Discipleship as a Means of Assimilating New Members into the Congregation
by James W. Sherod

Jesus told a parable once about a shepherd who had a hundred sheep and one of those had strayed. Using this illustration, Jesus pointed out the importance of every individual soul and ends it saying, "I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." (Luke 15:7)
It seems that our modern church has taken this to heart and has given heaven many potential opportunities to rejoice over those who have strayed away from the fold that may someday return. People leave churches in droves, out what is known "the back door." Back door losses have reached epidemic proportions in some churches. Joel Heck glaringly illuminates the magnitude of the problem that some denominations are experiencing by quoting such statistics as "One denomination had a net increase of 122,836 members over two decades, but during that same period it had welcomed 4,122,354 new members."[1]

When we hear of such staggering losses, we can thank God that we are not like those other church bodies. We don't see such losses in our church body, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod! But could it be that we don't see it because we have shut our eyes to the problem? Over the last two decades we have increased our membership by 48,758, but during that same period we have lost 312,504 out the "back door"! The membership of the WELS would be 732,310 right now if we had not lost anyone out of the "back door" from 1967-1987. Graphically the representation between where we are and where we could have been can be seen from the graphs and accompanying statistical figures in appendix A.[2]

Clearly, then, the problem which this paper addresses is nothing that we of the WELS have anything to feel smug about. Even in a comparison with the denomination that Heck quotes, we are twice as far behind in conserving souls.[3] The questions assail us: What is it that makes people who have joined a church leave? Should we re-evaluate our method of making people a member of the church? Can we isolate factors which are beyond our control from those which we can remedy? How should we tackle the problem? Is this a problem of the whole congregation or should a committee be assigned the task?

It is my contention after having thought about the problem many hard, long hours and having listened to the replies of bewildered pastors who basically have flung up their hands in despair, that the problem of assimilation is indeed the responsibility of the whole congregation. This means each and every member of the congregation must personally shoulder part of the task of helping another find a home in the church, of overcoming the sense of "otherness" that he or she inevitably feels in the presence of a group of strangers.[4]

In a Gallup poll taken in 1978, results showed that people drop out of church "because spiritual meaning, personal relationships, and mission activity are lacking."[5] These are not the type of factors that programs and boards can provide. These are only given through personal, heart-to-heart interaction within the body of Christ. This is not to say that these personal relationships cannot be assisted or fostered by the

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[1] Joel D. Heck, New Member Assimilation (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988) 7.
[2] Figures are taken and derived from the 1967-1987 WELS Statistical Reports.
[3] When one compares the percentage of people that denomination retained (2.97%) with the percentage we kept (1.49%) one sees that we conserved roughly half the percentage that they did. However, it hardly makes any difference when one considers that they lost 97.03% and we 98.51% of the number of people that joined our churches in the last two decades. One difference between our synod and their denomination (I would guess) is that they are geographically spread out and therefore able to reabsorb people when they relocate into a new area of the country. Since we are very limited in many of the states, it is quite natural that our losses would be higher. To do a fair assessment as to our effectiveness one would have to do a comparison with factors such as accessibility to a church being equal.
[4] John P. Huebner, "Integrating the New Member," essay, Florida Conference - South Atlantic district WELS, (January 24, 1979), 5.
[5] Duncan McIntosh and Richard E. Rusbuldt, *Planning Growth in our Church* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1983), 27.

superstructure planned by a board or committee, but one will see that a basic premise for a solution to the problem of back door losses is assimilation through one-on-one discipleship. Christians may "survive" in a church that does not practice discipleship, but rarely will such a congregation actually flourish.

When Jesus said for us to go and proclaim the good news to all creation in the gospel of Mark, he did so in abbreviated form. It is typical that Mark, recording the hasty Peter's remembrances, should do so. However, the church should pay particular attention to the more detailed great commission of Matthew 28. There Christ starts by defining our mission with the one imperative form in the whole verse: "Make disciples". Then he outlines how we are to do this: 1) We are to go out into the world in His name to all the nations. 2) We are to baptize those who believe in the name of the Triune God. And finally 3) We are to continue to teach them ALL THINGS Christ has "commanded" us. Furthermore we have Christ's own promise that as we do this instructing with His Word, He Himself will be present till the completion of this age of grace when judgment day comes.

