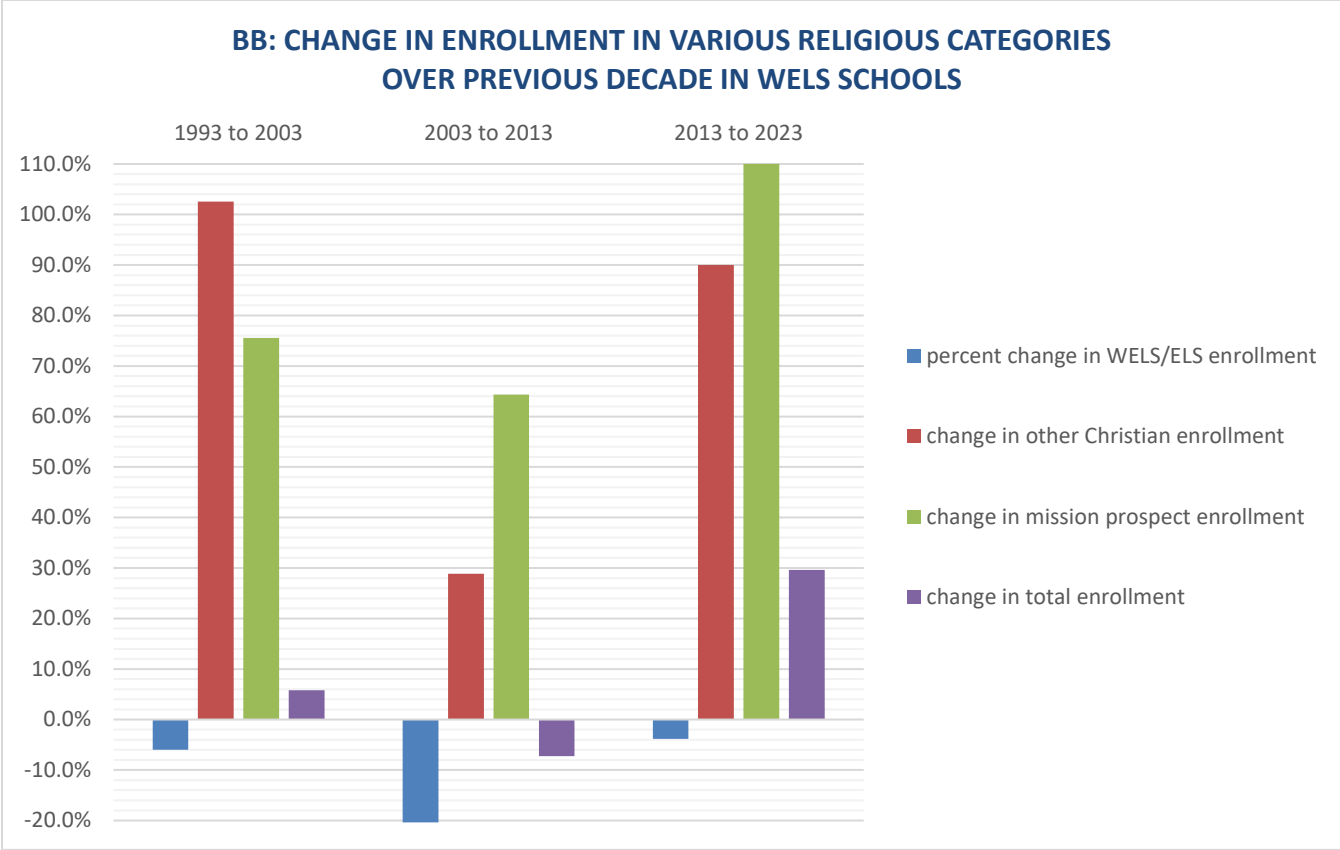
1. WELS children: both members of the congregation that has the school or members of nearby WELS/ELS congregations that utilize the school
2. Unchurched children: kids whose parents do not belong to any sort of religious institution
3. Other-churched children: kids whose parents profess to belong to a Christian congregation

(There is a fourth category that WELS tracks: non-Christian children. That would include children who come from households that are adherents to Hinduism, Islam, etc. This is about 0.06% of students in all WELS schools combined.)

We have discussed the decline in WELS' younger demographics. Yet, enrollment in WELS schools is at record highs. This is due to the rising enrollments of unchurched and other-churched children. Graph AA shows the breakdowns between those various religious categories. It groups unchurched children and non-Christian children together in a category we will call "mission prospects."



In the last two decades, across all types of WELS schools, enrollment by WELS and ELS students has declined 23.5%. In that same time, enrollment by other-Christian children has grown 144.8%. And enrollment by mission prospects has grown 245.6%. Decade over decade growth is shared in Graph BB.

