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The ELCA by the Numbers

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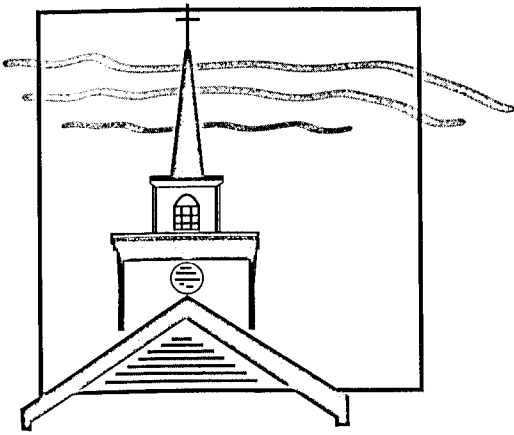
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THE ELCA BY THE NUMBERS

Mark Granquist



Well, it happened again. I sat through another dreary and depressing address (I would not deign to call it a sermon—no gospel) that was a long and tortuous *apologia* for decline in the ELCA. You know the kind: “Numbers aren’t the real issue, we are called to be faithful not successful, what really matters is the gospel,” yada, yada, yada. Though it was tempting to stand up and call out the speaker, I didn’t. But these are sentiments I have been hearing for years now, as one person after another tries to sugarcoat or explain away the demographic and financial disaster that has been occurring in the ELCA over that last twenty years or so.

Such a long stretch of unrelieved bad news is bound to create some discomfort and avoidance behaviors. But the fact that there has been no frank discussion of the situation is truly inexplicable. One might think that the scope of this disaster, which is truly a disaster, might have at least occasioned some soul-searching or attempts at honest explanation. But this just isn’t the case. It seems as though there is a vast silence, as if no one really wants to say that the emperor has no clothes. Most often heard are the kinds of evasions, excuses, and platitudes such as those mentioned above.

The worst part of these *apologias* for decline is how they attempt to turn disaster into a virtue, suggesting that somehow the decline of the ELCA has been caused by its faithfulness, or boldness, or daring. Rarely does one hear a word of self-critical reflection, soul-searching, or plain honesty, even where the discussion is happening. But the disaster won’t go away and things won’t get better until the problems are addressed head-on—or until the denomination simply collapses. I’m not taking bets on which will happen first.

To launch this long-overdue discussion, let’s look at the numbers first, and try to figure out what they mean later. Fact is, membership figures for the ELCA are not easy

to find, especially if you want year-to-year comparisons. A search of the ELCA website will not get you very far, especially if you don’t know exactly where to look. The ELCA Office of the Secretary is responsible for this data, but in their section of the website there is no document that states these figures as a whole. (You can get current statistics for each synod, however.) I’m not a tech genius, so my search of the website could possibly have missed something. But it shouldn’t take extraordinary web skills to track down this information, either.

The result is that, to get at detailed membership statistics, a researcher must consult scattered sources, mainly the reports of the secretary to the ELCA Church Council and to the churchwide assemblies. These figures are usually in appendices; it takes some determined searching to find them, and each document only lists figures for one or two years.

A second place to look is on the ELCA website for its Office for Research and Evaluation. But unless you already knew that the ELCA had such an office, and what it was named, you would hardly know that such a place

exists. Digging into the Research and Evaluation section of the website, after sorting through a couple of layers of material, you can find two reports of interest. The first, “ELCA Trends,” shows membership statistics from 2005 to 2012, and the second, “Membership Trends,” shows the same information in graph form from 1988 to 2010. Even these reports are not very detailed. And entering “ELCA Trends” into the search engine on the website brings up dozens of hits and no clear path to this specific document itself.

A third source of the yearly membership information is the print version of the ELCA Yearbook, but of course that is only for the most recent year. So, after much digging, I present here the complete membership and congregational trends for the ELCA from 1988 to 2014 (see table, next page).

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ELCA MEMBERSHIP BY YEAR¹

(BASE 1987: 5,288,048 MEMBERS IN 11,133 CONGREGATIONS)