As one can see from the foregoing, Christ is interested not in just getting people to "make a decision" (even in the correct sense of after having been captivated by His Word and after having been brought to faith by the Spirit through the Word, now to have chosen to join this or that congregation), but rather in having them be a disciple.[6] Joining a congregation doesn't make one a disciple of Jesus. Christ wants to see those who are mature in Christ taking a special interest in those who are newly sprung to life so that the convert receives shade when the troubles of life threaten to wither them down to the roots (Mk 4:17); to ensure they are regularly nurtured with the pure milk of God's Word (1 Pet 2:2); to help guard them against the forest fires of gossip (James 3:5-6) or sins by which Satan tries to burn them up (Eph 6:16).

Now lest what has just said be twisted to apply only to the new convert in Christ, we must also realize that the disciple making process truly never ends. Even with people who are transferring in to our congregation or have previously been Christians in another denomination and are now joining in visible fellowship with our church body, discipleship is a must. This is because everyone of us is continually growing in our relationship with Christ.[7] The example that Paul gave us, "Therefore I urge you to imitate me" (1 Cor 4:16) shows us how those who are mature in the faith are to act as role models for the less mature in the faith. Jesus was the one whom the disciples grew to know and love through three intense years of physical contact. They saw how he ate, drank, talked, praised, abhorred evil, prayed and was faithful even to death. As one author puts it, "His qualities and characteristics were to be engraved in their lives."[8] Paul also had the privilege of intense discipling of our Lord (Gal 1:17). Paul imitated Christ as he trained Timothy. Then Paul sent his disciple Timothy, who imitated Paul (really Christ - 1 Cor 4:17) as he discipled the Corinthians. And so the process was to continue on in the Corinthian congregation and in all the Christian congregations. Heb 13:7-8 reminds us: "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday today and forever." It is this consistent, unchanging reflection of Jesus Christ that God calls the church to imitate when through inspiration he directed the writer of Hebrews to say, "Remember your leaders…and imitate their faith."

Therefore we find that contrary to most modern concepts of disciple making, the New Testament gives us an example of the leaders of the church bearing the primary responsibility to disciple others in their church so that those others can in turn disciple still others. After all why did God give leaders in the church? God gave "some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the whole body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Eph 4:11-13) This type of discipling requires more contact with people than merely preaching to them for 20 minutes a week. It requires more than even sharing God's Word with them among a

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[6] Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps For Church Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 52. "Church Growth people believe effective evangelism means making disciples and responsible members of Christ's Church. Many methods of evangelism emphasize making decisions, Church Growth people are concerned with making disciples."

[7] McGavran and Arn, 20. "You see, the Church has two ministries: Caring for those already in the Church and reaching out to the lost. It's helpful to think of these as ministry to the body and ministry through the body."

[8] George W. Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 121.

crowd of people for an hour each week. This may be sufficient after one has been discipled for an extensive period, but to start with a personal relationship, between those who are mature and those who are being instructed in the Christian's walk with God, is a necessity.[9]

Discipleship overcomes problems typically listed as the decisive factors in keeping people from being assimilated into the congregation. McGavran and Arn give a typical scenario:

> Congregations often develop mechanisms which unintentionally exclude new members. Churches need to look at themselves carefully at this point. For example, Mr. X comes through the front door as a new member. He is given the right hand of fellowship. He is told that he is loved. He is given offering envelopes. Mr. X then begins looking for a group with whom he can identify and be a part.
>
> I was once an X. I had received the right hand of fellowship along with the offering envelopes. I had been told how much I was loved and how happy I would be in the church. However, I soon discovered that groups of people who knew each other spent most of their time within those groups. People all seemed to "belong." I didn't! Perhaps the problem was with me. I tried a few groups, and they were "friendly" but did not incorporate me. Eventually, I did what every other X does, I drifted out the back door. We don't speak much of back door, but evangelism is ineffective if the front door and the back door are both wide open. The back door will remain open unless smaller groups within the larger body not only "welcome" new people but really incorporate them into the fellowship.[10]

The problem described above is all too typical in Christian congregations today. But if there were someone who took responsibility for the new member's introduction and acclimation to the congregation during this critical time period, someone whose goal was to disciple Mr. X, some of the strangeness and awkwardness that newcomers inevitably feel could be reduced and made inconsequential.[11]