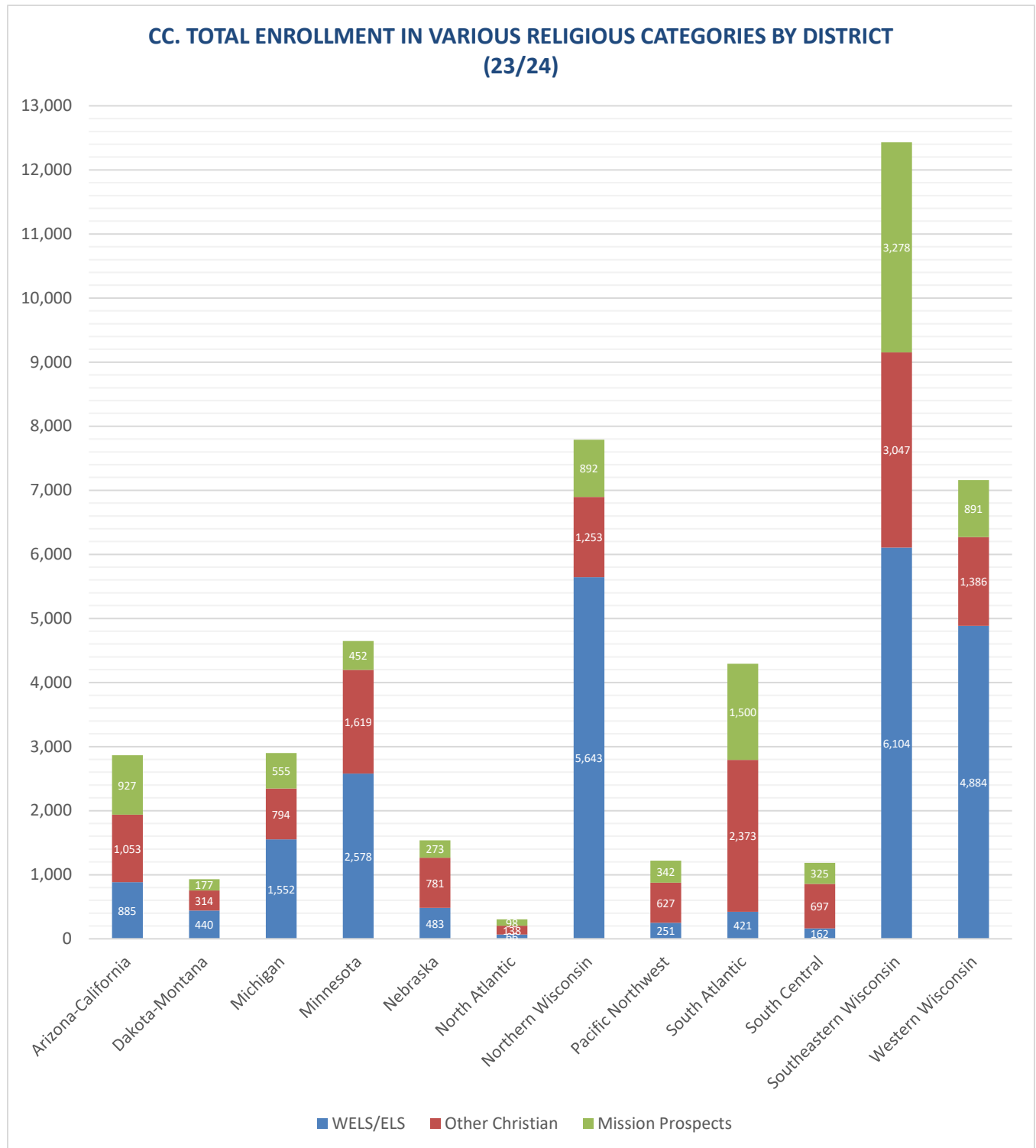


It should be noted that some students in the “other Christian” category are only nominal members in whatever church body their parents claim to belong. These students and their parents perhaps could be considered mission prospects. However, that raises some practical questions. What is the step-by-step process for accurately assessing if a student and his parents are faithful members or only nominal members of a heterodox Christian church? If we determine they are faithful members, does that affect how we think about them? Are WELS schools going to enroll every child whose parents are faithful members of another Christian church body just because they want Christian (or at least private) education? If they are faithful members in a heterodox Christian church, is it enough that the parents ask us to educate their child (knowing we will teach their child Lutheran doctrine)? If we acknowledge that the Lord of the Church has given some other pastor (i.e., the pastor of the heterodox church) spiritual authority over that family, is there also a responsibility to talk to that pastor? These questions are both practical and theological.

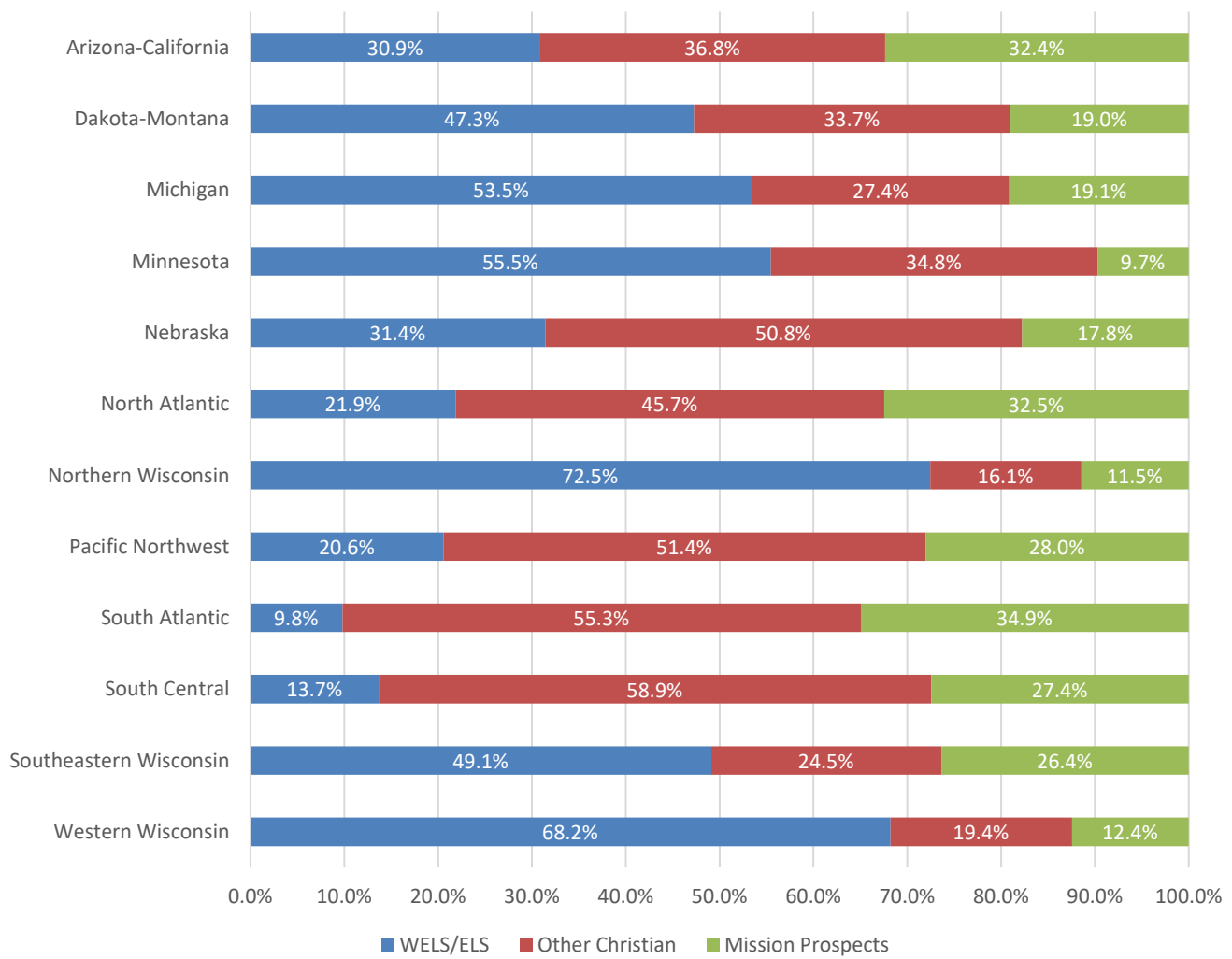
The answers tie into the strategic challenges we are facing. With WELS students, we can make informed estimations about future enrollment. We have solid data on births within WELS, on how many children we gain on average from an adult confirmation, etc. However, trying to forecast enrollments of “other Christian” students and mission prospect students is substantially more challenging. As previously established, nationwide interest in private education (including Christian education) is rising rapidly. How

