

"MY LORD ... MY GOD"

John 20:28



A Living History of St. Thomas
Evangelical Lutheran Church,
Phoenix, Arizona

by

Michael L. Gehl

May 12, 1998

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	1
INTRODUCTION	2
I. THE FOUNDING YEARS	4
II. THE TRAILER YEARS	8
III. THE BUILDING YEARS	11
IV. THE ALA YEARS	14
V. THE VICAR / BWM YEARS	17
VI. THE CROSS-CULTURAL YEARS	21
POSTSCRIPT	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY	30
INTERVIEWS	30
OTHER RESOURCES	30
APPENDIX A	31
LIST OF CHARTS (FROM WELS STATISTICAL REPORTS).....	31

Introduction

As I considered which topic I should choose for this Senior Church History paper, I asked myself, "What is the purpose of doing a paper in the area of church history at all?" I would imagine that most people consider history to be a rather boring subject. It's history, after all. It's in the past. We can't change it. Why don't we just let things lie where they are and concentrate on the present and future which we have a little more control over? Although history has always been one of my favorite subjects, in a certain way I guess I can relate to their points. All the other subjects we study have a very definite practical nature about them. Homiletics helps us prepare sermons and to hone our preaching abilities. In our education classes we learn and practice teaching techniques and then plan out a year's worth of lessons to put those methods into effect. Our studies in Scripture, whether in the original languages or in English or systematically, return us to the basis of the beliefs we have and give us the ability and knowledge to train our members why we believe the things we do. The other courses in pastoral theology -- worship and practical theology -- guide us in our day to day dealings with the congregations that we will soon be shepherding. But history is history. Something that happened in the past is not much help in preparing us for the future. Or maybe it is.

Some will disagree with me, but I feel that church history is just as valuable as any of the other subjects I just mentioned. Where is it that we learn how to establish a congregation from ground zero? Church history. Where do we come up with ideas that we can use in reaching out to people, whether in a big city or on a wide open plain in the middle of nowhere? Church history. Who remind us to constantly hold firm to the truths we find in Scripture? Those in church history. Where do we find fine examples of sound Lutheran pastors and preachers and teachers? In church history.

Which brings me back to my original point. What is the purpose of doing a church history paper? The answer is quite simple. The answers are those that I just mentioned. Church history helps us deal with church present. Church history helps us prepare to deal with church

future. Church history reminds us most vividly of the Holy Christian Church of which we, and all believers of all time, are members. Whether it's a year, a hundred years, or a thousand years ago, there is always something to learn -- something or someone whom we can imitate in our own future ministries.

So why St. Thomas of Phoenix, Arizona? It is not much different from any other WELS church. It began small. It built a sanctuary. It assisted in education. It is ministering across cultures. But it is for just these reasons that St. Thomas is a special congregation to me. During the relatively short time I spent at St. Thomas during vicar year, I learned firsthand the way in which a church grows. St. Thomas grew because it is founded securely on the unshakable Word of God. It grew as two or three gathered in his name and desired to practice church fellowship with one another. It grew as these two or three multiplied into twenty and thirty and as they called a man to be their shepherd and preach to them the life-giving water of salvation. It grew as they reached out to their community and to their synod. It grew as they took a part in preparing young men for the full-time ministry of the Word. It grows, even during a time of change, as the gospel continues to be preached in its truth and purity, now not only in one, but two languages.

This is the St. Thomas that I would like to present to you in this church history paper. But as the subtitle to the paper indicates, St. Thomas is by no means a dead church. It is a living, breathing, active group of men and women who are members of the Communion of Saints. This being said, this paper is directed especially to how the history of St. Thomas is a fine example of the future of many more churches to come as we, God-willing, continue to open new churches and to carry out the Great Commission to preach the Word to the world. Let us not get so bogged down in dates and details that we fail to recognize the many things we can learn and utilize from this portion of church history.

I. The Founding Years

In 1963, the Arizona-California Mission Board purchased seven lots from RPR Construction Co.¹, each one-third of an acre, at the southwest corner of 52nd Avenue and West Thomas Road in Phoenix, Arizona. The lots had served as a parking area for a model home display. Total cost of the 2.3 acre site was \$24,564.85. Funding for the purchase was provided through the Church Extension Fund (CEF) of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.²

In the spring of 1965 an 18' x 50' four bedroom home was constructed on the west end of the property to serve as parsonage and worship facility. The floor plan that was selected for the facility included a folding partition between the family and living rooms. With the partition open, about 60 people could be seated comfortably on folding chairs. The four bedrooms served as the Sunday School classrooms and the organ was placed in the kitchen which also served as the sacristy. The cost of this project was \$16,150.00, which also was provided by the CEF.³ Eagerly anticipating the beginning of their work on the west side of Phoenix, the DMB remarked, "We plan to open the 52nd Avenue and W. Thomas Road Mission in Phoenix in a few months."⁴

The congregation joined together for an open house on September 5, 1965, and on the following Sunday, September 12th, Pastor Duane Tomhave conducted the congregation's first worship service. Thirty-one people were in attendance and offered to the Lord and their church \$18.54.⁵

As was just mentioned, Duane K. Tomhave, pastor of Emmaus Lutheran Church in Phoenix, was the congregation's first shepherd. At the time, he was on the District Mission Board, and volunteered to serve the congregation since he had some spare time on his hands.⁶

¹Schroeder interview.

²St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 3.

³Ibid.

⁴1965 WELS Synod Proceedings, 182.

⁵St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 3.

⁶Meier interview.

Other notable members worth mentioning are: Mr. Alfred Poole, who served as temporary chairman of the congregation; Mr. Rod Petersen, who was appointed to serve as treasurer; Anne Marie Petersen who was the first infant to be baptized on Reformation Day, 1965; total income for four months in 1965 was \$782.89 in thank-offerings, and \$390.80 in subsidy from the WELS through its District Mission Board.⁷

Apparently, the work at St. Thomas was blessed right from the beginning. The following is an excerpt from the 1966 District Proceedings:

At St. Thomas in Phoenix we have had excellent response and an average attendance of 43 during the early part of 1966. The parsonage can seat only some 60, and the missionary cannot conduct more than one service, for Pastor Duane Tomhave also serves Emmaus in Phoenix. We therefore request a Vicar in September, or permission to call a man in July. We believe a Vicar will serve our needs for a year. We also request a chapel for St. Thomas for \$45,000.00 -- \$25,850.00 CEF, \$3,000.00 CEL, and \$16,500.00 transfer from the Parsonage-Teacherage Fund to the CEF, at present invested in the parsonage because it is used as a chapel.⁸

The vicar request was made in April of 1966, and a month later, Vicar Ronald Semro was assigned by the Lord through his Church to St. Thomas. He arrived with his wife in August and was installed on the 14th of that month. As happened with more than one of St. Thomas' vicars, Vicar Semro's first duty was to conduct the congregation's first Vacation Bible School. Vicar and his wife Donna lived in the back part of the parsonage throughout their stay until July, 1967.⁹

Vicar Semro served the congregation well during his year there, but everyone realized that it was time to begin calling for a permanent shepherd. This is from the Anniversary Directory:

The congregation received permission to begin calling for its first

⁷St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 3.

⁸1966 AZ-CA District Proceedings, 16.

⁹St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 3-4.

full-time pastor in January of 1967. After a call to the field for an experienced pastor was returned, it was resolved to request a candidate from the 1967 graduating class of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. On May 23, 1967, candidate William A. Meier was assigned as the first resident pastor of the congregation. A parsonage was rented five blocks from the property for Pastor Meier, his wife Marcia, and infant daughter Kristine. The Meiers arrived on July 27, 1967. Emmaus Lutheran Church, 39th Avenue and Sweetwater, in Phoenix, was the location for an Ordination-Installation Service for Pastor Meier on July 30, 1967. St. Thomas numbered 16 communicants on the day that it installed its first pastor.¹⁰

I asked Pastor Meier how it felt to be the first full-time pastor of St. Thomas. He said it came as quite a shock at first. Even though he grew up in Arizona, and kept in close contact through his father, who lived and taught there, he didn't even know a new church was opening in Phoenix. He was surprised to learn that he would begin his ministry at St. Thomas, "Pix," as President Lawrenz pronounced it. In his meeting following the call service, Pastor Gene Hartzell, chairman of the District Mission Board remarked concerning the small size of the congregation (sixteen members), "Either we're right or we're crazy." According to what Pastor Meier said, I get the impression that Pastor Hartzell was right on both counts. They were right in that the church quickly grew. For Pastor Meier, it was a little crazy and overwhelming at first. He had not vicared and everything was new and different for him. Having grown up on the Apache Reservation, he had never even attended a council meeting before.¹¹ There's nothing like a little trial by fire, I guess. The three officers of the congregation did their best to break Pastor Meier in slowly, and in October, 1967, the congregation adopted the Synod's model constitution. At the same meeting, the congregation resolved to purchase a used Hammond organ to be used in the parsonage / chapel. Once again the CEF provided the funding. This organ served St. Thomas Congregation for over a decade, beginning in the parsonage kitchen, then in the portable units (cf. Trailer Years), and finally in the present facility.¹²

¹⁰Ibid, 4.