YEAR	MEMBERS	GAIN/LOSS	CHANGE %	CONGREGATIONS		CHANGE %
1988	5,251,534	-36,514	-0.69%	11,120	-13	-0.12%
1989	5,238,798	-12,736	-0.24%	11,067	-53	-0.48%
1990	5,240,739	+1,941	0.04%	11,087	+20	0.18%
1991	5,245,177	+4,438	0.08%	11,074	-13	-0.12%
1992	5,234,568	-10,609	-0.20%	11,055	-19	-0.17%
1993	5,212,785	-21,783	-0.42%	11,023	-32	-0.29%
1994	5,199,048	-13,737	-0.26%	10,973	-50	-0.45%
1995	5,190,489	-8,559	-0.16%	10,955	-18	-0.16%
1996	5,187,363	-3,126	-0.06%	10,936	-19	-0.17%
1997	5,185,055	-2,308	-0.04%	10,889	-47	-0.43%
1998	5,178,225	-6,830	-0.13%	10,862	-27	-0.25%
1999	5,149,668	-28,557	-0.55%	10,851	-11	-0.10%
2000	5,125,919	-23,749	-0.46%	10,816	-35	-0.32%
2001	5,099,877	-26,042	-0.51%	10,766	-50	-0.46%
2002	5,038,006	-61,871	-1.21%	10,721	-45	-0.42%
2003	4,984,925	-53,081	-1.05%	10,657	-64	-0.60%
2004	4,930,429	-54,496	-1.09%	10,585	-72	-0.68%
2005	4,850,776	-79,653	-1.62%	10,549	-36	-0.34%
2006	4,774,203	-76,573	-1.58%	10,470	-79	-0.75%
2007	4,709,956	-64,247	-1.34%	10,448	-22	-0.21%
2008	4,633,887	-76,069	-1.61%	10,396	-52	-0.49%
2009	4,543,037	-90,850	-1.99%	10,348	-48	-0.46%
2010	4,272,688	-270,349	-5.95%	10,008	-340	-3.29%
2011	4,059,785	-212,903	-4.98%	9,638	-370	-3.70%
2012	3,950,924	-108,861	-2.75%	9,533	-105	-1.10%
2013	3,863,133	-87,791	-2.22%	9,464	-69	-0.72%
2014	3,765,362	-97,771	-2.53%	9,392	-72	-0.76%
CHANGE 1987-2014		-1,522,686	-28.80%		-1741	-15.60%

bers, and as of the end of 2014 its membership had declined to 3.7 million members. This means that in its twenty-six year existence the ELCA has lost approximately 1.5 million members, or close to 30% of its membership. If you factor in the change in the population of the United States over this quarter century—from 244 million persons in 1988 to 320 million in 2015—this means that the ELCA’s “market share” of the U.S. population has slipped from 2.1% in 1988 to 1.1% in 2015. So this real decline of 30% over the history of the ELCA is even worse when correlated with national population growth. To main-

tain a 2% “market share” in 2015, the ELCA would have had to grow to approximately 6.4 million members. Instead it has declined to 3.7 million.

A look at overall trends shows the rate of year-by-year decline. What is most worrisome here is the increasing rate of decline, one that shows no sign of abating or moderating. Indeed, of the 1.5 million members lost, a bit more than half of the loss (57% or 865,000 members) has come in the last six years for which we have data, from 2009 to 2014. Certainly this is a result of the congregational losses that occurred from the 2009 church-wide assembly decision to permit the

ordination of noncelibate homosexual pastors: membership losses were in the range of a quarter million members per year in both 2010 and 2011. But the situation since then has not gotten much better, with losses from 2012 to 2014 hitting roughly one hundred thousand members a year. If current trends continue, the ELCA membership will dip under three million in less than ten years (see table, opposite page, left).

Even bracketing out the years 2010 and 2011 with their major losses for what seem to be obvious reasons, it is clear that the rate of loss is increasing. If the average losses for 2012 through

MEMBERSHIP LOSS TRENDS	
YEARS	AVERAGE YEARLY DECLINE
1988-2000	12,500 per year
2001-2009	63,000 per year
2010-2011	241,000 per year
2012-2014	98,000 per year

2014 are a return to the “new normal,” then the ELCA is serious trouble. The declines are bad enough in themselves, but the increase in the rate of decline is even worse.

The major losses in the period from 2010 to 2012 can be explained, at least in part, to the departure of congregations from the ELCA over the 2009 decision on homosexuality. The two new centrist Lutheran denominations, Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (founded 2001 in response to Called to Common Mission) and the North American Lutheran Church (founded 2010 in response to the homosexuality decision) total between them over half a million members and one thousand congregations. That makes this schism from the ELCA, by both numbers and percentage, the largest schism in American Lutheran history since the 1860s—much larger than the one that split the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in the 1970s.

But this is still only part of the story, for loss in membership from 2000 to 2014 totals up to 1,360,000 members. If the two new denominations account for only half a million of the losses, where have the other 860,000 ELCA members gone?

