

Can We Stop the Bleeding ?

A Call to WELS Congregations to Address Teen Spiritual Losses

You and I and probably every called worker who ministers to and with children have had to deal with the cut finger or the scraped knee. Usually a band-aid or one of those handy ice packs and a few reassuring words handles the "crisis."

I'm thankful that in my nearly twenty years of parish ministry our amazingly gracious God has spared me from ever having to handle a more serious situation, such as a child with a severed artery or a dismembered hand or foot. When I think of all the soccer, basketball and wrestlings practices and competitions; all the Lutheran Pioneer campouts; the hundreds of students in Sunday School, Christian Day School, high school and Confirmation classes -- all the times that some tragic accident could have happened with any one of those children -- I can't *help* but be grateful for the Lord's protecting hand! But there is another type of tragedy taking place in far too many of our 1,235 congregations: a spiritual hemorrhaging which no paramedics, no E.R. physicians, no human surgeons can stop. The massive bleeding occurring in many of our parishes is the loss each year of hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of our high school, college and young adult members in the WELS. Let's look first at some of the causes for this gaping wound. Then we'll examine some of the possible approaches -- some "tried and true," some newer and innovative -- which might be utilized in our efforts to "stop the bleeding."

This writer doesn't want to be labeled an alarmist, but it is surprising to me that more congregations and their members don't seem to be expressing more concern about the state of the spiritual health of their 14 - 24 year old members. What's fueling our seemingly apathetic attitude about this problem? Is it that we aren't aware of the daily exodus of high school and college students from our WELS churches? Does the situation seem too overwhelming to us? Is the bleeding already so out-of-control that we're walking away from it? While I'm not aware of any solid statistics on Synod-wide teen retention in our WELS congregations, the "vital signs" we do have are certainly less than encouraging:

During the years 1970 - 1993, our own WELS statistics indicate back door losses of about 188,737 members.¹ These aren't souls who've transferred to another WELS congregation. These aren't members who the Lord has called home to Heaven. These are tens of thousands of former brothers and sisters in Christ who have become inactive, who have joined other church bodies or who in some cases have flat-out left the church, their faith and their Savior altogether! We can only wonder how many thousand of those 188,000 souls went out that proverbial back door during the ages of 13 - 21. A 1994 survey of 5,368 confirmands found that of those who still held membership in their congregation, **43 percent** were deemed "inactive" -- that is, they were no longer attending worship services, celebrating the Lord's supper, nor participating in Bible class!²

While more anecdotal than statistical, this comment deserves our attention:

"There's the sound of pounding feet outside our homes and churches these days -- the sound of teenagers running away from the Christian beliefs that parents and the church have taught them.

Some studies estimate that less than one-third of our students who are active Christians while they're in high school will still be active when they graduate from college. Christian churches everywhere are losing about two-thirds of their kids during and after high school." ³

What's causing this staggering and saddening exodus of Christian teens and young adults?

Open Wounds Keep Bleeding

Probably any person training to become a physician will be taught that before you start prescribing a cure for the patient you have to assess the symptoms and determine the cause of the condition. It seems like plain old common sense to you and to me that when faced with a case of severe bleeding, any doctor worth his or her salary would quickly look for a deep cut or wound! Likewise, when faced now with sizable losses of souls, particularly in our high school and young adult age groups, wouldn't we as shepherds of those souls use that same Spirit-given Christian common sense to try and determine what's leading to the severing of spiritual lifelines by hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of our young men and women?

If someone from your congregation hasn't been asking people why they've left or become inactive, maybe it's time to do so. Yes, it's true that the root cause of all spiritual decline and apathy is sin. But sometimes we like to toss that out as our easy, pat answer and look no further for other reasons. Perhaps some of the very things our congregations are doing -- or failing to do -- are contributing to the problem! (see insert) There seldom are easy answers. In fact, the factors leading the 12 - 24 year olds in your congregation to go belly-up spiritually are going to be somewhat different from those affecting the young men and women in another region.

3.

How Can We Stop the Bleeding?

One of the first skills which paramedics learn is how to deal with cuts and wounds. Bumps, bruises and even most broken bones are rarely life-threatening. But deep gashes or open wounds with large blood loss can all too often be fatal! That's why closing gaping cuts or using pressure points to stop heavy bleeding is such a top priority for those providing first aid.

As a parallel, one of the soul-nurturing skills which our congregations (and we as servants called to care) need to develop is that of supplying "spiritual first-aid."

Right about now you might be getting ready to flip the page because you can smell it coming, can't you? "Here we go again....," you're thinking to yourself, "he's either gonna lay on the guilt trip of just *one more thing* we all should be doing, or he's gonna tell us about some grand scheme for fixing the problem that he read in a book somewhere!"

