

The Missouri Synod 1947-1972:  
A Study of Church Growth

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Between the years 1947 and 1972 the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod increased in membership by eighty-four percent. In 1947 it recorded 1,547,453 baptized members in 4,429 congregations while in 1972 it recorded 2,886,207 baptized members in 6,094 congregations.<sup>1</sup> For a Christian those figures really aren't too astounding because that's what a Christian church is supposed to do, a Christian church is supposed to grow. Jesus didn't tell His disciples, "Hold the fort while I'm gone." No, He said, "Make disciples of all nations." So, growth is something expected of a Christian church.

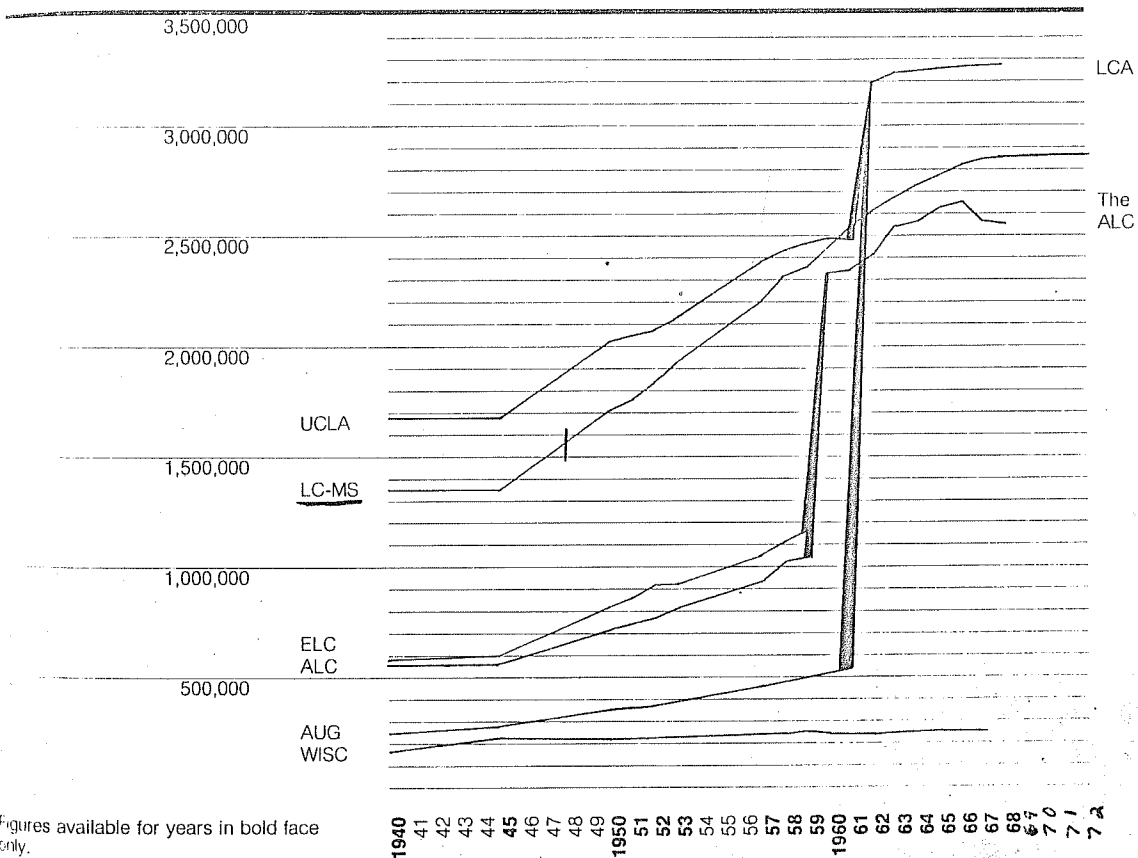
And growth really isn't anything new for the Missouri Synod either. The first hundred years of its existence are a growth history practically unparalleled by any Lutheran church organization in North America. But there is something special about these twenty-five years 1947-1972 in the beginning of this church's second century of existence. During those years this church body almost doubled in size. And growth during this period was not in short spurts but it was a steady increase. (See chart page 2.)