If these losses are ever discussed at all, they are usually attributed to the demographics of the ELCA as a denomination. It is widely known that the ELCA is a “graying” denomination, with the bulk of its members over fifty years of age. Too many Lutherans are dying and not enough being born. While it is true that an aging ELCA population may be cause for long-term concern, it is *not* the reason for immediate membership losses. Consider the congregational membership numbers just from 2008 to 2014 (above right).

CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERSHIP GAINS AND LOSSES 2008–2014		
Gains by Baptisms	56,000 average per year	393,000 total
Gains by Transfers In	55,000 average per year	387,000 total
Losses by Death	42,000 average per year	292,000 total
Losses by Transfer Out	56,000 average per year	394,000 total
Losses by Other	172,000 average per year	1,200,000 total

If you total up the losses and gains, you will find something interesting: namely, that in terms of “biological” demographics, the ELCA is *growing* slightly, with baptisms outweighing deaths by a discernable number. Furthermore, Transfers In and Transfers Out are roughly a wash. So where is the decline? The annual reports include one extra line: losses “For Other Reasons and Statistical Adjustments.”

Included in this category are those members who have left the ELCA because their congregations left the ELCA, under the catch-all moniker “Statistical Adjustments.” Presumably this is a euphemism for “cleaning the rolls,” that occasional exercise by which pastors and congregations finally admit that a significant number of those who used to be on their memberships rolls have, indeed, departed for parts unknown, often years earlier. It is in this category that almost all of the ELCA’s losses occur.

This is worrisome and even alarming for a number of different reasons. It indicates that the losses to the ELCA are not primarily demographic but due to individuals and congregations *choosing to leave* the denomination or just drifting away from it. These individuals and congregations have been disaffected by the decisions and directions taken by the ELCA over the past fifteen years or so. Have they left, or have they been driven out? Certainly the half million members and thousand congregations of LCMC and the NALC fall in this category, but that represents only a portion of ELCA losses. We hope that the rest of those who left found a church home elsewhere, but who knows?

This process of disaffection and

exit happens over time, with people slowly sliding away from their congregations. Pastors and congregations are often not quick to “clean the rolls,” so it might take ten years or more before it becomes clear how many individuals have really left the ELCA as a result of the 1999 and 2009 votes. It is clear that there has been a major exodus from the ELCA as a result of these votes, at the very least half a million members; and more likely a million members or even more. Leading up to these decisions opponents of the proposals suggested that there would be a major exodus from the ELCA as a result of a positive vote. Despite assurances to the contrary by proponents, it seems clear that the predictions of major membership losses have all come true. And most likely such membership losses are still ongoing, at the rate of about one hundred thousand members a year from 2012 to 2014.

Some proponents of the 2009 decisions suggested that these losses

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would be offset by those who would be attracted to ELCA congregations as a result of the changes. There is

no way to measure this directly, but what evidence there is doesn't support the notion. A study of the most liberal ELCA congregations, those who had declared themselves "Reconciling in Christ" congregations, shows that from 2003 to 2010 these congregations lost on average 12% of their membership, while the average ELCA congregation lost only 8% of its membership over the same period.² Having ELCA congregations become RIC and put rainbow flags on their lawns hasn't increased the membership of the denomination.

A further cause for worry in the ELCA is, ironically, the ones who have decided to stay. The nature of schism in the modern American denomination usually means that only a fraction of disaffected congregations and members ever actually leave. In the 1970s, when the Missouri "moderates" left to form the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Congregations, there were expectations that a substantial number of Missouri members—up to one million—might leave and join the nascent AELC. In actual fact, only about one hundred thousand actually did. What happened to the rest? They dropped out *within*, choosing to stay nominally within the denomination but having as little to do with it as possible. In contemporary America it is particularly complicated for a congregation to leave its denomination;

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the process is legally and politically difficult, and many congregational leaders don't wish to try. Instead they remain disaffected and minimally connected to the ELCA, of no real posi-

tive value to the denomination itself. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know how many disaffected ELCA members and congregations have "dropped out within" the denomination in the last fifteen years, but logic and anecdotal evidence would suggest that this number is substantial.

There is one additional way to measure this disaffection, and that is to look at the financial health of the denomination. Membership losses and "dropping out within" are problems that unfold only over time and are often imprecise indicators, whereas financial measurements are immediate. If the membership trends for the ELCA are bad, its financial trends are even worse. The proposed budget for the ELCA in the fiscal year 2017 is \$65 million, while the level of "mission support" (congregational giving) for 2015 was \$47.2 million, down 2.6% from the previous year.³ To put this in some perspective, the initial budget for the ELCA in 1988 was \$112 million (probably unrealistic), and in the early 1990s the budgets ran about \$90 million a year. Assuming the rate of inflation between 1988 and 2016, during which time the value of the dollar doubled, the 2017 budget figure of \$65 million is roughly one-third of what the ELCA budgets were at the beginning of the denomination's existence.

