

A CITY GREAT TO GOD:  
TEN YEARS OF WELS PLANTING TO INFORM THE NEXT ONE HUNDRED MISSIONS

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## ABSTRACT

From the isolated beginnings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), internal tensions have favored planting churches in non-urban settings. Numerous voices within the synod have seen this tendency as an area for growth. After reaffirming our theological commitment to the city, this thesis will define urban mission planting to provide a statistical analysis of WELS Home Missions' relationship with cities from 2012 to 2021. On the dawn of a new mission planting initiative, 100 Missions in 10 Years, this thesis provides parameters for planting and an analogous ten-year analysis to inform how the WELS might further its mission work to all people through a commitment to the city.

## INTRODUCTION: A CITY GREAT TO GOD

Most Bibles have a peculiar footnote hidden in an otherwise straightforward narrative of God, a prophet, and a great city. The verse appears in most Bibles something like this, “Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it” (NIV Jonah 3:3). The city was “very large,” says the English. However, as one peers down to the bottom of the page, one might find the Hebrew more ambiguous. The Hebrew reads, עִיר־גְּדוֹלָה לְאֱלֹהִים (*BHS*). It was “a city great to God.” Although English translations are likely correct in taking this phrase idiomatically for the city’s size, it does present readers with a worthwhile question. “Is the city great to God?” Or is it just “great?” What remains an exegetical question in Jonah 3 cannot be considered a question theologically. Through his revelation in Scripture, God has made clear his heart for the city. He does not leave this truth in the footnotes for us to doubt. The city is great to God.

What is less clear is if the city is great to us in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). At least it is safe to say the declaration does not leap off the pages of our synodical history. In recent years, one might sense that a page is being turned toward a chapter of commitment to the city. Essays have been written. Names have been called to locations of large populations. One might sense that the city is or is at least starting to become great to the WELS.

This thesis first seeks to answer the question, “How great are cities to us in the WELS right now?” By examining ten years of home mission planting from 2012 to 2021, this thesis will capture the pulse of our current synodical heart for the city. The data-driven analysis will do its best to objectively gauge our commitment to urban areas, for God’s commitment is evident. This ten-year reflection is germane to the discussion of where WELS should plant missions, especially as we endeavor to plant one hundred missions in ten years. This thesis’ goal is to provide reflections on our participation in God’s mission to the city over ten previous years to inform the next ten years of mission planting that our voice might be loud and clear, “The city is great to God and us!”

## PART 1: WHY GO TO THE CITY?

Before one embarks on a long journey, it helps to know why one is going. People do not spend hours waiting in security lines and baggage claims for no reason, nor should a synod be asked to go to great lengths to plant churches in cities without knowing why. The distance is great and so is the cost. Nevertheless, depending on the reason, arriving at these cities can be well worth the expense of time and money. This thesis analyzes and challenges how well WELS has traveled to cities. It has been a long route. There have been missed connections, delays, and fees, so it helps to remember why one should journey in the first place. Why have we, and why should we go to the city? The purpose of this thesis is not to prove this point. Exceptional essays in WELS and beyond have already been written regarding the theology of the city.<sup>1</sup> This section briefly reviews some of the most convincing reasons why we go to cities before judging how well we have executed.

### **The Doctrinal Argument**

The city is and will continue to be “the place to be.” Companies know cities are the place to scout talent. Artists flock to be part of a scene filled with opportunity. Younger generations leave their hometowns to “be a part of it.” Urbanization and globalization have made cities to be the cultural, political, and economic centers of the world. The secular sector has long advanced past

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1. Some of these include: Sorum, E. Allen. “A Theology of Missions with Special Application to North American Cities”; Lucas Bitter, “The World at Our Doorstep: The Stream of Immigrants Flooding into North America’s Largest Cities Demands Our Stronger Commitment to Global City Mission Work”; and Peter Kruschel, “A Cry From the City: WELS’ Need to Address Multicultural Issues.”



the discussion “Why go to the city?” but these secular motivations are entirely unconvincing for churches. In fact, many Christians struggle to find any reasons to go to the city.

Many Christians today, especially in the United States, are indifferent or even hostile toward cities. Some think of them as a negative force that undermines belief and morality, while others see them as inconsequential to Christian mission and living. It may also be true that some young Christians are adopting a romanticized view of the city. But the attitude of the biblical authors is quite different. The biblical view of cities is neither hostile nor romantic. Because the city is humanity intensified — a magnifying glass that brings out the very best and worst of human nature — it has a dual nature.<sup>2</sup>

The biblical view of the city—as Tim Keller writes—is neutral. God neither exclusively hates nor loves the city. God does not love one location more than another. He does not prefer skyscraper over farm. Rather, he reveals to us that God both hates and loves the city. That is because, although the city is neutral, humans are not.

### The Universal Truths: Original Sin, Objective Justification

Professor Sorum wrote a theology of missions for the city. He framed his theology upon the actions of the Triune God as Plowman, Sower, and Thresher.<sup>3</sup> First, God plows the hearts of *all* humanity. Second, he sows the gospel to *all*. Finally, he is the one who will judge and carefully separate *all*.<sup>4</sup> At the core of these three actions of God (plowing, sowing, and threshing) are two universal truths: Original Sin and Objective Justification. *All* people come into this world lost and in need of a savior. God sent his Son into the world to redeem *all*. “My dear children, I write

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2. Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 135.

3. Allen E. Sorum, “A Theology of Missions with Special Application to North American Cities,” (master’s thesis, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1995), 3.  
<http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/3803>.

4. Sorum, “Theology of Missions,” 3.

this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—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).<sup>5</sup> In these verses, the two objective truths stand side by side. The “*whole world*” shows that all have sinned and need a savior. Yet, God’s proclamation of forgiveness to all people is just as expansive as the universal condemnation. Jesus died not only for our sins, but for the sins of the whole world! Sorum makes these comments on God’s view of mission work in the city.

Clearly, inarguably, Scripture shows us a God who earnestly seeks to save the entire universe. God places all mankind under the judgment of the law but God also wants all mankind to hear the gospel and to believe his gospel so that all might be saved. In today’s world, most of mankind lives in or is moving toward the cities of the world. This has been and continues to be the trend. Clearly, inarguably, Scripture shows us a God that wants his Christians to carry out the Great Commission in cities. Many of the “all nations” now live in our North American cities. More and more nations continue to move into our cities. Let us Christians in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod now consider to what degree we have applied this universal missiology to our North American cities. To what degree have we applied *ourselves* to our continent’s cities? Would it not be in the best interest of the multitudes who live in our continent’s cities to admit that, as a church body, we ought aggressively to apply Scripture’s universal missiology and ourselves to North American cities?<sup>6</sup>

While the biblical view of the city is neutral, God’s view of the city's people is not. He sees their wickedness. He sees the destruction they deserve. However, God also sees the sacrifice of his Son that reconciled the world to him. God loves the city because God loves people. God loves the city because God loves *all* people and wants to save *all* (1 Tim 2:4). God’s mission is to *all*.

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5. Emphasis mine.

6. Sorum, “Theology of Missions,” 18.

## Entering God's Mission

What implications does this truth carry for a synod's church planting? Paul Peters provides perspective, "Only as we grow more and more conscious of mission as God's work, do we gain the necessary missionary impulse, of which we are always much in need."<sup>7</sup> Planting churches is not primarily a means to sustain a synod. Planting churches is a participation in God's work and God's mission field. We want to internalize the truth that we are not entering *our* mission field but God's. And if God's mission is to all people, then *our* mission is to all people.

If this is the case, would we want to reduce our synodical mission to less than God's mission to all people? Would we want to exclude people whom we have opportunities to reach with the gospel based on who they are or where they live? Surely not! In fact, there is no spiritual reason to exclude anyone from mission work because they live in cities or anywhere else! Kuske echoes this thought. "My life I give into my Savior's service; it is his will alone that I find pleasure in doing. And what do I hear him bidding me do? "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," he says. He speaks and I march to his word. No sacrifice is too great, no hurdle too difficult, no human being too despicable to turn me aside from doing his will."<sup>8</sup> If it is God's will to reach *all* people (and it is), then our desire is the same. As God grants the opportunities and resources, let us desire to reach *all* places and *all* peoples because church planting is just participation in God's mission and Great Commission.

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7. Paul Peters, "World-Wide Mission: The Work Of The Triune God" *WLQ* 65, no.4 (Fall 1968): 235. (As quoted in Sorum, "Theology of Missions," 18.)

8. David P. Kuske, "Objective Justification in Our Mission Outreach: An Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:18-19" *WLQ* 77.1 (1980): 22. (As quoted in Sorum, "Theology of Missions," 17). <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/2852>.

## Christ Crucified Prejudice

But what does this look like practically? God's mission is not confined by boundaries or borders, but a person is confined by time and space, and resources limit a synod. Ultimately, a church body must decide where to plant. The few new church plants pale in comparison to the vast sea of people entering this world every moment. Practically speaking, a synod needs to make decisions to organize efforts to reach *some* people in contrast to God's mission that seeks *all* people. How should a synod decide where to organize efforts? Perhaps it is easier to answer that question in the negative. We should not decide based on the prejudice of our flesh. We should not write off cultures, people, or cities because, in some way, they appear "less qualified" for the gospel than others as if that were possible. There was nothing good in us that caused Christ to choose us. He chose us by his great mercy. In doing so, Christ has crucified our prejudice. Christians no longer look at human distinctions to determine need for salvation, for all are in infinite need of Christ. Look at the way Paul speaks to the Corinthians.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! (2 Cor 5:14–17)

Christians no longer regard others from a worldly view. This new viewpoint must exclude any biases against mission work in urban settings. Perhaps this is a challenging new viewpoint, especially for a predominately non-urban synod. Biases such as these can be deeply embedded and hard to recognize, but there is value in uncovering them. The truth is that people who live in cities differ from those who do not. Urban demographics, socioeconomic statuses, and worldviews greatly differ from suburban and rural areas. With all these differences, there is a

danger of prejudice. There is a danger of seeing things from a worldly view and saying, “that’s too \*fill in the blank\* for our church body.”

Pew Research did an interesting study called “What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities.”<sup>9</sup> They studied the three communities' demographic, political, and social issues and how they interrelate. They discovered this revealing statistic.

Against this backdrop, a new Pew Research Center survey finds that many urban and rural residents feel misunderstood and looked down on by Americans living in other types of communities. About two-thirds or more in urban and rural areas say people in other types of communities don’t understand the problems people face in their communities. And majorities of urban and rural residents say people who don’t live in their type of community have a negative view of those who do. In contrast, most suburbanites say people who don’t live in the suburbs have a positive view of those who do.”<sup>10</sup>

Urban dwellers feel that other communities do not understand their problems. Perhaps the more revealing statistic is that both urban and rural dwellers sense that people from other communities look down on them. The data shows that urban, suburban, and rural dwellers see things differently from each other. With this perceived disconnect between communities, prejudice can easily slip in. Therefore, this thesis will list four possible areas for prejudice against the city, especially concerning how suburban and rural communities view urban communities since our synod is predominately non-urban. The metrics provided by Pew research will reveal the tension between these communities. Then, with our Christian perspective, we will consider how the prejudice is misguided and, most importantly, how Christ has crucified our prejudice against any aspect of urban life.

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9. Kim Parker, et al., *What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities* (Report. Pew Research Center, 2018).  
<https://apo.org.au/node/173886>.

10. Parker et al., *What Unites and Divides Urban*, 5.

## *Race*

One prejudice against urban life is racism. “White flight” is a well-documented trend that happened post-World War II where whites left the urban centers to flee from the changing communities. Some WELS churches in the center of Milwaukee experienced tremendous membership losses during this time as people fled the city for the suburb. Others simply closed.<sup>11</sup> Much growth has happened in our synod since then, but a discussion on race is necessary when speaking of potential deterrents from joining God’s mission to *all* people.

“Urban areas are at the leading edge of racial and ethnic change, with nonwhites now a clear majority of the population in urban counties while solid majorities in suburban and rural areas are white.”<sup>12</sup> Urban areas are dense and diverse. Not only are people from many different races and ethnicities, but they also view the importance of race differently. “Urban dwellers place a higher premium on racial and ethnic diversity.... Seven-in-ten urban dwellers – vs. about half in rural areas – say it’s important to them to live in a community that is racially and ethnically diverse”<sup>13</sup> There also seems to be a gap between the communities on how they perceive racial and economic issues.

