

THE WELS BATTLE FOR BEREA

A Look at the Recent Synod-Wide Growth
of the Adult Bible Class

by

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SENIOR CHURCH HISTORY

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THE WELS BATTLE FOR BEREA

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PREFACE

Special thanks to the 35 pastors who took the time to answer my Adult Bible Class questionnaire. They helped to make this paper what I hope is a representative, contemporary account of a present trend in WELS "history"--the development and growth of the Adult Bible Class.

NOTE: In the statistical section of this paper, when the expression "communicants who attend Adult Bible Class" is used, it is referring only to adults, not teenagers.

THE WELS BATTLE FOR BEREIA

I have maintained for years that some could not get a class together if they declared fishing season open and stocked the church basement with walleyes.

In some situations, unfortunately, I have no reason to doubt that this pastor's characterization of a congregation's Adult Bible Class (ABC) is true. But praise and thanks to God that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod's fishers of men seem to be involved at the present time in a gradual movement which is placing more and more emphasis on the role of the ABC in individual and congregational life. More and more Wisconsin Synod Christians are being helped in their walk through life by means of constant and consistent contact with the Word. More and more Wisconsin Synod Christians are making use of precious opportunities to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ Jesus their Lord. More and more Wisconsin Synod Christians are following the example of the Bereans of "noble character," who "received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). "Something" is going on in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, something that deserves notice and needs further blessing, something I would like to think of as "THE WELS BATTLE FOR BEREIA."

While some of my reasoning is based on subjective observation and even more subjective "gut reaction," I do not think that it can be denied that a simple look at the numbers will bear me out. Statistics, of course, can be deceptive; they can sometimes be used to prove whatever the analyst wants them to prove. But a sober look at a few summaries will at least show that there is a definite trend in WELS toward increased ABC attendance--though that trend

may admittedly be quite gradual, and though it may quite starkly demonstrate how far we need to go before anyone can consider us exemplary in ABC emphasis. Nevertheless, a beginning has been made.

To get a starting point, let's begin by looking at the annual percentage rate increase in communicant membership in WELS from 1967-1981:

CHART 1

1967-68	1.2 %	1974-75	2.2 %
68-69	1.9	75-76	1.5
69-70	2.2	76-77	1.3
70-71	1.6	77-78	0.6
71-72	1.3	78-79	0.7
72-73	1.6	79-80	0.8
73-74	1.3	80-81	0.9

Slowly, surely, and steadily the number of communicants continues to grow. A little bit better idea of the actual growth of WELS might be gained by recognizing that the 1967 total of 256,776 and the 1981 total of 312,049 mean that this fifteen year period of time has seen a 17.7% increase in the number of communicant members in WELS. For this we praise God!

Chart 2 will show how the ABC has fared in its annual percentage rate increase. (Notice that in both charts 1 and 2 we've only been talking about "increase." There has been no "decrease.") For example, the 4.6% increase from 1967-68 means that the 10,034 people who attended ABC in 1968 represents a 4.6% higher figure than the 9,568 who attended regularly in 1967.

CHART 2

IS ON THE
FOLLOWING PAGE

CHART 2

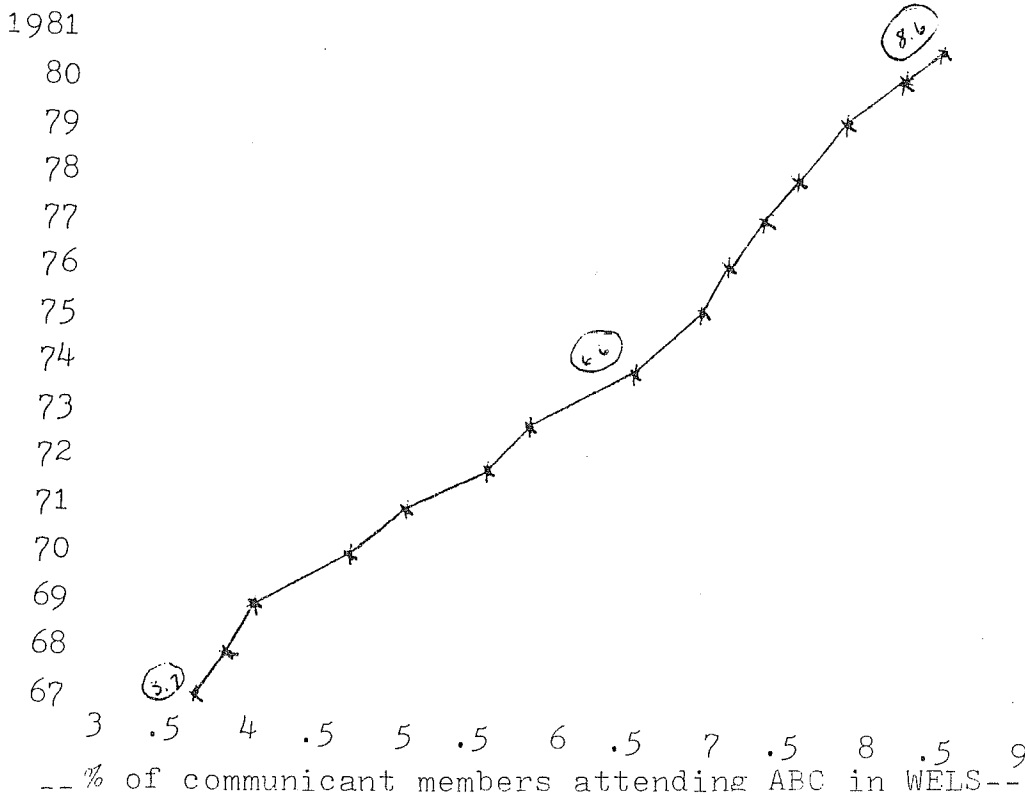
ABC ANNUAL PERCENTAGE RATE INCREASE

1967-68	4.6 %	1974-75	6.3 %
68-69	5.2	75-76	4.0
69-70	16.3	76-77	5.5
70-71	8.3	77-78	3.3
71-72	9.9	78-79	5.5
72-73	4.7	79-80	5.5
73-74	15.4	80-81	5.5

