



Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

LUTHERAN CHURCH OF HOPE

925 Jordan Creek Pkwy ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ May 20, 2005

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

I commented in the previous Update concerning the dramatic changes taking place all around us, and sometimes within us. Such change, although it does not seem so dramatic at times, is also affecting the various Christian denominations in our country. The latest edition of the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, edited by Rev. Dr. Eileen Lindner from the National Council of Churches, documents a number of these changes.

I list the 25 largest denominations and, where available, the growth or decline over the past year.

Denomination Membership Growth

The Catholic Church	67,259,000	+1.28%
Southern Baptist Convention	16,439,000	+1.18%
United Methodist Church	8,251,000	+0.002%
Latter Day Saints—Mormons	5,503,000	+1.71%
Church of God in Christ	5,449,000	
National Baptist Convention USA	5,000,000	
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	4,984,000	-1.05%
National Baptist Convention of America	3,500,000	
Presbyterian Church USA	3,241,000	-4.87%
Assemblies of God	2,729,000	+1.57%
African Methodist Episcopal Church	2,500,000	
National Missionary Baptist Convention	2,500,000	
Progressive National Baptist Convention	2,500,000	
Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod	2,488,000	-0.95%

Episcopal Church	2,320,000	+0.57%
Churches of Christ	1,500,000	
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America	1,500,000	
Pentecostal Assemblies of the World	1,500,000	
American Baptist Churches	1,433,000	-3.45%
African Methodist Episcopal Zion	1,432,000	
United Church of Christ	1,296,000	-2.58%
Baptist Bible Fellowship	1,200,000	
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ	1,071,000	
Jehovah's Witnesses	1,041,000	+1.82%
Orthodox Church of America	1,000,000	+11.11%

To summarize, the landscape continues to shift away from traditional mainline denominations. Three of the largest 25 are now Pentecostal, and six of the above are African American.

Something else needs to be said. Statistics are often unreliable. So many different approaches are being used to determine statistics that it is hard to find a common base. Some seem to be counting apples and others are counting oranges, so numbers can mean quite a different thing in different settings.

For instance, within most mainline churches, including Lutheran, a primary emphasis has been given to "baptized members." Most congregations determine their size by the number of baptized members, which again can mean different things to different people. Does baptized membership include all those who have been baptized at the congregation, or does it include only those who are presently active. I remember in some churches I served we had "active member" files and "inactive member" files. Are both of these in-

cluded in the statistics?

Complicating this analysis is the fact that many church analysts say that baptized membership is irrelevant, perhaps even membership is not all that important. What is most important is who shows up at worship. In other words, many would say today that the size of a congregation can only be determined by its worship attendance, all other measurements are irrelevant.

If that is true, then this puts the ELCA numbers in a very different perspective. Studies suggest that among ELCA congregations worship attendance only averages about 25% of baptized membership. It used to be a bit higher, but now is only about 25%. This means, of course, that if the ELCA says it has 5 million members, that only about 25% of them are in worship, about 1,250,000. That makes us a much smaller church than we might have thought.

To amplify this conclusion, it is rather fascinating to look through the ELCA yearbook, where both baptized membership and worship attendance are listed. There are a large number of congregations which have even less than 25% of membership at worship, some which are 10% or even less. I had a friend who pastored a church of 5,000 baptized members, but only worshipped about 600 on Sundays. I asked him about this and he said that the congregation never gave up on anyone, always had responsibility for people who were baptized there. It is almost a European model at times, huge numbers of baptized members who may or may not show up on Christmas and Easter, but very low worship attendance.

Lutheran Church of Hope is counter-cultural in this regard, at least as it applies to Lutherans. During 2004 the congregation averaged about 4,000 people in worship, including Immersion. At the same time our membership reached almost 6,000. In other words, Hope has about 66% of its members worshipping each week. In terms of rate of growth, our worship attendance during 2004 grew by 40% and our membership grew by 25%. If this trend continues, do you think there would ever come a time when worship attendance would be greater than membership? This is exactly the case in some

evangelical churches.

One other factor to consider. Whenever a congregation builds a new sanctuary, or increases space for worship, there is often a dramatic increase in worship attendance, especially if worship has been crowded and the church has been growing. Often a congregation will experience a 50% growth in worship attendance in the years after the completion of a new facility. If that happens at Hope, this means that our worship attendance might continue to grow faster than membership.

Some people denigrate statistics, call it a "numbers game." But every number represents a person, a person for whom Christ died and rose again. Certainly it seems to be far better to be increasing the number of people who are hearing the Gospel and participating in the Sacraments than it is to be decreasing. While we don't focus on statistics and do not measure our ministry by numbers, every once in a while it is good to pay attention to them. They can tell us something important.