

DEMOGRAPHIC SERVICES EVALUATION
ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation
Emerging Themes & Recommendations

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Evaluation Overview

The Department for Research and Evaluation's Demography program was one of the three ELCA churchwide programs to receive an evaluation in 1999. The evaluation had two components: first, we fielded a short questionnaire to everyone who requested and received demographic materials during a three-month period; second, we conducted focus groups with Division for Outreach Mission Directors who had some previous experience with demographic materials. Because a major focus of the demography program is responding to requests from DO Mission Directors, this evaluation primarily addresses this aspect of the program; the demography program, however, is more broad and also includes responding to demographic requests from congregations and other constituency groups.

The following two sections ("Emerging Themes" and "Recommendations") report the findings from this evaluation. An abridged transcript of the focus groups as well as the questionnaire frequencies follows. In general, this report probably affirms Demography staff's perceptions about the program and most likely does not contain any new information.

Emerging Themes

I. Challenge: The Displaced Demographic User

The original recipient of the demographic materials is often not the final or even primary user of the demographic material. Over half of the respondents in our sample intended to share the materials with other individuals or groups, some of which, such as congregation councils, may be the primary decision makers in any issues related to the demographic materials. In these situations, the original recipients must not only understand the materials they receive, but also be able to present it and explain it themselves and perhaps even facilitate its use.

Within this context, the questionnaire comments (although only few) about the cosmetic details as well as focus group participants' comments about their need for instructions become even more relevant. If the demographic recipients are not the end user, but instead an intermediary, the use of the demographic materials may depend on the recipient's ability to present, explain, and in effect, own the materials. Cosmetic flaws, such as hard-to-distinguish colors in maps, may detract from demographic use as much as unclear information because both impede the recipient's ability to claim psychological ownership of the materials in order to facilitate its use.

II. The ELCA Advantage: Parochial Data

Focus group participants noted their appreciation for the congregational trend reports they could access from the internet and they, as well as questionnaire respondents, had positive comments about the integration of community demographic information with congregational data. Although demographic recipients have many choices for community-level (or larger) demographic information -- other vendors, school districts, U.S. Census Bureau, local information sources -- they have fewer choices for ELCA-specific information. Information that contrasts congregational data with comparable community information is valuable to recipients, not only because of the helpfulness of the data itself, but also because of the limited sources of this data. When considering competition from other demographic sources, demographers should ask themselves if they are fully taking advantage of this natural monopoly.

III. Challenge: Combating the “So What?” Reaction

Many focus group participants reported that they did not request demographic information that they did not know how to use. On the other hand, many participants also reported that they appreciated that Percept included information on how to apply demographic information to their context (such as predictions on the type of worship styles). One interpretation of this conflicting information is that while demographic recipients are likely to request information with which they are familiar, they are not likely to seek out new information without some instruction on its relevance and application. We might infer, therefore, that the more information that depicts how to use demographic information, the more likely it is that key constituents will request more information that fits their situations.

Over half of the respondents in our questionnaire sample planned to use the demographic materials they requested as part of a long-term planning process or to augment their evangelism program. While educating recipients on planning processes or evangelism strategies is definitely outside the responsibilities of demographic staff, we should ask ourselves if the materials they provide point out “next steps” for recipients with these concerns. If not, who are potential partners that might provide these services?

Recommendations

1. Continue to explore cosmetic improvements in demographic reports. While the cosmetic features may appear to be secondary to the actual data in the report, users probably first react to the look of the demographic report before they react to the findings. Perhaps consider creating a “panel” of demographic friends who can react to different versions of the same report to determine what features are most user-friendly.

Some of the comments from the questionnaire indicates small cosmetic problems that could probably be addressed by a more careful examination of the product before distribution. While many demographic reports are now automated, problems can still occur with the graphics, and it's these small problems that distract demographic users from the information in the reports.

2. Capitalize on the natural data monopoly of the Department. Although the demography department may effectively duplicate the services of other demographic data providers, other vendors will never have access to ELCA congregational trend data. Demographers should continue to integrate community demographic information with congregational trend data and explore new ways of using ELCA-oriented research. Perhaps research collected by other RE staff, such as information on Christian education, could be formatted for inclusion with demographic reports on relevant demographic information.