Slow, sure, and steady would not really be proper adjectives for this quite noticeable jump, especially when looking at the real banner years, 1970 and 1974. By the grace of God, 26,879 people in 1981 regularly attended ABC, 29.3% more than the 19,006 who attended in 1974, and 64.4% more than the number listed for 1967!

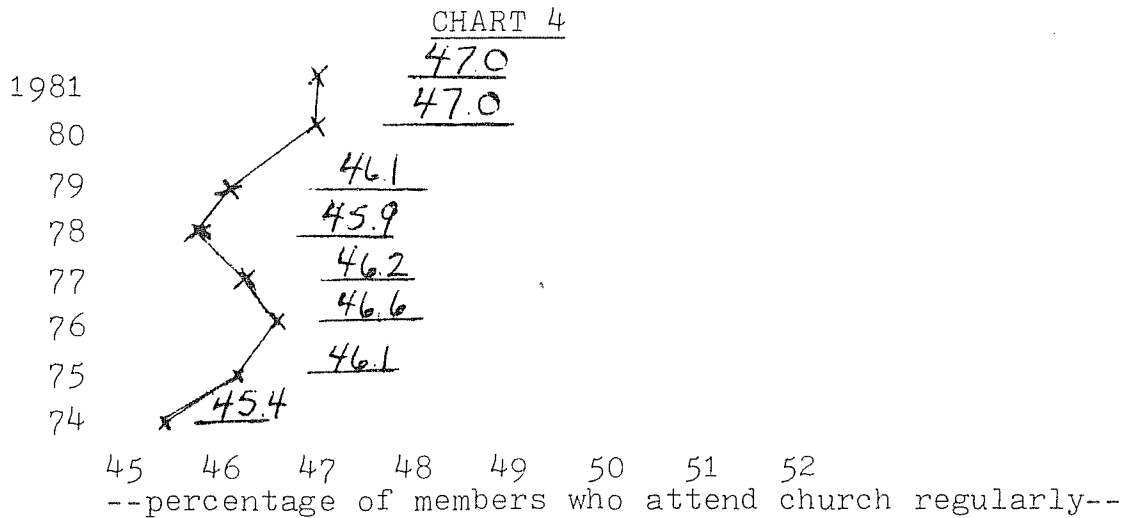
How charts 1 and 2 fit together is shown by the graph below (Chart 3). Unless we know the percentage of communicants who attend ABC synod-wide, the simple numerical increases of the previous charts might lose some of their significance.

CHART 3



There is a trend... And it's a trend upward! And although the fact that only 8 or 9 of every 100 members of WELS churches are presently attending is not impressive, yet it is a great deal better than the 3.7 of only 16 years ago. The dramatic nature of this rise is vividly demonstrated by yet another statistic, a statistic which gives the "actual annual percentage rate increase." The 6.6% of 1974 and the 8.6% of 1981 mean that the actual increase is 30.3% (8.6-6.6, divided by 6.6). The actual increase from 1967's 3.7% to 1981's 8.6% is a whopping 132.4%! And going back four years earlier to 1963, the first year Synod kept ABC records, we come up with an unbelievable 160.6% actual percentage rate increase from then till now!

The next thing I wanted to find out was if church attendance had any effect on the ABC increase. My first suspicion was that there would be a very prominent correlation. Chart 4 lists the percentage of members who attended church synod-wide from 1974-1981:



