

**Lutherans Say 7 Survey Report:  
Membership in the ELCA**  
Kenneth W. Inskeep  
Research and Evaluation  
Office of the Presiding Bishop  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
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## **Introduction**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA and its predecessor bodies) has a long and storied history. The mission and ministry of the ELCA have positively impacted the lives of millions in the United States and all over the world. Daily, the Gospel is preached and lives are changed as people encounter God's grace and, in response, reach out to serve others. The ELCA will continue its good work long into the future. Its approach to mission and ministry may change, but the power of the Gospel to sustain its work will remain. For the ELCA, the mission of God is central and the church is intent on recognizing, understanding, and working diligently to participate fully in that mission.

Recognizing the invaluable and on-going contributions of the members of this church and its three expressions (congregations, synods, and churchwide), it is also important to promote a positive and fruitful discussion about its future. What is God calling this church to be and to do? What role or part does it play in God's mission? In the context of God's mission, what are its aspirations? What are its responsibilities? What does it need to realize these aspirations and responsibilities?

## **Overall Membership and Giving Trends**

The baby boom and the wider cultural milieu in the United States after World War II produced ideal conditions for church growth and each of the major religious groups benefited. These conditions, however, were short-lived. For much of the last 50 years, the social environment, while not hostile to religion, has progressively distanced itself from religious institutions. Over the past 40 years, the membership of "mainline" denominations has declined while some conservative Protestant groups and nondenominational congregations have grown. The growth for conservative Protestants may be coming to an end,<sup>1</sup> but in the meantime these groups have emerged as the face of religion in American society and, ironically, "mainline" churches have been unable to clearly define themselves as viable alternatives.<sup>2</sup>

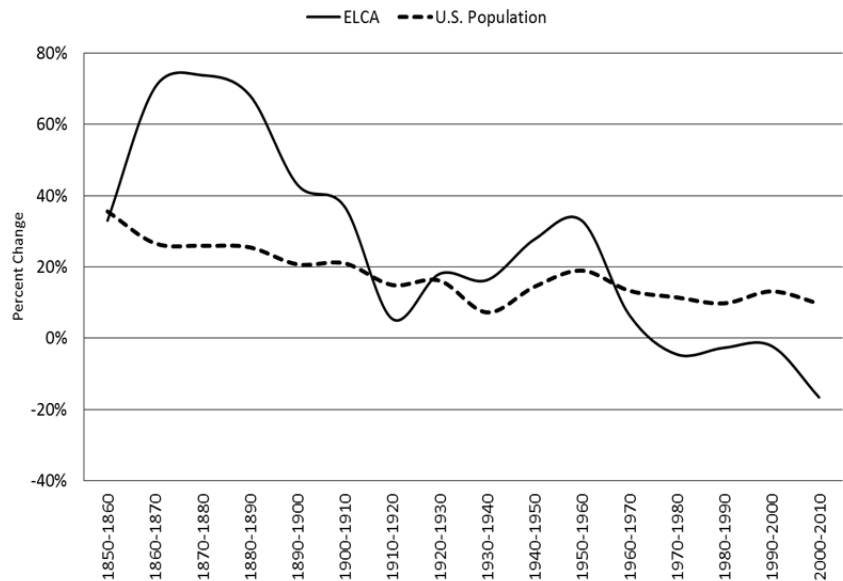
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<sup>1</sup> The following is from a June 6, 2013, press release from *Lifeway News* (Southern Baptist Convention-SBC), by Marty King: "Although the number of SBC-affiliated congregations grew [in 2012], reported membership of those churches declined more than one hundred thousand, down 0.7 percent to 15.9 million members. Primary worship attendance declined 3.1 percent to 5.97 million Sunday worshippers. Although baptisms were a bright spot in last year's [2011] report, increasing 0.7 percent, this year's report shows a decline of 5.5 percent to 314,956 people. Reported baptisms have declined six of the last eight years with 2012 the lowest since 1948. The ratio of baptisms to total members increased to one baptism for every fifty members."

