

Allegheny Synod Ministry Review 2008

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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The Allegheny Synod Ministry Review took place on October 28-30, 2008. The review was requested by the synod and conducted by representatives of the churchwide organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).¹ The review consisted of interviews with clergy and lay persons at various locations in the synod. Interviews were conducted at the following sites: Trinity in Somerset, St. John in Clearfield, Mount Calvary in Johnstown, Pine Hall in State College, Zion Hollidaysburg in Altoona, and Trinity in Bedford. Approximately 120 were interviewed.

Those who were interviewed were asked to comment about the strengths of, and the challenges facing, the synod's congregations, the leadership of congregations, and the leadership of the synod as a whole. They were also asked about the synod's resources, and the emphases and programs of the synod's office, the synod's council, and the synod's committees and teams. Finally, people were asked to suggest changes and to identify what they believe should be the top priorities of the synod.

Context

The total population of the territory served by the Allegheny Synod is estimated to have declined by 0.6 percent between 2000 and 2007. The estimated population of the territory of the synod in 2007 was 672,322 which is 4,153 fewer persons than in 2000. The projection for the total population of the territory of the synod for 2012 is 667,564.²

The total population of the territory of the synod was 95 percent White with 3 percent African American/Black, 1 percent Asian, 1 percent Latino, and 1 percent of two or more races.

The baptized membership of the 132 ELCA congregations in the synod in 2000 was 43,695 or 6.5 percent of the total population of the territory of the synod.³ In 2007, there were 127 congregations in the synod with a total baptized membership of 40,514 or 6 percent of the population. Between 2000 and 2007, the baptized membership of the synod's congregations declined by 7 percent while average worship attendance declined from 11,696 in 2000 to 9,507 in 2007 or 19 percent.

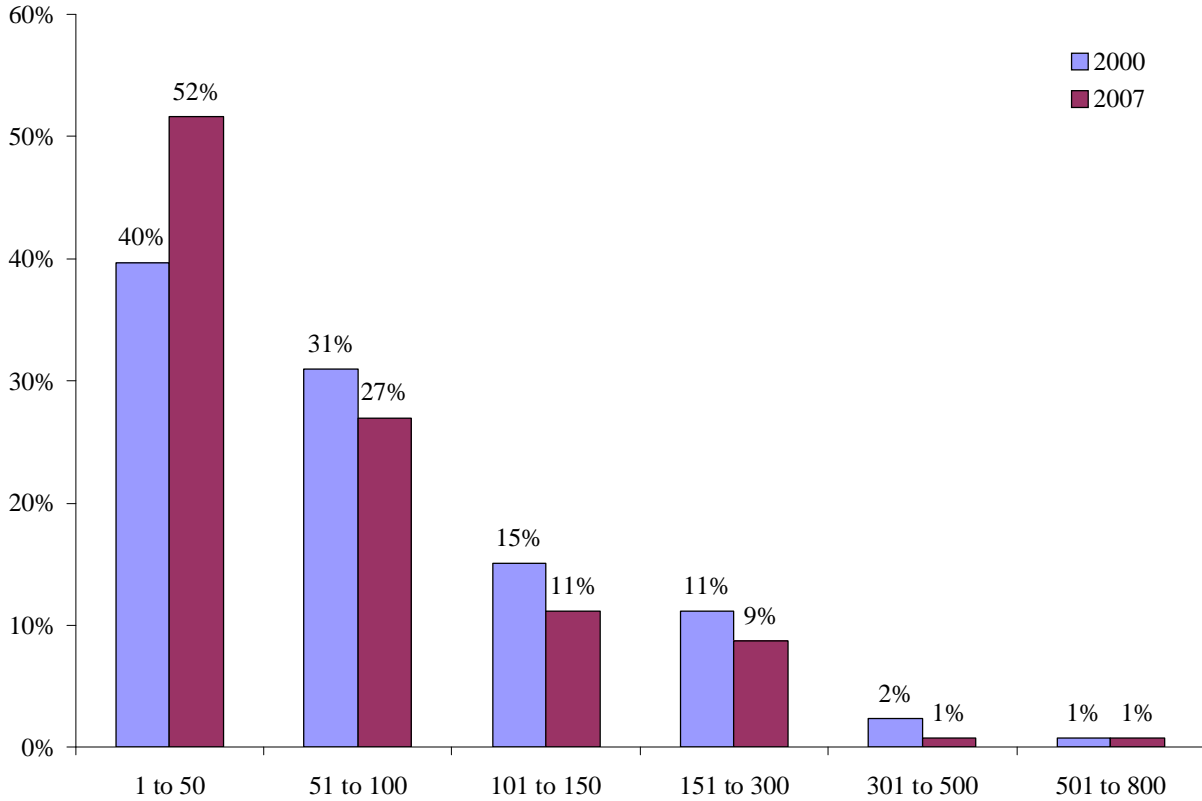
¹ The interviewers from the ELCA's churchwide office included Andrea Arey from Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission, Craig Settlage from Synodical Relations, and Victoria Flood from Research and Evaluation.

