

# **The Growth Of The WELS Through The Years**

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## **Introduction**

The growth of the church is the fruit of the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of people. God grows the church not men. God our Savior has charged us with the proclamation of the Gospel, to witness to people everywhere, to make disciples in all the nations of the earth. This commission of our Lord is addressed in the recently adopted mission statement of our Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, "As men, women and children united in faith and worship by the Word of God, the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod exists to make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity, using the Gospel to win the lost for Christ and nurture believers for lives of Christian service, all to the glory of God." (Adopted in convention, August 1989).

We talk about growth in people in a variety of ways. People grow up. They grow older; they grow spiritually; they grow in maturity. They grow big; they grow fat, lazy, sick, etc. Likewise as we speak about the growth of the church, the growth of a church body and its individual congregations, we can likewise speak of growth in a variety of ways. Of first importance is spiritual growth, the spiritual growth of the individual Christian, of congregations, of a church body.

In this presentation, however, it is my assignment to speak about the numerical growth of the WELS through the years. As stated in the opening paragraph, we recognize that such growth is the work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. Nevertheless by examining the patterns of numerical growth in the WELS there may be some observations that could affect our planning agenda as we would determine, under God, what are to be our key thrusts as we approach ministry in the 90's and prepare for the first decade of a new century.

## **The Early Years**

(The founding of the state Synods of Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota up  
to the Year 1892 when the joint Synod was first formed.)

The founding of our Synod as it exists today had its origin in three state synods, in Wisconsin, in Michigan, and in Minnesota. The primary emphasis of these state synods was the searching out of settlements of German Lutheran immigrants and the gathering of such people into Christian congregations. Much of this work was accomplished by circuit riders (Reiseprediger), who in the spirit of the Apostle Paul traveled from place to place, ministering with the means of grace and gathering people into Christian congregations. Prior to organization such locations were known as Predigt platze.

In Wisconsin work was begun in the 1840's with the organization of the Wisconsin Synod in 1850 by 5 pastors serving a total of 18 preaching stations. As Reiseprediger names like Fachtmann, Mohldenke, Thiele, Monhardt and Zibell come to mind. In 1859 the synod listed 21 pastors, 17 parishes and 40 congregations. By 1870 the number grew to 50 parishes and 92

congregations. In 1878 each conference was requested to commission one pastor to serve as a part-time itinerant missionary. In 1879 the Synod elected its first superintendent of mission (E. Mayerhoff served until 1894 when he had to resign for health reasons.), who, as I perceive, served much as in the fashion of today's mission counselor.

In Michigan much of the initial work was done by Pastor F. Schmid, who organized 20 congregations in Southern Michigan. He began his work in the 1830's, establishing the congregation in Scio Township near Ann Arbor in 1833. An interesting side note is that the Michigan Synod was initially called the Mission Synod because of its determination to do work among the American Indians. In 1878 the Michigan Synod listed 14 pastors and 24 congregations.

In Minnesota work was begun in the 1850's with the organization of Trinity, St. Paul and St. John, Stillwater in 1855, St. John, Red Wing in 1858, and St. Paul, New Ulm in 1865. In 1868 the Minnesota Synod listed 22 pastors, 35 parishes, 53 congregations and 3000 communicants.

Congregational development also took place in the Dakotas, in Nebraska and in the Pacific Northwest prior to 1892. Work was begun in Nebraska when an entire Lutheran congregation from the vicinity of Lebanon and Ixonia moved to Norfolk, NB. When their pastor, who migrated with them, died in 1877, the congregation appealed to the Wisconsin Synod for a new pastor. In the years that followed the synod answered other appeals of existing congregations for pastoral help. These German Lutheran congregations, bonded by mutual doctrine, banded together for mutual support and formed the Nebraska District Synod in 1904, becoming a district of the more fully organized joint synod in 1917.

Work in the Dakotas was begun in the 1870's in South Dakota under the direction of the Department of Home Missions of the Minnesota Synod. the early settle came primarily from Germany and Southern Russia (known as Rosslaenders). Here too much of the work was accomplished by the Reiseprediger.

The first congregation in the state of Washington was established as St. Paul's congregation in Tacoma. Early records say that this work was begun in 1884. In our current statistical report 1894 is listed as the year of organization.

In the 1895 report of the joint synod (the first published joint Synod record that I uncovered), the following statistics were noted for-October 13, 1992.

