

## An Evaluation of the 1991 Evangelism Strategy

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October 3, 2000

In 1991, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) churchwide assembly adopted an evangelism strategy. The resolves of the assembly action were ambitious.

### ASSEMBLY

#### ACTION

Yes--894; No-- 52

#### CA91.6.29

**WHEREAS**, to participate in God's mission, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America purposes to "Proclaim God's saving Gospel of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith alone . . ." (4.02.a.); and

**WHEREAS**, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America purposes to "Carry out Christ's Great Commission by reaching t to all people to bring them to faith in Christ . . ." (4.02.b.); and

**WHEREAS**, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in assembly in 1989 called for the development of an evangelism strategy as part of establishing directions for the 1990s; and

**WHEREAS**, it is the intention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to renew its commitment to be faithful in witness to God's good news in Jesus Christ and to be an evangelical people reaching out, inviting, and showing hospitality to all; and

**WHEREAS**, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is challenged by new opportunities for proclamation to unbelievers and the unchurched in the United States, the Caribbean, and throughout the world; therefore, be it

- (1) **RESOLVED**, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America renew its commitment to be "A Telling Witness to God's Good News" and, be it further
- (2) **RESOLVED**, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in all its expressions set as a priority nurturing and enabling all the baptized to be faithful witnesses to God's good news in their daily lives; and, be it further
- (3) **RESOLVED**, that each congregation, in consultation with other congregations and ministries in its area, examine its own ministry of hospitality, review the opportunities for sharing God's good news with the people in its unique setting, and develop ways to meet, engage, witness to, and invite those people to faith in Jesus Christ; and, be it further
- (4) **RESOLVED**, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America work toward establishing 50 new congregations a year and seek designated giving (Partners Plus); and, be it further
- (5) **RESOLVED**, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America commit itself to reach out, invite, and welcome people to faith in Jesus Christ and, recognizing the goal of at least 10 percent African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American members to be a central component, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America challenge itself to grow in net membership by three percent in each of the remaining years of this decade; and, be it further
- (6) **RESOLVED**, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America implement strategies for expanded use of the public media to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to invite people into the community of faith; and, be it further

- (7) **RESOLVED**, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America nurture and develop lay and clergy leaders with vision, commitment, and skills for evangelization; and, be it further
- (8) **RESOLVED**, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America continue to provide support and personnel to assist partner churches in other countries to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ in ways appropriate to their context, and initiate the development of new Christian communities in areas where the Christian Church is not present; and, be it further
- (9) **RESOLVED**, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America continue the development of new congregational ministries throughout the United States and the Caribbean, particularly in locations where the Lutheran Church has not been present; and, be it further
- (10) **RESOLVED**, that financial support for evangelism work be a priority in the churchwide budget and that synods and congregations be encouraged to make this work a priority within their budgets also; and, be it further
- (11) **RESOLVED**, that the ELCA Churchwide Assembly affirm the commitments outlined in this strategy, commend the work underway in support of this evangelism strategy, and call members, congregations, synods, and churchwide units to follow up on all recommended actions to accomplish this work; and, be it further
- (12) **RESOLVED**, that the bishop appoint a coordinating committee to oversee the implementation and further development of this evangelism strategy, to facilitate the involvement of all expressions of this church in a comprehensive approach, to develop means for monitoring and celebrating progress, and to report annually to the Church Council and biennially to the Churchwide Assembly.

In response to this final resolve, the coordinating committee has produced “The 1991-2000 Decade Report” on the strategy. This report offers a comprehensive account—item by item—of the activities of the churchwide organization in particular, that were undertaken in response to “A Telling Witness.” The daunting question this report seeks to address is: “Has the church made progress that it can celebrate?” To this question we offer first a summary and then a more detailed response.

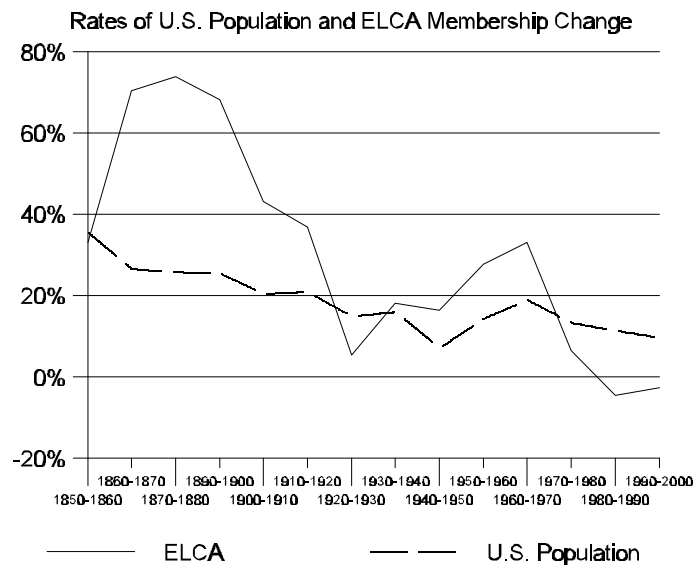
We believe with certainty that the ELCA can celebrate. The extent of the church’s activity has been enormous and this work has been conducted amidst complex and difficult circumstances with limited resources of staff and financial support. We know that many throughout the church have dedicated their lives to proclaiming the Gospel and that the congregations, the synods and the churchwide expression of the ELCA have worked long, hard and diligently to carry out the resolves of the 1991 churchwide assembly. The amount of work that is recounted in “The 1991-2000 Decade” report is impressive; without this great body of work the church may well have found itself in much more difficult circumstances. Despite the many factors that work against membership growth in the ELCA, including the fact that many congregations are located in areas with low rates of population growth, some believe that the ELCA is slowly but noticeably changing its culture from a church where evangelism is not a priority, to a church where evangelism is embraced as central to the church’s mission. If this is the case, it would be a significant change. The preponderance of the evidence at this point suggests that the ELCA has not yet made significant progress. Activities designed to change the culture have had only a short-term impact.