But there are other factors which mark this period of growth as being different from Missouri's previous growth history. The previous period, especially the first seventy-five years, was a story of growth through conservation. It was a story of gathering Lutheran

Figure 2

Lutheran Membership  
(Baptized)  
1940-68

2



Figures available for years in bold face only.

Data supplied by Office of Research, Statistics and Archives, Lutheran Council/U.S.A., N.Y.

immigrants into congregations. Growth was due to meeting the people as they got off the boat. In 1947 there weren't all that many German Lutheran immigrants getting off of boats. So this growth had to be somewhat different.

So what caused the Missouri Synod to grow during this period of its history? This question is a natural one for a member of the WELS of 1980 to ask. It is natural because our own synod has done some growing in the past decade or so, and anticipates doing some more in the coming decades. It would be nice to find the key to the kind of growth that Missouri experienced during these twenty-five years of its history.

The key that is most evident from a look at this portion of Missouri's history is also one which almost seems too trite to mention. That key is the thought that it is really the Lord who builds His Church. That finding might seem to be something that should just be taken for granted, for Jesus did, after all, say, "All power is given to me in heaven and on earth," and, "surely I will be with you always." (Mt 28:16+20) But often in history it isn't too easy to see just how He is doing what He said He would do. In this period of the growth history of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod there are so many factors that together made for such dramatic growth that it is evident that there was a masterplan but it wasn't a human one.

Certainly, there were key human efforts, or maybe we should say, Christian efforts, which can be noted as being important component parts of the whole picture, and, essentially, that is what is going to be the substance of this study. Yet, in each of these items, viewed individually or jointly, we can see the Lord's hand, arranging, encouraging, and guiding the efforts of His Church.

It might well be stated at this point that the years 1947-1972 were chosen rather arbitrarily because this growth trend actually started earlier and didn't abruptly end in 1972; although, there was some tapering off of the rate of growth. It seems, however, that this quarter century of Missouri's history is a good section to work with. This of course does not mean that this study will limit itself to only these years; for the beginning of much that happened took place in the 1930s. This study will, however, limit itself to the Missouri Synod's growth in the United States and Canada, thus excluding its world missions.

A good place to start in talking about growth is by proving that there actually was growth from the outside. Unless a church is rapidly losing its membership it should grow in numbers as the population grows. When we think of the years 1947-1972 we also should think of the post-World War II population increase, the baby-boom. So we have to look at the general population increase for this period as well. The census figures for 1940 and 1970 show that the population of the United States experienced about fifty-four

percent increase for this same approximate period.<sup>2</sup> Comparing this with the eighty-four percent increase for the Missouri Synod there remains a thirty percent increase that can not be counted as resulting from general population growth. This actual growth can also be seen by looking at the numbers of adult confirmations for this same period. In 1943 there were about 12,000 adults confirmed. In 1947 there were 23,000 adult confirmations. In 1960 there were 36,000, three times the number in 1943. After 1965 the numbers declined somewhat.<sup>3</sup> But these figures show that there was a definite increase from outside this church.

What then are the reasons for this increase? As stated previously, the Lord is the one who builds His Church and in the case of the Missouri Synod the most obvious way in which He was doing His work was by giving that church body the Bible-centered, Gospel-centered, confessional theology that they enjoyed from the very beginning. The Lord wonderfully protected this church so that it possessed the true and pure doctrine of His Holy Word. He made them conscious of what they had and they expressed that consciousness in a document called a Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod which was adopted in 1932.

But the Lord also made them aware that having the truth was not enough. The Lord moved them to realize that they were to spread that pure light and not sit on it. Already in 1937 Lawrence Meyer wrote "The Missouri Synod

today stands equipped spiritually, morally, and physically as no other church-body in the world to carry out the command of the Savior to go and preach the Gospel to the whole world."<sup>4</sup> There was indeed a recognition of the obligation that rested upon the Missouri Synod because of the blessing of the pure Gospel.

