

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

CARRYING ON THE MISSION OF THE SAVIOR'S HEART IN THE HEARTLAND:
MISSION AND OUTREACH IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY

SUBMITTED TO PROFESSOR JAMES TIEFEL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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BY

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ABSTRACT

It is no secret that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) in general has faced decline in membership over the past twenty-five years. For evidence of this decline, one need look no further than Milwaukee, the synod's birthplace and a metropolitan area with the most churches in the whole synod. The frustration is often heard, "Where did all the people go? We used to have full pews!" This thesis will track the changing dynamics of Milwaukee County and how this change has affected the congregations within the county limits. While there certainly are some factors beyond human control, it is critical to identify what is happening and what can be done from a human standpoint to faithfully carry out the mission of the Savior's heart in the synod's heartland, Milwaukee. This thesis will provide an examination of statistical data relevant to both the county and WELS congregations within it, along with a study of Milwaukee's history. It will examine the mission theology of Scripture and make specific applications to Milwaukee County, while also consulting and comparing current literature on congregational mission and health. Finally, it will draw insights from interviews with WELS pastors with first-hand experience in different contexts around Milwaukee County.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

 Why Milwaukee County? 4

CURRENT SITUATION OF WELS CONGREGATIONS IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY5

 Statistical Contemplation 8

 Projecting the Statistical Trend into the Future 10

A LOOK AT MILWAUKEE’ HISTORY12

 The *Deutsch-Athen* 12

 A Changed Outlook on “German” and the Introduction of a New Culture 13

 To the Suburbs and Beyond 14

 A New Wave and Changing Demographics 15

 The Effect of the Changes on WELS in Milwaukee County 19

 Many Converging Factors 20

 Failure to Connect 22

SCRIPTURAL MISSION THEOLOGY WITH APPLICATION FOR MILWAUKEE27

 The Mission of the Savior’s Heart 27

 The Savior’s Concern for Other Peoples 29

 Entrusting that Mission to His Believers 30

 Attractional and Mission-minded 32

 Growing Passive 33

 Refocusing Mission and Vision 36

 Mission Inseparably Connected to the Means of Grace 39

 The Means of Grace Conveyed by People 40

 The Savior’s Mission as Theology of the Cross 41

 Mission to the City and the Temptation to Run Away 44

PRACTICAL INSIGHTS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH MILWAUKEE COUNTY PASTORS48

 Pastoral Leadership Breeds Mission Mindset 49

 Ministry Planning 50

 Community Awareness 51

 Community Presence 52

Intentionality	53
Culture of Outreach	54
Among the “Sinners”	55
Worship Welcome and Follow Up	56
Lay-leader Training and Equipping	57
WELS Schools as an Outreach Arm	58
CONCLUSION.....	61
APPENDIX 1: WELS CHURCHES IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY	63
Milwaukee County.....	63
North Side Churches	64
South Side Churches	65
APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW FORM	66
APPENDIX 3: INFORMED CONSENT FORM	67
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	68

INTRODUCTION

“You are the man.” These are the words the prophet Nathan spoke to King David after strategically leading David to condemn himself to death. Those very words resounded in my head and heart after a particular experience early on in the process of preparing this thesis. I had already gone to work feverishly reading and studying evangelism strategies that would solve every Milwaukee congregation’s problem. This was the city where I grew up and I was going to find a way to fix it.

My wife and I had begun living in the church house of my home congregation on the north side of Milwaukee where she was going to teach, and I was going to serve as a senior vicar. Not long after moving in, the old battered aluminum siding on the house was completely replaced by members volunteering their hammer skills and a few Saturday mornings. Especially distressing, then, was the sound of a sudden *smack* against the new siding on the house one Saturday afternoon. As I went to the window to investigate, I discovered two African American teenage boys who were tossing the football around on the church lawn next to our driveway. Apparently one of the passes had gotten away.

In a sudden flush of huffiness, I decided that moment was good time to finally take the garbage out. I descended the porch steps, made my presence known by loudly disposing of the garbage, and made my way down to the mailbox. I never said a word, but the only thing visible to the boys was my worst Clint Eastwood scowl grimacing, “Get off my lawn!”

As I returned inside and later sat down at my desk full of books with words like “mission,” “neighborhood,” and “outreach,” the prophet Nathan’s words came crashing down on

me like a hammer. “You are the man.” Here God had brought about what every soccer camp and outreach canvass longs to have happen: two young people setting foot on your church property. The opportunity was there smacking me in the face. I like football. I spent half my childhood tossing the ball around. I’m a Christian. I’m supposed to be writing a thesis about outreach in my dear home city. Why didn’t all of those factors form enough momentum for me to walk over with a grin on my face and say, “Hey fellas, somebody go long. I’ll throw you one deep.”

This experience was the product of two things, a heart of sin and a mindset long developed in an environment corrupted by sin. The heart of sin is somewhat simple to explain. It’s an objective fact. My heart by nature cares only for itself. On top of that, as if my stubborn heart needs any more convincing to be silent about Jesus, I have an enemy the devil who constantly makes it his mission to silence every word about the gospel of Jesus. To carry out that sabotage, he uses every tool he can, including the environment in which we live and the resulting mindsets we carry around. In my case, it was a mindset that said, “One strike and you’re out.” One bad experience, one ball smacking against the siding, was enough for me to let every stereotype from my corrupted heart and environment take over my mind and shove my gospel light underneath a bowl. The two boys out in the yard were most definitely souls for whom Jesus died; they were souls who needed Jesus just as I much as I do. Why was that so easy to forget? Why was it so easy to stop viewing them as precious souls and to start “regarding them from a worldly point of view,” as two African American boys that shouldn’t be in my yard or bouncing balls off the newly sided house (2 Cor 5:16 NIV 84).

That afternoon was the last time I saw either of them, but it is a lesson I pray will stick in my heart and mind. I was a native Milwaukeean. I was a Christian, and one preparing for public ministry. I was even a part-time called worker of the local congregation, whose church steeple

loomed over that very lawn. On that day, I made no connection with the two boys at all, and certainly did not lead them to the Savior. All the strategies and all the “how-to” books didn’t soften my irritated heart, or move my sluggish feet, or open my scowling jaw. The only thing that can empower people connecting more people to Christ is the Holy Spirit working the through message of Christ-crucified for sinners. In his mission to pour out his life for sinners, we see the Savior’s heart. We see him proclaiming peace to those far and near and shedding his blood to reconcile them all to God. We hear his very own words telling us his mission, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Jesus takes the mission of his own heart and makes it the mission of his redeemed people. He makes sinners into saints and uses those sinner-saints to reach more sinners with the life-saving gospel. This is the mission for which Christ commissioned his Church. The Church then constantly strives to discover how to carry out the mission of the Savior’s heart in its specific location and context.

My failure on that day was not just a failure to be friendly or neighborly. It was a failure to take up the mission of the Savior’s heart. That opportunity, seemingly small and forgettable, was an opportunity missed and one that could have great spiritual significance. Though the specifics of that situation may be unique to me, the problem is widespread. A general hesitation and failure to connect with the local people of Milwaukee has become increasingly evident over the past few decades, as this thesis will show. Congregations have been forced to shut their doors. Membership and attendance have been steadily shrinking. What are we to do about it and how can we do it? How do we carry out the mission of the Savior’s heart in a city and county that is drastically different from what it once was? This thesis will certainly take up elements of how this mission can be carried out. Perhaps, what is of greater importance than *how* it is carried out, is *that* this mission to seek the lost is carried out faithfully and aggressively. The life-saving

mission Jesus accomplished for his believers empowers them to continually assess and reinvigorate the mission mindset of their congregations and complement that mindset with fitting strategies for ministry in Milwaukee County in the 21st century.

Why Milwaukee County?

In 1850, three pastors, John Muehlhaeuser from Grace Lutheran, in downtown Milwaukee, John Weinmann from St John's in Oakwood, and William Wrede from Salem in Granville, formed the First German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin.¹ Today this synod bears a slightly different name, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), but has continued to maintain its strong roots in the Milwaukee area. Already from its founding, the three pastors meeting at Grace represented the northern, central, and southern regions of Milwaukee County, which became an official county of Wisconsin when the state was established in 1848. The city of Milwaukee has expanded since 1848, but the county boundaries have remained the same. Based on the many congregations that have called the county home from the synod's early years, Milwaukee County could rightly be called the heartland of the WELS.²

1. John Braun, *Together in Christ: A History of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000), 4.

2. The term "heartland of the WELS" is sometimes used to describe the strong WELS presence in the Upper Midwest in general.

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF WELS CONGREGATIONS IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY

At the time of this writing in 2018, there are forty-three Wisconsin Synod congregations in Milwaukee County. These congregations generally are split into the Milwaukee-Metro Conference and the Milwaukee-Urban Conference, while there are two congregations in the Western Lakes Conference and one in the Shoreland Conference.³ The borders of the county and the layout of the congregations within it can be seen in Appendix 1. At different points in the history of Milwaukee County, fourteen additional churches existed.⁴ Nine have since closed their doors and five merged with other congregations. The closing or merging of these congregations does not in itself constitute a failure on their part to carry out the mission of Jesus. There may well have been wise or unavoidable reasons to relocate, merge, or close. Jesus is the Lord of the Church and ultimately, he decides where his Word will take root and prosper and where it will not. The closing of the congregations is mentioned to demonstrate the reality of the decreasing number of WELS congregations in Milwaukee.

3. WELS Statistical Report: 2017.

4. Mark Jeske, Interview, October 6, 2018

As of the 2017 WELS Statistical Report, the total baptized members at congregations within Milwaukee County totals 17,383. This number is down significantly from what it was 25 years ago. Pastor Jonathan Hein, head of the Commission on Congregational Counseling, points

out in the *Demographic Study*

of the WELS⁵ that the year

1990 marked the peak in total

baptized members in the

Wisconsin Synod at 421,396

souls. In 25-year period

leading up to the approximate

peak, from 1967 to 1991, the

WELS experienced a 13.5 %

increase in total membership.

In the 25-year period following

after the peak, from 1992 to

2016, there was an almost mirror image decline of 13.3% in total membership.⁶

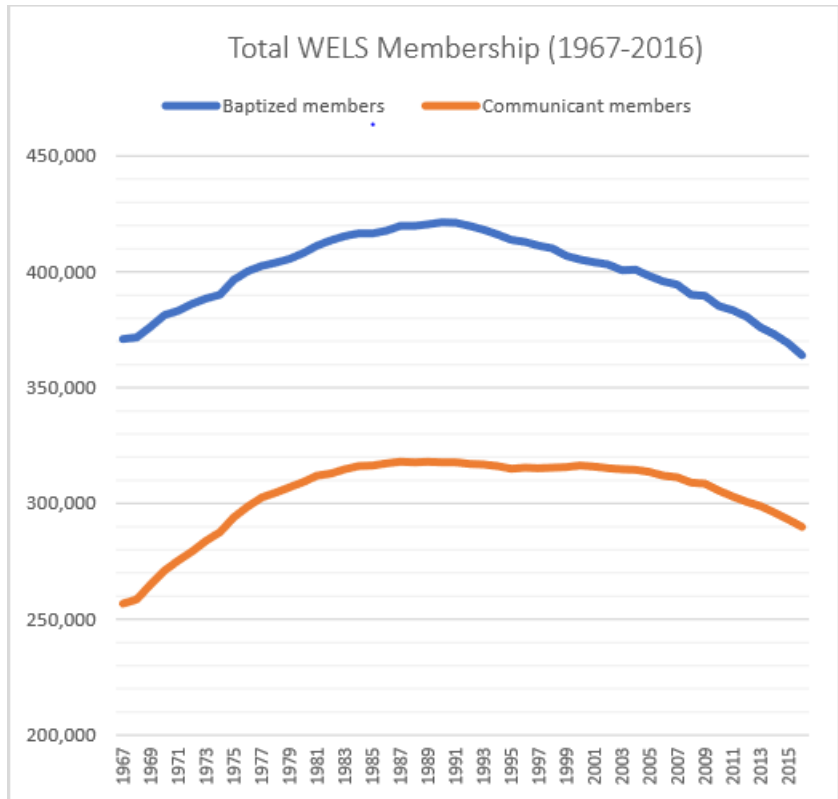


Figure One: Source, *Demographic Study of the WELS*

5. Jonathan Hein, “A Demographic Study of the Wisconsin Lutheran Evangelical Synod”, 2017. Accessed October 5, 2018.

6. Hein, *Demographic Study*, 5.

The decline in membership that is happening in Milwaukee County over the last 25 years is not unique to the region when compared to the synod as a whole. However, there are two things that are significantly different about Milwaukee County when compared to the trend line of the WELS as a whole. First, while the synod grew by 13% in the 25 years leading up to the peak around 1991, WELS in Milwaukee County was already experiencing significant decline, a 26% loss in total membership from 1967 to 1991.⁷ Secondly, while the synod experienced a 13% decline in the 25 years after the peak around 1991, Milwaukee County experienced a 38% decline from 1992 to 2016. In total, as shown by Figure Two, WELS in Milwaukee county has

been experiencing a sharp decline over the last 50 years. It is alarming to note that the total number of baptized members in WELS congregations in Milwaukee County has decreased by a total of 21,306 people, a 52% loss.

