

Rocky Mountain Synod Report

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Research and Evaluation

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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A STATISTICAL OVERVIEW OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN SYNOD WITH COMPARISONS

Territory

The Rocky Mountain Synod (RMS) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) covers more land area (421,829 square miles) than any other synod in the ELCA except Alaska. Figure 1 shows the relative territory covered for several synods. These six synods were selected because they provide a good overview of the various contexts within the ELCA.¹

Figure 1: Square Miles Covered by the Synods

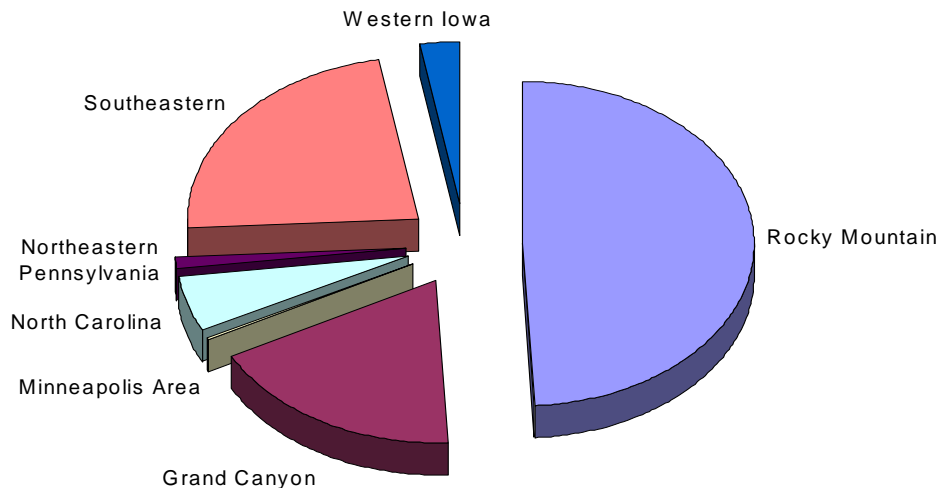
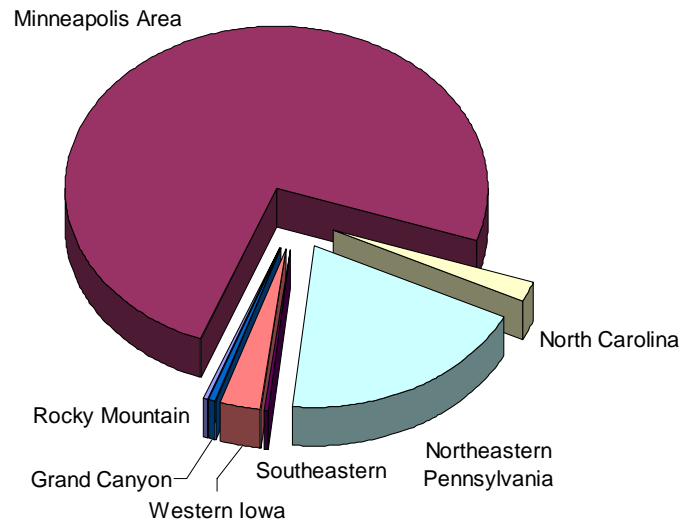


Figure 2 shows the number of Lutherans per square mile in these synods. RMS has about 0.2 Lutherans per square mile compared to 70.1 Lutherans per square mile in the Minneapolis Area Synod. The Grand Canyon synod has 0.5 Lutherans per square mile while in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod there are 18.2 Lutherans per square mile. The Lutheran Church has been traditionally strong where there is a high percentage of people of German or Scandinavian

¹ Grand Canyon (Arizona and part of Nevada) and the Southeastern Synod (Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee) cover considerable territory and represent areas where the ELCA has few historical roots. Minneapolis is a Lutheran stronghold. North Carolina has a long Lutheran tradition, but Lutherans are a minority in the state. Western Iowa represents Lutheranism in the Midwest while Lutheranism in the East is represented by the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

ancestry. About 15 percent of the population report German or Scandinavian ancestry in the RMS. This compares to 14 percent in the Grand Canyon Synod, eight percent in North Carolina, and five percent in the Southeastern Synod. On the other hand, 43 percent of the population in the Minneapolis Area Synod report German or Scandinavian ancestry as do 40 percent of those in the Western Iowa Synod and 20 percent in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

Figure 2: Lutherans Per Square Mile



The size of the U.S. population based on 2005 estimates for the selected synods is shown in Figure 3.² The population of the Southeastern Synod is over 22 million compared to about 10 million in the RMS. The RMS is expected to add about 1.3 million people between 2000 and 2010. The Grand Canyon Synod has about 7.5 million and is expected to grow at the fastest rate between 2000 and 2010. The projected rates of population change are presented in Figure 4.