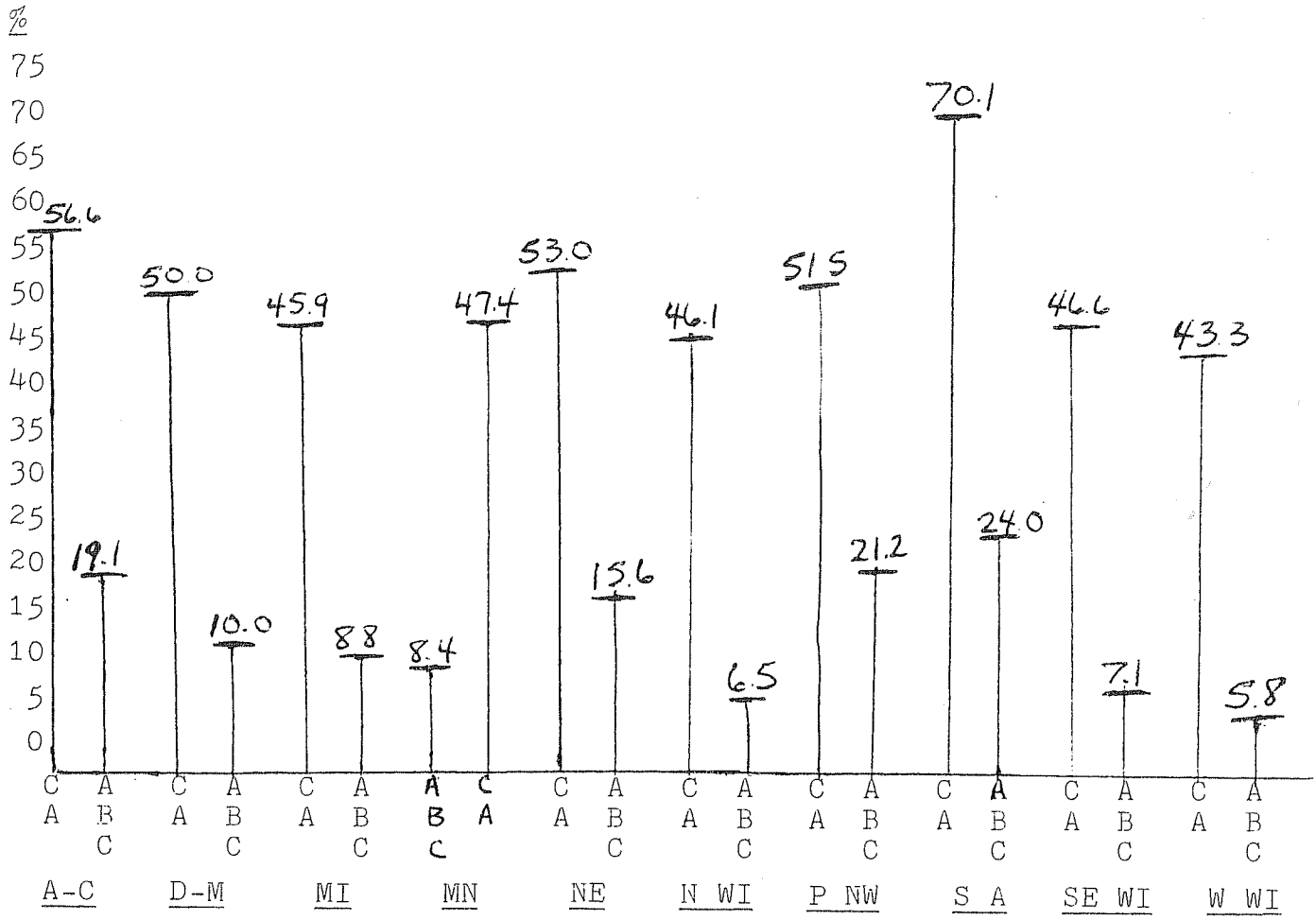
In this case my initial thought didn't prove terribly significant. At least, if there is a correlation, it is not an extremely prominent one. The synod-wide actual percentage rate increase (47.0-

45.4, divided by 45.4) was a minimal 3.5%, very low in comparison with the 30.3 % figure of the ABC increase over the same period of time. The increase in church attendance doesn't appear, in itself, to be a major cause of the ABC upsurge.

One interesting sidelight of the church attendance overview is a district by district comparison of church attendance and ABC percentage. I chose 1980 as a representative year, and Chart 5 gives the results.

CHART 5

1980 DISTRICT COMPARISON OF CHURCH AND ABC ATTENDANCE



CA=% of members who attend church
 ABC=% of communicants who attend ABC

The synod average for church attendance in 1980 was 47.0%.
 Except for the South Atlantic District with its mission church

influence and its sparkling 70.1%, none of the districts really stand out. Yet, the Arizona-California, Nebraska, and Pacific Northwest (the "outlying districts") stand tall with the South Atlantic in regard to Bible Class attendance. These districts do have a church attendance rate slightly higher than the midwest nucleus, but their hefty ABC numbers seem to indicate something other than "simple" church attendance as the primary cause.

The South Atlantic District does set the standard with its excellent church attendance and very good ABC percentage. Yet, to simply say that Synod's statistics look better simply because of the fact of life that mission churches generally do have better percentages doesn't really do justice to the trend we've noticed. The reason I say that is because in 1981 only 1.1% of the communicant membership of WELS belonged to the South Atlantic. In other words, their standard-setting statistics may have an influence on the synod, but, from a statistical standpoint, their numbers really haven't had a major impact on Synod's gradual ABC increase. In addition, it wouldn't be totally fair to the midwest districts, whose ABC attendance from 1970-1981 nearly doubled in all instances:

CHART 6

	<u>1970</u>	<u>1981</u>
MI	5.9%	9.1%
MN	4.4	8.4
N WI	3.1	6.2
SE WI	3.7	7.4
W WI	3.4	6.5

Still, it seemed very possible to me that the "things" influencing the mission districts' high percentages might be the very same types of things responsible for the overall increase in Synod. To find out what some of these "things" might be, I sent out 38 letters

to men who were either 1) pastors of large congregations with high ABC attendances, or 2) pastors of smaller churches with a high percentage rate of attenders. I was very happy to receive 35 replies! Chart 7 shows the number of replies per district--I tried to be as representative as I could.

The responses were intensely gratifying. Though my letter was sent about ten days before Ash Wednesday, these pastors took time to answer the questions, as well as to send numerous letters, notes of encouragement, and even some ABC materials. My covering letter and the questionnaire follow as Inserts 1,2,and 3. Although some of my questions--and some of the answers--were quite subjective, I think that definite impressions and observations will be readily noticed. None of the replies provided anything really "mind-boggling" or extremely "original" (for which we can be thankful!), but "The WELS Battle for Berea" is clearly more than a statistical observation or a personal gut feeling. It is a conscious effort to encourage more Wisconsin Synod Christians to let themselves be exposed to the Word. On to the replies of men presently on the battleground!