In addition to decline in total

membership, there has also been a corresponding decline in average attendance per week for congregations over the past 25 years. The average weekly attendance statistic is in some ways more indicative of a congregation’s situation. This number represents the average amount of

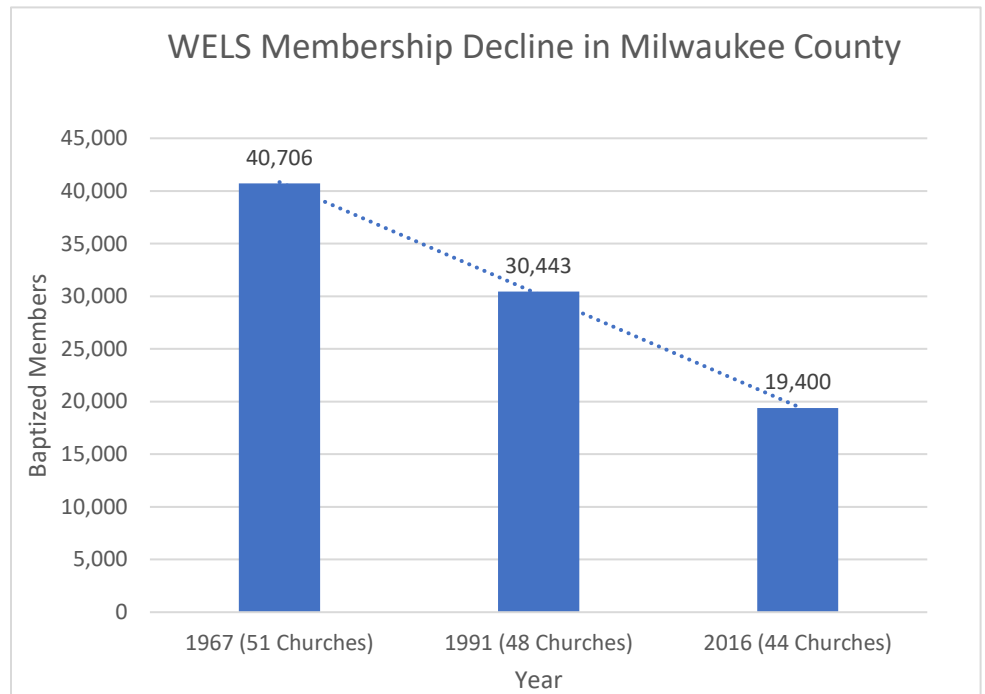


Figure Two: Source, Data from Synod Statistical Reports

7. WELS Statistical Reports 1967, 1991, 2016

people who come to worship each week. The reality is: regular worshipers are the people who keep a congregation going. To a certain extent, it doesn't matter how large the number of total members is; at a certain point there are not enough active people left to pay the pastor and maintain the building. A congregation may also still have a significant number of members on the membership roll, but a proportionately low average weekly attendance statistic may be a sign of poor congregational health. It is troubling to note that when looking at individual congregations within Milwaukee County, only 7 congregations have a higher weekly worship average in 2017 than in 1993. Additionally, Victory of the Lamb in Franklin, which began in 2006, has steadily increased since its founding. Garden Homes had the same average attendance in 1993 and 2017. That leaves 34 active congregations whose average weekly attendance declined during those years.⁸ Out of those 34 congregations whose average attendance declined, 24 of them declined by 50% or more from 1993 to 2017. Note also, that these particular calculations do not include the 14 other congregational sites that have been closed or merged.

Statistical Contemplation

So far, the data listed has given a picture of what has happened in the past. Making projections for the future based on statistical trends can be somewhat dangerous. In an article written for the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, John Brug, former professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, puts forward the argument of David Boyle, author of *The Sum of our Discontent: Why Numbers Make Us Irrational*, who says that statistics often produce inaccurate,

8. St John's on 8th and Vliet is a currently active congregation, which is excluded from this count because it was not a part of the WELS for majority of the time in view.

simplistic, caricatures.⁹ In Brug's article, he also sets forth the view of Kevin Vogts, who offers a review of Boyle's book with regard to the use of statistics applied in the church. Vogt warns that statistics often are largely negative and disturbing. He also suggests that statistics must be used in a way that serves the issues at hand, without ruling over them. Vogts also warns of the extreme difficulty there is in removing variables and anomalies that skew the data. All of this comes together to provide a beneficial warning to remember: predicting the future is impossible. Reason number one is the fact that Jesus is Lord of the Church. The future of his Church is ultimately up to him. Even with this warning in mind, however, it is not necessary to conclude that all statistics must be thrown out with the bath water. Professor Earle Treptow, from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, encourages a balanced approach to statistical contemplation. His first encouragement is to "note with thanksgiving the blessings God grants ... even if the blessings aren't the specific ones we wanted to see."¹⁰ Secondly, he adds,

"Contemplation of congregations statistics also can be helpful when it leads people to assess the ministry being carried out. Please don't misunderstand. Statistics are only statistics. God doesn't call his people to specific results when they proclaim his Word. He doesn't insist, for example, that they must increase congregational membership or Bible study attendance by 10 percent or face his judgment. The Lord does, however, call for faithfulness. He desires activity. He asks for effort. He wants his people to offer their very best. Sometimes statistics move leaders to ask important questions about activity: "What are we doing to reach the people in our community without a church home?"¹¹

In following these encouragements then, it is right to praise God for more than fifty Milwaukee County congregations that have proclaimed the Word of God since the synod's founding in Milwaukee in 1850. It is right to give thanks for the tens of thousands of souls who have been

9. John Brug, "Why Numbers Make Us Irrational," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* Vol 90.3 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2002) 219-222.

10. Earle Treptow, "Statistical Contemplation" *Forward in Christ*. Feb 2016. Accessed from wels.net/statistical-contemplation/. October 9th, 2018.

11. Treptow, Contemplation

fed by Word and Sacrament over that stretch of time. It is fitting to rejoice in the ministries that are still being carried out it this very day. Secondly, it is fitting to assess how our ministries are being carried out and consider what the statistical trends might look like when projected into the future. This consideration will lead to asking certain questions about the causes, the continuing efforts, and the best way to proceed into the future.

Projecting the Statistical Trend into the Future

Average weekly attendance data¹² from 1993 to 2017 was used to calculate the average amount each congregation's weekly attendance increased or decreased from year to year over the 25-year period. If, for example, in a particular year a congregation had 100 people worshipping, and over the next 2 years that number declined to 95 and then 85, then the average decline in those 2 years would be 7.5 people per year. In making the actual calculations, the average increase or decrease per year in each congregation was determined by the whole 25-year period. To project what a congregation's attendance might be 25 years from now, this average rate of change was multiplied by 25 and added or subtracted to the most recent attendance number from 2017 (or before). Based solely on this numerical projection, 25 out of 42 congregations would reach 0 in 25 years, with another 2 congregations averaging less than 10 people in worship at that time. Specifically, of those 25 congregations, 9 would reach an attendance of 0 in 10 years or less.

As identified before, a balanced approach to statistics does not look at these projections and proclaim that 27 congregations will no doubt be closed in another 25 years. A balanced approach also does not declare that statistics are irrelevant and useless for identifying concern

¹² Statistical data from each congregation is available in each congregation's profile at wels.net

areas. Rather, a balanced approach does look at the trends and ask questions about what happens if nothing changes in those trends. The answer to that question opens our eyes to the solemn reality that a major portion of congregations in Milwaukee County may well be in an extremely difficult situation in the next few decades. A balanced approach also looks to draw conclusions about reasons for this decline from a human standpoint. Here again, Brug's review of Vogts's advice is helpful. "Statistics can give some indication of *what* is happening. By themselves they cannot often explain *why* it is happening."¹³ A look at Milwaukee's history will prove helpful in considering the question, "Why the decline?"

13. Brug 220.

A LOOK AT MILWAUKEE'S HISTORY

The *Deutsch-Athen*

For the purpose of this paper it will suffice to look as far back as the German origins of the Wisconsin Synod in Milwaukee. Already in 1839, a group of German Lutherans came to Milwaukee, fleeing from the pressure to join the Prussian state church back home in Germany. Another wave of Germans came in 1848 after revolutions swept across Germany.¹⁴ Soon the city of Milwaukee became known around the world as the German Athens on Lake Michigan because of the “love of theater, fine music, literature and art, and the habit of leisure and good living” among these immigrants.¹⁵ This influx of German immigrants directly coincides with the very beginnings of the Wisconsin Synod which was founded in 1850. By the year 1850, there were already six (currently WELS) congregations that had been founded in the county, with an additional twenty congregations that were founded by the year 1900.

At the turn of the 20th century, 72% of the population of Milwaukee was German by birth or descent.¹⁶ The boom of the Wisconsin Synod in the Milwaukee area was not altogether surprising then, given the rapidly increasing German population. Roger Daniels, in his book *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, lists statistics showing over five million German immigrants who came to the United States between 1840 and

14. John Gurda, *The Making of a Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999) 59-62.

15. Austin Russell, *The Milwaukee Story: Making of an American City* (Milwaukee: The Milwaukee Journal, 1946) 140.

16. Russell 140.

1920.¹⁷ It is safe to conclude that the early numerical growth of the Wisconsin Synod in Milwaukee was due in large part to a gathering of newly transplanted German Lutherans. It seems quite fitting to describe the forming and growth of these congregations with what some current authors call the *Field of Dreams* method.¹⁸ “If you build it, they will come.” Church steeples were erected all over the county and people flocked by the hundreds to fill these congregations. The close proximity of many of these congregations also reflected the neighborhood mentality and the need for a church within walking distance.

A Changed Outlook on “German” and the Introduction of a New Culture

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, a crisis of culture erupted upon the German city of Milwaukee. “Well intentioned loyal Milwaukeeans began an indiscriminate campaign against everything German.... A thorough effort was made to erase every trace of German culture from the ‘German Athens.’”¹⁹ Foreign immigration to Milwaukee, in general, came to a halt by 1920. However destructive it was for Milwaukee’s German culture, World War I provided a distinct boost for the city’s industry. Even after the Great Depression hit in 1929, word spread that Milwaukee was an “island of prosperity in a national sea of depression, and jobless men began streaming into the city.”²⁰ This industrial prosperity brought a new

17. Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: Harper Perennial), 1990, 146)

18. Alan J Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009) 17.

19. Russell 177.

20. Russell 191.

migration to Milwaukee. In his book *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat*, Joe William Trotter Jr. describes this migration.

The Period between 1915 and 1932 witnessed the emergence of Milwaukee's black industrial working class. Labor shortages during World War I, destructive conditions in southern agriculture, and the legislative curtailment of European immigration were the chief factors promoting the entrance of blacks into the industrial work force.²¹

However, when the depression eventually hit Milwaukee with full force, competition for even the lowest jobs reversed the progress that had been made and resulted in a wave of African American unemployment.²² This combination of biased workforce competition along with discriminatory housing ordinances caused most African Americans to expand into the low-rent housing situated on Milwaukee's near north side of downtown.²³ In many ways, the racial makeup of Milwaukee can still be seen from this post-war depression period.

To the Suburbs and Beyond

When countless World War II veterans returned home to find the number of housing units to be inadequate, this let loose the phenomenon known as "urban sprawl". Milwaukee historian John Gurda noted the results of an annual survey of subscribers conducted by the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1945. According to the survey, "48.2% expressed a desire to buy or build new homes. Of that number, 62.2% intended to relocate beyond the city limits."²⁴ This quest for the outskirts was made possible when the number of housing units in the four-county

21. Joe Trotter Jr, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 73.

22. Trotter 151

23. Trotter 187.

24. Gurda 322

metropolitan area of Milwaukee, Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington counties nearly doubled between 1940 and 1970.²⁵ The availability of new housing together with a soaring number of automobiles and the construction of new expressways literally paved the way for city-dwellers to move out to the outer edges.²⁶ The City of Milwaukee reached its peak population of 741,324 people in 1960 after annexing more than forty square miles of the outer-ring communities. With the expansion of the city into these communities, it was becoming increasingly evident that the city's population was moving outward. In 1920, residents of the city of Milwaukee had accounted for 85% of the county's population, while in 1960 that number decreased to 71%.

A New Wave and Changing Demographics

Gurda notes three trends that describe the explosive nature of Milwaukee in the 1960's and decades to follow: social unrest, suburban expansion, and the growth of minorities.²⁷ After World War II, there was a nationwide migration of African Americans from south to north. This migration greatly affected major northern cities and had a drastic effect on the landscape of Milwaukee County. According to Gurda, "Milwaukee's black population mushroomed from roughly 13,000 in 1945 to ... 105,088 in 1970 – an increase of more than 700% in 25 years."²⁸ This increasingly large number of African Americans moved into Milwaukee's near north side, a region that had been racially and economically defined in the post-World War I period. As more and more moved to Milwaukee, the African American community expanded farther and farther

25. Gurda 326

27. Gurda 379

28. Gurda 361

into the German neighborhoods of the north side. Gurda offers an honest assessment of what transpired during this period.