² All United States population estimates and projections are from Claritas, Inc. Figures for 2000 are from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 3: Size of the Total Population Covered by the Synod

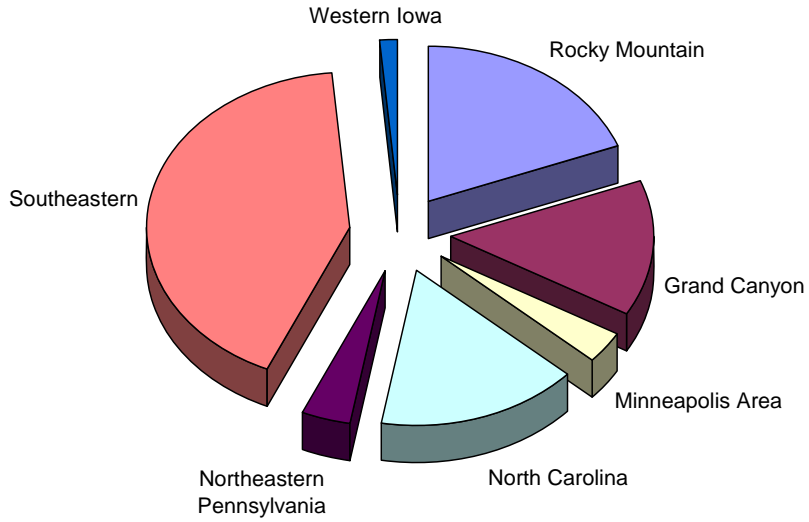
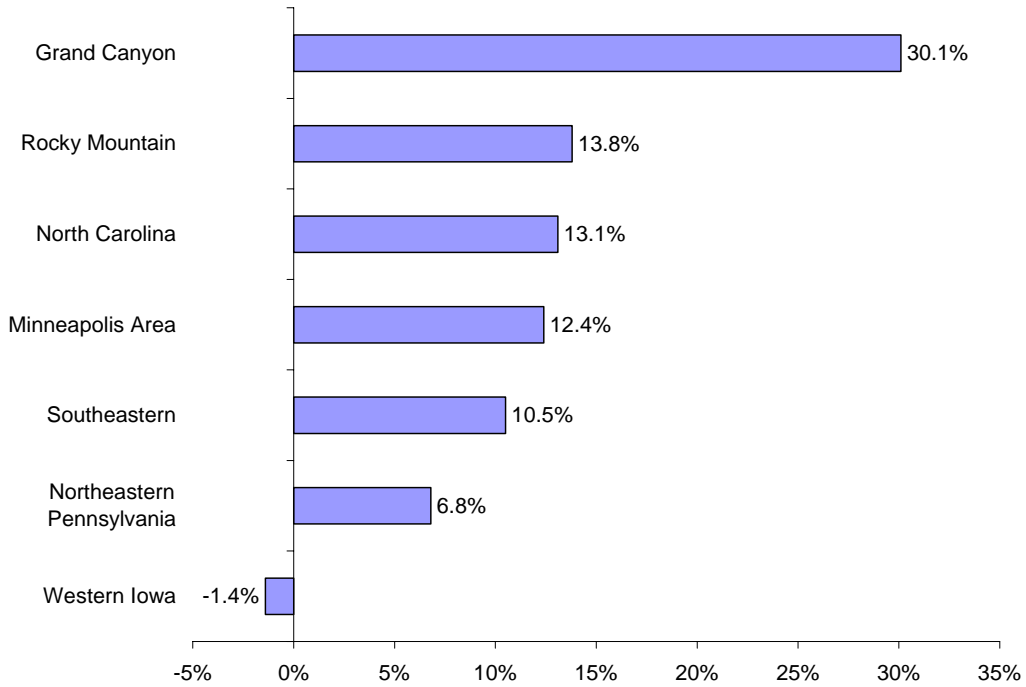


