

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP INITIATIVE

CHURCH-GOING SOCIETY _ UNCHURCHED SOCIETY

- > people no longer participate from a sense of responsibility
- > they seek congregations which meet their needs, often not on matters of faith
- > members support activities that address specific human hurts and hopes

WE DON'T SEE *THEM* LIKE THEY SEE THEMSELVES

- > unchurched people see themselves as having a strong faith and prayer life
- > church people see the unchurched asking "What must I do to be saved?"
unchurch people are asking, "How can I make my life work?"

WORSHIP SUBSTANCE -vs- WORSHIP STYLE

- > traditional worship styles have little meaning to most unchurched persons
- > methods and styles must match those we are trying to reach
- > polarization over changes reflects our idolatry of the worship style
- > most growing congregations offer solid substance in different styles

NUMERICAL GROWTH CAN HAPPEN ANYWHERE

- > strong sense of mission **beyond their current membership**
- > clergy and lay leadership with a **vision to grow**
- > **wide variety** of programs, resources, methods and approaches to mission
- > **flexibility in communicating** an unchanging message in a changing world
- > take **concrete steps** regardless of size, language, resources, criticism

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP INITIATIVE

This is a brief synopsis of the Church Membership Initiative Study (1993) which was funded by the Aid Association for Lutherans. It included an advisory committee of persons from Aid Association for Lutherans, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and observers from the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Starting with a realization that we have 500,000 fewer Lutherans than two decades ago, there was a detailed review of the literature. Eleven formal research studies were followed by a three day event involving 61 congregations which have been experiencing growth. The overall objective of the study is *to set in motion forces that will result in annual increases in the number of members of Lutheran congregations*. There are four primary findings:

FINDING A - THE UNITED STATES IS CHANGING FROM A CHURCH TO AN UNCHURCHED SOCIETY

- > people no longer participate from a sense of responsibility
- > they seek congregations which meet their needs, often not on matters of faith
- > members support activities that address specific human hurts and hopes

FINDING B - CHURCH AND UNCHURCHED PEOPLE HAVE A DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNCHURCHED

- > unchurched people did not fall away from the faith; they see themselves as having a strong faith, active prayer life, and seeking help with issues of everyday life. They left because they moved, found other interests more compelling, or felt they were being judged inappropriately.
- > church people see the unchurched asking "What must I do to be saved?" and answer they ought "return and be saved". Unchurched people ask, "How can I make my life work?" Worship must meet them on their level.

FINDING C - COMMUNICATING THE LUTHERAN MESSAGE SEEMS TO REQUIRE METHODS THAT ARE APPROPRIATE TO DIFFERENCES IN PEOPLE (style -vs- substance)

- > discussion of worship style generates a polarization of feelings
- > most growing congregations offer a variety of forms of worship each week

FINDING D - NUMERICAL GROWTH DEPENDS ON CONGREGATIONAL VISION - common patterns exist > strong sense of being in **mission which goes beyond their current membership**

- > clergy and lay **leadership which share that vision**
- > wide **variety** of programs, resources, methods and approaches to mission
- > **flexible methods for communicating** an unchanging message in a changing world
- > **action oriented**, not limited by size, language, resources, criticism

The general finding of the Church Membership Initiative effort was that **solutions are found within individual, motivated congregations taken one at a time**.

Several related issues were also uncovered during the research project:

- > clergy are critical to congregations achieving their mission
- > there are a significant number of demoralized clergy
- > laity are key (leaders of shrinking congregations oppose change of any kind)
- > clergy training is a significant issue (lots of seminary bashing - little actual continuing education)
- > congregation networking seems to be very beneficial for growth
- > church planting is important, but resources for the times are scarce, and church planters feel isolated
- > average worship attendance is a more appropriate measure of congregation size

Clergy Interviews

The most frequent opinion given for membership decreases was the "value of church to people". People don't seem to take the time for church. Clergy in growing congregations cited worship style as a second major cause of declining membership. Other reasons included: congregations not wanting to grow, concerns about the adequacy of seminary training, inadequate membership transfer referral system and not having an outreach orientation.

Judicatory Leaders

Bishops & presidents suggest somewhat different causes: lack of evangelism outreach and concern for the **lost** (emphasis mine), being bound by traditions, religion being less important to people, lower levels of denominational loyalty and congregations lagging behind cultural changes. Judicatory leaders cite worship style much less frequently than parish pastors.

External & Internal Experts

Experts basically agreed with reasons given in clergy interviews. The primary responsibility for addressing outreach lies in the congregation. Many congregations do not seem to focus beyond their current membership. People present a "consumer mentality" and will participate in congregations when participation contributes to the personal or family life and faith. Unchurched persons do not want to be "ministered to" and usually feel good about their faith, while many denominational programs operate from a premise of lost faith. Congregational attitudes (more than specific programs) seem to be important in reaching new members. Growing congregations meet the needs of people with issues in people's everyday life.

Interesting Demographics

- 75,000,000 people in the U.S. are unchurched (half born 1946-64)
- 3,600,000 unchurched persons identify themselves as Lutherans
- 5,400,000 Lutherans on membership roles do not worship in a given week

- 3,000,000 Lutherans worship each week (1 in 4 self identified Lutherans)

- 250,000 Lutherans were "released from membership" in 1990
- 2,500,000 Lutherans will become "back door" losses in the next decade

Half a million people immigrate into the U.S. each year with English as a second language and there are 29,000,000 African Americans in the U.S. who face significant cultural and language barriers in becoming Lutheran. Slight ELCA and LCMS growth rates in 1991 and 1992 appear to stem from higher U.S. white birth rates in those years. (SE MI Synod drops 26 members for every adult baptism)

Group A (20%) - congregations which are **interested in extending their ministry** beyond current membership and are succeeding. They have growing variety in ministry, increased financial support, increases in the number of persons from unchurched backgrounds and increases in membership.

Group B1 (40%) are congregations which **express an interest but lack the vision** and a plan for outreach or won't make needed changes. Group B2 (40%) are congregations focused on serving the needs of their current membership. They have stable or decreasing financial support, increases in average age, fewer persons from unchurched backgrounds and decreases in church membership.

(this summary was drafted by Pastor Lou Forney, JUL 93)