

Faculty Copy

Small Church Task Force

Report to a Plenary Session of the
Board for Parish Services

of the

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

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“To the angel of the church
in Philadelphia write:

*These are the words of him
who is holy and true
I know your deeds.
See, I have placed before you
an open door
that no one can shut.
I know that you have little
strength, yet you have kept my
word and have not denied
my name.”*

(Revelation 3:7-8)

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"We are asking you . . . to study the unique needs and ministry of small churches and to recommend to the Board for Parish Services how we can serve such parishes better."

– The "Small Church Task Force" charge

PREFACE

"Is there a story?"

The work of the "Small Church Task Force" began one year ago with the seven of us sitting around a table in Pinehurst, TX, asking, *"Is there even a story here?"* You are to be commended for asking the question, "Are we effectively serving our small congregations?" Yet, with the BPS "Report to the 12 Districts," its catalog, constitution, structure, brochures and publications in front of us, we all said (and still say), "Who could complain about the services and materials that are being offered!?" We were (and still are) impressed and overwhelmed by the all-encompassing service this Board performs. Our "story" (and we're sticking to it) is that the Lord has richly blessed the church through you and your labors; and this "Well Done!" is seconded by the pastors of small churches whom we interviewed. The news is good.

If anyone has *not* done all he could have, or has not performed in a way he would want to have performed when called to give an account, or if there is such a thing as "administrator guilt" to correspond to the terrors of "missionary guilt," we don't come with criticism but with absolution. In Jesus name, we forgive you. "We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:1-2)

The most important thing we could say to you for shaping and empowering your ministry having just been said, we turn to the story that did finally emerge as our work continued through its research, survey and analysis phases. I'll start with my own story, only because it may be typical.

I recently sat all alone in the sanctuary of St. Mark's, Watertown, overwhelmed to

think of what I received in that place. (You'll hear no "large church bashing" from me.) My spiritual life was formed in a church of 3000 souls, though I never thought of it as a large church. It was simply "normal." Honestly, I thought of the church of my vicar year in Delano, Minnesota, as being really quite small. It had 630 souls. Think about it.

I was assigned to an exploratory field in 1988. By 1989 I had the experience not only of worshiping with a group of 46 people, but also of being the only WELS member present. None of my forming in those *huge* WELS churches (6 to 20 times larger than the median) prepared me to see the significance of that experience. I was thinking that my whole church could sit in the ushers' section at St. Mark's.

It has taken me 11 years to begin to sort through all the models, methods and arbitrary but unshakable measures of success that I inherited from my large church formation. In my exploratory field, I labored mightily to set up a Sunday School class for every age group (and then actually prepared certain teachers that their classes might be empty). I recorded poor quality cassette tapes of my favorite Lutheran hymns for my prospects to politely listen to (they didn't exactly sing). I strained for a certain organizational structure that you might all consider basic. I perpetually judged myself a failure, suffering at the mercy of unexamined paradigms: What's a "good" youth group? What's a "successful" Bible Study? When has an outreach effort been "worthwhile?" In the arena of committees, structure, programs and numbers – though I truly mean none of these as "bad words" – I asked for years the pain-inducing question, "What's wrong with me and my church?" The mission did grow, slowly but surely, only to leave me bewildered by the disappointment and anger of my founding members when we grew beyond a "single cell." Through it all, I clearly lacked a model for my ministry.

But, I outlasted my critics, and learned to steel myself against "workshop overkill" and the mail from Synod. No criticism intended, much of it was simply from a different perspective and for a different audience. Before I understood that, I had wasted precious time and energy in discouragement that might have been spent on becoming a true, small church shepherd. I had rushed my charming "Mary" church to hurry up and be more like "Martha," developing structure before people, building programs (one after another) before relationships. I had been out of step with my mission which I fear has had to take the long way around before arriving where it is today. But, by God's grace alone my mission is finally building a beautiful facility and is poised to leave the category of "small church" behind.

Being a small church pastor has been a profoundly stretching experience, in which I've learned to live off a *different set of satisfactions*. There is the reliance on Christ and his Word that one finds in utter inadequacy and heart-breaking struggle. There is spiritual growth that comes through the extraordinary demand in a small church that preaching, teaching and developing people be done to the utmost of one's ability. There is the relationship between shepherd and sheep that I may never bear to sever. And that may be my only real qualification for addressing you today: I adore my small church!

And if nothing else, plenary session of the Board for Parish Services, you must understand and affirm that small *is* beautiful. Trust me. In terms of church life and experiencing the presence of Jesus in the "twos or threes," small can be exquisitely beautiful!

And yet.

Steve is a former Baptist minister who joined my congregation after over a year of intense instructions. Lutheranism – with all its distinctions oriented around objective justification – is a constant thrill to him. He came to me one time, almost overcome by emotion, having visited a friend at the hospital in intensive care. “I told her that her sins were forgiven. I was a minister all those years, but this is the first time I’ve ever said those words.”

Betsy is a lovely and talented bank executive who went knocking on doors with us this past summer. A man asked her wryly, “Now why would I want to go to your church?” Her eyes welled up. “It’s the best thing that ever happened to me.” “Really?” “Really.”

Both Steve and Betsy came to us through the simplest of methodologies – they were invited by friends. And the point is that small *is* beautiful.

Seeing a congregation grow through Gospel ministry is just MORE beautiful!

And like every small church pastor in the WELS, I long to see more of it.

But enough about me.

How has *your* view of “church” been shaped by your experience? What is a “typical” congregation, anyway? For whom do you prepare your programs? To whom are you offering your services?

If this report is to have an effect on your work on behalf of our synod, it will largely come if we are able to make you say, “Aha,” (i.e., “We see what a ‘different animal’ the small church really is!”); and “Wow” (i.e., “There are so many of you!”). Along with the many specific recommendations we bring for your consideration, it’s also these two paradigm shifts that will inform any new or improved efforts on behalf of small churches.

By the power of God’s Word and his Lifegiving Spirit, the potential for growing his kingdom through the 673 small church outposts spread across our synodical territory is tremendous. We have every reason to be optimistic. To the little church with a little strength Jesus said, “*I give you the open door.*”

– Pastor Mark A. Paustian
Small Church Task Force Chairman

“In a big world, the small church has remained intimate.
In a fast world, the small church has been steady.
In an expensive world, the small church has remained plain.
In a complex world, the small church has remained simple.
In a rational world, the small church has kept feeling.
In a mobile world, the small church has been an anchor.
In an anonymous world, the small church **calls us by name.**”

– Carl S. Dudley, Making the Small Church Effective

AWARENESS OF THE SMALL CHURCH

“What we’d like the administrators to know about us.”

Be assured that we read the Church Growth books on this topic – and there are many – with a grain of salt. Problems are identified and solutions are proposed entirely outside the context of Law and Gospel or the Means of Grace. While Christianity is strongly present in these resources, the answers have little that is distinctively Christian about them. In these sources, the “Chief Article on Which the Church Stands or Falls,” objective justification, is simply never in the picture.

But speaking of the “human side” of the small church – its unique characteristics, dynamics and structure; its particular strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and risks – the plethora of books do seem to accurately describe the territory. And all the experts agree: the small church is *not* a shrunk-down version of the large church, but an “entirely different animal.” This fact will have implications for methodology, programs, leadership styles and denominational support. Synod officials would be mistaken to broadly apply large church models and solutions to the small church.

What is the typical small church like? In particular, consider a church that has *remained small over many years*. How is it different from the large congregation?

An imperfect analogy: Imagine three generations of “Smiths” gathered together for a reunion. They are a family, and as such they are unique, defying generalities. In terms of culture and shared experience, characteristics and idiosyncracies, an outsider can barely begin to know them. What they love is their history and their heritage, their relationships and connections. These are the glue, not specific future goals, or anything like a clearly defined vision. (Remember that we’re using the analogy of an extended family to speak of the “textbook” small church, which has almost no

resemblance to other types of small churches, for example, the young suburban mission.)

Back to the Smiths. When they're together, certain people perform certain functions. *They always have.* Certain places and objects have special meaning. Certain things are done at certain times. *And everyone knows this.*

They expect that each person, to some degree, interacts with every other person – this is fairly defining to their experience. Everything is personal. They don't count empty chairs and say "attendance is low this year;" they say, "Where's Jim and Jill?" They introduce each other by name not by function. At their family gathering, they aren't always dividing into narrowly defined age groups. They don't plan the coming year; they say, "Whose house for Thanksgiving?" They don't always go for excellence or polish; Aunt Mary plays the piano just fine. (And anyway, who wants to tell her she doesn't?)

They fight like family. They love like family. They think like family.

They could change, but why? If someone in the family has a special need or disability, they don't need to form a committee to be able to respond. When the family has a problem, they don't create structure or go through channels before they can act. As far as personal involvement, all the "do-ers" in the family are already doing a great deal. The family rises to financial challenges when the need is understood. They are able to make decisions very quickly and informally.

All this to illustrate the very different dynamics in the long-time small church.

And this "church-as-family" analogy has some important implications for bringing leadership and change to the small church. While the Smith family *might* actually watch a video or flip through a 3-ring binder to learn to be a better family in some way, how many such programs do you think they'd tolerate? And what would it take for someone coming from the outside to truly influence them? If he became a "Smith," truly part of them – if he was proud to be, and connected well with each of them – perhaps he *will* lead them. But if he right away tries to get them to write a mission statement, they'll try to be polite. (This too shall pass.) And how likely are they to accept influence from some expert? It won't be by virtue of any authority he thinks he has in their home. It's a right he'll have to earn by taking time to understand them, respect them and affirm what they are.