many states will embrace school voucher programs, providing the financial means for more parents to seek private education? What is the upper limit to this interest? If we admit every interested “other Christian” student, how does that impact us synodwide, at a time of called worker shortages?

The following graphs break down enrollment in those various religious categories by district.



DD. PERCENT OF STUDENTS FALLING INTO VARIOUS RELIGIOUS CATEGORIES BY DISTRICT (23/24)



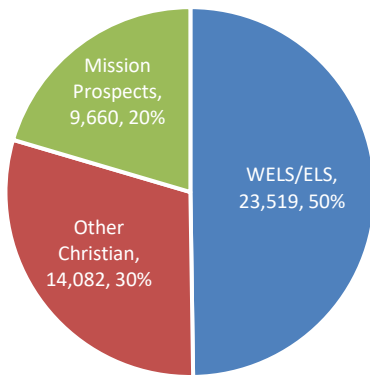
In one-third of WELS districts, over half of the students enrolled in WELS schools are from the “other Christian” category. In two-thirds of WELS districts, over a third of the students enrolled are from the “other Christian” category.

In all WELS schools combined, over 14,000 are “other Christian” students. Consider only Lutheran elementary schools and area Lutheran high schools, which have a total of approximately 9,300. If we think in terms of a teacher/student ratio of 1 to 18, that would mean in aggregate approximately 520 WELS teachers are teaching students who belong to a Christian church not in our fellowship.

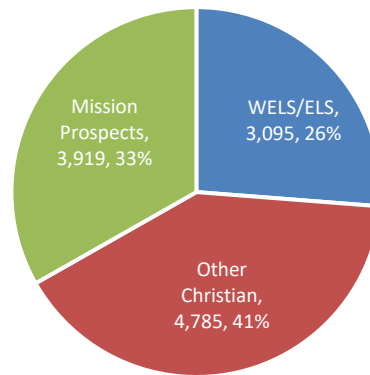
This is simply meant to illustrate that the strategic challenge of staffing our schools is directly connected to the shift in the mission and objectives of our Lutheran schools. We said that historically, WELS Lutheran schools were started primarily as a discipleship tool to teach Lutheran doctrine to WELS children. Today, only half of the students in WELS schools are WELS children. If the year-over-year growth rate averages of

the past decade were maintained, in one decade, WELS students would be about one-third of the total enrollment. There would be more “other Christian” students in WELS schools than WELS students.

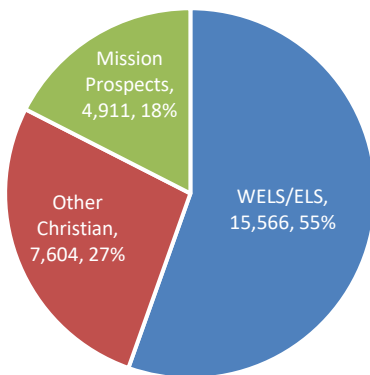
EE: STUDENTS IN VARIOUS RELIGIOUS CATEGORIES IN ALL WELS SCHOOLS PRE-K THROUGH 12th (23/24)



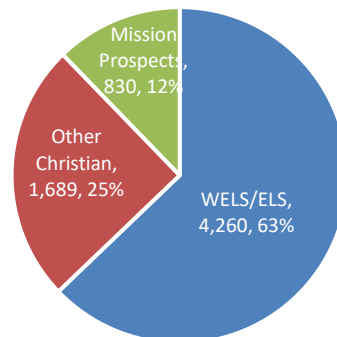
FF: STUDENTS IN VARIOUS RELIGIOUS CATEGORIES IN ALL WELS ECMs (23/24)



GG: STUDENTS IN VARIOUS RELIGIOUS CATEGORIES IN ALL WELS ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS (23/24)



HH: STUDENTS IN VARIOUS RELIGIOUS CATEGORIES IN ALL WELS AREA LUTHERAN HIGH SCHOOLS (23/24)