¹¹Meier interview.

¹²St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 4.

There were many challenges to be overcome during the first few years of St. Thomas' existence. According to both Pastor Meier and charter member, Harold Schroeder, the biggest challenge, and highest priority, was keeping up with each and every visitor that came in the front door. With six or seven visitors each Sunday, Pastor Meier had his work cut out for him in making calls. Another visitor challenge was trying to persuade those who stopped by for Sunday services that, "Yes, there still is room in the living room." As difficult as it was, the Holy Spirit used their evangelism efforts to create and strengthen faith in many. During the first years, hardly any of the membership gains were by transfer. About one-half were from the Missouri Synod, one-fourth from other Lutheran church bodies, and another fourth by way of adult confirmations.¹³ Within a year, the biggest challenge was what to do for worship space.

¹³Meier interview.

II. The Trailer Years

At the two 1968 Easter Sunday services there were sixty and fifty-seven in attendance respectively. It was evident that larger facilities were needed. The decision did not come easily, however. Once again, St. Thomas requested funding assistance through the Church Extension Fund of the WELS. The CEF was short of funds at that time, but the General Board for Home Missions was able to grant \$16,150.00, provided the pastor and family would move into the parsonage on the property (the Parsonage-Teacherage Fund).¹⁴ From the District Proceedings:

In Phoenix, St. Thomas is requesting a beautiful and practical pre-built chapel for \$11,300.00 with the hope that it may become self-supporting before requiring more funds for building. Candidate William A. Meier was installed as pastor in July. The congregation has assumed CEF-CEL repayments of \$190.00 per month before receiving the building. We rejoice that the CEL provided funds to finance the purchase of an organ. The chapel would permit the present house used for services to be used as a parsonage without any remodeling and thus save parsonage rental.¹⁵

The facility that was finally decided upon was a double-wide trailer. "At the time we were outgrowing the living room with two services and we didn't feel there were enough members to support a full-blown building program. Therefore we decided we needed a temporary facility on the property that we wouldn't get attached to and could easily be moved away."¹⁶ At that time, the man who was developing the Maryvale community on the west side of Phoenix, John F. Long, had hit a slump in sales of homes, so he decided to try building mobile homes at his prefabrication facility. St. Thomas contracted the J.F.L. sales people about a special double-wide unit with 10 ft. ceilings. They studied the request and agreed to construct such a unit.¹⁷ At first the congregation was not united on the matter. The statement was made that "an outhouse church equals an outhouse congregation."¹⁸ After some careful coaching, though, the

¹⁴St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 4.

¹⁵1968 AZ-CA District Proceedings, 19.

¹⁶Schroeder interview.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Meier interview.

decision was unanimous. The item which caused the most “discussion” was what the color of the carpeting should be. The building itself was 24’ x 60’ with 10’ ceilings, with heat pump heating and cooling.¹⁹ The contract price for “The Trailers” was approximately \$13,500.00. The other \$2,600 was used for site development and perimeter fencing that was required by Phoenix city code.²⁰ The District writes, “We joyfully report that St. Thomas of Phoenix, Pastor William A. Meier, has been given authority to obtain the 24’ x 60’ building they requested and the funds to put in the required fencing.”²¹

On October 27, 1968, the living room of the parsonage was used for the last time as our worship center, with 69 people in attendance. On Monday, October 28th, the trailers were delivered, and by Sunday, November 3rd, the first worship services were conducted in this new facility. Dedication services were held on Sunday, November 10th, with 194 people crammed into our new temporary house of worship.²²

According to Pastor Meier, the temporary facility was quite “worshipful.” The 10’ ceiling was very suitable for services and it was the first church in Phoenix to have air conditioning (other churches had “swamp” (evaporative) coolers). The tile floors made it a little noisy, but the building was easily adaptable to the needs of the congregation. The facility maxed out with 217 in attendance at a Vacation Bible School closing service. The only two problems were the noisiness and the fear of several members that they would be stuck there forever. During the “Trailer Years” from November, 1968 to May, 1975, the congregation grew from 40 to 200.²³ Mr. Schroeder states, “The community was fast growing and the mobile home facility didn’t seem to stop anyone from coming. We could almost count on two to ten new visitors each week.”²⁴

¹⁹Schroeder interview.

²⁰St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 5.

²¹1968 AC-CA District Proceedings, 22.

²²St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 5.

²³Meier interview.

²⁴Schroeder interview.

It was during these years that St. Thomas resolved to become a self-supporting congregation. On January 19, 1969, the congregation adopted a budget totaling \$11,946.00 with \$2,000.00 designated as Synod Mission Offering. Once again, the CEF was able to fund an \$8,000.00 loan for the purchase of a second trailer unit. This one measured 16' x 64', and provided St. Thomas with six Sunday School classrooms.²⁵

It was also during these transitional years that Pastor Meier helped to begin a congregation in Yuma, Arizona. From May to August, 1969 he did the demographics, canvassing, and preliminaries, and then from September, 1969 through July, 1970, he traveled the 180 miles of hot Arizona desert (St. Thomas was the nearest WELS congregation!!!) to Yuma to conduct services each Sunday evening at Prince of Peace. He would stay over in Yuma Sunday evening and then visit members and conduct Bible Information Classes on Monday before heading back to Phoenix. It is in reference to this that the District Mission Board writes, "We thank God that we received mission status and Candidate Clark Sievert at Prince of Peace, Yuma. Installation is scheduled for July 19th. We also thank Pastor William A. Meier for the grueling schedule that his work required to serve Yuma."²⁶

²⁵St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 5.

²⁶1970 AZ-CA District Proceedings, 25.

III. The Building Years

One of the biggest challenges during the trailer years was that there was a fear that the congregation would remain in the trailers forever and never have a permanent church of its own. For this reason, already in 1970 a building committee began to meet monthly to make plans for a new facility. Harold Schroeder, who was president of the congregation at that time, led this study committee which finally settled on Churches USA of Arvada, Colorado to build the present facility.²⁷ The quote they gave was \$157,500 for 10,000 sq. ft., just one-third of the rate the Mission Board was paying for church building at the time.²⁸ Fear was not the only reason for the planning. By 1974 St. Thomas had, in two services, managed to fill the mobile home facility to its capacity.²⁹

The site for the new sanctuary, of course, would be on the original property at 52nd Avenue and West Thomas, on the opposite end from the parsonage. Looking back, this was an ideal location for a congregation. The site had been chosen by the District Mission Board based on subdivision growth going on in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. J.F. Long, who was developing the neighborhood, was peaking at about twelve homes built per day!³⁰

These words from the Congregational Directory explain:

In 1970, the Church Council was designated as the Planning Committee. The Council worked faithfully at planning the congregation's permanent worship facility. Many different options were studied. Many different floor plans were evaluated. Finally, in the Spring of 1974, plans for a 10,000 sq. ft. facility were submitted through the Mission Board to the General Board for Home Missions. Funding was not immediately available, but six months later, in the fall of 1974, St. Thomas received a loan of \$165,000.00 from the CEF (as recorded in the District Proceedings³¹). Construction on our present facility began in late

²⁷Schroeder interview.

²⁸Meier interview.

²⁹Schroeder interview.

³⁰Meier interview.

³¹1976 AZ-CA District Proceedings, 30.

December, 1974, and continued through the first months of 1975.³²

Most everything went very smoothly. Mr. Schroeder stated, “By far the biggest challenges were choosing the color of the carpet and the color of the fabric for the pews! Everything else just went together with no hassles.”³³ The construction company out of Colorado took care of all of the construction and furnishings. The members did help, however with the exterior of the building. The concrete block wall around the property, the sidewalks, and the landscaping were all done by members. An obvious benefit of this was the ownership that the congregation felt of their new building and property.³⁴ As was mentioned earlier, the same organ that had served the congregation from its beginning accompanied them to their new church home.

The new building was dedicated on May 11, 1975, with over 500 people joining together in Christian fellowship to rejoice with the members of St. Thomas.³⁵

What was done with “The Trailers?” They continued to serve our synod well.

In July of 1976, Shepherd of the Plains Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lubbock, Texas, made plans through its Mission Board to purchase both of our trailer units. They were sold for exactly what we paid for them, and transported to Lubbock in the same month. The buildings served that mission for over three years, until it built its own permanent buildings.³⁶

How did the new facility affect the membership of St. Thomas? “The community was still growing, so St. Thomas continued to grow.”³⁷ By 1982 the membership had doubled and by 1984 peaked at just under 450 communicant members.³⁸

On one additional note, in 1979, St. Thomas purchased and dedicated a new organ which has served the congregation well up to the present. This organ’s fame even reaches to the

³²St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 6.

³³Schroeder interview.

³⁴Meier interview.

³⁵St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 6.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Schroeder interview.

³⁸WELS Statistical Reports (see attached charts).

Seminary campus as men from there visited St. Thomas to “check out the organ.” The exact same make and model was purchased for use in our Seminary auditorium.³⁹

³⁹Meier interview.