CHART 7

<u>DISTRICT</u>	<u>NUMBER OF PASTORS WHO REPLIED</u>
A-C	4
D-M	1
MI	4
MN	5
NE	2
N WI	4
P NW	2
SA	4
SE WI	5
W WI	4
<u>WELS</u>	<u>35</u>

--INSERTS 1, 2, 3 FOLLOW--

David Kolander
February 3, 1983

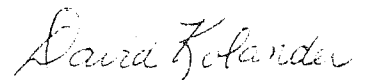
Dear Pastor,

I am a Senior at our Seminary in the process of gathering information for my final Church History paper. I know that the Lenten season is just around the corner, but if I could have about half an hour of your time, I would appreciate it very much. If that is not possible, I certainly understand.

My project is concerned with the quite noticeable growth of the Adult Bible Class in the Wisconsin Synod during the past decade. For example, from 1974-1981 communicant membership in WELS increased 8.5%, while Bible Class attendance jumped 41.4%! The "actual" increase in Bible Class attendance during those same years was a quite significant 30.3%. What I would like to do in this part of my research is get the opinions and feelings of 1) pastors of large congregations with high Bible Class attendances, or 2) pastors of smaller churches with a high percentage rate of attenders. I'm trying to pursue this topic from the positive angle.

If you could take a portion of your time to help me out by returning the enclosed questionnaire during the month of February, I would be very grateful.

In our Savior,



David Kolander

P.S. If you have any additional comment or criticism about the questionnaire or my approach, please feel free to write it down.

Any information you submit will, of course, not be attributed to any "author," nor will it point any accusing fingers. I simply am interested in looking at how far we've come in this area, and, perhaps, how far we have to go. The tentative title for this project is "The WELS Battle for Berea."

--INSERT 1--

--ANSWER WHATEVER QUESTIONS YOU WISH--

1. What time(s) and what day(s) do you have Adult Bible Class (ABC)?
2. How much time on the average do you spend in preparation for one ABC session?
3. Do you have any lay help in ABC instruction?
If so, do you have any comment on the benefit/necessity/disadvantages of this?

If so, how do you recruit and train teachers for the ABC?

4. What in your opinion would be a concise summary of the primary purpose of your ABC(s)?
5. What are the major secondary purposes and goals of your particular ABC?
6. Do you actively "recruit" or consciously make an effort to stress the import of ABC attendance?
If so, what do you feel is/are the best way(s) to do this(e.g. personal calls, word of mouth, sermon appeals, etc.)?
7. Do you make use of pre-printed (i.e. NPH,CPH) ABC materials, or do you generally follow your own course?
8. Do you have any comment concerning the useability/quantity/benefit of the Northwestern Publishing House ABC materials?
9. What have you found is the biggest obstacle(s) to ABC attendance?
10. What do you feel has contributed most significantly to the general increase in our Synod's ABC attendance?

--INSERT 2--

--IF YOU WOULD LIKE OR CAN AFFORD TO SPEND ANY MORE TIME,
PLEASE ANSWER WHATEVER QUESTIONS ON THIS PAGE YOU WISH--

1. What was/is the biggest fear regarding the ABC that you had/have to overcome?

2. How would you answer a seminarian's question: "What is the best way to get as many people as possible to see the need to attend and, then, to actually attend ABC?"

3. How would you answer a seminarian's question: "What is the best way to make sure that those who attend continue to do so?"

4. Is there something in your particular ABC or ministry that relates to ABC attendance that you would like to share?

5. Do you have any standout "rewarding" experience regarding your ABC that you would care to share?

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--THANK YOU VERY MUCH--

--INSERT 3--

1. WHAT TIME(S) AND DAY(S) DO YOU HAVE ABC?

According to the pastors' responses, one of the basic necessities for a healthy, "successful" (this term is not meant to imply in any way that numbers determine spiritual success) ABC is to make the class available as often as possible to as many people as possible. This desire is shown by the chart below which records when these congregations offer their Bible classes.

CHART 8

SUNDAY MORNING	26	usually during Sunday School
MONDAY EVENING	5	
TUESDAY MORNING	8	mid-morning
TUESDAY EVENING	4	
WEDNESDAY MORNING	3	"
WEDNESDAY EVENING	13	
THURSDAY EVENING	6	
FRIDAY MORNING	2	including a 6 a.m. breakfast ABC

Generally the classes run from one to one and a half hours. The Sunday morning class, in particular, has a time limit, since it is usually run in conjunction with Sunday School. Sunday is the most active day for having ABC, and there would be even more who had class on that day, except that several of the pastors have dual parishes, which makes this almost impossible.

Another fact that stood out was the general feeling that the Sunday ABC should be a continuous class, while the weekday classes are best if they run as shorter mini-series. The morning classes are primarily for mothers, third-shift workers, and the elderly. The evening classes are for the entire congregation, and often take hold of the special opportunity for informal fellowship, with a "coffee and donuts atmosphere" prevailing. One congregation even calls its Monday evening ABC a "Congregational Bible-Social." In this connection, it should be mentioned that a relaxed, informal atmosphere was often advised for Sunday mornings, as well.

Make the classes available at times the pastor, Board of Elders, and congregation feel they will serve the most people, and you just might be on your way to better be able to foster the attitude that ABC can be a natural part of a Christian's way of life.