<sup>2</sup> A *Reuter's* blog by Bill Schneider (July 10, 2014) on the recent Hobby Lobby Supreme Court decision illustrates the point. Schneider makes specific reference to "fundamentalist Protestants", "observant Catholics", and "many Orthodox Jews" but

Figure 1 shows the rates of change in baptized membership for the ELCA by decades from 1850 to 2010. Only after World War II has the change rate for the congregations in the ELCA mirrored the rate of population change for the U.S. overall. In the late 1800s immigration from Germany and Scandinavian contributed to the growth of the ELCA, but as immigration slowed the rate of growth dropped below the rate for the general population. Growth began again with the Baby Boom and extended through the mid-1970s. Since then, the growth rate for ELCA congregations has

Figure 1: ELCA Baptized Membership and U.S. Population Change Rates by Decade from 1850 to 2010



dropped below 0. Growth in the ELCA, when it has occurred, has been largely internal. Two-thirds of the respondents to a recent survey of ELCA members were baptized in a Lutheran church. Over half of those who came to a Lutheran church later in life were raised Roman Catholic (32%) or Methodist (24%). ELCA Lutherans have not made significant inroads into the wider culture by attracting persons without a religious background or from a variety of other religious traditions. In terms of membership, ELCA Lutheranism has been, and remains, largely parochial. It is a significant presence in small and medium sized cities throughout Pennsylvania into Ohio and the Midwest, but a small minority in the fastest growing areas of the U.S. The ELCA has sustained itself from within, but the birth rate among ELCA Lutherans is very low as is the number of new Lutheran immigrants coming to the United States (now primarily from Lutheran churches in Africa). The number of child baptisms per congregation, an indication of the number of babies being born to members of ELCA congregations, has dropped from 7.8 in 1988 to 4.8 in 2013.<sup>3</sup> With regard to immigration, since 2009, the only group to grow significantly is the African National group.<sup>4</sup> This leaves one other possible source of growth which is the baptism of adults or adult affirmations of faith. In 1988, the average number of adult baptism/affirmations of faith per congregation was 5.5. In 2013, it was 4.9.

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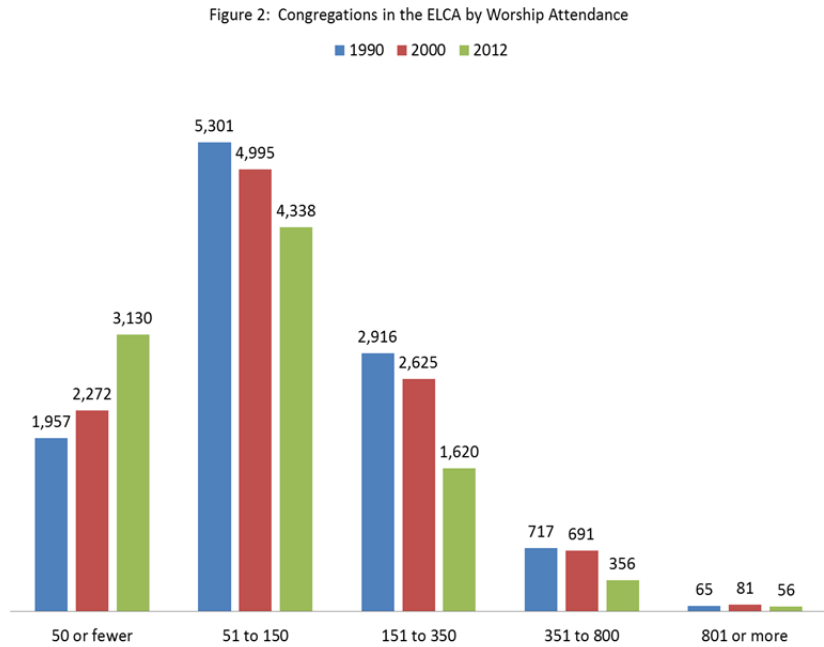
then goes on to conclude, as if there is no alternative, being religious means being opposed to women’s rights. Schneider writes: “religious Americans are a shrinking portion of the electorate. They remain holed up in their fortified congressional-district redoubts but no longer control a presidential majority. The Old America lost dramatically on the issue of same-sex marriage. Now it’s turning to the federal courts for protection.... To the Old America, the 1950s are the good old days. To the New America, the 1950s are the Dark Ages”.

<sup>3</sup> In 1970, the rate was 9.2.

<sup>4</sup> The actual rate of growth is impossible to establish, however, since statistics on African Nationals were not kept until 2009.

These figures clearly raise the question of sustainability even without factoring in the number of people leaving ELCA congregations (typically reported on annual reports as statistical adjustments). Between 2009 and 2013, a typical congregation in the ELCA lost 18 members annually and this figure does not include congregations which left the ELCA.

The slide in membership has impacted every expression of the ELCA. For congregations, the number with 50 or fewer in worship has increased dramatically (see Figure 2). Often these congregations hope to maintain support for a full-time pastor and to maintain their congregation’s programs and facilities. Because of this, their operating expenses can quickly exceed their giving income. On average, ELCA congregations with 50 or fewer in worship received \$50,000 in total giving (undesignated and designated in 2012) while spending \$57,000 in operating expenses.