Figure 4: Percent Projected Population Change from 2000 to 2010

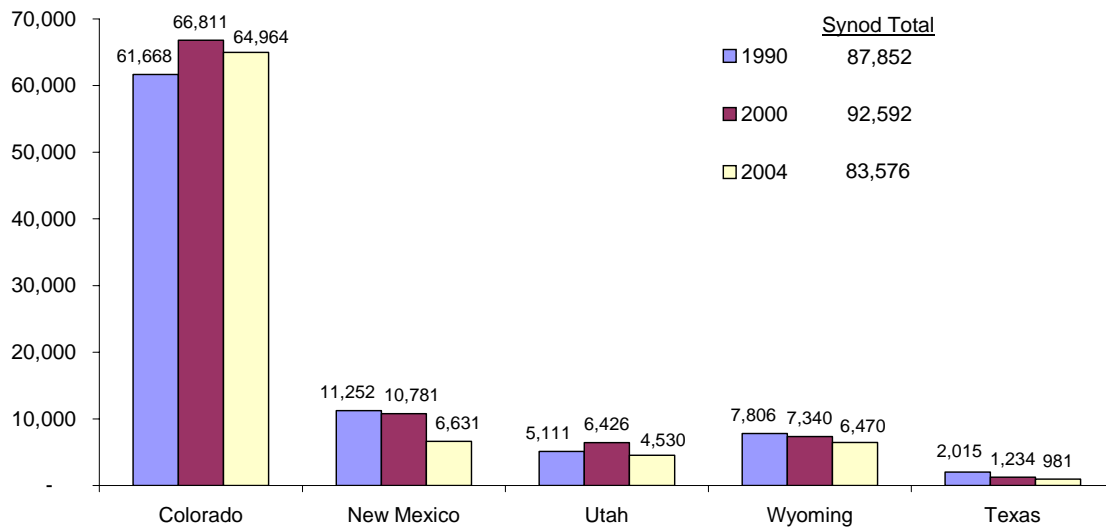


About 20 percent of the population of the RMS is non-White. In the Southeastern Synod about 31 percent of the population is non-White. This compares to five percent of the Western Iowa Synod, nine percent of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod and 16 percent of the Minneapolis Area Synod.

Baptized Membership and Worship Attendance

In 2004, the RMS included 169 congregations, four forming congregations, and two authorized worship communities. These congregations included 83,576 baptized members or an average of 483 per congregation. The congregations baptized 1,315 children and 133 adults in 2004. The congregations affirmed the faith of 1,785 adults. Five hundred and ninety members died and 6,286 other baptized members were removed from the roles. The trends in the baptized membership of the synod by state are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Baptized Membership in the Synod by State in 1990, 2000, and 2004