And do they want to grow? On that they are ambivalent. Small churches *do* want to grow. They truly do. They just don't want to become something they're not, or to lose what they have and cherish. Yet, the love of Christ compels them to reach out. (And there may also be the painful decline of the institution creating incentive to "find some new members.") But even where such desire is strongly felt, not only their worst qualities (small church sins for which we offer no excuse), but their most endearing ones as well, (e.g., "We're so close-knit.") are getting in the way.

And whether they know it or not, they need help to grow, help that may be significantly different than that which succeeds in larger congregations.

This paper is not addressed to small church pastors who need to understand *precisely* how their small churches are different. You do not need to be small church experts; if I may be so bold, better that you know what you don't know, simply for lack of having had the experience. Many of the solutions we'll propose for small church pastors will come *through* you but must be *by* small church pastors. For the sake of the recommendations that will follow, it will be enough just to tell you how many of us there

are, and to convince you that small is different . . . and is extremely challenging.

Small Is Different

The small church functions more as a family than as a business.

The small church values relationships far more than programs.

The small church demands personal connection with its pastor and values his personal characteristics more than all his professional competence.

To get into specifics: in small churches the work is done by individuals, many of whom have several roles; the planning cycle is far shorter; the focus is on people not their functions; finances are handled informally, less systematically, with people simply responding to need; administration is far less structured; its meetings are fairly social; there is less need for specialized ministries; the small church is intergenerational; it emphasizes participation more than performance; it views ambitious programs and increased structure with suspicion; it tends to rely (with limited success) on "attraction" for its growth; small (at its best) is beautiful: intimate, relational, responsive to need, busy in worship, growth, prayer and good works, developing the ministry potential of many individuals that would hide in a larger church; with a shepherd that actually has time for sheep – who profoundly loves his people and offers a walking model of Christian discipleship; and speaking historically, the small church is remarkably resilient.

Small Is Challenging

The small church will likely have a poor self-image.

The small church will likely have short tenures of pastors.

The small church will likely have a lack of manpower and resources; and have inadequate facilities and equipment.

To be more specific: The small church may not recognize its strengths, but only bemoan its limitations, evaluating itself against unrealistic standards, not even recognizing when it has a smashing success (4 kids in youth group may mean that 80% of it's young people are involved in their church!) It may underestimate its potential, responding to every challenge with, "But, we're so small!" It may endure a succession of short pastoral tenures; be perceived to be a stepping stone for seminary graduates; be perceived to be served by less competent pastors (and who, if "Protestant" statistics apply, *are* less likely to be content, only partly due to salary, and more likely to characterize their ministry as "powerless" – the first word chosen from a list by 80% of Protestant pastors to describe their ministry). It may spend as much as 70% of its budget on its pastor, so that programming and outreach suffer. Lay leaders are in short supply, with individuals handling multiple duties with genuine fatigue. The pastor may be doing far too much, due to unrealistic expectations and/or heavy

dependencies on him for all aspects of ministry. (Yet, it's also possible that he does too little.) The loss of a single energetic family may significantly cripple the small church's program – a terrible set-back as it struggles to attain a certain "critical mass" needed to attract families. Internal conflict can be absolutely consuming, considering the proportion of members that may be involved. Certain essential talents (such as musical accompaniment) may simply be missing. The facility may lack in countless ways: narthex, kitchen, lighting, acoustics, AV; with converted spaces ending up far less than ideal for such things as educating children or worship. Above all, the small church may be in decline, completely inward in its orientation, pessimistic about its mission field, without any clear vision for impacting its community, *and with survival as its primary mission and focus.*

If these differences don't seem significant, it's because, rightly so, you think of the one ministry of reconciliation that we all share and which remains the same. We know the power inherent in the "nuda verba," which operates completely apart from the "unique dynamics and personality of the small group." Still, we do operate from a set of unspoken assumptions as we try to support the organized congregation. How easily these small church strengths could be overlooked by leaders or administrators; how easily these challenges, such as a dismal self-image, can be unwittingly exacerbated.

Imagine a "textbook" small church, as we've just described it. They don't have an evangelism committee or even a prospect list, and may feel very bad about that. Now imagine the pastor (a sem grad) and two laymen (the machinist-president who also cleans the church and a farmer-treasurer who also plays the Hammond) filling out a hundred-question "Mission Awareness and Preparedness Checklist." Or picture them opening up the "Forward in Christ" package and paging through the documents. We'll leave you to consider all the realities described above that come into play at those moments. (Hint: there are many!) Or how about two Sunday School teachers, well aware of their budget, sitting down to try to adapt "Christ-Light" to their 4 faithful attendees (2 1st-graders, 1 in 4th, and 1 in 8th.)

You would be misreading us if it sounds like we find anything *wrong* with those kinds of materials or programs. Not only are they excellent, but they are excellent for *many* small congregation – those that are *not* "textbook." But neither should you see something *wrong* with or give up on a small church that does not embrace methods, materials, or structures that are tried and tested in very different situations. If they don't fill out the whole checklist, or read through the whole package, or order Christ-Light, do not conclude that they don't want to grow or do not love their synod or are not passionate about their ministry.

After all, do these programs still seem like a fit to you? Do they affirm the small church and its natural ways? Do they appeal to and build on the magnificent strengths that their small church has? (For that matter, does their own pastor?) Do we even *have* a viable model for small church ministry that embraces their unique characteristics – a crystal clear understanding out of which materials and services are emerging? It is true that many resources designed for larger congregations *can* be adapted to fit the small church's realities – less or no structure, dramatically fewer participants, few willing workers that are not already overworked, implementation falling to an individual lay member or the pastor, survival-mode budget. Yet, is continually

making that assumption – small churches should just adapt – the best way of communicating that “those parts of the body that seem weaker are indispensable, and the parts we think are less honorable we treat *with special honor?*” (1 Corinthians 12:22-23) Or, through the fault of no one, is the “collie” (a warm and friendly if sometime snarly church) constantly feeling dismissed or useless for not being a better “garden” (a multi-faceted and productive if sometimes impersonal church)?

If the premise holds, that some of Synod’s services are distinctively by and for the leaders of larger churches, the fact is that it has still been serving *most* of its people well. Two thirds of WELS *people* do belong to the larger WELS congregations, those with over 150 in worship. And not all small congregations complain of a disconnect. But what about the more typical small ones and the majority of our pastors that serve them?

It’s a complicated issue, and the risk that we’ll be misunderstood is always present. A small church that is optimistic about its future with a half dozen energetic lay leaders will be invigorated by such resources as the “Mission Awareness and Preparedness Checklist” which was cited earlier. Other BPS resources, even if not a perfect fit to the small church are easily adapted and/or are still the right tools because they help the small church to “think big,” and to anticipate that future in terms of planning and structure.

But we’ll need to be extremely sensitive! A declining church may be humiliated by the same exercises, held up to a standard that it will never achieve nor should. Its pastor may measure years of tireless ministry as a failure based on the single criterion, the ever-prevalent expectation of growth. There may be significant pain of the “I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do” kind. And support of an entirely different kind is needed.

An anecdote: one of the best and most exciting programs we have is the “School of Outreach.” However, the day after one of our congregations attended the “School of Outreach,” the evangelism chairman resigned. He was overwhelmed at the gap between where his congregation *was* and where it *should* be. This is no indictment on that fine program! In fact, in spite of that result, it was still extremely valuable to the congregation in question. There the pastor heard about a church that had for years been doing virtually nothing in terms of mission, but its pastor turned things around by spending regular time in Bible study with a very select group of men over the course of two years. He developed them as extensions of himself and gradually changed the culture of the entire congregation. We would like to have the opportunity to sit down with a shepherd like that. Even so, just hearing that story at the “School of Outreach” had tremendous influence on that pastor. It had to do with starting where you are.

It was not a program.

It was wisdom!

Our point: The longtime small church that begins to thrive will likely point to *two* or *three* simple but significant factors. There may be hundreds of small church situations where the crying need is not for program or structure, but for *wisdom and perspective*; for relationship with a sister congregation in the same situation; for celebration of small church successes as well as new ways to apply our “theology of the cross.” The practical need of a small church pastor may be for a model from someone who changed the culture and self-image of his declining rural congregation, or who found that “simple is beautiful” and mobilized an entire congregation by a single

fascinating idea. There may be nothing better you could do for a small church than building up its pastor by creating a connection between him and a joyful brother. "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." (Proverbs 27:17) The small church pastor may need more than anything else a mentor, especially one who takes his joy from that other "set of satisfactions" and is growing a church by loving his people and modeling Christian discipleship – connecting with them by the Word, not figuring them out and fixing them, not structuring them and keeping them busy.

Above all, we're suggesting in the strongest way we know how that leading the small church is a true specialty within the grand scheme of Gospel ministry! Let this fact be recognized by the WELS and embraced by its administrators.

We've spent a great deal of time in this paper on the issue of awareness of the small church. Before we turn to solutions and recommendations, we need to grasp how many churches we're really talking about, and consider the opinions of the pastors involved from which our recommendations were born.