IV. The ALA Years

As early as the early 1970s the WELS congregations in the Phoenix metropolitan area had been making plans to have an academy in the Valley. During 1975-1976 Pastor Meier chaired a committee to study the feasibility of this undertaking. The outcome of the study showed that there was the desire to start a Lutheran high school in Phoenix already in the 1977 school year, but then the committee decided to hold off until the 1978 school year.⁴⁰

The Black Canyon delegate conference in February, 1975, appointed a committee to study the feasibility of a Lutheran high school to serve our Valley congregations. After several years of study, and after most Valley congregations joined our high school federation, it was resolved to begin Arizona Lutheran Academy in St. Thomas' facility in August of 1978. Initial enrollment numbered 44, with 33 freshmen, and 11 sophomores.⁴¹

Because of a lack of funds, the committee sought to choose a facility that was already in existence and that had the space and resources to meet the needs of a high school. With the large fellowship area in its new facility, St. Thomas was one of the few locations able to meet those needs. Two criteria sealed the decision. It was available and it was cheap. No rent was charged except one-half of the utility bills. The four classrooms used for Sunday School would be perfect for the four high school grades. The kitchen and fellowship hall could be used for science labs and a cafeteria.⁴²

On Reformation Sunday of 1977, the committee called Robert Adickes to serve as the first principle and science teacher of the new school. Mr. Adickes had been serving at Lakeside Lutheran High School for seventeen years from 1960 to 1978. He accepted the call and arrived in Phoenix in April of 1978 to begin planning for the inaugural school year.⁴³

The second area high school in our district will be Arizona Lutheran Academy, which will welcome its first students this fall

⁴⁰Adickes interview.

⁴¹St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 6.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

as it opens in the facilities of St. Thomas in Phoenix. Mr. Robert Adickes has been installed as principal and has been on the job since about Easter. Mr. Victor Fenske has accepted the call as the second instructor and will assume his responsibilities in the near future. The projected enrollment for the academy is between 30 and 40.⁴⁴

In the fall of 1978, then, Arizona Lutheran Academy opened its doors to the young men and women of the Phoenix area. For the first year, the school only taught two classes -- freshmen and sophomores. Besides Mr. Adickes and Mr. Fenske, other part-time faculty members for that first year include: Mrs. Evelyn Adickes, Allan Just (who became full-time after Christmas), Pastor Meier, and his father, Art Meier.⁴⁵ The Synod Yearbook includes this paragraph describing the school:

Arizona Lutheran Academy is operated by a federation of WELS congregations in the State of Arizona. The Academy opened its doors for the first time in August 1978 with freshman and sophomore classes, temporarily using the educational wing of St. Thomas Lutheran Church. The Academy offers a four track curriculum on the secondary level: pre-vocational, pre-college, pre-DMLC, and pre-NWC. Those from outside the Phoenix Valley are accomodated in private homes. Enrollment: 45.⁴⁶

For the following school year, classes were projected to be in the forties, so the house across 52nd Avenue was purchased for use as an office and for some classes. Robert Gruetzmacher from Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Norman Tech from Fox Valley Lutheran, and James Pasbrig were called as full-time instructors, and Kathleen Dittrich and Mrs. Sharon Just served part-time. With the additional instructors, a third class was added.⁴⁷ The Yearbook adds the comment, "ALA offers a Christ-centered education to grades 9, 10 and 11. Grade 12 will be added in the 1980-81 schoolyear."⁴⁸ Enrollment for that second year was 91.⁴⁹

⁴⁴1978 AZ-CA District Proceedings, 53.

⁴⁵Adickes interview.

⁴⁶1979 WELS Yearbook, 137.

⁴⁷Adickes interview.

⁴⁸1980 WELS Yearbook, 141.

According to projected growth for the 1980-81 school year, St. Thomas would no longer be a suitable facility for the school. Madrid School, a public grade school a few miles from St. Thomas on 37th and Osborn was leased from the Alhambra School District as ALA's second temporary home. The State of Arizona gave the school a scare when they decided to use the Madrid School for a police academy and consequently ALA lost its lease. It turned out, though, that the deal with the State Police fell through and ALA was able to use the school after all.⁵⁰

The relationship between Arizona Lutheran Academy and St. Thomas Congregation was a mutually beneficial one. The members of the church were able to get a taste in Kingdom Work by sponsoring the new school and seeing it work firsthand.⁵¹ From the beginning St. Thomas has offered much support, both of time, and prayers, and dollars to the work of ALA. The school received a readily available and very affordable facility for its use -- at least until enrollment outgrew the building.⁵² As far as membership was concerned, the school did not have much of an effect on St. Thomas, other than many of the faculty members joining the congregation. Harold Schroeder of St. Thomas was able to share in the work of the high school as the financial secretary of the Federation.⁵³

To close out this chapter in ALA's history, the school lost its lease of the Madrid School again in 1986 and relocated to its present facility at 27th and Southern Avenues.

As long as we're on the subject of education, St. Thomas was able to offer its facilities to another school for its use in a time of need. Good Shepherd Lutheran School used the St. Thomas facilities after a fire severely damaged its classroom building.⁵⁴

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Adickes interview.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Meier interview.

⁵³Schroeder interview.

⁵⁴St. Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory, 7.

V. The Vicar / BWM Years

In 1973, Pastor Meier was elected to the Synod's Board for World Missions and has served as chairman of that Board from 1981.⁵⁵ He will hold that position until 1999. I asked Pastor Meier what some of the high points were during his years on the BWM. Basically, the joys he experienced revolved around the many new world missions that were opened during his time on the Board. During those years the number of missionaries increased from nineteen to seventy. From eleven countries in 1973, the WELS is now present in twenty-six.⁵⁶

I also asked several of the members how they feel St. Thomas benefited with Pastor Meier on the World Board. Their answers:

We always know the latest of what is happening with the BWM, and we get to hear the missionaries' stories as they rotate home for vacations and stop by St. Thomas.⁵⁷

We were more knowledgeable about world missions and more motivated to give to and pray for them.⁵⁸

The congregation benefited in having a better understanding not only of missions, but of the worldwide nature of God's kingdom as a whole. The congregation had failed to meet its synod subscription one year and was paying the deficit back to the synod with interest. That's something many of our congregations could learn something from.⁵⁹

Along with myself serving on the Synod's Board for Parish Education, the congregation always had firsthand information.⁶⁰

I also asked what the downside of Pastor being on the Board is.

The biggest disadvantage with Pastor on the BWM is that our fulltime shepherd is not fulltime! He spends almost a week per

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Meier interview.

⁵⁷Schroeder interview.

⁵⁸Naber interview.

⁵⁹Strutz interview.

⁶⁰Adickes interview.

month in Milwaukee. As president, I heard many members complain that Pastor wasn't there when they needed him! They sometimes mused that he was more interested in BWM work than his flock at St. Thomas.⁶¹

There is so much involvement of Pastor's time and energy that we feel that we are neglected. The Bible mentions serving two masters and this is what it is like. He has a call to St. Thomas and he has the obligation to BWM and at times one or the other will suffer.⁶²

Several members lamented not having their shepherd there full-time. It was difficult for Pastor Meier to give his full energy and time to the congregation, even when he was there, as there were phone calls and reports, etc. to be prepared. Also, the travel takes its toll. Days of his service would be lost due to fatigue and planning of itinerary, especially as he got older. I don't say that as a cut or a slam on Bill, but it was something I observed. To some degree, certain members felt somewhat like the Synod had stolen their pastor. Finally, Bill was very limited as to other duties he could take on at ALA and so forth because of his World Board duties. A vicar can only do so much in replacing the pastor.⁶³

The congregation most definitely suffered by losing time with its pastor and did decrease in membership during these years.⁶⁴

The congregation suffered because of the lack of time I was able to spend with them. Also, I was not able to make as many evangelism calls as I would have liked. Two of the things that helped me balance my time between church and board were late hours and good vicars.⁶⁵

⁶¹Schroeder interview.

⁶²Naber interview.

⁶³Strutz interview

⁶⁴Adickes interview.

⁶⁵Meier interview.

Since Pastor Meier became chairman in 1981, the Synod has helped to subsidize the vicar program at St. Thomas. Sixteen consecutive vicars have served there and the last one will be assigned there this May. These are the men who have been assigned to St. Thomas throughout the years⁶⁶:

1982 - Glen Seefeldt	1990 - Andrew Schultz
1983 - Randy Bader	1991 - Michael Borgwardt
1984 - Leroy Dux	1992 - Galen Riediger
1985 - David Hussman	1993 - David Blaho
1986 - Jud Krohn	1994 - Robert Frick
1987 - Robert Krueger	1995 - Nathan Strutz
1988 - James Panning	1996 - Michael Gehl
1989 - Brian Keller	1997 - Craig Engel
	1998 -

I asked how the congregation felt they benefited by being a part of the vicar program.