2. HOW MUCH TIME ON THE AVERAGE DO YOU SPEND IN PREPARATION FOR ONE ABC SESSION?

Here the answers varied from 1-25 hours, with over two-thirds being in the 3-8 hour range. Two of the variables include whether you are preparing your own course or not, and how familiar you are with the material you're going through. Much more will be said about preparation later, but already now it can be noted that the pastors consulted want no part of a "rush job." One, two, even three specific blocks of study time appear to be designated as ABC time every week.

3. DO YOU HAVE ANY LAY HELP IN ABC INSTRUCTION?

If so, do you have any comment on the benefit/necessity/disadvantages of this?

If so, how do you recruit and train teachers for the ABC?

80% of the pastors said, "No," several with an exclamation point. ! Of the remaining 20%, most were situations where Christian Day School or Lutheran High School teachers helped with one or more of the classes. Those laymen who are not public ministers of the Gospel are under the direct supervision of the pastor, and have demonstrated through previous faithfulness and after training from the pastor that they are "mature enough" to assist the pastor in this vital area. For the pastor who must often be away, or who is already teaching several classes, this can be very welcome relief.

Most, however, felt that the very fact that the pastor has had

8-12 years of training, specifically geared toward giving him a firm grasp of Scripture, makes him the only one who should be charged with the responsibility of instructing the members of his congregation's ABC. Though several allowed that they might think of lay assistance if a member "displayed exceptional abilities," yet the general tenor of the comments seemed to be best reflected by the pastor who noted, "Much time, usually, has to be spent in preparing them (lay leaders), and much time might have to be spent in correcting something that was mistakenly said or a wrong impression that was left."

The message: if you have teachers available, use them; if you have lay members with "exceptional abilities," or if the topic being considered is in "their field of experience," try them; be cautious.

4. WHAT IN YOUR OPINION WOULD BE A CONCISE SUMMARY OF THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF YOUR ABC(S)?

No matter when one has his classes, no matter how much time he spends in preparation for them, no matter whether he has lay assistance or not, the pastor needs to keep in his mind the fundamental purpose of why he stands before his class every week. Without a definite objective or viewpoint, there really isn't much reason to "instruct" anyone. This probably seems self-understood, but I wanted to see how consistent the pastors would be in their descriptions. I was not disappointed.

The statements ranged from the desire to "get every adult into some kind of formal Bible study." to "maturation for discipline" to "the fun of learning and growing together in Christ" to the goal of "growing in the knowledge of the Scriptures and in the ability and power to apply the truths of the Scriptures properly and profitably to one's life." At the root of every single answer

was the desire to have every single "student" "grow stronger in his faith in Christ Jesus," to make sure that the primary purpose of the ABC always remain the chief purpose of the Scriptures, which were "written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). All of this may seem obvious to us evangelical, Bible-believing pastors and students, but what an unfathomable blessing this is. Every single pastor who replied to this questionnaire has one goal in his ministry--one pastor summed it up in this way: "to edify the saints with the Gospel of Christ crucified"! If numbers are the key to success, then spiritual leaders of denominations who do all they can to enforce attendance are the wizards. If not, evangelical, Christ-centered, Gospel-focused emphases abide supreme. Such a simple question, but such God-blessed answers by the men of God who are helping their members battle for Berea of old!

5. WHAT ARE THE MAJOR SECONDARY PURPOSES AND GOALS OF YOUR PARTICULAR ABC?

While the fact came out clearly that there was an essential unity among the pastors regarding the primary purpose of their ABCs, it also became obvious from their answers to question 5 that they had previously spent a fair amount of time formulating their secondary goals and objectives--what side benefits they wanted their "saints" to derive from the class. One pastor described it in the following way:

- a) to discover how much the Lord has to give
- b) to discover that Bible study is fun
- c) to reduce the ability of Satan to blindside my people
- d) to provide a meaningful framework for grasping one's life

Another pastor expressed it like this:

- a) to promote Bible awareness
- b) to touch on current subjects from a biblical perspective
- c) to encourage personal Bible study
- d) to produce a better understanding of WELS
- e) to instill a "Scripture is our ONLY norm" attitude in our lay people

In addition to encouraging personal Bible study on a regular basis and giving people a better understanding of the structure and doctrines of WELS, other purposes that repeatedly came up were the desire to develop a sense of the special fellowship we have as members of the body of Christ (perhaps best summarized by the expression "fellowship around the Word"), a chance for the people to become more comfortable with and trusting in their pastor, and an opportunity to stress the need for and the ability to witness to one's faith, whether in everyday life or on a formal evangelism committee.

These are basic necessities, really, for a healthy Christian life, aren't they? We want to take time for beneficial personal and family Bible study and meditation. We want to be fully aware of what our church teaches--and why. In this connection, too, it can be noted that we do want members to see that the "Scriptures are an interrelated whole, and not a compilation of proof texts," but we also want them to be sure they understand what the "whole" of Scripture says about the doctrines we draw from it. All we need to do is always remember the many, many questions we had about church doctrine to get a fair taste of what might be going on in the minds of lay people who have not had or have not taken the opportunity before to dissect God's Word.