A small WELS congregation which averaged 89 in worship during 1998, was larger by this measure than **most** other WELS congregations.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WELS

What the WELS is really like.

Research suggests that there is something “natural” about the gathering of Christians into small congregations, and that somewhat “extraordinary” conditions are required (such as extraordinary pastoral gifts, or extraordinary effort by the laity) to create and sustain a healthy large congregation. The basic facts about the WELS on the next page reveal the large proportion of our congregations that have “found their level” in the small church category. At any rate, synod officials would be mistaken to perceive every new small church as a future thousand-member congregation, or every old small church as a failed large one. Rather, let each congregation be supported to reach its unique God-given potential through the extraordinary Means of Grace.

On the next page we’ve gleaned some of the outstanding surprises. If you are, in fact, surprised, you might think again about how your own experience has created a false perception of the “average” WELS congregation. Consider which churches and pastors we tend to hear from and about, and whether much of what is produced and reported only reinforces our perception of the WELS.

You’ll also find some extremely valuable analysis of WELS small churches attached to this report as an appendix. That information is not readily available through the WELS statistician or database, but was painstakingly gathered from maps, statistical print-outs and annual reports! What you’ll find there is information about small congregations according to their location (rural, city, metro or suburban), according to their growth or decline (by the standard of 20% over the past 20 years), and broken down by district. You’ll know what information is most relevant for you.

Facts about the WELS

1. The median worship attendance of WELS congregations is 88.
2. Over 25% of WELS congregations average 50 or less in worship attendance.
3. Less than 30% of WELS congregations have an average worship attendance greater than 150.
4. Well over half (56%) of the congregations of the WELS are small churches by our working definition: those averaging less than 100 in worship. Over half of these 673 small churches are rural. Over half of these are in decline – that's 183 declining rural congregations! (*This represents the single largest sub-category of small churches.*)
5. There is great variation between Districts relative to the size of congregations.
 - * Southeastern Wisconsin (the administration district) is by far the least typical district, with less than one quarter of congregations fitting our definition of the small church. (Only the Northern Wisconsin District can even compare, with 37% small churches.)
 - * Six WELS districts have a sizeable *majority* (70-84%) of congregations in this category.
 - * There are other significant differences to note *between districts*. E.g., in both the Dakota-Montana and North Atlantic Districts, over 80% of congregations fit our definition of a small church (!), but in the former *most* of these are rural, unsubsidized and in decline, while in the latter *only one* is declining (and it is *not* one of its rural churches.)
6. The WELS is changing.
 - * Since 1974 the number of congregations has grown by 300 (more than 30%); yet the number of congregations averaging over 300 in worship has declined by 19 (more than 12%).
 - * Accordingly, over the past 25 years, the median worship attendance has gone from 110 to 88 (a 20% decrease).

(More factoids: The *average* number of souls per WELS congregation is 331, altering our perspective of what is "normal." For every WELS congregation that worships over 800, there are 143 congregations with less than 100. If any of us tends to think of a congregation of over 500 worshipers as "normal", that actually describes less 1 in 20 WELS congregations. Or, what's more likely, if 250 or more worshipers seems "average" to you, you should know that we're still talking about roughly 1 in 7 WELS churches. Also, for the purposes of implementing new small church efforts by the districts, note that the number of small churches per district varies from 30 in the SC District to 95 in the WW District.)

“You can’t judge the vitality, faithfulness, or potential of a church by its size any more than you can judge the greatness of a man by his height.”

– a WELS small church pastor

SMALL CHURCH PASTORS’ SURVEY

The word from the field.

Easily the most significant aspect of our work, was the in-depth interviews by phone of 180 WELS small church pastors. This represents over 25% of all the small church pastors in the Synod. 15 pastors were selected from each district. An added feature is that the congregations they served were very carefully selected to be typical of the small churches in their district. (E.g., If a third of the small churches in the district were rural, and two-thirds were in decline, the same was true of the congregations whose pastors we interviewed.) We asked open-ended questions about their challenges.

Many of these conversations opened a floodgate of both joy and frustration in the pastors we talked to. Many could have easily run over an hour had we allowed them to. These were the major influence in this report and the source of our recommendations; we on the task force were deeply effected. Small church pastors clearly have a lot to talk about; and it was clear they were greatly encouraged by the contact from our task force, and by the fact that such a task force even existed. You were thanked.

We had 8 questions to guide these interviews, including one for each area of Parish Services. Though it was extremely difficult to summarize these conversations, we’ve tried to do so in the following pages. Included as an appendix to this report is a rationale for our method and a more detailed summary. It may be the most important feature of this report, and though the compiled survey results are lengthy, we strongly encourage you to read those portions that are appropriate to your role in this Board for Parish Services structure, including question #8: *What would you like the administrators of Synod to understand about small churches?*

Summary of Surveys

Question #1 - What is the greatest challenge to you and your small congregation?

Too few tackling the work, lack of lay leadership, inadequate funding and facilities. The smaller size offers both challenges and benefits. Small churches cannot be all things to all people. A greater percentage of members are required to participate. Small congregations need to focus on a few programs or one "mission" and do it well. There appears to be a lack of awareness of the materials the BPS has to offer.

Question #2 - What is the greatest challenge in your ministry to the unchurched?

Many have done it all, the results are a real mixed bag. In terms of approaches, one size will never fit all. E.g., opposite results are reported for such efforts as door to door canvassing. Friendship evangelism is the only method that gets a positive response across the board, but the struggle is getting WELS people to share their faith. Positive feedback was received for TCW teams and their efforts. A number in urban areas feel we must open our eyes to the potential of day care as an evangelism tool.

Question #3 - What is the greatest challenge in your Worship ministry?

How to make use of available technology, given a small musical talent pool, declining number of church organists and a strong desire to do worship well, where the congregation's program is dominated by worship. Worship is considered extremely important to the small congregation to a degree perhaps not understood by a number of those pastors or administrators without small church experience. It is the small church's preeminent "program," and still the opportunity to share the Word with the most people.

Question #4 - What is the greatest challenge in your Sunday School and Youth Ministry?

What would *you* do for Sunday School with 1 or 2 teachers and only a few children ranging in age? How about their Christmas program? What would *you* do with a youth group of 3 and a novice youth leader? Meaningfully address these questions in terms of program alternatives and in terms of materials, either new or existing for our small churches. It's very difficult to simply "adapt."

Question #5 - What is the greatest challenge in Adult Ministry?

For many, the lack is not of Bible study materials but models and methods for gathering people. There appears to be a greater percentage of member participation in Bible studies in the small church. Need to explore models and materials that assume a small group of committed disciples to start with, but who want to see their group grow. Small churches rise to local stewardship challenges. Many smaller churches remember the support offered them and are very mission minded, even with their limited funds.

Question #6 - What is the greatest challenge in the area of Special Ministries? Do you have a Care Committee?

Overall, there are few challenges with special ministry other than the obvious limitation of resources. Where special ministry needs are concerned, the pastor and members are closer in a smaller setting. The small church does a very good job in responding to focused opportunities as they present themselves. The smaller group also tends to be more aware of pastoral needs without called worker care committees.

Question #7 - What is the greatest challenge in the area of Schools?

Those who are trying to address these needs face big challenges of facility, money and manpower. They need BPS to be a clearinghouse for LES-alternative methods, models, and support.

Question #8 - What would you like the administrators of our synod to understand about small churches?

We are different than large churches. Many visitors needing to hear the gospel are intimidated by the large church atmosphere, feeling it is too cold and not family like. We feel many synod programs do not really understand our limited manpower, resources and facilities. The help small churches need is entirely different from large churches. The small church must focus on a few significant areas with available resources. Understand small church dynamics, the family-like atmosphere and the need to respond on a very personal level.

The primary skills, qualities, and understanding the small church pastor must exhibit for moving a small church forward are different. Help to support and encourage these small church pastors in their work by understanding that they often have only a few energetic lay people in the entire church to draw from. Smaller congregations are a training ground for active lay leaders who often move on to serve well in a larger congregation.

The BPS has much to offer, while the small congregation lacks the manpower to take advantage of it. Needed are programs and materials written by talented pastors and lay people in small churches, for small churches. Understand the discouragement, pain and limited resources in a declining congregation when they need shepherding, affirmation, guidance and time with peers. Many votes of thanks were extended to the synod for all the support already offered. Building upon past support, the general tone was that assistance to the small church must avoid the oversimplification of "why don't you just do what's working at the big churches in Milwaukee?" *Be a clearinghouse of ideas specifically by and for small churches!*

(Other observations: the older pastors had more to say; younger pastors were *far less aware* of the BPS; the distinction between the "big 5" districts and the "outlying 7" may be as significant in terms of their opinions about BPS as the distinction between large and small churches; and many WELS small church pastors are independent thinkers: they just don't wake up in the morning asking, "How can BPS help me today?" There are a few who feel that with every new idea that comes from synod a heavy "should" comes with it. We don't concur or suggest you made any adjustment to that mentality.)

“A conference just for pastors of small churches? *What would you talk about?*”

– A large church pastor to the Small Church Task Force Chairman

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to the BPS as a whole.

Honor and Affirm the Small Church

The existence of the “Small Church Task Force” and the upcoming issue of the “Lutheran Leader” that will be dedicated to small church ministry are significant efforts in this regard, and evidence that you *do* honor the small church.