As African Americans in search of housing followed the old corridors to the north and west, they entered heavily German neighborhoods that retained a significant measure of their original vitality. Where the races met, the encounter quickly assumed the oil-and-water character that typified the urban North. Neighborhoods, it seemed, could either be black or white, but rarely both ... [The attitude of residents with German descent] could best be described by the word *Gemutlichkeit*. The emphasis in Milwaukee was on domestic tranquility: a warm hearth and a pleasant home, flowers in the front yard and tomato plants in the back. From South Side to North Side, from Glendale to Greendale, white Milwaukeeans shared a common set of expectations. African Americans represented change of a different order of magnitude. Their culture was unfamiliar, and their living conditions were so patently unpleasant, that there was no room for the North Side ghetto in the inherited picture of *gemutlich* Milwaukee. As the ghetto grew and its problems became more apparent, many whites simply could not make the necessary perceptual adjustment.

The phenomenon of *urban sprawl* may have originally begun as a quest to move up and out into the quieter suburban life and may have been devoid of racial motivation. However, as the African American migration *into* the city coincided more and more with the white migration *out* of the city, *urban sprawl* gave way to what was known as *white flight*.

The civil rights movement had swept the nation in the 1950s and 60s. There was a huge push for new legislation to counteract racial segregation, and discriminatory policies in both housing and the workforce.²⁹ Marches and protests, some peaceful and some not, ran their course all over the country. On July 30, 1967, tensions at a march vying for fairer housing ordinances boiled over into a riot on Milwaukee's north side. By the conclusion of the riot, there had been 1,740 arrests, nearly 100 injuries, and three deaths.³⁰ Instances such as this added fuel to the fire

29. Tula Connell, "1950s Milwaukee: Race, Class, and a City Divided" *Labor Studies Journal* 42, no. 1 (March 2017) 33.

30. Gurda 371.

of racial tension that characterized America during this time in history. The tension also thickened during the 1970's when Federal Judge John Reynolds ordered the desegregation of the Milwaukee Public School system, which "had maintained 'a consistent and deliberate policy of racial isolation and segregation for a period of twenty years.'"³¹

In the midst of this unrest, Milwaukee's population began experiencing dramatic shift. While Milwaukee Mayor Henry Maier had predicted the city would hold one million people by 1986, the population of the city actually dropped to 628,088 people, a decrease of 110,000 from 1960 to 1990.³² People were moving farther and farther out, first out of the city to the outskirts of the county, and then even farther beyond. During the same years from 1960-1990, the total population of Waukesha, Washington and Ozaukee Counties nearly doubled while Milwaukee County gradually decreased in population.³³ What is crucial to note is that the whole population of the four-county metropolitan area only increased 12% in those thirty years.³⁴ Thus, the massive growth of the three bordering counties was characterized not by massive new growth to the area, but an emptying out of Milwaukee County and relocation into the outer three counties. The racial makeup of these "sprawling" Milwaukeeans can be recognized as distinctively white. "[The City of Milwaukee's] white population plummeted from 675,572 in 1960 to 398,033 in 1990—a decline of 41%."³⁵ The result of this trend was a city whose racial clustering earned it the title in 1990 of the fifth-most segregated big city in the country.³⁶

31. Gurda, 382.

32. Gurda 383.

33. Gurda, 383.

34. Gurda 386.

35. Gurda 386.

36. Gurda 388.

The 1980s also marked the emergence of new minority groups. The Hispanic community on Milwaukee's near south side numbered some 40,000 by 1990. Following the Vietnam war, refugees from Southeast Asia began trickling into Milwaukee's old neighborhoods all around the city. These new groups have contributed to the overall diversifying of Milwaukee, which can be seen from the most recent census which was done in 2010. The City of Milwaukee is now a city where the total minority population makes up the majority at 63% of the total population of 594,833. The longtime white majority population has now become a minority group, making up only 37% of the total population. It has been surpassed by the black population, which now makes up the single majority at 39% of the total population. Hispanic and Asian populations continue to grow, now making up 17% and 3.5% respectively of the total city population.³⁷ This diversity in the city and county of Milwaukee has largely continued to be segregated as seen by the graphic of the four-county area in Figure Three. Milwaukee's north side holds the vast majority of its black population. The south side represents a heavy Hispanic population. The white population in Milwaukee County is most heavily populated in an outer ring surrounding the two other populations, while the makeup of the three bordering counties is still almost exclusively white. The segregation trend has only increased as Milwaukee climbed from the fifth most segregated city in 1990 to be the number one most segregated metropolis of over 500,000 people in the nation.³⁸

37. 2010 Demographic Data Report. *Official Website of the City of Milwaukee*. Available at https://itmdapps.milwaukee.gov/publicApplication_SR/DemographicServlet?firstStreet=38th&secondStreet=Clinton&submit=Submit. Accessed November 10, 2018.

38. Gwen Sharp, *2010 Data on Residential Segregation*. <https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2011/03/30/2010-census-data-on-residential-segregation/> Accessed December 1, 2018.

2010 Census Data on Racial Segregation

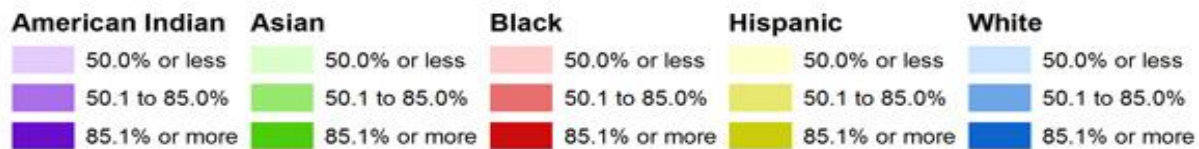
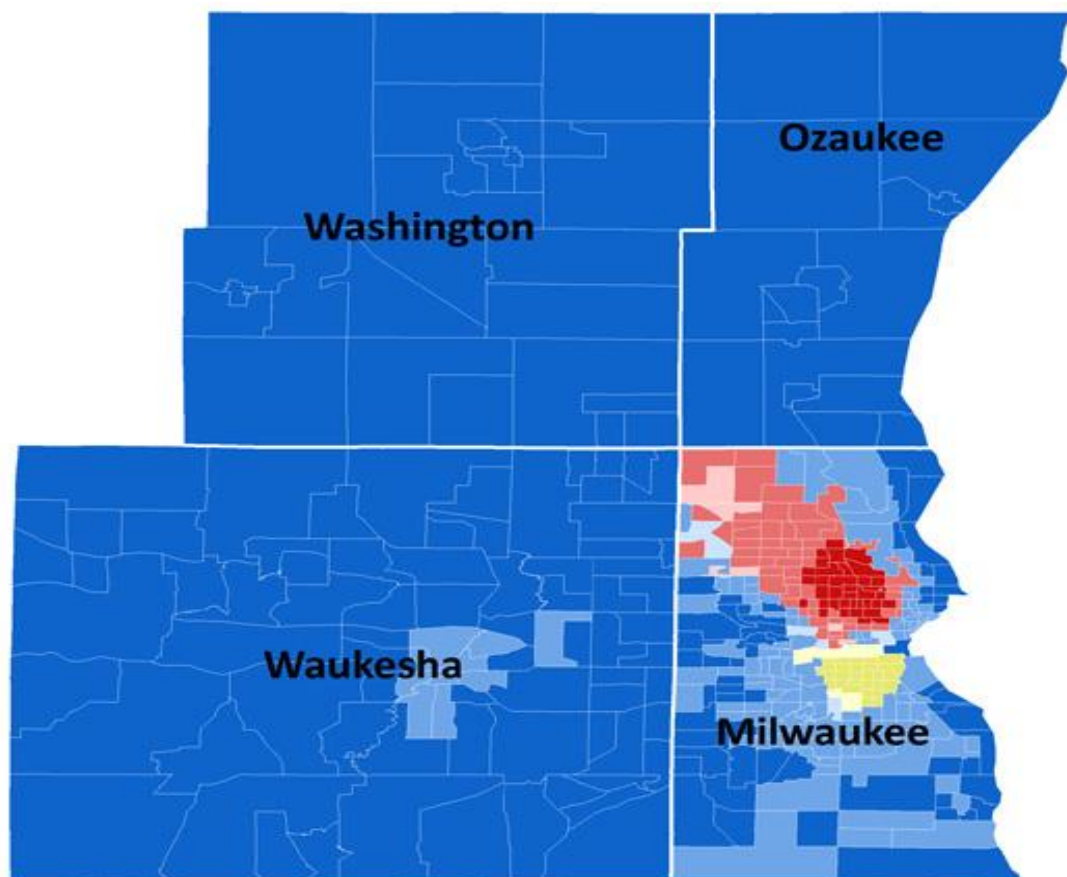


Figure Three: Source, thesocietypages.org

The Effect of the Changes on WELS in Milwaukee County

Because the heritage of the Wisconsin Synod is so distinctively German, it was no surprise when congregations in Milwaukee County were experiencing rapid expansion and growth. The massive German immigration had transplanted a huge population that was prone to

either remain in or become a part of a local Lutheran congregation. Growth continued in the county as the original immigrants gave birth to several generations of German Americans who held strongly to their culture, a significant part of which was Lutheranism. When the two world wars struck, even the mention of the word “German” aroused suspicion. When African American migrations came from the South after the two world wars, Milwaukee’s white population, much of which was German, began its trek outward, in many cases leaving their old neighborhoods and congregations behind. Since from 1960 to 1990, the city lost 41% of its white population, it is not surprising that there was a corresponding 26% drop in membership in congregations in the county. In 1960, Milwaukee’s population was still over 90% white, and that number has now dropped to 37% white. This equates to a 53% decrease in the white population of the city, which is extremely similar to the 52% decrease in total church membership in Milwaukee County over roughly the same 50-year period. There is some comfort in noting that much of this decline may just be a matter of relocation and not net loss. Just as people relocated their homes to the surrounding counties, many WELS members also relocated to new church homes in the counties surrounding Milwaukee. There is less comfort however in the new-found realities of the many congregations which endured the exodus.

Many Converging Factors

It would be unfair to say that “urban sprawl” or “white flight” is the only factor that has affected the general decline of congregations in Milwaukee County. Pastor Jonathan Hein points out a number of other factors that are contributing to the declining numbers of the WELS in general over the last twenty-five years. First, the number of infant baptisms has been declining, pointing to the fact that Americans, including WELS members, are having fewer children.

Secondly, the death rate of WELS members is also increasing, meaning that the average age of members is becoming older and congregations are transferring more members to heaven. Hein's third point describes the difficulty there has been to retain younger members, which has led to a large number of "back door losses." The fourth factor Hein points out is a recent decline in the number of adult confirmations over the past decade. The number of adult confirmations basically represents the number of non-WELS people who are becoming WELS members. As Hein puts it, "If births/baptisms are declining and deaths are rising, the only way for WELS not to decline statistically is to offset those losses through adult confirmations, [a process when adults go through doctrinal instruction and join a congregation]."³⁹ To summarize Hein's point, (from a statistical standpoint) the membership base of the WELS is shrinking at both ends and needs to increase in the middle in order to keep up.

When applying these factors to Milwaukee County, a fairly clear picture of cause and effect emerges. German immigration to Milwaukee produced a huge concentration of congregations and members, but that immigration ceased. Post-war migrations of new ethnicities began to fill the Milwaukee area, which partially coincided with and partially brought about a relocation of Milwaukee's white population to the suburbs, much of which was German in heritage. WELS congregations have felt this decline in numbers resulting from the massive relocation combined with a general aging of the membership and a decreased number of infant baptisms and adult confirmations. The new African-American and Hispanic ethnicities that began to reside in the areas where WELS churches were located did not bear the same cultural ties with Lutheranism as that of their German predecessors. The historic religious roots of the African American and Hispanic ethnic groups tend much more toward Reformed or Roman

39. Jon Hein, Demographic Report, 12.

Catholic Christianity. Racial and economic tensions have also significantly contributed to the difficulty WELS congregations have faced in reaching out to their new neighbors. One such example, though there are many similar ones, is historic St. John's on 8th and Vliet. In an article entitled *Breaking Faith: Religion, Americanism and Civil Rights in Postwar Milwaukee*, Kevin Smith describes the situation St. John's faced.

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church was Milwaukee's leading Wisconsin Synod institution before World War II. After the war, as many white members moved to the suburbs, the surrounding neighborhood began to attract a substantial number of African Americans... By the mid-1960s nearly all of St. John's white members had left the church, leaving nearly empty pews on Sunday morning in Milwaukee's former bastion of Wisconsin Synod Lutheranism.⁴⁰

Many of the city's congregations experienced a similar situation in the coming years, including Saron, Bethel, Ephrata, Parkside, Jerusalem, Zebaoth, and Nathanael.

Failure to Connect

Milwaukee county has changed and continues to do so; there is no doubt about that. A large portion of the people that used to make up WELS congregations in Milwaukee now lives somewhere else. A new population of people that does not have historic cultural ties to the WELS now lives in the area of many WELS congregations. However, a caution is in order not to attribute the blame for declining membership numbers to the actual change in racial and ethnic demographics. In many cases, as seen in Appendix 1, some congregations are located in areas of the county that remain largely unaffected by major shifts in demographics, and yet many of them have experienced the same decline in numbers. In those areas that have experienced a major

40. Kevin Smith, "Breaking Faith: Religion, Americanism, and Civil Right in Postwar Milwaukee" *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 20, Issue 1. 67.

demographic change, the change itself ought not be considered the cause for decline. To this point, Pastor Mark Jeske, long time pastor at St. Marcus in Milwaukee offers this clarification.