## EVANGELISM AND THE HISTORICAL PATTERN OF MEMBERSHIP CHANGE IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

In the history of the Lutheran church in America, Lutherans have not been evangelistic in an American sense which is defined by the practice of testifying with the intention of converting other adults. The Lutheran church in America was established by Europeans steeped in a “state” church experience where church membership was established through baptism. In Europe, the state church faced little competition, at least from other religious groups, and nonbelievers deprived themselves of the many benefits of state-sponsored church membership. Dissenters were seldom intent on changing the established religious tradition; instead they called people to a higher level of personal devotion within, or alongside of, the existing church. Accepting the practice of testifying was difficult for Lutherans. Occasionally, some person or group would argue that adult conversions were critical to the survival of a religious group—especially those with low birthrates—but a steady stream of immigrants from Scandinavia and Germany throughout the early and middle years of the 19th century, and the flood of immigrants between 1870 and 1900, provided Lutheran churches with new adult members without needing to adopt the practice of proselytizing. Lutheran churches expended their energy in gathering immigrants who were most often already baptized and familiar with the beliefs and practices of the Lutheran church. The historians August Suelflow and E. Clifford Nelson note that the high rate of immigration had the “effect of establishing and institutionalizing on American soil the Lutheranism of nineteenth-century Europe.”<sup>1</sup> Second, it had an “isolating and introverting effect upon Lutherans in their relationships to each other and to other American Protestants.” And third, it “provided for membership growth despite the isolation and introversion.”

During the early part of the 20th century, immigration from the Scandinavian countries and Germany began to slow as a worldwide economic depression and two world wars took center stage. It was not until after the Second World War that Lutheran churches began to experience a significant growth in their membership once again (along with almost all the other church groups in America). Much of this growth was due to high birthrates. In short, the birthrate was skyrocketing. In 1950, there were 151 million Americans and by 1970 there were 50 million more. In 1950, 3.6 million children were born. In 1955, 4.1 million children were born and in 1957, another 4.3 million. There was a minimum

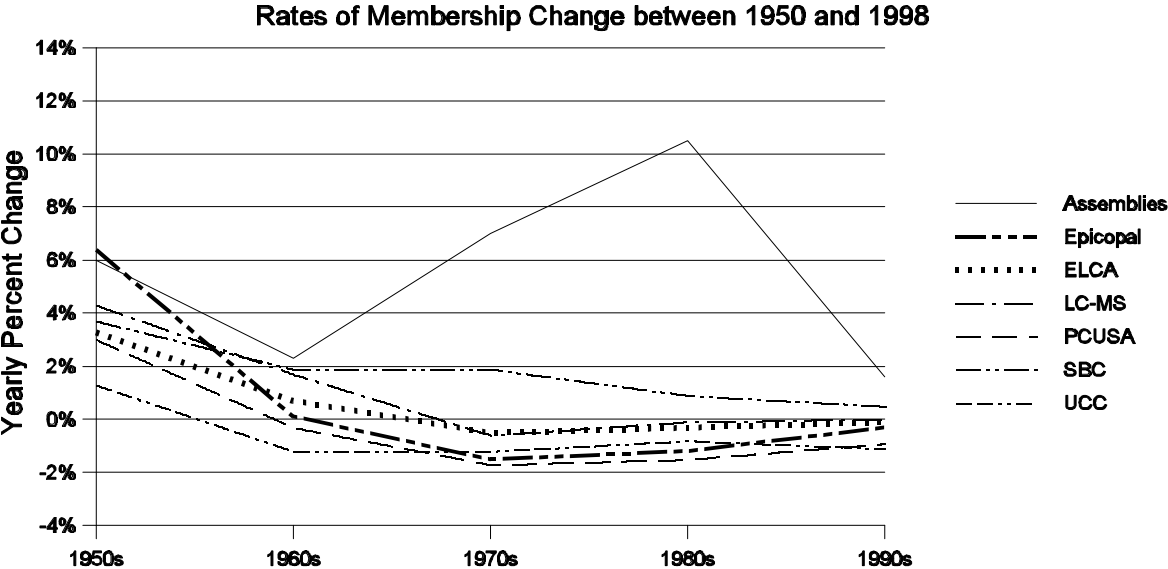
**Figure 1**



<sup>1</sup> “To the Promised Land.” Pp. 147-192 in E. Clifford Nelson's *The Lutherans in North America*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975.

of four million births a year from 1954 through 1964. And, not only was the country in the midst of a baby boom, it was also in the midst of a building boom—an interstate highway system, automobiles, homes, churches and all of the material goods Americans could desire. The United States charged ahead of its international competition as its industrial machine cranked up to remake America and to rebuild the world. In this very special set of circumstances, all American churches began to add new members in unprecedented numbers. Between 1950 and 1970, the Roman Catholic Church grew by almost 20 million members while the fastest growing Protestant body, the Southern Baptist Convention, grew by 4.5 million members. The American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) added a combined 1.5 million members during the 20-year period and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod added one million. These rates of growth meant that some churches were increasing their membership by a third and others were nearly doubling in size. In 20 years, the Assemblies of God grew by 98 percent and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints increased their membership by 87 percent. The Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention and the

**Figure 2**



Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod all grew by 60 percent or more, while the ALC and the LCA combined grew by 42 percent.