3. Improve supplementary demographic materials. Recipients, particularly mission directors, need better information in order for them to work with the ultimate users of the data. Efforts, already underway, to provide more educational materials to mission directors certainly is a critical step toward improving their ability to interpret and advocate for the demographic data they receive. In addition, Mission Directors were particularly vocal in their requests for a menu of demographic services, or a list of possible reports available to Mission Directors.

4. Adopt a consistent and strategic policy toward ELCA member use of competitor vendors. Is Percepts a competitor? Or, an inadvertent partner providing ELCA congregations and synods with extra demographic services that RE can't afford to provide? Demographers may take issue with Percepts' methods and accuracy, but some ELCA mission directors, synods, and congregations report that they find these same reports to be helpful. Should we provide similar information even if we doubt its accuracy? Should we educate demographic recipients about our view of these inaccuracies? What if recipients still find it helpful? Demographers should develop an intentional strategy to address these and other issues relating to competitor vendors and then should actively communicate that policy to ELCA synods and mission directors.

One possible outcome of these decisions might be more creative methods of relating to those heavy demographic users that also rely on Percepts or other vendors. Perhaps a portion of the funds demographic clients spend on outside data sources could be collected to provide more customized demographic services to those interested in those services. A first step might be to meet directly with a few DO Mission Directors who regularly use Percepts or other vendors and talk with them in great detail about what they gain from these services and how they use the data.

Mission Director Focus Groups *Abridged Transcripts*

We conducted focus groups with Division for Outreach Mission Directors during their May all-staff meetings in Chicago. Because of time limitations, we could only meet with two-thirds of the Mission Directors. Kenn Inskeep facilitated a focus group with high frequency demographic services users and Kathy Sime facilitated a group with moderate frequency demographic services users. Once the focus groups were completed, we did not note many differences, if any, between the two groups despite their different levels of usage. The comments from the two groups were combined and an abridged transcript, arranged thematically, follows.

I. Using Demographic Materials

Q: What do you do with the information after you've received it?

Well, I've ordered it for a reason, either I'm evaluating a new start, I'm meeting with a congregation and I want to hold up for them a diagnostic report of their area. So it's used for a purpose, so it's applied accordingly. I use it with a mission outreach board to say here's what we're looking for, if it's a new start or a redevelopment. Either with a congregation or with a board.

From my perspective, I use it with 4-5 days of receiving it. Then I put it in a file. I would say that 50-60% of the stuff I get, I use again within the next year.

I normally bring a copy for the congregation so they can also see it and be aware of it.

That's important – I give it away. I normally give a lot of it away.

One of the groups we use it [demographic info] with all the time is with call committees. The demographic information has to be more interpreted. And I don't know if there's another way to set it up, short of a map. I need to do a verbal walk-through and talk about that, but I'm not always there to do that. And if there was a cover... I don't know if there are questions on the web or "this is what this might make you think of . ." And even if I am there, if there was a supplemental thing to help interpret . . .

I'm working with a congregation right now that's looking at relocation and a lot of their assumptions about the community, they've not proven one of them when they've looked at the demographics of the community. And that's been very helpful for them, to see what the reality is versus what they thought it was.

At the back of the demographic [zip code report], there's the narrative, and I'm not sure what to do with that.

When I ask for information, I'm asking for it for a specific reason, so I don't have any trouble knowing what to do with it.

The narrative part I found interesting. And I've had this situation where I've reviewed it with a call committee, that becomes the center of discussion and they'll say "that's not true." But because I don't know the ins and outs of how that information gets developed or accessed, it's kind of made me back-pedal.

If we could get the county denominational membership information by zip code, instead of by county, that would be really helpful.