Why are Lutheran churches shriveling at such a terrible rate in the city? And pulleeze—don't anybody say 'changing neighborhood.' Do the Means of Grace work only on German-Americans? Neighborhoods may have different people-groups living in them, but they're still full of people, people with wretchedly sinful lives, people whom Jesus loves, people from whom he died and rose. Somebody must be moving into the houses that German-American people are selling.⁴¹

The cause of decline, then, is not the changing of neighborhoods itself. Rather, in many cases, people's negative reaction to the change in demographics is to blame for declining numbers.

There may be any number of reactions, including blatant racism, more subtle forms of cultural or classist preference, a flight or isolation response, or an insecure hesitation to do anything.

As a premier historian of Milwaukee, Gurda offers an opinion from a purely social, non-religious standpoint, "Milwaukeeans share an inherent complacency, a stubborn insistence that things are basically all right and won't need fixing until they are broken beyond repair." This commentary has much to say about the human race in general, but it seems especially fitting when considering the religious situation in Milwaukee. Many WELS congregations in the county have not been immune to this complacency and have struggled, hesitated, or even refused to reach out in their new contexts. In a paper submitted to the Southeastern Wisconsin District Mission Board in 1971, Kurt Koeplin, pastor at Atonement in Milwaukee, offered these comments.

The real tragedy is not so much what has happened and what is happening now, but rather what is not happening! The neighborhoods are not being harvested for the souls that are all around them! This is not an indictment; it's a sad fact. This does not seek to place blame or point fingers; it's a recognition of reality.⁴²

41. Mark Jeske, "Principles of Worship and Applications to Outreach and Multicultural Situations" Unpublished. 1996. 2.

42. Kurt Koeplin, "A 'New' Mission Horizon: The Established Church in a Declining Neighborhood", *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File*: 4

The failure to reach the neighborhoods is a troubling reality since really the only way to bring more people into the fold of God is to reach out to more people. In Milwaukee's case, this new target group of people must be the people that now make up the neighborhoods surrounding currently existing congregations.

This thesis began with just one example of my own failure to connect with two boys in the neighborhood surrounding my congregation. I proposed that my failure on that day as a native WELS Milwaukeean was representative of a general hesitancy and failure of WELS congregations in Milwaukee to take up the mission of the Savior's heart and connect with new people in their community. One personal example does not prove anything. However, the statistical decline points to a much larger number of losses than additions in membership. Another statistic that bears a significant (though not absolutely dependent) relationship to the mission efforts of a congregation is the number of adult confirmations. There is a danger for one to apply this statistic in an overly simplistic way, as if to say absolutely that congregations with no adult confirmands in a particular year did no outreach, while confirmations with several confirmands did much outreach. One congregation might aggressively reach out and not gain any new members, while another might have new members flocking in without any apparent outreach. The same congregation might do exactly the same things with the same vigor in two different years and be blessed with several confirmands in one year and none in the other. Looking at the adult confirmation statistic over a period of years may, however, be able to reveal something about whether or not a particular emphasis or effort is being placed in the area of evangelism and outreach.

When looking at the WELS Statistical Reports for the last four years, from 2014 to 2017, eighteen out of forty-three active WELS congregations in Milwaukee County averaged one adult

confirmand or less over those four years. Out of those eighteen congregations, eight did not have any adult confirmands over that period of time, while there were only four congregations that averaged ten or more adult confirmands per year. When considering these numbers, it is beneficial to keep two thoughts in mind. First, Professor Treptow’s advice is again especially relevant, “God does not call his people to specific results when they proclaim his Word.” Pastor Hein also adds a significant point,

Only the Holy Spirit, working through the Word, can move someone to see their need for a Savior and the benefits of joining a Christian church. Thus ultimately, adult confirmation numbers are out of our control. On the other hand, since believers are the way that God shares the Word with the world, it is good and right that we examine our outreach efforts to see if we are doing all we can to share the gospel.⁴³

Thus, when looking at the adult confirmation numbers, it is not safe to demand a certain total per year. However, it is fair a conclusion drawn from the numbers to assert that many Milwaukee County congregations would do well to increase their emphasis and effort in carrying out the mission of the Savior’s heart—reaching the lost.

The changed and changing nature of the county invites and urges a new focus and renewed mission emphasis that takes into account the changes which have and will continue to happen. The Milwaukee area will likely never again experience droves of Lutheran immigrants and their children who were gathered or born and baptized into the German neighborhood congregations of long ago. Now, perhaps, more than ever, congregations in Milwaukee County have the opportunity to cultivate a mindset that looks outward toward their unchurched neighbors and to execute plans for connecting them to the saving message of the gospel. The source, power, motivation, and direction for this mission come not from a desire to improve statistics or bring congregations back to their “glory days.” Rather, these crucial factors come

43. Hein, Demographic Study, 12

from the gospel, “which is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). They come from a heartfelt examination of the mission Jesus accomplished for sinners, and the mission he left for his Church to carry out.

SCRIPTURAL MISSION THEOLOGY WITH APPLICATION FOR MILWAUKEE

The Mission of the Savior's Heart

The mission of the Savior's heart is as old as sin itself. God established the Savior's mission already back in the newly corrupted garden. "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers: he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Gen 3:15). From the very first promise, God defined the Savior's role as one distinctly concerned with destroying the power of sin, death, and the Devil over sinners. A large portion of Old Testament history operates with this limited yet sufficient scope about what the coming Messiah would do. The latter half of the book of Isaiah greatly expands an understanding of what the Savior's mission was to be.

And now the LORD says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself ... he says "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth. (Isa 49:5–6)

This last phrase really provides the full scope of that which the Savior's mission consisted. He was sent to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. Isaiah then proceeds to describe different aspects of how the Savior was to carry out that mission, the most central of which was his substitutionary sacrifice for sinners. "For he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isa 53:12). But also primary to the Savior's mission is the aspect of proclamation seen in Isaiah 61:1. "The spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." This role of proclaiming the good news was such an integral part of Jesus's mission as Messiah that he quotes these very

words about himself as he reads from the scroll of Isaiah at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:21).

Jesus further expands the nature of his proclamation of peace to those far and near in Luke 15 when he tells three parables about the “lost and found.” It is beneficial to note that Jesus’s presence among the tax collectors and sinners was the very thing that provoked the muttering of the Pharisees and the need for him to tell the parables. First, the shepherd who loses one of his one hundred sheep leaves the ninety-nine and goes out desperately seeking the lost one. The woman who loses one of her ten coins searches carefully to find it. Note the great degree of rejoicing there is when both the lost sheep and coin are found. Both of these parables emphasize the urgent seeking nature of Jesus’s mission. This can also be seen in the parable of the Prodigal Son, as it is commonly called. The emphasis in this parable is not on the wayward son, but the father longing to have his son back, and rejoicing when he returned. What Jesus was teaching in these parables is specifically carried out by him in the real case of Zacchaeus the tax collector. As Jesus called this sinner down from a tree and went to his house to be his guest, he was carrying out his mission to bring salvation to the ends of the earth by bringing it to one house on that day. Then in Jesus’s own words, he spelled out his mission. “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). Zacchaeus was not a Son of Abraham by birth but became one by faith as a result of the Savior’s seeking. This was the mission of the Savior’s heart—to seek out and proclaim the good news of how he was soon to crush the Devil’s head and bring forgiveness for the world.

The Savior's Concern for Other Peoples

Just as Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would not just restore Israel, but would also be a light for the Gentiles, Jesus clearly fulfilled that prophesy during his ministry. As he travelled around, he often came upon individuals who were not sons of Abraham, and yet he showed them his heart just the same. Jesus commended the Roman centurion for having greater faith than any in Israel and then healed his paralyzed servant (Matt 8:5–13). At other times, Jesus intentionally went to Gentile regions where he encountered people and helped them. He travelled to the region of the Gadarenes, where he met two violently possessed men and drove out their demons (Matt 8:28–34). On another occasion, Jesus withdrew to the regions of Tyre and Sidon, where he met a Canaanite woman whose daughter was demon-possessed. His initial statements to her might have suggested he was only concerned about Israel. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel... It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs” (Matt 15:24,26). However, when he heard this woman's amazing response, “Yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table, (Matt 15:27)” he displayed his heart and healed her daughter at the very hour.

Finally, there is an especially significant account recorded in John 4, where Jesus spoke with the adulterous Samaritan woman. There were many things that would have usually prevented the two from speaking. First, Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other, so much so that often Jews would travel around the region of Samaria instead of going through it. Second, she was a woman, with whom a foreign man would not typically converse. Third, Jesus knew she was an adulterer. Yet at the outset of this journey we were told, “He had to go through Samaria.” (John 4:4). On this occasion, he purposefully came to this well in Samaria and asked this adulterous Samaritan woman for a drink. What resulted from this encounter? Jesus

revealed himself as Messiah to her and many Samaritans came to believe, saying, “This man really is the Savior of the World” (John 4:42). The mission of the Savior’s heart is concerned with all people.

Entrusting that Mission to His Believers

When Jesus the Great High Priest offered himself as the sacrifice to atone for sin and conquer the devil, he completed the mission appointed for him to do. As Ephesians 2:13 states, “But now in Christ Jesus you who were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” Jesus reconciled both those who were far and near to God by his death on the cross and by preaching peace to them (Eph 2:16–17). When he had accomplished his suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus entrusted his mission to his believers. “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (John 17:18). “You will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). “Go and makes disciples of all nations, baptizing ... and teaching...” (Matt 28:18). Again, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. (Mark 16:16). His beloved and redeemed people were now to carry on the mission of his own heart, to be a light for all nations and bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

This was a distinct change from the general way things had worked in the Old Testament. By God’s design, he had centered salvation in the promise of the Savior that was carried on through the descendants of Abraham, the nation of Israel. God had separated his people from all the other nations by making a covenant with them and giving them regulations to make that separation evident. The religious nature of God’s Old Testament people was essentially attractional, focused on drawing foreigners in to be part of the covenant. In Exodus 12:48, God made a special stipulation in the Passover regulations that foreigners would be allowed to eat of

the Passover if their whole household underwent circumcision. God's people were to make God's covenant attractive by living as faithful people and experiencing the blessings of God's faithful love, that others might be drawn in. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he reoriented the focus of his people to something much more missionary in nature, that is, focused outward. The proclamation of salvation is still centered in God's people, the Church, but now they are to urgently go out on the Savior's mission searching, witnessing, proclaiming good news, teaching and baptizing. The ultimate goal of this redirected mission emphasis is still essentially the same as it was in the Old Testament. The mission is to bring new souls in to share in the salvation of the household of God. Isaiah prophesied about these new souls who would become part of God's people.

And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. (Isa 56:6-7)

Just as the mission of the Savior's heart is concerned with all people, so the mission given to his Church is concerned with all people.

The early New Testament church struggled for a time with this concept of bringing in foreigners to share in God's grace. The Jewish believers were so accustomed to the laws that kept them separate from Gentiles that it was easy to fall back into avoiding the Gentiles even after God had specifically called them to preach to the Gentiles. Scripture describes this issue even among the apostles. The apostle Peter had seen in a vision that God declared the Gentiles to be clean. He had seen the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on the house of the Gentile Cornelius and had realized that God "accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:35). Yet, even Peter "began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group" (Gal 2:12). When this

happened, the apostle Paul had to publicly oppose Peter to his face and correct his sin. Even the apostles were not immune from favoring their own people and retreating from other groups and races of people. God had also called them to serve the Gentiles and therefore, to overcome their natural tendencies to serve only their own. This is a struggle that God calls his Church to overcome even to this day.

Attractional and Mission-minded

Jesus reoriented his people to first go out with the message so that they might bring people in, but to what extent is this outward missionary focus practiced today? In the book *Introducing the Missional Church*, Alan Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren propose that the dominant “imagination” of North American churches is still attractional. “The assumption of the attractional imagination is that average people outside the church are looking for a church and know they should belong to one, and therefore, church leaders should create the most attractive attractional church possible.”⁴⁴ Roxburgh and Boren do not argue against doing things in an attractive way, but they recognize the assumption that people are looking for a church is becoming less and less true. Scott Sunquist echoes that same notion in his book *Understanding Christian Mission*, when he tells the story of a man who just happened to walk in to church one morning seeking to become a member of the church. Since this does sometimes happen, Sunquist offers this comment.

It would be wrong to suggest the “attractional” model is entirely bad.... People do walk into churches seeking God, but most of those who come to faith are found by a church, or church members, going out in mission. The local church should have a missionary posture; it must see itself as a missionary presence in each place, in each parish.⁴⁵

44. Roxburgh and Boren 18.

45. Scott Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013) 300.

The problem that arises is when local churches shift out of a missionary posture and assume that a steady stream of people is just going to walk in the front door and seek membership. Sometimes this problem happens as a reaction to a period when God did bless congregations with a huge influx of people streaming in the front door. Pastor Jeske cites the example of St John's on Vliet St., whose pastor, Johannes Bading, was baptizing 200-250 people a year in the 1880s.⁴⁶ Congregations grew accustomed to that pattern during the years of feast but have struggled to assume a missionary posture during the lean years of the past several decades. Let us here remember the Savior's mission to seek and save the lost, lest we forget to seek. Let us also remember Paul's rebuke to Peter, lest we draw back to serve only our own. Carrying on the mission the Savior entrusted to his Church entails a consistent and continual emphasis on actively seeking the lost in one's community, no matter who they are or what they look like. The Church prizes the responsibility to go out and be witnesses and proclaimers of the gospel to those who do not yet believe. What a mission and privilege Jesus has given his Church.