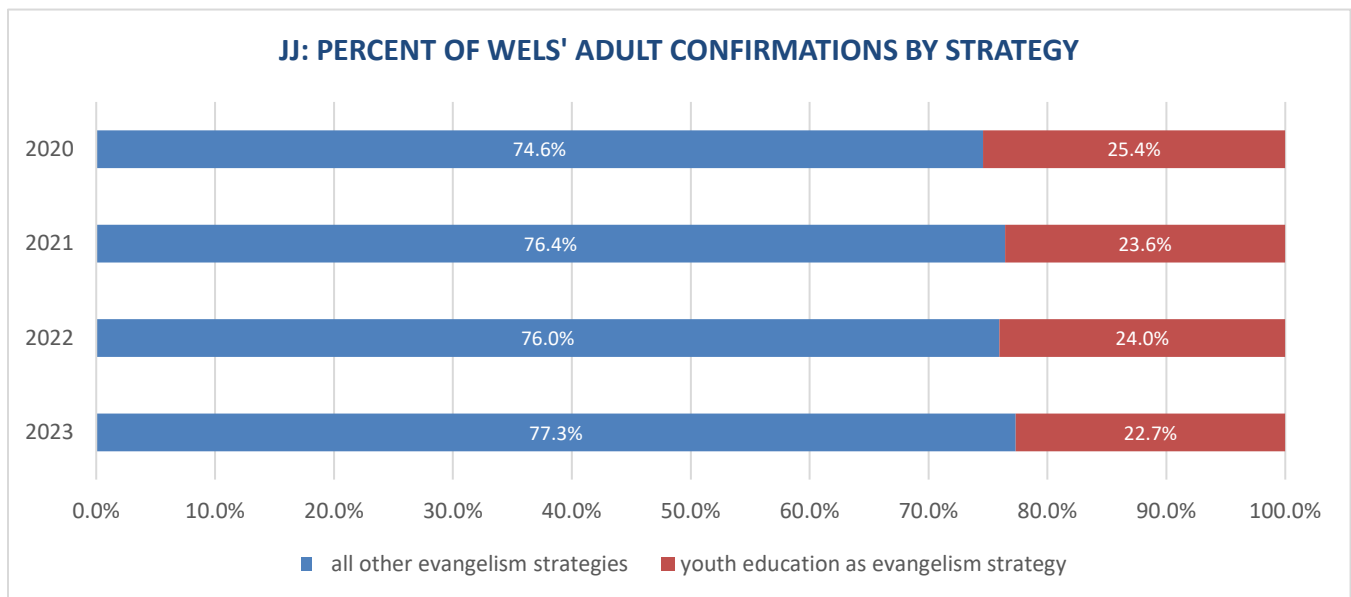
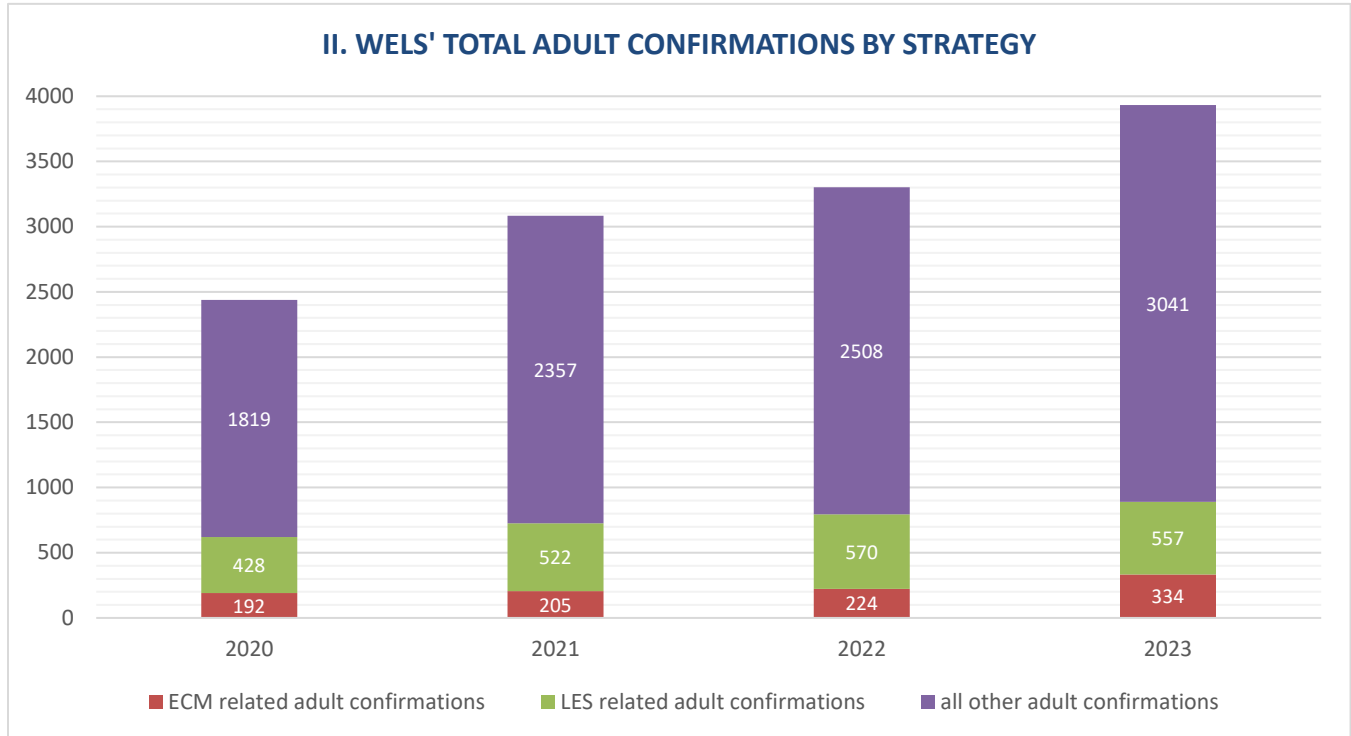


Some will argue that the growth in non-WELS students provides needed mission opportunities. WELS is contracting. Might these non-WELS students and their parents be a good source of future members?

Even if that argument is accepted, there are still questions we must wrestle with. While WELS tracks adult confirmations that came from harvest strategies in ECMs and Lutheran elementary schools, we do not track what religious category the adult confirmations come from. So, do we actually gain adult confirmations from parents who claim they belong to a heterodox Christian church? If so, how often? Is this a regular,

steady source of new WELS members, or is it rare? Or do most adult confirmations related to a youth education strategy come from unchurched prospects?