Nonwhites consistently voice greater concern than whites about the magnitude of a variety of problems in their community. In many cases, the racial gap persists across community types. In urban, suburban and rural areas, nonwhites are significantly more likely than whites to say that poverty, crime, racism, jobs, access to good doctors and hospitals, and access to high-speed internet are major problems in their local communities. In some cases, whites in the suburbs stand out as being the least concerned about these issues. For example, when it comes to poverty, 17% of suburban whites say

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11. Thomas E. Schroeder, “White Flight: The Response of WELS Churches in Central City Milwaukee to a Major Cultural and Ethnic Change” (1994), <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/3021>.

12. Parker et al., *What Unites and Divides Urban*, 4.

13. Parker et al., *What Unites and Divides Urban*, 11.

this is a major problem in their community, compared with 28% of rural and 35% of urban whites.<sup>14</sup>

What does all this information reveal? For our purposes, it reveals this: (1) urban communities are different racially, and (2) urban communities see race differently. All this is not to insinuate that the WELS is currently avoiding mission planting in cities for racial reasons. It is saying that racial differences are real when comparing rural/suburban communities to urban communities. Christians want to be careful to make sure that racial differences—whether in skin color or thought patterns—would never deter us from entering God’s mission field to all people. Christ is greater than any prejudice against race. The gospel is more pervasive than any human barrier. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

Bitter says about the city's diversity, “Racial diversity may take us out of our comfort zone, but this is a good thing. The gospel is the answer to prejudice, racism, and cultural divisions. This is precisely what makes Christianity so special.... The gospel brings about a special unity that transcends all earthly divisions. Seeing people from so many cultures praising one Lord is one of the most uplifting and heartwarming parts of serving in a global city.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Safety*

Another possible reason to pass over doing mission work in the city is fear of violence and crime. Cities are statistically speaking more dangerous than their suburban or rural counterparts.

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14. Parker et al., *What Unites and Divides Urban*, 49–50.

15. Bitter, “World at Our Doorstep,” 22.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics released a report in 2021 that revealed for every thousand people, 24.5 people experienced a violent crime in urban residences, while its suburban counterpart averages 16.5.<sup>16</sup> Crime does increase as one moves to larger cities; however, perceptions often exaggerate the reality. Prof. Sorum speaks from his personal experience.

I am occasionally invited to preach for sister WELS congregations to talk about the multi-cultural nature of the ministry at Garden Homes Lutheran Church. I enjoy these opportunities to tell my WELS brothers and sisters about the joys and excitement of working in the city of Milwaukee. I speak in positive, upbeat terms about what God is doing for us and through us. The vast majority of people in these outlying congregations express sincere appreciation and sensitivity after I've told them about us. Yet, it seems that there is always one curious church member who has to wonder aloud, in words I dare not put into print, how I can serve in an environment of drugs, crime and minority welfare single mothers. I share these stories to illustrate aspects of widely held stereotypes against people who live in the city. The first thing people need to do—especially Christian people—is to learn to distinguish between stereotypes and media-generated fears toward city folk in general that are both judgmental and groundless. There are valid fears and legitimate concerns. There are some neighborhoods that we would do well to enter only with a trusted and street-wise guide or not at all. In general, however, suburbanites would find many city dwellers, especially inner city dwellers, committed to their neighborhoods, concerned neighbors, law abiding citizens and community minded. Suburbanites would also learn that the few who do “mess up the hood” are afflicting the many who are doing their best to “dress up the hood.”<sup>17</sup>

Safety can be an issue within a city, but it often is not as bad as people claim it to be.

More importantly, if we agree with Kuske's words, "No sacrifice is too great, no hurdle too difficult, no human being too despicable to turn me aside from doing his will," then not even our own safety could keep us away from sharing the message with others.<sup>18</sup> The Apostle Paul

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16. According to NCVS regarding violent crime. “Includes rape or sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault. Excludes homicide because the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is based on interviews with victims.”

17. Sorum, “Theology of Missions,” 26–27.

18. Kuske, “Objective Justification,” 22. (As quoted in Sorum, “Theology of Missions,” 17.)



endured many hardships to advance the gospel into many places. He did so with complete confidence that the Lord is supremely reigning in heaven, even over his physical well-being.

### ***Wealth***

Another possible prejudice against the city is the assumption that those living there are poor. Church planters might avoid planting in cities because the viability of the mission is questionable. There are two significant problems with this line of thought. First, the assumption that those who live in the city are poor is a half-truth at best. It is true that “the poverty rate is somewhat higher in rural (18%) and urban (17%) areas than in suburban (14%) counties.”<sup>19</sup> Notice, though, that rural counties are the most impoverished and that the discrepancy between urban and suburban is only four points. “Another measure of economic health average earnings per worker – is highest in urban counties and lowest in rural ones.”<sup>20</sup> Depending on location, urban areas can be both the richest and poorest places. Often the two are right next to each other. Cities are unfairly generalized as “poor.”

However, if one were to avoid cities because the residents are poor, there would be a more significant spiritual issue. Many areas in the city are poor. However, this is no reason to avoid these areas. If we are not reaching out to people because they are not wealthy, this is classism, not spiritual wisdom. After urging Christians not to show partiality by giving special attention to the rich, James says, “Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those

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19. Parker et al., *What Unites and Divides Urban*, 8.

20. Parker et al., *What Unites and Divides Urban*, 28.

who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (Jas 2:5). Professor Sorum speaks in the spirit of James,

To the degree that people in the city are poor and from minority groups, this would in no way affect our commitment to the city. God's commitment to mission work is a universal commitment. Our commission to do mission work in the city is a universal commission. ... WELS Christians, along with Paul, will condemn racism and classism. We will also work hard to make sure that racism and classism do not dictate mission policy and distribution of limited mission dollars. Racism and classism are such ugly and obvious sins that we needn't take more time and space than is required to condemn these sins.<sup>21</sup>

### *Politics*

It would be beneficial to discuss one final area for prejudice against cities. Cities have long been Democratic strongholds, and this trend is only accelerating. Tension continues to grow between the cities and other communities as the cities steer further left and the rural areas further right.<sup>22</sup>

"At the same time, urban and rural communities are becoming increasingly different from each other politically. Adults in urban counties, long aligned with the Democratic Party, have moved even more to the left in recent years, and today twice as many urban voters identify as Democrats or lean Democratic as affiliate with the Republican Party. For their part, rural adults have moved more firmly into the Republican camp. More than half (54%) of rural voters now identify with or lean to the GOP, while 38% are Democrats or lean Democratic."<sup>23</sup>

While that political tension is growing, Christians need to know that God has called us not to a political kingdom but a spiritual one in Christ. There are significant issues if a church body avoids reaching certain areas for political reasons. If this were true, that synod would be playing with the fires of Christian nationalism.

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21. Sorum, "Theology of Missions," 29.

22. David A. Graham "Red State, Blue City," *The Atlantic*, 2 February 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/red-state-blue-city/513857/>.

23. Parker et al., *What Unites and Divides Urban*, 5

Christian nationalism takes the name of Christ for a worldly political agenda, proclaiming that its program is *the* political program for every true believer. That is wrong in principle, no matter what the agenda is, because only the church is authorized to proclaim the name of Jesus and carry his standard into the world. It is even worse with a political movement that champions some causes that are unjust, which is the case with Christian nationalism and its attendant illiberalism. In that case, Christian nationalism is calling evil good and good evil; it is taking the name of Christ as a fig leaf to cover its political program, treating the message of Jesus as a tool of political propaganda and the church as the handmaiden and cheerleader of the state.<sup>24</sup>

Jesus has not thrown a political qualifier upon his great commission. He says to reach *all* people, which extends across political aisles—Republican or Democrat.

#### Doctrinal Argument Conclusion

God’s mission is to *all* people. His two universal truths, original sin and objective justification, reveal that our mission is not to some but to *all*, as is his. The ‘*all*’ includes all people living in cities, just as it includes people in suburban and rural areas. As Christians consider church planting, we remind ourselves that we are entering God’s mission and that no human way of thinking—racism, classism, fear, or politics—should impair our mission to reach them.

#### The Strategic Argument for the City

The Lord’s command and encouragement to reach all people is all the motivation we need to reach the city. Even if the call to the city contradicted human wisdom, it would not impede our mission, for our desire is to serve our Savior. However, as it stands, God’s call to the city does

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24. Paul D Miller, “What Is Christian Nationalism?” *Christianity Today*, 3 February 2021. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/february-web-only/what-is-christian-nationalism.html>.

not contradict all human wisdom. Quite the opposite, there are many strategic reasons to enter the city.

### Kingdom Strategic

This thesis will divide the strategic arguments for the city into two subsections, the “kingdom strategic” and the “synodical strategic.” “Kingdom strategic” refers to how reaching the city benefits the kingdom of God at large in the invisible church.

### *The Early Church*

Historically speaking, Christianity has long been urban. Tim Keller writes, “It is easy to see that the mission strategy of the early church was to evangelize the city. It is no exaggeration to say that in Acts, the church is almost exclusively associated with the city.”<sup>25</sup> In Paul’s missionary journey, he traveled from one city center to another, spreading the message of Christ. This method was not happenstance but strategic.

“Paul evidently saw these cities as hubs from which the gospel could radiate into the rest of the provinces. That is exactly what appears to have happened. He preached the gospel in Antioch of Pisidia, and “the word of the Lord spread throughout the whole region” (Acts 13:49.) He preached the gospel in Thessalonica, and the Lord’s message rang out from there into the rest of Macedonia and even into Achaia and beyond (1 Thessalonians 1:8). He preached the gospel in Corinth, and it spread into the surrounding province of Achaia (2 Corinthians 1:1, Romans 16:1). He preached the gospel in Ephesus, and “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” as “the word of the Lord spread widely” (Acts 19:10,20). Paul thus evangelized whole

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25. Frank S. Frick, *The City in Ancient Israel*. Scholars Pr, 1977. (As quoted in Keller, *Center Church*, 148)

provinces or regions of provinces by evangelizing the strategic city of the province or region.”<sup>26</sup>

### *Center of Influence*

In the New Testament, the Early Church seems to prioritize evangelizing the cities. Perhaps Paul and others recognized the city's effect in a broader region. Tim Keller summarizes the Roman society in the Early church like this, “As the city went, so went the culture.”<sup>27</sup> If cities were functional in Paul’s day to reach the many, how much more today in a world as urbanized as ever? The city is the center of influence. Therefore, the city is a strategic center for the kingdom of God.

Cities today are centers of influence for culture and immigration. Regarding immigration, “If you share the gospel in a city, you can reach dozens of national and ethnic groups. Indeed, you can reach them through one language — the *lingua franca* of that place. The gospel then travels back into many different cultures through immigrants who return to visit or remain in their homelands.”<sup>28</sup> In this way, cities provide a way to reach the world by reaching *our* nation. In a phone interview with Lucas Bitter, Pastor Tim Bourman, living in New York City, stated, “You can reach cultures, races, and individuals in the city that you could never reach if they were in the home country. These people are dying without the gospel, but here in Queens you can

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26. David Valleskey, *A Portrait of Paul* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House), 2002. (As quoted in Bitter, “World at Our Doorstep,” 7.)

27. Keller, *Center Church*, 149.

28. Keller, *Center Church*, 148.

reach them!”<sup>29</sup> These immigrants are here in our country and are aggressively “evangelized” by other groups. If we don’t reach them with the gospel, who will? “Global city ministry is a valuable “beachhead” against the increasing menace of Islam and other pagan religions. We cannot sit by and allow Muslims and pagan faiths to spread their message all over the global cities while we are keeping the gospel in the suburbs.”<sup>30</sup> People from every tribe and nation enter our borders, searching for physical and spiritual homes. We have the opportunity to share the riches of God’s kingdom with people who are searching in every sense of the word. We can do it right at the center of influence—right in the city.

Immigration is just a portion of a city’s center of influence. Cities are also the capitals of commerce and culture. “In the village, someone might win its one or two lawyers to Christ. However, if you want to win the legal profession, which will influence all lawyers, you must go to the city, where you will find the law schools and the law journal publishers—the key institutions of influence in that profession.”<sup>31</sup>

Cities are strategic locations for Christians to evangelize people for the greater kingdom. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit converts, yet he gives Christians wisdom and a part to play in sharing this message with others. Logically and historically, cities are the centers of Christianity. Staying away from these strategic locations would mean missing out on some of God’s amazing kingdom work.

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29. Lucas Bitter, “Interview with Tim Bourman,” n.d.

