

Local Congregational Social Ministry Activity in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America January 11, 2001

Social ministry is an important part of the ministry of most congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Caring for others, particularly those in need, is a witness to the Gospel. In an attempt to describe the nature and extent of social ministry, the Department for Research and Evaluation, in cooperation with the Division for Church in Society, fielded two questionnaires to a sample of 700 ELCA congregations.¹ The first questionnaire was mailed in February of 1999. Four hundred sixty-two congregations returned the first questionnaire (66%). In an attempt to confirm and track the results of the first questionnaire, a second questionnaire was mailed in June 2000.² Three hundred and fifty-one congregations returned the second questionnaire (50%). The findings presented here are based on responses to the initial questionnaire. In large part, the findings of the second questionnaire matched the first.

We know that most congregations provide financial support to persons in need through their financial gifts. In a recent survey, 88 percent of ELCA congregations indicated that they provide cash assistance to families or individuals either directly or in cooperation with other agencies.³ Based on the current survey, 40 percent of congregations indicated that they provided financial support to a local community organization to help homeless persons and 38 percent are involved in some type of support for Habitat for Humanity projects. Twenty percent of congregations also noted they provide home energy (heat and utility) assistance. But, in general, this study was designed to go further—to focus on the involvement of congregations beyond financial support. We wanted to know how many congregations provided physical space for a ministry, or volunteers, or even direct oversight.⁴

Types of Social Ministry Activities?

Congregations choose a variety of ways to engage in social ministry, often dependent upon their particular ministry context. Forty-six percent of congregations are involved with a food bank with 38 percent providing space, volunteers or both. Collecting for a food bank is the most common

¹ Because we believed that the social ministry activity of congregations may vary significantly by the size of congregations, we randomly selected 100 congregations in seven different size categories for a total of 700 congregations. We determined the size of a congregation based on its baptized membership in 1998. The size categories were 1-175; 176-350; 351-500; 501-700; 701-950; 951-1500; and 1500 or more. We statistically weighted the returns presented here so that they are representative of the ELCA as a whole. In the future we will pursue difference related to size.

² For the mailing of the second questionnaire, we supplemented the first sample with a set of new randomly selected congregations in each of the appropriate size categories. We did this to replace those congregations that did not respond to the first questionnaire. As a result, the second questionnaire was mailed to a total of 700 congregations which included 411 congregations that responded to the first questionnaire and agreed to receive a second, and 289 congregations which received the questionnaire for the first time.

³ Based on data from a survey of ELCA congregations participating in the *Cooperative Congregational Studies Project*. Detailed frequencies are available upon request from the Department for Research and Evaluation, ELCA.

⁴ We defined direct oversight to mean that the “ministry is a significant part of the congregation’s life and the congregation plays a significant role in providing oversight to the persons managing or running the program and in providing or raising its financial support.”

congregational social ministry activity that goes beyond simple financial support. Thirty percent of congregations provided clothing, 23 percent have a food pantry in their church building, 22 percent provide home energy (heat and utility) and 22 percent have a preschool in their church building. Other types of activity are also presented in Figure 1.

The vast majority of congregations are not engaged in more intensive social ministry activities, but a few provide space, volunteers or direct oversight for substance abuse programs (8%), mental health services (7%), tutoring programs (6%), for soup kitchens (5%), for youth at risk (5%), for medical services (3%), job counseling (3%), and legal services (1%). (See Figure 2.)

In terms of the most significant level of social ministry involvement—13 percent of congregations provide **direct oversight** for preschools and 9 percent of congregations provide direct oversight for a food pantry and 6 percent for food bank collection activities.

How Many are Served?

It is difficult to make reliable estimates with regard to the number of people served by congregational social ministry. What do we mean, for example, by providing service? Do congregations keep actual counts? Despite these difficulties, we asked congregations that have direct oversight for a social ministry to estimate the number of persons served. It is our belief that when congregations provide direct oversight for a ministry they are more likely to know the number of persons that are being served. Table 1 shows the estimates.

Twenty-two percent of the congregations who provide direct oversight for a social ministry reported turning persons away “due to lack of capacity.” Eleven percent reported a waiting list for some service provided by the social ministry.