In 1950, the ALC and the LCA claimed 2.6 percent of the population. In 1965, the membership of the predecessor bodies of the ELCA peaked at 5,650,137 which was about 3 percent of the total population of the United States. By 1970, the membership in the ALC and the LCA decreased about 30,000 members and the downward trend continued into the 1980s. Between 1970 and 1980, the ALC and the LCA lost about 26,000 members per year and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod lost about 16,000 per year.

Between 1990 and 1999, church membership rates stabilized; losses have not been as severe among the mainstream denominations and gains by the conservative and Pentecostal groups have also moderated. Instead of growing at 10 percent a year, the growth rate among Assemblies of God congregations is now about 2 percent per year. Most of the established religious groups in America, including the ELCA, are still losing members but at about one percent per year or less. Most of the growing groups are gaining less than one percent per year. (See Figure 2.)

Between 1998 and 1999—the most recent data available—the ELCA lost about 22,000 members. (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Baptized Membership and Average Worship Between 1990 and 1999**

Year	Baptized	Worship	Change
1990	5,238,599	1,635,534	
1991	5,236,681	1,620,143	-1,918
1992	5,228,437	1,608,633	-8,244
1993	5,202,415	1,576,714	-26,022
1994	5,191,559	1,573,270	-10,856
1995	5,188,289	1,570,929	-3,270
1996	5,179,005	1,569,480	-9,284
1997	5,177,395	1,577,642	-1,610
1998	5,169,869	1,575,822	-7,526
1999	5,150,636	1,568,468	-21,994

From this simple but bottom-line point of view—that membership growth is evidence of progress in evangelism—the conclusion is straightforward. Lutherans have never embraced evangelism as a central part of the mission of the church and despite an enormous amount of recent effort at reorienting the church, the ELCA has lost members every year since it adopted an evangelism strategy in 1991 (and

**Table 2: Sources of Baptized Membership Change between 1991 and 1999**

	1991	1999	Change
Child Baptisms	92,934	80,566	-12,368
Adult Baptisms	8,948	8,409	-539
Adult Affirmations	61,909	63,946	2,037
Transfers from ELCA	107,930	84,682	-23,248
Transfers from other Lutheran	21,984	17,949	-4,035
Transfers from non-Lutheran	23,428	21,380	-2,048
Other Gains	19,786	22,189	2,403
Deaths	48,624	51,489	2,865
Transfers to ELCA	81,738	61,189	-20,549
Transfers to other Lutheran	13,719	12,046	-1,673
Transfers to non-Lutheran	18,017	15,367	-2,650
Other Losses	167,360	185,586	18,226

well before). While accounting for the losses with some confidence is difficult, they appear to come from two primary sources—a decline in child baptisms and fewer transfers from and to other ELCA congregations. (See Table 2.) The number of members who are dying has also increased somewhat, but the increase is moderate. The number of persons transferring to non-ELCA Lutheran and non-Lutheran congregations is down. On the gain side, the number of adult baptisms averages about 8,300 per year and has varied little since 1991. Adult affirmations of faith also vary little and average about 62,000 per year. In short, the church is baptizing fewer children and a larger and larger proportion of existing members are leaving ELCA congregations with little evidence that they are becoming active again in other churches. Without adult conversions to Lutheranism to offset the decline in child baptisms, or without considerable attention to why people are leaving, the ELCA will continue to lose members and a voice in the American dialogue on religion.

**Resolve 1:**

**RESOLVED, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America renew its commitment to be “A Telling Witness to God’s Good News.”**

“A Telling Witness to God’s Good News” details a long list of requested activities to support the evangelism strategy. It focuses primarily on the production of resources and events designed to assist people “to tell God’s good news.” Over the course of the strategy, this resolve has received considerable attention and it is the resolve to which the churchwide organization in particular has most thoroughly and successfully responded. Based on our best counts, the churchwide organization produced or conducted 280 distinct resources or events in response to “A Telling Witness.” (See Table 3.)

**Table 3: Resources Produced and Events Conducted between 1991 and 1999**

	<b>Number</b>		<b>Number</b>
Evangelism Events/Workshops/Conferences	99	Audio-cassettes	3
Congregational Print Resources	57	Devotionals	3
Financial Assistance/Granting Programs	36	Media Training Projects	3
Videos	19	Evangelism Packets	3
Advertising Resources	10	Small Group Resources	3
Web Based Sites/Resources	9	Books on Evangelism	2
Bible Studies	7	Brochures	2
Consultation Events	5	Neighborhood Canvassing Door Hangers	2
Planning Guides	5	Interactive Videos	2
Assessment Tools	4	Leaflets	2
Newsletters	4	<b>Total</b>	<b>280</b>

**Resolves 2 and 7:**

**RESOLVED, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in all its expressions set as a priority nurturing and enabling all the baptized to be faithful witnesses to God's good news in their daily lives; and, be it further**

**RESOLVED, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America nurture and develop lay and clergy leaders with vision, commitment, and skills for evangelization.**

We believe that the vast majority of members of the ELCA are faithful witnesses in their daily lives. We also believe that there is ample evidence that many Lutherans continue to be hesitant at the prospect of testifying. A random sample of LCA members (*Lutheran Listening Post-LLP*) was asked the following question in 1977: “If your pastor were to give you names of three persons or families in your neighborhoods who were not church members and asked you to arrange to visit these people to tell them about your faith and about the meaning of the Gospel in your life, how would you respond?”<sup>2</sup> On a 1991, survey of lay members of ELCA congregations (*Lutherans Say...5-LS5*), the question read “If your pastor gave you the names of three persons or families in their neighborhood who were not church members, offered to train you in visitation and asked you or your group to visit these families and to share the meaning of the gospel in your lives, how would you respond?” (See Table 4.) These questions and the response categories are not strictly comparable, but it is clear that no more persons were willing to take on this visitation, faith sharing task in 1991 than in 1977. We have not asked this question more recently.