30. Lucas Bitter, “The World at Our Doorstep: The Stream of Immigrants Flooding into North America’s Largest Cities Demands Our Stronger Commitment to Global City Mission Work” (master’s thesis, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2013), 20.

31. Keller, *Center Church*, 148.

### *Numbers*

The next “kingdom strategic” argument could be called the “numbers” argument. Millions of people live in urban centers. Walking on these streets opens one’s eyes to just how many people there are to reach with the gospel. Although people often cite sheer population in favor of city planting, this might not be the best way to look at it. Yes, there are many more people in urban centers than in small towns, but this does not inevitably mean one will reach more people with the gospel. The potential is exponential, but the work is often demanding. Populous centers bring about sizeable spiritual marketplaces filled with “competition” from different religions and ideologies. Planting in this environment can make growing a physical church more complex.

A fairer number argument for the city is not “how many” a church will reach but “who.” Hundreds of people walk by a storefront daily, while only one might dare walk through the door. Only God knows who that one person will be. No human estimation or strategy could force it, but God has provided a church in the middle of millions for the one lost sheep who enters the door. While at its surface, one might assume that the best argument for the city is that a large population will equate to larger churches, this argumentation is self-destructive. One classic counterargument to planting in urban centers is the statement that a “soul is a soul.” At the surface of this statement, this is entirely true. An urban soul is not valued at one and a half souls, while suburban or rural souls only count for one. Of course not! A soul is a soul, and ministry is just as important in the country as it is in the city.

The problem is when the phrase “a soul is a soul” is used as justification for only entering locations humanly seen as “sure-fire” spots to plant and grow churches with higher church attendance with an extremely high “success” rate and low cost. The “how many” argument might be the most detrimental to urban planting. Church planters might look at locations according to

their demographic makeups and socio-economic statuses and know that suburban or rural churches get a better “bang for their buck.” After all, “a soul is a soul,” so why not spend less to get more? Why not get more people with the money that was saved?

This author wonders if the numbers argument is simply the wrong way to look at mission planting, regardless of whether one uses the number argument for or against the city. There is a danger of institutionalism if we concern ourselves too much with the numbers of the “soul business.” The Shepherd did not seem too concerned about the numbers when he left the ninety-nine for the one (Lk 15:1–7). Perhaps we should not overly concern ourselves with the stat sheets. Yes, each number is a person, and we want to reach as many as possible, but not to the exclusion of others. The “all people” is a description of quantity *and* variety. While God is “not wanting anyone to perish” (2 Pet 3:9), he also commissions us to reach “all nations” (Matt 28:19). We have not been commissioned to preach the gospel with simply “the most” people but with “all people” whom God so loves and for whom Christ gave himself. The “who” argument for numbers is putting oneself in a position to preach to millions because we never know “who” God will bring. If a soul is a soul, then Jesus is also concerned about that person, whom only he knows, walking past a vacant storefront.

If we were to entertain the number argument for a moment, the scales might still favor cities. The fact of the matter is that far too many of our churches experience growth up to a certain point but then hit a barrier. They even begin to experience a certain sense of despair in their community. They have come to realize that most in their community have either visited them or heard of them. Deep down, the church in this community knows that very few people will give them a second chance. They are stuck with thin new mover lists and the hope that someone will change their mind. In cities, churches never, ever have this problem. The problem



is always the overwhelming amount of opportunities. The static weekly attendance in a suburban or rural church might be higher, but the urban church consistently interacts with and adds new people. The transient nature of cities does not show physical evidence as quickly, but the number of souls impacted is likely more significant over time.

### Synodical Strategic

Ultimately, any strategy is just a human plan. God may choose to work through our plans as he sees fit. Sometimes he works in ways despite our best plans. Making plans is a godly endeavor as we prayerfully consider how to serve him best. Therefore, the following strategic reasons would like to level the playing field by exemplifying that for every reason for the WELS to plant suburban or rural, there is also a reason to plant urban.

### *Diversification of Investments*

One example would be that planting in the cities could be a strategic way to diversify “investments.” By favoring a particular community (suburbs or others), a synod is then subject to the life cycle of that community. The relationship between cities, suburbs, and rural areas is constantly changing. If a synod were to put all its eggs in the suburban basket, it is possible that when trends shift in the United States, the suburbs might be the struggling communities. Often, outer ring suburbs become the most challenging communities as growth continues even further beyond and makes the suburb less desirable to new residents. A healthy balance between urban, suburban, and rural compared to the American average is a safe way to “invest,” crassly put.

### *Young Adults*

Another strategic argument could be made for the city by showing who is moving where. “By cohort group, the share of Millennials in the top 50 MSAs increased during the period from 53.4% in 2006 to 56.6% in 2019.”<sup>32</sup> Over half of young adults live in the fifty most populated cities in the United States. Hyojung Lee does not see this trend changing anytime soon. “We can still expect that the urban concentration of young adults, or youthification, will continue as post-Millennials will move into their 20s and therefore flock into city districts.”<sup>33</sup> Young adults are in the cities, but it is more than just adults; many are students. Tim Keller writes about this topic, “This means, of course, that if the church in the West remains, for the most part, in the suburbs of Middle America and neglects the great cities, it risks losing an entire generation of American society’s leaders.”<sup>34</sup> The number of colleges in some of the major cities is dumbfounding. Los Angeles has 230, New York City 200+, Chicago 148, Boston 118, and Philadelphia 115.<sup>35</sup> Colleges fill these cities, and they are often the most prestigious.

As much as these cities provide opportunities to evangelize to young people, they also can connect young WELS members moving to these cities for work or school. “Nearly two-thirds of U.S. 18–29-year-olds who grew up in church tell Barna they have withdrawn from

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32. Hyojung Lee, “Are Millennials Leaving Town? Reconciling Peak Millennials and Youthification Hypotheses,” *International Journal of Urban Sciences* 26.1 (2022): 68–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/12265934.2020.1871061>.

33. Hyojung Lee, “Are Millennials Leaving Town?”

34. Keller, *Center Church*, 160.

35. Sarah Goldy-Brown, “U.S. Cities with the Most Colleges.” *Plexuss*, n.d. <https://plexuss.com/news/article/us-cities-with-the-most-colleges>.

church involvement as an adult after having been active as a child or teen.”<sup>36</sup> In theory, placing churches in cities where many young people are moving can help slow that hemorrhaging. This age group is essential for the future and certainly needs much attention in the WELS.

### *Good Timing*

The final argument that this thesis will present as a strategic reason for the synod to engage in urban church planting is that this is an excellent season. Many factors in the world and in our synod’s status have lined up to make opportunities to serve in urban centers possible and desirable. It is necessary to admit that although it is an excellent time to plant in urban centers, there are difficulties that come with the territory, especially for those who did not grow up in urban settings.

It is infinitely easier to talk about living out this posture “on the ground” in our cities than to actually do it. The challenge is to establish churches and other ministries that effectively engage the realities of the cities of the world. The majority of evangelical Protestants who presently control the United States mission apparatus are typically white and nonurban in background. They neither understand nor in most cases enjoy urban life. As I have been arguing, many of the prevailing ministry methods are forged outside of urban areas and then simply imported, with little thought given to the unnecessary barriers this practice erects between urban dwellers and the gospel. Consequently, when ministers go into a city, they often find it especially hard to evangelize and win urban people — and equally difficult to disciple converts and prepare Christians for life in a pluralistic, secular, culturally engaged setting. Just as the Bible needs to be translated into its readers’ vernacular, so the gospel needs to be embodied and communicated in ways that are understandable to the residents of a city.<sup>37</sup>

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36. “Church Dropouts Have Risen to 64%—But What About Those Who Stay?” *Barna Group*, n.d. <https://www.barna.com/research/resilient-disciples/>.

37. Keller, *Center Church*, 172–173.

Urban ministry takes work. It takes time and experience to learn how to do this fruitfully, both at a personal level and as a synod. We are a synod that is rather inexperienced with urban mission work. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the hesitancy to reach these city centers. However, this should not be viewed as an excuse, but an even greater reason to get started now.

If we do not plant now, when will we? This is what I will call the generational argument. Planting urban churches now will benefit us later with years of time-tested experience and adaptation. Our urban strategy will morph as our synod learns what works and what does not work in reaching urban communities. Right now, our experience is minimal. If we commit ourselves to urban planting now, future generations will have gained wisdom from our successes and failures.

But the effects go further than strategy. A commitment to urban planting is also a commitment to future urban leaders. As Tim Keller pointed out, and as some WELS pastors have experienced, the city takes some adjustment. Raising leaders from these urban communities is a natural way to put their personal experience to work. This investment, as it is said, should have started yesterday. The time is ripe to be committed to the city because the time has always been ripe to carry out God's mission to all people.

There is also a financial reason that now is a time that is ripe for urban planting. In reviewing the history of WELS mission planting, the tension between having enough pastors and money has swung back and forth like a pendulum. Financially, it appears this is an excellent time to reach new areas with the gospel. "During a global pandemic, calendar year 2020 CMO came in at its highest historical level of \$21.7 million. Further, calendar year 2021 CMO subscriptions have come in at \$21.6 million, just 0.6 percent lower than calendar year 2020 and the highest

level of subscriptions on record.”<sup>38</sup> While we have the opportunity, let us invest in these urban missions. Yes, they often require more upfront costs, but for the reasons we have mentioned before, it is worth their weight in gold. A commitment to urban ministry is not by word but by action. There is a unique opportunity with these coming one hundred missions, God-willing, to invest now in these strategic places to benefit the synod’s future. More importantly, there is an opportunity to reach previously unreached souls with the gospel. The time for a commitment to the city is now, especially now as it always has been.

### **Why Go to the City: Conclusion**

Flying is not always enjoyable. First is the drop-off, as three or more lanes fight for the inner lane to drop off their loved ones. Then one walks inside to wait in line, only to wait in another and another. One takes off their shoes and scurries to put them on again. Tired faces are all around. People rush not to miss their flights while others stare blankly at screens full of cancellations and delays. Flying can be chaotic. As this is the case, it helps to know the reason for flying. Why are we traveling to the city?

First, our God has told us to travel. He says his mission is to *all* people, so we gladly listen. Secondly, we travel with a smile amid the difficulties because we anticipate the new places, the new things, and the people we will discover on the journey. We imagine the many races, ages, and communities God allows us to serve. Thirdly, we thank God for the opportunity to participate strategically in his mission to the city. God has given us wisdom and the ability to

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38. *Book of Reports and Memorials* (WELS, May 2021), 84.

plan and participate in the work he can do with or without us. All this makes our traveling, despite the expense, despite the waiting and need for patience, despite the inexperience, incredibly worth it. It is worth it because, as Christians, we have redefined success.

“When we reach this important stage in our own spiritual maturity, we will willingly endure whatever trials, struggles, and sacrifices are required to undertake a commitment to doing mission work in the city. Our goal will then be to figure out how many different groups we can reach and how many neighborhoods we can serve and how socioeconomically and culturally diverse a church body we can build for Christ. This is success.”<sup>39</sup>

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39. Sorum, “Theology of Missions,” 30.

## PART 2: ANALYZING THE PAST 10 YEARS

This thesis is far from the first to show the value of urban mission planting, even within the WELS. In fact, the synod has seen value in urban planting and has committed itself to it in the past. More than words, it has participated in planting urban churches. In the 2014 BORAM, the Board for Home Missions reports this, “At the fall Board for Home Missions meeting in September 2014, a presentation was given about urban missions, also called global city missions. How we can start and the importance of starting missions in the larger cities of our country were main points of the presentation. Research is showing that in a number of areas the suburban spread is slowing, and more people are moving back into cities.”<sup>40</sup> As a synod, we have acknowledged the opportunities for urban mission work. We have seen the value theologically, and as the report indicates, some practical reasons to plant in these cities.

The value of this thesis is then not to prove that urban planting is worth it. This has already been proven and accepted—especially at the doctrinal level. What this thesis does intend to add to the discussion is a historical reflection on our practice. Have we reached urban communities as well as we could have? Have we answered our calls to commitment to urban mission work with action?

Nevertheless, how does one analyze our practice? How might one judge whether we have effectively practiced urban planting? This thesis seeks to analyze WELS mission planting from two perspectives. The first perspective is a historical perspective looking at the synod's history

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40. *Book of Reports and Memorials* (WELS, May 2015), 125.

and seeing how these ten recent years of planting fit in with the broader WELS history. The second perspective will be a concept I will term “Average America.” As we seek to be a church body growing in diversity by community type and race, the national averages will serve as a benchmark for our national synod. This will aid in identifying ways WELS mission planting is going well regarding urban planting and where there are still areas for growth. A decade is not very long, yet studying these ten years parallels the new plan of one hundred missions in ten years. We would not want to jump into a story without context; therefore, the following section will give these ten years the necessary historical perspective.