This is driven, of course, by congregational giving and their willingness to support the national ELCA. It is clear that giving to congregations has not declined appreciably, so that means congregations are keeping an ever greater amount for themselves. Some of this decline in giving to the national ELCA can be attributed to increased costs for congregations, especially for salaries and benefits. But a proportion of the decline in giving to the ELCA, probably a substantial proportion, is a measure of the disaffection of congregations and their members. If they are "dropping out within" the ELCA, one indicator of this would be a reduc-

tion in giving to their synod and to the national denomination.

Of course, numbers like this are only raw data, and they have

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their limitations. All such data must be interpreted and understood. I've offered some possible explanations for the drastic loss of membership and financial support within the ELCA, but there are others (although it's hard to see how any explanation of the data could ultimately point toward something positive). The most optimistic interpretation of the data is that, although the losses were drastic, things will eventually stabilize. Unfortunately, there is nothing right now (obvious or subtle) to support such an interpretation.

The most troublesome reality, though, is that there has been little or no discussion within the ELCA at all about these drastic declines, only a collective denial ("don't mind that iceberg ma'am, this ship is safe"). Even worse, as the initial anecdote suggests, is that some in the ELCA actually seem to be spinning the decline as proof of positive faithfulness.

Numbers are not everything, but they are often an important indicator of the health of a denomination and its institutions. Certainly membership might be increased in any number of ways, some faithful, others not. But decline, especially on this scale, can hardly be seen as good. Although it is possible to debate the degree of

severity of the decline, and the reasons for that decline, it is still arguing over relative degrees of badness. But the ELCA leadership is apparently not even having this conversation—at least not in any frank, thorough, and public way. (One assumes much hand-wringing behind closed doors.) Liberals talk to liberals, conservatives talk to conservatives, and either way no substantive conversations seem to be happening at all. Many church leaders seem to be weary and resigned as a result of the unrelentingly bad news and want to focus on whatever positives they can find. This is certainly understandable, and a very human reaction, but it is not going to move the ELCA forward in any real way. The worst part is the attitude sensed in some in the ELCA who seem more than willing to put up with the loss of membership, because those who are leaving are mainly conservatives. Such a wave of departures might make the ELCA a more congenial place for their religious and political agenda, even if it prompts further departure.

Although the immediate causes for this decline are the decisions in the churchwide assemblies in 1999 and 2009, the issues within the ELCA go back much further. Over the past fifty years American Lutherans, especially those who eventually constituted the ELCA in 1988, have generally failed in the areas of catechesis, education, and evangelism—the making, attracting, and retaining of disciples for Jesus Christ. Instead we have focused on

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secondary matters; laudable, to be sure, but not at the expense of our primary mission. A cursory look at the ELCA website shows many virtuous initiatives: mosquito eradication, voter registration, help with disaster relief, initiatives and statements on racial issues, and so forth. But where is the obvious, consistent, and profound commitment to catechesis, education, and evangelism? And ultimately, where is the honest discussion of the deep problems within this denomination and possible solutions to pulling ourselves out of this deep hole? They are not readily apparent.¹

The history of Christianity shows that when Christian groups decline into irrelevancy and decay, they do

so quietly and gradually. American Christian denominations rarely explode, but with regularity they decline and fade away. The fade gives plenty of time for denial and excuses, arguments that things aren't as bad as they seem, hopes that recovery is just around the corner. Let's call this what it is: wishful thinking, divorced from reality. If this is not to be the fate of the ELCA, then we all must commit to this urgently needed conversation and honest appraisals of the current situation. LF

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Notes

1. This table of statistics is constructed from the reports from the ELCA Office of the Secretary as found on the ELCA website on multiple URLs. I don't know if this information exists in any similar form anywhere else, but if so, I wasn't able to find it.

2. Mark Granquist, "A Slow Disaster and a Proposal for Reform," *Lutheran Forum* 46/2 (2012): 24.

3. "Report of the Secretary to the ELCA Church Council, April 7-10, 2016," pp. 33-34, online at <http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/CC86_April_7-10_2016_Minutes.pdf?_ga=1.255217864.1194629687.1462889522> (accessed July 15, 2016).

4. Over the years I have been accused of being unnecessarily negative about the future of the ELCA and even of indulging in *Schadenfreude* at its decline. I do not think this is the case: what I seek is a conversation on the matter.