² The source of the estimate and the projection is Claritas, Inc.

³ These statistics are based on the annual reports of congregations. Not all congregations submit reports. When a congregation does not submit a report, data from the last year a congregation reported is used.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of congregations by worship attendance in 2000 and 2007.⁴ In 2000, 40 percent of the congregations in the synod had 50 or fewer in worship. In 2007, 52 percent of the congregations had 50 or fewer in worship.

Figure 1: Percent of Congregations in 2000 and 2007 by Worship Attendance



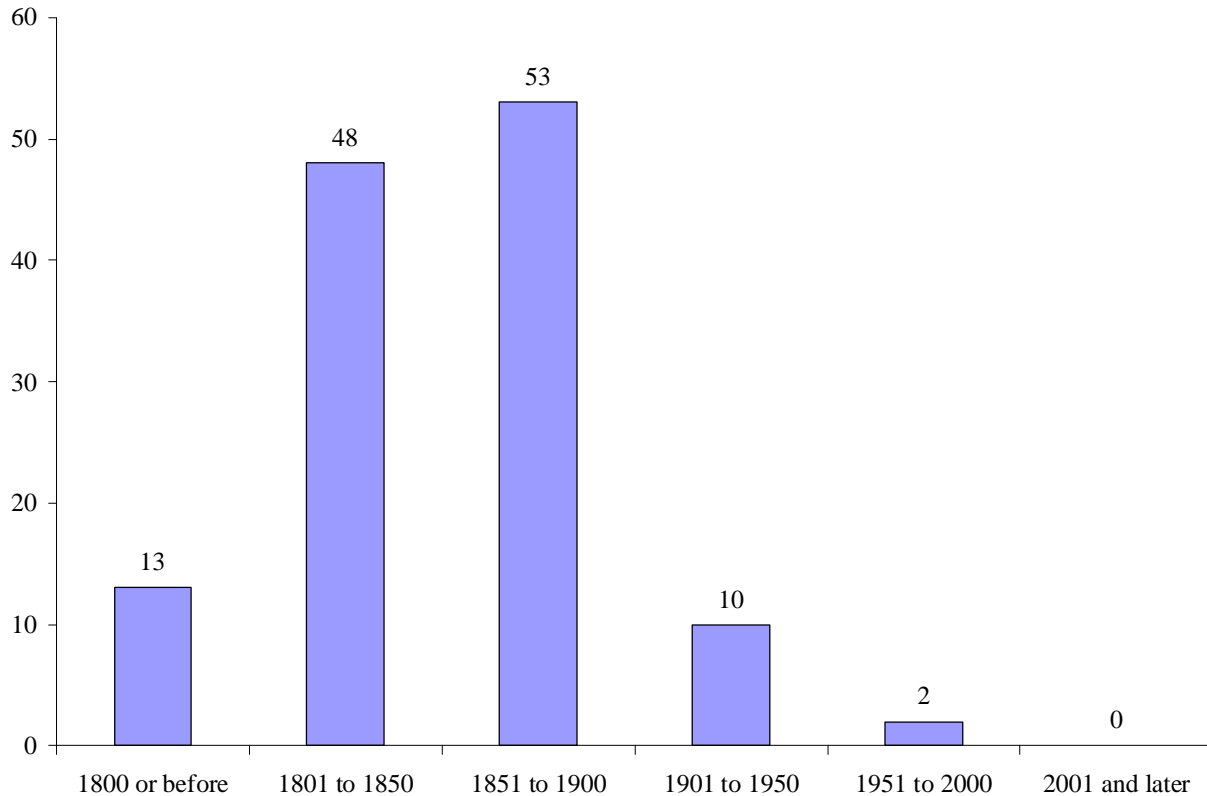
Total giving (undesignated giving and designated giving) increased from \$11,223,885 in 2000 to \$12,830,790 in 2007. This increase, however, did not kept pace with inflation. Over the same period, mission support for the synod and churchwide organization declined from \$1,125,762 in 2000 to \$999,952 in 2007.