### **WELS Mission Planting History**

“Over the last seventy-five years, WELS has been saddled with the caricature that it is a church body “against” everything: Scouting, military chaplaincy, unionism, open communion, and women pastors.”<sup>41</sup> One could easily add cities to the list of things the WELS opposes by surveying the relative absence of WELS churches in urban settings. However, this oversimplifies the historical context of each mission plant. There is a sharp contrast between the ballooning urbanization the world is experiencing and the rate at which the WELS is reaching the cities. This does not mean one should sit back and conclude, “The WELS must not care about cities.” This section seeks to give perspective to the present lack of presence in urban settings through a historical lens. The attention given to this is cursory, not exhaustive, noting the most significant

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41. Joel D. Otto, “The Church Grows Under the Cross: Mission Expansion in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1929-1983” (master’s thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2019), 6.



tensions in WELS mission planting history pertinent to urban ministry. Hopefully, what flows is a synodical self-awareness that promotes progress without guilting the past.

### Niche or National—Self-image

The first tension to note in home mission planting in the WELS is self-identification. Was the WELS destined to be a synod for all peoples in many locations? Or was the WELS a puzzle piece alongside a tapestry of synods that had its specific shape and place? How did the young synod see itself? How does that affect the mission of the WELS today? The tension between a *niche* and national mission has been and still is a significant factor in mission planting.

### *Isolated beginnings*

The story begins in isolation.<sup>42</sup> Yes, this may be a caricature that previously was said to be avoided, but many aspects of the synod's first three-quarters of the century bring the word isolation to mind. However, the isolation was not inherently bad. In fact, aspects of isolation brought blessings to some, and ultimately, God used all of it for his purposes in his timing.

The first sense of the word isolation prevalent in the early years of the Wisconsin synod refers to its beginnings. German immigrants were entering the United States at increasing rates, and with that growth came the need for Lutheran pastors and congregations to feed them with Word and Sacrament. The formation of the synod was very much an effort to reach the

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42. Norman W. Berg, "Home Mission Moods and Modes - 125 Years in Wels," *WLQ* 73.4 (1976): 266. This word isolation is used by Berg in his essay as a concluding note of why he thinks the WELS had slow growth.

“displaced brethren.”<sup>43</sup> The mission was to reach those isolated from the culture, language, and family they left behind in Germany. In this way, the synod's mission was far from isolated, but rather it intended to reach the isolated.

With good intentions, however, come adverse side effects. The mission to reach the expatriates remained sharply focused to the exclusion of other growth and ministry within the synod. As demonstrated in Norman Berg's essay, a firm “inreach” mentality existed to collect the lost (either geographically or spiritually) almost exclusively from within their clan.

“Here, too, the prevailing mood was to reach “the children of our people.” This attitude prevailed for the first half century as reflected in President Bading’s report to the 1883 Synod Convention when in calling attention to the need to conserve die Kinder unseres Volkes he quoted St. Paul’s words, “Let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” This was the apparent need, and for some time money and manpower were lacking to reach out farther. But one is struck by the apparent lack of concern for the “heathen” of America. In a lengthy report of the tale of woe of a Pastor Weitbrecht, who had just come from Germany, a horrifying account of the boisterous behavior of his traveling companions, both German and “American,” takes up a goodly portion of the 1854 Synodical Proceedings. An account of a similar experience is given by G. Thiele in the November 15, 1866, Gemeindeblatt. In neither case, however, is any concern voiced relative to the spiritual need of these “heathen” Germans and Americans.”<sup>44</sup>

The ministry to the isolated quickly morphed into a ministry in isolation. The noble focus to reach their own sadly led to the exclusion of others in their efforts. One of the most straightforward illustrations of this is how long the WELS clung to the German language instead of adapting (at least in part) to the culture around them. In 1902, a survey and study determined that an English-speaking missionary (circuit rider) was not yet necessary because “the English Lutherans in our congregations at present will be cared for with Word and Sacrament in

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43. Berg, “Home Mission Moods and Modes,” 252.

44. Berg, “Home Mission Moods and Modes,” 253.

satisfactory fashion by our German pastors.”<sup>45</sup> This philosophy must have lasted until at least 1920, when it is reported that only 9 of the 737 congregations used only English.<sup>46</sup>

“It becomes easy to see why there would be a struggle for a church body to reach out to a largely English-speaking populace when the pastors were still spending extensive time and energy perfecting their German skills.”<sup>47</sup> The WELS continued in cultural and linguistic isolation as the average American differed further and further from the German immigrant the synod was initially built to save. “[It] was still very common into the 1930s for congregations to have at least one weekly service in German. The education at the ministerial education schools, especially the seminary, continued to have a strong German component into the 1940s.”<sup>48</sup> This connectedness to the German language fostered a demographically *niche* self-identity while English was king all around them.

### ***The Missouri Connection***

The delay to the English language and the everyday American leave contemporary readers befuddled at church fathers who seemingly lacked compassion for the ‘all nations’ commission. Recognizing that WELS was not alone in its work is instrumental in understanding the rationale. The Synodical conference supported much of the mission work that WELS could have (and

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45. Berg, “Home Mission Moods and Modes,” 258.

46. Berg, “Home Mission Moods and Modes,” 258.

47. Otto, “Mission Expansion,” 18.

48. Otto, “Mission Expansion,” 17–18.

maybe should have) been doing.<sup>49</sup> Conceivably, one member of the synodical conference influenced WELS mission planting more than any factor to date, the Missouri Synod.

The Wisconsin synod and the Missouri synod worked together hand and glove, with Missouri being the hand and Wisconsin the glove. Missouri was present in larger cities and had vast influence even in its early years. On the other hand, WELS was very localized and specialized in lower-density areas. “If members moved to urban areas outside of the Midwest, they were transferred to the nearest Missouri Synod congregation. WELS seemed content to let the Missouri Synod do the heavy lifting in home and world mission work.”<sup>50</sup> This meant the big projects like the cities were left up for grabs by the much larger Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). The WELS remained predominantly rural. “Exceptions would be Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona; Tacoma, Washington; and Portland, Oregon, although all of these cities were more growing towns in 1930 than booming metropolises.”<sup>51</sup>

The tension between being a *niche* or national synod was hardly tension since Missouri took away the need for expansion. “The Wisconsin Synod saw itself as the little sister to the Missouri Synod. It was content to remain the “country cousin” to “Big MO.””<sup>52</sup> The following quote from Carleton Toppe speaks to this same issue.

“Small synods can easily develop inferiority complexes. They see the grand scale on which larger church bodies carry out their projects, the impressive totals they run up, the variety and scope of their activities—and they feel like apologizing for their own efforts and achievements... Synod members that constantly make unfavorable comparisons between the modest progress of their synod and the impressive accomplishments of a

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49. Otto, “Mission Expansion,” 17.

50. Otto, “Mission Expansion,” 10.

51. Otto, “Mission Expansion,” 10.

52. Otto, “Mission Expansion,” 11.

larger body, risk contracting the malady of defeatism. They are in danger of making only half-hearted efforts at furthering new undertakings; they may even lapse into a do-nothing attitude.<sup>53</sup>

The WELS would need to grow from a *niche* synod with lower self-esteem to a national synod with bigger aspirations and broader horizons. However, it seems that the scales would favor a *niche* synod until the split with the LCMS would tip the scales towards national.

### Keeping Truth or Sharing Truth: Confessionalism

The previous section focused on WELS's identity and how it saw itself fitting into kingdom work geographically and demographically. The attention now shifts to another tension in how WELS has identified its theological vision and purpose: is it to keep the truth or share the truth? One of the *niche* qualities of the WELS identifiable in its self-image was its fervor for pure doctrine and confessionalism. Lutheranism at large has a great heritage for the quest for the truth, and the WELS would excel in doctrine after breaking from pietistic beginnings. Keeping and sharing the truth should not be mutually exclusive; rather, keeping the truth ought to inform and aid the sharing of this truth. However, as will be shown, the two were somehow seen as opposites.

### ***Brenner and Hoenecke***

Perhaps one of the most poignant illustrations of this tension in home missions would be the rift between President Brenner and Pastor Edgar Hoenecke, although the story revolves around international work. Immediately following World War II, there were opportunities to reach

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53. Carleton Toppe, "Small Synoditis," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 47, no. 23 (6 November 1960): 355. (As quoted in, Otto, "Mission Expansion," 6.)

places that had been closed off during the war. At the 1945 convention, “There were at least two sides to the issue: men, many of whom were in synodical leadership positions, who urged caution in entering what would undoubtedly be an expensive endeavor, and the “mission brethren” who saw this as the time for aggressive work.”<sup>54</sup> Pastor Edgar Hoenecke indeed saw this as a grand time to reach the world and exhorted the convention, “The vastly increased opportunities resulting in so many ways from the present war,—these are our opportunities; the grave responsibilities, not of reconstruction, but of regeneration by the Gospel of the hearts and lives of literally hundreds of millions, these are our responsibilities in the Wisconsin Synod!”<sup>55</sup>

This optimism and desire for expansion was met by President Brenner’s caution and verbal disapproval of Hoenecke’s remarks. What followed was a visible tension between the two. Hoenecke desired to enter Africa, and Brenner was not yet sold. This optimism and conservatism jockeyed for position until Hoenecke and his comrade, Pastor Wacker, were eventually approved to travel to Africa. This letter from Hoenecke to Brenner demonstrates that they were still not in complete agreement about the trip.

My heavy heart is because of my upright concern for you. Every secular agency with whom we have had dealings, also here in blasé New York, including the high officials of the City Bank, went out of their way with a warm, personal interest for our safety and success in a venture entirely foreign to their sphere of interest. They sent us on our way with genuine wishes for our safe return and success. As your friend and brother, I have waited for months for a word from you, our president,—in vain.<sup>56</sup>

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54. Otto, “Mission Expansion,” 61.

55. Reports and Memorials for 1945 Convention, 9.  
(As quoted in Otto, “Mission Expansion,” 53.)

56. Edgar Hoenecke to John W. O. Brenner, 29 April 1949, box 01, folder 005, The John W. O. Brenner Papers, WELS Synod Archives. (As quoted in Otto 65)

Some acknowledge that Brenner could have wanted to proceed with caution. In fact, Brenner was President during some of the most challenging times, including the Great Depression, where financial conservatism was a must. However, Hoenecke thought there was something more.

Edgar Hoenecke believed that this tension had roots that went back to the two influential professors of the seminary from its days in Wauwatosa: J. P. Koehler and August Pieper. Hoenecke, recounting especially the beginning of the Wisconsin Synod's work on the Apache reservation, spoke of Koehler's philosophy that some church bodies have the mission to remain small and compact and grow internally and that beginning new ventures could distract from that mission. Koehler also commented that the "mission brethren's" insistence that unless a church body is engaging in heathen mission work it is not carrying out the Great Commission was "dogmatism with a streak of pietism." In contrast, Hoenecke recalled Professor Pieper frequently mentioning the need to reach out into all the world with the gospel during his lectures on Isaiah. In addition, Hoenecke quoted from Pieper's essay to the 1919 synod convention, "The True Reconstruction of the Church," where Pieper chided the synod for its lackluster efforts to carry out both mission and education work. At a time when the transition to English was in full force, Pieper encouraged the synod to see the opportunities and get to work.<sup>57</sup>

At the heart of the argument was the synodical purpose. Was the purpose of the WELS to remain small and retain the truth through bolstering ministerial education and not stretching itself too thin with heathen mission work? What exactly was the WELS meant to do? Should it grow modestly and internally or strive to reach the ends of the Earth?

This tension might have reached its peak at a meeting in May of 1951, where there was a decision to hold off on mission work to Northern Rhodesia because of financial issues. The looming confessional issue with the Missouri Synod that was intensifying was equally significant in the decision.<sup>58</sup> In response to this, Conrad Frey addressed the confessional issue. "The

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57. Otto, "Mission Expansion," 62–63.