We recommend:

- * ***Immediately begin planning and find sources of funding for a “National Small Church Convention” or a series of “Regional Small Church Conferences” designed to reach every unsubsidized small church in the country*** (i.e., those not involved in the 2000 “National Missionaries’ Conference”). Above all, this effort must fit the description of “*BY and FOR*” Small Church Pastor-*Specialists*. We’d like to see this as the next major emphasis of BPS after “Forward in Christ.”
- * That you continue to randomly survey small church pastors and lay leaders in some systematic way on an annual basis.
- * That those on the Board for Parish Services who have no experience in smaller churches find ways to become personally involved with one.

- * That further resources for understanding the small church be made available to those within the BPS structure who have responsibility in particular for the Dakota/Montana Districts, and other districts heavily weighted toward small congregations. (*See the bibliography attached to this report.*)
- * That as positions in the Board for Parish Services change hands, great thought and care be given to make the Board "look like the Synod" in terms of small church experience; and otherwise find ways to draw outspoken small church pastors and lay members into synodical dialogues.

Wisdom and Perspective Through Mentors and Counselors

Perspective is one thing the small, local church lacks. They know their own situation very well, but they rarely understand how their situation compares with others. You would be doing them a great service with any effort to help them see their ministry in the context of the whole church. The farmer-elder who says "we grow more corn and fewer people every year" must know that he is not alone in facing that situation. The congregation that is perpetuating a service no longer needed should be shown how others have reshaped their ministry and redirected their energy. The declining congregation in a changing community must connect with others who are working through that. Pastors who feel down about their particular congregation need to share their story with others who have stories of their own. Pastors who confront a continually discouraging situation need supportive relationships with others in similar situations but who have perspective on it. Local congregations and their pastors need the kind of perspective that denominational structures are able to provide by facilitating contact with counselors who have "been there" and with other pastors and leaders who "are there." Small churches can come to "see" their situation in new ways as others have learned to "see" theirs, and they will find wisdom to make excellent decisions when given enough examples of what others in similar struggles have been able to do.

We recommend:

- * That BPS create the formal structure for identifying small "at risk" congregations, and for bringing their pastors into supportive and mentor relationships with others who are known to be handling similar situations and challenges well.
- * That BPS lay the groundwork for providing "Schools" for various types of small churches (particularly declining rural congregations) modeled after the "Schools of Outreach," but with an approach characterized by "wisdom and perspective through networking" and designed not only to affirm (not intimidate) small churches, but also to "move them off square one." This groundwork would include supporting talented individuals in small churches to further develop their expertise and models, so that these schools, too, can be "by and for" pastors of small churches.

(NOTE: *these two recommendations have, in part, already been suggested in "A Proposal For Assisting 'Plateaued' Congregations" that was put out by the Parish Assistance Program with oversight by the BHM. We are unaware of the status of that project but wholeheartedly endorse it.*)

- * Develop a smaller scale, less costly "Parish Assistance Program" for "at risk" Small Congregations (tailored in ways suggested by this report).
- * Or otherwise provide counseling services free of charge to the most "at risk" congregations
- * Actively solicit invitations by small church pastors to bring these services to their congregation.
- * Encourage the BHM to make the mission counselors available to unsubsidized and especially "at risk" small churches. (Make similar efforts to have other valuable services made available to unsubsidized small churches, such as Kingdom Workers, TCW teams, Outreach Grants, etc.)
- * In lieu of or in advance of the "formal structure," find ways to informally create the mentor relationships and peer connections described above as soon as possible.
- * Consider proposing a new position of "Small Church Counselor" for the 485 small churches that receive no subsidy, to further develop this newly recognized specialty and to advance all these recommended strategies.
- * Develop a new tool, "The Small Church Newsletter" aimed at the small church challenges identified in this report, modeled in style after "Preach the Word."

A Simplified Approach to BPS Programs

There is a perception that BPS materials are too complicated, confusing, or even too glitzy and expensive. We generally don't find that to be true. Most seem to us to be very good, with a wealth of assistance for ministry that every small congregation could be taking advantage of today! But when a program assumes an active committee or a large number of participants the small church will not be able to take advantage of them so readily. Neither is it the small church (given everything we've said) that is in the best position to continually be told to creatively adapt programs and materials. And on that matter of cost, you might think in terms of "cost per participant" to understand why some feel that materials are too expensive to justify a purchase. (We have reason to believe that resources, created with an assumption of one lay implementer who will work on a task not committee basis, will find an enthusiastic audience in larger churches as well.)

We recommend:

- * On the most expensive programs, such as Christ-Light, consider adjusting the cost for the smaller congregations who want to offer this outstanding program to classes as small as 2 or 3 students.
- * In general, examine all new materials across the board from a set of small church assumptions, and consider including simple instructions for adapting to small churches, or better yet, offer a simplified version of the same materials. (Find a small church consultant to help you, even on an informal basis; develop a habit of running things by him.)
- * For all materials that are determined to be *unadaptable*, especially those regularly produced (e.g., Christmas programs, stewardship materials), provide alternatives in some form.
- * Specially commission many *new* resources by and for small church pastors as will be suggested later in this report. These will be materials that will have Small Church assumptions *as their starting point*, in terms of numbers of implementers and participants. (*And be patient and persistent, allowing time for these resources to find their audience.*)
- * For the area of most urgent need, evaluate the LCMS video course for “Models of Ministry for Rural Congregations” and commission a WELS alternative.

Increased Visitation by Administrators

We recommend:

- * Though administrators currently are invited to conferences, we recommend that you actively solicit more of these presentations, especially to *outlying districts*, and that the stress be less on theory and more on practical aspects as may be suggested by this paper, e.g., musical arrangement for small church musicians, anthems for small choirs, intergenerational approaches to Christian education, sharing small church models such as for “finding that one thing” to do as a ministry to your community.

Basic Communication

We recommend:

- * A personal contact with all new pastors about the mission and ministry of the Board for Parish Services. Basic information about how BPS can help and how its six divisions serve the parish is fundamental to starting a fruitful long term relationship. This ought to be supplemented by those who serve within the districts, if they aren’t already doing so, but we

recommend a phone call from someone in each of the six BPS offices, in the new pastors critical first year, and expect this to be well worth the effort. (You might be surprised just how unaware the younger pastors are.)

Conference Papers

- * We recommend you actively encourage conference papers to deal with the topic of the Small Church, especially in conferences heavily represented by small churches. Ideally, many conferences would begin a series of practical papers on matters relevant to small churches, beginning with an understanding of the differences as alluded to in this paper. (*"By and For"* small church pastors is still the key.)

Intranet and Web Site Resources

"Put things in our hands!" Do this in every way possible, as inexpensively as possible. (E.g., Bible Studies, special occasion worship services, children's devotions, etc., and programs of all kinds that are specially designed to be implemented by individuals on a task basis, or for smaller groups.) The Adult Discipleship Commission has created a model web site and is to be commended.

We recommend:

- * That all branches of the BPS attempt to place as much information as possible on the WELS home page, with more links to district pages, especially for the sharing of BPS materials that will from now on be created with versions specially adapted for small churches. Consider having "Alternatives for Small Congregations" as a new and prominent feature on these web pages. This will become increasingly significant as more districts rely on the intranet to disseminate information and as pastors turn more and more to this resource.

Implementation

- * We recommend that the Board for Parish Services meets to improve these recommendations, that you prioritize them and create a working plan to begin implementing the best of them, both in your office and especially through the districts immediately.

'A small church can get by with mediocre worship, but in larger churches, with hundreds of worshipers, excellence is essential. . . uh . . . that might be a bias.'

– In a keynote address, at a WELS District Convention

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for each Commission

Many of the recommendations made to this point apply across the board to all the commissions and will not always be repeated in the coming pages. They include:

- * Simplify materials currently being produced with small church versions or instructions for adapting
- * Commission new materials by and for small church pastors
- * Develop small church models for every area of ministry
- * Create mentor relationships as a strategy for helping small congregations with specific shared challenges

Others include fully utilizing the "web," traveling as frequently as possible to conferences and churches in outlying districts, participating in the conventions and "schools" we recommend, etc.

Naturally, responsibility for implementing many of the suggestions in this paper falls to the district structure. Due to the turnover among coordinators, we do generally feel that those commissions will be most effective and have the most continuity of effort which are able to meet periodically with *all* their personnel including the pastors and laymen from the district committees. The subject of this paper could also be shared in those bodies.

And please be aware that behind each recommendation that follows, even when not apparent, there lies some specific small church challenge we hope you can address.

Commission on Adult Discipleship

We say that adult spiritual growth is “Job Number One.” The number and variety of reliable, well-written Bible studies is remarkable in comparison to what we offered as a Synod just fifteen years ago. This availability is one of the strongest statements Parish Services can make that we believe that when parents grow spiritually, the whole family benefits. The logic, the interactive nature, and the wide variety of subject matter of the newer generation of Bible studies makes them ideal for the small congregation. We commend the Commission on Adult Discipleship for developing the four recent major families of Bible studies and believe that never before have there been as many Bible study opportunities for the small congregation. We also note that the Commission on Adult Discipleship has used many small church pastors in the writing of Bible studies. As mentioned, the amount of material on the Commission on Adult Discipleship website is exceptional.