I don't think there is any reason to say the the Vicar period (per se) has affected me as a member. It has just been another facet in congregational life. My role was always to offer encouragement to each one as they improved during the year.⁶⁷

It helped us understand how the vicar program works and how our future pastors are prepared to spread the Word of God. It gives us an interest in them as they return to the Seminary, we pray for them, and then we stay in touch with most of them and take an interest in their future ministries. They become an extended family.⁶⁸

Having a vicar as part of the deal made our worker-training program more real for many people. The congregation felt much more a part of the Synod than most congregations in one of the outlying districts would. Some members even planned their vacations around visiting past vicars from several years ago. What a plus!⁶⁹

How did vicars benefit by being assigned to St. Thomas?

The members of St. Thomas have all had some input in the growth

⁶⁶Seminary call day lists in vertical file.

⁶⁷Schroeder interview.

⁶⁸Naber interview.

⁶⁹Strutz interview.

and maturity of each vicar. Each year we see major changes in each vicar from the first sermon presentation to the last.⁷⁰

The vicars were given a lot of responsibility at St. Thomas and the reason is Pastor's involvement on the BWM. I feel that this added responsibility helps the vicars to grow and helps them to be better prepared for the ministry. Also, due to Pastor's BWM experience, it helps the vicars to better understand World Missions.⁷¹

Working with Pastor Meier teaches big-picture thinking for the ministry. I think it's good to have some guys who have served somewhere else than the midwest. It broadens your horizons. On the flip side, it may be better in the long run to have more vicars serve where dual staff is needed, rather than as a fill-in for a pastor who is frequently gone. What I'm saying is, it might be better to combine some part-time positions into a full-time administrative call, and let local pastors be local pastors⁷²

Besides the things that Nate Strutz mentioned as a former St. Thomas vicar, I too have many experiences that I cannot begin to recount. The friendships I made with members will last for many, many years. It is true that my year was a very busy one with Pastor often out of town and I feel that I learned many things, both from picking up when he was gone and from learning from him when he was there (not just how to swing a golf club, either). I wrote earlier in the paper how Pastor Meier started a congregation in Yuma, 180 miles away from Phoenix. Well, it just so happened that during my vicar year there was a vacancy at Prince of Peace, Yuma, and I learned firsthand what driving across 180 miles of Arizona desert was like. I benefited by getting to know not one, but two congregations, and many friendships were made in Yuma as well. St. Thomas and the seventeen vicars it "hosted" have been extremely blessed throughout those years.

⁷⁰Schroeder interview.

⁷¹Naber interview.

⁷²Strutz interview.

VI. The Cross-Cultural Years

It was during the early 1980s that the neighborhood around St. Thomas began to grow more and more Hispanic. It grew from zero percent in 1989 to sixty percent in 1994 and currently is at about seventy-five percent.⁷³ Harold Schroeder comments,

I've been pushing to get St. Thomas involved in the ministry to the Hispanics since about 1992, but no one, including Pastor Meier would discuss it seriously. They would shake their heads saying yes and then change the subject of the conversation. The idea was continually pused aside until 1995-96. As to any affect on me personally, I'm just happy that it is now happening.⁷⁴

Pastor Meier said that many in the congregation preceived the decline in membership at St. Thomas as a result of his work on the BWM rather than the neighborhood. He worked at constantly urging the members to reach the Hispanics rather than move out. "God put us here for a reason. We can't run away as a church body." According to national statistics, by 2010, two out of three people will be living in urban areas.⁷⁵ After a congregational survey in 1995-6, the opinion was almost unanimous that something had to be done. Some members felt that the congregation was failing in carrying out the Great Commission.⁷⁶ The District Mission Board was shocked when the request for manpower came in. The general consensus was that to continue, the congregation must reach out to the neighborhood.⁷⁷

At first the DMB was hesitant and cautious. The first request for manpower in February of 1995 was turned down.⁷⁸ Then, "At the April meeting of the BHM, the congregation was granted te authority to call a Spanish-speaking pastor. The first call will be issued later in the summer."⁷⁹ Four men were called from the field during 1996 and early 1997, all of which were

⁷³Meier interview.

⁷⁴Schroeder interview.

⁷⁵Meier interview.

⁷⁶Naber interview.

⁷⁷Meier interview.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹1996 AZ-CA District Proceedings, 21.

returned. Finally, in April of 1997, the congregation opted to go to the Assignment Committee. In May of 1997 Candidate Timothy Otto was assigned to St. Thomas as Hispanic missionary. Installation was held on July 13th.

The following is an e-mail interview with Pastor Tim Otto, of St. Thomas' Hispanic mission, which gives most of the current information concerning this phase of St. Thomas' ministry.

Q: How did your vicar year prepare you for a Hispanic outreach ministry?

A: Before my vicar year I didn't know any Spanish. So I was sent to Monterey, Mexico to study Spanish for 6 months. During this time I lived with a Mexican family and spent time with Mexican friends. This helped me not only learn the language, but also better understand the culture. Then I went to Puerto Rico for the last 9 months of my vicar year. Here I practiced the language more and learned more about the culture, but more importantly had hands-on experience in church work among the Hispanic people. I had the privilege of celebrating Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter in the Hispanic culture that year as well as living every-day life with them.

Q: How did you become involved in the Hispanic outreach ministry at St. Thomas?

A: In May of 1997 I graduated from the Seminary and received my assignment to St. Thomas to do Hispanic outreach.

Q: What were some of your early efforts?

A: I arrived in Phoenix in early July of 1997 before St. Thomas had held its Vacation Bible School. I decided to offer VBS in Spanish too. While most of the Hispanic children who came knew English, I followed up on their names and went to meet their families. These were my first prospects. I offered them Bible information classes and a few accepted. Then my wife and I began general canvassing. We went door to door introducing

ourselves and asking if at a more convenient time we could come back and talk about the church. About 10 percent said that we could come back. So when we did, we would explain about St. Thomas' new effort among the Hispanics people. It was very important to gain their confidence. So we sometimes had to go back two, three, or even four times before they were comfortable to talk about the church. Those who were interested began classes, others agreed to be put on our mailing list, others we simply decided to keep contact with now and then. And of course some were not interested at all.

Q: At this time what is your basic course of action?

A: Lately I haven't had much time for door to door canvassing because of the group I am working with and giving classes to. Also, the people already studying with me or going to church sometimes give me names of new prospects. But my basic course of action is to find a way to bring the Gospel to everyone. Some are not ready to take the step of going to a Lutheran church, some are only studying in their homes. Some are going to church, and studying in their homes to become members. Some don't want any commitment, and would rather just go to church for right now and not study. And some I just go to their houses now and then to give them a devotion. Before I had services I would start with in home BICS and ask if they would like to now go to church. Afterwards I would offer regular church goers who weren't taking classes yet to start a BIC to possibly become a member. Beginning church services (on November 2) was a huge outreach tool. It gave me something to invite them to.

Q Give me an outline of an average week.

	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Sunday	Church 10:30 / Bible Class until noon	BIC	Choose sermon text
Monday	BIC	Paper work / odds & ends / Translate BIC	Two BICs
Tuesday	Sermon work	golf / Translate BIC	BIC
Wednesday	Sermon work	visits	BIC
Thursday	Write sermon	Write sermon	BIC
Friday	Memorize sermon	BIC	Spend time with Jenny
Saturday	Memorize sermon	Prepare readings / bulletin / adult Bible class	BIC

Q: Describe your Sunday worship service.

A: We follow the basic order of service. Confession of sins, liturgy, collect, readings, responsive Psalm, hymn, sermon, Creed, offering, prayer, Lord's Prayer, benediction. Our liturgy comes from a hymnal the Missouri Synod came out with called "Cantad al Senor" (Sing to the Lord). It's similar to Christian Worship, (Glory be to the Father, Kyrie, etc) but with a more Gospel type, up-beat melody.

Q: Give me some of the statistics in your work.

A: Members--None yet, no one is finished with the BIC, but some have expressed an interest. Look to have up to 5 by this summer.

Bible classes--I offer an adult Bible class Sunday mornings, but we only get 2 or 3 if any on a normal Sunday

BIC's--Nine in home Bible Information Classes, 21 people

Preschool enrollment--7, some English speaking, some Spanish speaking

Baptisms - 5

Q: What materials are you using?

A: Evangelism: I normally don't use materials, but talk to the people instead. I usually make up a flier to invite the community to special church services or holidays. I have several fliers made by other Hispanic home missionaries.

BIC: I use Rolfe Westendorf's "By Grace Alone" which I am translating into Spanish. I have found that the people are comfortable with it because the Bible passages are printed out, it is informal, and it allows discussion.

Liturgy: Cantad al Senor (LCMS) We select our hymns from Cantad al Senor and from Culto Cristiano (LCMS).

Q: What is your working relationship with the original St. Thomas Congregation?

A: St. Thomas (Santo Tomas) is one church whose people worship separately. We do not consider ourselves two churches who use the same building. Eventually the idea is to have one congregational council with representatives from both parts. Practically speaking, at times the language creates a barrier. Right now we are just starting out and interested in making the Hispanic congregation comfortable worshipping in their new church. Down the road we look to possible joint fellowship, but everything takes time. The original St. Thomas congregation offers what it can in assistance and support.

Q: Are you receiving much help from the other members?