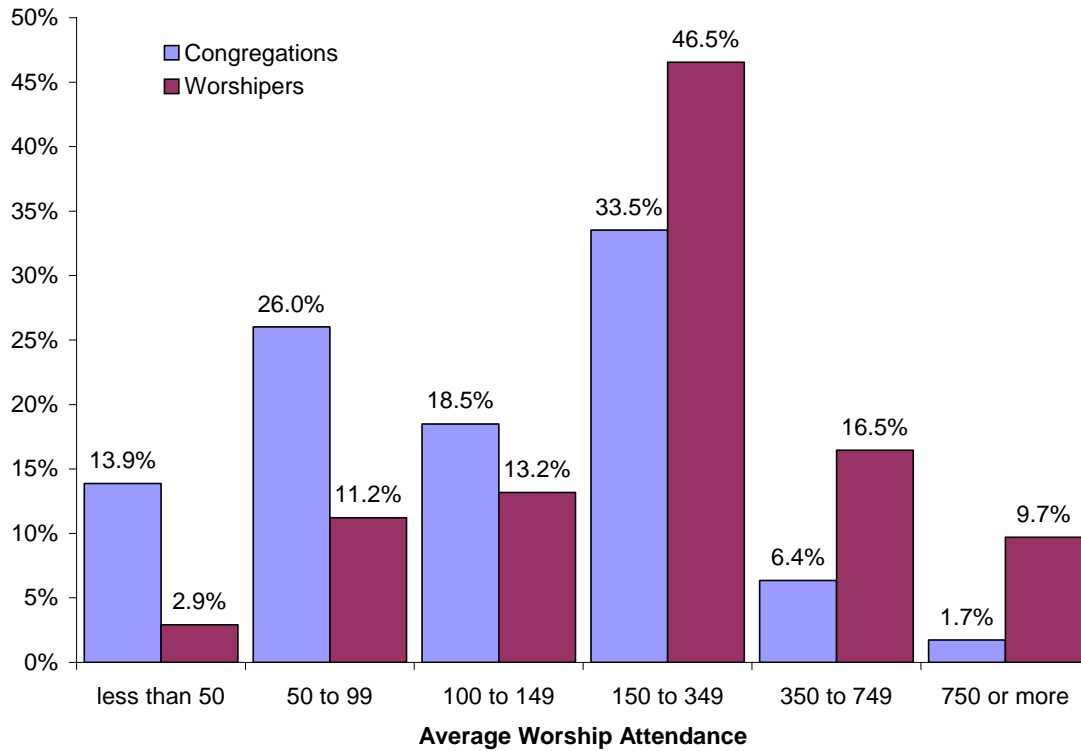


Two congregations, Augustana in Denver and First in Longmont were established in 1878, but 70 percent of the congregations in the synod were established after 1945. In the Grand Canyon Synod, 97 percent of the congregations were established after 1945 which compares to 35 percent of the congregations in the North Carolina Synod and 13 percent of the congregations in the Western Iowa Synod.

Ninety-seven percent of the baptized members of the synod are White which is typical of the ELCA as a whole. The United States population in the territory served by the RMS is about 80 percent White.

Worship attendance on a typical Sunday is 28,764 (34% of the baptized membership) with an average of 166 worshipers per congregation. (The average for the ELCA is 141.) Forty percent of the congregations worship under 100 (compared to 52% of the ELCA), while eight percent of the congregations worship 350 or more (compared to 3 percent in the ELCA). (See Figure 6.)

Figure 6: Percent of Congregations and Worshipers by Average Worship Attendance



Twenty-seven percent of the worshipers attend congregations with less than 150 in worship, 47 percent of the worshipers attend in congregations with 150 to 349 members and 26 percent attend congregations worshipping 350 or more. Overall, the congregations in the RMS are somewhat larger than typical congregations in the ELCA.

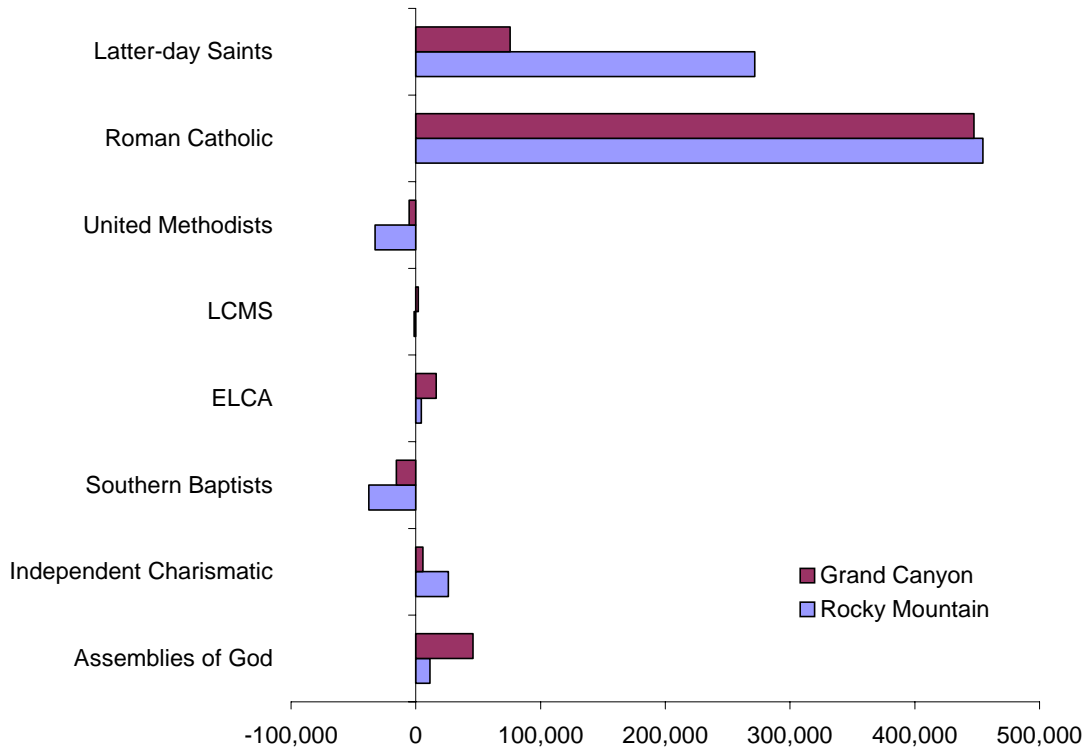
By state, 77 percent of the worshipers attend in Colorado, 9 percent attend in New Mexico, 7 percent in Wyoming, 6 percent in Utah, and 2 percent in Texas.