At the synodical level, the decline in baptized membership means fewer congregations. In 61 of 65 synods, there were fewer congregations in 2010 than in 2000. In 4 synods, the number of congregations declined by 20 percent or more and in 34 synods the number of congregations declined by 10 to 20 percent. In addition to the decline in the number of congregations, many of the remaining congregations are faced with declining membership which, in turn, produces difficult decisions. This means congregations are passing on less in mission support precisely when they are asking the synods to do more to assist them. The impact of fewer and smaller congregations on mission support for synods (and the churchwide organization) is exponential. Between 2000 and 2012, total giving to congregations was down 18 percent but mission support declined by 23 percent.

**What Should the Church Expect in the Future?**

**Trends in the Lives and Views of Members**

**Lutherans Say 7 (with comparative data from other ELCA surveys)**

Lutherans Say (LS) is an occasional survey of the members of the ELCA. The LS series began in 1988. In 1988, a random sample of 300 congregations was selected and these congregations were asked to provide membership lists to the ELCA’s research office. At the start of the new church, interest was high and nearly all the congregations asked to provided lists did so (N=293). Members were selected from these lists. The final sample in 1988 included 1,968 members. Of those selected, 1,134 completed and returned usable questionnaires for a response rate of 58 percent.

In 2013, a random sample of 401 congregations was selected and these congregations were also asked to provide membership lists. Forty-nine of the 401 congregations returned lists after repeated requests. Because the congregations which responded were reasonably well distributed across the ELCA and because they reflected a variety of sizes and contexts, a sample of 1,019 was selected and LS7 was mailed. Three hundred six-two individuals responded for a response rate of 36 percent.

The response rate from congregations, while low, was very similar to 2001 which was the last time congregations were asked to provide membership lists. The 36 percent response rate for members is also typical of the recent past.<sup>5</sup> The returns for LS7 were well distributed regionally. The western part of the United States was somewhat under-represented while the southern part of the country was slightly over-represented, but returns from the other regions of the ELCA were proportionate to the baptized membership in the region.

For both LS1 and LS7, the initial sampling frames were the baptized members of congregations. While concerns are sometimes expressed about the condition of these lists, only 2 percent of the questionnaires were returned with bad addresses and only 1 questionnaire was returned in behalf of an addressee who was deceased. (Perhaps only lists in good condition were received.)

Those who were selected as part of the sample were asked to return their questionnaire blank if they did not wish to participate so their names could be removed from the mailing list. Four percent of the sample did so. Taking all these figures into account, 58 percent of the sample went unaccounted for. Under these circumstances, it makes sense to review the findings from LS7 in the context of other member or attendee surveys which have been conducted in the ELCA over time. In so doing, this report tries to answer two basic questions:

1. How are the responses to LS7 similar or different from other ELCA survey results?
2. What do these comparisons mean?

### Comparative Data

Three basic types of data exist for comparison since at least some of the LS7 questions were shared with these other surveys.

First, LS7 results can be compared with LS1 survey results. LS7, however, is more a survey of householders in the ELCA than baptized members. This distinction is made more clearly in the next section of this report.

A second source of comparable data is the *Faith Practices Survey* which was conducted in 2001. The *Faith Practices Survey* also relied on congregational lists. In this case, 100 congregations were asked to provide lists and 40 did so. These membership lists included just over 16,000 names. The names were

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<sup>5</sup> This includes those surveys using the Seeds for the Parish mailing list which is a resource sent to congregational leaders.

compiled into a database and used for telephone interviews. Individuals in the database were selected at random and phoned. The process continued until 600 interviews were completed.<sup>6</sup>

A third and primary source of comparable data is the *U.S. Congregational Life Surveys* (USCL). These surveys were conducted in 2001 and 2008. The sampling frame for these surveys, however, was different. In both 2001 and 2008, approximately 800 congregations were randomly selected and asked to participate. The congregations were asked to distribute a questionnaire to everyone over the age of 15 who participated in any worship service held on a designated weekend. In 2001, 420 congregations agreed to participate and 43,363 usable questionnaires were returned. In 2008, 369 congregations agreed to participate with 29,976 usable questionnaires returned.<sup>7</sup> While the *Lutheran Say* series and the *Faith Practices Survey* relied on membership lists, the *U.S. congregational Life Survey* surveyed worship attendees.

Finally, in addition to ELCA Lutherans, the USCL was also a cross-denominational survey which included Roman Catholics, conservative Protestant groups, and other mainline denominations.<sup>8</sup> When possible, comparisons are presented for these denominational families.