One thing that Percepts doesn't give you is that congregational analysis. That's really helpful. I use that. But I use that a lot with congregations because in the area that I'm in, we're not developing new ministries as we are developing existing congregations. So for the most part, the ZIP code data and the congregational trend report are the two tools that I've used a lot in congregations. And it's very helpful to just provide those -- the more visual you can make it, the more effective it is in working with people. They look at that graph on worship attendance and they say "Oh, that's what's been happening for ten years." They knew it, but they didn't see it until they see it on the trend report and then you can begin to have some conversation about the what the next steps are. And they you can take the zip code data and say "here's an overall picture of what's happening in the population in your area" and you use the comparison between what the trend report says and what the zip code report says, and you can have a real interesting conversation about where their ministry should be going.

Q: Are there other sources for demographic information besides what we've talked about here?
City planners, school districts, US Census, marketing people who've done business studies in the area.

One company that's worked for me is McDonalds. I call there all the time and ask for their statistics on where they're starting new franchises because they have the lowest rate of failure of any corporate office in the US. Very free with why they do that.

Q: Can you give me an example of a piece of demographic information that you do depend on?
Prism narrative.

The question that we have to answer is: "is there a viable field for the model of ministry that we're proposing?" And so first of all we need some basic information about size of population and the geographic area may differ based on the context because if we say the population within 20 minutes drive, well 20 minutes is one place is really different in another place. So that's one of the things that we look at: is the field viable? And so we need the basic population figures and the growth figures. Sometimes I need to know how much the population is declining when I'm working with some congregations that are looking at re-doing ministry because they're in areas with massive outflows of population, so those are the things that I look at.

For the community that's in a slow decline where the population's changing, there may still be room for new ministry in a declining area there, if the people who move there, if the makeup of the community is changing. How is the population shifting?

What else I've found is very helpful is when they've superimposed what's been going on in the congregation in terms of worship attendance in those zip codes to see if membership's been going up or down since we're doing re-development as well. Very helpful.

II. Satisfaction with Past Demographic Requests

Q: Are there ever times when you receive information and wish it had been presented differently or with different information?

I have to say that the requests I've made at the ELCA office, they've really been good and accurate about what I've requested. And I have to say, that 99% of the time I look at it and say "Hmm. That's exactly what I asked for. Now why didn't I ask for this?" But I have to commend them at that point – whoever's on the other end does a really good job of listening to what I'm asking them for. [*Q: What would have helped you ask for what you really wanted?*] I think an understanding of exactly what you can produce.

I think another piece that's helpful too is that in the Zip code data. You have several different looks at income in the area, so it can be used as a stewardship piece too with a congregation and if they say "we think the average income is this" and then we can say "well, here's another report that says this." Again, it's another piece of information, it's a really good data.

It came up before, but one issue is the time, the turnaround time – when we order something, how soon we can get it. I think in my case, we met them, but my frustration was the turnaround time. And I think that's my biggest frustration, why I end up going to Percept more often. So if somehow that could be improved, that would be a big factor.

The web site information is great – that's really helpful.

Just last week, one of the pastors at a training event we were at came with some of the latest information that RE can provide. And he had maps and everything else, and I was very impressed with that. But I did not realize that we were that advanced, that we could do that. I think that we should get the word out that we are advanced – that would be very helpful.

I can't read your maps. I need instructions. That's my biggest complaint -- I try really hard, but I just need instructions.

[Regarding Hispanic origin data] . . . we need to know if it's a Puerto Rican community or a Peruvian community and that's really hard to get to. Even if the census data is new in 2 years from now, because that under-count is so notorious in those communities, you're talking about illegal immigrants and such, I don't know if you can ever trust what you get out of the Census Bureau.

My experience with that 16-page report is that I read through the first several pages very carefully – I mean its got a lot of stuff in it that I want to talk about, like population increase and decrease and all that stuff and then the rest, a lot of the stuff about educational attainment, its nice

information, but I don't always need it for what I'm doing when we get back into some of those finer things. And if I'm presenting this to a committee or group, that's where I start losing people, when we get about halfway through the 15-page report – their eyes start glazing over – what does this mean?

I guess I'd add to that too. I feel like that – it's helpful, but I feel like in the back of my mind is what else haven't I asked for that might be useful? What else could I have asked for that would be helpful? I'm not sure what Pat or Jackie has available.

