

# *Lutherans Say* # 1

## Narrative Report

### *Introduction*

*Lutherans Say . . .* is an ongoing program of surveys conducted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), with the purpose of providing information on the concerns, views, situations, and characteristics of ELCA members and pastors. The selection of the first samples of members and pastors began in September 1987. First a random sample of 300 congregations was drawn, and then we worked with these congregations to choose random samples of their members. The procedure gave each baptized member of the ELCA (13 years old or more) an equal chance of being chosen. A random sample of pastors was drawn, and to it was added the pastors serving the selected congregations.<sup>1</sup> Pastors in any kind of call were included, but fully retired pastors, and those without a call, were not. By February 1988, the sample was complete.

The topics for the *Lutherans Say . . .* surveys are generally determined by consultation among all the churchwide units of the ELCA. For the first survey of the program, however, the Office for Research, Planning, and Evaluation (ORPE), which is responsible for the program, chose topics which seemed likely to provide useful baseline information for the infant church. Three topics were chosen:

- basic information (what is often called "demographics") on the social and economic characteristics of members and pastors;
- current involvement in the life of the church; and
- how and why church involvement has changed over people's lifetimes.

The questionnaires were mailed in late February and early March, and were followed by three reminders, one of which contained a new copy of the questionnaire. By the cutoff of returns (at the beginning of June), 1134 usable questionnaires from lay members, and 1023 from pastors, had been received.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The member sampling was done using a two-stage cluster design. In the first stage, congregations were divided into explicit strata of roughly equal size, and then two (serving as primary sampling units) were selected, with probability proportionate to reported congregational size, from each stratum. In the second stage, respondents were selected from congregational member lists by systematic selection with a random start and probability inversely proportional to reported congregational size. The pastors were chosen by systematic selection with a random start through the computerized clergy rosters of the three predecessors to the ELCA, sorted by a set of implicit stratifiers. This gave each pastor an equal chance of selection. The pastors included because their congregation was selected for the lay sample, however, had unequal chances of selection; weighting will be used to compensate for this in later stages of the analysis. Full documentation of the sampling process can be obtained from ORPE. An analysis of the design effects and sampling errors resulting from this process is still to be performed; the results from this analysis will also be available from ORPE.

<sup>2</sup> It is hard to report an unambiguous response rate, since many of those who did not return questionnaires turned out to be ineligible. The raw number of people to whom  
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Below is a narrative summary of the results. A statistical appendix showing the exact percentage of respondents who chose each possible answer to each question is available.

### ***Characteristics of ELCA Members and Pastors***

Gender. Almost 62 percent of the lay respondents are women. This reflects in part the fact that there are more women than men in the church--in the sample, 56 percent of those whose gender could be determined were women--in part that women are more active in church than men, and in part that they are easier to contact and more willing to respond to surveys. (By comparison, the 1986 General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, using a national sample of the adult population, had 58 percent female respondents; this is significantly higher than the proportion of women--52 percent--in the adult population; this shows how women are more prone to participate in surveys than men.)

ELCA pastors, on the other hand, are overwhelmingly male: men comprise over 90 percent of the respondents. Women began to be ordained in the predecessors to the ELCA less than 20 years ago, and the current gender balance is clearly in the process of changing.

Age. The median age for the lay respondents was 47. Compared with the U. S. population, we have quite substandard representation of people in the age brackets up to 35 years, approximately proportionate representation of the brackets from there to 55, and overrepresentation of all older age groups. Overall, 40 percent of our people are 55 or more, compared with 26 percent in the U. S. population (excluding those under 13, to make a valid comparison). Clearly this indicates intense challenges for the future of the ELCA.

The pastors cannot be compared directly to the lay respondents, since fully retired pastors were not included in the sample and children are not pastors. Almost all the pastors were between 25 and 64 years old, with a median age of 45.

Race and ethnicity. As we also know from annual congregational reports, few ELCA members--less than 2 percent--are Hispanic or non-White. ELCA members come from predominantly Northern European stock; 45 percent said their primary ancestry was German, 26 percent Scandinavian, and 15 percent English, Scotch or Irish; only 14 percent come from all other ancestries combined! The pastors are similar ethnically.