A: The members do what they can. They are happy to share food, coffee, whatever. As far as physical help, such as passing out fliers, it is difficult. Many are elderly and simply cannot do those things anymore. There are one or two members who help regularly with

flyers (Louie Huber and Verle Naber)

Q: What do you see as the future of the Hispanic ministry?

A: It is not a whole lot different from a beginning Anglo congregation. Through study of the Word I pray that the people will be built up and look at Santo Tomas as their church and look at it as a priority. I will also of course keep following up on the prospects as they come in. The others interested do a pretty good job of inviting their friends and giving me contacts. In the future I plan to keep giving more BICS in the homes and go on with further Bible study (Gospel of John) with those who finish. Basically in the future I see the faithful preaching of the Word and giving the Holy Spirit as many opportunities as possible.

Q: What do you see as the future of the original St. Thomas congregation?

A: There has been some talk about starting a new mission in Western Phoenix and seeding it with the original St. Thomas congregation some day. This would leave St. Thomas as a strictly Hispanic Church. Many members say they would gladly serve in this way. However, this is only talk and if it would happen would be years down the road. For right now, we are very comfortably and happily one church, with two "congregations" who worship separately. There are still over 200 English-speaking souls cared for here and plenty of room for everybody.

Q: What is Jenny's role in your outreach ministry?

A: She accompanies me on many of the BICs that are at night because legally I cannot drive at night. Therefore she is my chauffeur. We almost always go together on canvass visits. She participates in all of the flyer handouts. She is the director and teacher of the pre-school. Sounds like she does more than me. Without her I could not do it. She is my

"Aaron."

Q: What are some difficulties you have experienced so far?

A: The Roman Catholicism is definitely a huge difficulty. Most Hispanics are "Catholic" even if they don't know where a Catholic church is in Phoenix. Many are terrified to step out of the family religion, even if it is a religion they haven't practiced for years. Also, we have been faced with some problems unique to working in a different culture while still in the United States. The Hispanic culture in an American environment tends to create a individualized culture, everyone is a little different depending on how "Americanized" they are. This makes the people at times hard to read, and unpredictable. Also, our situation from time to time brings us the problem of illegal immigrants wanting us to lie for them. These are situations one probably would not deal with in a foreign mission field.

Q: What are some stumbling blocks that have to be removed so people take you and your ministry seriously?

A: In my first few weeks here I grew a goatee to look older because age is a big factor in respect for the Hispanic people.

It is important that people realize that mission work among the Hispanic people is historically very slow. People need to consider less the numbers and more the work that is going on.

Q: How does the typical Roman Catholic Hispanic react to the message of salvation sola gratia?

A: At first they really don't get it. It has been drilled home to them since they were kids plus their own built in opinio legis that they have to earn their own salvation. They often say

they get it, but really don't. It takes a lot of time and patience. when it finally sinks in there is a tremendous load taken off and it shows although they often slip back into the thought that they have to put in their part. so constant reminder and strengthening on this point is crucial.

Q: What plans are you making for the near future?

A: I guess just keep up the visiting, teaching, preaching etc. Hope to confirm some adults and start a youth age catechism class this summer. Will have a few more baptisms in the coming months also. On May 12th - 14th there will be a Hispanic conference/USA in Las Vegas. I am in charge of the evangelism presentation. Should be helpful. Pray for the work here.

As far as the original membership of St. Thomas, basically two options remain. With thirty-five of one-hundred eighty members over the age of eighty, one option is to let the white portion of St. Thomas die out, with the rest of the membership transferring to the nearest WELS church. A second option which is being given serious consideration is to open a new congregation in Litchfield Park, on the western outskirts of Phoenix where the original members would relocate and then let the 52nd and Thomas facility become a completely Hispanic congregation.⁸⁰ Only the Lord knows the future and we leave all things in his hands.

⁸⁰Meier interview.

Postscript

In this thesis, there is no way I could cover all the various happenings at St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Phoenix, Arizona, but I hope that the material I have provided here will be a source of comfort and information to all who read this paper. The Lord of the Church has truly blessed this congregation with both members and the shepherds who have served them. The congregation has raised thousands of voices in glorious praise to God for all the blessings they have been given. They have provided many people, myself included, with a fine example of a mission-oriented mindset, always seeking to save the lost in the community and throughout the world. May our prayers always be with those who carry out their various ministries in the congregations far-removed from the security of our Midwest. May our prayers always be with those who labor in the Lord's vineyards in Phoenix.

Soli Deo Gloria

Bibliography

Interviews

Verle Naber (member) (e-mail) - April 12, 1998

Pastor Timothy Otto (Hispanic pastor at St. Thomas) (e-mail) - April 13, 1998

Pastor Nathan Strutz (former vicar) (mail) - April 14, 1998

Harold Schroeder (member) (mail) - April 16, 1998

Robert Adickes (member) (phone) - April 19, 1998

Pastor William Meier (pastor of St. Thomas) (personal) - April 29, 1998

Other Resources

St Thomas 25th Anniversary Directory

AZ-CA District Proceedings (various years)

WELS Synod Proceedings (various years)

WELS Statistical Reports (1966 ff)

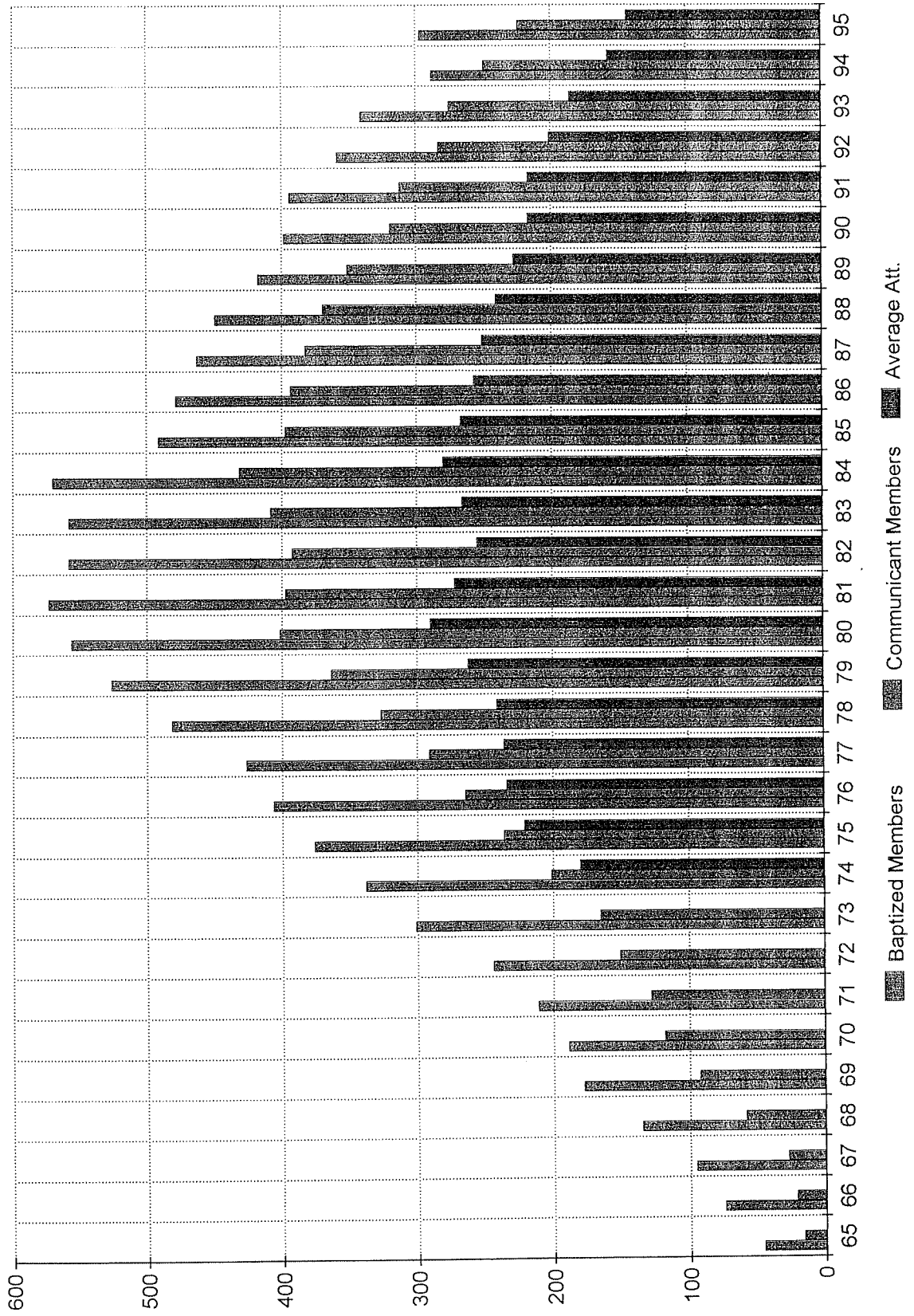
WELS Yearbooks (various years)