I've had 2 synods, now, that have asked for demographic profiles. And that's really a hard thing to get a handle on. Allegheny synod wasn't too bad – that's 7 counties. That's not too bad to do. But West Virginia - Western Maryland – you're talking about a whole state and it's a state that's shaped like I don't know what – an eagle that was hit on the road or something. It's a splat. And then you've got this one county in Maryland that you put into it, so we've really struggled about how you do a demographic profile for a synod that wants to re-do its outreach strategy. That's why we're asking for that – we want to re-do our strategy.

I think I'll say in this case how much I have appreciated the work that's been provided for the synods that I relate to. Very good synod-wide demographic strategy complete with maps. That has been very helpful with just that – in developing that outreach strategy.

The biggest problem I've had is that she sends me these nice colored maps and I try to run them off on my black and white copier, and sometimes it doesn't pick up the real fine distinctions between colors. And I know I can go back and ask her to run them in black and white for me, I just don't always think about that.

One of the things that Jackie and I have been experimenting with is sending me the files in a .JPG format. We haven't perfected that yet, but if we could move in that direction, that would really be helpful for PowerPoint.

One of the things that I find frustrating about these reports for the whole synod is that its broken down by counties and I'm looking at a county, like Louisville is in Jefferson County. That just tells me that the county will do fine. So in that situation, a county break-down is just not helpful.

Q: Things that aren't there that you wish were there – besides ethnicity break-downs . . .

The lifestyle stuff is nice because it's descriptive. And it always generates discussion when I work with a council or doing mission planning. Because they're always saying 'Oh, this is us' or 'oh, this is not us' A lot of discussion.

It tells you that this many percentage of the population is this, so it's usually not more than 20 or 30 percent of the population is this, so you know you're not going to get the whole thing, but you get a sense. I like it.

It just seems to me that in our shop we should be able to buy . . . go through something like a new start packet that pretty much fits us all and match it with the stuff you folks can do and probably

tweak it with something from redevelopment and so on, but if we did that for just a little while, I think we'd have everybody's stuff . . .

I would appreciate having a listing out of what can be provided from Research and Evaluation so we can tailor graphs according to what they're capable of.

Our new church development form really is oriented to a site, and we aren't buying sites anymore! It's asking some of the wrong questions at the front end, rather than what is the human condition component – what is the potential and possibility rather than . . . it's almost a second question on our form, not yours is where is this to be located and at what intersection. That's not the issue any longer because that's not the first thing we're doing. We don't buy land first anymore. That's 15 years later, theoretically.

Some of the ministries that we're starting are not geographic specific. They're specific to some population group. Like, if you're doing post-modern ministry, you want to know how many 18-35 year olds there are within a half an hour radius in this metro area.

When we're doing area outreach discussions and working with two or more congregations, trend reports are very much appreciated in that regard.

You guys have provided lists of communities that are declining or growing and congregations that are declining or growing. And I've gotten that list from you. But when I'm asking for, I don't know how to ask for, so I haven't received it yet, even though I've asked for it a couple of times, is the window where you plot them and I can get a sense of are the growing congregations growing at the same pace as the community and are the declining congregations declining at the same pace as the community? And Bob Hoyt's making me do a graph of that for my synod, but I haven't been able to ask for that so I haven't received it yet.

It would be good to have a listing of available resources because that tells us how to make the right request so that we get the appropriate stuff back.

One of the things I appreciate the most is that Pat really takes an interest in what I do and what I want, so I can call her up and say "I'm meeting with these folks, and this is what I want to do and this is what I want to talk about" and Pat will say 'oh, you need x, y, and z.' And she'll send it to me and she'll say 'How was the meeting' the next time I see her. It's really much more than being a computer that gives what I want. It's really nice that she takes an interest and she has some really good ideas.

I'd second that for Jackie, too.

III. Relationship between the Department for Research and Evaluation and Division for Outreach Mission Directors

Q: How can RE best support your ministries?

I don't know how this happened, but we just received from Marty Smith, this wonderful comparison of all the congregations in our synod in terms of their worship growth, Sunday school growth – and that's really very potent information. I've never seen it before like that. We've already turned that around into a PowerPoint presentation for our congregations. Not all of our mission work is with new starts – a lot of it is getting other congregations on board. And that materials is excellent. That took somebody's imagination to produce and that's the kind of research that would be helpful.