But to continue with the above-mentioned "basic necessities"--as we grow stronger in our personal study of God's Word, and see how that Word is faithfully expressed by our church, we will want

to take part in that special fellowship, that oneness, we have with those who believe as we do. Maybe it means a special "fellowship around the Word," but maybe it also means sharing a joke with a real laugh, sharing insights and opinions without a desire to criticize, maybe even sharing time with each other by developing personal and family friendships. And when these things are happening, the leader of the group, the pastor, often loses what is a lopsided emphasis on the "black robe" part of his functioning. He is a human being like them, who has a sincere desire to help them "grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ," never forgetting that he may perhaps be learning the most! And finally, the result of all this will naturally lead to the desire to share--to witness: "This is what God's Word says," "This is what it means to me," "This is why our church is so special"... When pastors consciously realize that these are the "major secondary purposes" of the ABC, their people will be the winners. God's people will know how God's Word and God's love in Christ Jesus "relate to their everyday life." And experience is proving that they will be back for more!

6. DO YOU ACTIVELY "RECRUIT" OR CONSCIOUSLY MAKE AN EFFORT TO STRESS THE IMPORT OF ABC ATTENDANCE?

If so, what do you feel is/are the best way(s) to do this?...

"I sell the Bible Class whenever I can" seems to best summarize the pastors' outlook toward ABC recruitment, and "a quality product sells itself" summarizes the best way to actually get them to come. One-on-one personal announcement and encouragement is also considered far and away the best way to publicize the ABC, and to help the congregation's members determine their weekly priorities. Some do this through individual notes of encouragement from the pastor or letters in the name of the congregation. Most feel the best way is through every member visits by the stewardship committee, church

council, or board of education, with some even giving help in how the family can budget their "church time" for the coming year. The key is to let the people know what's coming, what's expected of them, and how much time they will need to set aside. When the need for Bible study is stressed in practical, God-pleasing ways, Spirit-worked fruits, we are assured, will follow.

Other methods of recruitment included stressing the class for new members of the church, "pushing it" on your men's and ladies' groups, and strongly encouraging your council and committee members to attend. All these things will become easier, of course, if and when the "satisfied customers" start doing the recruiting for you. Until then, the message from these pastors is : "Advertize and pray!"

7. DO YOU MAKE USE OF PRE-PRINTED (I.E. NPH, CPH) ABC MATERIALS, OR DO YOU GENERALLY FOLLOW YOUR OWN COURSE?
8. DO YOU HAVE ANY COMMENT CONCERNING THE USEABILITY/QUANTITY/BENEFIT OF THE NPH ABC MATERIALS?

1970 seems to be a watershed year as far as ABC materials from the Northwestern Publishing House goes. That's the year when the landmark Acts series of Pastor Werner Franzmann came out (The Gospel Begins Its March of Conquest, etc.), as well as the all-time ABC best seller, Family Life under Christ (over 18,000 copies sold), and Christ and the Holy Scriptures (present availability?). In the last thirteen years thirty-six different courses have been offered by the Publishing House--"enough," as one pastor noted, "to keep Bible classes profitably occupied for many years." I myself have been extremely impressed with the materials and have tried to gobble them all up. What I wanted to do in questions 7 and 8 was to find out what the general attitude of the pastors who were buying them was.

What was reported, I guess, was not particularly surprising. Only one of the pastors uses the NPH materials "as is"--and not all the time. Nearly all the pastors use them in some way (with perhaps three exceptions--including two quite vehement ones).

In general, however, these ABC leaders feel that the quantity and quality of NPH materials makes them "very good^{and} useable for resource material," as well as valuable tools "for a young pastor as a launching pad." Another pastor feels "that the excellent quality of Synod materials is one of the primary reasons for the dramatic increase in attendance of the ABC."

On the minus side, the feeling came out that their cost may make them prohibitive, that most of them are too lengthy for a mini-series format, and that "generally they are too simple, with too many leading, obvious questions." One pastor added, "The ones I have used are too rigid--not enough charts, diagrams, illustrations, application. Frankly, some have been quite sterile."

The lesson from these pastors is really quite an obvious one: be thankful for everything NPH has put out, use what you can--and it's great to have "material you know you can trust"--, take the time to develop your own course. And, as the WELS Secretary of Part-Time Education pointed out, that's the exact purpose Synod's ABC materials are designed to serve!

9. WHAT HAVE YOU FOUND IS THE BIGGEST OBSTACLE TO ABC ATTENDANCE?

According to a survey taken in November, 1981, of one pastor's congregation, there were three "excuses" which stood out above the others:

- 1) not used to it
- 2) don't know enough about the Bible
- 3) one hour on Sunday is enough

In one form or another, these were the basic answers the rest of

the pastors gave, also.

The bottom line, of course, is the Old Adam. He does whatever he can to influence people to stay away from anything that might lead to his downfall. One way he goes about this is by reminding the people that this is something they haven't done before, so why worry about it now. "My parents and grandparents never even heard of a Bible class--and they were Christians. So why should I worry about it?" Trying to cultivate an attitude that longs for more opportunities to grow in Scripture knowledge takes patient preparation, especially when long-time habits are involved, as well as a list of priorities that has perhaps never listed Bible instruction anywhere near the top.

The second reason listed was quite surprising to me, but it came up on over 20% of the answers. Many people feel self-conscious, it seems, about their ignorance of the Bible, and, as a result, don't want to display that ignorance before what they view as an elite group of Bible students. "They are," as one pastor noted, "content to confess, 'I believe what the church believes.'" Time and time again pastors advised, "Don't put anyone on the spot with questions. Don't call on individuals to read unless they volunteer. Don't make anyone think he's spiritually inferior if he doesn't know the answer to what might seem to be a simple question." How shrewd that Satan should use this excuse to keep people from the Bible study they subconsciously realize they desperately need.