In regard to stewardship ministry to small congregations, we feel that the synod stewardship/discipleship programs are adaptable to the small congregations. However, pastors of small congregations often feel intimidated by the detail and would benefit from a set of specific instructions tailored to the needs of the small congregation.

In regard to emerging forms of Adult Discipleship work such as family ministry, senior ministry, singles ministry, opportunities for group life, and fellowship opportunities we have no specific recommendations, only that you remember the uniqueness of the small church and how many small churches there are. (For example, after evaluating the pilot projects of family ministry in which “at risk” families are matched with families rooted in God’s Word, programs and models should be set up specifically for small congregations.)

We recommend:

- * That models for small group ministry be explored and evaluated; that a Means of Grace oriented vs “support group” model for lay-lead, intentionally growing small groups be developed (including ways to address the prevalent concerns about such groups).
- * That you evaluate the “Excel in the Grace of Giving Program” as one example of a program geared toward larger congregations with its \$2500 base. Perhaps the small congregations would use this program more often if the fee were cut in half by having the counselor stay only five days.
- * That you commission a comprehensive Bible study, or series of Bible studies, for small churches by the small church pastor/s. (This would be in addition to the program we recommended for rural congregations with its more urgent needs and challenges. The purpose would be to understand small church characteristics, to affirm and build upon its strengths, and to identify characteristic problems and risks with ideas for addressing them.)

Commission on Evangelism

We all recognize that evangelism is too important to be relegated to being “the pastor’s job.” However, we believe it is absolutely critical for the pastor of the small church to lead in this area by example; that he develop at least one true evangelism “ally” within his congregation to share his vision and complement his gifts; and that he learn to permeate his small church’s culture with a heart-felt passion for the lost. What has already been said in this report about the need to share wisdom and ideas, models and success stories between congregations with similar challenges may apply to this area of ministry more than any other.

The Commission on Evangelism is to be commended for doing so much to support congregational outreach in ways that every congregation can take advantage of, regardless of its size. We believe the following recommendations, while they are addressed to the specific challenges of small churches, are such that will meet a need in large churches as well.

We recommend:

* That you commission a broad range of evangelism materials, by and for small church pastors, that operate from the following assumptions.

- implementation by a single lay person with the pastor’s support. (Though it may involve rounding up other volunteers on a short term or “task” basis, it will not depend on standing committees or any preexisting structure).
- bring together in one place every conceivable item or resource needed, organized in a simple time-line and checklist of steps. (Do all the creative and organizational work.)
- rather than aim for a multi-faceted program of evangelism activity, help a congregation to do “one thing more” than it is currently doing in evangelism (in many cases, this may mean moving a congregation “off square one”)

*That the following is only a partial list of evangelism efforts that might be conducive to this approach:

- “Step by Step to a Prospect List”
- “Step by Step to an Effective Friend Day”
- “Step by Step to a Neighborhood Bible Study”
- “Step by Step to Prospect Nurture”
- “Step by Step to a Ministry of Welcome and Visitor Follow-up”
- “Step by Step to a Neighborhood Canvass”
- “Step by Step to a Phone Survey”
- “Step by Step to Newcomer Outreach”
- “Step by Step to Using Free or Inexpensive Local Media”

(Small church pastors with these recognized specialities should be commissioned to prepare these packages, with clear guidelines provided by the Commission on Evangelism to unify the approach. They should be asked to remain available to consult with small churches about the program they prepared, as a prominent feature of the approach. These materials could meet a significant need by not intimidating the congregation that is doing little as far as programmed evangelism. It could also be effective in supporting the small church pastor who has a single lay "champion" to implement a single carefully chosen program for the sake of *"doing one thing well."* Other congregations where committees have not been effective may still have several members prepared to find their "niche" through these "step by step" packages. Small churches that resist structure need to experience success through well-adapted small-church programs; individual lay people that are ready to "do something" in their static small church need support.)

We also endorse:

- * the Commission on Evangelism's plans to modify and simplify the School of Outreach for congregations that have avoided the more aggressive program.

Commission on Parish Schools

If worship is the preeminent "program" in a small congregation, a Christian Day School is the preeminent "dream" of a small congregations. Since each small congregation has limited manpower, money, and facilities, schools are not often seriously considered even when they might be feasible and be very appropriate as a chosen philosophy of ministry (such as in a community with a bankrupt public school system). There's a conventional wisdom about the size or income a congregation must have before thinking of starting a school – we would like that to be reexamined. Under certain circumstances, the small congregation in a metropolitan area could have great potential to reach the unchurched through a school. The small congregation that has neighboring WELS congregations has great potential in working together to create a joint school. We would like there to be an exploration of more creative methods in which the WELS' recognized excellence in the area of Parish Schools could be utilized in more small congregations.

Many WELS Schools were started with the intention of being the main outreach arm of the congregation, though this intention is often not realized. Our small schools need new helps and support for reaching the unchurched, training our teachers and helping them to organize in ways that allow them to reach out through their classrooms.

We recommend:

- * Encourage small congregations to consider starting a Christian Day School when certain special conditions exist (as suggested by your experience.) Provide them with the necessary models. (Create a video to explore the key issues, similar to the one produced by the BHM for churches considering a building program.)
- * Encourage small congregations to consider tuition as the way of supporting their Christian Day School, as well as other innovative methods of funding (e.g., donations, scholarships, third source funding such as grants, estate gifting, etc.)
- * Encourage our ministerial schools to emphasize outreach training for teachers.
- * Understand the difficulty of always having synodically certified teachers in small schools in outlying Districts. Look for ways to be creative and flexible.
- * Understand the difficulty and huge expense for small congregations to always state certify New Ulm graduates. (In states that require this).
- * Encourage schools to give their principle more time to do outreach work in his community.
- * Recommend to the BHM that they consider using Day Schools to start mission congregations under certain special circumstances which you will define.

- * Encourage neighboring congregations with schools to include smaller congregations in their plans for operating the day School. Provide direction for working through difficult financial situations. Encourage them to focus on the overall mission of the church.
- * Continue to assist congregations with able consultants. Encourage even small congregations to use them.

Preschools and Day Cares are not immediately thought of when the Commission on Parish Schools is brought up. But it is clear that this is an important part of the Parish Schools' work. Our survey work discovered that in some areas of our country there is a great need and desire to have Preschools and Day Cares as a primary method of outreach. Many congregations wrestle independently with the significant questions of financing, facility and personnel, unaware of the available resources of materials and/or people who could offer personal direction.

We recommend:

- * Encourage Small congregations, under certain circumstances (based on your experience of "success stories"), to consider a Pre-School or Day Care as the focus of their outreach efforts.
- * Help assist small congregations with the calling and/or training of qualified Pre-school teachers and Day Care staff.
- * Help assist small congregations with ideas for suitable locations to host the Pre-School and Day Care if facilities are limited at their present location.
- * Use small churches that have Pre-Schools and Day Cares as models. Introduce these congregations to those that are exploring the possibilities, and a video resource for guiding this process.

Since small churches rarely have a Christian Day School, many more parents in small churches are beginning to Homeschool their Children. Those parents desire a better connection with others in our Synod who are doing the same thing, some official affirmation of their choice and recognition of their need for synodical support.

We recommend:

- * Research how many WELS members are Home Schooling their children; determine if the numbers warrant a more formal and concentrated effort of support for WELS home schoolers at the synodical level, in the areas of curriculum and guidance for parents.
- * Organize a Web page designed by Home School parents to better communicate with them, and to offer ideas and guidance in choosing a curriculum.

Commission on Special Ministries

We've alluded to a difference in the way the small "church-as-family" congregation responds to special needs, and the fact that there is less desire for specialized programs in small congregations. However, there are other unique needs of small congregations where the Commission on Special Ministries could help. One example is that of serving WELS members, particularly the many aging members, who need to be served with the Means of Grace when their isolated rural congregation closes. Another is helping small congregations who are quick to say, "We have no mission field," to recognize opportunities they may be overlooking, such as in nearby nursing homes, serving the hidden disabled population in their city, supporting prison ministries, etc.

And though a small church may believe it's serving the needs of a member with special needs just by including them in the "family," those members may privately long for contact with people with similar challenges and heartaches and who also share the same faith.

In keeping with how small congregations often feel about formal structures, there are many which have no "Called Worker Care Committees," while the needs of pastors for peer counseling, especially in declining congregations, can be significant.

This may also be the right place to mention the "PR" problem that exists in all areas of Parish Services. There is not only a bottleneck of information at the pastor's desk, but the pastors themselves can be surprised to hear about such resources as Bible Studies for prison inmates, which they might have been making excellent use of. Other information needs to be there when the need arises; members won't pay attention to such things as large-print hymnals and devices for better hearing in worship until the need is theirs.

We recommend:

- * that you seek ways to serve people in rural areas where congregations have closed and pastoral services are scarce.
- * continue to explore ways to utilize the web to keep pastors informed of the helps that are available for serving special needs.
- * further explore the possibilities of using the web for networking members with similar special needs in isolated congregations and parts of the country.
- * discover and share stories of small congregations who find a unique niche in responding to special needs in their community.
- * explore methods and create a structure for offering supportive services for pastors without "Called Worker Care Committees" in their congregations, and for anticipating those needs under certain circumstances, such as in declining, isolated congregations. (This could include creating the mentoring relationships already mentioned, providing opportunities for continuing education and fellowship in these situations, etc.)