I mentioned that Bob Hoyt had said that he wanted to put together a particular set of documents. Bob said at that time that his group was working on 20 to 21 different measurements you would want for a congregation new start, a different set of measurements you would want from a re-start, and a third set for helping a call committee, etc. That was specifically outlined and I ask Bob every six months when we are going to get it.

A checklist would be helpful – I don't know what I'm going to ask about.

I think I'll say in this case how much I have appreciated the work that's been provided for the synods that I relate to. Very good synod-wide demographic strategy complete with maps. That has been very helpful with just that – in developing that outreach strategy.

IV. Relationship with Percepts and Other Vendors

Q: Why do you use Percepts?

One of the things that they [Percepts] are saying to us is that they will be able to provide training to staff in how to understand and read demographics. Not just simply providing the information, but how to interpret it. And someone also talked about the way in which they ... the map that they show about information, it's color-coded. The other thing too, what they promise is that they will help us to strategically plan for new mission and the new developments in the area.

I use three providers, including RE, I go often to Percepts, I go to Vision Decision, I like Vision Decision because they're descriptive. That part is quite different from Percept ... But sometimes I like the descriptiveness. I had done that descriptive one, particularly ethnic groups. ... But if the ELCA can do that, I'd like that too. It might not be able to, because of the manpower, or womenpower that you might not have. If I buy a map from Percept and I have a contract, it only costs \$100, and those are very easy to use. It comes with everything. Standardized, so the person ... knows the system. And it comes in seven days or two weeks. That costs money, coming from the ELCA doesn't cost money, but it takes time. Most of the data is similar, so I'm not worrying about whose data is more accurate, but that's what I do. It costs money.

One of the things I've noticed is that I only used to use Percepts until the last two I've gotten from here [RE] and they've both been excellent and so far upgraded from where they were a year or two

ago and I was turned off on everything -- too slow, doesn't give me what I need. Real close to be able to do everything here. . . .Speed is one of the things.

I think that we as a church body do new church development really well. Other denominations look at the ELCA in a way and say "I wish our denomination did that." I would like to know if, to continue that, are we going to go the direction where we are going to provide a demographic report to the caliber of what Percept does – are we moving in that direction? And is there a kind of time line in that? Where are we going with that? Are we going to provide some services? Is there a trend in this area?

I have a representative from Percepts that's going to meet with me.

The other thing that I've found with Percepts is that the individual that I relate with is always checking to see what our needs are and have resources not only to help us read demographics but also where we can use what the demographics tell us.

We use the information first for developing our five synod strategies. Every time our synod outreach ministry team meets, the Percept maps are up and we're studying them and I can get the updates now because of my training, so I can come in to that meeting and do that. Second use of that information is assisting synods with the call process. Third use is helping congregation identify either a target audience or a critical mass and assisting them in developing a mission plan. We have found that Percepts gives us the specifics that we need.

I'm fairly new but I don't know all that RE can do. I don't know if there's a menu out there. I know what you have on the web. But I was surprised to learn all the things that I could get if I was able to give some lead time. So I'd be interested in a menu of resources that RE could provide so I could weigh apples and apples in terms of other demographic providers, like Percepts, so I can see whether or not you could provide what I need.

One thing that crosses my mind as I listen to this conversation is that we've really made a comparison to what our demographic department can provide and Percepts – that's basically been our discussion. I'll speak for my region where we have 3 synods fully invested and one with a partial program with Percepts. Before we start making expectations of our office, maybe we need to convince our synods to put the kind of money into it, because one of the reasons why Percepts can do for me what it does is because my synod has bought into a 3 year program where they're kicking into it \$25,000 - 30,000 over those three years. And I don't think we can ask a 3 person staff to do what this corporation can do with that. But it's also something to consider as we look to the future. Because, quite frankly, I'd rather work within the church than without.

Even if when we used the services [of RE], we had to purchase it at some level but not at the Percept level, I could make that fly.

