



# Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

LUTHERAN CHURCH OF HOPE

925 Jordan Creek Pkwy ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ Feb. 24, 2006

By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and Peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

At the risk of sounding redundant (again) I dredge up a refrain I have used before in past Updates: "Numbers do not mean everything, but they do mean something." We cannot dwell on numbers, but we cannot ignore them either. It seems to be more impressive that 3000 people were baptized on Pentecost rather than 3, or that Jesus fed the 5000 rather than 5. Thus every once in a while I think it is good to look at some numbers.

In the most recent Thrivent Magazine, some statistics are highlighted which speak volumes. The number of Lutherans (all Lutherans, not just ELCA) are totaled in each of the fifty states. Pastor Richard said the numbers would mean more if we threw in percentages, so I have done that on the ten states with the most Lutherans.

### TOP TEN

1. Minnesota	1,088,000	20% of population
2. Wisconsin	905,000	17%
3. Pennsylvania	604,000	3%
4. Illinois	545,000	2.5%
5. Michigan	433,000	4%
6. <b>IOWA</b>	<b>377,000</b>	<b>13%</b>
7. Ohio	361,000	3%
8. California	293,000	1%
9. Texas	293,000	1.5%
10. Nebraska	244,000	13%

### BOTTOM FORTY

11. New York	235,000	31. Oklahoma	32,000
12. North Dakota	192,500	32. Tennessee	31,000
13. Indiana	183,000	33. Idaho	24,000
14. Missouri	175,000	34. Nevada	21,843
15. South Dakota	163,000	35. Louisiana	21,000
16. Florida	161,000	36. Wyoming	20,000
17. Washington	160,000	37. Arkansas	20,000
18. Maryland	121,000	38. Kentucky	17,000
19. Colorado	115,000	39. Alabama	17,000
20. North Carolina	109,000	40. Alaska	16,000
21. Arizona	106,000	41. West Virginia	14,000
22. Kansas	103,000	42. New Mexico	12,000
23. New Jersey	97,000	43. Utah	9,700
24. Virginia	85,000	44. Delaware	9,000
25. Oregon	68,000	45. Rhode Island	6,500
26. South Carolina	65,000	46. New Hampshire	6,000
27. Montana	64,000	47. Mississippi	5,000
28. Georgia	48,500	48. Maine	5,000
29. Connecticut	42,500	49. Hawaii	4,500
30. Massachusetts	34,000	50. Vermont	1,800

Looking at the numbers, I draw the following conclusions:

\*Minnesota has the densest Lutherans in the country.

\*Lutherans have no common political identity. Minnesota and Wisconsin have usually been strong blue states while North and South Dakota and Nebraska have been red states.

\*Given the estimate that about 25% of Lutherans worship each week, Lutheran Church of Hope probably has more people in weekend worship than each of the states from 35<sup>th</sup> (Louisiana) to 50<sup>th</sup> (Vermont).

\*The numbers are shrinking each year. The ELCA handbooks say that only 12 out of 65 synods are growing, 53 showed varying degrees of decline.

\*Most synods which are growing have one or two major congregations which are contributing much of that growth. The South-eastern Iowa Synod has shown a tiny growth, guess which congregation in that synod has made the difference between positive or negative numbers?

\*The numbers at Hope are truly counter-cultural. There is no logical reason why a church in West Des Moines, Iowa should be the fastest growing Lutheran congregation in the land. The numbers just don't make sense. Why isn't this happening in some of the truly fast-growing areas of the country? It must be a God thing.

Another set of numbers tell us something else about ELCA Lutherans.

Average Attendance	No of congregations	Percent of Cong.	Percentile
2,000 plus	11	0.1%	100.0%
1,000 to 2,000	36	0.4%	99.6%
500 to 750	215	2.0%	99.0%
350 to 499	407	3.9%	97.0%
200 to 349	1439	13.6%	93.1%
150 to 199	1056	10.0%	79.5%
100 to 149	1856	17.6%	69.4%
75 to 99	1370	13.0%	51.8%
50 to 74	1748	16.6%	38.9%
35 to 49	1113	10.6%	22.3%
1 to 19	356	3.4%	3.4%

Interpreting the Numbers.

\*If it takes from 100 to 125 people in worship to support a pastor's salary, as studies have indicated, it would appear that several thousand congregations are at risk.

\*If our new satellite congregation in Ankeny begins with about 200 in worship, which is very likely given the increasing interest, that means it would be in the 80% bracket on Day 1. In other words, 80% of existing congregations would be smaller, only 20% larger.

\*The big picture problem is not that many congregations are declining, many of them reflect declining populations in communities. The real problem is that we have not planted effective and growing congregations in growing areas of the country.

\*A mega-church by definition has 2000 in worship on a weekend, that means 11 ELCA congregations qualify. I believe Mt. Olivet in Minneapolis is the largest, then Lutheran Church of Hope and Hosanna in Lakeville, MN are next and the fourth is probably Prince of Peace in Burnsville, where I served for 21 years. Here is the list:

Mt. Olivet Lutheran	Minneapolis, MN
Lutheran Church of Hope	West Des Moines, IA
Hosanna Lutheran	Lakeville, MN
Prince of Peace Lutheran	Burnsville, MN
St. Andrews Lutheran	Mahtomedi, MN
Hope Lutheran	Fargo, ND
Community Church of Joy	Phoenix, AZ
Upper Arlington Lutheran	Columbus, OH
Calvary Lutheran	Golden Valley, MN
Shepherd of the Valley	Apple Valley, MN
St. Phillip the Deacon	Plymouth, MN

At one time I worried about a congregation becoming too big, so I asked a pastor friend the question, "How large should a congregation become? His answer, "as large as the Holy Spirit wants it to be." In other words, focus on the mission and let God worry about the growth.

The article about Lutheran Church of Hope in [The Des Moines Register](#) was about as good as it could have been. The only missing numbers were these—the average age of the congregation. For the most part Lutherans have lost an entire generation, the 18 to 40 year olds. But when you observe our worship on the weekend, we have literally thousands of people under the age of 40. The average age of Lutherans today is 65, I would guess that the average age of people at Hope is less than thirty. As long as Hope can reach young adults, it will continue to thrive. Numbers are not everything, but they do mean something. Praise God.