Strengths of the Synod

Many pointed out that the congregations of the synod have a long, and well established tradition of service in the territory of the synod. The congregations are well known in their communities. The oldest congregation in the synod is Trinity in Bedford which was established in 1769. Thirteen congregations in the synod were established by 1800 or before. (See Figure 2).

⁴ Only congregations with worship attendance figures for both years are included.

Figure 2: Number of Congregations by Year of Origin



Many also said that the members of most of the congregations in the synod were very dedicated and committed to their congregations. The words “family” and “close-knit” were used frequently to describe congregations. People said that these long-term, committed members provide strength and stability in times of trouble or change.

Many said that there is good collegiality among the pastors in the synod and those that serve in the synod are very committed to it. Many also said the pastors in the synod were faithful servants of the Gospel with a strong commitment to proclaiming the Word. Many described the pastors of the synod as well trained, competent, motivated leaders who were dedicated to their work and to serving the people of the synod.

The interviewees were generally very positive about Bishop Pile and the synod staff. The vast majority believe the Bishop and the staff provide very good pastoral care and are responsive to the needs of pastors in the synod. Most were positive about the call process and many felt the Bishop and staff deal well with congregational conflict. Several stated that the Bishop is a good theologian and is faithful to the Word. Some said the communication coming from the synod office has improved and that the Bishop and staff are positive about, and supportive of, women in ministry.

The vast majority also believe that the synod has good relationships with the social ministry organizations serving the people of the synod and that the synod, itself, is responsive to the needs of the community.

Finally, many spoke positively about the Discerning Your Discipleship program, the synod's reconciliation team, and *The Lutheran Letter*.

Challenges Facing the Synod

In terms of challenges facing the synod as a whole, many expressed the belief there is a shortage of clergy, but people also believe that the synod has many congregations that are no longer viable and should close. Some expect the synod to take up this challenge. A few argued against forming multiple point parishes saying that serving multiple point parishes is too taxing on pastors.

The few who were critical of the call process said the time interims serve during a vacancy is too long. Others described the call process as too "inconsistent."

Some believe that caring for pastors takes too much of the Bishop's and staff's time and that other important, strategic things, are neglected, including critical administrative tasks. A few expressed a frustration that the synod office keeps "trying the same things" and "just" hopes that things will get better. Specifically mentioned in this regard was communication and youth events. A few said attendance is going down at youth events, but new approaches designed to address the attendance decline or to engage youth in other ways are not forthcoming. They also felt this was true of other synod initiated programs.

A few suggested the synod should do more with older pastors and older members of congregations. Those who made this point feel the synod office is "too youth oriented" in its focus.

A few pointed to wider issues like the ever growing secularism in the society and church controversies over sexuality as producing challenges for the synod.

Communication

Many argued that communication continues to be a challenge for the synod, both between the synod office and the congregations and, a few suggested, between the synod council and the synod council teams. Many argued interpreting the mission of the synod to lay people should be a top priority for the synod office. Lay members, from the point of view of many, wonder why the Bishop does not visit more, and they are often not aware of the activities of the synod office or what the synod office does in their behalf. A few suggested that the challenge of communicating is made more difficult by a general lack of interest in anything that is beyond the immediate scope or experience of any particular pastor or lay person but, they believe, little can be done about this other than continuing to look for, and try new ways, to connect.