Now obviously the pastor cannot directly disciple 1000 or even 100 people all at once. And yet the proper response is not just to shake the head and say "who is adequate for so great a task?" (2 Cor 3:5-6 can be misapplied as an excuse for shirking our work) or again "Well, after all, each person is responsible for his own soul." (Cf Gen 4:9, Rom 12:5, Phil 2:4, Heb 13:17) The discipling process is something that must be developed within the congregation. One of the ways that many propose to develop caring, nurturing relationships is through smaller groups within the local congregation (whether they are Bible Study groups or service orientated groups). McGavran and Arn write:

> The same love and caring that brings people into any church must be exercised by groups within that church so that newcomers really become "one of us." The new person has to be "grafted" into some group in the church, and that takes doing.[12]

These smaller groups are all the more necessary for congregations who have increased in size to the point that not everyone is able to recognize and know everyone else. C. Peter Wagner points this out when he says:

> When a growing church begins to pass the 200 to 300 mark, more and more strangers are noticed in the worship service. The church is no longer one happy family where everyone knows everyone else. Fellowship has to take place in several subgroups rather than among the

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[9] McIntosh and Rusbuldt, 49. "The members of the body of Christ fulfill their purpose best when they have had times of intimate relationship with God and with other members. If growth is to occur, there is a need for members to be linked with one another and to share sustenance and strength."

[10] McGavran and Arn, 86.

[11] Heck, 89. The first six months are especially critical for assimilation into the congregation.

[12] McGavran and Arn, 87.

membership group as a whole. And if the church is to continue to grow well, the fellowship groups have to be prepared to divide regularly."[13]

Likewise Lyle Schaller says, "This [the small group's cohesiveness] also may be the most important single factor in that church's ability to assimilate new members."[14]

All this calls for the pastor to train leaders to be theologically sound and at the same time effective, caring people who can help the pastor teach, rebuke, correct, and train others in righteousness. The leaders of such groups will be people whom the pastor is able to trust. The pastor will disciple such people so they in turn may disciple others.[15]

A structure of discipling within small groups has several advantages over the congregation as a unit trying to carry on assimilation. The bond of fellowship and friendship between group members provides a protective web for those hit by tragedy or suddenly caught in a snare. Instead of a nebulous "caring attitude", small groups force people to realistically put the love of Christ into practice with those who are hurting within their group. Such groups form natural bridges for evangelism prospects to get to know a few people before facing the trauma of facing a whole congregation of strangers on Sunday morning. Also the relaxed atmosphere of a small group along with the limited amount of people insures that even a reclusive person will have opportunity to communicate and share insights that otherwise might pass by unnoticed in the crowd. Not inconsequentially, a small group ensures that a person knows at least 7 people well in the church, which seems to be a critical number of people to get to know if someone will stay with the church past six months.[16]

There can be a number of negative things to watch for in connection with small group situations however. The experience 17th century Lutheranism had with pietism makes the very idea noxious to most pastors. It is associated with a downplaying of the means of grace and separatist tendencies which lead to "churches within churches." Also, such groups can tend over time to become exclusive rather than inclusive. It would be possible for a congregation to become so rigidly set that it would be an impossibility for a newcomer to join in! Groups can become gossiping, agitating cliques that serve no purpose other than to hinder the spread of the Gospel.

For the above reasons, it is all the more necessary that the pastor find a leader he can trust. It may be slow going at first, finding the people who can handle the leadership role, making sure they are trustworthy, training them. But when one looks at the alternative (lost souls) surely any effort is worth it. Also it may be a good idea to rotate members from group to group so that cliques don't form. If the groups were in the habit of reforming every 6 months or so this could alleviate the threat of groups rallying behind some cause and causing the congregation grief. The real influence to stop such things though must be the leader who will remind the group that their purpose for getting together is not to tear down other's actions or programs, but to build up each other's faith.

Another area at which disciple making can help readily assimilate members is by providing opportunities for service. The Church Growth people of course have everything neatly categorized into numbers. Heck warns, "There need to be at least 60 roles and tasks available for every 100 members in your church." And goes on to quote Win Arn, "Any fewer than 60 'creates an environment which *produces* inactive members [emphasis Arn's]"[17] While I'm not sure as to the exactness of their number here, it does stand to reason that someone who understands what the Lord has done for him, and then is not given opportunity to

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[13] C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can He Healthy*, Creative Leadership Series, Lyle E. Schaller, Ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 27.

[14] Lyle E. Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, Creative Leadership Series, Lyle E. Schaller, Ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 100.

[15] Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughan and David J. Seifert, *The Complete Hook of Church Growth*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1981), 164.
Dave Roper, a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California gives some excellent recommendations on how to disciple leaders. While we would not agree with all of these I have listed them in full in Appendix B.