	<u>Pastors</u>	<u>Congregations</u>	<u>Preaching Places</u>	<u>Communicants</u>	<u>Schools</u>
Wisconsin	158	260	65	83,743	168
Minnesota	62	89	18	16,594	54
Michigan	37	62	8	9,552	35
	<b>257</b>	<b>411</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>109,879</b>	<b>257</b>

### Notes

1. The 1894 statistical report lists only 6603 communicants for the Minnesota Synod (Wisconsin - 83,967, Michigan - 9,669). It would appear that the 1894 number is the more accurate number as the report for 1915 lists 18,886 communicants for the Minnesota Synod.
2. The 1897 report for the Michigan Synod list 14 congregations (3 preaching places) and 1600 (circa) communicants. The 1909 report lists 15 congregations (2 preaching places)

- and 3704 communicants. A separation occurred in the Michigan Synod in the early 1890's, which accounts for this loss of congregations and communicants.
3. Schools are not to be defined in the same way as our day schools of today. I was told that the first assignment of our first full time secretary for schools in the late 1930's was to determine how many schools (full time day schools) we really had.
  4. Of the 411 listed congregations in 1892, nearly 339 exists today as member congregations of the WELS. A few of the currently listed 339 congregations organized prior to 1892 came to use from the LCMS and other Lutheran church bodies. The loss of congregations from the original 411 is explained by the following; losses to LCMS and CLC in the 1950's and 1960's, losses as a result of the Protestant controversy, and losses as some congregations merged and disbanded.
  5. In 1894 the Wisconsin Synod listed 5 congregations over 2000 communicants and 18 between 1000-1999 communicants. There was 1 congregation each over 1000 communicants in the Michigan and Minnesota Synods.
  6. Early statistical records identified only the name of the pastor, and the number of baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals as essential information. Later records followed this pattern but added the pastor's address, location of preaching place and the number of communicants. Churches were not listed by name. Truly we were a Synod of the clergy.

The *key thrusts* of the pre-1892 era were:

- A. The search for and gathering of German immigrants into Lutheran congregations.
- B. The struggle for confessionalism, including the separation from the "theologically tainted" German mission societies.
- C. The development of an education program for the training of church workers (necessitated by the separation from the German mission societies).
- D. The search for and banding together of confessional Lutherans. This prompted the formation of the Synodical Conference in 1872 and the joint Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and other states in 1892.

### **Formative Years 1893-1919**

These years saw the continuing thrust of gathering German speaking immigrants into Lutheran congregations. In fact it wasn't until after World War I (and in part as a response to the anti-German sentiments generated by this war) that much mission work (or any congregational work for that matter) was done in the English language. The 1900 Synod report indicates that there was a need for English speaking congregations. In 1901 the need was again emphasize and it was stated that "the Synod should take a position whether it wishes to receive such congregations into membership." The 1902 convention said that an English mission program was premature because, "English Lutherans.... will be cared for... in a satisfactory fashion by our German pastors." It is obvious that this directive limited the potential growth of the church during these years. Nevertheless, some work was being done in English. In Waukesha, for example, Grace congregation was established in 1909 as Grace English Ev. Lutheran Church. In 1920 only 54 of our 737 congregations had any English services and only 9 used English exclusively.

New church development continued in the outlying areas of the Dakotas, Nebraska and the Pacific-Northwest. The report for 1902 lists 10 pastors, 14 congregations and 2 preaching stations in the Nebraska District. Nebraska became a District Synod in 1904. In 1907 the Wisconsin Synod (all references until 1917 refer to the state synods. In 1917, the state synods became district of the joint synod.) mission board sent Missionary J. Martin Raasch to do mission work in Northcentral Washington. (Pastor Raasch was a predecessor of mine in Lake Mills, WI whom I served until his death in 1971.) In the early 1900's work was also begun West of the Missouri River in South Dakota. Expansion of the railroad West brought new settlers and new congregations. These years also saw mission outreach expand into Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Ohio. Because of the emphasis on reaching German immigrants most of our congregational expansion took place in rural areas and small town, as these were farm people for the most part. It wasn't until the 1920's that the thrust of our congregational expansion was changed from rural areas to the cities. The statistics for the joint Synod in 1915 present the following:

	Pastors / Professors	Congregations	Preaching Places	Communicants	Souls
Wisconsin	306	373	65	100,000	150,000
Minnesota	103	135	48	18,886	28,257
Michigan	37	55	6	9,417	14,998
Nebraska	21	20	14	2,500	3,200
	<b>467</b>	<b>583</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>130,803</b>	<b>196,555</b>