However, even if we set aside the “other Christian” category and focus on mission prospects, there are still questions surrounding the strategy of using youth education for outreach.



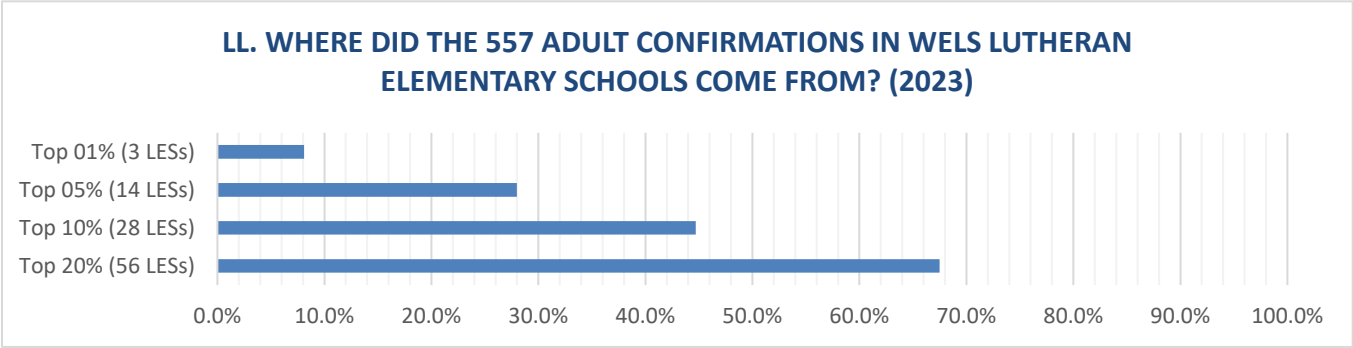
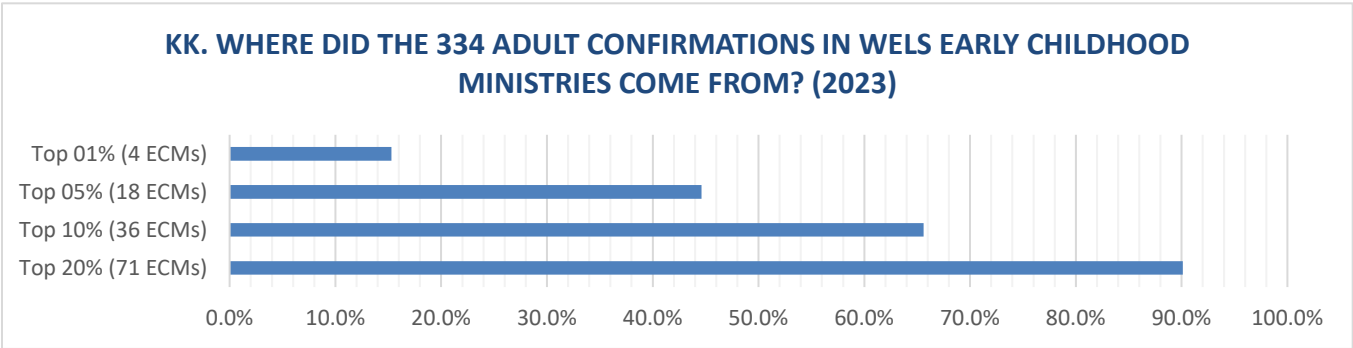
Graph II and Graph JJ break adult confirmations down by evangelism strategies. We note with thanksgiving that a good number of WELS’ annual adult confirmations are connected to a harvest strategy within a school or ECM. Over the past two decades, anywhere between 14% to 25% of adult confirmations are

related to youth education. We also acknowledge that some of the “other” adult confirmations might be related to youth education, even if not directly connected. For example, imagine a parent who never joined the church when her child attended that Lutheran preschool. However, that parent joined that church years later in a time of personal duress. That would not technically register in the “youth education as evangelism strategy” numbers. Yet, there is certainly an indirect connection.

However, there are three other things that must be noted about youth-education related adult confirmations.

First, they still comprise the minority of adult confirmations by a wide margin. This is simply meant to discourage the false narrative that says churches *must* start schools and preschools to reach people for Christ. The reality is that the vast majority of adult confirmations in WELS are *not* related to a youth education strategy.

Second, the adult confirmations that are related to youth education are consolidated in a small number of schools. Graph KK and Graph LL demonstrate this.



10% of WELS ECMs accounted for two-thirds of all ECM related adult confirmations. 10% of WELS Lutheran elementary schools accounted for 44.7% of all LES related adult confirmations. 72% of WELS ECMs had zero adult confirmations last year. 50% of all Lutheran elementary schools had zero adult confirmations.

The reality is that for some of our congregations, the ECM or LES serves well as an evangelism strategy. Nineteen churches recorded five or more adult confirmations related to their ECM in 2023. Thirty-eight churches recorded five or more adult confirmations related to their LES in 2023. (Twelve of those were the same congregation, i.e., they had five or more adult confirmations from *both* their ECM and LES.) But for the majority of WELS congregations, their ECM and/or LES is not serving as a major gateway to membership.

On the one hand, we can look at that as an opportunity to try and implement harvest strategies the Lord is blessing in a few of our congregations more broadly. On the other hand, for some congregations, it might be healthy to recognize that while the ECM and/or LES still serves the historic mission of discipling our young members in Lutheran theology, they *aren't* really serving as an effective outreach strategy. Which leads to the third point that must be noted about youth education as outreach.