**Table 4: Request for Visitations to Share the Gospel**

<b>Response Categories</b>	<b>1977</b>	<b>1991</b>
Accept Eagerly	10%	8%
Accept With Reservation	26%	22%
Accept, Rather Not Be Asked	18%	—
Probably/Definitely Say “No”	29%	38%
Not Sure	17%	33%

We did ask ELCA clergy on the *Cooperative Congregational Studies Project Questionnaire (CCSP)* to estimate, based on the total number of adult participants in their congregation, the number that are involved in “recruiting new members.” (See Table 5.) In 1977, the *LLP* asked LCA clergy to estimate how active members were in the “congregation’s efforts to gain new members.” (See Table 6.) In 1977, the pastors estimated that 35 percent of their members were “not at all” active in gaining new members and in 2000, 39 percent of the clergy estimated that “few” of their members were involved in recruiting new members. In response to both these questions, it is clear that the vast majority of members in the vast majority of congregations are yet to be convinced that evangelism is a significant and important part of the their lives or the mission of the church.

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<sup>2</sup> All *Lutheran Listening Post* and *Lutherans Say...* questionnaire materials are available through the Department for Research and Evaluation.

**Table 5: Percent of Membership Involved in Recruiting New Members**

Pastor Estimate	2000
Almost All	1%
Most	7%
Some	40%
Few	39%
Hardly Any	13%

**Table 6: Percent Active in Congregation’s Efforts to Gain New Members**

Pastor Estimate	Percent in 1977
Very Active	1%
Moderately Active	6%
Slightly Active	46%
Not at All Active	35%
Not sure	12%

**Resolve 3:**

**RESOLVED, that each congregation, in consultation with other congregations and ministries in its area, examine its own ministry of hospitality, review the opportunities for sharing God's good news with the people in its unique setting, and develop ways to meet, engage, witness to, and invite those people to faith in Jesus Christ.**

After ten years of the evangelism strategy, no more congregations, based on clergy reports, have organized programs for membership recruitment than in 1977. The 1977, *LLP* questionnaire asked clergy if their congregation had an organized membership recruitment program and a version of the

**Table 7: Percent Of Clergy Responding “Yes” to Organized Evangelism Efforts**

	1977	2000
Congregation has an organized program for membership recruitment.	43%	—
Focused efforts to identify and contact people who have recently moved into the congregation’s area.	—	44%
Newspaper Advertisements	76%	82%
Radio or Television Advertisements	14%	22%

same question was asked on the *CCSP* questionnaire in 2000. Again, the questions are not strictly comparable, but the percent responding “yes” to an organized or focused program to recruit or make

contact with potential new members is remarkably the same. (See Table 7.) Both of these questionnaires also asked about media use. There was a increase in the number of congregations saying they used newspaper or radio or television advertisements.

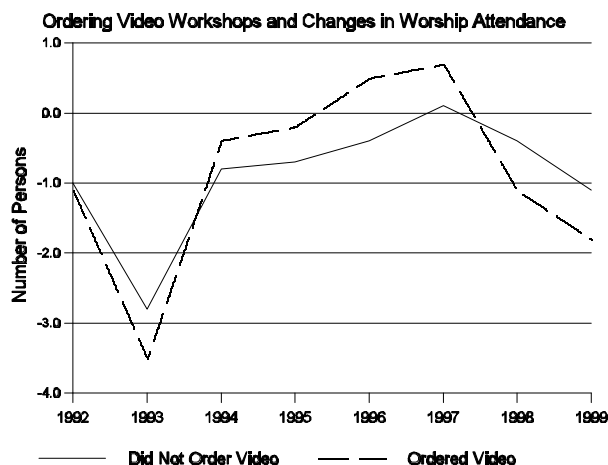
If the culture is changing, it is doing so slowly, but there is some evidence of change. Almost 90 percent of ELCA clergy indicated that in the last year they stressed in their preaching and teaching the importance of witnessing to others about one's faith (CCSP). Forty-two percent said they held special worship services intended to attract the unchurched or nonmembers in the last year (CCSP). Thirty-six percent sponsored special programs especially intended to attract unchurched/nonmembers in the community in the last year (CCSP). But 12 percent of pastors believed their congregations would resist any "growth or evangelistic" campaign (CCSP).

### Video Workshops

Specific efforts designed to change the culture of the ELCA as a part of the strategy have also shown some promise, but they are up against formidable odds that seem to reassert themselves over a short span of time. With the assistance of the Division for Congregational Ministries (DCM) we obtained the lists of congregations that ordered one of several video resources produced by DCM between 1994 and 1996. We are well aware of the myriad possible intervening and confounding factors that make it nearly impossible to conclude that ordering a single resource is causally related to changes in congregational membership. As a result, we do **not** claim there is a relationship. We do, however, believe that congregations order resources for pragmatic reasons. Or put differently, we believe that evangelism resources are ordered because someone is concerned about evangelism. In this case, the resources that it was possible to order included several video workshops: the *Awakening* video produced in 1994, the *Disciple* video produced in 1995, the *Renewed* video produced in 1995, the *Restored* video produced in 1996 and the *Choices* video produced in 1996.