### Notes

1. The statistics for Wisconsin are viewed as estimates (as also Nebraska) and probably are on the high side based on the more accurate statistics for 1921 and 1931.
2. The number of congregations grew from 411 in 1892 to 583 in 1915. The number of preaching places grew from 91 to 133. The increase in the number of congregations is 172 or 42%. Our current records list 158 congregations organized between 1893 and 1919. Of the 158 congregations organized during this period, 90 were in Wisconsin, 26 in Minnesota, 12 in Michigan, 15 in the Dakotas, 7 in Nebraska, 5 in the Pacific-Northwest, and 3 in Arizona (the later an outgrowth of our Apache Indian Mission). By 1920 71% of the current congregations in the Northern Wisconsin District, 55% in Southeastern Wisconsin, 70% in Western Wisconsin, 55% in Minnesota, and 35% in Michigan, were established.
3. The number of communicants grew by 20,924 from 109,879 to 130,803 or 19%. The conclusion that we may draw from this is the numerical growth during this period came as a result of the establishment of new congregations. An interesting statistic from this period is the reported number of baptisms and confirmations. In the state synod of Wisconsin baptisms (of children only?) numbered nearly 6000 each year (1894-5619, 1895-6097, 1896 5898, 1897-5738) and confirmations (again, the assumption is children) averaged over 3000 (1894-2852, 1895-3245, 1896-3416, 1897-3665). this trend continued into the early 1900's. In 1919, the first year the statistical report broke the state of Wisconsin into its three districts, baptisms totaled 7210, and confirmations totals 5208. It is obvious that in 1919 we were a very young church. In 1989 with more than double

the number of communicants and souls, we baptized 8677 children and confirmed 5313 children.

The *key thrusts* during this period were:

- A. Continued expansion of mission work in the heartland, in the existing mission fields in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and in Washington.
- B. Further development of the joint synod with its “refined” formation in 1917 as districts of the joint synod (including the division of the state synod of Wisconsin into 3 districts).
- C. The beginning of “world” mission work with our mission among the Apache Indians in Arizona. This step initiated the beginning of nation-wide expansion and an outreach to non-German speaking people.

### **Difficult Years 1920-1959**

In 1920 the WELS was primarily a German church and a rural church. The 20's saw the beginning of the change from German to English and from working in rural areas to working in cities. In 1920 the only concentration of congregations in metro areas was in Milwaukee and Minneapolis-St. Paul. In the Detroit, MI area our oldest congregations were in rural settlements, in Livonia, Plymouth and Westland. We have only 3 congregations in Detroit, Zoar a black congregation established in 1952, Paul the Apostle established in 1939 as a “separation” church, and Mt. Olive established in 1928. Three other Detroit city churches either closed or relocated. Today we have 72 congregations in metro Milwaukee, 36 in metro Minneapolis-St. Paul, 19 in metro Detroit, 18 in metro Chicago, 14 in metro Phoenix, 9 in metro Seattle-Tacoma, and 8 in metro Dallas-Ft. Worth as the most heavily represented metro areas.

In 1920 the Synod authorized a general missionary for Arizona, an authorization that seemed to go unfulfilled until 1939 when F. Stern was sent to Arizona and Im. P. Frey was sent to Colorado. A loss of membership also occurred in the late 20's as a result of the Protestant controversy. Ten congregations separated and formed the Protestant Conference.

The 1930's saw, as we might have expected, the slowest period in new congregational development. The Great Depression took its toll. Only 38 new congregations were organized, the lowest in any decade of our history. The Synod during these years faced a growing indebtedness. Salaries of called workers were reduced. In 1931 one half of the graduating class of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary went unassigned. Yet it is to be noted that our communicant growth rate during this decade was the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest of any decade this century, exceeded in the 50's by only .2%. “While man proposes, God disposes.” God will have his way. The 1930's also saw the beginnings of our doctrinal controversy with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

During the 1940's, in spite of 4 years of World War II, 80 congregations were organized, more than double the number of the 1930's. Nevertheless, the growth rate in new congregations in the 40's fell to the rate of the 20's. During the period of 1920-1959 an average of 66 congregations per decade were organized as compared to 58 per decade in the 1893-1919 period. For a much larger church body and one that enjoyed considerable prosperity in at least 2 of the 4 decades, this was an insignificant increase in new congregational development. During the period of 1941-45 (in the midst of war) 88 “new trial fields” were undertaken. In 1943, and again in 1950, statistics for home mission congregational showed more adult confirmations than children confirmations. The mission statistics for 1950 showed 221 mission congregations,

24,681 communicants, 155 pastors, and activity in 16 different states. The numbers are not much different from today, but note the ratio of pastors to congregations, a sign of what the Synod would face in the 50's.