As noted above, RMS includes 173 congregations. This compares to 111 in the Grand Canyon Synod, 166 in the Southeastern Synod, 167 in the Minneapolis Area, 171 in Western Iowa, 238 in North Carolina, and 294 in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Between 1990 and 2000, the religious group growing the fastest in the RMS was the Roman Catholic Church.³ (See Figure 7.) The United Methodists and the Southern Baptists suffered losses, while the Assemblies of God, the independent charismatic churches, and the ELCA made some gains. In both the RMS and the Grand Canyon Synod, however, the percent of the population not claimed by any church is greater than the percent claimed by any single religious group.

³ A census of religious groups by territory is only compiled every decade so new figures will not be available until 2010.

Figure 7: Change in Membership for Selected Religious Groups between 1990 and 2000



The worship attendance in the RMS declined between 2000 and 2004 from 32,239 to 28,764 which is a decrease of 12.1% over the 4 year period. In terms of numbers, this decrease was considerably larger than the gains made between 1990 and 2000. (Between 2000 and 2005 the population of the synod is estimated to have increased by 6.8 percent.) Of the decline between 2000 and 2004, the loss of 1,816 attenders can be attributed to five congregations leaving the synod. Figure 8 presents the changes in other synods. Of these six, only the Western Iowa Synod declined more than the RMS. (The decline in the population of the Western Iowa Synod is expected to be 0.8% between 2000 and 2005). The only increase in worship attendance, which was a very modest 103 worshipers, was in the Grand Canyon Synod. (In the Grand Canyon Synod the estimated population increase between 2000 and 2005 is 14.6%).

