

Let's plant churches!

The Gospel does not pack greater power at a new church than anywhere else. Nor does the freshness of a group help the Holy Spirit change the hearts of newcomers. Still, even as healthy societies need families who procreate, church planting remains important for the church's evangelism and mission strategy.

Lutheran church plants are to grow into Lutheran churches. At its 2019 convention, the LCMS reaffirmed its first mission priority, which is to “plant, sustain, and revitalize Lutheran churches.”

In 2019 Resolution 1-02, the Synod also resolved that “congregations and circuits [groupings of congregations within LCMS districts] be encouraged and supported by their respective districts to investigate and identify new mission plants.” Furthermore, the resolution stated that “congregations, circuits, and district leaders be encouraged to think strategically and plan collaboratively when establishing these new mission plants,” adding that “the congregations and workers of the Synod [should] regularly pray that the Lord of the Harvest would bless these efforts and enlarge His kingdom.”⁴

So, why plant new churches when there is room for more people in the churches we already have?

We pray that there will always be room for new people in existing churches. No one wants to overlook these congregations. Our Synod declared that it wants not only to plant but also to sustain and revitalize Lutheran churches. It makes a growing array of *re:Vitality* tools available to help with the latter effort. (See lcms.org/church-revitalization.)

Yet planting new churches need not be de-railed. After all, it is nothing new in the history of Christianity for the church to grow numerically in some places even if it is shrinking in others. Remember also: Churches that plant other churches tend to grow themselves. In effect, they fall in love with Christ's mission of seeking and saving the lost all over again.

How might your congregation get involved in church planting? See Part 2 of this brochure.

Church Planting and Your Congregation

PART 1: Church Planting

Our Lord wants the lost to be sought.

Jesus had put in a busy evening, healing many people. He awoke early the next morning, determined to move on. “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well,” He said, “for I was sent for this purpose” (LUKE 4:43). Later, He elaborated: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (LUKE 19:10).

Having received forgiveness and life because of Jesus' death and resurrection, His church continues His seeking and saving work. The Book of Acts begins with Luke recalling his “first book,” the Gospel according to Luke, which told of “all that Jesus *began* to do and teach” (ACTS 1:1, emphasis added). Ever since, the ascended Lord *continues* to act and to teach through His church and her pastors.

After He rose from the dead, Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” As He had been sent, He was sending them (JOHN 20:21-23).

Christ sends His church because He does not want those who are lost in trespasses and sins to remain unsought. God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 TIM. 2:4). He still does.

⁴ 2019 LCMS Convention Proceedings, 116.

Our Lord wants to gather His sheep.

Having sought out a lost sheep, a shepherd does not isolate it. He brings this newly found one into his flock.

“I am the good shepherd,” said Jesus, who “lays down his life for the sheep” (JOHN 10:11). The Lord not only creates in people the faith that receives His blood-bought forgiveness, but He also gives believers the gift of being members of His church. “My sheep hear my voice,” Jesus continued. “I know them, and they follow me” (JOHN 10:27). Therefore, Martin Luther wrote that “a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (SA 3 XII 2).¹

“The Church is the congregation of saints [PSALM 149:1] in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered” (AC VII 1).² Specific local gatherings of sheep around the voice of their Shepherd may consist of many people or few. They may be old or new.

Church planting is using God’s Word to start new congregations. “Congregation” comes from the Latin word *grex*, which means “flock.”

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) thinks of a new church start as an *intentionally organized* gathering that meets on a *regular* basis for *worship and/or Bible study* and that is intended to *grow into an LCMS congregation*. It may or may not own any property or be formally incorporated under state law. If sheep are hearing the voice of Christ, their Good Shepherd, the church is there!

Church planting is hardly new in the history of Christianity. St. Paul wrote: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 COR. 3:6). Church planting is not new in LCMS history, either. During 1953, a new church was organized within the Synod every 100 hours (on average). A 1960 LCMS pastoral practice manual observed: “The church grows in direct ratio to new congregations carefully planted and soundly established. Every time a new Christian congregation is born the whole church of God should rejoice.”³

Why engage in church planting?

Starting new churches is an excellent way to reach the unchurched, from the standpoint of the church. A church just getting underway is quite attuned to

bringing in new people. Such a church “puts its best foot forward”: It highlights the saving Gospel of Christ and energetically tells this Good News about Jesus.

History bears this out. At 126 new church plants during 2000–2020, at least 5,300 people new to the LCMS regularly attended worship. Of these folks, about 1,000 were non-Christians. On average, then, each church plant saw 42 new worshipers and about eight non-Christians. Combined, these church plants reported almost 1,200 adult Baptisms, 1,500 adult confirmations and nearly 2,000 professions of faith.

Starting new churches is also a good way to reach the unchurched, from the standpoint of the unchurched. If people are at all interested in “putting their toe in the water” at a church, which might prove more appealing: a brand-new congregation or one that is 100 years old? Where would newcomers be more likely to feel out of place: in a group of people where everyone is new, more or less, or in a well-established group?

Also, consider population dynamics.

- The world population is growing, as is the U.S. population. Yet the percentage of Christians in the population keeps declining.
- The population is mobile. Some neighborhoods and communities shrink, while others grow.
- More than half of the counties in the U.S. have no LCMS church, while one-half of the Synod’s total church members live in just 121 counties nationwide.

The above points suggest the importance of church planting. And don’t forget reaching across cultural or ethnic lines and into inner cities.

Churches that plant other churches tend to grow themselves. They focus on what is most important. “The more the congregation is steeped in God’s Word, the more faithful they are for God’s will in the church,” said LCMS Mid-South District President Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola.

**I planted,
Apollos
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God gave
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—1 COR. 3:6

¹ Paul T. McCain et al., eds., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 283.

² McCain, *Concordia*, 34.

³ *The Pastor at Work* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 272–273.