Excuse number three was labeled the "midwest Lutheranism attitude" by several. The idea that confirmation instruction means graduation from Christian instruction is still a mighty force to be reckoned with. This, of course, ties in with the first excuse. Many simply aren't yet used to the idea that Bible study is a way

of life, whether it be as an individual or with a group. Here's also where the devil always brings up the time problem. "You get your religion on Sunday. You have lots of other things to do during the week." And they do. The pastors noted that the lack of time in peoples' schedules plays in heavily with obstacles to ABC attendance. The crops, the kids, and the camper all have to be given fair time. People work forty or more hours a week, and some families have other members working on different shifts. Many times people are just plain tired. Some are very active in other areas of congregational life.... There are definite time obstacles. But as proper attitudes toward adult Christian instruction have been gradually developed, this time problem has begun to subside. Much of it has been erased simply by removing ABC stereotypes and the "misunderstandings of what Bible Class is really all about."

10. WHAT DO YOU THINK HAS CONTRIBUTED MOST SIGNIFICANTLY TO THE GENERAL INCREASE IN OUR SYNOD'S ABC ATTENDANCE?

The answer, actually, lies in removing the "excuses" mentioned under question 9. Pastors are pushing harder to get people "used to the idea of ABC." People realize they need to be better equipped spiritually "for times of difficulty." And the feeling that one hour of "church" is enough is gradually being replaced by a "growing awareness on the part of many of our people that we never outgrow our need for the Word."

In the "push by pastors" category, graduates from the Seminary in the past 10-15 years come out smelling like a rose. Several (and not just young pastors!) mentioned that the younger pastors themselves have left the Sem with a high awareness of the need for congregational Bible study, as well as with some training in methods on how to best carry it out. In this connection, "our pastors are

seeing the importance of personal instruction that can be given in a more relaxed situation than from the pulpit." In addition, one pastor feels that "the failure of the 20 minute sermon to successfully wage war against the moral decline in our society" has made a significant contribution to pastoral awareness. "People need more than a one hour worship service to combat what the world throws at us today. Pastors see this need and have engaged in all sorts of 'extra' study of the Word to help." And our pastors also can't ignore the fact that "there is a general trend toward Bible study, and if they don't offer their people Bible study within the church, they're going to go outside the church and have their own little Bible study cells."

This "general trend" has also served to help eliminate the fear people have about their Scriptural ignorance. There is a certain "openness with which religion is discussed in our day, resulting in questions for which people need answers. Also, in this regard, the presence of the cults, JWs and Mormons, makes it necessary for our people to get answers." As pastors become better educators and members become more comfortable being educated, "application and discussion" have been increasing. Many do want to "know what the Bible says to them" so they might be "able to explain what they believe to others." How thankful we can be that the power of the Gospel is turning the tables on Satan's trick, and causing a growing "awareness on the part of well-educated people that they are almost illiterate in the Bible, and has given them the desire to correct it!"

Mentioning the expression "well-educated" leads into another contribution to our synod's ABC increase. Adult education in general is simply more accepted in our society. Many are college graduates.

Many are involved in adult enrichment courses. The "confirmation-class mentality" listed under question 9 is becoming more and more suspect as an excuse to stay away from ABC. People are realizing the need for continuing education, and the ABC has reaped some of the benefits of this changing attitude. Another aspect of this movement which has affected our churches is the success evangelical and fundamentalist groups have enjoyed with their ABC indoctrination-- "If it's okay for my friend the Baptist, it's okay for me." And numerous pastors mention the God-blessed fact that the modern Bible translations are helping many search the Scriptures with eyes enlightened as never before.

I also should mention two very obvious reasons for an increase in ABC enrollment. First, as was pointed out by the missionaries who responded, time for group Bible study in mission congregations is simply taken for granted. It's part of the Sunday morning routine to come to worship and to study God's Word. It's "part of the weekly habit." The second obvious point is "simply the fact that there are more ABCs" in the synod than in the past. For example, the 1013 Bible Classes in 1981 are almost twice the 550 that were conducted in 1970. "More pastors are doing it successfully, and this is influencing others to try it." Thanks be to the Lord of the harvest who is moving reapers to educate, and who is causing fruit to be produced in abundant measure. "Continue to preach the pure Gospel," one pastor succinctly noted, "and the Lord eventually gives the increase." And that, really, is the only path there can possibly be to Berea!

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Insert 3 lists five general questions which the pastors could answer if they wanted to. All of them took the time to answer at least some of them. This gave them an opportunity to expand on some points they made on the first page, or to offer some practical suggestions, give some anecdotes, and reveal their ABC outlooks and philosophies. I thought it would be beneficial and interesting to share some of them.

HOW TO INSURE CONTINUED ATTENDANCE AT YOUR ABC

- 1) short series
- 2) preview next lesson
- 3) be interesting and practical
- 4) question and answer time
- 5) THREATEN TO SHOOT THEM IF THEY DON'T COME NEXT WEEK!

Suggestion 5 may be a bit on the extreme side, but that kind of frantic thought will be avoided if we don't get too caught up in the "numbers" game.

Don't worry about outward success in numbers. Work and pray and let God take care of the success. Be more concerned about the quality of your presentation than about the quantity of your participants. Growth in Bible Class is most importantly inner spiritual growth.