58. Foreign Missions Committee to General Synodical Committee and The Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 14 May 1951, box 01, folder 003, The John W. O. Brenner Papers, WELS Synod Archives. (As quoted in Otto, "Mission Expansion," 71.)

secretary does not feel that either he or the synod is compelled to make a decision between expanding into foreign missions and concentrating on the preservation of the truth. To him the disturbed condition of the Church is one reason we ought to expand into foreign heathen work at this time.”<sup>59</sup>

While this is only one example of a crisis moment, it reveals a lingering tension. If one reaches out too much, one will lose the truth that is so closely tied to their identity. It is as if one's hands are firmly grasping the truth; then one will inevitably be too closed to reach out to others whose worldviews vary significantly from their own. This is a perceived tension—not one in reality—because the hand that receives the truth also shares the truth.

#### Planting or Gathering: Strategy

While the tension between the WELS seeing themselves as a *niche* or national synod was more philosophical in the early years, a confessional catalyst would take the philosophical into the realm of practical and strategic. When WELS broke ties with LCMS, there was a dire need for action outside the synod's regional norms. The hand and glove partnership would no longer work. Members who left WELS territory could no longer find refuge in the better-traveled and more urban LCMS. “And since we are making a stand that the Missouri Synod has drifted from its earlier confessional roots, might we be the needed voice of confessional Lutheranism

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59. 200Foreign Mission Committee to General Synodical Committee and The Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 14 May 1951. (As quoted in Otto, “Mission Expansion,” 76.)



throughout the nation and the world?”<sup>60</sup> The question was no longer if the synod needed to reach further; the question was, “where?”. The question was, “how?”.

### *Every State by '78*

That answer would be neatly packaged in the slogan “Every State by '78.” It was an ambitious goal for the synod coming out of the turmoil to diversify and expand, and it was widely successful. It was more than a slogan; it was a strategy. “These catchy phrases were not motivational gimmicks but expressions of the realistic hopes the Spirit had raised in the hearts of the home mission leaders of the day.”<sup>61</sup> Primarily, this growth came from confessional Lutherans looking for a new church body to call home. “More than a dozen other WELS congregations appeared in Texas and the surrounding states over the next few years, and the majority of them had their roots in the WELS/LCMS split.”<sup>62</sup>

Churches do not appear overnight. The mission board had to strategize to accomplish the task of reaching every state. The strategy was to “ring the cities.”<sup>63</sup> They would start ministries in metropolitan areas but would primarily reach the suburbs where the growth and movement were happening. This is also presumably where many estranged LCMS members resided.

“The many calls coming from concerned Lutherans caused the GBHM to list as a third primary objective, besides reaching the unchurched and conserving the membership of the WELS, the objective, “To serve on request people who share our confessional

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60. Otto, “Mission Expansion,” 24.

61. Berg, “Home Mission Moods and Modes,” 264.

62. Kyle Bitter, “Growth out of Conflict: Opening WELS Missions after the Synodical Conference Dissolved,” 2010, 7.  
<http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/501>.

63. Berg, “Home Mission Moods and Modes,” 264.

concerns.” A new rubric appeared in the Home Mission statistics in 1969, that of members received “By Profession of Faith,” concerned Lutherans formerly of other synods not in doctrinal agreement with us. The figures in this column are now double those of adult confirmands.”<sup>64</sup>

The WELS’ immediate expansion after the split with Missouri was heavily fueled by gathering Lutherans as opposed to planting new seeds. Undoubtedly both happened, but the desire to reach every state, along with incredible opportunities to gather Lutherans, and a suburban strategy, led to massive expansion to areas where Lutherans already were. In other words, the cities' centers were generally unreached, although within driving distance.<sup>65</sup> One can hardly fault the manner of expansion after the split. There was so much uncertainty, and so many needed a pastor and congregation that it simply would seem unwise to plant a mission without a core group. However, the result is that in one of the most rapid periods of growth, gathering was prioritized as opposed to planting in urban centers.

### WELS Mission Planting Conclusion

While the brief history provided has focused on philosophical and strategic tensions that have shaped our synod, there have undoubtedly been external factors and crosses the synod has had to bear with no fault of their own.<sup>66</sup> Shortages of pastors, financial deficits, and internal struggles have affected who the WELS is today and how it sees itself. One has to marvel at God’s

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64. Berg, “Home Mission Moods and Modes,” 264-65.

65. The distinction between suburban and urban is significant. This discussion will be addressed later in the paper.

66. Speaking of the crosses which the WELS had to bear comes in part due to the title of Otto’s thesis, “The Church Grows Under the Cross: Mission Expansion in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1929-1983.”

providence that he brought a small, isolated synod to be what it is today. The fact that this paper can be written stands on the presumption that today the synod is a national church body that can reach even more. God has blessed the church through its efforts and despite its efforts.

However, as the synod continues the noble task of planting and watering the seeds of the gospel through church planting, there is value in recognizing the tensions and tendencies. The truth lies on both sides of each tension. We want to remain balanced in our approach. Are elements of a *niche* self-image dominating, isolating the synod from our nation? Has the affinity towards keeping truth blurred our focus towards reaching those without truth? Is there a chance that the overshadowing model of gathering and watering seeds has led to choking out the value of planting new seeds with purely exploratory missions? If there is truth in the following, it has likely led to an underrepresentation of WELS congregations in urban settings. We must address our self-image, philosophy, and strategy for change to occur.

### **The Data**

Now that a historical reference has been established, this thesis's task is to report the statistical findings of WELS mission planting between 2012 to 2021 and provide an analysis. What follows is the author's attempt at an objective study of data collected by WELS official reports, census data, and respected urban research.

## Defining Terms

Before any reliable data can be collected, we must set and define limits. This section defines “What is Urban?” and “What is a Mission Start” for statistical analysis and future strategic planning.

### *What is a Mission Start?*

This thesis will evaluate new mission starts in the WELS between 2012 to 2021.<sup>67</sup> For the data to be considered, a plant must meet the following criteria: (1) It must be a WELS mission planted by the Board for Home Missions within the United States.<sup>68</sup> (2) It must be a new mission as opposed to a restart.<sup>69</sup> (3) It must have been authorized and recorded as a new mission start in an official WELS report between 2012 and 2021.<sup>70</sup>

Why study mission plants specifically? One could study all WELS congregations and analyze the level at which the synod is urban. While this would be helpful to see where the synod stands, the practical implications would be blurry. If it were revealed that a vast majority of WELS congregations lie in rural settings, it would hardly seem fitting to conclude that we should close the ministry being done in these non-urban settings to make more room for urban ministry.

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67. The reason for selecting this time period is that it is the most recent data with the majority of the mission plants having a ministry center location that can be easily analyzed. Data any more recent would be difficult to analyze.

68. Although the BHM planted a few congregations in Canada, those two congregations will not be included. This allows for a more consistent collection of data through zip codes.

69. This excludes restarts, amalgamations, and mergers.

70. The RTTD’S and BORAM’S report each year which missions are authorized. The missions which are analyzed in this thesis have been taken from these official reports and are distinguished from mission restarts and other forms of missions outside the scope of this paper according to the language presented in these reports.

Studying new mission plants captures the current pulse of synodical strategy and indicates the synod's future direction. A small rudder can significantly change the course of the ship.

Similarly, the power to steer the synod in a more urban direction lies in Home Missions. Mission planting is the key to diversification and has the unique capability of entering settings where the synod has before left untouched.

### ***What is an Urban Plant?***

A city has intangibles. When someone walks into the sea of illustrious screens in Times Square, energy is in the air that is felt. When someone brushes shoulders with multiple people on their way to buy milk, there is an innate sense of awareness that tells that person that they are living in the city. Even those who live in the suburbs feel a marked difference when they get closer and closer to the heart of the city. A city is felt.

However, what comes naturally in one's mind is incredibly difficult to quantify. Defining a city has to date, remained an inconclusive quest. It is not hard to see why considering all the different ways a city can be defined. "By urban we mean emergent, complex, adaptive social network systems in physical space resulting from continuous human exchanges (e.g., information, resources, goods, social connections, social supports, services, money, power)."<sup>71</sup> A city is more than just numbers. A city is something walked. It is something lived. It is something that influences and provides. A city is more than numbers, yet numbers have a critical role.

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71. Michael O. Emerson and Lenore M Knight Johnson. "Soul of the City: The Depth of How 'Urban' Matters in the Sociology of Religion," *Sociology of Religion* 79.1 (2018): 4. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srx056>.

There are two big questions for us to consider regarding where to set the limit for this study. First, we will need to determine *how big* a city has to be to qualify as an urban plant. Secondly, we will define *where* in the city it must be for it to classify as an urban plant. Once an urban plant is defined by answering these two questions, it is possible to examine the results objectively.

### Population-size Matters

Just how large does a city have to be to be a city? Turning to the most natural resource for population measurement in the United States, the US Census Bureau defines a city as having more than ten thousand people.<sup>72</sup> One could analyze the data according to this definition and count every mission plant in a community larger than ten thousand people as a success. However, this would seem to be hardly satisfactory. Basic intuition senses that placing a church plant in New Ulm, MN, and New York, NY in the same category of *urbaness* lacks precision.

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72. "Urban Areas for the 2020 Census-Proposed Criteria." *Federal Register*, 19 February 2021. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/02/19/2021-03412/urban-areas-for-the-2020-census-proposed-criteria>. It is perhaps a little more complex than stated above. Here is the official statement from the resource referenced above. "The Census Bureau proposes to cease distinguishing different types of urban areas. In adopting this proposal, the Census Bureau would identify urban areas of 4,000 or more housing units or 10,000 or more persons without distinguishing types of urban areas. The 50,000-person threshold that has been used to distinguish between urbanized areas and smaller urban areas (whether urban places outside urbanized areas or urban clusters) no longer has the same meaning as when it was adopted in 1950 and, therefore, should no longer be used to distinguish types of urban areas. Further, the threshold is, to some extent, arbitrary; that is, as far as the Census Bureau has been able to determine from scholarship, there is no reason to assume that an urban area of just over 50,000 persons is fundamentally different in terms of economic and social functions and services than an area with just under 50,000 persons. Lastly, federal agencies apply a range of thresholds to various urban-rural classifications. These thresholds can be applied to the published data by the individual agencies to meet their own objectives."

Geoffrey West provides us with insightful discoveries regarding city size in his book, *Scale*.<sup>73</sup> Emerson and Johnson summarize his research below.

He began by looking at infrastructure. As cities double in size, how much more infrastructure is needed? Based on findings in biology and related fields, he hypothesized that there will be economies of scale, such that doubling the population of a city will not require doubling the infrastructure. One example of city infrastructure is gasoline filling stations ... shows his results for the number of gasoline stations in cities plotted logarithmically against city size for four nations for which he obtained data—France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain. The dotted line is the line one would find if the number of gas stations increased in a linear fashion with population. Each nation presents the same relationship, a sublinear relationship. That is, with each doubling of city size, 85 percent more gasoline stations are needed. He found this sublinear scaling—all centering around the 85 percent figure—also for the amount of roads, length of electrical wires, and amount of water pipes in cities around the world. In short, within any given country, a city of one million people needs only 85 percent more infrastructure than does a city of 500,000 people. Even more fascinating is a finding that does not seem to have a counterpart in nature. It is the consistent finding that for socioeconomic factors—e.g., social interactions, innovation, economic activity, GDP, average wages, patents, number of restaurants, social capital—within any given country a doubling of the city population is related in a superlinear fashion, centering around 115 percent. That is, for each doubling of a city population, socioeconomic activities double plus 15 percent. If a city of 500,000 people has 1,000 restaurants, this means that if it grows to one million people, it will have on average not 2,000 restaurants but 2,300 restaurants (double +15 percent). West and his colleagues also find that negative social aspects are superlinearly related to urban growth. Within a nation, double the size of a city and crime increases on average double plus 15 percent, as does segregation, stress, and related negative externalities.<sup>74</sup>

How does this research affect how we should evaluate our urban planting? There are two takeaways: (1) Urban is on a spectrum. As the population increases, so do social interactions, innovation, cultural amenities, and the like. All cities are not the same. New York is quantifiably more urban than New Ulm. While that may be painstakingly obvious, the second reflection deserves careful attention. (2) As cities double, the *urbaness* more than doubles. This super-

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73. Geoffrey West, *Scale: The Universal Laws of Life, Growth, and Death in Organisms, Cities, and Companies*. Reprint edition. New York: Penguin Books, 2018.

74. Emerson, “Soul of the City,” 5.

linear scale proves that there is a bonus for reaching the larger cities. Therefore, attention should be given so cities are weighted according to their *urbaness*. Simply put, the bigger the city, the better, for better or worse.