## **The Characteristics of the Respondents**

### Gender, Age, Households, Race/Ethnicity

In terms of gender, 63 percent of the respondents to LS7 were female. For LS1 it was 62 percent. On the USCL survey in 2008, 62 percent of the ELCA respondents were female which compared to 61 percent for the Roman Catholic, conservative Protestant, and mainline respondents. Clearly the majority of the members and worship attendees of ELCA congregations are women and this has been the case since the beginning of the ELCA. A higher proportion of women is also characteristic of all religious groups in the United States.

Table 1 presents the distribution of the respondent's ages for several of the surveys noted above. Younger people did not respond to LS7 and this, unfortunately, was likely a function of the sampling procedure. Congregations which provided lists in 1988 were asked to indicate the age of each member. Congregations were not asked to do so in 2013 because of concerns about further hindering congregations providing lists. Because ages were not known, the decision was made to include only members of congregations who were married (or partnered couples) or those listed as single persons. (For married or partnered couple, the first or second person of the couple was alternately selected.)

Given these selection procedures, the overall age distribution of the ELCA is better understood from worship attendees (USCL) (which still does not include those under the age of 15). Based on the USCL

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<sup>6</sup> The number of refusals is not known so it is impossible to calculate a "response rate".

<sup>7</sup> The *U.S. Congregational Life Survey* project included many religious groups and was supported by the Lilly Foundation.

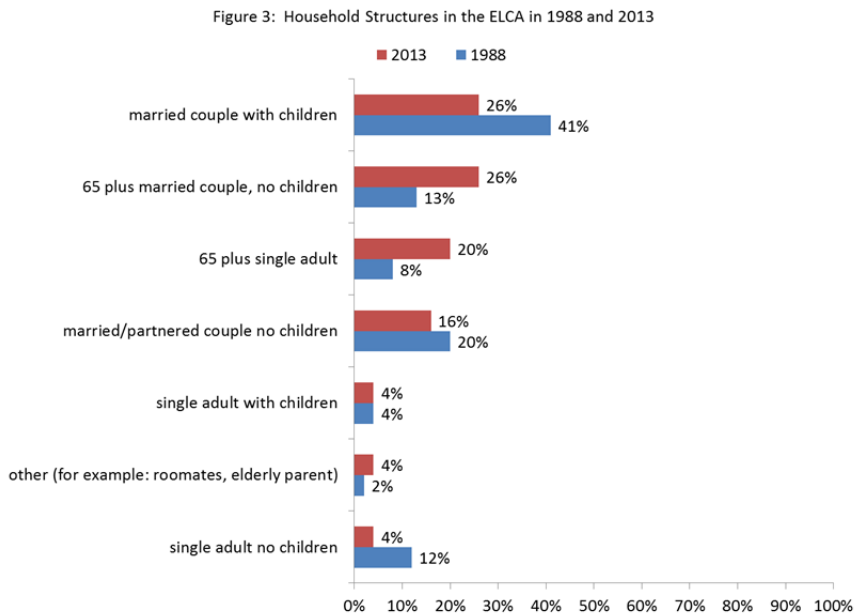
<sup>8</sup> The mainline groups include the American Baptist Churches, Disciples of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the ELCA, the United Methodists, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ.

data, the age distribution of the ELCA is typical of other mainline religious groups. Roman Catholics are somewhat younger, with the conservative Protestants much more likely than the other groups to have attendees who are between the ages of 25 and 44.

**Table 1: The Age Distribution (15 and above) of the ELCA based on Survey Data with Comparative Figures for Other Denominational Families**

	ELCA						USCL (2008)		
	LS1 (1988)	Faith Practices (2001)	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)		Roman Catholic	Conservative Protestant	Mainline
15 to 24	13%	4%	7%	7%	0%		9%	10%	5%
25 to 34	14%	12%	7%	6%	4%		9%	13%	5%
35 to 44	17%	17%	18%	13%	8%		16%	20%	12%
45 to 54	14%	20%	19%	18%	15%		19%	23%	19%
55 to 64	16%	16%	16%	18%	22%		18%	17%	20%
65 to 74	14%	18%	17%	18%	23%		15%	11%	19%
75 to 84	9%	11%	13%	15%	20%		11%	5%	15%
85 or older	3%	2%	3%	5%	8%		3%	1%	5%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%		100%	100%	100%
over 65	25%	31%	31%	37%	51%		27%	17%	37%