One thing that Percept has is 46 areas that you can ask for special, I think 2 or 4 or 5 from those 46 areas. Because I think that's good – you can see where the Lutherans are, where the Episcopalians are, Catholics, whether it's a gang area, drugs, whatever. They have 46 areas about different communities that they can highlight.

Demographic Services Questionnaire
ELCA DEPARTMENT FOR RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Please answer the following questions by completely filling in the circle next to the response that best reflects your feelings about the item. (When filling in the circles, please **completely** fill in the circle (●). **Please do not place a or in or on top of the circles.** Thanks!)

1. Did the information you received adequately meet your request?

100% Yes

-- No → Briefly describe below what else you would have liked to have received:

2. Did you receive the information you requested within the agreed-upon time period? **Or**, if no time period was specified, did you receive it in a timely manner?

100% Yes

-- No

3. Please rate the information you received:

	Very True		Somewhat True		Not at all True
a. The information I received was easy to understand .	86%	14%	-	-	-
b. The terms used to explain the information were familiar to me.	86	14	-	-	-
c. I found the lay-out of the information (the page design) to be " reader friendly ."	72	24	3	-	-
d. I understand how to use the information I've received.	79	17	3	-	-

4. What one or two suggestions would you make to improve the usefulness of the information sent to you?

Particularly make suggestions if you indicated that any of the above items were "Somewhat True" to "Not at all True."

5. Within the past six months, how frequently have you used or studied demographic information (including, but not limited to, the information you received from the ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation)?

46% Once 27% Two or three times 27% Four or more times

6. Did you request this information on behalf of a congregation or a group of congregations?

79% Yes → Please continue to questions 7 (below) and 8-10 (on the reverse).

21 No → On whose behalf did you make this request? _____

The rest of this questionnaire is for those who requested information on behalf of one or more **congregations**.

7. What was the **primary** purpose for which you requested this demographic information?

(Pick the **one** response that best reflects your reason for contacting the Department for Research and Evaluation.)

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 11% We're in a call process. | - | For information to augment our stewardship program. |
| 11 We're in a church building program. | - | For information to augment our children's ministry/Christian education efforts. |
| 37 We're conducting a long-term planning process. | - | We'd like more information about our community (but not related to any of the other reasons here). |
| 21 For information to augment our evangelism program. | - | 16 Other: |
| 5 For information to augment our social ministry program. | | |

8. How did you become aware of the demographic services offered by the ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation?

14% From a suggestion/recommendation of a pastor.

38 From a suggestion/recommendation of a synod staff member, synod bishop, or a churchwide staff member.

21 From a suggestion/recommendation of a member of your congregation.

- From a suggestion/recommendation at a conference you attended.

- From a reference in materials on the call process or other written materials you received.

7 Other:

9. What will you do next with the information you received?

(Pick all that apply to you)

48% Give it to a committee.

31 Give it to your pastor(s).

48 Give it to the council or a member of the congregation's council.

52 Discuss it at a meeting or with other congregation members.

31 Share it with your congregation

38 Read it/study it some more.

38 File it/save it.

3 Recycle it/throw it away.

10 Other:

10. Do you have any questions about the information that you received that you would like answered? If so, please write your question(s) below and be sure to include your name and contact information (preferably an address and a phone number or email address).

Comments from Demographic Use Questionnaire

When requesting demographic characteristics for a whole synod, it would be useful to have the chart of population up and down and worship attendance up and down attached. Also estimates of unchurched attached.

I would like the church to go a step further in suggesting what approach would be best in designing ministries that would help us reach the three largest life style groups. Such as type of worship, programs for parenting, etc.

Colors on graphs were too similar in color. I find it difficult to distinguish the colors used. I need more contrast. Not a big issue.

When shifts in a number or percent are close, use contrasting colors -- the red/orange were too close in color so projection on the screen was unclear. We were looking at about 8 suburban areas and differences were hard to tell.

Perhaps larger print, space between lined items. Bold print main items.

Could you look at the Division for Outreach profile for new congregations and include the questions asked about demographics in that profile with your reports to D.O. mission directors?