Growing Passive

What happens to this mission and privilege? In his book *Activating the Passive Church*, Lyle Schaller spells out numerous reasons, causes, and effects for churches that have grown passive. At the top of the list, he argues that the "most common sources of passivity in a congregation is the effect of the sense of mission's being eroded and replaced by a priority on institutional self-preservation."⁴⁷ This often coincides with a period of decline in the numerical

46. Jeske, *Worship*, 3

47. Lyle Schaller, *Activating the Passive Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981) 52.

size of the church. According to Schaller, the loss of mission focus leads to decline, and the decline further leads to more focus on preservation rather than on mission. In this self-preservation mode, balancing the budget and keeping the bills paid unintentionally becomes a higher priority than reaching the lost. There are certainly vital items of maintenance and operation that demand careful attention, but these preservation items must serve the mission of the congregation rather than becoming the end goal. In this phase, there is usually a small amount of new people coming in and a heavy reliance on the same people who have always contributed their time and talents to make things run. This often ends in volunteer exhaustion and a larger void to fill in maintaining the institution. All of these factors have a spiraling effect as loss of mission results in decline and decline causes members to evaluate their own congregation as “small, weak, inept, unfaithful, unsuccessful, dull, uninteresting, dying and without a future.”⁴⁸ This low self-image usually results in a feeling of powerlessness and a self-fulfilling prophecy of a nearing end.

Near the end of his extensive study of Milwaukee history, Gurda, as he looks to the future, notes the tendency for people to look ahead with little hope for change. For those who view the long trends and continued social problems as a death sentence for Milwaukee’s social makeup, he urges them to consider “Ezra Pound’s wicked parody of melancholic English poet A.E. Housman.”

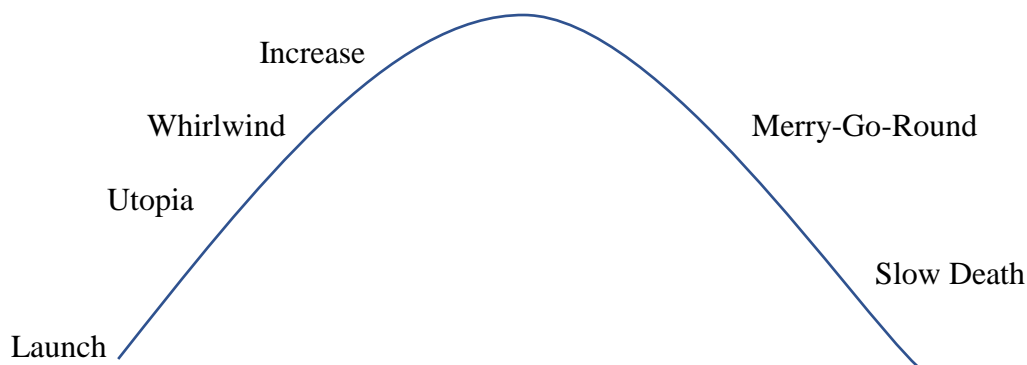
O woe, woe
People are born and die,
We also shall be dead pretty soon
Therefore let us act as if we were dead already.⁴⁹

48. Schaller, *Activating*, 61.

49. Gurda 436

If we take an honest look, does this not strike a familiar chord with the sentiment felt in many Milwaukee County congregations? Pastor Jeske suggests the way this sentiment takes form, “We assume dying city churches is God’s plan, or that it is the fault of our evil world, or that it is our destiny to be a small, suffering church.”⁵⁰ This attitude is much the opposite of the implied vigor with which Christ commissioned his Church. “Go into all creation . . .” (Mark 16:16). Remember the urgency with which the shepherd left the flock to seek out the lost sheep. Remember the joy that filled his heart and spilled over to others as he celebrated with them his lost sheep now found. Remember the joy in heaven Jesus spoke of over one sinner who repents. He called his Church to urgency, activity, optimism and joy in their mission.

A key element to turning the tide of passivity and returning to an optimistic mission mindset comes simply by moving past denial through a process of assessment and realization. Chris Sonksen, author of *When Your Church Feels Stuck*, pictures the lifecycle of a congregation as the following curve.⁵¹



He then proposes the critical task of identifying where a congregation is its lifecycle so that the appropriate conversations can happen about its future. Looking specifically at the down side of

50. Jeske, Worship 3

51. Chris Sonksen, *When Your Church Feels Stuck* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017) 48.

the curve, Sonksen explains that as a congregation enters the Merry-Go-Round phase, it continues to make itself busy with programs and maintenance, but leaders and members both have drifted away from a mission mindset and often feel as if they are going through the motions.⁵² As a congregation proceeds to the end of its life-cycle, the phase called Slow Death is often characterized by a clinging to the way things have always been and a refusal to change at all costs. Yet, reaching the downward side of the life-cycle is not a certain death sentence. When a congregation recognizes that it is moving toward a point from which there is no return, that stark reality can serve as the mirror that initiates change. Through his Word, the Holy Spirit can lead his people to repent of complacency, of stubbornness, or putting their personal preference above the mission of the Church. When repentance is worked in these areas, then the gospel once again empowers a rededication and refocusing that may help a congregation to recycle its life cycle and return to a thriving ministry.

A great deal of time was spent exploring statistical information and a projection of what Milwaukee County might look like if trends continue. The purpose was not to be the harbinger of doom, but rather to lead to the realization that many congregations may well be nearing the final phases of their life cycle. A change in direction is certainly still possible, if and when the Spirit pleases and by his power, but it will not happen by clinging to the same complacent mindset. Positive change must be intentional.

Refocusing Mission and Vision

Any number of authors such as Sonksen, Schaller, and Kevin Harney and Bob Bower, the authors of *The U-Turn Church*, will agree on the vital process of a congregation defining its

52. Sonksen, *Stuck*, 60.

role, identifying its mission in its context, and sharing the vision with every member and leader of the congregation. This planning process marks an intentional turning point and provides an opportunity to clarify what the congregation exists to do. It also clarifies how the congregation will carry out its mission among the people already being served and the people that it hopes to serve in the future. It should be noted well that this is a process. There may be many steps and sessions to bring about a contextual mission statement that centers in Christ, addresses the congregation's and community's needs, and can be realistically carried out by the members of the congregation. A first step involves a genuine study of Christ's mission for his Church by both called workers, congregational leaders, and as many members as possible. This study of God's Word establishes the divine source and urgent necessity of Christ's mission, along with the gospel power and motivation for carrying it out.

A study of Christ's mission is followed by an input-gathering stage, which helps to determine a congregation's direction in its context. It asks questions like, "What are perceived needs of our community?" and "What are our strengths as a congregation?" At the outset, it is best to get as much input as possible, whether that be by listening sessions, interviews, or Bible-class discussions. This promotes congregational buy-in and ownership of the process, as members have a chance to express what they see as strengths, weaknesses, and areas of opportunity. It is vital that this input and feedback is honestly received, carefully reflected upon, and factored into the next steps of planning. Another one of Schaller's causes of congregational passivity is going through a process of soliciting ideas, suggestions, criticisms, and recommendations and then having all of it be ignored by the leadership.⁵³ Sonksen recommends a smaller group of 4-8 committed leaders to formulate the congregational input into a short

53. Schaller, *Activating*, 55.

mission or vision statement. Everybody can contribute something to the discussion, but a smaller group is needed to produce a precise statement. Harney and Bouwer advise something short and memorable, tightly-connected, with a bit of flair and artfulness.⁵⁴ Once the mission statement has been formulated and adopted, they adamantly emphasize the importance of teaching it, reviewing it, and emblazoning it in the hearts and minds of members.

The truth is, many churches have these kinds of statements on the records. Some time in their history, the church gathered a group of people to write a statement, or the pastor crafted some kind of vision declaration. But sadly, it is not guiding the practice and direction of the church. If a church is going to function with crystal-clear vision, it needs to be in writing. But it also needs to be on the front burner of the church ministry at all times. Everyone must know it. Leaders must follow it. And this vision needs to guide the direction of all the church ministries.⁵⁵

A small caution is in order that the mission statement does not trump Christ's command or the rest of his Word but summarizes and reflects it in a precise statement for a specific context and location.

The whole point of this mission statement is to clarify what the congregation is there to do and communicate to everyone that they have a role in doing it. The mission statement is a tool to help foster a mission mindset, a focus on others rather than self. As leaders and members reflect on the mission of the congregation, the process leads them to ask questions about what they can do in service to the mission. "Are there worship guests that I can meet and welcome, or is there some way I can help them during the service?" "Is there something ordinary that I might be able to do, so pastor can focus more on something I can't do?" The mission statement takes the mission of the Savior's heart and identifies how to put it into practice in a contextual way in

54. Harney and Bouwer, *U-Turn*, 44.

55. Harney and Bouwer, *U-Turn*, 44.

the congregation and community. How this mission is carried out and with what tools is where we turn our attention next.

Mission Inseparably Connected to Means of Grace

As the Savior prepared to ascend to his Father, he prepared his Church for their ongoing mission. He gave to them the keys to the kingdom of heaven, often referred to as the binding and the loosing key. “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:21). The Church was to be specifically concerned about the proclamation of both law and gospel and the forgiveness of sins. When Jesus commissioned his Church to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them, he tied that mission inseparably to the means of grace, the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. In outreach contexts, the fitting sacrament is ordinarily baptism, the sacrament of initiation. Then, as learning disciples undergo further instruction in the Word of God, the sacrament of Holy Communion becomes an appropriate means of offering the forgiveness of sins and joining in the unity of the confession of faith they have come to believe. The gospel in Word, as it is proclaimed, heard, and read, and in Sacrament, as it is connected by Jesus’s promise to the earthly elements, are the only means by which the Church can truly carry out its mission of making disciples.

The problem with much of the literature that has been written about carrying out Christ’s mission disregards and misunderstands the crucial connection that exists between mission and the means of grace. Instead of the means of grace, many authors, who come from a Reformed perspective of theology, substitute methods for bringing people to faith. The basic premise is this, “If you do this... your church will grow.” In Gary McIntosh’s book *Growing God’s Church*,

he includes an entire chapter entitled, “What Method Most Influenced Your Decision for Christ.”⁵⁶ While it certainly is important to consider effective methods of gaining a hearing for the gospel, the method should never receive the credit that is due the Holy Spirit and the means of grace. As the Lutheran Confessions state in the Article II of the *Epitome of the Formula of Concord*.

Therefore, before the conversion of the human being there are only two efficient causes, the Holy Spirit and God’s Word as the instrument of the Holy Spirit, through which he effects conversion; the human creature must hear this Word, but cannot believe it on the basis of its own powers but only through the grace and action of God the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷

With these thoughts in mind, it is vital for congregations to remember the central importance of the means of grace. There may be a great deal of necessary change in aspects of methodology and mission approach, but there must never be a change in or compromise of God’s Word. This will never produce true growth in God’s kingdom, but only division. The means of grace also must never be set aside for more “current” or “effective” methods, as if those existed. The Holy Spirit accompanies his Word and the Sacraments, and those are the tools of growth with which to carry out the Church’s mission.

The Means of Grace Conveyed by People

In a paper entitled “Treasure in Jars of Clay: The Synergy Between the Instrumental and Ministerial Causes in God’s Plan of Salvation,” Pastor Jonathan Hein describes how the instrumental cause—the means of grace—and the ministerial cause—the ministers and people

56. Gary McIntosh, *Growing God’s Church: How People Are Actually Coming to Faith Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016) 103.

57. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, “Epitome of the Formula of Concord” *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 494.

God uses—work closely together.⁵⁸ People play a vital role in God’s saving work by utilizing the Word and Sacraments. The synergy between these causes is expressed most clearly in Romans 10:13–14, “For ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” The Word works to create faith, and someone preaches it, shares it, sings it, posts it. The next important clarification Hein makes is that the Word works both supernaturally and psychologically. It works supernaturally by God’s power in a way that cannot be understood and causes people to believe things that are impossible to understand. Yet, it also works psychologically, touching our intellect, will, and emotions.⁵⁹ This means that the way the Word is communicated is also important and should be done in a humanly excellent and effective way. God’s agents cannot add power to his Word, but they can certainly hinder the Word from being received by robbing its beauty and presenting it in a way that is cold, confusing, or irrelevant. Therefore, communication and methodology are important and are not to be disregarded as though the Word works only supernaturally. A further treatment of psychologically effective methods for sharing the Word or gaining an opportunity to share the Word will be given later in the section on insights from pastors for outreach.

The Savior’s Mission as Theology of the Cross

Previously it was stated that Christ gave his mission to be carried out with urgency, joy and optimism. This should not be taken to suggest that everything will be happy-go-lucky, that

58. Jonathan Hein, “Treasure in Jars of Clay: The Synergy Between the Instrumental and Ministerial Causes in God’s Plan of Salvation” *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File* (accessed December 7th, 2018) 3.