LS7 is still very useful for comparing households. For LS1, 59 percent of the adult households (over the age of 18) had 1 or more members working full-time but for LS7, it was 37 percent of the households. In terms of the composition of households, the changes since LS1 are dramatic (see Figure 3). Twenty-six percent of the respondents to LS7 are living in households where the couple is married, 1 of the householders is 65 or older, and there are no children. This compares to 13 percent on LS1. Twenty percent of the respondents to LS7 are



individuals who are 65 or older and living alone. In 1988, only 8 percent of the households were individuals who were 65 and older and living alone. Between 1988 and 2013, the number of households in the ELCA where at least 1 of the householder is 65 or older has more than doubled while the number of married couple households with children (where both householders are under the age of 65) has dropped from 41 percent to 24 percent. This drop in married couples with children closely mirrors the change in the U.S. but it has occurred more quickly and more recently in the ELCA. For the wider population between 1970 and 2012, the share of married couple households with

children under 18 dropped from 40 percent to 20 percent.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the percent of married couple households with children under 18 actually remains higher in the ELCA than in the general population.

Finally, the percent of white, non-Hispanics in the U.S. population is about 63 percent. The percent of white, non-Hispanic respondents to LS7 was 97 percent.

Education and Income

The educational level of the LS7 respondents was high (see Table 2). About 29 percent of the general population has a bachelor’s degree or higher level of education. For the respondents to LS7 it was 62 percent. The percent of LS7 respondents with an advanced graduate degree is at 26 percent, which does, however, compare directly to other mainline religious groups.

Median household income in the U.S. is just over \$51,000. It was nearly \$82,000 for the LS7 respondents.

In short, the respondents to LS7 were older, very well educated, and well-off financially, despite the fact many were also retired.

**Table 2: Education Levels in the ELCA with Comparative Figures for other Denominational Families**

18 and older only	ELCA						USCL (2008)		
	LS1 (1988)	Faith Practices (2001)	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)		Roman Catholic	Conservative Protestant	Mainline
no high school diploma	16%	3%	10%	8%	4%		11%	10%	5%
high school diploma or GED	28%	24%	37%	36%	11%		31%	34%	25%
some college or technical training	28%	31%	17%	18%	24%		17%	22%	15%
a college degree	18%	26%	23%	23%	37%		26%	21%	30%
an advanced graduate degree	10%	16%	13%	15%	26%		15%	13%	25%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%		100%	100%	100%

Theological Views

The high levels of education and income may account for more liberal theological views among LS7 respondents. The respondents were asked to describe their current stand on theological issues. Table 3 shows 26 percent of the LS7 respondents indicated they were liberal (21%) or very liberal (5%) on theological issues. This is considerably higher than the percent who reported being liberal or very liberal (a combined 15%) on the USCL survey in 2008. At the same time, most ELCA members continue to hold moderate to conservative theological views and this pattern is consistent across the surveys. While those who are more conservative may have contemplated or actually left the ELCA in response

<sup>9</sup> See “America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2012”. Available at [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

to the actions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly<sup>10</sup>, the percent of ELCA members who say they are theologically conservative (34%) or very conservative (5%) remains significant at nearly 40 percent. And, these LS responses in 2013 are consistent with ELCA USCL responses in 2001.

**Table 3: Current Stand on Theological Issues with Comparative Figures for other Denominational Families**

	ELCA			USCL (2008)		
	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)	Roman Catholic	Conservative Protestant	Mainline
very conservative	5%	7%	5%	10%	19%	4%
conservative	34%	41%	34%	38%	47%	16%
right in the middle	48%	37%	35%	36%	25%	33%
liberal	11%	13%	21%	13%	7%	33%
very liberal	2%	2%	5%	3%	2%	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

### Congregational Ties

When compared to the respondents of LS1, the LS7 respondents are more frequent worship attendees (see Table 4). Over 80 percent attend at least two or three times a month with a majority attending once a week or more. Table 4 clearly shows the differences between selecting samples from membership lists (LS) and distributing the questionnaires at worship (USCL). As might be expected, using the membership lists results in a significant drop in those worshipping once a week or more.

**Table 4: Worship Attendance with Comparative Figures for other Denominational Families**

	ELCA				USCL (2008)		
	LS1 (1988)	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)	Roman Catholic	Conservative Protestant	Mainline
once a week or more (LS, USCL)	42%	74%	70%	51%	77%	79%	74%
2 or 3 times a month (LS, USCL)	31%	18%	20%	31%	12%	13%	18%
once a month (LS, USCL)	8%	3%	4%	6%	3%	2%	3%
less than once a month, but more than twice a year (LS)	12%	-	-	9%	-	-	-
less than once a month (USCL)	-	1%	2%	-	3%	2%	2%
once or twice a year (LS)	4%	-	-	2%	-	-	-
seldom or never (LS)	3%	-	-	1%	-	-	-
hardly ever/special occasions (USCL)	-	2%	2%	-	3%	2%	2%
this is my first time (USCL)	-	2%	2%	-	2%	2%	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

The respondents to LS7 were also more likely to attend congregational activities other than worship when compared to the respondents to LS1 (see Table 5). Still, 38 percent of the LS7 respondents said

<sup>10</sup> The 2009 Churchwide Assembly acted to ordain gay and lesbian pastors in committed, long-term relationships.



they seldom or never attend congregational activities other than worship and this percent is consistent with the ELCA USCL surveys.