Appendix A

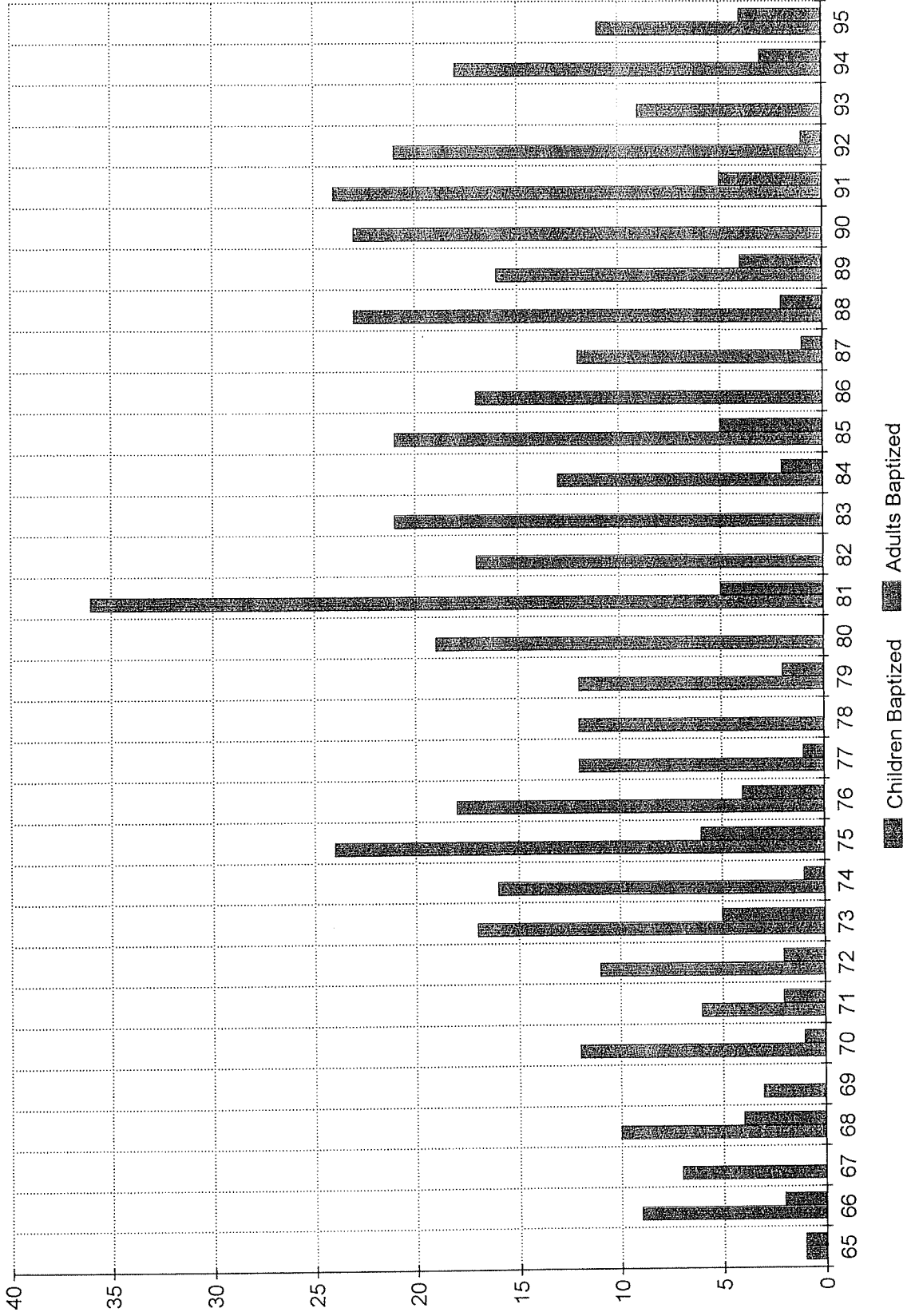
List of Charts (from WELS Statistical Reports)

1. Membership and Attendance
2. Pastoral Acts - Baptisms
3. Pastoral Acts - Confirmations
4. Other Membership Gains
5. Membership Losses
6. Pastoral Acts - Marriages and Burials
7. Education - Youth
8. Education - Teen and Adult
9. Education - Other