Figure 8: Change in Worship Attendance between 2000 and 2004

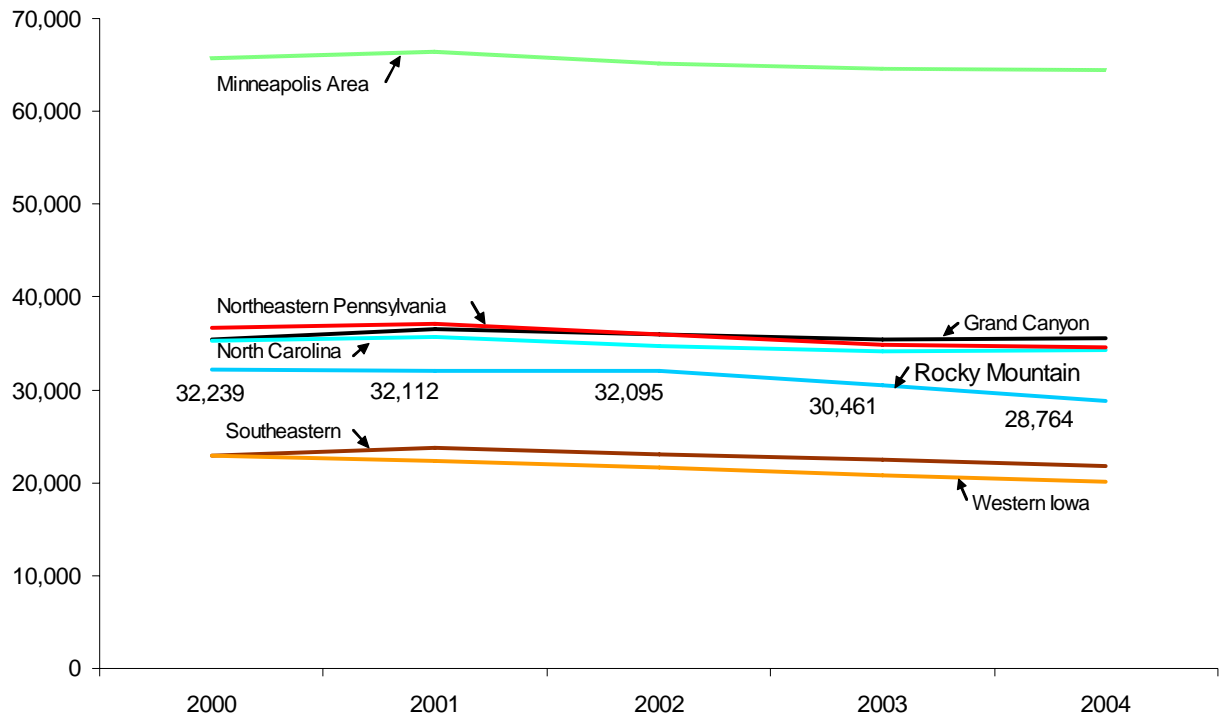


Figure 9: Change in Worship Attendance in the RMS between 2000 and 2004 by Attendance Size in 2004

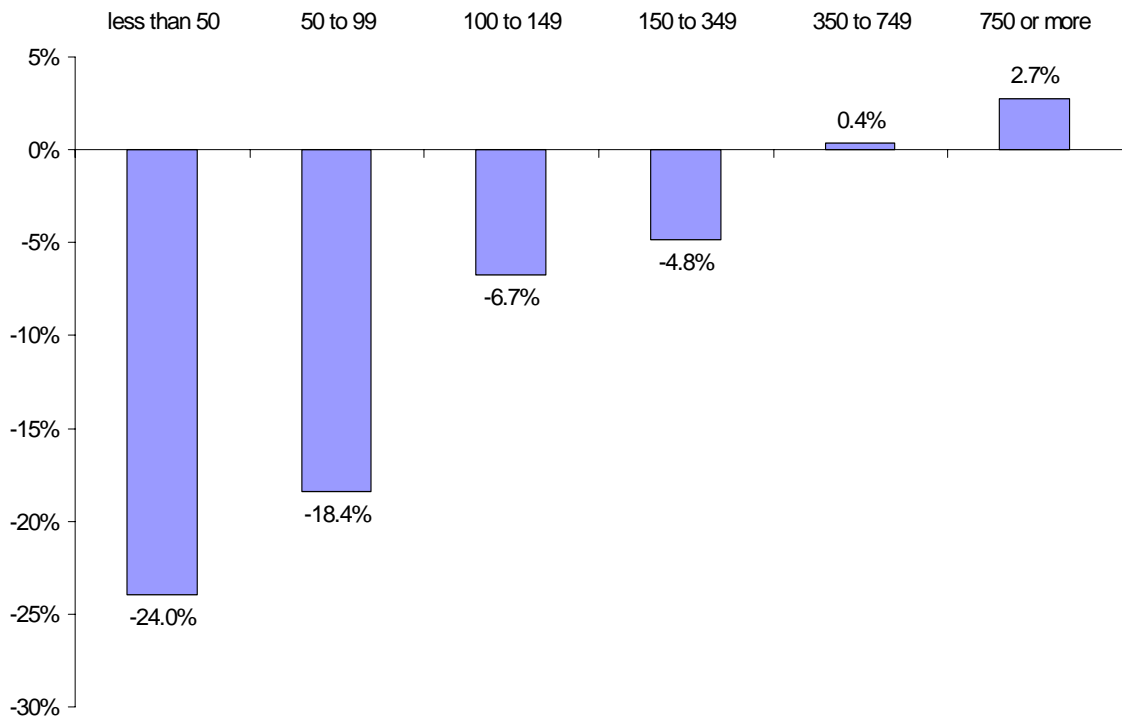
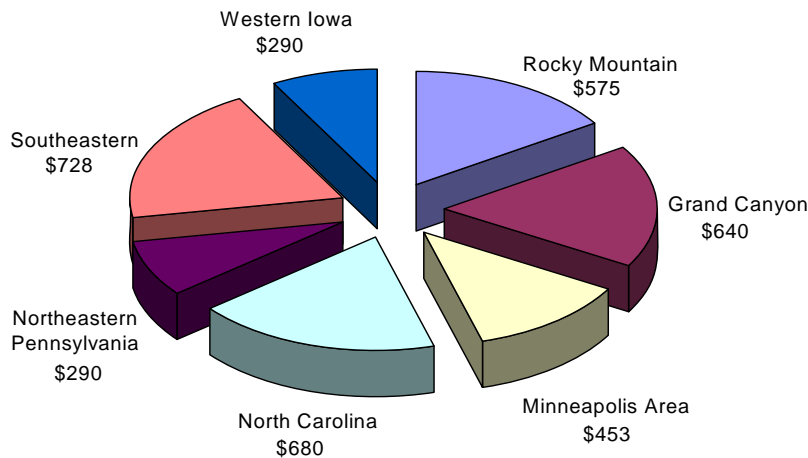