[16] Heck, 24.

[17] Heck, 29.

express that thanks in service to the. Lord through the congregation, will be most likely to give up after a while and seek a church that will allow him to use his talents in service to God.

In conclusion, assimilation (the process of integrating someone into a congregation) is a very definite problem in most church bodies, WELS not excepted. Since we see the need for change, our churches should be looking at the alternatives. The alternative I suggest is disciple making by the pastor through the leaders of the congregation to the members in conjunction with small service/study groups. There is no perfect "program" or "structure" which will magically solve our assimilation problems. However, it seems rather wasteful to expend so much effort in training our young people or doing evangelism work, only to see them never really become part of the congregation and silently fall through the cracks. Also, even if some of these people who leave through the back door join other church bodies, to have brought people into contact with the precious truth of Christianity that our synod possesses and then let them drift away into semi-pelagian groups such as Roman Catholicism or the Reformed traditions is an absolute tragedy to say the least. As one Professor Valleskey has put it, "An evangelism program is only as good as its weakest link." May the Lord of the harvest grant us the wisdom to close the door on back door losses through effectively discipling our members, thereby assimilating them into the church.

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Appendix A
Membership (Gain/Loss/Net) Numbers for 1967-1987

| ■ App. Gain | + Loss | ◇ Actual Gains |
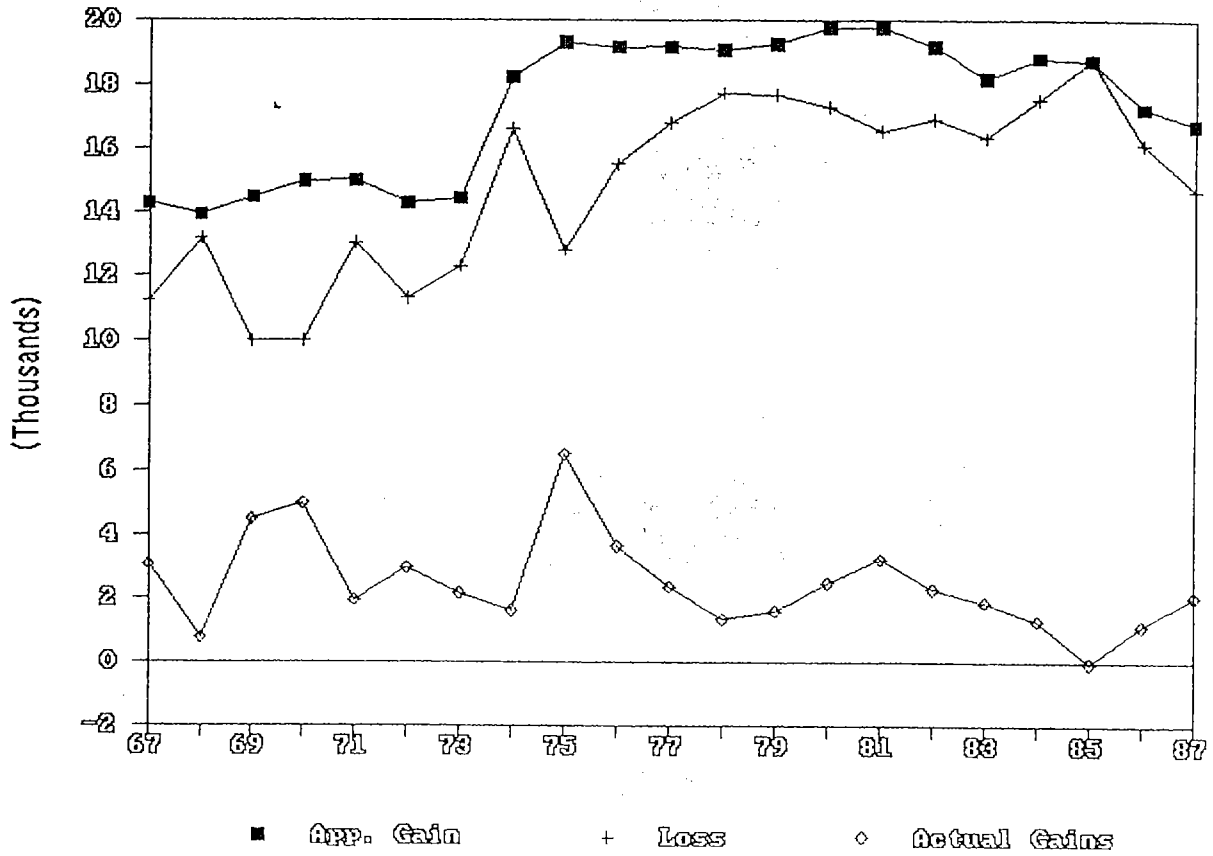
Membership (Gain/Loss/Net) Percentages for 1967-1987