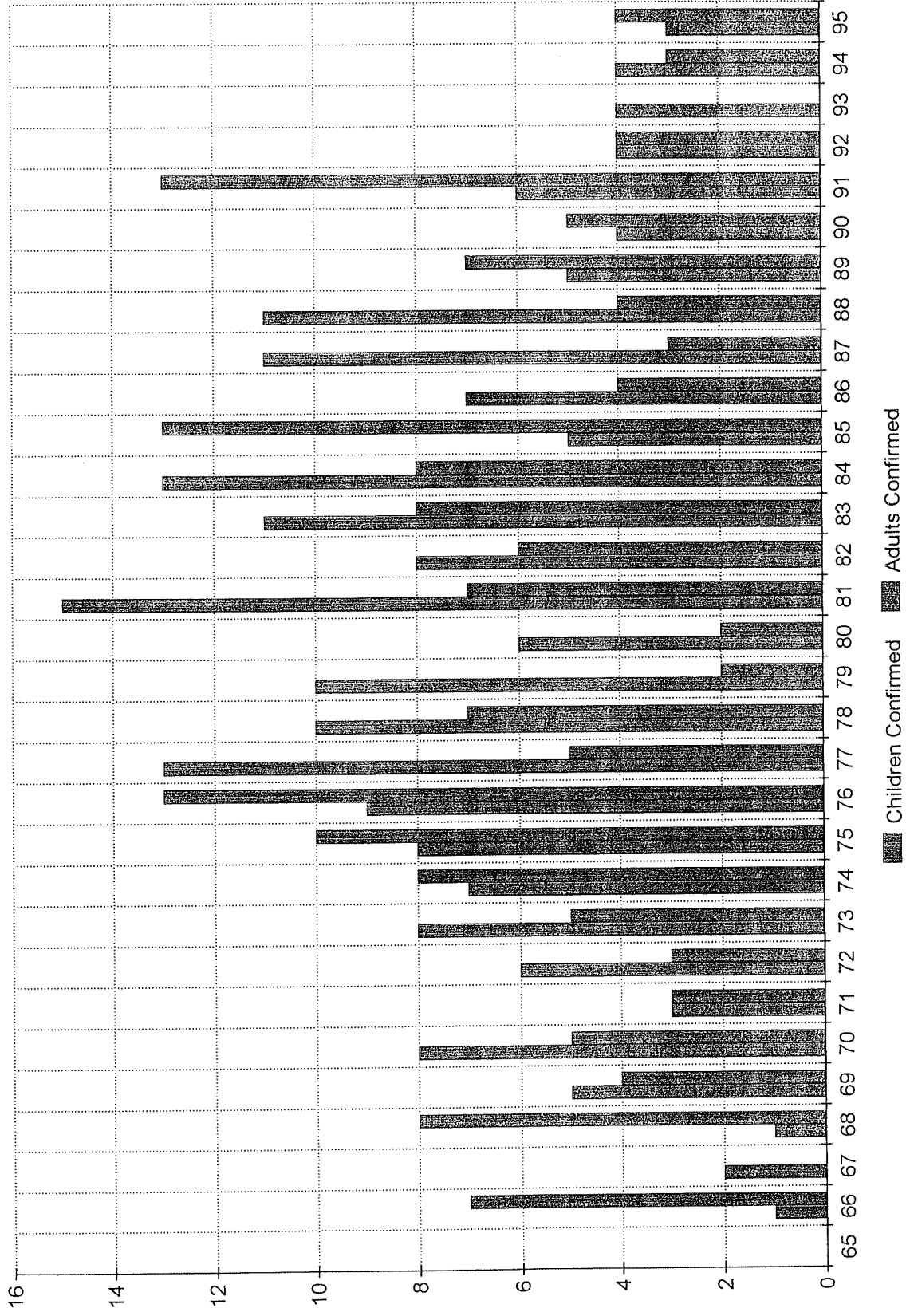
Membership and Attendance



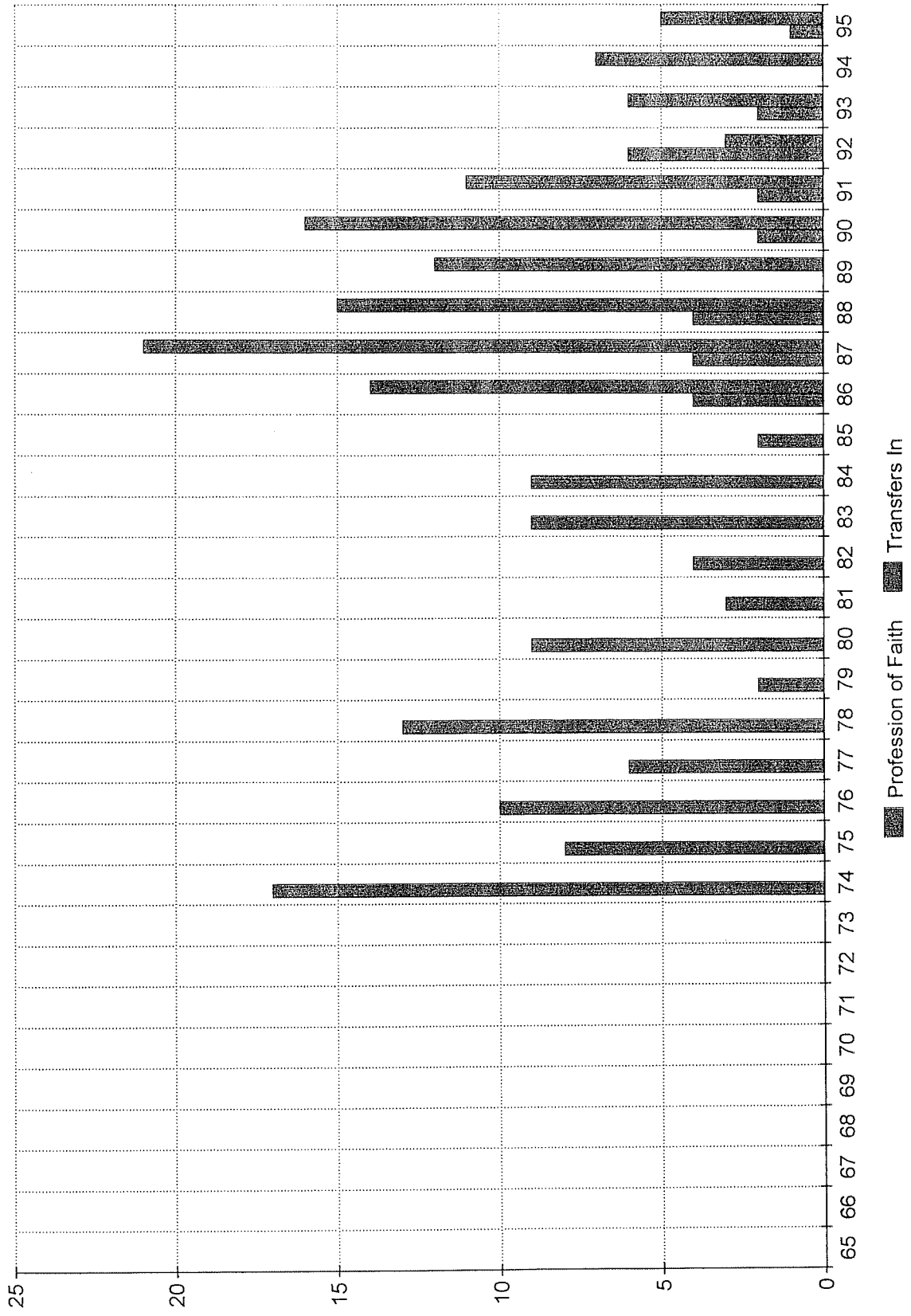
Pastoral Acts - Baptisms



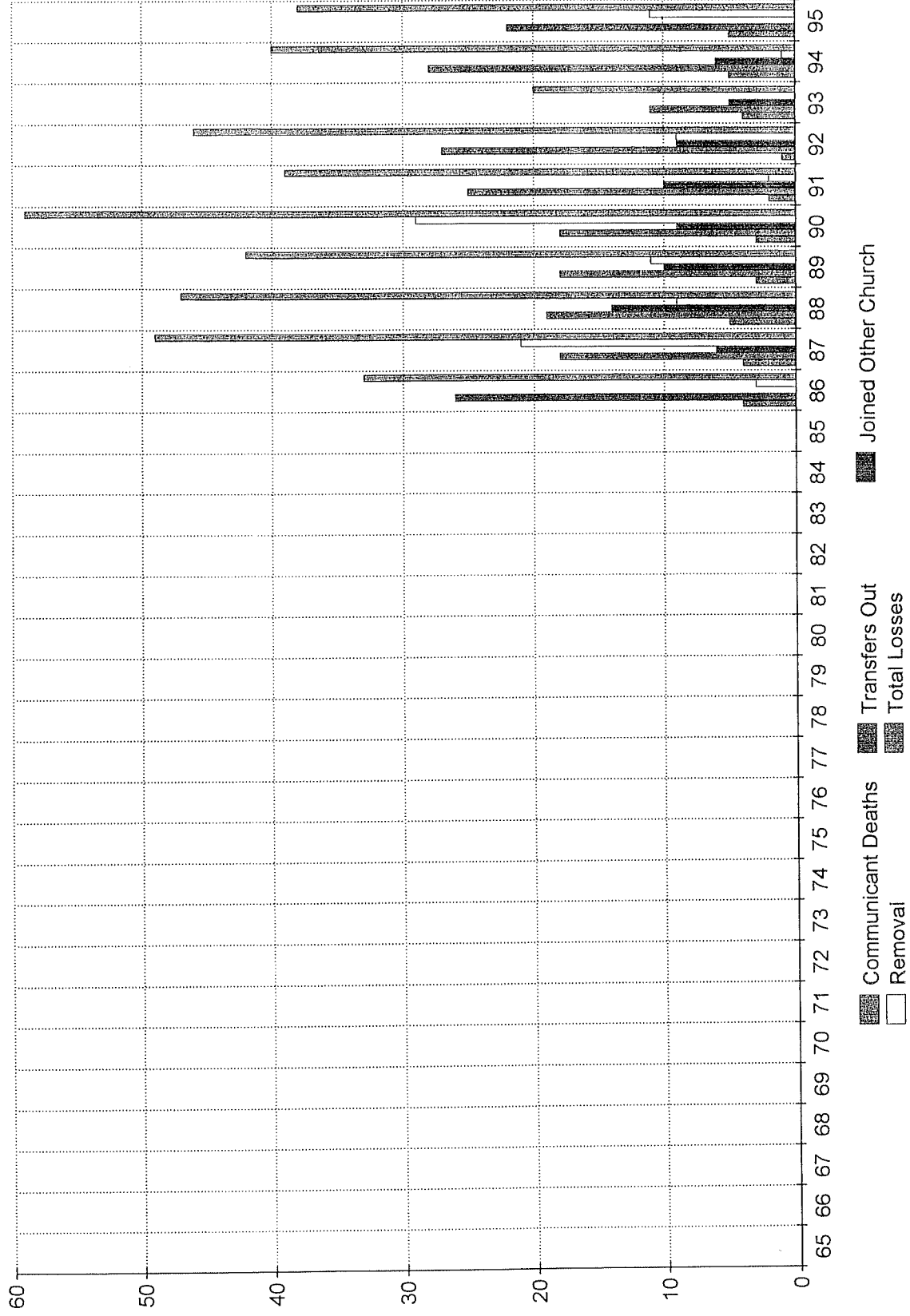
Pastoral Acts - Confirmations



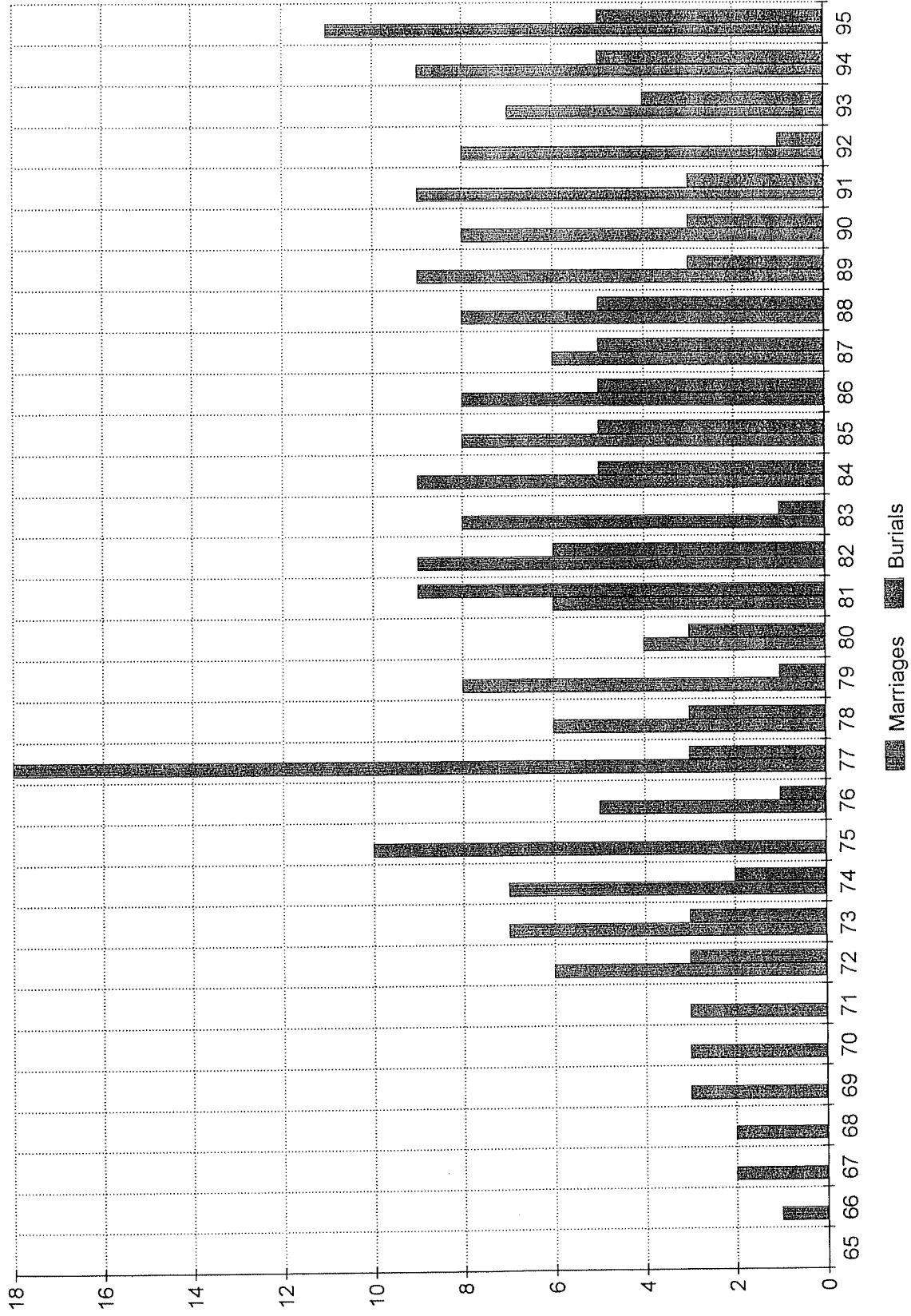