59. Hein, *Treasure*, 8.

everyone will love the gospel and the Church will grow at all times. Jesus gave a promise to his Church that is much to the contrary. “All men will hate you because of me” (Matt 10:12). Then again in his prayer to the Father on behalf of his believers, he laments, “I have given them your word and the world has hated them.” (John 17:14). These are not the most encouraging verses to consider in a mission context, but in a way, they provide comfort. The unbelieving world will hate believers just as Jesus said it would. As always, he was right, and now his Church can heed his warning and brace for it.

Spreading the good news of Jesus will often not be easy, nor will it always be met with great visible success. To the laboring pastor or the gospel-proclaiming congregation, that reality is hard to swallow. After all, the way Jesus told his “lost and found” parables makes sense to the human mind. The shepherd urgently sought the lost sheep and experienced the immense joy when he found it. The woman searched for her lost coin and rejoiced when she found it. In these parables, joy hinges on the happy ending. So where is the joy in doing all the seeking, but very little finding? Where is the joy in a thousand invites without a single new person showing up? How is a pastor to maintain a joyful optimism about teaching Bible instruction classes as he struggles to come up with one out of the last thirty people he has taught who remains an active member? What room is there for optimism in a congregation or pastor’s ministry when all it seems to amount to is decades of numerical decline and earthly failure? Humans have a natural tendency to be theologians of glory. They demand to see growth and success as a mark of the Church and proof of genuine ministry. Pastor Robert Koester, author of *Law & Gospel: Foundation of Lutheran Ministry*, maintains that this brand of success theology has captivated the Church Growth Movement and pervades much of the popular literature about mission and

congregational health.⁶⁰ Does Jesus suggest this way of thinking in his parables—to expect and demand success after searching?

In Jesus’s parable of the Sower and the Seed in Mark 4, Jesus spoke of four different results for the seed, depending on where it fell. The seed that fell along the path, on the rocky places, or among the weeds, was all either snatched away or killed off after it sprouted. The interpretation is clearly given. Satan snatches away the seed from some right away. In other cases, the seed of the Word sprouts faith, but later that faith dies off or is choked out by persecution or the desires of this world. In only one of the scenarios does the Word take root and produce a lasting crop of faith. Jesus is making the point that some, even many, will hear the Word and will fall away. Though this reality is certainly not desired, it is to be expected and is part of the cross Jesus calls his believers to bear. The job of the sower still remains the same—to sow. Jesus illustrates that point in a second parable in Mark 4:26–29. A sower scatters seed, which takes root and grows to bear fruit though the sower knows not how the growth happened, nor did he cause it.

Just as salvation did not come through earthly success, but by the Savior’s bearing of the cross, so also the mission efforts of believers may not be blessed with success or crowned with glory. Salvation came through the cross and also brings a cross for believers. As the Apostle Paul told the Philippians, “It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.” (Phil 1:29). Under the burden of the cross, the Church proclaims the gospel and administers the sacraments, its true and proper marks. What then brings joy and optimism, if it does not depend on the result of a soul being won for Christ? How can WELS congregations in Milwaukee joyfully and optimistically carry out the mission of the Savior’s

60. Robert Koester, *Law & Gospel: Foundation of Lutheran Ministry* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House 1993) 123.

heart with the pressures of decline trying to squelch their zeal. The Savior we serve and the lifegiving message with which he sends us fuels us with enough joy to last a lifetime, even without another ounce of visible success. The apostles expressed that joy in their mission and message in Acts 5 after they had been flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus. “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 5:41–42).

Mission to the City and the Temptation to Run Away

The book of Jonah often has the same effect as a children’s sermon prop. The prop gets all the attention and the message it is supposed to convey gets forgotten. God does something very special and unordinary in calling the prophet Jonah to go the Gentile city of Nineveh. This was the capital city of Israel’s biggest rival and enemy, Assyria. At least from a selfish human standpoint, Jonah had good reason not to go preach against the city as God had called him to do. Why would he want to help save the enemy of his people? Thus, he ran away and embarked on a ship headed the other direction. Nevertheless, God had his set purpose for Jonah in Nineveh. So, God sends a storm to get Jonah thrown overboard. Then God carries out an amazing act of law and gospel in having quite literally sending a great fish to rescue his wayward prophet by swallowing him whole and vomiting him out on land. What God is making crystal clear in all this is just how important the mission is, which he is calling Jonah to do. “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.... Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned” (Jonah 3:2). While God’s swimming prop, the real live fish that swallowed Jonah, often gets all the press, the point of the book of Jonah is God’s concern for a city of “One-

hundred twenty thousand people who don't know their right hand from their left" (Jonah 4:11). This is the message we need to remember. God is concerned for the great masses of people in the city. When people are called to serve there, he wants it done!

Earlier it was shown that the population of the City of Milwaukee has been radiating out into the outer regions of the county and beyond. Congregations have moved farther out of the central city. It seems a significant portion of WELS membership in the county has also relocated to more suburban areas. God does not tell his people where they must live. That is certainly a matter of freedom. However, there is a potential for even a free decision of where to live to be a spiritual issue. Professor E. Allen Sorum, who formerly served at Garden Homes in Milwaukee, writes in his book *Change: Mission and Ministry Across Cultures*, "I will suggest that we judge carefully our motivation for preferring the suburbs over the city. This is a spiritual issue."⁶¹ If moving to the suburbs is motivated by racism or classism, then it is sin. If these same issues cause members to join another church or congregations to relocate, then it is falling into the temptation to run away from God's commission to preach to all creation.

In the nearly five decades since the Civil Rights Movement, there has been some visible progress regarding race issues and especially segregations laws. The blatant racism of American slavery has at least partially died off with an older generation or retreated into more subtle forms of racism or classism. One such example is called ethnocentrism. Professor Sorum explains the concept of ethnocentrism in this way: "the tendency of humans to levy a judgment upon another culture using their culture as the standard of excellence."⁶² This is much harder to be rid of, even

61. E. Allen Sorum, *Change: Mission and Ministry Across Cultures* (Milwaukee: WELS Outreach Resources, 1993) 36.

62. Sorum, *Change*, 66.

for Christians. Certainly, it is fitting that people grow a certain preference for styles or the way of life they have grown accustomed to according to their culture. The problem is that this preference becomes the only right way and leads to the exclusion or belittling of other cultures or styles. It also leads to an unwillingness to accommodate some aspects of worship, such as music or sermon style, to fit a new cultural norm. Sorum offers this view on ethnocentrism.

It is not enough for you to have a few different ethnic faces in your congregation whom you expect to conform to your congregational culture, worship style, decision making process, and fellowship activities. This kind of cultural insensitivity makes it highly unlikely that you will ever grow a church for Christ in a new culture, a church that is sensitive to and respectful of that culture and a church that will gather in and disciple greater number of new members from that culture.⁶³

African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and German Americans all possess vastly different cultural traits, yet they can each recognize the value of each other's culture and the unity believers share in Christ. "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

I am not the first one to discover or write about the issues facing the city of Milwaukee. Papers such as "A 'New' Mission Horizon: The Established Church in a Declining Neighborhood" by Atonement pastor Kurt Koeplin and "Extent and Limitation of the Great Commission in Inner City Church Work" by Carl Lawrenz were written in the early 1970s. Professor Sorum's congregational resource *Change: Mission and Ministry across Cultures* was written and revised in the 1990s. Yet, the trends of decline and the general struggle to reach out are still ongoing in 2018. The Church will always struggle to reach out because it is comprised of saints who are at the same time sinners. They are prone to care only about themselves. They have an enemy, the devil, desperately working to silence them and they are affected by the sinful

63. Sorum, *Change*, 139.

environment in which they live. These sinners also have a Savior who poured out his blood for them and calls them to action. In the face of these struggles, there is always a place for self-reflection and repentance. Just as Dr. Luther submitted that the whole life of a Christian is one of continued repentance, so the life of the Church is one of continued refocusing on the mission of the Savior's heart—proclaiming the gospel that others might have eternal life.

PRACTICAL INSIGHTS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH MILWAUKEE COUNTY PASTORS

In the first section of this thesis I attempted to give a summary and picture of WELS congregations in Milwaukee County with a historical perspective of the area. In the second section, I set forth a distinctly Lutheran mission theology formulated by our Savior's work and commission to us. In the pages that follow I will provide insights for outreach methodology and strategies gained from twelve interviews with pastors who have served or are currently serving congregations in Milwaukee County. Professor Sorum describes the importance of doing so.

We can decide corporately and appropriately to develop strategies that will get the precious, life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ to the growing population of our ethnic neighbors. Or we can decide to be an insulated holdout of traditional ministry to white middle-class nuclear families. To make no decision or to agonize too long over a decision is only an expeditious choosing of the second alternative.

Sorum's assertion is directed specifically toward developing multi-cultural ministry strategies.

This does represent a primary concern in Milwaukee County, but the point also applies to the parts of the county that are still ministering in areas still largely made up of a white population. It is still necessary to develop strategies that fit contextually with your location and place in time.

The pastors who were interviewed make up a wide sampling of ministers in the county with varying years of pastoral experience and varying settings in ministry. Some serve at congregations that have been growing steadily over the last twenty-five years. Others offer the ministry perspective of congregations that have been getting smaller. Both perspectives are helpful because they offer insights on the one hand into what methods are working well, and on the other hand, how they are adapting to some of the present-day challenges. As there were a wide variety of situations, the insights will be broken down into themes.

Pastoral Leadership Breeds Mission Mindset

An initial insight came not so much from anything a specific pastor said, but rather from the way each man carried himself. The leadership of a pastor in his congregation has a profound effect on the congregation. In a 2018 paper delivered at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium, Professor David Scharf quoted John MacArthur saying, “Optimistic enthusiasm inspires followers. People will naturally follow a leader who arouses their hopes, and they will just as surely back away from someone who is perpetually pessimistic.”⁶⁴ To a large degree, the pastor’s mindset becomes the people’s mindset. While constantly striving to maintain an optimistic enthusiasm reflective of the gospel he represents, a pastor is tasked with carrying out four different aspects of leadership. In Pastor Hein’s paper at the same symposium, he described the spiritual, relational, operational, and replicational aspect of leadership.⁶⁵ The pastor-shepherd leads his people into Scripture to help them apply it. He nourishes relationships for encouragement and harmony. He organizes and manages resources to do what needs to be done in the congregation. Finally, he expands gospel efforts by equipping others to do what he does. In the midst of trying to tirelessly balance these important tasks with a full load of preaching and visiting, there comes a constant challenge. How do you do it without looking “overworked and joyless”? Scharf answers, “Remember, they are watching. Show them the privilege and the joy you have [in Jesus].”⁶⁶

64. David Scharf, “St. Paul and Martin Luther: Paradigms of Shepherd-Leaders” (delivered at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium, September 2018) 9.

65. Jonathan Hein, “The Shepherd-Leader at Work: Moving Forward” (delivered at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium, September 2018) 11.

66. Scharf 14.

Ministry Planning

The concept of ministry planning was almost unanimously confirmed as vital to an aggressive mindset. Pastor Ken Fisher, who previously served at Risen Savior in Milwaukee, stated that he took the congregation through a ministry planning process three times during his twelve years of service there. For him, this was a way to constantly review and educate the congregation about what the mission of the Church is. Fisher stated, “I honestly believe that WELS people are willing to change. We all struggle with change, but if they know the reason why, then they are willing to change.... they knew we needed to.”⁶⁷ Both Pastor Fisher and Pastor James Huebner, from Grace in downtown Milwaukee, mentioned a general format for this planning. It starts with settling on a scripturally powered mission to the people you are trying to serve, followed by programs to serve them, and acquiring the needed staff and facilities to do it. Huebner stated, “If a congregation is going to do some kind of turn-around, where their mindset isn’t just, ‘Take care of ourselves,’ but they actually want to touch more souls, then they have to get into the Scriptures and find out what God has to say about why we are here on earth.”⁶⁸ Once members of a congregation have taken this step, then they can put it into writing and commit to it. It was interesting that Pastor Huebner and Pastor Kyle Bitter, from St John’s, Wauwatosa, shied away from a typical ten-year plan and suggested that a plan looking six years ahead was a more practical reality. Materials for this kind of planning are available in the WELS School of Outreach resources that the WELS has previously published, and new resources will soon be

67. Ken Fisher, Interview, October 15, 2018.

68. James Huebner, Interview, October 24, 2018.

available from the Commission on Congregational Counseling.⁶⁹ This commission also exists to help congregations assess their situations, work through challenges, and plan for ministry.

Community Awareness

The pastors were asked to describe both the demographics of their congregation as well as the demographics of their community. In many cases, pastors related the inconsistency there was in comparing the two. Often, they noted their congregation was still predominantly white while their community was predominantly African American, for example, or a different ethnic group. To be aware of this is a first needed step in the process of trying to bring more people from the community into the congregation. The demographic makeup of a community can certainly be observed with the eyes, but often the results of a demographic study based on actual census data can reveal a hidden reality. For example, I grew up within one mile of the congregation I currently serve as a ministry assistant. While I operated with the assumption that the neighborhood was about a half and half mix of white and black folks, I was surprised to find out that 75% of the people living within a one-mile radius were from a minority population. Therefore, it is wise to consult demographic information that can often be obtained freely from city or county records or from a paid demographic service. Once the congregation understands whom it is trying to serve, then the members can go about trying to understand how to serve their community.