Commission on Worship

If a small congregation has one room, it will be a sanctuary. Worship is the preeminent “program” in a small congregation, and in terms of retaining and attracting members, especially when a small church is overshadowed by large church programs in the same community, the need to do worship well simply cannot be overstated!

However, it also may be the most difficult area for the BPS to offer support because the desires and needs of small churches vary so dramatically – compare the rural congregation to the suburban exploratory; or the “Bible Belt” congregation to the cross-cultural mission. In some of our settings, insisting our people adapt to Lutheran hymnody and traditional liturgies as the dominant musical expression may be no more appropriate than it is in world mission fields. (E.g., WELS pastors in the “Bible-belt” say they are flat-out losing younger people and families, and failing to get guests to return a second time, over this one issue.) Yet it doesn’t seem wise to have our congregations working independently as they stray beyond traditional forms. The Commission on Worship needs to remain fully involved and strongly guiding our small congregations in their pursuit of excellence in worship.

In addition, help is needed in small churches as they tackle some other very significant small-church challenges, most notably the smaller talent pool, but also inadequate instruments and sound systems. We firmly believe technology to be a true blessing in this regard, and we invite the Commission on Worship to continue to support the many small churches that are independently engaged in the same pursuit – how, in even the smallest of churches, to provide the best musical vehicle possible for delivering the Word of Christ to the heart of the worshiper.

We recommend:

- * Create services that have upbeat contemporary music; are “visitor friendly,” and are Lutheran “to the core,” not merely adapted from Evangelicals. (Some feel that new liturgies, including more formal ones, need to be regularly produced, versus cycling through only 3 or 4 liturgies over decades of worship.)
- * Suggest standard MIDI Systems to coordinate all missions, small congregations and other WELS congregations.
- * Provide a large variety of music (hymns, choral, instrumental music) on MIDI and CD (both traditional and contemporary; both CW and TLH; and be open to other sources such as the new WELS songbook and the “Celebration Hymnal”).
- * Make Christian Worship and other material available in electronic media. Many missions provide the entire service in a worship folder to make it easier to follow.

- * Create a "Worship" website like the NPH Bible Study Website, for sharing complete regular services and special services for all occasions.
- * Create a "Sermon" website for preaching resources and ready-to-read sermons for elders when needed.
- * Promote music listenings at pastor conferences for new songs, canticles, small choir pieces, etc.
- * Develop sermon series (conducive to our Lutheran distinctions) for the non-festival half of the church year.
- * Create resources like Creative Communications for the Parish or Concordia's Creative Worship.
- * Create a children's Christmas service for the small group (E.g., think of 6 children, but include instructions on how to adapt to a larger number of children.)
- * Promote simple keyboard music for preludes, postludes, offertories, etc.
- * Every July/August make 10 easy and 10 medium/easy choral pieces/anthems available for the church year (for a 6-10 member choir)

If there is any resistance to the proliferation of MIDI technology or CD accompaniment in small churches, such as that it negatively impacts the development of church musicians, we offer these assurances: many church members who have been exposed to wonderful church music through new technology still respond enthusiastically to a competent live pianist as well as to budding young musicians when they are available; and many young keyboard students are inspired by being exposed to such excellent vs mediocre church music. At any rate, putting the priority on our mission to reach the lost strongly suggests to us that providing excellent music for small churches where musicians are lacking eclipses other concerns.

If there is any resistance to offering a website for sharing original orders of worship by WELS pastors, we can only reiterate how valuable many small church pastors would find this to be. Such services are being written and shared to great benefit with or without BPS oversight, and we invite you, along with creating this valuable web page, to author guidelines for the creation of new sound worship services, critiques on several samples, and that you otherwise *guide* the creation of superb, truly Lutheran worship services.

Commission on Youth Discipleship

Overall, the small congregations like the materials and programs that are being produced by Youth Discipleship, e.g., "Christ-Light." The only problem is that many small congregations perceive that these materials and programs were produced with the large congregation in mind and find that adapting the material or program for the small congregation sometimes lessens the quality.

And it is in this area where the word "model" used so often in this report may be most applicable. The small church realities – few leaders and few participants spanning many ages – call for new ways of thinking about and of addressing these ministry needs. If you meaningfully address this concern, you will greatly strengthen the relationship between you and the small congregations of the WELS.

Further, we hope you will continue to serve as a clearinghouse of ideas for children's ministry alternatives: midweek Bible School programs and "kids' clubs," family retreats, variations on VBS, etc.

We recommend:

- * Consider year round intergenerational Sunday School materials for a small congregation. (example: 8 kids ranging from 5 to 13 and 1 or 2 teachers)
- * Promote models for integrating teens into the broad ministry of the congregation and pairing teens with mentors, instead of traditional youth groups.
- * Promote "family-based" youth ministry models – discipling the teenage Christian in the context of his own family.
- * Promote methods for adapting traditional youth groups to 2 or 3 participants.
- * Write children sermons that follow the church year (A, B, C) - simple and not too many props. (*Many* small churches have children's devotions every Sunday, and find it very stressful.)
- * Produce a Christ-Light lesson calendar for each school year. It will help the small congregation figure out the most effective way to use Christ-Light. (especially for congregations with no LES or Midweek program)
- * A large number of small congregation pastors use Valleskey & Biven's "Confirmed in the Faith" for confirmation and would like to see supplemental material produced - especially video, Power Point & out of the class projects.
- * Bring satellite youth leader workshops to the districts.
- * Offer more videos showing actual Sunday School teachers at work and the methods they use - All grades.

- * Develop a "Youth Counselor Newsletter" similar to the "Mission Counselor Newsletter".
- * Help circuits call a staff minister who focuses on the youth ministry of each congregation in the circuit – especially circuits made up of mostly small congregations.
- * Produce Teen/Family devotion material.
- * Anyway you can, help with youth leader and Sunday School teacher recruitment and retention.
- * Create 7th & 8th grade Christ-Light lessons that follow the same story as the other grades (to make possible the ideal of unified Sunday School teachers' meetings.).

“Don’t you think it’s time you stretch yourself?”

– Large church pastor to small church pastor, about a call to a large church.

CONCLUSION

The members of the “Small Church Task Force” bring this report with immense gratitude for having had the opportunity to work together, discovering in each other a deep reservoir of love for our small churches and appreciation for the privilege of leading them. We know many small church pastors will be similarly blessed by the opportunities you’ll be providing them and their congregations to mutually encourage each other.

We are well aware of how easy it is to play the role of consultant – to scan for omissions or flaws such a multi-faceted, remarkably ambitious and productive organization as the Board for Parish Services. That is what we have done, though we have only a limited grasp of your “universe” as the administrators called by God to serve the WELS. What must not be lost or obscured by the lengthy report we offer, however, is our heart-felt appreciation for the role you play and how beautifully, by the grace of God, you play it.

We do hope we’ve made you say, “Aha” – “the small church really *is* different and leading it is a specialty to be more fully developed in our small church pastors;” we hope we’ve made you say, “Wow” – “There are more of you than we realized and modifying some of our approaches will be truly worthwhile;” and maybe we’ve even made you say, “All right already” – “You shall have your simpler resources, your new models, your networking, your small church convention”

Most of all we say, together with you and the whole Christian church on earth and in heaven, “Amen” to God whose every promise is “Yes” in Christ our Head, of whom we are all the body.

*“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable **we treat with special honor.**” (1 Corinthians 12:21-23)*

Appendix

Detailed Statistical Analysis of WELS

DEFINING THE WELS SMALL CHURCH

The small church of the Wisconsin Synod has not only redefined itself, but has reshaped itself in size and location in the last twenty five years. The perception of a small church within our synod has changed as well. Most called workers are surprised to hear that the median average worship attendance of a WELS congregation is 88 and 28% of the congregations have an average worship attendance over 150. Surprise turns into shock and perhaps concern, when they find out that the median average worship attendance in 1974 was 110 and 38% of the congregations had an average worship attendance of 150 or higher. However, we need to keep in mind that the Synod has added roughly 250 congregations in that time span; a 25-30% increase.

What does the small church look like that currently exists in our Synod? The small church within the WELS is predominantly rural. A quarter of the small congregations are located in cities with a population between 10,000 and 100,000 people. Half of the rural congregations have a declining worship attendance while almost 90% receive no subsidy from the Synod. A total of 2/3 of the rural congregations exist in the "Big 5" districts. Half of the small city congregations receive no subsidy from the synod and half of the city congregations have a growing worship attendance.

Almost a quarter of the WELS small congregations are located in metro or suburban communities. A total of 80% of these congregations exist outside of the "Big 5" districts. A third of the small churches in metro areas have a declining worship attendance and well over half receive no subsidy from the Synod. Half of the small congregations in suburban communities have a growing worship attendance and over half receive no subsidy from the Synod. (See Appendix)

The statistics seem to suggest that the number of WELS small churches are increasing due to the decreasing numbers of actual worshipers each Sunday, especially in established congregations. Yet, the statistics also strongly suggest a certain vitality stemming from the faithfulness and hard work from small congregations throughout the entire Synod. Each congregation has its own unique ministry, but a common identity and purpose. This flavor will be even more pronounced in the report that lies ahead.