So, where should the limit be set for this study? The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) provides functional categories. Surveying every county within the United States, the NCHS placed each county into six categories: (1) Large central metro<sup>75</sup> (2) Large fringe metro<sup>76</sup> (3) Medium metro<sup>77</sup> (4) Small metro<sup>78</sup> (5) Micropolitan<sup>79</sup> and (6) Noncore.<sup>80</sup> Especially beneficial to this study is category one, which defines a large central metro county as one with one million or more residents. This number provides this study with a reasonable benchmark for the population.

The division between categories one and two is extremely valuable. For example, a church may be easily within a city's greater Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and be almost entirely separated from urban life. LaSalle County in Illinois is part of the Chicago–Naperville–Elgin, IL–IN–WI MSA, and yet the county is over ninety miles away and a ninety-minute drive

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75. Ingram DD, SJ Franco “2013 NCHS Urban–Rural Classification Scheme for Counties.” National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Health Stat 2(166). 2014. 8. “Counties in MSAs of 1 million or more population that: 1) Contain the entire population of the largest principal city of the MSA, or 2) Have their entire population contained in the largest principal city of the MSA, or 3) Contain at least 250,000 inhabitants of any principal city of the MSA”

76. Ingram, “Urban–Rural Classification Scheme for Counties, 8. NCHS definition Page 8 series 2, no. 166.

77. NCHS definition Page 8 series 2, no. 166 “Counties in MSAs of populations of 250,000–999,999”

78. NCHS definition Page 8 series 2, no. 166 “Counties in MSAs of populations less than 250,000”

79. NCHS definition Page 8 series 2, no. 166 “Counties in micropolitan statistical areas”

80. NCHS definition Page 8 series 2, no. 166 “Nonmetropolitan counties that did not qualify as micropolitan”



from the center of Chicago.<sup>81</sup> Walking in even the largest city in the county, Ottawa, IL, is unsurprisingly different from walking in Downtown Chicago. Therefore category 2 (Large fringe metro) is helpful to classify a suburban county or a “large fringe metro” as defined by the NCHS.

The United Nations (UN) did multiple population studies in 2018 looking at the world's global cities with an urban agglomeration of at least one million residents. In 2018, 45 cities in the United States exceeded one million.<sup>82</sup> Forty-five cities is an achievable mark to assess whether we have reached the larger cities (after all, the bigger, the better).<sup>83</sup> If the purpose of this thesis is to analyze how well we have reached the city over ten years, and if cities' *urbaness* is relative to the population on a super linear scale, then this limit respects the principle that the larger a city is, the more urban. The base for this study to classify as *big enough* is to be in a county defined as a Large central metro (category one).<sup>84</sup> This is the first of three qualifications for a mission start to qualify as an *urban plant*.

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81. “Urban Areas for the 2020 Census-Proposed Criteria.” *Federal Register*.

82. UN Population Division, *The World's Cities in 2018*: UN, 2018.  
<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3799524>.

83. Since defining a starting point on a spectrum is relatively arbitrary, this author researched all U.S. cities above 300,000 found in the U.N.'s work. This was the most exhaustive list the author could find by the United Nations. There were 144 U.S. cities in 2018 that exceeded this mark. However, in the analysis of the mission plants between 300k-999k, none of the mission plants in medium metros qualified as an urban plant because of their low population densities due primarily to the location within the city where each was planted. Therefore, the threshold was reset at one million.

84. Once again, this category is defined as “Counties in MSAs of 1 million or more population that: 1) Contain the entire population of the largest principal city of the MSA, or 2) Have their entire population contained in the largest principal city of the MSA, or 3) Contain at least 250,000 inhabitants of any principal city of the MSA”

## Location Matters

A size limit has been set. However, we must now determine where in or around the city an *urban plant* has to be to be considered ‘in the city.’ In other words, this thesis must deal with the dilemma of the suburb. The first test distinguished between urban and suburban counties, but distinctions should be made even within a county. The difference between suburban and urban life is incredible, since the very nature of the suburb was created to avoid some of the primary aspects of urban life. Therefore, if suburban and urban are different, what distinguishes the two? How does one know what the city is versus the suburb?

The advancement of the suburb has blurred the lines between suburban and urban making this a complex answer. “Although suburbs are one of the most popular spatial concepts in geography and beyond, defining what constitutes a suburb has remained an elusive endeavor. (Clapson and Hutchinson 2010; Forsyth 2012)”<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, many have tried. There are various models that researchers have used to define suburbs best. Researchers have used four of these models: political boundaries, adjacency to the city, building age, and density and building age.<sup>86</sup>

Fabian Terbeck provides valuable research in suburban studies. He researches these four models side-by-side to determine what should classify as urban or suburban. After a thorough analysis of the four models, he writes this. “In conclusion, the finding of this article is that studies on suburbs can justifiably rely on administrative boundaries to define suburbs, even though recent trends in inner cities and inner-ring suburbs have blurred the differences between

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85. Fabian J. Terbeck, “Defining Suburbs: An Evaluation and Comparison of Four Methods.” *Professional Geographer* 72.4 (2020): 587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2020.1758574>.

86. Terbeck, “Defining Suburbs,” 587–89

inner cities and suburbs.”<sup>87</sup> City structures vary regionally, so no model is fool-proof, but Terbeck expresses this recommendation for a nationwide survey. “Although the definition by Anacker, Niedt, and Kwon (2017) overall performed less well than the other methods, it often came in second to one of the other methods, which puts this method in a middle position between the others. It is perhaps a suitable compromise for use in research comparing suburbs across many metropolitan areas.”<sup>88</sup>

The suggested model functions accordingly; Whatever is within the city limits of the primary city of a Metropolitan Statistical Area counts as the city, and all other areas classify as suburban. While this method seems incredibly simple, statistics have shown the lasting impact of political boundaries when discussing aspects of urban life, such as diversity, socioeconomic status, and population density.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, a mission start for this study will qualify for the final round of study if the plant's location is within the administrative boundaries of that city of an MSA of one million or more inhabitants.

### Population Density Matters

If the goal is to reach urban people, there is a distinction between urban and living within the boundaries of a city. For example, many parts of cities (especially in sprawling Southern cities) are just as, if not more, isolated than the typical suburb. “AHS neighborhood description data show that even central cities—which are presumed to be the most urban part of metropolitan

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87. Terbeck, “Defining Suburbs,” 595.

88. Terbeck, “Defining Suburbs,” 594.

89. Terbeck, “Defining Suburbs,” 595.

areas—are quite suburban. A slight majority of households (51 percent) living within the central city of a metropolitan area describe their neighborhood as urban, whereas nearly half (47 percent) describe their neighborhood as suburban. For areas outside of central cities but within a metropolitan area, most respondents (64 percent) describe their neighborhood as suburban.”<sup>90</sup> If someone lives within a city’s boundaries, and yet their lives are not surrounded by people, their lives are more suburban than urban. The principle that *urbanness* is on a scale applies not only when comparing different cities but also comparing areas within a city.

“A city is a social form in which people physically live in *close proximity* to one another.”<sup>91</sup> If we regard this definition of a city as accurate, then there must be a higher population density. Tim Keller speaks to the difference between urban and suburban lifestyles.

If you think of these elements as components of a pizza (tomato sauce, cheese, pepperoni, dough), the city is a place where every neighborhood is a slice of pizza. Along with residences, it has places to work, shop, read, learn, enjoy art and music, worship, and play, as well as public government buildings such as town halls and courts. All are mixed and compacted together within walking distance. In ancient times, rural areas and even villages could not provide all these elements; only cities could sustain them all. This is why some define a city as a “walkable, mixed-use settlement.” And in modern times, the dominant arrangement — the suburb — deliberately avoids this urban pattern. Suburbs are normally dedicated to large, single-use zones — so places to live, work, play, and learn are separated from one another and are reachable only by car, usually through pedestrian-hostile zones. Suburbs and rural areas have the pizza ingredients, but not in pizza form. It is tomatoes here, dough there, and pepperoni over there.<sup>92</sup>

Therefore, this final stage of the examination is crucial. A required level of population density must be set to determine whether the area of the city where the plant is located retains

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90. Shawn Bucholtz, “Urban. Suburban. Rural. How Do Households Describe Where They Live? | HUD USER.” *U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development*, 3 August 2020. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr-edge-frm-asst-sec-080320.html>.

91. Keller, *Center Church*, 135.

92. Keller, *Center Church*, 137.

key aspects of urban life. The primary resource for accessing the census data, City-Data, categorizes population densities for zip codes as follows: 0–999 (very low); 1,000–2,999 (low); 3,000–5,999 (average); 6,000–9,999 (high); 10,000+ (very high).<sup>93</sup> For the location to qualify as an urban plant, the final requirement will be that the zip code in which it currently resides must be average or above in population density. This sets 3,000 (people/mi<sup>2</sup>) as the minimum.<sup>94</sup>

The requirements for a mission start to classify as an urban plant are as follows: 1. To be in a county classified as a Large central metro 2. To be located within the administrative boundaries of the primary city. 3. To have a population density of 3,000 (people/mi<sup>2</sup>) or more.

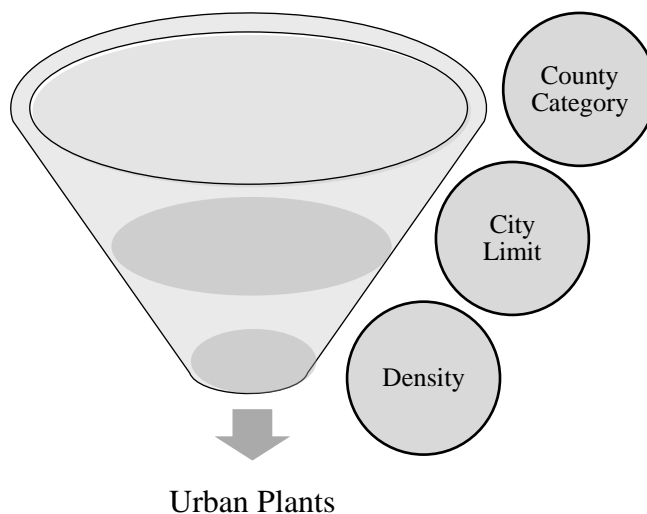


Figure 1. Urban Plant Funnel

93. “Stats about All US Cities,” *City-Data*, n.d.  
<https://www.city-data.com/>.

94. The mean population density for WELS’ Home Missions plants between 2012 and 2021 was 1,577 (people/mi<sup>2</sup>). This is categorized as low population density. Perhaps a more accurate representation to avoid outliers skewing the data is to look at the median. The median population density of mission plants in this study was 1189 (people/mi<sup>2</sup>). For a point of reference, the zip code where Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is located has a population density of 1,040 (people/mi<sup>2</sup>). Thirty minutes of a drive away, at Grace Lutheran Church, downtown Milwaukee, there is a population density of 12,199 (people/mi<sup>2</sup>). At the highest end of the scale, Sure Foundation in Queens, NY boasts 33,326 (people/mi<sup>2</sup>). All population density data in this paper is gathered from “Stats about All US Cities,” *City-Data*, n.d.

### Mission Plant Examination: How Many Urban Plants?

Now that terms and limits are defined, it is time for the numbers to talk. All eligible mission plants were compiled and examined through two series of analyses.<sup>95</sup><sup>96</sup> The first method of analysis follows the process diagrammed before to determine the number of urban plants over the past ten years. The second method evaluates how the results of where the WELS planted affected the demographic surroundings of the missions.

#### ***Test 1: Counties***

The first step in the examination process will look at city size defined by county categories. The first question is to quantify how many mission plants were placed in “large central metro” counties. This determines if the mission plant is in an MSA<sup>97</sup> that is *big enough*, requiring one million inhabitants. The missions in “large central metro” counties will advance to the second round of examination.

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95. “Home Missions List Compiled,” n.d.

The mission plants were taken from this BHM document and cross-referenced with documentation from WELS’ official reports. Population data was taken from a 2018 report from the United Nations using population data from urban agglomerations.

96. UN Population Division, *The World’s Cities in 2018* : UN, 2018.  
<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3799524>.

97. An MSA is a Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Planting according to city size

From 2012 to 2021, the Board for Home Missions planted fifty-nine new missions eligible for this study. Out of the fifty-nine, WELS planted thirteen within qualifying metropolitan counties.

They are:

- Keller, Tarrant County;
- South Gilbert, Maricopa County;
- Las Vegas, Clark County;
- Goodyear, Maricopa County;
- Las Vegas, Clark County;
- Peoria, Maricopa County;
- Atlanta, Fulton County;
- Cornelius, Mecklenburg County;
- Milwaukee, Milwaukee County;
- Phoenix, Maricopa County;
- Folsom, Sacramento County;
- Houston, Harris County; and
- West San Antonio, Bexar County.