In *Change*, Professor Sorum also strongly advised a demographic study of the community, followed by ethnographic interviews. An ethnographic interview includes a series of questions designed to find out straight from the mouths of people you are trying to serve what

69. These resources are available from the resource center at wels.net

their needs and hurts are. When interviewed, Sorum stated, “You need to figure out how to be church to them, how to be a relevant witness.”⁷⁰ This step of firsthand listening will help to uncover opportunities to apply law and gospel and will aid the process of developing specific mission and ministry strategies.⁷¹ Roxburgh and Boren, who are proponents of a what is called the *missional church*, advise this same kind of process. As with the term *church growth*, the term *missional* can often be associated with a theology that devalues the role of the means of grace and the public ministry. Thus, there is good reason to read this missional literature carefully, but there is a helpful emphasis on entering the community. This is when leaders “spend time entering the lives of the people in their neighborhoods, engaging their stories, and then [asking] questions about church structures and strategies that would best serve the people of the surrounding communities.”⁷² This process leads to a much more genuine and careful understanding of how to serve the community than when leaders simply go with what they think they know.

Community Presence

Once members have identified the people they are trying to serve and what their needs are, then they can go about figuring out how to serve them. Ultimately the best methods for gaining a hearing for the gospel and sharing it are the ones that you learn work best in your community. Different pastors stated all kinds of unique community events or programs that they were able to host or provide some form of service. From neighborhood rummage sales to joining the chamber of commerce, even to something as simple as handing out hot cocoa at a winter

70. E. Allen Sorum, Interview, October 16, 2018.

71. Sorum, *Change*, 143.

72. Roxburgh and Boren 85.

festival, these are all ways to let your community know you are there and that you care. Much of this type of community engagement is not strictly evangelism in the sense of sharing the gospel, but is often a way to gain name recognition, to demonstrate Christian love, and to invite to a hearing of the gospel.

On the other hand, there are many ways to specifically and directly share the good news about Jesus. The Lighthouse Youth Centers located at both Redemption and Garden Homes provide a safe and caring place for youths to come daily and hear devotions from God's Word. This is a way to provide a valuable community service and at the same time a genuine witness to Christ. In other cases, it might be door-to-door knocking and canvassing. Professor Sorum noted that he took a group canvassing often, and frequently got the chance to share a law/gospel messages in people's homes.

Intentionality

The previous methods or practices were all examples of intentional and organized outreach efforts. Pastor Huebner stated, "Congregations should not ever stop, in my opinion, an organized approach to evangelism—where you do your advertising, mailings, events, etc.... It raises your identity in the community so that when people are in need, they know who you are." This organized approach demands planning and logically then, someone to plan it. It will not just happen or fall into place on its own. When consulting with many different size congregations, there was a large variety in how congregations were structured to carry out this regular planning and consistent activity. The concept of a specific evangelism pastor is becoming much more prevalent in congregations with more than one pastor. In other cases, there were still evangelism teams or committees, though the term committee is largely falling by the wayside because of its

association with long meetings and terms of service. In any case, whether it is one person or many, it is essential for someone to be specifically tasked with investigating opportunities and initiating plans for outreach activity.

Another benefit of intentionally planning outreach events or services is that it gives people something special to which they can invite their friends or neighbors. Typical members might not overcome their silence to invite someone to a normal Sunday service, but they may be much more likely to invite someone to a special festival service with a meal or something else designed specifically for outreach. Most of the time, a mission mindset breeds intentional activity, but in some cases, having scheduled activities or events leads people to think more about whom they can invite and then the importance of actually doing it.

Culture of Outreach

In an interview with Pastor William Dunn, a recent graduate now serving a bi-lingual role for Hispanic outreach at St. Peter on Milwaukee's south side, he stated, "Our outreach isn't so much door to door activity yet, it's a culture."⁷³ He went on to describe the relational enthusiastic feel of members who are excited about their church. They are proud of their congregation and are willing to invite people to it. Then it is a matter of engaging new faces with a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Pastor Huebner described the most effective practice in his congregation's outreach efforts still to be friendship evangelism. This is where your members simply invite the people they know—friends, relatives, associates, neighbors (so-called FRAN evangelism)—to come experience what is so meaningful in their lives. Pastor Huebner called it

73. William Dunn, Interview, October 25, 2018.

the “satisfied customer” factor, which encourages members to pass on what they have found. “This is where I have Jesus ... and I’d like you to have that too .”⁷⁴ Because this relational evangelism has continued to be the most effective means of bringing in new people, an important factor then is carrying out your worship with excellence. When people are excited about their relationship with Jesus and are proud of well-done worship, then they are much more likely to invite others to come. This corresponds with the psychological working of the Word. Excellence does not add power to the gospel, but a boring or sloppy presentation can certainly hinder it from being heard and taken to heart.

Among the “Sinners”

Remembering what was said in the mission theology portion of this thesis about Jesus spending time among the sinners and actually seeking out the lost, it is important to set aside a healthy amount of time for being among unchurched people. Pastor Mark Jeske, from St. Marcus, pointed to a real-life example that can lead to a new way of thinking in this area. The WELS church softball league in Milwaukee used to have a rule where you could only have a few players that were not members on your team. The point was to make sure some churches would not stack their team with good players who had nothing to do with church. Jeske then pointed to the ten-thousand-member non-denominational church with its own softball league. This league had a much different rule, however. Their teams could have no more than half of their team be church members, so that their members could bring buddies to play ball with, have a drink with, and form normal relationships. From that softball team relationship, they had a much more

74. Huebner, Interview, October 24.

natural connection to model Christianity and invite their teammates to their homes for a group get-together with a Bible study, or to attend a worship service.

All of this comes down to taking advantage of opportunities where you encounter people who need to hear about Jesus. Jeske suggested trying to have at least two meaningful spiritual conversations a week with someone outside your church. This strategy puts a focus back on members and called workers being everyday missionaries in their world and not just servants of their congregation.

Worship Welcome and Follow-Up

A great deal of effort and emphasis must be put into reaching out to invite people to worship. There also needs to be an intentional plan for what a congregation does to capitalize on every opportunity, every soul, who shows up. Pastor Nathan Strutz, who serves at Resurrection Lutheran, a multi-site congregation in Verona and Monroe, Wisconsin, frequently remarked, “Worship guests are magicians. They appear out of thin air as the bell is ringing and vanish just as quickly after the service.” This often makes it difficult to make meaningful contact and even more so, to get needed information for following up. This also demands planning. Do members know they are responsible for greeting someone they don’t recognize? Are there a select few who are not wearing greeter nametags that are specifically tasked with introducing themselves? These are the kind of questions that lead members from mission mindset to actually putting it into practice on a Sunday.

The second challenge is how to get their information. The friendship registers at the back of church or in the pews still seems to be the most common method, though many pastors indicated that this system lacks effectiveness. Pastor Kyle Bitter, at St. John’s Wauwatosa,

indicated that they also had separate guest cards available, and noted that there are a growing number of churches using “connection cards.” These are inserts in the bulletin on which members and guests alike can leave their information and put it into the offering plate. The hope behind this strategy is that guests see everyone filling it out and feel inclined to do so also, and it gives them something to put into the offering plate.

Whatever information is received becomes a treasure trove, stored carefully in a file or database and used. Professor Sorum remembered with a degree of fondness his days of “persistent, dogged follow-up,”⁷⁵ often visiting the same prospect some six or seven times. Several pastors did indicate that their follow-up process could use more organization. Generally, they espoused the principle of a follow-up visit in person within one to three days, followed by lay-members bringing a welcome gift in the next two to three weeks. After this initial process, the prospect receives continued visits or invitations to worship and Bible instruction class.

Lay-leader Training and Equipping

All of this, no doubt, takes a great deal of time and effort. No matter how faithful a pastor is in his duties, there will always be more to do. That is why it is also vital to remember that “Christ gave ... pastors and teachers to equip God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:11). In his demographic study of the WELS, Pastor Hein points out that 88% of WELS members responded positively about their willingness to receive training for outreach.⁷⁶ This training for outreach can be done as a part of regular Bible classes or as special seminars at different times throughout the year. Pastor Huebner remarked that the

75. Sorum, Interview, October 16.

76. Hein, Demographic Study, 22.

special “Saturday seminar” typically only garners the people you might expect. Pastor Paul Steinberg, who formerly served at St Marcus, and Professor Sorum, from his time at Garden Homes, stressed the importance of finding new lay-leaders from the culture and ethnicity you are trying to serve.⁷⁷ This is extremely difficult because they are often still young in the faith and struggling with past issues, but they will also be extremely passionate about giving more people the same amazing blessings they have received.

Both Steinberg and Sorum, who worked in primarily African American areas, described the effectiveness of training new leaders by personally going with them repeatedly to do follow-up visits until they reached a comfort level to do it on their own. They also trained leaders to teach parts of the basic instruction class. Steinberg passionately expressed a personal opinion, “If you can’t train members to teach a Bible information class, what can you train them to do? They should be able to share the core basic truths of God’s Word, otherwise what are you training them to do?” He obviously admitted that this is not for every single member, but a basic premise of Christian mission is teaching people the truth so that they can teach others. Doing this helps to bridge the gap of carrying out all the many responsibilities pastors bear.

WELS Schools as an Outreach Arm

For basically every pastor interviewed whose congregation runs a school, the school served as its primary form of outreach and evangelism. It did not matter whether the congregation was urban or suburban, the school was the main source of prospects. Many urban synod schools have found a valuable way of bringing children and their families into their schools through the Milwaukee School Choice Program. Pastor Hartmann, who serves at

77. Paul Steinberg, Interview, November 6, 2018. Sorum, Interview, October 16

Atonement, recognized that in the past, the move to the choice program was often more motivated by a desire to survive than to reach out.⁷⁸ However, he believes this has finally changed at his congregation, as the parish leadership has put into place a strategy to once again unite the church and school. They use what are called “At One” services, held once a month, during which the school children are scheduled to sing. A major effort is made to invite and encourage attendance beforehand, and afterward there is a big fellowship meal for the purpose of forming relationships between non-member families and members.

Pastor Aaron Bublitz, from Mount Lebanon, also noted the importance of having special services and events to which families can come, but stressed the importance of making home visits to every non-member family.⁷⁹ Again this harks back to the principle of going out in mission, before expecting people to come in for worship. Both Atonement and Mount Lebanon have started “adopt-a-family” programs in which members are specifically connected to a non-member school family to build relationships and encourage involvement in worship and instruction class.

WELS schools require immense resources, effort, and staffing, and in some cases, they have been extremely difficult to maintain. A number of parish schools have been closed throughout the history of WELS in Milwaukee County. Nevertheless, congregational schools have proven to be one of the best ways for congregations to serve their community. The schools are attractive because they provide a Christ-centered education of high quality. Recognizing the key nature of the school, it is imperative to make the best possible use of this excellent resource for Christian education and for outreach. Lutheran school teachers have the amazing opportunity

78. Jon Hartmann, Interview, October 15, 2018.

79. Aaron Bublitz, Interview, October 16, 2018.

to share the gospel with children every day. On top of that, there should also be an intentional harvest strategy for bringing those children and their families into the church to continue hearing about the Savior who has redeemed them with his own blood. This strategy does not need to be complex but needs to be known by staff and intentionally carried out so that the school is used to its full mission potential.

CONCLUSION

God's Word has not changed. God's mission has not changed. He desires all to be saved. He wants his saving message proclaimed to the ends of the earth. That mission takes place in a world with people and places and cultures which do change. It is the task of the Church then to take powerful timeless truths and proclaim them in a time-bound world, to people who are born, who live, who move, who work, and who relate to each other all in a way that is unique to the particular place and time in the span of history. That unique proclamation is the privilege and the challenge Christ bestowed upon his Church. It is a privilege and challenge, a mission carried out with God's saving means of grace appropriated into the lives of living, breathing sinners. Because these things are true, we notice trends and numbers. We study the Scriptures for motivation, power, and direction. We plan and organize and invite. We learn new methods that can produce opportunities to offer and deliver the unchanging gospel with all its power. We are stewards of the time and resources God has blessed us with in our own time of grace as we seek and pursue the lost for Christ during their time of grace.

This is Christ's mission, privilege, and challenge, which we cannot hesitate to carry out. Time is of the essence and the fields are ripe for harvest. The Savior's redeeming love compels WELS congregations in Milwaukee County, the synod's birthplace and heartland, to continue joyfully carrying out the mission of the Savior's heart. It is a matter of identity, mindset, activity, trust, and necessity. It is the natural result of the blood of Christ cleansing sinners and the love of Christ working in their hearts. "You are a chosen nation, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:9). Whether God wills the rebirth and regrowth of many struggling congregations in the county is only for him to know. Maybe in his eternal wisdom, it is better for

them to close and enable people and assets to be reapportioned somewhere else. God has not revealed these mysteries. On the other hand, Christ has clearly made known the mission he tenderly calls us to carry out. Carrying on the mission of the Savior's heart in Milwaukee County is our urgent priority and joyful task.