Growth in the number of new congregations in the 1950's was slowed by a shortfall in the number of Pastoral candidates available and a shortage in the Church Extension Fund to buy mission properties and build mission chapels. This is the primary reason why only 80 congregations were organized during the 50's, a period of spiritual "revival" in our country.

Our communicant growth rate was at it's highest, 17.6% for the decade, and children's baptisms reached an all time high, 105,455. The 50's also saw the beginning of our expansion to become a nation-wide church body as congregations were organized in Florida and California.

The first published statistical report for the WELS was introduced in 1955, containing the report for 1953-54. Previous to this statistical reports were included in the proceedings and, I might add, without any real consistency. It is obvious that we are better at theology than "numerology". The 1956 statistical report included a special report on adult confirmations, noting that 540 congregations had adult confirmations while 314 had none. Ten congregations had more than 20 adult confirmations, 5 in Michigan, 3 in Minneapolis-St. Paul, and 2 in Milwaukee.

During the 1950's the Synod was consumed with its doctrinal controversy with the LCMS, sapping much of its energy and consuming much of its time. In 1959 the Synod lost a net of 10 congregations and 2,001 communicants, many of which formed the Church of the Lutheran Confession and some of which joined the LCMS. Again in 1961, while experiencing a net gain of 11 congregations, the Synod lost 1496 communicants. The next time the Synod was to lose communicants was 1988 with a net loss of 297 communicants. The loss in 1959 was felt most severely by the Dakota-Montana District, losing a net of 5 congregations and nearly 800 communicants. The Western Wisconsin District experienced the greatest loss in 1961, a net loss of 5 congregations and some 4000 communicants.

The *key thrusts* during this period:

- A. Reduction of the Synod's debt in the 1930's.
- B. The doctrinal controversy with the LCMS (which covered nearly 30 years), and the Protestant Controversy of the late 20's.
- C. A world mission emphasis; joint work with the Synodical Conference in Nigeria, Africa, and our mission in Poland ("destroyed" by World War II. In 1939 we identified 8 pastors, 12 congregations and 2,818 communicants in the Poland Mission.)
- D. The first steps toward national expansion, in Arizona and Colorado in 1939, and in Florida and California at the threshold of 1950.

### **Nation-Wide Expansion (1960-1979)**

In many respects the 60's and 70's represent the period of our Synod's greatest numerical growth and expansion. In 1960 we were active in 16 states. By 1984 we had organized congregations in all 50 states. (Maine was the last state with Beautiful Savior congregation in Portland organized in 1984.) In the 60's 136 congregations were organized and 203 in the 70's. Twenty percent of our current number of congregations were organized during this 20 year

period. We also experienced decadal communicant growth of 12.7% in the 60's and 15.8% in the 70's.

During the 60's and 70's the greatest number of new churches in any district were established in the Arizona-California District and in the outlying areas of the Michigan District. The 70's also saw a high number of new churches organized in the South Atlantic District. 15.2% of our communicant growth in the 70's came in the AZ-CA District, in a district that was only one-third the size of the 5 large mid-west districts. Most of the balance of our communicant growth came from these large mid-west districts (Michigan - 12.8%, Minnesota - 10.8%, Northern Wisconsin - 16.1%, Southeastern Wisconsin - 9.8%, and Western Wisconsin - 17.5%) The growth of the 70's is no less than amazing.

Much of this growth came from children's confirmations (a result of the high number of baptisms in the 50's), and from those who joined us by profession of faith, confessional Christians joining a confessional church body. Adult confirmations decreased in the 60's as compared to the 50's, but increased by 17.5% in the 70's. The 80's show the highest number ever in adult confirmations, an increase of 22% over the 70's. Children's confirmations reached an all-time high, 74,436. However, children's baptisms in the 70's declined to 81,618, 25,000 less than during the peak of the 50's and gives one primary reason for the flattening of our growth rate in the 80's.

We had a very clear focus during this period. Start new churches and start them all over this country. The slogan of the 70's became "Every state by seventy-eight." In fact, we could say that the 60's and 70's had but one *key thrust*: mission expansion - both at home and abroad.

