

**Report on the Region 8 Consultation on Ministry Needs  
in Small Membership Congregations**

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*March 1, 2005*

**Background**

***There are a steadily increasing number of small-membership congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.***

In 1990, 1,957 ELCA congregations (18%) had average attendance of 50 or less in worship. 4,538 congregations (41%) had 90 or fewer in worship. By 2000, the number of congregations with 50 or less in worship had risen to 2,269 or 21.3% of all ELCA congregations. By 2003, the number of congregations with 50 or less in worship had risen to 2,477 or 24% of all ELCA congregations. To put it in another perspective, the number of ELCA congregations with average worship attendance of fewer than 90 in 2003 was 5,066 (49%).

***The number of small-membership congregations poses a significant challenge to the ELCA in regard to both leadership and mission support.***

Small-membership congregations have a higher level of operating costs per member. The operating cost per member for congregations with 50 or less in worship is about 20 percent higher per member than the operating costs of congregations with 800 or more in worship. Congregations with average worship attendance of 50 or less average about \$36,000 in total giving compared to \$1.8 million for a congregation with average worship attendance of 800 or more. Congregations with average worship attendance of 90 or less average just over \$60,000 in total giving.

These figures point to the reality that very few congregations with average worship attendance under 50 in worship can afford to pay a full-time pastor. Congregations with average worship attendance under 90 are at, or near, the limit of their ability to afford a full-time pastor. In fact, many congregations with 50 or less in worship are currently spending more than they are receiving in total giving. This set of circumstances has at least two other related consequences.

1. Congregations look for first-call pastors because they believe they can pay first-call pastors less or they look for alternative ways of decreasing their costs for leadership by limiting raises or by calling a part-time pastor often without a significant lowering in their expectations of how much can be accomplished.
2. Congregations decrease their mission support for the wider mission of the church simply because the increase in their operating expenses leave them little alternative.

A 2004 projection by the ELCA Board of Pensions described the implications of continuing increases in health care costs to ELCA congregations. In 2003 a congregation with an annual budget of \$84,000 paid \$7,783 in health care coverage for a full-time pastor. In 2013, those costs could rise to \$20,190 (an annual increase of 10%). With a 2.5 percent annual increase in the annual budget, the budget would increase to \$107,527. But if all other costs – like the pastor’s defined compensation and the congregation’s pension contributions – are held constant (as a percent of the total annual budget), the only means for offsetting the increase in health care costs is to eliminate mission support.

In short, other models providing leadership for small congregations than the typical model of one congregation, one full-time pastor, must be explored. To do so, the Division for Ministry, in collaboration with the Department for Research and the ELCA Board of Pensions, organized a “Consultation on Ministry Needs in Small Membership Congregations” for the synods in Region 8. The consultation took place in Bedford, Pennsylvania on January 31 and February 1, 2005. The synods in Region 8 have a significant number of small-membership congregations and the bishops in the region are particularly impacted, interested, open, and committed to addressing the issues described above. The consultation was designed to explore how these synods perceive the problem and, if it is a problem, how they are responding to the leadership needs of small membership congregations including issues of clergy compensation and alternative approaches to providing leadership. The consultation was also intent on identifying options that can be further explored together for the sake of the whole church. All of the synods in Region 8 were represented either by the bishop of the synod, or by assistants to the bishop, or both. The consultation was led by David Adams, ELCA Board of Pensions; Kenneth Inskeep, Department for Research and Evaluation; and Craig Settlage, Division for Ministry.

### **The Context in Region 8**

While 24 percent of all ELCA congregations average 50 or less in worship, the percentage of congregations that do so in Region 8 is much higher for several synods. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1:** Worship Attendance and Multiple Point Parish Percentages for Region 8 in 2003

Synod	Percent of Congregations Averaging 50 or Less in Worship	Percent of Congregations Averaging 90 or Less in Worship	Percent of Congregations That Are Part of Multiple Point Parishes
West Virginia-Western Maryland	47%	81%	50%
Allegheny	43%	70%	52%
Upper Susquehanna	40%	70%	57%
Northwestern Pennsylvania	39%	74%	42%
Southwestern Pennsylvania	30%	60%	32%
Delaware-Maryland	23%	50%	19%
Lower Susquehanna	22%	48%	20%
Metropolitan Washington, D.C.	12%	35%	7%
ELCA	24%	49%	27%

Table 2 shows the percent of congregations with no called pastor in 2003 compared to 1990. In every one of the synods in Region 8, there are more congregations without pastors. It two synods, Allegheny and Northwestern Pennsylvania, over 20 percent of the congregations have been without a called pastor for at least five years.