Oh Christians, haste, your mission high fulfilling.
To tell to all the world that God is light,
That he who made all nations is not willing
One soul should perish, lost in shades of night.
Publish glad tidings, Tidings of peace,
Tidings of Jesus, Redemption and release.⁸⁰

80. Mary Thomson "O Christians, Haste" *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993) 570.

APPENDIX 1: WELS CHURCHES IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY

Milwaukee County

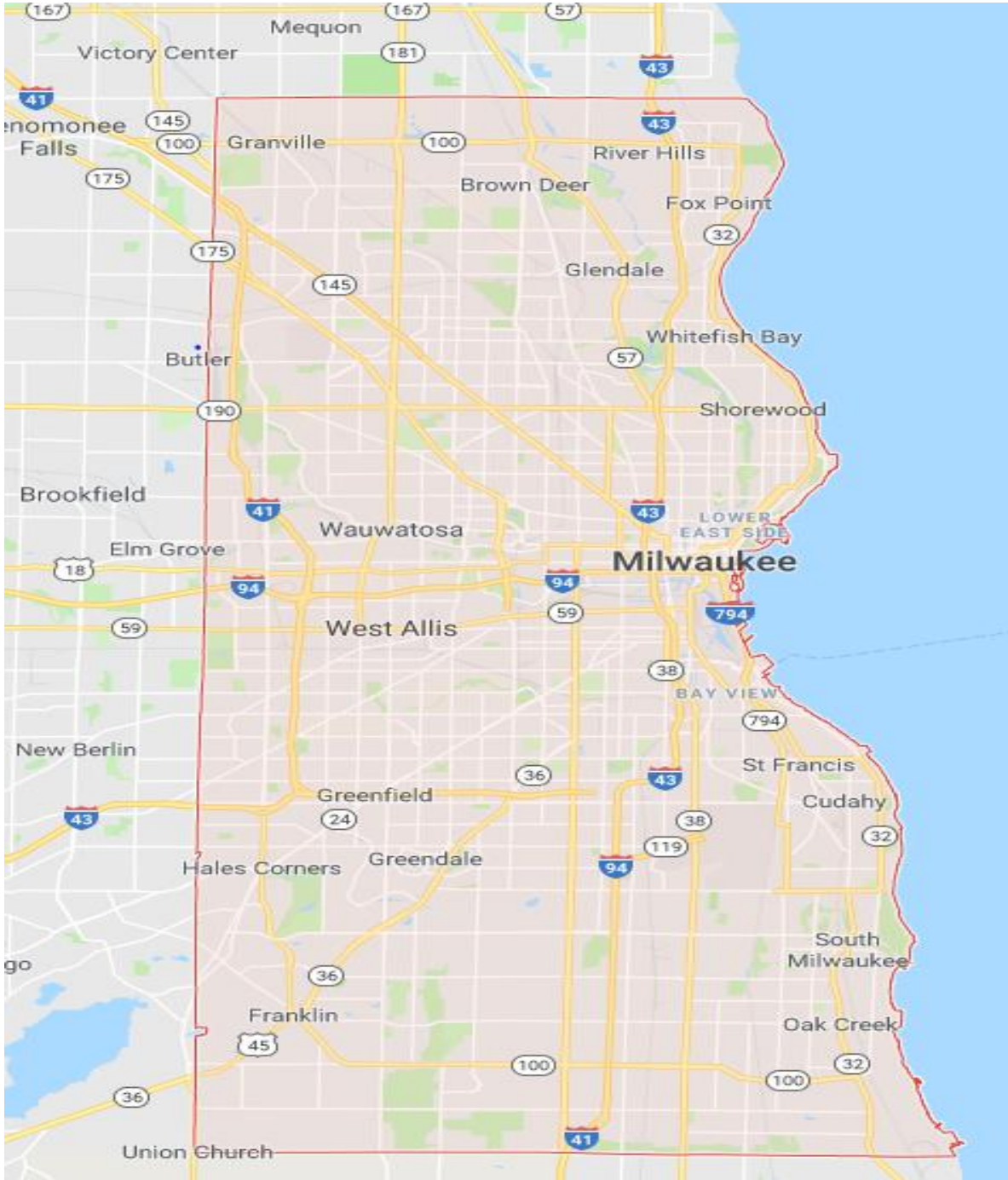


Figure 1: Source, Google Maps

North Side Churches

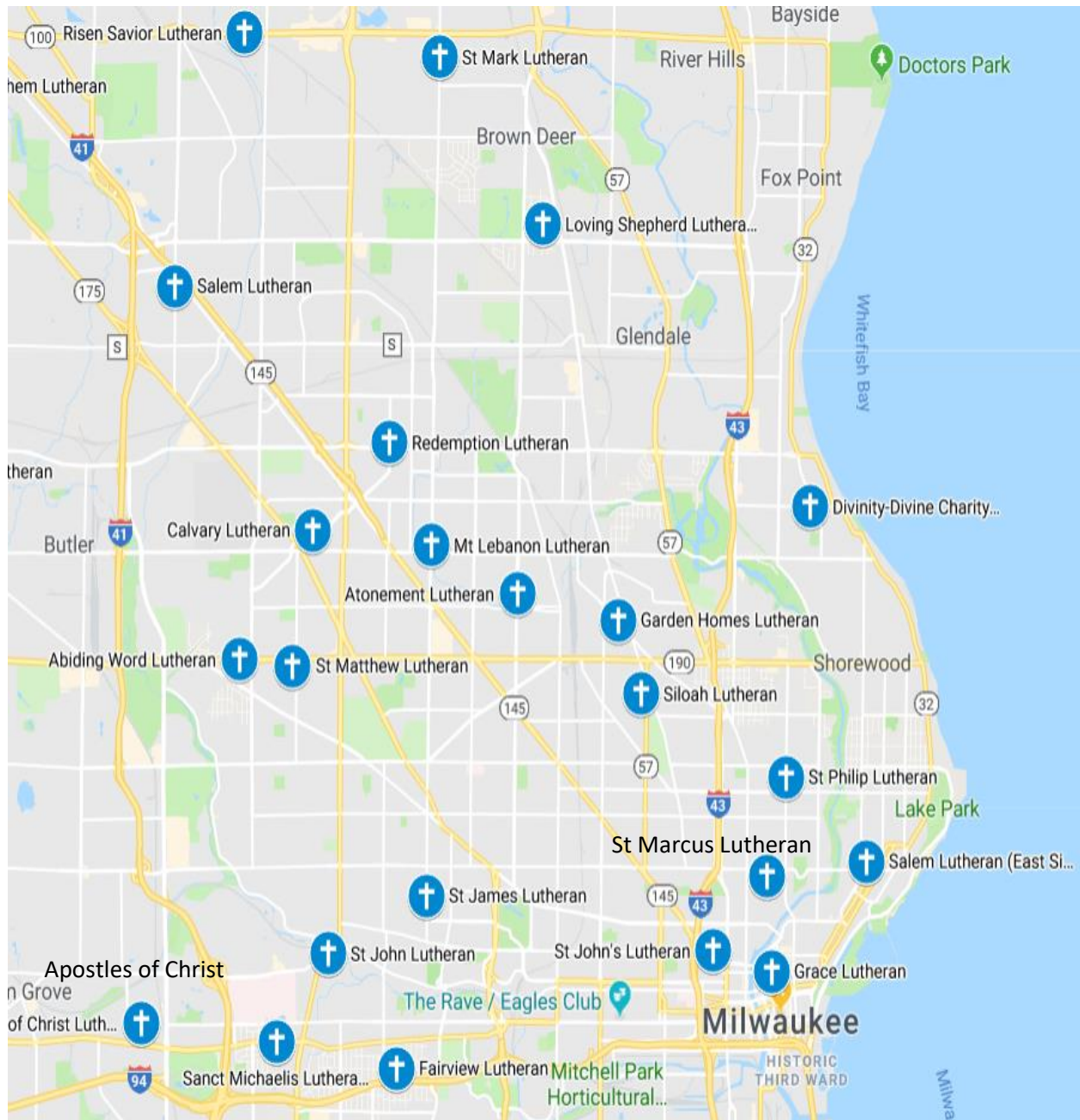


Figure 2: Source, WELS Locator App

South Side Churches

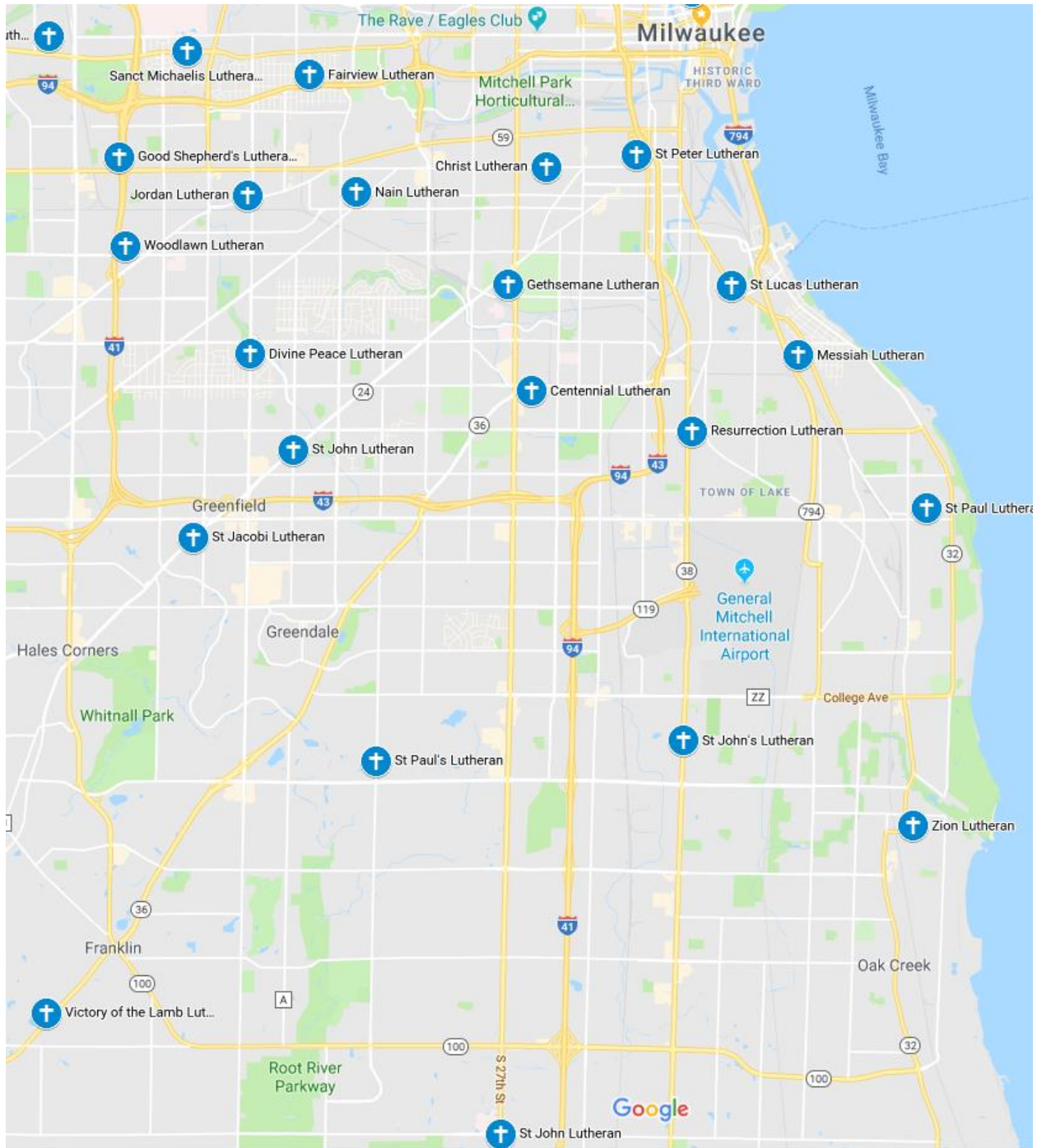


Figure 3: Source, WELS Locator App

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW FORM

1. Describe the demographics of your congregation.
2. Describe the demographics of your neighborhood or target area.
3. How would you express your congregation's overall attitude and outlook on its ministry?
4. What do you see as the best practices for your congregation's outreach efforts?
5. What does the process look like for a first-time guest moving to membership?
6. How would you describe your involvement in outreach at your congregation?
7. How would you describe your congregation's involvement/structure as it applies to outreach?
8. Does your congregation use a ministry plan? If so, to what extent?
9. What do you see as your congregation's top strength and weakness?

APPENDIX 3: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to investigate Milwaukee congregations and gain insight into how the mission of the church is being carried out in a particular area. This research is being conducted by seminary senior, Timothy Prieve, as a part of the senior thesis required for graduation at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

In this research, you will be participating in an interview in which you will share information about your congregation's general makeup and leadership structure especially as it applies to evangelism, along with your views on your congregations' strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and blessings. The interview will be recorded with your permission for the sake of accuracy and data gathering.

Please be assured that any information that you provide will be held in confidence. Please indicate below whether or not you would like your responses to be kept anonymous. Please understand that your participation in this research is totally voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time during this study.

* * *

I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate.

Name (print) _____

I would like the information I share to remain anonymous _____ (yes/no)

Signed _____

Date _____

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