Third, youth education is the costliest evangelism strategy within WELS, both in terms of dollars and manhours. For example, in the 22/23 school year, 4,911 “mission prospect” households and 7,604 “other Christian” households had students enrolled in WELS Lutheran elementary schools. That is 12,515 non-WELS students total. Using the teacher/student ratio of 1:18, in aggregate WELS needed 695 teachers to teach those non-WELS students. In that school year, 557 adult confirmations took place related to LES ministry. Which means, in aggregate, 1.2 teachers were teaching non-WELS students for every one LES related adult confirmation. Now, obviously, that is not how it works on a more local level. Very few WELS teachers teach *only* non-WELS children. Most are discipling member children as well. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous point, there are schools where the Lord is blessing their harvest strategy. This is simply meant to illustrate that on a synodwide level, WELS is investing a massive amount of called workers on an outreach strategy that produces only 14% to 25% of our adult confirmations in a given year.

This leads us back to the larger questions surrounding the mission of our schools. The reality is that if we continue to expand enrollment in WELS schools at the rate of the past decade, it will not be possible to staff those schools entirely with WELS teachers, no matter how many pipelines into the teaching ministry we open. So, what is the solution? Do we discourage schools from expanding unless a) the number of member kids are growing necessitating the expansion (discipleship mission), and/or b) the congregation has proven that their school is a good source of adult confirmations? Are school choice dollars of other Christian households seen as simply another source of funding for things like facility expansion? If so, how should we think about that? These are questions that *must* be prayerfully considered and honestly discussed.

Critical Mass Questions

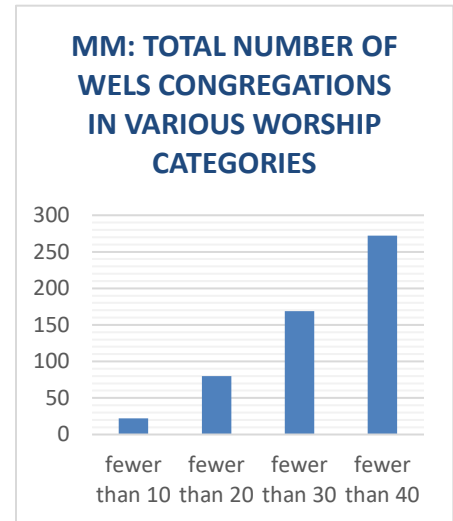
We established that WELS has the same number of pastors today that it did when WELS' membership was at its highest. We have also established that, with the decline in birth rate and recent youth confirmations, it will be challenging to increase the number of called workers that our ministerial education system produces, particularly pastors. The Ministry Recruitment Task Force Report offers numerous suggestions, which we pray the Lord richly blesses. However, that report also encourages realism about the ceiling of possibility in a church body our current size. If we can get Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary graduating classes to rise and then hold at around 34 annually, that would be a blessing. However, it would only allow us to maintain our current WELS-wide pastoral “footprint” *at the current rate of vacancies*. Yet, we have established that “the harvest is plentiful.” There are many new gospel opportunities.

We seem to have reached this point of equilibrium: number of pastors needed in WELS; number of pastors WELS can produce. Therefore, new ministry efforts are going to increase the pastoral vacancy rate, at least in the short term. (Long-term is harder to determine. E.g. a parish pastor who is called to be a recruiter might, long-term, result in a net gain in pastors.) A growing congregation wants to add a second pastor. Home Missions wants to start new churches around the country, reaching more souls for Christ. World

Missions wants to establish confessional Lutheran beachheads in Tanzania, Senegal, New Zealand, Australia, and more. Federations of congregations are thinking, “What about an area Lutheran high school here?” Ministerial education wants pastor recruiters. A synod-affiliated ministry wants to have a pastor or two serving in support of their mission. These are all wonderful gospel opportunities! But the fact stands. They will affect the vacancy rate.

So, in addition to attempting to increase recruitment of pastoral candidates, what can be done? One possibility: we can prayerfully wrestle with the question of critical mass in congregations.

Consider Graph P again (page 13). There, we note that the only in-person weekly worship attendance category exhibiting growth is “fewer than 50.” In one decade, that rose from 346 congregations to 442. Those 442 represent 37.5% of all WELS congregations. 790 WELS congregations worship fewer than 100 weekly (67%). 15% of WELS congregations worship fewer than 30 weekly (185 churches). Graph MM looks at churches that have an average in-person weekly worship attendance fewer than 40.



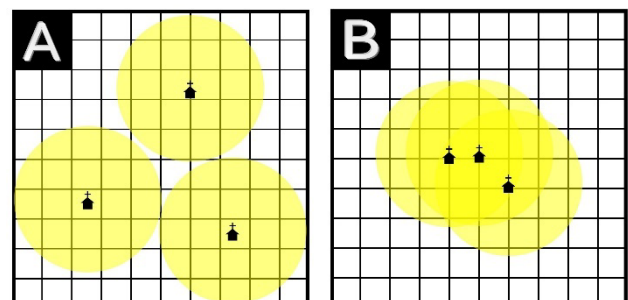
This raises questions of critical mass within the congregation. If a worship guest walks into a sanctuary that seats 170 yet has 38 people in attendance, what is the perception? If a church has 40 in worship and 80 total members, can it run a VBS or have a choir or operate a Sunday school? If not, does that affect ministry efforts?

Of the 440+ congregations that have a weekly worship attendance fewer than 50, at least half are within ten minutes of another WELS congregation. It raises the critical mass question. Might it be helpful to their mission efforts to combine or consolidate? Some might push back, “Fewer congregations would mean less ministry.” Does it? Consider the following.

- A rule of thumb is that one pastor can effectively shepherd a congregation that has a membership of about 300 or a worship attendance of about 150. The upper limit is a membership of 400 and worship attendance about 200. (Obviously, there are exceptions.)
- The modern “parish area” is generally defined as all territory within a 15-minute drive time of the church. The vast majority of Americans, if they decide to attend church, want to drive no longer than 15-minutes. (Again, there are regional exceptions. In the West, where people drive an hour to get groceries, they might be willing to drive more than 15 minutes to attend church.)