Between January 1995 and May 1997, at least 880 congregations ordered at least one of these video workshops. We compared the average worship attendance in these congregations to the 8,375 congregations that did not order the video. Only ELCA congregations with membership data for every year from 1991 to 1999 were included. Congregations that ordered the video workshops had greater losses in average worship attendance before 1994. (See Figure 3.) After 1994 they begin to have fewer losses and there were gains between 1995 and 1997. For whatever reason, congregations that ordered videos gained in worship attendance, precisely at the time one would expect these increases to occur if the video workshops were to play a role. Unfortunately, however, these gains are not sustained so that by 1998 and 1999 losses return and are greater than among those for congregations that did not

Figure 3

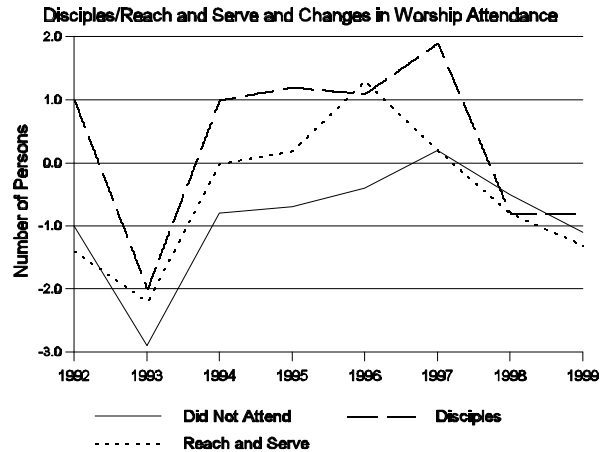


order videos. During the entire period from 1992 to 1999, the congregations that ordered videos lost an average of 6.9 worship attenders and those congregations that did not order the videos lost an average of 7.2.

*Events*

We also had data available on two events that were sponsored by the DCM in 1995 and 1996. *Making Disciples: Christian Education and Evangelism* was held in 1995 (209 congregations sent participants) and *Reach and Serve: Social Ministry and Evangelism* was held in 1996 (242 congregations sent participants). Congregations attending either event were already more likely to be growing, but it appears that *Making Disciples* had a very positive impact on spurring growth in worship attendance. (See Figure 4.) Once again, however, it is clear that these gains were not sustained.

**Figure 4**



*Grants*

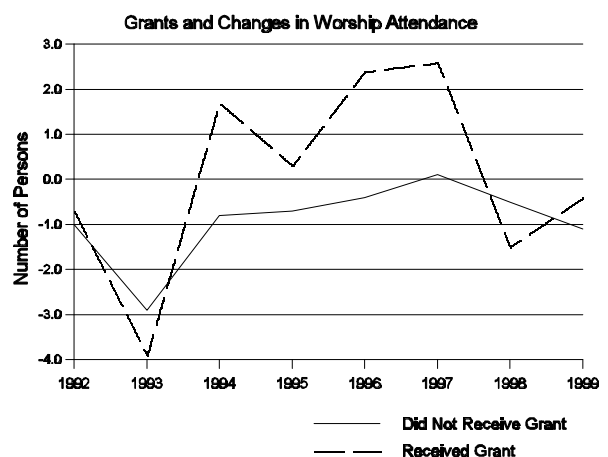
Finally, we know of 120 congregations that received grants to attend evangelism events sponsored by a wide variety of different church and para-church organizations. The grant program was administered by DCM, but made possible through the Congregational Membership Initiative which was sponsored by AAL. Once again, grants spurred growth but the growth was not sustained. (See Figure 5.)

**Resolves 4 and 9:**

**RESOLVED, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America work toward establishing 50 new congregations a year and seek designated giving (Partners Plus) and, be it further**

**RESOLVED, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America continue the development of new congregational ministries throughout the United States and the Caribbean, particularly in locations where the Lutheran Church has not been present.**

**Figure 5**



There was considerable debate among the churchwide assembly voting members in 1991

about this resolve. Some felt that the number should be lowered to 30 primarily because the church did not have ready access to the resources needed to begin 50. Starting 50 means providing the support for 50 mission developers. The move to lower the number was defeated and the goal became 50.

Knowing exactly what to count as a new start is surprisingly difficult. The Division for Outreach (DO) is charged with redeveloping congregations as well as beginning work where there has been little or no ELCA presence. The ELCA also authorizes “synodical worshiping communities” some of which become congregations and some of which do not. Since 1991, the ELCA has begun work in about 329 different sites. Of these, 34 sites are no longer active, 178 have become new congregations (about 20 per year) and 117 remain works in progress. About 85 percent of these sites will finally produce congregations (about 11 per year). Finally, three new congregations have been received after being started by other congregations. (See Table 8.)

**Table 8: Sources of New Congregations Since 1991**

	<b>Number</b>
New Starts	178
Forming (about 85 percent will become congregations)	117
From Existing Congregation	3
Site No Longer Active	34
Total Number of New Congregations Per Year	31

New congregations are a significant source of new members for the ELCA, though as new congregations move through their first decade of existence the number of adult affirmations decreases and the number of child baptisms increases.<sup>3</sup> In other words, just as with the programmatic efforts to make evangelism a primary focus of the mission of the church, ELCA congregations find it very difficult to sustain an evangelistic focus over time. Finally, by the ambitious bottom-line criteria of 50 congregations per year, the church fell short by 19 congregations per year.

