

BEST PRACTICES SURVEY OF DYNAMIC ELCA CONGREGATIONS

One hundred fifty dynamic ELCA congregations were nominated by Synod Bishops and members of the Evangelism Team as congregations practicing excellence in their evangelism ministries. A questionnaire was mailed on July 3, 2002, to lay leaders and pastors with two weeks (July 15, 2002) to answer and return their reflections. One hundred sixty responses were tabulated.

In addition, four congregations from rural, urban, suburban and small town settings received site visits. Along with a pastoral interview, members discussed various selected topics without the pastor present. Twelve phone interviews were conducted to lay and pastors from six additional congregations.

The Rev. Dr. Carl L. Johnson, a pastor experienced in congregational, synodical and churchwide evangelism, conducted the interviews and tabulated the results. Assisting with the survey process were The Rev. Michael Rothaar, Division for Congregational Ministries, ELCA; Mr. Kenneth Innskeep, Director for Research and Evaluation, ELCA; and Dr. Marty Smith, of the Research and Evaluation Department, ELCA; The Rev. Brent Dahlseng, Evangelism Strategy Director; and Mr. Jim Petersen, (former) Associate Director of Evangelism.

SURVEY RESULTS:

“Word and action” are part of most definitions of evangelism. It was clear from this survey (38%) that speaking the name of Jesus and carrying out acts of love were how dynamic congregations lived out their evangelism.

The seven questions, with a synopsis of the responses and specific data as well as quotes from congregational members interviewed, are shared below.

1. List two or three of the most important decisions that were made by the congregation that you believe were key to growth. What was the role of prayer and scripture in the process?

(Quotes are in italics)

Pastor's Response

1. Mission Focus - 17%
2. Alternative Worship - 14%
3. New Facility - 14%

4. Prayer - 10%
5. Evangelism Ministry - 9%
6. Staffing - 9%

Members Response

1. Pastoral Leadership - 16%
2. Lay Ministry Emphasis - 16%
3. New Facility - 15%

4. Alternative Worship - 12%
5. Small Groups/Adult Study - 9%
6. Staffing - 9%

- 7. Hospitality - 9%
- 8. Discipleship - 7%
- 9. Bible Study - 7%

- 7. Mission Focus - 8%
- 8. Prayer - 7%
- 9. Hospitality - 5%

Dynamic congregations focus on the needs of the neighborhood being served. Serving the needs of the unchurched is the goal as facilities are renovated. Growth was not just a numbers issue, it was a faith development focus for the sake of the Good News. It includes any mention of staffing, youth ministry, small groups, discipleship, Bible study and adult education. Growth decisions included openness to new ideas, focus on guests, prayer and hospitality.

- *High commitment in the leadership to seek God's will for the congregation.*
- *The courage to reorganize.*
- *The congregation sees the value of having a quality Sunday School and youth program.*
- *Make hospitality a vital part of our congregational life.*
- *Make decisions based on people who are not here yet.*

2. Why were these decisions made?

Pastor's Response

- 1. Mission of the Church - 35%
- 2. To Make Disciples - 13%
- 3. Outreach to Unchurched - 11%
- 4. Address Needs of Community - 11%
- 5. Pastoral Leadership - 6%
- 6. Lay Leaders Saw Need - 6%
- 7. Address Needs of Members - 6%
- 8. Better Hospitality - 5%
- 9. Staff to Reach Out - 5%

Members Response

- 1. Lay Leaders Saw Need - 16%
- 2. Mission of the Church - 15%
- 3. Focus on the Good News - 14%
- 4. Inclusivity - 13%
- 5. Reach Unchurched - 8%
- 6. Value of Youth - 8%
- 7. Inward Focus - 7%
- 8. Survival - 7%
- 9. In Geographic Growth Area - 6%

Dynamic congregations focus on decisions to assist growth in leading members to fulfill the Great Commission. Through the Holy Spirit and pastoral leadership, members saw the need to focus outward. Youth, unchurched, the world, survival, community needs were the reasons for focusing on the Good News.

- *It creates a mindset in the people to invite.*
- *Our evangelism committee chair took responsibilities seriously.*
- *Rural population was decreasing.*
- *A Planning process that involved wide congregational participation.*
- *Mentoring inner city kids nearest to the church.*

3. List specific ways that you keep Christ at the center of your ministry.

Pastor's Response

1. Prayer - 21%
2. Bible Study - 16%
3. Mission Focus - 14%
4. Sermons - 12%
5. Ask What Jesus Wants - 11%
6. Discipleship - 11%
7. Worship - 6%
8. Small Groups/Adult Study - 6%
9. Willingness to Grow - 5%

Members Response

1. Prayer - 25%
2. Bible Study - 16%
3. Small Groups/Adult Study - 16%
4. Variety of Worship - 9%
5. Ask What Jesus Wants - 7%
6. Vision/Mission Statement - 7%
7. Outreach Programs - 6%
8. Fellowship - 5%
9. Frequency of Holy Communion - 4%

Dynamic congregations keep Christ at the center of their ministry through variety in worship, discipleship, a vision for the future and asking what Jesus wants. Prayer topped the list for pastors with a difference of 5% above the next category. Members had an 9% greater difference for prayer over the next category.