### ***Test 2: City Limits***

Now that we have divided suburban and urban counties, the next step is determining whether the area within the county is suburban or urban. The limiting factor will be whether the plant is inside or outside the city limits of the primary city within the MSA. The city-limit standard

excludes Keller (Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington), South Gilbert (Phoenix–Mesa–Chandler), Goodyear (Phoenix–Mesa–Chandler), Peoria (Phoenix–Mesa–Chandler), Las Vegas Korean Fellowship (Las Vegas–Henderson–Paradise, NV), Cornelius (Charlotte–Concord–Gastonia), and Folsom (Sacramento–Roseville–Arden-Arcade). These mission plants were located in counties defined as “large central metro” but were not within the city limits of the primary cities listed on the MSAs. The following mission plants were the only ones to pass the city size and city limit test:

- Las Vegas—Nevada African (2015);
- Atlanta—Intown (2016);
- Milwaukee—Grace (2018);
- Phoenix—Midtown (2018);
- Houston—Hope in the Heights (2019); and
- West San Antonio—Our Savior (2020).

Six of the fifty-nine mission plants (10.2 percent) were located within the city limits of cities with MSA’s over one million people.

### ***Test 3: Population Density***

Seven mission plants have advanced to this final stage of examination. Because of the focal role of population density in urban life, the 3,000 (people/mi<sup>2</sup>) limiter will now be applied. One of the six failed to pass this examination stage, while the other five exceeded this requirement. They are:



- Las Vegas—Nevada African (2015);
- Atlanta—Intown (2016);
- Milwaukee—Grace (2018);
- Phoenix—Midtown (2018); and
- Houston—Hope in the Heights (2019).

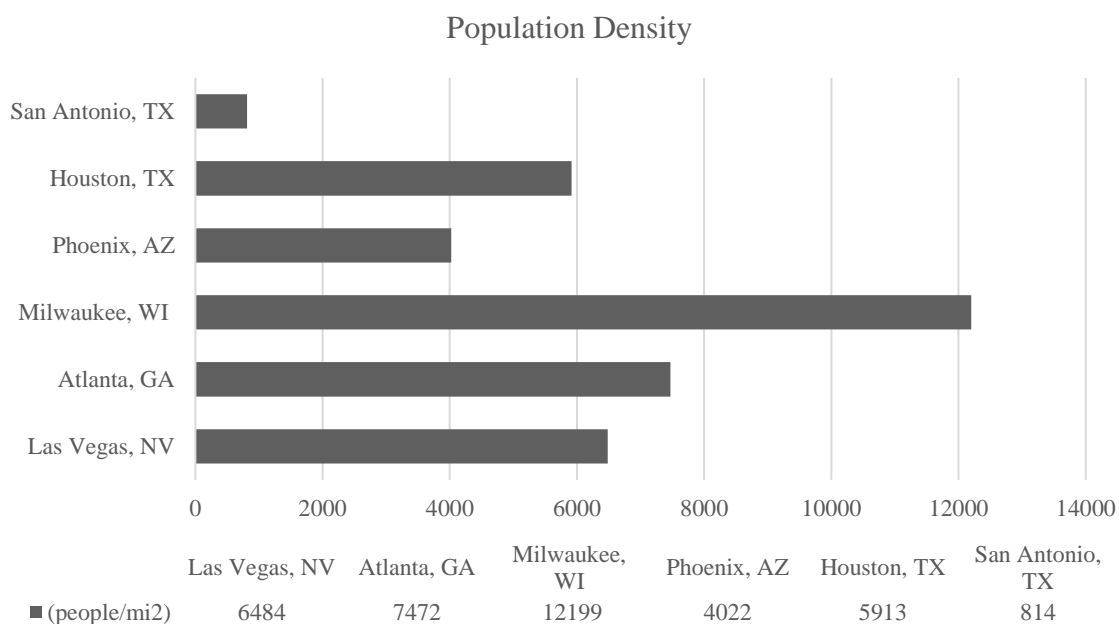


Figure 2. *Source* “Stats about All US Cities,” City-Data, n.d. <https://www.city-data.com/>

The notable large city plant excluded by the population density limiter is West San Antonio. Sitting on the very edge of the sprawling San Antonio city limits, this zip code has an average of 814 (people/mi<sup>2</sup>), although it likely will increase. This population density is lower than that surrounding Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon and lower than the average suburb in this study. Although San Antonio is one of the nation's largest cities, the mission plant's location falls more into the suburban category than urban. It is helpful to note that the mother church is an urban church reaching out into currently suburban areas! As stated earlier,

planting churches in lower-density areas is nothing wrong. However, as we categorize at a synodical level, we should recognize the difference between planting a suburban church in a city and planting an urban church.

### ***The Results***

These five mission plants represent all *urban plants* over ten years of WELS mission planting, yielding a percentage of roughly eight percent of all mission starts that were *urban plants*.<sup>98</sup>

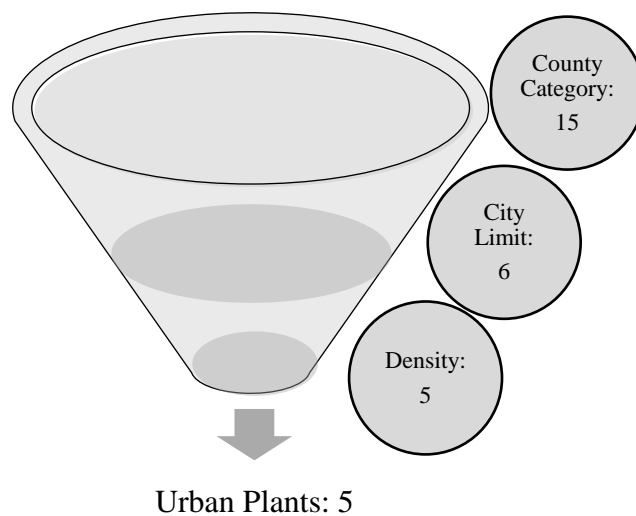


Figure 3. Urban Plant Funnel Results

### **Data Analysis**

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98. Notably, none of the mission plants located in cities smaller than one million people achieved a qualifying population density score. Although there was at least one (and usually multiple) zip-code(s) within each of these cities well above the threshold, none of the plants were in these population dense areas.

### Analyzing Where WELS Planted

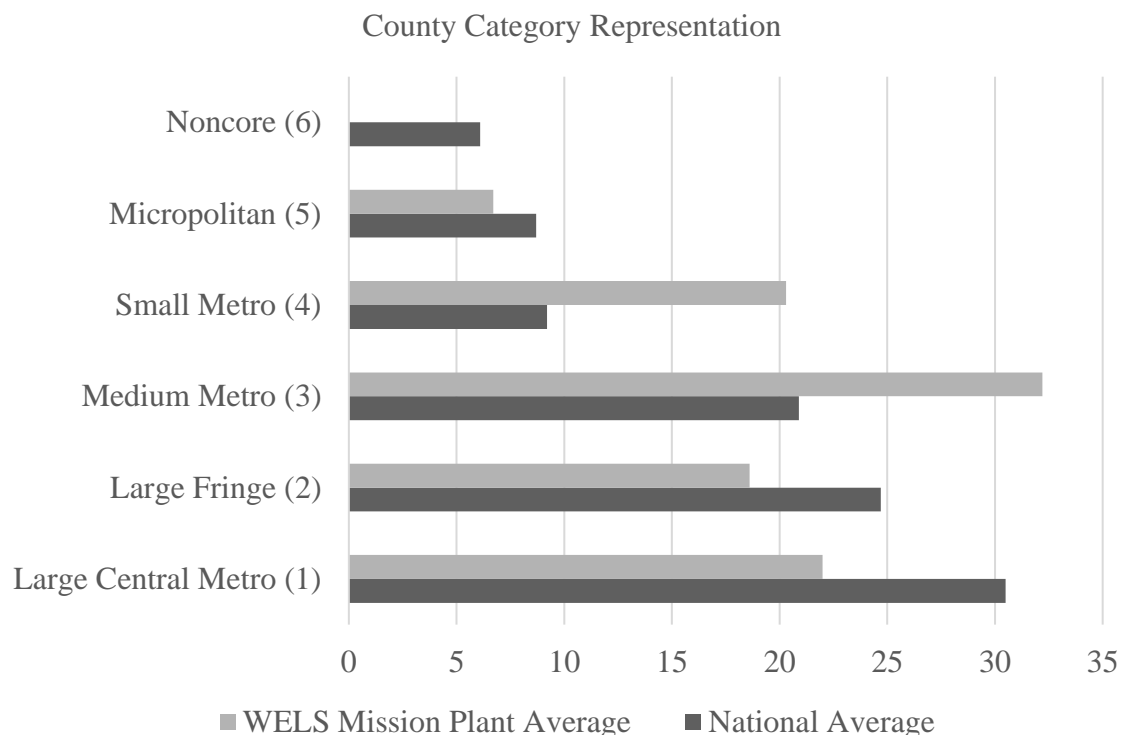
In analyzing where the WELS planted missions, the method will be to analyze it at various scopes parallel to the three tests in the examination process. The first will be a satellite view to see whether we have reached large metropolitan areas (including suburbs). Second, the focus will zoom in on the distinction between planting in the administrative boundaries of large cities versus planting in the suburbs. Third, the focus will zoom in once more to look at those plants within the administrative boundaries of large cities and see the micro-scale tendencies. Finally, the author will give a general assessment of the entire picture of where WELS planted. A three-tiered analysis aims to illuminate areas where WELS is performing well and to show areas for growth.

#### *Satellite View*

On the wall of this author's childhood bedroom, there was a map of the world at night. Along the darkened face of the Earth, there were illustrious centers of activity where millions of sources of light all combined to mark the location of a single city. Similarly, this analysis looks at where WELS planted from the viewpoint of a satellite at night. Were mission plants in or around those major sources of light in the night? Or were they unilluminated or too small to find from a distance? This was the purpose of the county categorization.

The first thing one notices from above are those large cities above one million residents. They span from East to West, Seattle to Miami, Boston to San Diego, and many in-between. In these glowing cities, there are 24 crosses representing WELS mission plants in and around the forty-five largest cities in the United States. A cross lies within the city limits of six of these

large lights. An additional sixteen reflect the light of those large cities in the suburbs like the moon reflects the sun. There are more crosses illuminated by the lights of the large cities than one might expect. In fact, 40.6 percent of all mission plants are in these big cities' metropolitan statistical areas (categories one and two).



*Figure 4. Representation by County Category*

Source: Ingram, “Urban–Rural Classification Scheme for Counties, 8.

While this seems like a fair share (especially since there are six categories in total), it does not reflect where the US population resides. 55.2 percent of Americans live in “large central metro” or “large fringe metro” counties.<sup>99</sup> There remains a negative 14.6% gap between WELS mission planting and where the average American lives. A further inspection shows that the disparity comes from categories one and two counties. Mission planting in WELS is

<sup>99</sup> Ingram, “Urban–Rural Classification Scheme for Counties, 8.

underperforming (−8.5 percent) in “large central metro” counties as well as (−6.1%) in “large fringe metros.” In other words, the problem is in these major MSA's urban and suburban areas.

While a fourteen percent gap is not overwhelming, it displays room for growth. If through mission planting, there is a desire to correct the trend that WELS remains underrepresented in these major cities, it would necessitate planting above 55.2 percent to achieve “Average America.” This is because, as a synod at large, the vast number of congregations are already firmly established in less populated areas.

Where are the missions being planted if there is a disparity in the first two categories? It is not because they are being planted in rural settings, contrary to what one might surmise. The bottom two categories (5—Micropolitan and 6—Noncore) are also slightly underrepresented by a margin of −8.1%. Most (52.5%) of WELS missions were planted in medium or small metros (categories one and two). Contrast that with 30.1% of where Americans live, resulting in a +22.4% gap between WELS and average America.

From a satellite view, every single plant within categories one and two is an encouragement and blessing to the synod. Although still underrepresented, these mission plants around these metropolises shine brightly as evidence that the WELS is not unwilling to plant urban. However, the current tendency remains noticeably under the curve.