Average Worship Attendance:

<u>Number:</u>	<u>1998</u>	<u>1974*</u>
0-25	115 cong.	62
26-50	226	149
51-75	211	143
76-100	163	107
101-125	125	82
126-150	82	64
151-175	47	60
176-200	55	48
201-250	66	61
251-300	50	45
301-400	48	64
401-500	36	32
501-750	51	53
751-999	6	12
1000+	4	3
Total:	1285	985

*1974 was the first year the WELS included Average Worship Attendance as a category. A total of 52 congregations in 1974 did not report any worship figures.

THE FOLLOWING STATISTICS ARE BASED ON THE 1997 STATISTICAL REPORT AND WERE USED TO DETERMINE CONGREGATIONS TO CONTACT

Number of WELS small congregations: 673

(Note: A small congregation in the WELS was determined to be one with an average worship attendance of 100 or fewer.)

Number of WELS small congregations by district:

Arizona/California	52	51.5% of the district churches
Dakota/Montana	69	84.1% of the district churches
Michigan	77	51.3% of the district churches
Minnesota	78	48.1% of the district churches
Nebraska	68	74.7% of the district churches
North Atlantic churches	34	82.9% of the district
Northern Wisconsin	56	36.8% of the district churches
Pacific Northwest	35	74.4% of the district churches
South Central	30	69.8% of the district churches
South Atlantic	43	71.7% of the district churches
Southeastern Wisconsin	36	24.8% of the district churches
Western Wisconsin	95	54.0% of the district churches

Type of Location

Rural congregations (A community or city with less than 10,000 people)	359	(53%)
City congregations (A city between with a population between 10,000 and 100,000)	164	(24%)
Metro congregations (A city with a population over 100,000)	82	(12%)
Suburban congregations (A community/city that borders a metropolitan community)	68	(10%)

Subsidy Status

Member of Synod (non-subsidy)	485	(72%)
Member Interest Subsidy Only	88	(13%)
Member Subsidized by Synod	61	(9%)
Exploratory, Subsidized by Synod	29	(4%)
Other	10	(2%)

Worship Attendance Status

Number of Congregations with a growing attendance:	210	(31%)
Number of Congregations with a static attendance:	185	(27.5%)
Number of Congregations with a declining attendance:	273	(40.5%)
Unknown	5	(1%)

(Worship attendance figures were taken from the 1997, 1992, 1987 and 1977 WELS statistics report. If a congregation displayed a 20% increase in worship attendance during this twenty year span they were labeled as growing. If a congregation displayed a 20% decrease in attendance, they were labeled as decreasing. If a congregation reported both an increase and decrease in that time span, or fell in between the 20% marks, they were labeled as static.)

TOTALS OF ALL WELS SMALL CHURCHES

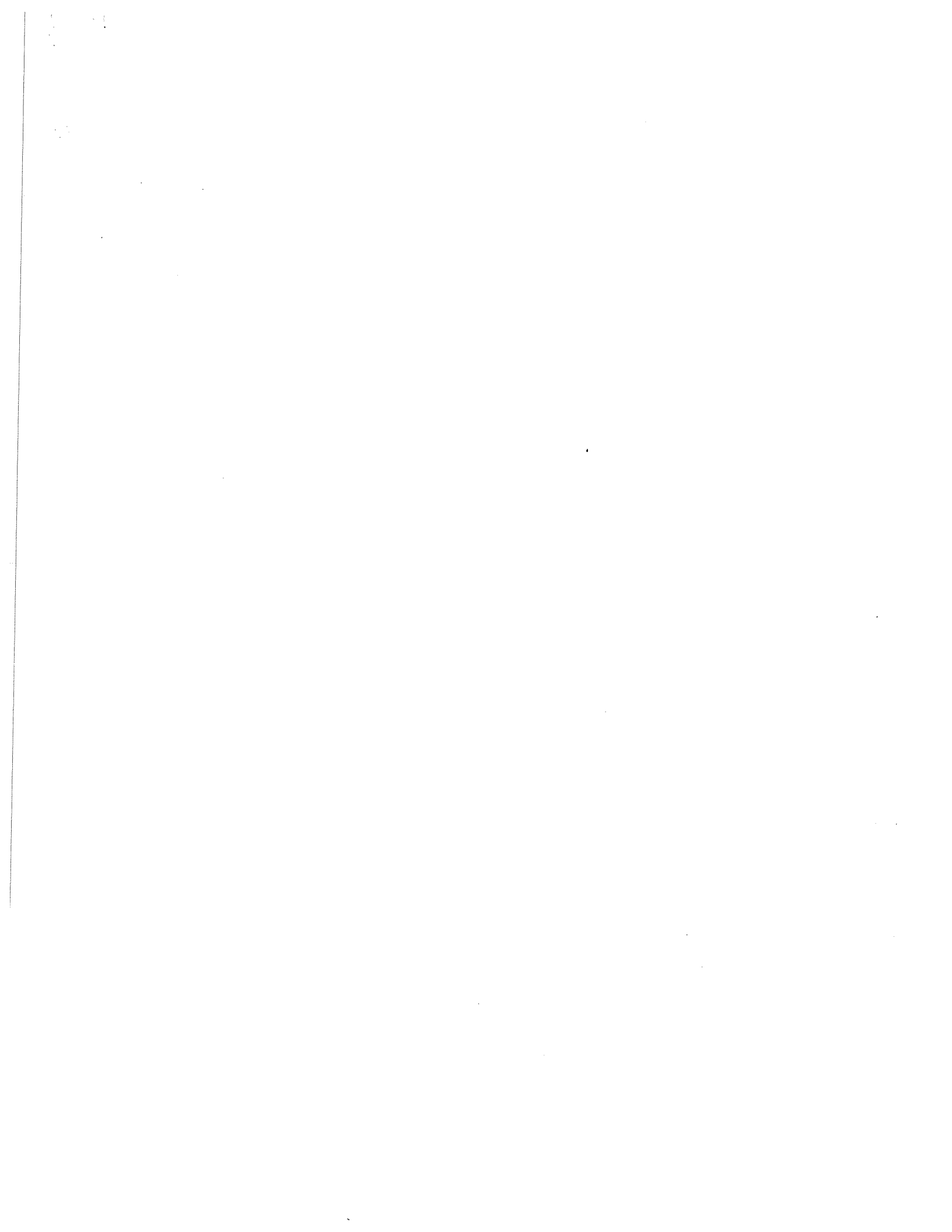
A. Rural Congregations		359	
Growing-	57 (16%)	Non Subsidy-	318 (89%)
Static-	117 (33%)	Interest Subsidy-	18 (5%)
Declining-	183 (51%)	Subsidy/Other-	23 (6%)
Undetermined-	2		
B. City Congregations		164	
Growing-	81 (49%)	Non Subsidy -	81 (49%)
Static-	38 (23%)	Interest Subsidy-	40 (24%)
Declining-	44 (27%)	Subsidy/Other-	43 (26%)
Undetermined-	1		
C. Metro Congregations		82	
Growing-	37 (45%)	Non Subsidy-	48 (59%)
Static-	18 (22%)	Interest Subsidy-	17 (21%)
Declining-	26 (32%)	Subsidy/Other-	17 (21%)
Undetermined-	1		
D. Suburban Congregations		68	
Growing-	35 (51%)	Non Subsidy-	38 (56%)
Static-	12 (18%)	Interest Subsidy-	13 (19%)
Declining-	20 (29%)	Subsidy/Other-	17 (25%)
Undetermined-	1		

TOTALS OF SMALL CHURCHES IN INDIVIDUAL WELS DISTRICTS

ARIZONA/CALIFORNIA DISTRICT:

52 small churches

A. Rural Congregations		15	
Growing-	2	Non Subsidy-	11
Static-	7	Interest Subsidy-	1
Declining-	6	Subsidy/Other-	3
B. City Congregations		10	
Growing-	4	Non Subsidy-	4
Static-	4	Interest Subsidy-	3
Declining-	1	Subsidy/Other-	3
Undetermined-	1		
C. Metro Congregations		12	
Growing-	3	Non Subsidy -	7
Static-	4	Interest Subsidy-	2
Declining-	4	Subsidy/Other-	3
Undetermined-	1		



D. Suburban Congregations		15	
Growing-	3	Non Subsidy-	11
Static-	5	Interest Subsidy-	2
Declining-	6	Subsidy/Other-	2
Undetermined-	1		

DAKOTA/MONTANA DISTRICT

69 small churches

A. Rural Congregations		48	
Growing-	3	Non Subsidy-	45
Static-	12	Interest Subsidy-	1
Declining-	33	Subsidy/Other-	2
B. City Congregations		17	
Growing-	5	Non Subsidy-	6
Static-	8	Interest Subsidy-	4
Declining-	4	Subsidy/Other-	7
C. Metro Congregations		4	
Growing-	4	Non Subsidy-	1
Static-	0	Interest Subsidy-	0
Declining-	0	Subsidy/Other-	3
D. Suburban Congregations		0	