- *Prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit to keep Christ central.*
- *The mission statement reflects the Great Commission.*
- *Appropriate music in worship services.*
- *Bible studies with many different opportunities and days to attend.*
- *Council agreed to pray daily.*

4. What drives your passion for evangelism?

Pastor's Response

1. Matthew 28 - 19%
2. Jesus - 17%
3. God's Call - 15%
4. Love for Lost - 14%
5. God's Love for All - 12%
6. God's Grace - 6%
7. Faith of Pastor - 5%
8. Holy Spirit - 5%
9. Willingness to Grow - 3%

Members Response

1. Jesus - 25%
2. Matthew 28 - 19%
3. Evangelism Ministry - 10%
4. Living Faith Daily - 10%
5. Joy/Fun - 8%
6. Love for the Lost - 7%
7. Bible Study - 6%
8. Caring for People - 6%
9. Pastoral Leadership - 5%

Dynamic congregations emphasize God's movement in one's life which changes faith. Fellowship and joy in the daily walk set the member's responses off from the pastor's responses. Pastors focused on God's love for the lost, grace, God's call and an openness to grow. Members put a great deal of emphasis on relationships, fun, fellowship and joy.

- *The mission statement clearly points to evangelism.*
- *Lost people matter to God.*
- *How Jesus has changed lives for the better and the desire to share that with others.*
- *The joy that people experience....*
- *Seeing the needs of the world.*

5. What do you see as two or three of the most effective means that your congregation used to reach unbelievers and the steps you took to accomplish them?

Pastor's Response

1. Invitation Evangelism - 19%
2. Welcoming Worship - 17%
3. Hospitality - 14%

4. Inclusivity - 11%
5. Publicity - 10%
6. Alternative Worship - 9%

7. Discipleship - 7%
8. Children's Ministry - 6%
9. Preaching - 5%

Members Response

1. Hospitality - 21%
2. Personal Invitation - 18%
3. Children's Ministries - 13%

4. Focus on People's Needs - 11%
5. Alternative Worship - 10%
6. Publicity - 7%

7. Trained Leaders - 7%
8. Mission Focus - 6%
9. Building Relationships - 5%

Dynamic congregations centered on hospitality, inclusivity, community ministry, children, alternative worship forms, publicity, relationships, social ministry, leadership training and preaching as a way of reaching the unbelievers, even though some had difficulty with the term "unbeliever".

- *People joining say they feel accepted.*
- *The attitude of the congregation.*
- *Assisting with a resale clothing store.*
- *Seeking and meeting the needs of others in a Christ-centered way.*
- *Developing worship services that are non-threatening and understandable to unchurched.*

6. Where do you go for support and resources for evangelism?

Pastor's Response

1. Teaching Congregations - 19%
2. ELCA Conferences - 15%
3. Certain Colleagues - 11%

4. ELCA Resources - 11%
5. Study of Evangelism Books - 10%
6. Bible Study - 9%

7. Synod - 8%
8. Net Results/Publications - 7%
9. Interdenominational Evangelism Workshops - 6%

Members Response

1. Pastor - 21%
2. Teaching Congregations - 14%
3. Synod - 14%

4. Experienced Members - 12%
5. ELCA Conferences - 11%
6. ELCA Resources - 8%

7. Study of Evangelism Books - 7%
8. Publications - 7%
9. Seminars - 6%

Dynamic congregations include the equipping of pastors and members through example, creativity and concrete leadership events. Members looked to their pastors for resources while pastors saw Bible study and books as central. The responses varied from staff support to other experienced members, small group ministries and ELCA resources.

- *Other congregations, Lutheran and non-Lutheran, who are thriving.*
- *Pastor has been terrific leader and role model.*
- *Prince of Peace, Burnsville, MN.*
- *Periodicals and dialogue with others.*
- *Bill Easum, Kennon Callahan, Leonard Sweet, Community of Joy, Phoenix, AZ.*

7. What are the three most vital ministries in the congregation?

Pastor's Response

1. Worship - 21%
2. Youth Ministry - 17%
3. Christian Education - 13%

4. Social Ministry - 11%
5. Alternative Worship - 8%
6. Members Care Teams - 7%

7. Music Ministry - 7%
8. Small Groups/Adult Study - 7%
9. Discipleship - 6%

Members Response

1. Worship - 21%
2. Youth Ministry - 15%
3. Christian Education - 11%

4. Social Ministry - 11%
5. Outreach - 10%
6. Alternative Worship - 9%

7. Fellowship - 7%
8. Music Ministry - 7%
9. Discipleship - 6%

Dynamic congregations include ministries of members caring for other members, kids clubs, servant projects, lay ministry, and evangelical outreach to the community. Regarding worship, comments on contemporary forms, inspiration/contextual music, prayer and a variety of choirs were added. Members ministry responses included discipleship, social ministry, leadership, spiritual gifts, spiritual growth, fellowship, training and small groups.

- *Hands on mission trips (for adults, families, youth) to Kingston, Jamaica.*
- *Child Life ministries (preschool, day care and after school care).*
- *Small group ministries.*
- *A lay care program that extends to the homebound.*
- *To be a member, one must have a ministry.*