Work, school, education, and income. ELCA members are clearly more privileged than Americans as a whole, although the differences are not extreme,

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<sup>2</sup>(...continued)

we attempted to mail questionnaires was 1968 for the lay sample and 1103 for the clergy, and therefore the response rate cannot be lower than 58 percent lay and 93 percent clergy. A telephone survey of non-respondents was conducted during summer 1988, and the data from this survey are being analyzed. This will permit us to make good estimates of nonresponse, and also of the biases it produced in the survey results. A report on this survey and the response rate for *Lutherans Say . . .* will be available by the end of 1988 from ORPE. At this point, it is already clear that the response rate, as one might expect, was higher among those active in the church than from inactives. The views, situations, and experiences of inactive members are therefore underrepresented. Once the nonrespondent survey has been analyzed, we can estimate the bias thus introduced and use weighting to correct for it when analyzing topics where we especially need to give full weight to inactives.

and there is great diversity among members. For instance, 54 percent have had at least some college, compared with 38 percent of the GSS respondents. About 20 percent, however, never graduated from high school. Income levels are also moderately high: 39 percent reported family income of under \$ 25,000, another 20 percent \$ 25,000 to \$34,999, and the remaining 41 percent over \$ 35,000. Most are working at least part-time, as Table 1 shows, and 15 percent are currently enrolled in school. Two thirds of the spouses of married respondents are also working, as shown in Table 2.

Table 1  
Work Situations of *Lutherans Say . . .* Respondents

	<u>Lay Members</u>		<u>Pastors</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Total resps.	1134		1023	
Missing info.	49		16	
Valid info.	1085	100.0	1007	100.0
Not working	314	28.9	8	0.8
Retired	125	11.5	0	0.0
Working-total	646	59.6	999	99.2
-Full-time empl.	400	36.8	853	84.7
-Part-time empl.	146	13.5	42	4.2
-Self-employed	95	8.8	91	9.0
-No answer	5	0.5	13	1.3

Pastors are obviously an extremely well-educated group. Their family incomes cannot be directly compared with lay ones, since retired people and students are absent; the median is around \$ 37,000. Essentially all are working, the vast majority full-time. Among the married pastors, nearly three quarters have working spouses, and 13 percent have spouses in school; few, therefore, have spouses who could meet the traditional expectations of clergy spouses (even if this were desirable).

Table 2  
Work Situations of Spouses of *Lutherans Say* . . . Respondents

	<u>Spouses of Lay Members</u>		<u>Spouses of Pastors</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Total resps.	1134		1023	
No spouse	366		99	
Missing info.	45		45	
Valid info.	723	100.0	879	100.0
Not working	146	20.2	231	26.3
Retired	99	13.7	1	0.1
Working-total	478	66.1	647	73.6
-Full-time empl.	304	42.0	338	38.4
-Part-time empl.	77	10.7	263	29.9
-Self-employed	91	12.6	40	4.6
-Not indicated	6	0.8	6	0.7

### ***ELCA Families and Their Residences***

Two thirds of the lay respondents are currently married, with 9 percent widowed, 3 percent divorced or separated, and 19 percent never married. Compared with the GSS national sample, this means that we have a significant overrepresentation of married people and a dramatic underrepresentation of the divorced and separated (who make up 14 percent of the GSS sample). Among the factors which may contribute to this situation are the disruptions and burdens which divorced people have to cope with, making church involvement difficult, the failure of some parishes to make such people feel fully welcome, and the possible contribution of religious life to maintaining stable marriages. ELCA members are also a very stable lot geographically; well over half have lived at their present address over ten years.<sup>3</sup>

Members almost all travel by car to church, and tend to live moderate distances--typically about 10 minutes drive--from where they worship. About one fifth, however, live about 15 minutes away, and another fifth live 20 or more minutes away. In urban or suburban settings, this means that typically the church is about one neighborhood or community away from where one lives. One might say that our churches tend to be "extended neighborhood" operations, rather than either neighborhood churches in a strict sense, or regional churches. For those who live in urban or suburban areas with a fairly high concentration of ELCA congregations, a 10 minute drive probably means that one is not attending the closest ELCA church. Many members, it seems, are making an elective choice of congregation, based on other factors in addition to proximity. If our goal is that our congregations are to be neighborhood churches, we have work to do.