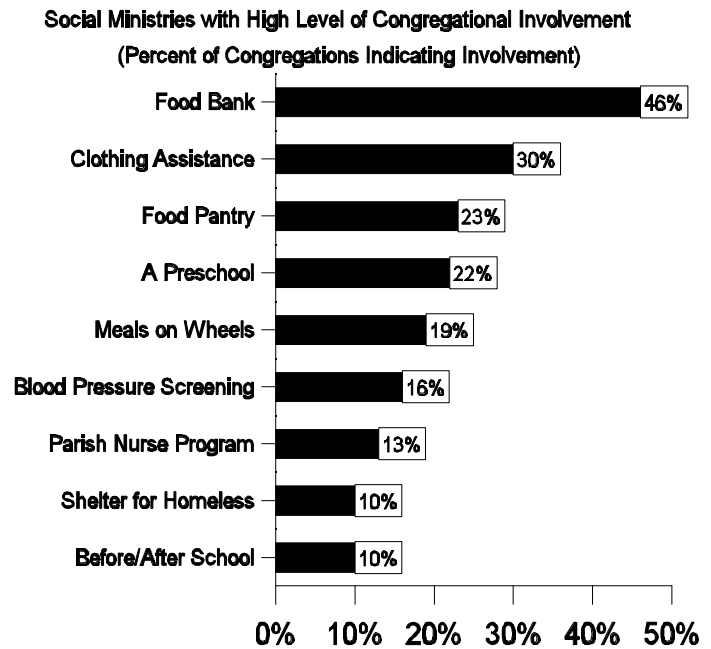


Figure 1

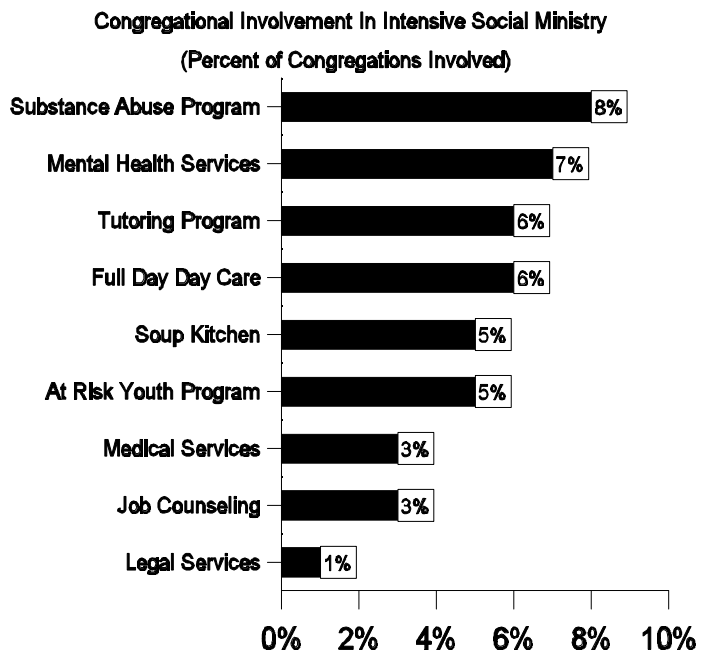


Figure 2

Table 1

Number of People Served by the Social Ministries of Congregations in the ELCA in 1998 <i>(the estimates include only programs for which congregations provide direct oversight)</i>				
Program	Percent of Congregations with Direct Oversight	Average Number of Persons Served	Estimated Total Number of Congregations in the ELCA with the Program (N=10,689)	Estimated Total Number of Persons Served by the Program
a food pantry	9.4%	1,861	1,005	1,869,870
a food bank collecting for other agencies	5.9%	2,562	631	1,615,728
a WIC program	1.1%	4,845	118	569,670
a "soup" kitchen	1.9%	1,137	231	230,914
a preschool	13.1%	58	1,400	81,215
full day child care	3.3%	82	323	28,924
before and/or after school program	7.1%	32	759	24,285
tutoring program (for children)	2.6%	27	278	7,531
program for at risk youth	1.9%	30	203	6,093

Who is Served?

Table 2 shows the characteristic of the persons served in 1998 by the social ministries of congregations with direct oversight for that ministry. The congregations with direct oversight reported that 75 percent of the persons served were members of their congregation and 80 percent served came from the local community.

Table 2

Characteristics of People Served by the Social Ministries of Congregations in the ELCA in 1998 <i>(the estimates include only programs for which congregations provide direct oversight)</i>					
White	67%	Female	60%	Under age 5	21%
African American	17%	Male	40%	5 to 18	19%
Hispanic	8%			19 to 64	20%
Native American	3%	Physically disabled	5%	65 and over	22%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2%	Members of Single Parent Families	31%		
Other	1%				

What Does It Cost?

The amount of money budgeted for social ministries in 1999 was approximately \$15,000 for congregations with direct oversight of social ministries, but the amount of money actually spent was closer to \$17,000 per congregation.

Most congregations (73%) with direct oversight of ministries charge no fees for any of the social services that they provide, but about 22 percent of congregations indicated that they had turned persons away because of a lack of capacity.

Can Congregations Do More?

No more than one-third of ELCA congregations devote a significant amount of their time and budget to local social ministry activities, and the vast majority of these congregations are engaged in collecting and distributing food and clothing. While the amount of volunteer time is substantial and significant, about \$30 million is spent by ELCA congregations in local social ministry activity. The average for congregations is \$2,500 and the median is \$500. Congregations spend the vast majority of money available to them on salaries for clergy, maintaining the facilities and paying for other ministry programs and resources. About eight percent of the expenses of congregations are spent in support of the ministries of the synod and churchwide organization of the ELCA. For congregations to substantially increase their role in local social ministry, most would have to increase the size of their budgets or significantly redistribute what is available to them. Forty percent of ELCA congregations have operating budgets of less than \$74,000 a year, and fewer than 10 percent have operating expenses of more than \$275,000. Once these congregations pay the costs of full-time professional clergy, there is little left over. Other than to apply for government aid (which 10 percent report having done), the only real avenue open to congregations is to increase the level of their efforts that have low direct costs such as gathering and distributing food and clothing and/or volunteering for projects financed by others like Habitat for Humanity. This is indeed, what most congregations do. In short, it is very unlikely that local ELCA congregations could provide a significant safety net for persons in need if the government were to substantially reduce its role.