**Table 2:** Percent of Congregations with No Called Pastor in 1990 and 2003 and the Percent of Congregations with No Called Pastor in the Last Five Years

Synod	Percent of Congregations with No Called Pastor		Percent of Congregations with No Called Pastor in the Last Five Years
	1990	2003	1999 to 2003
West Virginia-Western Maryland	15%	29%	11%
Allegheny	19%	30%	21%
Upper Susquehanna	25%	37%	17%
Northwestern Pennsylvania	13%	39%	21%
Southwestern Pennsylvania	12%	24%	11%
Delaware-Maryland	11%	16%	6%
Lower Susquehanna	18%	27%	11%
Metropolitan Washington, D.C.	11%	14%	4%
ELCA	14%	22%	8%

Table 3 shows the operating expenses for congregations and the median clergy salaries in the synod as a percent of total giving for 1990 and 2003. In all of the synods in Region 8, the operating expenses are taking more of total income. In Northwestern Pennsylvania, operating expenses took 85 percent of the congregation's income in 1990 but in 2003 operating expenses took 95 percent of the congregation's income. In the Allegheny Synod, which is also a synod with a high number of small congregations, operating expenses took 80 percent of the congregation's income in 1990. In 2003, operating expenses took 90 percent of the congregation's income.

**Table 3:** Operating Expenses as a Percent of Total Income in 1990 and 2003 and Median Clergy Salaries as a Percent of Total Giving in 1990 and 2003

Synod	Operating Expenses as a Percent of Total Income		Median Clergy Salaries as a Percent of Total Giving	
	1990	2003	1990	2003
West Virginia-Western Maryland	80%	89%	80%	68%
Allegheny	80%	90%	67%	76%
Upper Susquehanna	80%	86%	61%	84%
Northwestern Pennsylvania	85%	95%	55%	56%
Southwestern Pennsylvania	86%	92%	42%	59%
Delaware-Maryland	86%	90%	42%	45%
Lower Susquehanna	82%	89%	39%	40%
Metropolitan Washington, D.C.	75%	83%	22%	23%
ELCA	84%	88%	42%	43%

## **The Participants' Discussion**

The concern about the increasing number of small congregations and their leadership needs was widespread among the synods including the more urban synods where older suburban congregations are struggling with membership. Congregations are using up their reserve resources. Some are exploring “creative” compensation strategies or trying to manage increased costs by moving out of the health care plan especially if a spouse can provide coverage. Some congregations are closing, but in many cases continued ministry in a community is still necessary and appropriate. Some congregations are exploring opportunities with other congregations, but joint agreements are often difficult to achieve and once achieved, they often need on-going attention. A recurring theme was the increasing number of congregations that cannot afford full-time called ministry, and the need for bi-vocational leaders.

Some synods are looking to the synodically authorized lay ministry program as a means for providing leadership, but what these individuals can do is limited both by the church and the amount of time they have to actually serve (because they are bi-vocational). Some see the synodically authorized ministry program as the first step in moving toward ordination through a process like Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM). In general, the participants in the conversation believe that the problem of providing leadership can only be address if there are several different models available to congregations. “In five years these ministries need to be different.”

All of the participants were committed to the health of small congregations. Do these congregations fit into our vision of the church? If so, how? Some of these congregations will not grow given their demographic circumstances, but other can learn to focus less on survival and more on mission. It is unlikely that “regular” giving will continue to support professional ministry based on the one congregation – one pastor model. Either congregations will grow or alternatives for leadership must be found. The intent must be to refocus from survival to a renewed sense of mission. The synods in Region 8 are willing to address this issue together and not separately

## **Observations – Next Steps**

The issue of small-membership congregations and its implication for the life of the ELCA should be of major concern to the leadership of this church. The growth of small-membership congregations will likely continue, and the financial capacity of those congregations to provide for full-time pastoral leadership will continue to diminish. The implications both for the life of these congregations and for their ability to provide mission support for their synods and the churchwide organization need careful analysis and strategic planning.

- Region 8 bishops and their staff acknowledged that the data provided in the consultation was very helpful in analyzing the ministry needs and resources within their synods. We suggest a similar audit be made available to every region within the ELCA and, as it is possible, to provide for a similar consultation.

- A review of “best practices” within synods who have a significant number of small-membership congregations should be done regarding yoked and multiple-point parishes. How have some synods been able to engage congregations in joining together in multiple-point parishes? An earlier study by the Small Town and Rural Team of the Division for Outreach led to the development of “A Resource for Persons Considering Forming a Multiple Point Parish.” Are there other resources available to assist synods and congregations in utilizing this potential ministry strategy?
  
- In Region 8 there was interest in developing regional or multi-synodical teams to assist congregations in finding and adopting a model that best fits their circumstances. Ministry assessment tools may be part of the resources these teams offer. Or these teams may be trained in how to help a congregation close – a kind of “hospice ministry” for congregations. Such teams may be possible in other regions.
  
- There should be a continued study of the use of alternative leadership within small-membership congregations including the use of retired ELCA pastors, ordained ministers of full-communication partner churches (i.e. the “orderly exchange” process), synodically authorized ministers, and persons prepared through the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) program. The Division for Ministry’s proposal to the Conference of Bishops (March 2005) to explore the development of strategies for responding to these emerging needs and opportunities is a necessary component of this process.
  
- The ELCA seminaries, the Conference of Bishops, and the Division for Ministry should continue to study how best to prepare candidates for first-call ministry in small-membership congregations, including the criteria for identifying “first call” congregations and the possible expansion of internships in small-membership congregations or in multiple point parishes (e.g. by expanding the *Horizon* internship program).