Thus, Missouri moved to carry out this obligation. This of course brings up the large topic of evangelism. Evangelism in its large <sup>sense</sup> is the whole activity of the Church, for it is the bringing of the Good News to all those without the Good News. But there is also a narrow sense and that is the preaching of the Good News on an individual basis. This sense is the one which usually involves the layman as well as the clergy. Already in 1926 Paul Kretzmann had published a small book with the title While It Is Day, which is a practical handbook for evangelism. This small book seems to have been directed both toward instructing as well as organizing an evangelism effort.

The booklet from which Lawrence Meyer was quoted above titled Torch Bearers was another such effort to organize and systematize an evangelism effort. It included a section called "The Witnessing Layman".<sup>5</sup>

In the early 1930s the Missouri Synod moved to organized programs the first of which was called the "Call of the Hour". In the late Thirties this became the "Call of the Cross". The specific intent of this

program was that each family should be responsible for inviting people on their block to church. These programs did have results for adult accessions did begin to rise.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1940s the evangelism program became "Each One Reach One". Here the emphasis was decidedly on each individual Christian doing his part in spreading the Good News (See next page) The materials were long on inspiration but a bit short on practical help.

Evangelism got a boost in the Fifties when the 1953 Houston convention established a Department of Evangelism, and a Secretary of Evangelism was appointed.<sup>7</sup> One of the immediate effects of this was a program of area evangelism missions in which area churches would band together for a week of intensive evangelism training and work. These area programs came to be called "Preaching, Teaching, Reaching, Missions" from the three activities that were involved. Between 1955 and 1956 at least nine such missions were conducted.<sup>8</sup>

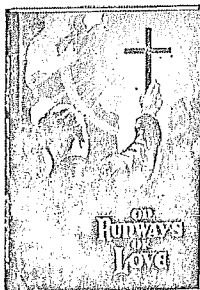
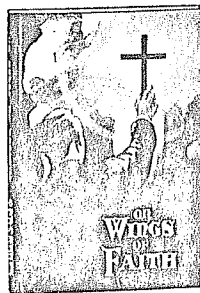
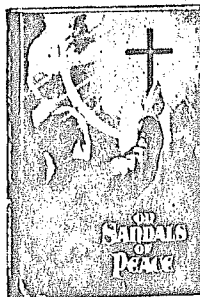
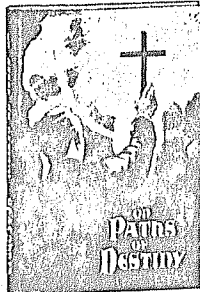
In the 1960s there were some new approaches with separate workshops for pastors, for teachers, and for laymen. Special Sunday observances were made and called "Evangelism Sunday" or "Evangelism Festival". So evangelism had become a regular feature of the church year emphasis for those individual Sundays.<sup>9</sup>

But when we look at the rate of growth and the rate of adult accessions, we find that the growth of evangelism



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emphasis doesn't exactly match up with the results, in fact often the results precede the emphasis. Yet when we look at the over all picture of the growth of evangelism in the Missouri Synod we can see that the Lord used this means quite effectively to expand His Church.

Another factor which contributed largely to the growth of this period was something we today might call pre-evangelism. We could put the individual aspects of this area under the broad heading of Public Relations. The Missouri Synod showed an early consciousness of their public image as a church and already in 1926 established a Press Committee.<sup>10</sup> In 1947 the Synod took the further move of creating a Board for Public Relations and Oswald C.J. Hoffmann was elected Director.

Probably the most effective channels for good public relations that came into being were the radio and television efforts of the Missouri Synod. The "Lutheran Hour," of radio and "This is the Life" of television brought the Missouri Synod into almost all of the homes in America and a good part of the world as well. The first of these efforts was not, however, a regular part of the Synod program but was rather supported by the Lutheran Layman's League.