MICHIGAN DISTRICT

77 small churches

A. Rural Congregations		37	
Growing-	2	Non Subsidy-	34
Static-	15	Interest Subsidy-	2
Declining-	20	Subsidy/Other-	1
B. City Congregations		8	
Growing-	3	Non Subsidy-	5
Static-	1	Interest Subsidy-	2
Declining-	4	Subsidy/Other-	1
C. Metro Congregations		11	
Growing-	0	Non Subsidy-	10
Static-	2	Interest Subsidy-	1
Declining-	9	Subsidy/Other-	0
D. Suburban Congregations		21	
Growing-	9	Non Subsidy-	13
Static-	3	Interest Subsidy-	5
Declining-	9	Subsidy/Other-	3

MINNESOTA DISTRICT

78 small churches

A. Rural Congregations		55	
Growing-	7	Non Subsidy-	53
Static-	13	Interest Subsidy-	2
Declining-	35		
B. City Congregations		14	
Growing-	6	Non Subsidy -	8
Static-	4	Interest Subsidy-	4
Declining-	4	Subsidy/Other-	2
C. Metro Congregations		2	
Growing-	1	Non Subsidy-	2
Static-	0	Interest Subsidy-	0
Declining-	1	Subsidy/Other-	0
D. Suburban Congregations		7	
Growing-	6	Non Subsidy-	2
Static-	0	Interest Subsidy-	4
Declining-	1	Subsidy/Other-	1

NEBRASKA DISTRICT

68 small churches

A. Rural Congregations		39	
Growing-	7	Non Subsidy-	31
Static-	19	Interest Subsidy-	2
Declining-	13	Subsidy/Other-	6
B. City Congregations		20	
Growing-	11	Non Subsidy-	13
Static-	4	Interest Subsidy-	3
Declining-	5	Subsidy/Other-	4
C. Metro Congregations		7	
Growing-	5	Non Subsidy-	3
Static-	2	Interest Subsidy-	4
Declining-	0	Subsidy/Other-	0
D. Suburban Congregations		2	
Growing-	2	Non Subsidy-	0
Static-	0	Interest Subsidy-	0
Declining-	0	Subsidy/Other-	2

NORTH ATLANTIC DISTRICT**34 small churches**

A. Rural Congregations		6	
Growing-	6	Non Subsidy-	0
Static-	0	Interest Subsidy-	4
Declining-	0	Subsidy/Other-	2
B. City Congregations		16	
Growing-	10	Non Subsidy-	5
Static-	2	Interest Subsidy-	4
Declining-	1	Subsidy/Other-	7
C. Metro Congregations		5	
Growing-	4	Non Subsidy-	1
Static-	1	Interest Subsidy-	1
Declining-	0	Subsidy/Other-	3
D. Suburban Congregations		7	
Growing-	5	Non Subsidy-	4
Static-	2	Interest Subsidy-	1
Declining-	0	Subsidy/Other-	2

NORTHERN WISCONSIN DISTRICT**56 small churches**

A. Rural Congregations		47	
Growing-	5	Non Subsidy-	45
Static-	20	Interest Subsidy-	0
Declining-	21	Subsidy/Other-	2
Undetermined-	1		
B. City Congregations		8	
Growing-	1	Non Subsidy-	8
Static-	2	Interest Subsidy-	0
Declining-	5	Subsidy/Other-	0
C. Metro Congregations		0	
D. Suburban Congregations		1	
Growing-	1	Non Subsidy-	0
Static-	0	Interest Subsidy-	0
Declining-	0	Subsidy/Other-	1

PACIFIC NORTHWEST DISTRICT

35 small churches

A. Rural Congregations		9	
Growing-	3	Non Subsidy-	6
Static-	3	Interest Subsidy-	2
Declining-	3	Subsidy/Other-	1
B. City Congregations		14	
Growing-	7	Non Subsidy -	7
Static-	4	Interest Subsidy-	5
Declining-	3	Subsidy/Other-	2
C. Metro Congregations		6	
Growing-	3	Non Subsidy-	3
Static-	1	Interest Subsidy-	1
Declining-	2	Subsidy/Other-	2
D. Suburban Congregations		6	
Growing-	3	Non Subsidy-	4
Static-	1	Interest Subsidy-	0
Declining-	2	Subsidy/Other-	2

SOUTH CENTRAL DISTRICT

30 small churches

A. Rural Congregations		8	
Growing-	6	Non Subsidy-	7
Static-	1	Interest Subsidy-	0
Declining-	1	Subsidy/Other-	1
B. City Congregations		11	
Growing-	6	Non Subsidy-	1
Static-	1	Interest Subsidy-	3
Declining-	4	Subsidy/Other-	7
C. Metro Congregations		9	
Growing-	5	Non Subsidy-	3
Static-	3	Interest Subsidy-	4
Declining-	1	Subsidy/Other-	2
D. Suburban Congregations		2	
Growing-	1	Non Subsidy-	1
Static-	1	Interest Subsidy-	0
Declining-	0	Subsidy/Other-	1

SOUTH ATLANTIC DISTRICT

43 small churches

A. Rural Congregations		5	
Growing-	4	Non Subsidy-	3
Static-	1	Interest Subsidy-	1
Declining-	0	Subsidy/Other-	1
B. City Congregations		21	
Growing-	17	Non Subsidy-	8
Static-	2	Interest Subsidy-	7
Declining-	2	Subsidy/Other-	6
C. Metro Congregations		14	
Growing-	9	Non Subsidy-	7
Static-	3	Interest Subsidy-	4
Declining-	2	Subsidy/Other-	3
D. Suburban Congregations		3	
Growing-	3	Non Subsidy-	1
Static-	0	Interest Subsidy-	1
Declining-	0	Subsidy/Other-	1
Undetermined-	0		

SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN DISTRICT

36 small churches

A. Rural Congregations		11	
Growing-	3	Non Subsidy -	9
Static-	3	Interest Subsidy-	1
Declining-	5	Subsidy/Other-	1
B. City Congregations		11	
Growing-	7	Non Subsidy-	7
Static-	1	Interest Subsidy-	1
Declining-	3	Subsidy/Other-	3
C. Metro Congregations		10	
Growing-	2	Non Subsidy-	10
Static-	1	Interest Subsidy-	0
Declining-	7	Subsidy/Other-	0
D. Suburban Congregations		4	
Growing-	2	Non Subsidy-	2
Static-	0	Interest Subsidy-	1
Declining-	2	Subsidy/Other-	1

WESTERN WISCONSIN DISTRICT

95 small churches

A. Rural Congregations		79	
Growing-	9	Non Subsidy-	72
Static-	23	Interest Subsidy-	3
Declining-	46	Subsidy/Other-	4
B. City Congregations		14	
Growing-	4	Non Subsidy-	9
Static-	2	Interest Subsidy-	4
Declining-	8	Subsidy/Other-	1
C. Metro Congregations		2	
Growing-	1	Non Subsidy-	1
Static-	1	Interest Subsidy-	0
Declining-	0	Subsidy/Other-	1
D. Suburban Congregations		0	

Appendix

The Survey Method

The small church task force felt a strong desire to provide a comprehensive report that would make the greatest impact on the Board of Parish Services. To achieve this goal, the task force needed to gather information from other pastors serving small congregations rather than relying on the opinions of the task force. We needed to have a better feeling and understanding of the challenges facing small church pastors throughout our synod. One option was to mail surveys to all small church pastors. However, the task force felt that this process would not only achieve a small response rate, but the information would be impersonal in nature. It was determined that an effort should be made to contact small church pastors personally over the phone. Not only would the response rate be higher, but more information could be gathered through a person-to-person dialogue. A questionnaire was designed to help lead a discussion on the challenges associated with implementing areas that was directly related to the concerns and mission of the Board of Parish Services.

The next challenge facing the small church task force was to determine how to select pastors of small congregations to interview that made a fair and broad representation of our synod. The first step was to define the WELS small church. Instead of relying on communicant membership, the task force decided to use worship attendance as the sole determining factor of a small church. This decision was based on the fact that worship attendance gives a more accurate reflection of church size versus communicant membership. Since the average median worship attendance was 88, the task force determined that a WELS small church is a congregation with an average worship attendance of 100 or less. (This figure represents 55.6% of all WELS congregations.)

The next step for the task force was to determine the number of pastors to contact for a phone interview. The task force agreed and committed themselves to contact 15 small church pastors from each of the 12 districts of our Synod. Each task force member personally interviewed 26 pastors over a 4-6 month time span. A total of 180 pastors were contacted which represented 25% of all WELS small churches. This comprehensive and exhaustive strategy gave the task force a far greater reflection of the opinions and attitudes of our synod, especially since half of all WELS small churches exist outside the "Big 5" districts of Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota.

To further the task force's desire to achieve an accurate and fair representation of the challenges facing small churches, an effort was made to select congregations that reflected the makeup of each district (see appendix). Congregations were selected based on geographic area (rural vs. metro) and whether there were signs of church growth or decline (see appendix). If 50% of the small churches in a certain district were located in a rural area and 75% of these small churches were showing a decline in membership, then great care was taken to select congregations within that particular district that reflected this statistic. (e.g. Of the fifteen congregations chosen in that district, 7-8 of those churches would be rural with 5-6 showing signs of membership decline.) The task force has gone far beyond what is statistically necessary to achieve an accurate representation of the thoughts and feelings of our small church pastors.

Appendix For Further Study

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Madson, Paul O., The Small Church - Valid, Vital, Victorious. Judson Press: Valley Forge, 1975.

Schaller, Lyle E., The Small Church Is Different. Abington: Nashville, 1982