Sorry to disappoint you, but there'll be no arm-twisting or guilt-inducing here. Nor will there be any grandiose ideas conjured up by some ivory towered idealist who hasn't worked with teens or young adults in a real parish. What follows is simply a menu of options and opportunities for you, your staff, your congregation and its leaders to think over and talk about. These are not pie-in-the-sky theories; rather, they are efforts being used in real congregations like yours and like mine. If any of these examples help your congregation address its loss of young brothers and sisters, then praise the Lord!

◆ Get help! In your district you'll have available to you and

your congregation the free services of a District Coordinator for Youth Ministry. He and his team are there to help you with such assistance as consultations, workshops for Youth Leaders or those interested in Youth Ministry, and even a workshop on Teen Retention.

- ◆ Don't be afraid to ask for more help! It's not exactly a "911" call, but you can contact our Commission on Youth Discipleship for more resources and assistance -- some of which are available in print, others of which are done in person. Call 414 - 256 - 3224 for information.
- ◆ Feel that your church is too small to have a viable youth ministry? Some congregations with fewer than 10 high school students "**partner**" with other WELS congregations in their area. One congregation organizes the first activity; a second congregation organizes the next event, and so on.
- ◆ **Parents are key partners!** All too often we try to minister to high school students by yanking them away from the most spiritually influential people in their lives (whether that influence is for better or worse!) On occasion, **meet with parents** as well as students. Listen to their concerns and use those as launching sites for spiritually nurturing not only the teens, but the entire family, with the Living Word!
- ◆ Don't hesitate to **ask parents to be front-row participants** in ministering to and with high school students and young adults. Consider asking parents and their high-school son or daughter

- > to be ushers or greeters together;
 - > to serve the coffee and donuts for Bible Class together;
 - > to serve together for one year on whatever committee, board or team the parent is currently serving on;
 - > to serve as teammates together in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School.
- ◆ Start simple. Do a few things well. Then build on those things as the Lord blesses them.
 - ◆ Let your 12 - 24 year olds know you care. How about an occasional phone call or answering machine message to your high school and young adult members? Or a quick note or postcard? Or maybe an e-message? Since you're busy, perhaps this would be a ministry area which another member could take and run with.
 - ◆ Involve young men and women in your ministry teams. Unless there's some regulation in your church's constitution or by-laws prohibiting it, why not ask a few sixteen year olds to sit in on or even serve on your Evangelism and Outreach Committee or other such organizations? They have some great input to offer!

This list contains only a *few* of the ideas being utilized by some congregations in our church body. From this writer's perspective, it's not so important whether you use Idea A or Idea Z; what matters is that you and your congregation do something in Christ's service to stop the bleeding. Our Savior's love for you and for me would have kept him on his cross even if the nails in his hands wouldn't have. May our love for him and for our fellow members in the Body of Christ motivate us to dare to care!

References Cited

- 1 WELS Commission on Evangelism. "*WELS Membership Growth Patterns.*" (1995).
- 2 WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship. "*Teen Member Retention Survey.*" (1995): 4.
- 3 WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship. "*Teen Member Retention Bible Study.*" (1995): 1.

Note to the Editor:

This "box" is intended as an addendum (*ala' Time or Newsweek*) and may be included anywhere in the article.

Thank you!

Why is the loss of so many 14 - 24 year olds so surprising to many of us?

When we step back a moment and take an honest look at what we do in so aspects of our ministry, I believe we might find some things which almost "set us up" for the loss of souls we see around us! For instance:

- > Congregations with Christian Day Schools invest a great percentage of full-time called staff and finances in working with children age 4 - 13. Most of us would agree that's commendable and is one of the strengths of our church body and of those congregations.
But what happens after that?

In a sense, aren't we "spiritually reaping" what we're "spiritually sowing?" Let me just use the example of one of the congregations in which I was privileged to previously serve. We had 7 full-time called servants and an operating budget of over \$375,000 for the day-to-day, face-to-face ministry with the 140 - 160 children up to age 13.

But once graduation was over, those same children were then to be served on a minimal, part-time basis by one Pastor with a Youth Ministry budget of under \$100!

- > Check your congregation's monthly calendar! How many ministry activities allow your congregation's families to be together? Compare that to how many meetings and events separate the spouses, parents and children of your church. Are we REALLY "family friendly" in our ministry?
- > We say we're equipping our Confirmation students for life-long service in the Lord's kingdom work. But are we? Are our confirmands just sitting on their backsides for those two or three years, or are we already involving them as 7th and 8th graders in meaningful service? If they're already "plugged in" to the life of God's church **BEFORE** Confirmation Sunday, they may be less likely to wander away from it **AFTER** the rented white robe is turned back in!