

The Small-Town Lutheran Church
Rev. Heath Curtis, SID President
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Stop beating yourself up. The fact that yours is a small church does not necessarily suggest that you or your congregation are doing anything “wrong.” Churches across the board are facing declining numbers. For our Synod, another factor is that a majority of the members of our congregations are located in states where the population is declining. Small-town churches may well be in towns that are getting smaller, not larger. It is hard to grow a church amidst a shrinking number of people. Don’t beat yourself up over this.

Watch your aim. Aiming at membership growth may actually *hurt* a congregation’s membership growth. Like happiness in the life of an individual, membership growth is a by-product. So don’t aim directly at it. Instead, be about doing what the church does. The Lord may well send membership growth your way.

The first step in outreach. No one wants to join a congregation where everyone is miserable. Love your church. Don’t complain about it, but always speak well of it. This is the first step.

Thirty and more years ago, then-LCMS Evangelism Director Jerry Kosberg said that people will invite their friends to church if they feel good about their Lord, about their church, and about their pastor.

Invite! Growth in evangelistic skills is always possible, and it is a good thing. (See CID’s Witnessing Helps, for example.) But the church does not necessarily need a stable of world-class evangelists. What is needed is for people actively to invite their non-churched friends, relatives, and neighbors to come along with them to church. If anyone asks why, a good initial answer can be, “I love it.” If you love it, and they know you, that alone will get their attention.

Retention of members. Our goal is for our congregations to be filled with lifelong faithfully worshipping Lutherans. Every child who enters our churches via baptism is someone the Lord is giving us to care for. If the LCMS had retained every child our churches baptized this century, we would be a growing church body – even if we did nothing else. So it behooves us to take note of the times and circumstances in life where baptized people often leave the church and give special attention to caring for them with God’s Word at these key points.

Strong assimilation or incorporation of new adult members into our congregations also stands out in importance. If they go out the “back door,” we will need to reach out to them all over again. We eagerly await the release of the Synod’s *re:Vitality* module “Members of One Body.”

Plus One: Every congregation is to make disciples of Christ by preaching His Gospel and administering His sacraments. Thriving congregations, even in small towns, usually also have one other distinctive feature about them: a “plus one.” Perhaps they run clothing or food banks for their communities. Some operate schools or preschools. Whatever the “plus one,” it gives church members a project on which to work together. It also provides something for which the church can be known in the area.