To insure quality presentation there needs to be quality preparation. "Don't despise your people," one pastor wryly noted, "by boring them through a lack of preparation." Never forget that a "good product sells itself." And "don't try to be original... There are excellent materials available. Use them, study them, borrow from them, make their materials, ideas, insights your own." To illustrate his point, this pastor continued: "I'm reminded of a seminarian who stated as he left the seminary that he was going to be original or nothing. In two years he was both!"

This commitment to thorough preparation will also help to

eliminate the fear which several pastors mentioned they had to overcome--the fear of not being able to answer difficult questions. In addition, it will enable the pastor to grapple with ^{the} difficult problem of "keeping the lesson simple and understandable," of "finding a suitable style somewhere between kindergarten and a college lecture." BE WELL PREPARED came out as a recurring theme under almost every question I asked. There simply is no substitute.

HOW DO YOU GET PEOPLE TO COME TO ABC?

Much of this was discussed under the congregations' different recruitment procedures, but there are a few additional comments that should be noted.

The heart of the encouragement, again, is to make "regular, patient, and loving appeals to God's saints to grow in His Word." "Extremely important is Gospel motivation and patience. Avoid legalism as motivation." "Remember that the Law will only show your people what they don't know and their sinful attitude toward the Word. The Gospel will win them." All of the advice and insights these men gave must be understood in this light--the light of the Gospel.

When appealing to people on the basis of the Gospel of their Lord to see the need for Bible study, one bit of advice came out very sharply--ADVERTISE. "Let the people know what is going to be taught and give the class as much publicity as possible." "Use some thought provoking questions that the class is designed to answer." Two pastors gave examples:

If, for example, you are beginning a study of Genesis, put questions in the bulletin: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Which is older, granite or marble? If all animals bring forth 'after their kind,' how can we have beefaloos?

and

...things like: Did you ever wonder what happened to unbaptized children? Where does our soul go when we die? Would you like to know more about the Moonies?

To get people to come to ABC, motivate with the Gospel and stimulate by letting them know what they can expect to learn...

...But how do you get them to stay?

Here is where some of the pastors' philosophies were expressed. First and foremost, one pastor said, "See that they have a good time and enjoy themselves. There are still a few people who believe that the more miserable you are the better Christian you are, but... the days when a monk went into his cell to hit himself with a whip are past." One church tries to confront this problem by having a "joyful time" prior to the class: "We spend fifteen minutes each Sunday morning with the whole Sunday School (children, teens, adults) just singing, mostly songs of a 'lighter' variety as found in song-books such as 'Sing and Celebrate for Kids,' etc.--we put the words on overhead transparencies." Another pastor feels it's important "not to bore them by extending a topic more than 8-10 weeks." Another "don't" is "don't repeatedly get involved in discussion/argument with one person. You may find that in each group there is one lady who just loves to ask questions and then answer them! Allow her some time, but don't let her monopolize the Bible class, or your class may dwindle to two people--the lady and you!"

Two pastors played alphabet soup and said the "P's" and "D's" were vital: 1) prayer, preparation and proper presentation on the pastor's part, and 2) allowing the people to discover, discuss, and decide or determine the doctrine you are presenting. In this connection still another pastor shared something he said has helped

him in teaching his ABC:

TEN GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING ADULTS

- 1) Stress relationships
- 2) Move from knowns to unknowns
- 3) Stress concepts and meaning of language
- 4) Teach by overkill (i.e. BE WELL PREPARED)
- 5) Use appropriate current or contemporary applications
- 6) Explore and illustrate thematic materials (i.e., word study)
- 7) Seek active commitment (live the Word you're learning)
- 8) Use humor when possible (let them know you enjoy a good joke and that you can poke fun at yourself)
- 9) Do not try to substitute piety for faith in your teaching
- 10) Let the Word challenge them

--and one final summary for keeping the people in your ABC:

ENTHUSIASM, ENTHUSIASM, enthusiasm, enthusiasm, ENTHUSIASM, ENTHUSIASM
 PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER
 BE PREPARED, BE PREPARED, be prepared, beprepared, BE PREPARED
 PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER, PRAYER

--"And let it show in your ministry. The Lord will
 take care of the rest."--

IN CONCLUSION..., what is the reason for the growing ABC trend in WELS? There certainly is no mind-boggling, "teach-you-something-new" answer, but perhaps I could best summarize the thoughts, observations, and feelings of the men in the field in the following way:

ALERT PASTORS
 EVANGELICALLY ENCOURAGING
 GOD'S CONCERNED PEOPLE
 TO LEARN MORE
 ABOUT GOD'S HOLY WORD

AND THEN

CONDUCTING LIVING, APPLICATION-FILLED CLASSES, WHICH
 STIMULATE THE SAINTS TO ACTS OF SERVICE, AS WELL AS
 GIVING THEM THE DESIRE
 TO SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT ABC TO OTHERS.

Is it possible to attain Berea? Perfectly? --of course not. Even close to perfectly? --probably not. But God be praised that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has at least been recently involved in a conscious, concerted effort to "preach the Gospel"

also by means of the ADULT BIBLE CLASS, giving the people of God opportunities to learn about the Word of God and how it applies to their lives in ways not possible before. Yes, as one pastor remarked, "our track record is poor," but we are "on the mark," some are "getting set," and others are already "on the go." May God help us to keep going--to help our people grow in their desire to "receive the message with great eagerness and to examine the Scriptures every day..." It's a noble battle we're engaged in, a battle to better be able to equip God's saints for works of service--it's the WELS BATTLE FOR BEREA!