| ■ % App. Gain | † % Loss | ◇ % Actual Gain |
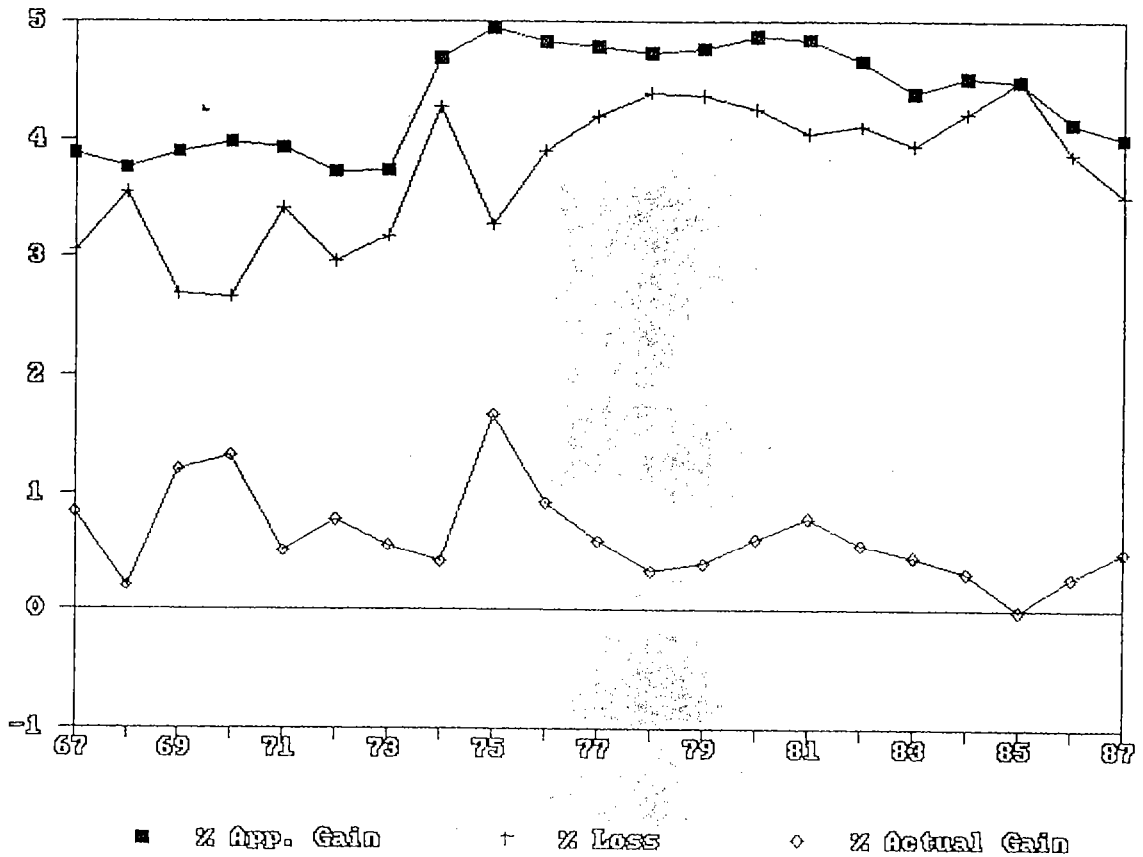
Figures Used to Compute WELS Backdoor Losses