Already in 1923 the "Gospel Voice Radio Station" KFUD had been established in St. Louis at Concordia Seminary. In 1930 "The Lutheran Hour" was begun and although it faltered at first due to the Depression it eventually got going in the middle and late Thirties. It was carried on the

newly formed Mutual Broadcasting System and spread throughout the United States and out into the world where it was broadcast in several different languages.<sup>11</sup>

The main speaker of the "Lutheran Hour" was Dr. Walter Maier. He was a forceful and engaging speaker, and he soon had a huge following. He especially attracted the anti-liberal movement among protestantism known as the Fundamentalists. The motto of the program was "Bringing Christ to the Nation". And this is what Dr. Maier tried to do, for his sermons were solidly Christ centered.<sup>12</sup>

The Missouri Synod, however, itself funded and produced its very successful television program, "This is the Life". This project began in 1952<sup>13</sup> and by 1959 covered 98% of all homes in the United States. A unique feature of this program was that it offered booklets to those who would like them and then sent names and addresses of those who responded to pastors of congregations in the area. Local comgregations were urged to use the program as a publis relations tool by identifying themselves with it. More than a million people requested booklets in the eight years between 1952 and 1960.<sup>24</sup>

It is interesting for us also to note that George L. Arms, a pioneer of televion, once commented on the "This is the Life" series by saying it was a "solidly successful experiment in a new kind of mission."<sup>15</sup>

But then he also went on to say that since this program had been produced at a time when television stations were

searching for something good to put on the air, that such a situation could never be duplicated again. The Missouri Synod was simply in the right place at the right time with the right program.

The effect of this public relations aspect is hard to measure in terms of actual numbers. But there can be no doubt that this also fits into the picture of this synod's growth.

There is another whole area in the overall picture of this period which we dare not overlook for not only does the Lord move His people to respond to His love for them but He also provides the opportunities. Probably the biggest opportunity that the Lord arranged for the Missouri Synod began in Poland in 1939. World War II with its immense toll of death and destruction is not often seen as something positive but it certainly had its positive effects on the growth of the Missouri Synod.

Already before the United States entry into this war there was a recognition that the war that was raging overseas was having an effect on the American population in general. John H. Baumgartner wrote in an article in the April 29, 1941 issue of the Lutheran Witness,

"God is holding out to our Church greater Gospel-sharing, redemption-bringing, soul-winning opportunities than this generation has ever known...1940 and 1941 have turned the trick. They have brought home to men the war and all its agony, the shattering of cherished ideals and the collapse of material values...At the same time they have awakened in the hearts of men that

age-old desire for God...In this awaking, spiritual consciousness which is growing in America today lies our great opportunity as individuals and as a Church."<sup>16</sup>

The Second World War had its spiritual consequences as well as its material. This is only natural, because in war death is thrust upon the minds of all people. It becomes vivid in their thinking, and the realities of life are brought into sharp focus.

The title of Baumgaertner's article was "A Challenge to Our Church", and the Missouri Synod moved to meet the immediate challenge in late 1941 when war became a reality for this country. President Behnken appointed a board to study the problem of population movement for defense industries and the Fiscal Conference voted \$150,000 for "Wartime Conservation and Missionary Fund".<sup>17</sup> It has been estimated that during the war 23,000,000 people in this country moved to areas of new defense industries.<sup>18</sup> The Missouri Synod took steps immediately to serve their people who had moved and also then to establish missions in the new communities that began to spring up around the defense industries.

One novel method employed at this time was the "trailer mission". This mission method consisted of a pastor, a car, a home trailer, a tent, chairs, visual equipment, charts, and loudspeakers. The mobility of such a ministry is obvious. Seven such units were used in the course of the war and a couple were used after the war simply as mission starters.<sup>19</sup>

Another way in which the war affected the Missouri Synod was in the matter of finances. It was reported that in 1941 the actual offerings were \$100,000 over the budget needs, and by August of 1942 there had been a sixteen percent increase for that year.<sup>20</sup> This is understandable when we realize that our nation really didn't pull completely out of the Great Depression until WWII began. With the combination of a renewed mission awareness and some measure of prosperity the Missouri Synod was bound for growth.