## **The Eighties 1980-1989**

Our growth rate flattened during this decade. In fact, it was virtually non-existent during the past five years, as we gained a net of only 1620 communicants. The growth rate of 3.6% (communicants) is the lowest in this century and the total net communicant gain is the lowest since 1920.

There are several contributing factors:

1. Children's confirmations were at the lowest level in three decades, a decline of 15,000 from the previous decade. This decline accurately reflects the decline in children's baptisms in the 70's. What is most disturbing about the decline in children's confirmations is the decline in the ratio of confirmations to baptisms. In 1978 we confirmed 78.1% of the number of children's baptisms of 1964. In 1989 we confirmed only 66.3% of the number of children's baptisms of 1975. We are losing our children via "the back door" (and their parents?!) prior to confirmation. This is an issue we must address as a synod.
2. Acquisitions by profession of faith have been recorded in our statistical reports since 1974. Based on this 15 year record, we saw a decline of 1000 per year in the number of professions of faith as compared to the last half of the 70's.
3. During the past four years we have also recorded back door losses, those who joined other churches and those who were removed from membership. During each of the past 4 years we have experienced back door losses numbering some 8000 each year. During the past 4 years over 10% of our membership was lost via the back door. This is a most

disturbing statistic. This is an issue that is being addressed by the Member Retention Committee and will also serve as the subject of the 5<sup>th</sup> year in our series of district evangelism workshops. It is my feeling that the number of back door losses has increased significantly over previous decades. What this seems to indicate is a decreased loyalty to the Word, to the local congregation and to the church body. Is not the low percentage of adults involved in group Bible study a primary contributing factor? It also indicates a weakness on the part of our congregations in assimilating new (as well as existing) members.

4. The number of new churches organized during the 80's was 101, less than half the total in the 70's, and closer to the rate of the 40's and 50's. We might point to inflation as the primary culprit. What is also of considerable concern to the Board for Home Missions is the large number of mission congregations organized in the 70's that are still receiving operating subsidy. Seventy one congregations organized prior to 1980 are still receiving operating subsidy. The mission explorer program and the new contract or subsidy grant program will hopefully reduce the length of time for operating subsidy needed by mission congregations. The BHM must still tackle the growing problem of high land and high construction costs for mission chapels.

In a study by F. Toppe of Kimberly, WI a few years ago, he concluded that 26% of our numerical growth since 1938 came from our largest 100 congregations and 21% of our growth has been in mission congregations in the four new districts (South Atlantic, North Atlantic, South Central, and Arizona-California). While this may have been true, especially in preceding decades, it was not true in the 80's. 86.5% of our communicant growth in the 80's came from our outlying districts (Arizona-California - 25.6%, North Atlantic - 12.2%, Pacific Northwest - 7.3%, South Atlantic - 24%, and South Central - 17.4%). In 1989 our largest congregations, those over 500 communicants (54 over 1000 communicants and 118 between 500-999) lost a net of 476 communicants. However, these same congregations accounted for 1285, or over one-third of our adult confirmations. What this says is that our large churches are capable of winning larger numbers of people, but at the same time must give serious consideration to assimilation and retention of members. In 1989 it took 86 communicants to gain one adult confirmand. In contrast our 176 mission congregations in 1989 (exploratories and operating subsidized, no interest subsidized congregations were counted in) confirmed 513 adults and gained a net of 1018 communicants. It took 53 communicants to gain one adult confirmand in a mission congregation.

In many respects the 80's might be described as "business as usual". Perhaps this may have caused us to become lackadaisical about the mission of the church. It is hard to pinpoint any *key thrust* during the 80's. One key thrust was the Reaching Out program, aimed at reducing the "high cost of doing business" (high interest costs for borrowed funds for CEF and capital improvements), which provided over \$20 million for the Church Extension Fund, the World Mission Building Fund and the Institutional Building Fund. In contrast, shortfalls in the operating budget, especially in the past five years, have slowed our home and world mission expansion.

## **Conclusion**

What will the 90's and the next century bring? The safest and most correct answer is, only God knows. Nevertheless it is our responsibility to plan and coordinate our ministry that we may most efficiently and, prayerfully, most effectively carry on our Lord's mission. The



Coordinating Council of the WELS has established the *key thrusts* as we enter the 90's; parish renewal and home and world mission expansion. From my perspective I would view a 'renewed parish' as one that is giving priority to "reaching the lost for Christ."

May the Lord move us, as we look to the past, to look to the future with confidence, boldness and joy as we seek to fulfill the mission he has given to his church on earth, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28:19-20.