Apply that to Illustration NN. Those grids represent an area 30 miles by 30 miles, where the average speed throughout the grid is 30MPH. The yellow shaded circles represent a 15-minute drive time from the church at the center. Ideally, WELS congregations would be placed in a pattern like Option A, i.e., about 25 to 30 minutes apart. That would bring the largest number of lost or unchurched within the parish areas of

NN: 30 MILES BY 30 MILES; 30MPH AVERAGE



those congregations. However, WELS often has churches placed in a pattern like Option B, i.e., multiple congregations a short drive apart.

That wasn't a mistake, but a necessity at the time. When WELS was started, the vast majority of the American population were farmers. So, WELS congregations in the Midwest were often spaced close together, as farming families would walk to church or arrive by horse-and-buggy. In the cities, Lutheran churches were quickly landlocked. Moreover, the construction methods often didn't lend to facility expansion. So, as church membership grew, the only options were to go to many services or to start another church, perhaps only a mile away. The second option was the one most often chosen. Thus, a mindset developed in WELS that it was normal, perhaps even beneficial, to locate our churches close to one another.

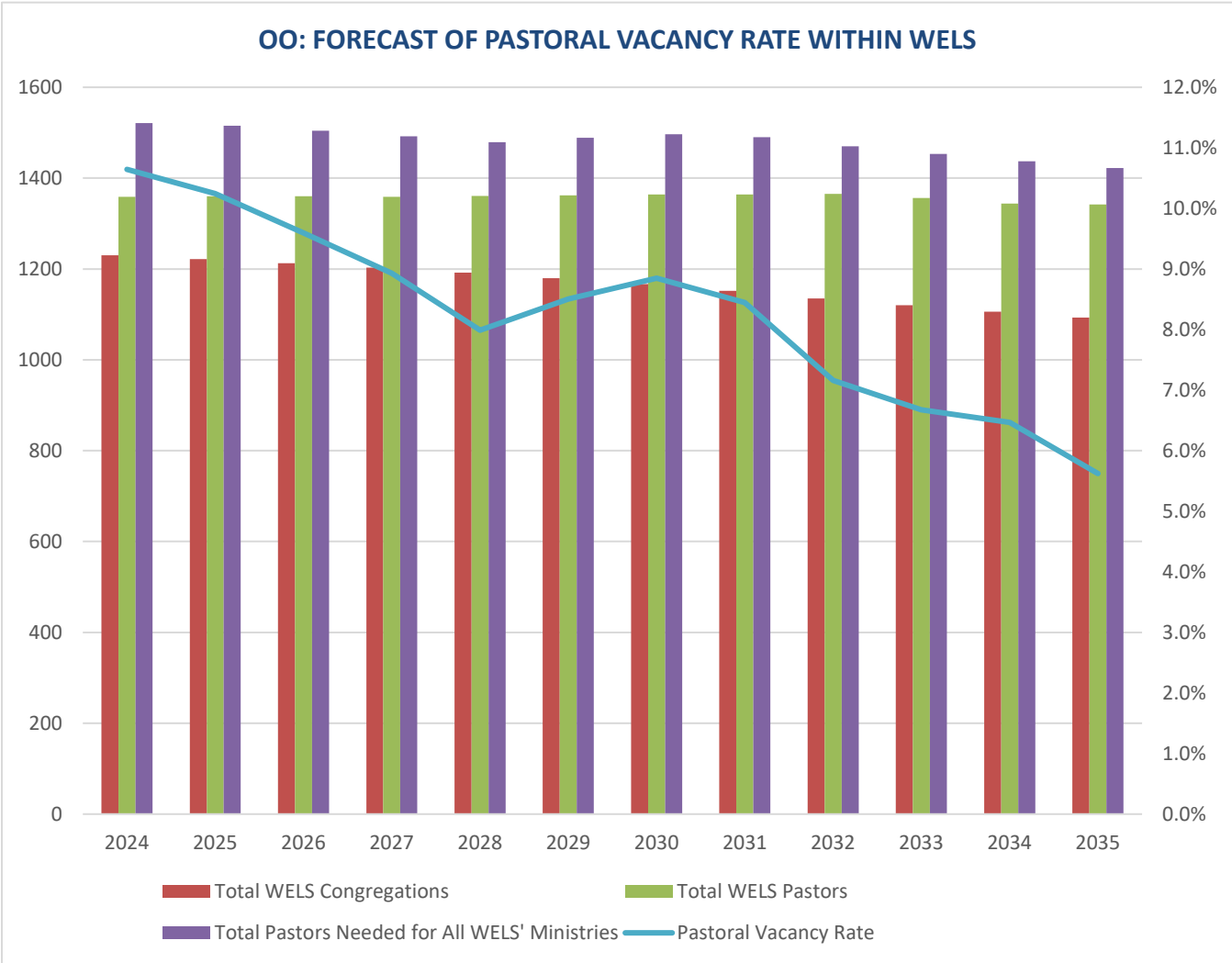
That mindset persisted, even as WELS (and the rest of the country) had fewer farmers. Many congregations started by WELS Board for Home Missions in the past thirty years were well within the parish area of other WELS congregations. Perhaps the thought was that members from those nearby churches might form a "core" of the new start. Thus, we have places in the Midwest where there is a high density of congregations with overlapping parish areas. If they were all 300 to 400 members, that would still be of necessity. As we said, that is the limit of what one pastor can serve. But what if membership and worship attendance are lower than that?

Go back to Illustration NN. In Option B, imagine if those three churches had average weekly worship attendances of 30, 35, and 45 and memberships of 70, 90, and 110. If they consolidated at one location, their attendance would be 110, with a combined total membership of 270. What is the downside? There are fewer "lost" within the combined parish area, but since the congregations were close, it is not a significant loss of "reach." Probably more impactful, there is the "loss" of two churches, and that has an emotional cost. Members are rightly attached to the places where God's Word and sacraments have fed their faith. So, there is a downside. It is primarily emotional, not necessarily mission related. When it comes to mission, what is the upside? The merged congregations have achieved a higher critical mass, likely enabling them to do more ministry. This is the primary benefit. A secondary one? Instead of needing three pastors, the membership and attendance numbers suggest only one is needed. That means those two other pastoral positions are capable of being deployed to one of the many gospel opportunities before our church body.