### ***5x Focus: Planting within the Metro Area***

We will continue with the metaphor of satellite imaging, zooming into the twenty-four counties classified as “large central metro” and “large fringe metro” counties occupied by mission plants. The goal is no longer to see whether they are ‘illuminated’ by being around the city; the question

is whether they are the center of the light or are they smaller independent lights flowing from the city like the corona of the sun. Breaking from the metaphor, are these plants in the city proper, or are they in the suburbs?

As we take snapshots from these twenty-four plants in and around these major urban centers and locate the plant in reference to the administrative boundaries, eighteen of the twenty-four are in the suburbs. Stated positively: six of the twenty-four (twenty-five percent) are within the city limits. This data shows that suburban plants in these areas are favored three-for-one over plants within the city's administrative boundaries.

### ***10x Focus: Planting within the City Limits***

The focus again narrows. Now only what is inside the city limits can be seen. The purpose of this scope is to evaluate if, once entering a city, the missions would trend to the less urban parts to find the most suburban areas of urban centers. In this regard, the mission plants within the city performed exceedingly well. West San Antonio was the outlier with a low population density. It is helpful to note that there is nothing wrong with planting in areas of low density as long as it is not the only thing we are doing. The purpose is to see if trends show we are not reaching specific communities. Two of the five missions that qualified as urban mission plants fell into the normal density range, while two were high density, and one was very high. This demonstrates that once a mission plant was within the administrative boundaries of these cities, they did not seek the most suburban areas in these cities.

### *Concluding Assessment of Where WELS Planted*

WELS can be proud of many things for their mission planting from 2012 to 2021. However, there is an equal number of things to be learned. The tension between quality and quantity appears to be an appropriate method to assess these ten years. Regarding quantity, the number of urban plants is still low compared to “Average America.” The most significant component in this seems to be favoring the medium and small metro areas over category one and two counties.

As quality is concerned, however, WELS can boast. The five *urban plants* are in population-dense areas reaching people less frequently reached by the synod. The most notable aspect of their quality relates to the *urban scale* principle.<sup>100</sup> Within the five qualifying cities, there is a variance in *urbaness*. This author has classified the cities according to size. The category of 1000k to 2000k has Grace Downtown’s proposed second site as the lone occupant. Doubling the city size, the Las Vegas plant represent the category between two and four million residents. When we double the category once more, three cities stand above the rest. Houston, Atlanta, and Phoenix fall between 4—8 million residents.<sup>101</sup> What is commendable is the size of the three cities in that final category. The cities in this category represent three of the nation’s ten largest cities. While an increase in quantity is desirable, the quality of the urban plants (according to *urbaness*) is a hopeful sign in this direction.

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100. Geoffrey West, *Scale*.

101. “World Urbanization Prospects - Population Division - United Nations,” n.d. <https://population.un.org/wup/download/>. It is helpful to note that there are three cities in the United States that are in categories above this—Chicago with over nine million, Los Angeles with nearly fourteen million, and New York with nearly twenty-one million.

### Analyzing Mission Planting's (Urban Plants') Impact

Although the number of urban plants has been stressed throughout this thesis, the end goal has never been about location; it has always been about people. While there are many categorizations one could study to assess the impact of *urban plants* on a synod, one of the most important and accessible for analysis is racial diversity. Therefore, this thesis will see how the *urban plants* racially affected the ten years of mission planting. To do so, I have collected the zip codes of each mission plant and gathered its demographic and socioeconomic metrics.<sup>102</sup> There are three primary reasons to study the plants as such. For one, it highlights the difference between urban versus suburban/rural planting. Secondly, it provides a more explicit depiction of the demographics of our planting grounds. Third, it brings to light helpful or hurtful trends for future consideration.

#### *Demographically*

According to the United States Census data from 2010, 13.6% of the US population is Black/African American alone.<sup>103</sup> The Hispanic/Latino category claims 18.9% of the US population.<sup>104</sup> In comparison, over ten years of mission planting, the average population demographic of the zip codes we planted in was 7.6% Black/African American and 12%

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102. Zip codes were collected from the WELS yearbook search. Addresses represent where these missions currently gather, except for a few rare cases where a location could not be found. In those cases, the data was averaged from the zip codes within the town or city named in the reports.

103. "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States," n.d. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/POP010220#POP010220>.

104. "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States," n.d.



Hispanic/Latino. Comparing the two shows a  $-6.9\%$  disparity between the Hispanic/Latino community and a  $-6.0\%$  gap with Black/African American communities. While more discussion will come about this in later analysis, the fact that the shortcoming is not even shorter is thanks to the five *urban plants*. See Figure 4:

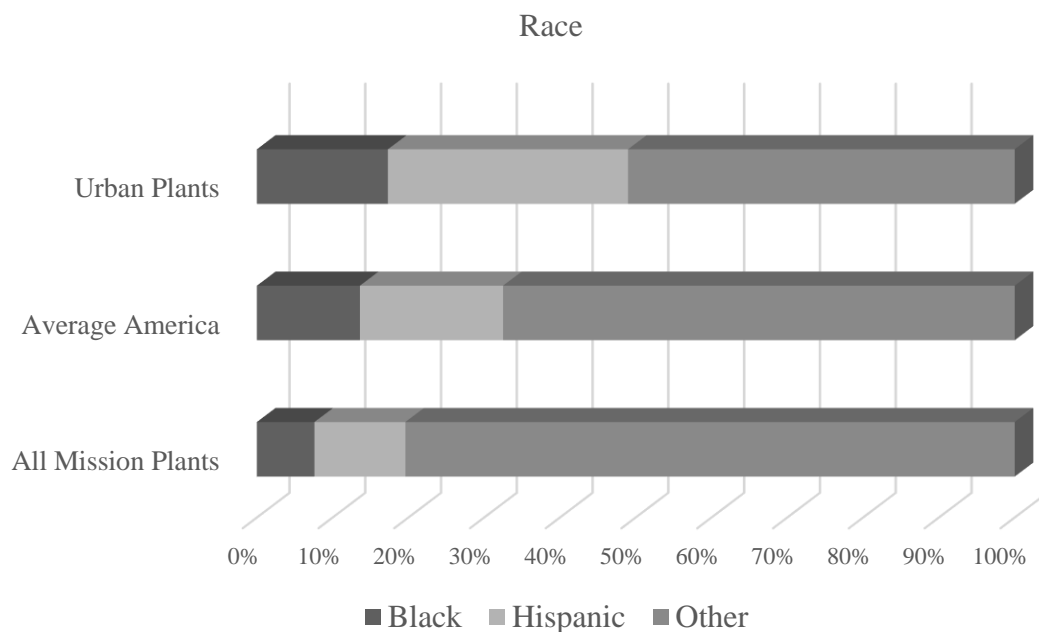


Figure 4. Demographic Comparison of Mission Plants and the United States

Sources: “Stats about All US Cities,” City-Data, n.d.; and “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States,” n.d.

As for the five urban plants, the communities in which they were placed were more diverse than even the national averages and much more diverse than the *non-urban plant*. The average Hispanic/Latino population of these urban plants was 31.7%. This is 67.8% more Hispanics/Latinos in these urban plants than the national average. An even more significant difference is seen when one compares the urban plants to the non-urban plants. Hispanics/Latinos only represented 10.0% of other mission plants’ zip codes. This means that the

Hispanic/Latino population in urban settings more than tripled that of their non-urban counterparts.

The Black/African American population displays similar trends. The WELS non-urban plants averaged 6.7% African American. On the other side, *urban plants* averaged 17.3% of their zip codes being Black/African American. This is closer to, but still 3.7% above, the national average of 13.6%. The rate Black/African Americans were in the communities of *urban plants* versus *non-urban plants* is more than double. Therefore, if WELS wants its churches to reflect their communities, and if the synod wants to reflect the nation, *urban plants* are essential for diversification within a synod. Urban plants significantly impact opportunities for racial diversification and intercultural ministry.

### PART 3: INFORMING THE NEXT 100 MISSIONS

This spring, the WELS will embark on its most aggressive mission planting plan since “Every State by ’78,” if not in its history. We will feel the effects of the next ten years throughout the remainder of the synod’s history. What we do today regarding *urban planting* affects the future. The past ten years have brought a shielded optimism about what the next ten years might bring. While WELS has demonstrated a certain level of commitment to urban planting, there is room for the next ten years to increase this commitment. The author of this thesis has not been called to strategize where and how we should plant missions. Nor does this author presume to know more than those who are called to decide where missions go. God has granted these men authority and wisdom to act as they serve the synod and their Lord. This is a difficult calling. What follows, then, are not suggestions of what to do but rather humble ideas to bring about reflection for us as a synod to consider how we might grow.

If the historical review of WELS mission planting has taught anything, it has shown the many barriers to mission planting. These tensions come in waves of various strengths throughout the years. There can always be a reason not to invest in urban planting. The tension between planting and gathering, *niche* and national, keeping and sharing, has been and will continue to be problematic for urban mission planting. If the synod is committed to urban mission planting, it would be beneficial to acknowledge this formally. Specific goals or plans would serve the synod in two respects. First, it would hold itself accountable when tensions arise. There is necessary flexibility with any stated goals, as the Lord is the only one in charge of our history and the

world's future. However, these goals would guide the synod to stand firm through various waves. Secondly, it sends a clear message and meta-message to ourselves and to other communities that we believe and practice what we preach, that God's mission is to *all* people. If one grants a need for being intentional, the following suggestions discuss how the synod might do so.

#### Percentage of Urban Plants

As a synod, we have declared an incredible goal, 100 missions in 10 years. What is preventing us from subdividing that goal into a few more goals? What if the synod declared that a certain percentage of those mission plants would be urban? Subdividing this goal would prevent taking only the "easy" or "safe options" and unknowingly favoring the moderately wealthy, white, middle-class. This goal (as with every goal) requires clear definitions of what one means by an *urban plant*. Perhaps the definition provided in this thesis can serve as a starting point.

#### Average America Demographics

Another possible goal would be to shoot for "Average America." Instead of shooting for a specific number of urban plants, WELS could seek to balance its "assets" by community type to achieve "Average" or "Above Average America." Similar to the methods previously applied, the WELS could attempt to match America's population spread. The county method displayed by the NCHS could help the mission plants at a macro level by determining what percentage of missions should be planted in each category of counties. The population density metrics would

help ensure that WELS is reaching different people in different places. This approach is difficult, however, because one is shooting at a moving target. The benefit of this approach is that it provides a more thorough depiction of the grand scheme of WELS planting. A combination of the “Average America” method and the “Percentage of Urban Plants” method would be the most thorough and beneficial.

### Experiment with Various Models

Urban planting is a marathon, not a sprint. This is true locally but even more at the synodical level. It is an investment of time and resources. The most notorious inhibitor of urban planting is the cost. However, its value far outweighs the price. One wonders if urban planting inherently means a financial burden upon the synod. A goal in this regard could be to field test three different models of urban planting. One model could be completely exploratory, another with a suburban sister church, and another with significant third-source funding built into the ministry plan to sustain the budget. Property in urban centers comes at a high price, but the value generally increases, and renting office space presents exciting opportunities for further consideration. This author trusts that minds greater and more experienced will be able to bring viable options to the table for urban methodology. Testing urban planting is an investment for the future that would greatly benefit our ability to reach more people in urban communities successfully.

## CONCLUSION

In the conclusion of Professor Sorum's work, he writes a persuasive paragraph.

That question with which God concludes Jonah's book always gets me. When I get fed up and frustrated, when I start looking for a boat heading out for the calmer suburban seas, when I just don't want to deal with the city, it's this question that puts my life and my call back into perspective. I am a great and wicked sinner. Yet, God has had mercy on me and so even promised to share his glorious, eternal home with me. I am now perfectly, blissfully safe. But what about that great city? Should God not be concerned about urban North America? What a ridiculous notion! Of course he is. Should I not be concerned with the eternal destiny of souls in urban North America? Should pastors and teachers and the grassroots of the WELS not be concerned with urban North America? Remember, now, what this question is really asking. God's question really asks, "Do I appreciate my gracious, merciful Savior and all he did for me enough to take him on the road and downtown to the peoples and folks so that all might have the chance to enjoy the free gift of eternal salvation through Jesus Christ?" God doesn't ask rhetorical questions. He is waiting for our answer."<sup>105</sup>

Between 2012–2021 the WELS answered, although timidly. There is a voice that our synod has taken from a whisper to an "inside voice." The time is ripe. The season is here. God has stated his mission and invited us to respond. Over the next ten years and one hundred missions, let us respond to God with a resounding shout so that everyone can hear, "God's mission is to *all* people! The city is great to us."

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105. Sorum, "Theology of Missions," 50.

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