	# Entering	# Buried	App. Gain	% App. Gain	Net Loss	% Net Loss	Real Gain	% Net Loss/Gain
1967	17782	3473	14309	3.889	11220	3.049	3089	0.839
1968	17701	3731	13970	3.765	13216	3.562	754	0.203
1969	18255	3749	14506	3.902	9989	2.687	4517	1.215
1970	18757	3760	14997	3.985	9995	2.656	5002	1.329
1971	18746	3737	15009	3.936	13067	3.427	1942	0.509
1972	18183	3874	14309	3.733	11328	2.956	2981	0.778
1973	18249	3788	14461	3.744	12294	3.183	2167	0.561
1979	21953	3710	18243	4.697	16626	4.281	1617	0.416
1975	22979	3660	19319	4.953	12802	3.282	6517	1.671
1976	23065	3894	19171	4.835	15515	3.913	3656	0.922
1977	22935	3756	19179	4.792	16807	4.200	2372	0.593
1978	22774	3690	19084	4.741	17747	4.408	1337	0.332
1979	23095	3807	19288	4.775	17686	4.379	1602	0.397
1980	23545	3770	19775	4.877	17300	4.266	2475	0.610
1981	23617	3841	19776	4.847	16547	4.056	3229	0.791
1982	22893	3688	19205	4.670	16918	4.114	2287	0.556
1983	22184	3994	18190	4.399	16325	3.948	1865	0.451
1984	22671	3846	18825	4.532	17536	4.222	1289	0.310
1985	22743	3992	18751	4.500	18784	4.508	-33	-0.008
1986	21246	3993	17253	4.141	16122	3.870	1131	0.271
1987	20675	3944	16731	4.005	14680	3.514	2051	0.491

The above figures were computed as follows:

E (# Entering) = Child bapt + Child conf + Adult conf + PDF
B (# Buried) = Figure from WELS Statistical Report
C ("Current Year's" Baptized Membership)
P ("Previous Year's" Baptized Membership)
AG (Apparent Gain) = E - B
% AG (% App. Gain) = $(((P + AG)/P) * 100) - 100$
RG (Real Gain) = C - P
% RG (% Real Gain) = $((C - P)/P) * 100$
NL (Net Loss) = AG - RG
% NL (% Net Loss) = $(1 - (P - NL)/P) * 100$ OR (% AG - % RG)

Note: PDF was not given for the years 1967-1973, therefore these years do not show the full extent of "back door losses." The average % RG reflects this deficiency. For the years 1967-73 the % RG = .7764, while the 1974-87 % RS = .5575 . Presumably the actual % RG for 1967-73 was around .55 also.

WELS Member growth vs. no "backdoor losses" 1967-1987

■ Actual   + Actual + Losses
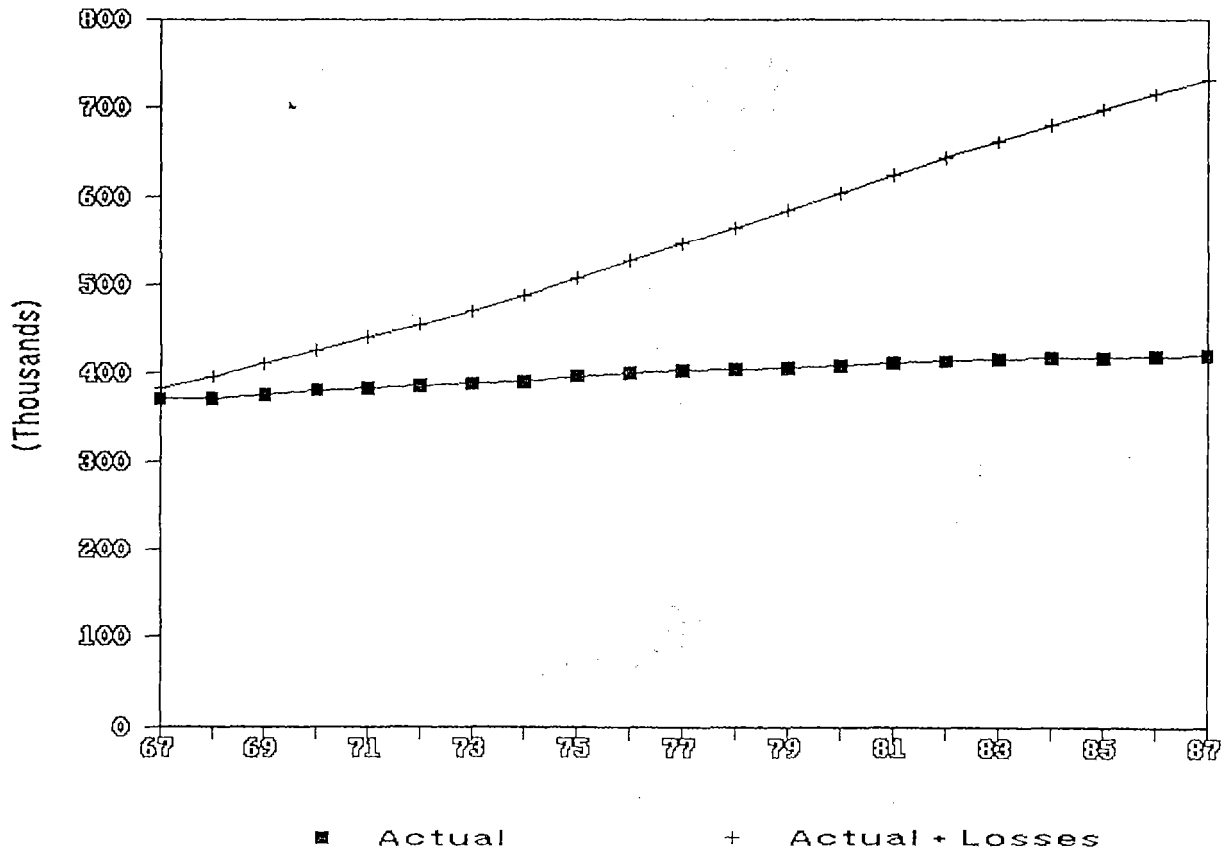
WELS Membership Figures