**Table 5: Involvement in Group Activities other than Worship with Comparative Figures for other Denominational Families**

	ELCA				USCL (2008)		
	LS1 (1988)	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)	Roman Catholic	Conservative Protestant	Mainline
1 or 2 times a month (LS)	30%	-	-	35%	-	-	-
3 to 5 times a month (LS)	15%	-	-	18%	-	-	-
more than 5 times a month (LS)	4%	-	-	10%	-	-	-
seldom or never (LS)	51%	-	-	38%	-	-	-
no, I'm not regularly involved in group activities (USCL)	-	37%	36%	-	51%	33%	35%
Total	100%			100%			

When asked if they regularly take part in any congregational activities which reach out to the wider community (for example, visitation, evangelism, outreach, community service or social justice) 62 percent of the LS7 respondents said they were not regularly involved (see Table 6). This percent is consistent with findings from USCL surveys where 58 percent of the worship attendees said they were not involved in outreach activities in 2001 and 55 percent said they were not involved in these kinds of activities in 2008.

When asked if they would be prepared to invite to a worship service at their congregation any of their friends and relatives who do not now attend a congregation, the LS7 respondents were less likely to say they would do so, or have done so, than the worship attendees on the USCL surveys (see Table 7). When compared to other religious groups, ELCA Lutherans are very similar to Roman Catholics and somewhat like other mainline religious groups when it comes to being prepared to invite others. When compared to conservative Protestants the LS7 respondents are much more likely to indicate they don't know if they would, or they probably would not.

**Table 6: Would you be prepared to invite to a worship service at your congregation any of your friends and relatives who do not now attend a congregation?**

	ELCA			USCL (2008)		
	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)	Roman Catholic	Conservative Protestant	Mainline
yes, and I have done so in the past 12 months	42%	38%	38%	38%	60%	44%
yes, but I have not done so in the past 12 months	41%	45%	37%	42%	32%	44%
don't know	11%	8%	13%	8%	4%	4%
no, probably not	5%	8%	11%	11%	4%	7%
no, definitely not	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Increases and Decreases

The LS7 respondents were asked if there was a point in their lives when their involvement with the church increased substantially. Sixty-seven percent said “yes” and the median age for this increase was 33. The respondents were also asked what factors were most important in causing this increase.

- The most frequent response (38%) indicated it had to do with an event or change in their life. The events cited most often included marriage, divorce, the birth of a child, or a life changing tragedy.
- The second (26%) most frequently cited reason for the increase in church involvement had to do with the influence of a person. Most often cited was the influence of a spouse or other family member, a friend, or a pastor.
- The third (13%) most frequently cited reason was a religious experience or conversion.

Sixty percent of the LS7 respondents also said there was a time when their involvement with the church decreased dramatically. The median age when the decrease occurred was 18 and the most cited reason was they went off to college.

**Growth in Faith and Meeting Spiritual Needs**

LS7 included two questions on growth in faith and on the meeting of spiritual needs.

1. “Over the last year, how much have you grown in your faith”?

The LS7 respondents were considerably more likely than ELCA respondents on past surveys to say “no real growth” and conversely, they were less likely to say “much growth, mainly through this congregation” (see Table 7). In the past, about a third of ELCA respondents said they have experienced considerable growth mainly through their congregation. This was slightly higher than the percent for Roman Catholics and other mainline groups. But, on LS7, the percent indicating they had grown in their faith mainly through their congregation dropped considerably. The responses to this question, however, are tied to worship attendance. When compared only to LS7 respondents who attend worship once a week or more, 30 percent, which is consistent with past surveys, say they have experienced much growth mainly through their congregation.