Other Gains



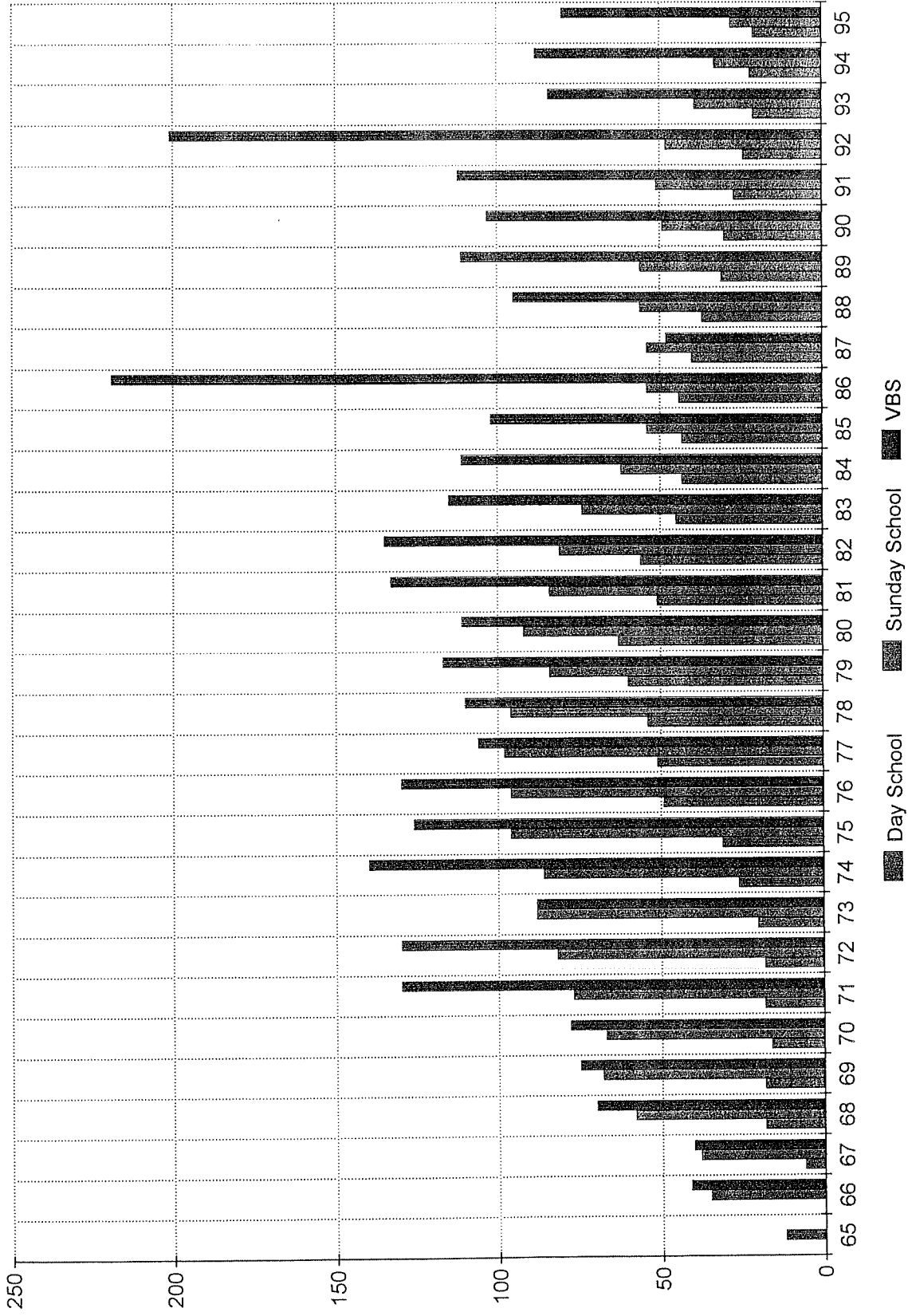
Membership Losses



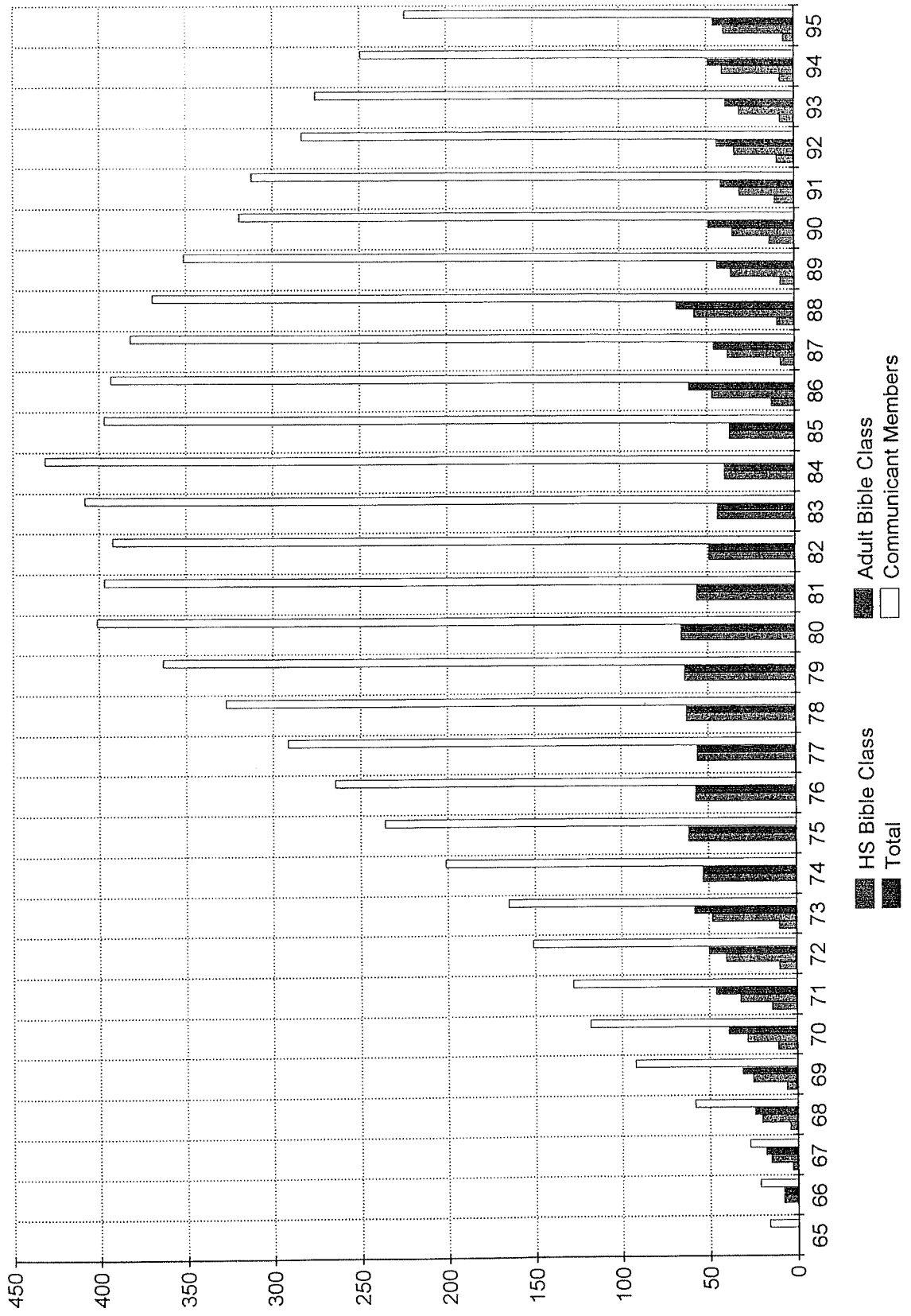
Pastoral Acts - Marriages & Burials



Education - Youth



Education - Teen & Adult



Education - Other

