

What are the facts regarding membership changes in the LCMS since 1972 and why does it matter?

Questions have been posed and assertions made similar to the following "Letter to the Editor" in the June, 2004 edition the LCMS's *Reporter* newspaper:

I have been reading in *Reporter* and other sources about a 250,000-member loss in our Synod since 1972. The attempt is made to make this number look like we have not been doing the work of spreading the Gospel faithfully in that time. I, for one, would rejoice if this number is true, since it means we have been growing steadily in that time.

In order to say this you have to look at the history of the Synod since 1972. In the controversy of the 1970s, many churches left and formed the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). The number of members must have approached at least 100,000. Then the Brazil District was released to become an independent church body in 1979 with at least 200,000 members. Then there was the release of the LCMS Canadian districts in 1989 to become Lutheran Church--Canada with at least 100,000 members.

That totals at least 400,000 members lost since 1972. If we are down only 250,000 since that date, we must have grown by at least 150,000 members. While we would like more, this is a healthy growth rate for any church, especially when the reports are of American churches being generally in decline.

Please don't just report the raw numbers, report the history of those numbers so that they can be put in perspective and so the true growth of our Synod can be seen.

*Rev. W. James Lowmaster
Mio, Mich.*

The editor of the *Reporter* replied:

*According to Dr. John O'Hara, the Synod's research analyst, the 250,000 members lost by the Synod since 1972 as cited by the Mission 21st Century Task Force are U.S. figures only -- the number does not include those who are now members of the church bodies in Brazil and Canada. O'Hara adds that there is no way to know the actual number of members that left the Missouri Synod for the AELC, but estimates range widely, from a low of 75,000 to a high of 125,000. **That means that Synod congregations have had a net loss of at least 125,000 members since 1972, not counting those who became members of AELC congregations.** -- Ed.*

(emphasis added)

In the president's speech to the District Conventions in 2003 the issues regarding membership changes in the LCMS were publicly addressed, as follows:

From 1971 to 2001, our Synod's baptized membership has decreased from 2.89 million people to 2.54 million and confirmed membership has decreased from 2.01 million to 1.92 million. A couple of the factors in this decline were the formation of the AELC in the seventies and The Lutheran Church-Canada in the eighties.

However, these account for only part of an alarming decrease during a 30-year period, when the population of the United States grew by 77 million, from 203 million to over 280 million people, and is now over 293 million.

One will note that the 1971 numbers represented in the above statements *did include* numbers from Canada, which congregations did form the LCC. Thus, those public statements noted above took into consideration the formation of the AELC *and the LCC* as factors in the decreased numbers presented. However, as referenced in the editor's note in the Reporter, determining the exact number of people who actually left the Missouri Synod to become part of the AELC is difficult to determine. So, to quote exact numbers would not be in order. However, it is clear that there is a trend of declining membership in the LCMS over the past 30 years in the net range of 125,000 to 175,000 baptized members.

What is even more alarming is when one looks at the statistics of the past decade – a time during which no new synods were formed from among the LCMS. If one considers the mean of the range of loss between 125,000 to 175,000, approximately 150,000, then **one-half of that decline occurred during the past decade**. Synodical statistics show that from 1991 until 2001 (after all of the events mentioned in Rev. Lowmaster's letter) the LCMS declined from 2,615,567 baptized members to 2,540,045, or a decrease of 75,522. During that same time period, average weekly worship attendance declined by about 82,000.

This most recent decadal trend of decline cannot be denied or rationalized in any other manner except to say that the LCMS decreased in baptized membership by over 75,000 people during that time. *What is more startling is that this decline occurred during a time when the population of the United States grew by over 32 million people!* These facts are significant however one looks at this issue.

When a country grows by 32,000,000 people and during the same time period a church body declines by 75,000, it is time to raise the flag and ask the question "Why did we not gain more?" Even if we had increased by 75,000 during that same period, the same question would still be relevant. "Out of 32,000,000 people, why are we not gaining more?" That is the relevant question surrounding this issue and the question to which the Mission 21st Century Task Force responded.