<sup>3</sup> An analysis of the respondents' geographic location, regionally and in terms of urban/rural/suburban distinctions, remains to be done. We do already know that the largest concentrations of respondents are found in Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

ELCA pastors, because of their age range, are much less likely to be single or widowed, and 90 percent are currently married. Geographically, however, the nature of their work leads to instability; 45 percent have lived at their present address three years or less.

Comprehensive data on respondents' family structures was collected, and future reports will describe more fully what can be learned from this information. For this report, we have a preliminary analysis of types of family structure, presented in Table 3. The first part of this table shows basic household types. Five out of six<sup>4</sup> of the lay respondents providing full household information live in households containing a married couple, with only small proportions in each of the other main types of household. The second part of the table shows the age groups present in each household type (these percentages add to more than 100 because there are people of varying ages in all but the single person households). The single person households are mostly composed of elderly people. About half of the "other family households" contain children under 18; these are single parent households. Altogether, 39 percent of the households contain children under 18; 25 percent contain persons 65 or older.

Table 3

Household Structures of ELCA Members and Pastors

A. Basic types of household structure

	<u>Members</u>		<u>Pastors</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>Pct</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Pct</u>
Married family households (containing a married couple)	842	82.3	924	90.9
Other family households (no married couple, but related persons)	96	9.4	14	1.4
Non-family households (unrelated persons)	22	2.1	5	0.5
Single person households	63	6.2	73	7.2
TOTAL	1023	100.0	1016	100.0
(Not typeable - missing information)	111		7	
(Total respondents)	1134		1023	

This proportion is higher than the proportion currently married, because the respondent is not necessarily one of the married persons in the household. The respondent, for instance, could be a teenager living with married parents, or an older person living with a married child.

## B. Ages of persons present in each type of household

	<u>Members</u>	<u>Pastors</u>
Percent of households with at least one person in this age group:		
Married family households (N)	(842)	(924)
Child or children under 18	41.6	54.2
Person(s) 18-24	16.3	20.1
Person(s) 25-64	75.8	94.9
Person(s) 65 or older	21.0	4.0
Other family households (N)	(96)	(14)
Child or children under 18	49.0	78.6
Person(s) 18-24	25.0	42.9
Person(s) 25-64	64.6	28.6
Person(s) 65 or older	16.7	
Non-family households (N)	(22)	(5)
Child or children under 18	18.2	-
Person(s) 18-24	40.1	-
Person(s) 25-64	63.6	100.0
Person(s) 65 or older	4.5	
Single person households (N)	(63)	(73)
Child or children under 18	-	-
Person(s) 18-24	-	-
Person(s) 25-64	15.9	100.0
Person(s) 65 or older	84.1	-

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### ***Current Church Involvement***

ELCA members are even more stable in their congregational membership than their residence; 68 percent have been members of their present congregation 10 years or more. This indicates that on the average they are more likely to move (presumably locally) but remain in the same congregation than to shift congregational allegiance while remaining in the same home. The other side of this is that only 15 percent of ELCA members have joined in the last three years, which may mean insufficient infusion of new people, ideas and energy into ELCA congregations.

The members who responded to the survey are predominantly active members: 42 percent attend worship weekly, another 31 percent two or three times a month, and 8 percent about once a month. If all ELCA members were like the respondents, 65 percent of our members would be in church on an average Sunday. However, we know from congregational reports that the average proportion of baptized members worshipping is 31 percent. This indicates how much more likely active members were to respond to the survey.