Graph OO is a model of how the pastoral vacancy rate might return to a more reasonable level by 2035. Here are the underlying assumptions:

- Throughout WELS we average seven new ministries annually between now and 2035. (This would be mostly home and world mission efforts.)
- The average age of retirement for pastors reaches 70. (It is slightly lower than that today but trending up.)
- The average number of pastors who leave ministry for something other than retirement (e.g., death, resignation) is about 5 annually.
- WELS maintains the percent of pastors who serve in something *other* than a parish, home mission, or world mission setting at the current level of about 11.3%. (That 11.3% is lower than it was in recent decades. However, to maintain that level, we would need to be *very* thoughtful about adding ministries/positions that require pulling a pastor out of the parish.)

- Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary sees annual graduations trend upward, reaching 34 by 2028 and then holding there. (As we move towards 2035, those 34 annual pastoral graduates are going to increasingly represent historic percentages of the total seminary-aged population in WELS. Thus, this model assumes the Lord also blesses our recruitment efforts.)
- Between now and 2035, through consolidation or closures, WELS averages an annual reduction of 19 needed parish pastoral positions. (The model has those reductions starting at the average of recent years, then trending up, peaking at 24 in 2031, then trending back down again.)



A lot of assumptions are built into that model. Most of them are beyond our ability to control. Graph OO is simply meant to illustrate that prayerfully wrestling with the questions about critical mass could play a role in addressing the strategic challenges before our church body.

By no means would all the challenges be addressed. Hundreds of congregations in WELS have a declining membership, yet consolidation or partnership with another congregation is not an option due to geographic isolation. We must plan how we can continue to serve the saints within those congregations with the gospel.

Count the Cost

So, we can summarize the current reality in WELS like this. The harvest is plentiful. A growing number of gospel opportunities are before us. But the workers, if not yet few, are limited in this sense. While, God-willing, we can increase the number of men and women who offer to serve in public ministry, it will be extremely hard to increase called workers *at the pace* these opportunities increase. If this is not acknowledged and we continue forward status quo, it seems inevitable that congregations and schools will increasingly have to deal with worker shortages. When a congregation sits vacant for two years, that has a cost. When a school is down two positions, while they might make heroic adaptations, it still costs that school in ways hard to assess.

This section of the statistical analysis is titled *Strategic Questions*. We have not tried to answer them here but simply lay out some issues suggested by the data trends for prayerful consideration and discussion. If as a synod we hope to *walk together*, now is the time to *talk together*. This is going to take both the faith and wisdom Jesus seeks in our stewardship efforts.

In Luke 14, Jesus talks about counting the cost of building a tower. He then mentions thinking through the strategy of facing a larger army. Thus, some have used that chapter to stress the importance of planning. While that is perhaps an ancillary application, it is hardly the main point. Note how Jesus bookends the discussion.

²⁷ "And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? ²⁹ For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, ³⁰ saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'

³¹ "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³ In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples."¹⁶

The real topic is discipleship. The crowds following Jesus were growing into great multitudes. Many thought that following the One who could feed multitudes and heal the infirm would mean a life of relative ease. So, Jesus is simply being honest when he explains that following him does not transform one's earthly life into an endless supply of lollipops and puppies and other delights. Discipleship is neither a low-risk nor a low-cost endeavor. Jesus is asking, "Are you sure you are ready?" It may be that in service of our Lord and his mission, we will need to "give up everything [we] have." Relationships. Wealth. Reputation. Life. *Everything*.

¹⁶ Luke 14:25-33

Why would we ever do such a thing? Only because the Spirit moves us to do so by opening our eyes to the sight of Jesus counting the cost first. Before there was time, the Son of God saw us, knew us, loved us. He understood what it would cost if we were going to spend eternity with him. *Everything*. He would have to trade the heavenly throne for an earthly manger. He would have to become infant-level weak. The giver of the Law would need to be born under it, and he would have to obey perfectly for us. He would have to know what it's like to watch loved ones die . . . to have friends let you down. He would have to be plunged into our misery. He would have to suffer—to scream and groan. He would have to bleed. He would have to die. The Son of God saw us. He counted the cost. What did he conclude?

"Totally worth it!"

And because he did, he has opened for us the gates into an eternal existence consisting of way more than lollipops or puppies or whatever else we think makes existence delightful.

Whatever solutions will be needed to navigate the next decade in WELS, it begins with remembering *that*. Remembering *that* will have us in the right place mentally and emotionally and spiritually as we wrestle with whether we can build this tower or fight that war. As we remember *that*, the Spirit will move us to pick up whatever crosses need carrying . . . to give up whatever needs giving up.

What does that mean? Certainly, something different for each of us. Perhaps it means digging into life savings to help a grandchild or grandnephew or niece study for ministry. Perhaps it means looking at partnering or even consolidating with that nearby congregation, even if that potentially means walking away from a beloved facility. Perhaps it means *not* expanding some ministry effort (one requiring more called workers) that is not absolutely mission critical because of the broader pressure it would generate within our sister congregations.

What does that mean? Certainly, something in common for all of us—that we would ask the Holy Spirit to give us opportunities and the courage to build relationships with unbelievers and the unchurched, so that in time we might share our faith with these people we have come to truly love as friends . . . to invite them to our church . . . to be in the Word with them. If we all do this, perhaps Christ, through us, will pull many new souls into our congregations. That, obviously, would help us navigate these challenges. (*Christ Through Us* is the theme of both WELS' 175th anniversary celebration and WELS' next long-range plan.)

Count the cost. Whatever that means for each of us, as we fix our eyes on Christ and all that he has done and promised, the Spirit plants this thought in our mind and heart.

"Totally worth it!"

God grant it among us.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Jonathan Hein
Coordinator, WELS Congregational Services