**Resolve 5:**

**RESOLVED, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America commit itself to reach out, invite, and welcome people to faith in Jesus Christ and, recognizing the goal of at least 10 percent African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American members to be a central component, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America challenge itself to grow in net membership by three percent in each of the remaining years of this decade.**

“It shall be a goal of this church that within 10 years of its establishment its membership shall include at least 10 percent people of color and/or primary language other than English.” This continuing resolution of the ELCA constitution was adopted by the Constituting Convention of the ELCA on April 30, 1987 and incorporated into the 1991 evangelism strategy. But, despite sincere intentions and high hopes along with considerable attention to achieving the goal at the churchwide level, the ELCA has made little numerical progress in this regard. (See Table 9.) The number of African Americans, Asians,

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<sup>3</sup> See “A Brief Review on the Membership Growth of Congregations in the ELCA that were Organized in 1980.” July, 1997. Available from the Department for Research and Evaluation.

Native Americans, Others and Hispanics members of the church has increased while the total number of White members has declined. In the case of the African American, Asian, and Native American members, the increase is less than 2,000 per group over a nine year period. Among Hispanics, however, the membership has increased by slightly over 50 percent. This increase along with a decrease in the White membership has increased the membership of African Americans, Asian, Hispanic, Native Americans and Others in the ELCA from 2.0 percent of the total membership to 2.6 between 1991 and 1999. At this current rate, it will take the ELCA over 100 years to achieve the 10 percent goal.

**Table 9: Baptized Membership by Race/Ethnicity between 1991 and 1999**

Year	White	African American	Asian	Native America	Other	Hispanic	Percent White	African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, Other
1991	5,140,021	49,464	21,175	6,231	3,690	24,596	98.0%	2.0%
1992	5,127,358	51,818	20,964	6,418	2,987	25,023	98.0%	2.0%
1993	5,106,109	49,705	21,529	6,542	3,150	25,750	98.0%	2.0%
1994	5,089,960	49,156	21,870	6,685	3,716	27,661	97.9%	2.1%
1995	5,080,066	49,460	22,007	6,912	3,926	28,118	97.9%	2.1%
1996	5,068,071	49,707	21,898	7,005	4,805	29,424	97.8%	2.2%
1997	5,068,920	49,438	21,769	6,896	7,044	30,988	97.8%	2.2%
1998	5,057,028	50,635	22,467	7,134	8,696	32,265	97.7%	2.3%
1999	5,019,050	50,794	22,541	7,351	13,324	37,576	97.5%	2.6%
Change	-120,971	1,330	1,366	1,120	9,634	12,980		
% in 1991	98.0%	0.9%	0.4%	0.1%	0.1%	0.5%		
% in 1999	97.5%	1.0%	0.4%	0.1%	0.3%	0.7%		

**Resolve 6:**

**RESOLVED, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America implement strategies for expanded use of the public media to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to invite people into the community of faith.**

In 1996, the ELCA commissioned a study of the awareness of the ELCA among the general population. The study, by Parkwood Research Associates, conducted random, nationwide telephone interviews of 1000 persons who said that religion was at least somewhat important in their lives. Parkwood asked the respondents to name five denominations without aided recall. Catholics were mentioned 84 percent of the time; Baptists 66 percent; Methodists 47 percent; Presbyterians 37 percent; and Jews, 33 percent of the time. Lutherans were mentioned by a quarter of the respondents, and among those that mentioned Lutherans 84 percent made no unaided distinction between denominational types of Lutherans.

The Parkwood study also asked about religious advertising. Forty-five percent of the respondents reported having seen or heard an advertisement which promoted a religious group and television was the predominate source of those advertisements. “When asked to name the organization the advertising promoted, far and away the group most often mentioned was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” Lutherans were mentioned less than 5 percent of the time.

The ELCA does use the public media. The *Lutheran Vespers* radio program began broadcasting in 1947. It is a listener-supported program that is subsidized by the churchwide organization. The

program airs on stations all over the United States and, among its various purposes, it is designed to be an outreach ministry for congregations who are encouraged to place a 30 second identification spot at the end of each program. Despite the “vespers” title, the program is aired, by the vast majority of stations, in a Sunday morning slot.

It is impossible for us to assess the impact of the program. But, because it relies on listener and congregational support primarily for purchasing radio time, the program airs on stations where the ELCA already has a significant presence. For example, the program airs on 21 stations in Minnesota, 19 stations in Pennsylvania, 18 stations in Wisconsin, 12 stations in Iowa and 12 stations in Ohio. In contrast, the program is carried by no stations in Florida or Georgia, three stations in California and three in Washington and one in Arizona. At the same time the number of stations carrying the programs has grown. In 1994, the program was carried on 125 stations and it is currently carried on about 230 stations.

The ELCA is also part of the *Odyssey Television Network*, but because the ELCA is one part of a coalition of many, many other religious groups, it is unlikely that public awareness of the unique character and contributions of Lutherans will be raised through the church’s association with *Odyssey*. The only mention of particular religious groups on the *Odyssey* Web site are links to the Web sites of the various religious groups under the title “Community Connections.”

Most recently, the Department for Communication of the ELCA produced a series of advertisements designed for television, billboards and print media and, with the assistance of AAL, the church made grants to congregations, synods, and other Lutheran organizations for the local use of these advertisements. We are not yet able, because sufficient time has not passed, to assess the impact of this campaign. At the same time, the decision to use a granting process is not without implication. Because it was important to make congregations aware of the advertisements and to ensure that they were adequately prepared to respond, congregations that attended synod/churchwide training programs were given preference. The unintended consequence of this approach was that the synods that took up these training events and developed grant proposals then received the bulk of the funding. This meant that nearly one million of the two million in funding went to states where Lutherans are already relatively well established—Illinois, Wisconsin, and Ohio. (See Table 10.)