**Table 7: Over the last year, how much have you grown in your faith?**

	ELCA				USCL (2008)		
	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)	LS7 (weekly attendees)	Roman Catholic	Conservative Protestant	Mainline
no real growth	6%	8%	20%	10%	9%	5%	9%
some growth	44%	47%	47%	48%	44%	35%	47%
much growth, mainly through this congregation	34%	31%	20%	30%	27%	42%	30%
much growth, mainly through other groups	6%	5%	3%	3%	6%	7%	5%
much growth, mainly through my own private actions	10%	9%	10%	9%	14%	11%	9%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

2. Agree or Disagree: “My spiritual needs are being met in this congregation”.

Over the past several years, RE has collected the responses of over 500 congregations who have completed the primary questionnaire for Natural Church Development (NCD).<sup>11</sup> The NCD questionnaire is designed to assess the health of a congregation based on eight characteristics. Among these eight is “passionate spiritual” and consistently ELCA congregations have scored lowest on passionate spirituality. But, when asked if their spiritual needs were being met by their congregations, 32 percent of the LS7 respondents “strongly agreed” they were being met while 48 percent “agreed” (see Table 8). And, when compared to other mainline religious groups, ELCA respondents had a more positive response to this question. On the other hand, it may be that an emphasis on spirituality is not typically a goal for most ELCA congregations and probably not a high priority for most ELCA members.

**Table 8: My spiritual needs are being met in this congregation.**

	ELCA					USCL (2008)		
	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)	LS7 (weekly attendees)		Roman Catholic	Conservative Protestant	Mainline
strongly agree	31%	30%	32%	45%		31%	44%	20%
agree	53%	54%	48%	44%		52%	42%	42%
not sure	12%	12%	15%	10%		13%	11%	26%
disagree	3%	3%	4%	1%		3%	2%	6%
strongly disagree	1%	1%	1%	0%		1%	1%	6%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%		100%	100%	100%

**Congregations and the Future**

Over the years the responses to two survey questions have shown a consistent relationship to congregational membership growth. The first is the level of excitement members feel about their congregation’s future and the second is their perception of the congregation’s willingness to try something new. The comparative data shows the responses of the LS7 weekly worship attendees and other mainline attendees are very similar with regard to their sense of excitement about the future, but the conservative Protestant respondents were much more likely to “strongly agree” (see Table 9). Nearly a third (31%) of LS7 respondents said they were “not sure” and 9 percent “disagreed” (8%) or “strongly disagreed” (1%) with the statement “I have a sense of excitement about our congregation’s future”.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ncd-international.org/>

**Table 9: I have a sense of excitement about our congregation’s future.**

	ELCA (2013)		USCL (2008)	
	LS7	LS7 (weekly attendees)	Conservative Protestant	Mainline
strongly agree	19%	27%	45%	24%
agree	41%	45%	39%	48%
not sure	31%	24%	14%	24%
disagree	8%	4%	1%	1%
strongly disagree	1%	0%	1%	3%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%

\* Question was not included on the Roman Catholic version of the questionnaire.

At the same time, the LS7 respondents were the most likely to “strongly agree” with the statement their congregation is always ready to try something new, though the percent dropped off somewhat for the LS7 weekly attendees (see Table 10).

**Table 10: This congregation is always ready to try something new.**

	LS7 (2013)	LS7 (weekly attendees)	Conservative Protestant	Mainline
strongly agree	30%	24%	22%	11%
agree	48%	46%	45%	48%
not sure	15%	21%	27%	31%
disagree	5%	8%	5%	9%
strongly disagree	2%	1%	1%	1%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%

\* Question was not included on the Roman Catholic version of the questionnaire.

## Lutheran Identity and Connections to the ELCA

The view “all the different religions are equally good ways to find ultimate truth” is prevalent among ELCA Lutherans. Thirteen percent of LS7 respondents “strongly agreed” with the statement and 32 percent “agreed” (see Table 11). These percentages have been roughly consistent over the years and on various surveys.

**Table 11: All the different religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth.**

	ELCA				USCL (2008)		
	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)	LS7 (weekly attendees)	Roman Catholic	Conservative Protestant	Mainline
strongly agree	13%	12%	13%	12%	18%	6%	14%
agree	41%	39%	32%	32%	41%	16%	38%
not sure	21%	24%	28%	26%	20%	16%	8%
disagree	18%	18%	20%	21%	15%	25%	21%
strongly disagree	7%	7%	7%	9%	4%	37%	19%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Changing Congregations

Nearly three-quarters or more of the respondents to these various ELCA questionnaires “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that changing congregations would produce a feeling of loss (see Table 12). On the other hand, for the LS7 respondents, 18 percent of those who indicated they attend worship weekly said they were “not sure” or they “disagreed” that changing congregations would produce a sense of loss.