Lawrence Meyer in his book Missouri In Motion says, "one of the major factors contributing to the recent consistent growth and expansion of congregations and membership of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has been the development and growth of its Church Extension Fund program."<sup>21</sup> The Missouri Synod had already recognized this ~~in~~ in 1902 when a Church Extension Board was established. But it took some time for it to become an effective part of the growth picture. Between 1902 and 1908 only \$400 was put into it. From 1909 to 1922 most of the money which came into it was from special collections or the remains of some other program that was closed out, but in 1922 there was \$834,445.55 in the fund.<sup>22</sup> Yet, this fund did eventually grow and become an important part of the total growth program. In fact, it is estimated that more than ninety percent of all the congregations in the Synod received help at one time or another from this fund.<sup>23</sup>

*Handwritten notes:*  
 23  
 1909-1922  
 1909-1922  
 1909-1922  
 1909-1922

In addition to the Synod's General Church Extention Fund all the districts of the aynod also eventually had their own extention funds. This also facilitated missions building because of the ability of the local district to better deal with individual cases and situations.<sup>24</sup>

In 1955 there was an effort made to increase the C.E.F. by a member loan program called "God's Bank". It payed a rather low rate of interest but it did raise fairly large amounts of money for the C.E.F.<sup>25</sup>

The list of factors which had a part in the amazing growth of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod could go on for some length yet, but these mentioned here would seem to be the outstanding ones. As these factors have been reviewed it becomes quite clear that no single one could be called the key. This also then should serve to strengthen the conviction that the Lord indeed builds His Church. But in reviewing these factors we of the Wisconsin Synod should also see that when and where God provides the oppportunities we must not hesitate to take full advantage of those oppportunities. The Lord knows how to build His Church.

Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Eldon Weisheit The Zeal of His House (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972) p. 88.
- <sup>2</sup>The World Almanac and Book of Facts, (New York: Newspaper Enterprise Association, 1979) p. 207.
- <sup>3</sup>Statistical Yearbook 1968, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1969) p. 236.
- <sup>4</sup>Lawrence Meyer Torch Bearers p. 14.
- <sup>5</sup>Lawrence Meyer Torch Bearers p. 56.
- <sup>6</sup>The Lutheran Witness Vol 91 No 6 April 30, 1972 p. 5.
- <sup>7</sup>Reports and Memorials Forty Third Regular Convention LCMS June 20-30, 1956 at St. Paul p. 282.
- <sup>8</sup>Reports and Memorials 1956 p. 284.
- <sup>9</sup>Convention Workbook Fiftieth Regular Convention LCMS 1973 p. 307.
- <sup>10</sup>Carl S. Meyer Moving Frontiers (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964) p. 403.
- <sup>11</sup>Carl S. Meyer Moving Frontiers p. 397.
- <sup>12</sup>Carl S. Meyer Moving Frontiers p. 397.
- <sup>13</sup>Alan Graebner, Uncertain Saints (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975) p. 150.
- <sup>14</sup>The Lutheran Witness Vol 78, No. 6 August 11, 1959. p. 372.
- <sup>15</sup>The Lutheran Witness Vol 77, No. 21 October 21, 1958 p. 499.
- <sup>16</sup>The Lutheran Witness Vol. 60 No. 9 April 29, 1941 p. 158.
- <sup>17</sup>The Lutheran Witness Vol. 61 No. 20 October 18, 1942. p. 421.
- <sup>18</sup>Walter A. Baepler A Century of Grace (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947) p. 338.
- <sup>19</sup>Walter A. Baepler A Century of Grace, p. 338.
- <sup>20</sup>The Lutheran Witness Vol. 61 1942 p. 297.
- <sup>21</sup>Lawrence Meyer Missouri in Motion p. 30.
- <sup>22</sup>Walter A. Baepler A Century of Grace p. 249.



<sup>23</sup>Lawrence Meyer Missouri in Motion p. 30.

<sup>24</sup>August R. Suelflow The Heart of Missouri (St. Louis:  
Concordia Publishing House, 1954) p. 99.

<sup>25</sup>Carl S. Meyer Moving Frontiers p. 401.

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