	Actual	Actual + Losses
1967	371048	382268
1968	371802	396238
1969	376319	410744
1970	381321	425741
1971	383263	440750
1972	386244	455059
1973	388411	469520
1974	390028	487763
1975	396545	507082
1976	400201	526253
1977	402573	545432
1978	403910	564516
1979	405512	583804
1980	407987	603579
1981	411216	623355
1982	413503	642560
1983	415368	660750
1984	416657	679575
1985	416624	698326
1986	417755	715579
1987	419806	732310

Membership Statistics for WELS

	Members		Baptisms		Confirmations				
	Baptized	Confirmed	Child	Adult	Child	Adult	POF	% SA	Burials
1966	367959								
1967	371048	256776	8128	571	7152	2502			3473
1968	371802	259954	7930	568	7462	2309			3731
1969	376319	265069	8123	573	7531	2601			3749
1970	381321	271117	8571	572	7446	2740			3760
1971	383263	275500	8437	555	7749	2560			3737
1972	386244	279239	7886	590	7464	2833			3874
1973	388411	283885	7599	596	7824	2826			3788
1974	390028	287366	7725	609	7624	2764	3840	45.4	3710
1975	296545	293982	8019	581	7655	2977	4328	46.1	3660
1976	400201	298614	7811	615	7565	3072	4617	46.6	3894
1977	402573	302687	8300	551	7424	2946	4265	46.2	3756
1978	403910	304677	8331	590	7083	2942	4418	45.9	3690
1979	405512	306995	8943	569	6602	3001	4469	46.1	3807
1980	407987	309342	9098	718	6422	3510	4515	47.0	3770
1981	411216	312049	9209	741	6329	3745	4334	47.0	3841
1982	413503	312917	9100	697	6309	3584	3900	46.3	3688
1983	415368	314792	8914	647	6133	3429	3708	46.5	3994
1984	416657	316228	8968	667	6440	3404	3859	46.9	3846
1985	416624	316297	9035	625	6168	3647	3893	46.4	3992
1986	417755	317332	8739	517	5895	3156	3456	46.6	3993
1987	419806	318037	8534	618	5378	3419	3344	46.3	3944

	TI	TO	CD's	JOC	Net Rem.
1986	8275	7999	3648	3809	4261
1987	8120	7980	3611	3691	4279