Some suggested the synod office is understaffed and some hope a new synod staff person will be hired to help congregations re-conceive their mission. They want this new staff person to focus on revitalizing congregations—on generating new excitement about mission. One person argued that this new staff person should begin working directly in one-on-one relationships with the rostered leaders of the synod. Each rostered leader should assess "where they are and where they want (or need) to go." This view was shared by others in the group. Many agreed that this new person needs to be "out in

congregations at least 90 percent of the time.” “Every congregation needs to discern and articulate a mission. If they don't, they become complacent and don't grow.”

A few said certain geographic areas of the synod feel forgotten which also results in low participation in synodical events and that the mountains are a geographic barrier in getting to synodical events. Many said new ideas and new approaches are needed in addition to *The Lutheran Letter*, but suggestions were few and far between. Those that offered ideas proposed letters from the Bishop designed as bulletin inserts, posters focusing on synodical events or programs, and DVDs of the Bishop interpreting the work of the synod which would be shown in congregations.

Congregations

Many recited a list of difficult issues facing the congregations in the synod including declining membership, aging members, and congregationalism and parochialism taken “to an extreme.” Some said the declining economy in the territory of the synod puts financial stress on most congregations and that people are less willing to volunteer their time because they are so busy with work including long commutes. Because of the pressure of finances congregations cannot afford adequate staffing.

Young people, many believe, especially those with a college education, are moving away and this results in an aging population and aging membership in congregations.

Others noted there is great competition for the “leisure time” of members and the church is just one of the groups vying for that time. In response, at least one person said that pastors are not preaching enough about the cost of discipleship—encouraging, even demanding, that faithful people place their commitment to the church among their highest priorities.

A few argued that the church growth materials they have encountered are oriented toward suburban “living.” From this point of view, these materials do not recognize the “Allegheny reality” that each small community has its own local and parochial identity. Some suggested that people do not trust the synod office in Altoona, much less the churchwide office in Chicago. But, others disagreed. Some see those outside the congregation as those most likely to promote or sponsor change and they see this as a good and necessary thing even though it can cause conflict. Those who took this view, however, were in the minority and they felt the forces against change are strong. They held that when those who see change as positive collide with those who do not, those in favor of change typically find themselves on the “outside” and, as a result, congregations become even more isolated and inwardly focused. Again, from this perspective, this is unfortunate because it means congregations get smaller and often lose any sense of mission to the wider community.

The Future

Many believe that too many people in congregations throughout the synod are neither inspired nor excited about their congregations or the mission (or potential) mission of their congregations. Some said they wish the congregations and pastoral leaders would be engaged in frank conversations about where each congregation has been, where it is now, and where it should go. From this point of view, the “issue” is “inspiration.” Some believe that among too many members, there is a lack of emotion, a lack of excitement for the work of Christ. Without a renewed commitment to the faith and a renewed

sense of mission, most believe the majority of congregations in the synod will continue to face significant challenges. Programs designed to produce better stewardship or to encourage evangelism or church growth or even to better communicate about the work of the synod are not likely to be successful unless there is a new excitement and commitment to mission.

Priorities

Many said the synod office should be about building confidence and trust. This may mean doing less so that what is done can be done with high quality and excellence. Suggestions were that the activities of the synod office should focus on challenging congregations and helping them get excited about the mission possibilities in the territory of the synod. From this perspective, the synod office needs to focus on building strong relations and then, inspiration and renewal.

Some also suggested the synod office should continue to look for new ways of engaging people. Some said it cannot be for an “all day” meeting in a centralized location, because people will not give up the time. But, the synod, perhaps with new staff, should go to congregations, or smaller groups of congregations for shorter meetings, even on Sundays, immediately before or after worship services, for example.

Other suggested it is time to get back to basics. To them this means more teaching at the congregational level with a renewed emphasis on adult education that is engaging. From this perspective, the synod should offer seminars for Sunday school teachers and those responsible for Vacation Bible schools, and so on. This should be done in congregations or with small groups of congregations rather than in large, day long meetings. The suggestion was also that the synod should promote continuing education for pastors and organize workshops for those involved in youth ministry. And, the synod should focus on the Book of Faith as a synod-wide initiative.

It is clear that many in the synod are concerned about the future of the synod’s congregations and that they hope the synod office, with additional staff, can play a significant role in helping congregations find a renewed sense of mission and a renewed sense of commitment to that mission.