**Table 12: If I had to change my membership to another congregation I would feel a great sense of loss.**

	ELCA				
	LS5 (1991)	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)	LS7 (weekly)
strongly agree	31%	40%	48%	37%	50%
agree	40%	41%	37%	39%	32%
not sure	11%	10%	9%	4%	4%
disagree	16%	7%	5%	19%	13%
strongly disagree	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

A Lutheran Church

Eighty percent or more of the respondents to these various ELCA surveys have “agreed” or “strongly agreed” it is important for them to be a member of a Lutheran church (see Table 13). For those who are 65 or older, the percent agreeing climbs to 88 and for those who are 44 or younger it drops to 78 percent. In either case, the percent agreeing is high.

**Table 13: It is important for me to be a member of a Lutheran Church.**

	ELCA				
	LS5 (1991)	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)	LS7 (weekly)
strongly agree	37%	42%	51%	42%	52%
agree	43%	39%	33%	39%	31%
not sure	7%	7%	7%	4%	5%
disagree	11%	10%	7%	12%	10%
strongly disagree	2%	2%	2%	3%	2%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

An ELCA Lutheran Church

Finally, respondents to LS7 were asked their level of agreement with the statement “It is important for me to be a member of a Lutheran church which is part of the ELCA” (see Table 14). It is clear a substantial minority are part of the ELCA who are “not sure” (or even “disagree”) it is important to them. This is as true of the LS7 respondents who are weekly worship attendees as it is for LS7

respondents overall. Seven percent “strongly disagree” it is important for them to be members, while 28 percent “disagree” and another 5 percent are “not sure”.

**Table 14: It is important for me to be a member of a Lutheran church which is part of the ELCA.**

	ELCA				
	LS5 (1991)	USCL (2001)	USCL (2008)	LS7 (2013)	LS7 (weekly)
strongly agree	18%	26%	34%	27%	31%
agree	42%	43%	38%	39%	36%
not sure	18%	14%	14%	5%	5%
disagree	19%	3%	12%	22%	22%
strongly disagree	3%	14%	2%	7%	6%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

## Conclusions

The findings of LS7, when compared to other similar ELCA surveys, show a clear picture of the membership of the ELCA.

- A significant majority of active participants in ELCA congregations are women.
- ELCA household structures have changed significant over the past 10 years. About a quarter of the households have children under the age of 18, while nearly half of householders are 65 or older.
- There is little racial diversity among the membership of the ELCA.
- The education level of the membership is high which is also reflected in higher household incomes.
- Most members of the ELCA hold moderate to conservative theological views.
- The primary connection members have with their congregations is through worship and many participate in very few other congregational activities.
- The vast majority of ELCA members feel their spiritual needs are being met by their congregations.
- A majority of ELCA members are excited about the future of their congregations but a significant minority is not sure.
- Members of the ELCA are divided over the value of different religions. Forty-four percent “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement “all the different religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth”, while 26 percent indicated they were “not sure” and 30 percent “disagree” or “strongly disagreed”.
- Members are also divided over how important it is for them to be a member of a congregation which is part of the ELCA. Sixty-seven percent “strongly agreed” or “agreed” while 5 percent were “not sure” and 28 percent “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed”.

This membership profile is characteristic of a church which continues to reflect its parochial heritage and there is little to suggest a significant change is imminent. In most congregations adjusting to a changing environment comes slowly and with difficulty. It is likely, in the vast majority of ELCA congregations, the number of households with children will continue to fall and the average age of members will continue to climb. And, despite the on-going growth in the racial diversity in the general population there has been no significant change in the diversity of the member of the ELCA. Many

members may be excited about the future of their congregation but this excitement is not produced by, nor has it produced, innovation. It is also reasonable to conclude that many ELCA Lutherans are, at the very least, unaware of how ELCA Lutheranism provides a unique contribution to the dialog on religion in American society.

At the same time, there is considerable reason to believe the theological appeal of ELCA Lutheran theology could be high. Lutheran theology is adept in dealing with the complexities of modern life. Lutheran theology is about change and historically it played a central role in the very development of modern society and its emphasis on individual freedom. ELCA Lutheran theology takes the Bible very seriously, but it compels no one to take it literally. And, at its foundation, ELCA Lutheran theology emphasizes a God who is committed to redeeming all of creation and in so doing, this God accepts all without condition. In response, the church is set free to serve others.

*See, this is what it means to have a proper grasp of the Gospel, that is, of the overwhelming goodness of God, which neither prophet, nor apostle, nor angel was ever able fully to express, and which no heart could adequately fathom or marvel at. This is the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure, and content. This is what preaching the Christian faith means. ...Now when you have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you. (Martin Luther: A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels)*