Abbreviations

POF = Profession of faith
% SA = % of Sunday Attendance
TI = Transfers in
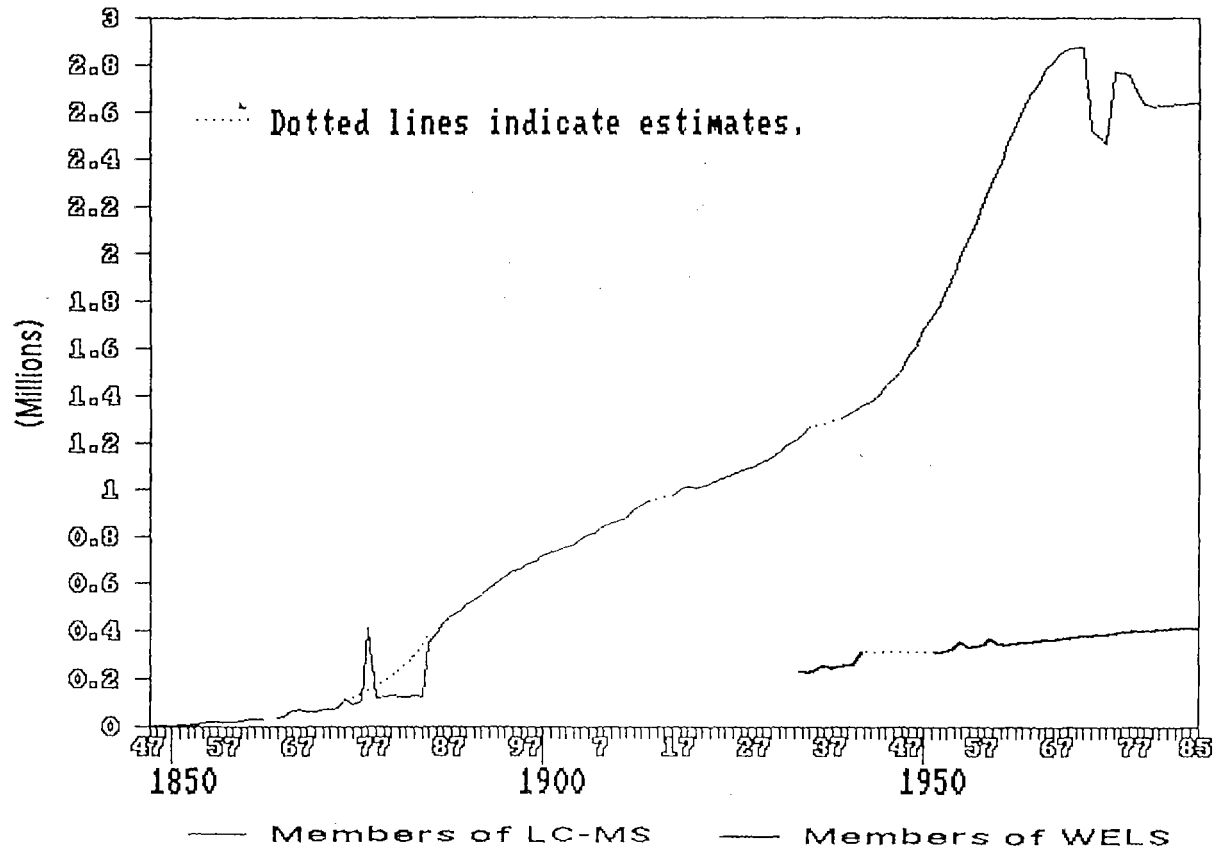TO = Transfers out
CD's = Communicant deaths
JOC = Joined other churches
Net Rem. = Net Removal

A Comparison of Membership in LC-MS and WELS

.... Dotted lines indicate estimates.

(Millions)

3
2.8
2.6
2.4
2.2
2
1.8
1.6
1.4
1.2
1
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0

47 57 67 77 87 97 7 17 27 37 47 57 67 77 85
1850   1900   1950

——— Members of LC-MS   ——— Members of WELS

Appendix B

1. Select key men from the larger Christian body to which you are ministering (congregation, Sunday school class, Bible study group, etc.). Note these verses for the basis of your choice: 2 Tim 2:2; Luke 6:12-13; Mark 3:13.

2. Begin to spend time with this select group (John 3:22). Spend leisure time with them (Mark 6:31). Get them into your home and family life; involve them in your personal life and ministry (Mark 5:37).

3. Provide additional opportunities for teaching through Bible study and discussion, reading, Scripture memorization, tapes, etc.

4. Expose them to other teachers and leaders. It takes all the saints to know all the dimensions of the knowledge of God.

5. Encourage them to open up and share their lives with one another. Set the pace by your own openness and honesty.

6. Be sensitive to teachable moments (Mark 10:1,3-16).

7. Don't be afraid to be hard on these men; God's men will bounce [back] (Mark 8:18,33; 9:1-8; 9:19).

8. Welcome adversity in their lives; these times are opportunities for advancement (Mark 4:35-41).

9. Encourage them into ministries of their own. Give them plenty of rope. You can trust the Holy Spirit in their lives. Provide counsel and encouragement. Evaluate periodically (Mark 6:7-13, 30). Move them out into positions with increasing responsibility. Gently push them out into situations beyond their depth so they have to trust the Lord.

10. Impart your vision to encourage them to disciple others and send them out (John 20:21).

11. Maintain a support base even when they are on their own. Provide help as they need it. Pray for them, write, be available for counsel.