About half of the lay respondents also attend church activities other than worship once a month or more, and a little over half have been involved in at least one group or committee of their congregation within the last three years. These proportions are almost certainly much higher than among members with a more typical level of worship attendance.

## ***Church Involvement in the Past***

The final section of the questionnaire dealt with one aspect of religious biography: how connected to the church people have been at various points in their lives. The data here cannot be compared to any other survey, because nobody else, as far as we know, has collected such detailed information on this topic. We asked respondents to indicate, for each decade of their lives, whether they were attending church with any regularity (once a month or more), and what denomination they were part of. We also asked whether they had experienced any significant increase and/or decrease in their level of church activity during their lives, and if so, when this happened and what factors brought it about. The answers to these more qualitative questions have not yet been analyzed, but we have done preliminary analysis of the reports on church involvement at various ages.

Tables 4 and 5 show the major patterns of church attendance and denominational allegiance, respectively. In Table 4, those who attended regularly both as children and now are differentiated from those who attended as a child but not now (the "dropouts"), those who did not attend as a child but do now (the "converts"), and those who did not attend either then or now (the ones we "never had"). The first category is further divided between those who have always been churched (the "steadfasts") and those who dropped out at one point but have now returned (the "prodigals"). Table 5 shows a similar breakdown with regard to denominational allegiance, except that there are no "dropouts," since only people who are currently Lutherans were eligible for the survey. The proportions in each category, in both tables, should be interpreted with caution, since we have an atypically involved group of ELCA members in our sample.

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Table 4  
Attendance History of ELCA Members and Pastors

	<u>Members</u>		<u>Pastors</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Regular churchgoer* as child and now				
Steadfast: always regular	443	44.6	732	77.9
Prodigal: was down at one point	214	21.5	155	3.2
Can't tell which of above	60	6.0	19	3.2
Subtotal	717	72.1	906	90.2
Dropout: regular as child, not now	172	17.3	2	
Convert: regular now, not as child	82	8.2	94	
Never-had: not regular either now or as child	23	2.3	2	
Total	994	100.0	1004	100.0
(Not typeable - missing information)	140		19	
(Total respondents)	1134		1023	

\* "Regular churchgoer," for this table, means attending monthly or more.

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Table 4 indicates that the most common pattern is the "steadfast" one, but that the "prodigal" group is very significant; without their return, the ELCA would be very much weaker. The "converts" are a much smaller group, but still make an important contribution. Their relatively small numbers (less than one in twelve of the respondents) challenge us to think about our strategies of evangelism and outreach: what kind of people are we reaching? What kind do we desire to reach? What kind do we need to reach, for their sake and for the sake of the ELCA?

Table 5

Denominational History of ELCA Members and Pastors

	<u>Members</u>		<u>Pastors</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Childhood Lutheran				
Always Lutheran	545	56.9	751	77.9
Has been something else	40	4.2	31	3.2
Can't tell which of above	112	11.7	55	5.7
Subtotal	697	72.8	837	86.8
Lutheran convert	260	27.2	127	13.2
Total	957	100.0	964	100.0
(Not typeable - no childhood info.)	177		59	
(Total respondents)	1134		1023	

The denominational histories show more "conversion" (but of course one could argue that it is much less significant to change denominations than to change from an unchurched person to a churchd one), but less oscillation among those who were born Lutheran. There does not appear to be a great deal of returning to the Lutheran fold, but there is considerable infusion--more than a quarter of ELCA members--from other denominations.

The patterns for pastors are significantly different from those for lay members. Almost three quarters have always been regular churchgoers; this is not surprising, given that most have been involved in seminaries and other church structures as part of the process leading to ordination, and therefore haven't had the same chance to "stray" (especially during their young adult years) as lay members. The proportion of "converts," however, is just as high as among lay members; this is a significant source of ELCA pastors. Denominationally, however, pastors are much more stable than members; 78 percent, vs. 57 percent for lay members, have always been Lutherans. It isn't clear, of course, whether this leads to stronger or weaker, or a different kind, of Lutheran identity, but it is clear that it must mean some significant differences between ELCA pastors and the members they serve.

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