**Table 10: Churchwide Identity Grants by State and the Percent of the Population That Is ELCA**

State	Approximate Number of Grants	Average Amount	Total	Cumulative Amount	Cumulative Percent	Percent of State Population That Is ELCA
IL	57	\$5,802	\$330,730	\$330,730	16.8%	2.35%
WI	60	\$3,602	\$216,124	\$546,854	27.7%	8.81%
OH	84	\$2,234	\$187,684	\$734,538	37.2%	2.75%
MI	36	\$5,191	\$186,881	\$921,419	46.7%	1.65%
CA	29	\$6,071	\$176,062	\$1,097,481	55.6%	0.54%
SC	18	\$5,391	\$97,032	\$1,194,513	60.5%	1.61%
NC	26	\$3,217	\$83,634	\$1,278,147	64.8%	1.16%
NY	4	\$18,810	\$75,238	\$1,353,385	68.6%	0.97%
CO	33	\$2,077	\$68,540	\$1,421,925	72.0%	1.65%
KS	14	\$4,500	\$62,999	\$1,484,924	75.2%	1.68%
PA	30	\$1,909	\$57,270	\$1,542,194	78.1%	5.26%
FL	8	\$7,010	\$56,079	\$1,598,273	81.0%	0.61%
NE	9	\$5,149	\$46,341	\$1,644,614	83.3%	7.72%
TX	16	\$2,841	\$45,459	\$1,690,073	85.6%	0.78%
OK	3	\$8,371	\$25,113	\$1,715,186	86.9%	0.32%
MA	10	\$2,478	\$24,782	\$1,739,968	88.2%	0.46%
SD	20	\$1,212	\$24,231	\$1,764,199	89.4%	16.37%
WA	17	\$1,421	\$24,158	\$1,788,357	90.6%	2.29%
MO	10	\$2,326	\$23,260	\$1,811,617	91.8%	0.52%
MD	17	\$1,331	\$22,621	\$1,834,238	92.9%	2.02%
NV	1	\$17,481	\$17,481	\$1,851,719	93.8%	0.58%
CT	6	\$2,760	\$16,557	\$1,868,276	94.7%	1.01%
VT	1	\$15,000	\$15,000	\$1,883,276	95.4%	0.24%
MN	16	\$907	\$14,511	\$1,897,787	96.1%	17.92%
IA	7	\$1,699	\$11,891	\$1,909,678	96.7%	9.28%
WY	3	\$3,610	\$10,830	\$1,920,508	97.3%	2.06%
AL	3	\$3,272	\$9,815	\$1,930,323	97.8%	0.12%
WV	4	\$2,375	\$9,500	\$1,939,823	98.3%	0.79%
DE	4	\$2,075	\$8,300	\$1,948,123	98.7%	0.85%
ME	1	\$8,300	\$8,300	\$1,956,423	99.1%	0.35%
VA	2	\$2,671	\$5,341	\$1,961,764	99.4%	0.97%
NM	3	\$1,300	\$3,900	\$1,965,664	99.6%	0.62%
HI	1	\$3,826	\$3,826	\$1,969,490	99.8%	0.24%
TN	1	\$2,192	\$2,192	\$1,971,682	99.9%	.31%
ND	1	\$1,125	\$1,125	\$1,972,807	99.9%	27.53%
DC	1	\$552	\$552	\$1,973,359	100.0%	.79%
IN	1	\$500	\$500	\$1,973,859	100.0%	1.26%

Some areas of the country where Lutherans are isolated into geographic pockets also received substantial funding like South and North Carolina. Key population states like California and Colorado also received considerable funding, but considerably less went to other key population growth states like Florida and Texas. Two of the countries fastest growing states, Georgia and Arizona, neither applied for nor received any of the public media grants.

Finally, with regard to the use of the public media, the World Wide Web has emerged as a significant new tool. The web presence of the ELCA, certainly when compared to most other denominations, is substantial and extensive. The site <http://www.sharingfaith.org/> is specifically designed as an evangelistic resource. The site receives about 4,300 “hits” per month, but it is difficult to determine the

extent to which the page is achieving its evangelistic intention. Based on the monthly logs that keep track of the key words used by persons who visited the site, there is some question about whether or not the site is assisting them. Based on the key word searches, many people come to the site looking for Bible studies for children or youth or to answer questions about the Bible and faith. The sharing faith site does not have obvious or direct links to Bible studies nor does it devote significant space to questions of faith or on the Bible.

**Resolve 8:**

**RESOLVED, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America continue to provide support and personnel to assist partner churches in other countries to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ in ways appropriate to their context, and initiate the development of new Christian communities in areas where the Christian Church is not present.**

Based on research work conducted in 1994 as part of the Church Council review of the Division for Global Mission (DGM), there is evidence that the work of DGM among the partner churches is viewed positively.<sup>4</sup> Two hundred forty-six partner churches and mission agencies were invited to participate in the study, and 179 questionnaires were returned. We asked the partner churches and mission agencies to respond to the questions noted in Table 11. The partner churches indicated that they were very satisfied with the relationship between their area program director and the church/agency and with the responsiveness of the program director. They also noted that DGM was very cooperative and that the communication between the church/agency was very good. They were a bit less positive about the information they received from DGM with regard to policies and decisions. (See Table 11.)

**Table 11: DGM’s Relationship to Partner Churches and Mission Agencies**

	Average score on a “5” point scale with “1” = “Very”
How satisfactory is the relationship between ELCA/DGM area program director/representative and your church/agency?	1.7
How cooperative is your relationship with ELCA/DGM?	1.8
How responsive is the ELCA/DGM area program director/representative to your church’s/agency’s concerns?	1.8
How good is the communication between your church/agency and ELCA/DGM?	2.0
How adequate is the information you receive about ELCA/DGM’s policies?	2.7
How adequate is the information you receive about ELCA/DGM’s decisions?	2.8

The proportion of the churchwide organization’s budget that is committed to global mission activities is also significant at 26 percent (including World Hunger) of the total churchwide budget including the \$9.1 million of world hunger funding that flows through the Division. In addition to these funds and direct support for missionaries, the ELCA provides \$5.4 million to the Lutheran World Federation, \$4.6 million to partner churches, and \$3.8 million to Lutheran World Relief.

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<sup>4</sup> See “A Survey of Partner Churches and Mission Agencies.” March, 1995. Available from the Department for Research and Evaluation.

The number of missionaries supported by the Division has been reduced over the years as the Division has shifted to direct grants and the use of short-term persons and volunteers. According to the “Survey of Partner Churches and Mission Agencies,” 86 percent of the churches/agencies have a plan for training leaders and 65 percent have sent their own missionaries into new areas in their own countries. Just under 50 percent sent their own missionaries into another country.

Finally, the growth of the church in Africa and Asia stands in stark contrast to the situation in Europe and North America. (See Table 12).

**Table 12: Membership Change in the Lutheran Church for Selected Countries between 1992 and 1999**

Country	1992	1999	Change
Germany	14,802,200	13,927,262	-5.9%
United States	8,400,755	8,288,352	-1.3%
Sweden	7,630,000	7,505,930	-1.6%
Finland	4,602,425	4,598,473	-0.1%
Denmark	4,554,150	4,539,857	-0.3%
Norway	3,920,620	3,821,060	-2.5%
Indonesia	2,297,715	3,794,393	65.1%
Tanzania	1,500,000	2,500,000	66.7%
India	1,242,190	1,621,065	30.5%
Madagascar	1,200,000	1,500,000	25.0%
Ethiopia	1,038,630	2,593,163	149.7%
Brazil	982,600	915,982	-6.8%
South Africa	776,540	884,719	13.9%
Papua New Guinea	653,525	910,000	39.2%
Namibia	634,935	740,000	16.6%

**Resolve 10:**

**RESOLVED, that financial support for evangelism work be a priority in the churchwide budget and that synods and congregations be encouraged to make this work a priority within their budgets.**

It is very difficult, because of changes in the structure of the churchwide offices and because of changes in the focus of the programs of specific units to judge the extent to which the church has devoted more or less of its financial resources to evangelism. (And, we can say nothing of the financial priorities of synods and congregations.) In general, after adjusting for inflation, there is less “real” money in the churchwide budget in 2000 than there was in 1991. Then, the amount of money allocated to the units of the churchwide organization with evangelism as a major programmatic responsibility—DCM, DGM, and DO—has also declined somewhat as a percent of the total budget. (See Table 13.) The decline for DCM has been 0.1 percent, 0.8 percent for DO, and 1.5 percent for DGM.

**Table 13: Churchwide Budget by Unit and the Percent of the Total between 1991 and 2000**

	1991	1995	2000
Congregational Ministries	8.4%	8.4%	8.3%
Ministry	7.3%	7.3%	7.1%
Outreach	18.6%	18.1%	17.8%
Higher Education	7.0%	6.1%	6.0%
Church in Society	4.8%	4.3%	4.3%
Global Mission	21.1%	20.0%	19.6%
Multicultural Ministries	1.6%	1.5%	1.5%
Women	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
Bishop	1.9%	1.0%	1.0%
Communication	3.2%	3.1%	3.1%
Ecumenical Affairs	2.1%	1.9%	2.0%
Human Resources	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
Occupancy	5.0%	5.9%	5.9%
Research and Evaluation	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%
Synodical Relations	0.0%	1.5%	1.5%
Conference of Bishops	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Secretary	1.4%	1.8%	2.0%
Church Council	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Legal Services	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Churchwide Assembly	0.9%	1.0%	1.0%
Treasurer	3.6%	3.8%	3.9%
ELCA Foundation	1.8%	2.3%	2.3%
Church Periodical	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%
Strategy Implementations	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%
General Treasury	8.4%	0.1%	0.8%
Mission Operating Fund	0.0%	2.0%	2.0%
Depreciation	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Retiree Health & Benefit Costs	0.0%	7.4%	7.7%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

## Summary

Has the church made progress that it can celebrate? We began this review with reference to the enormous amount of work that has taken place under complex and difficult circumstances. At the same time, we maintain that the preponderance of the evidence suggests that the ELCA has not yet made significant progress in changing the culture of the church with regard to evangelism and, as a result, the evangelism strategy has not achieved its intended purpose. We believe that achieving significant progress will take renewed vision and commitment in addition to the discovery of new methods and approaches. In terms of vision, the church seems to be caught between the church growth successes of conservative evangelical and fundamentalists and the legacy of the state church. As a Reformation church, Lutherans must find another, more creative way—a way to grow that can capture the imagination of the majority of the ELCA members (or at least a very substantial minority.) If it does not, the Lutheran church in America will be unable to fulfill its call and make the kind of religious contribution that is so sorely needed in America—piety without condemnation or judgment. In terms of commitment, the ELCA must focus its efforts on educating leaders with this unique, Lutheran vision of church growth and then it must find the means to support them to the best of its ability. Finally, we must find new methods. Our existing repertoire shows only a limited and short-term impact. If we can do all that, with the help of God, we will indeed have something to celebrate.