Figure 9 shows the change in worship attendance in the RMS by size of congregation. Congregations with less than 50 in worship declined in worship attendance by 24 percent. Congregations with 750 or more in worship grew by 2.7 percent. This pattern is characteristic of the ELCA as a whole.

Giving

Total giving (undesignated and designated giving) for 2004 was nearly \$48 million. Nearly \$3 million was given in Mission Support.⁴ The average amount given per baptized member was \$575. (See Figure 10.) This is lower than the Southeastern Synod, the North Carolina Synod and the Grand Canyon Synod. Giving is typically higher in areas where there are fewer Lutherans.

Figure 10: Per Capita Giving for Baptized Membership by Selected Synods



Mission Support numbers varies dramatically per baptized member. In the RMS and the Grand Canyon Synod, it is \$35. In North Carolina it is \$54. In the Southeastern Synod it is \$45. The figure drops to \$21 in Northeastern Pennsylvania, \$17 in Minneapolis, and \$16 in Western Iowa.

Figure 11 shows the percent of congregations in the synod by the percent of their total giving which is given to Mission Support. About 24 percent of congregations in the synod give less than three percent of their total giving for Mission Support. Figure 11 also shows the percent of all Mission Support given to the synod by the congregations in each category. In other words, the 24 percent of the congregations which give less than three percent of their total giving for Mission Support account for about three of the all the Mission Support given to the synod. On the other hand, about 13 percent of the congregations give 10 percent or more in Mission Support and these congregations account for over 20 percent of the total Mission Support given to the synod.

⁴ Mission Support includes all monies given to support the work of the RMS and the churchwide organization of the ELCA.

Figure 11: Distribution of Congregations and Mission Support

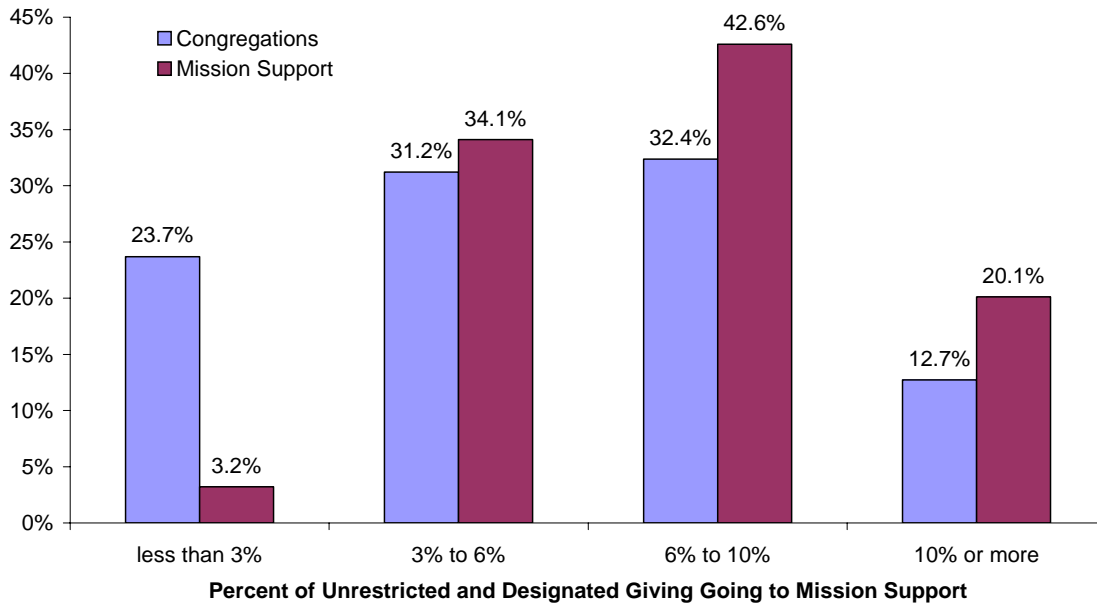
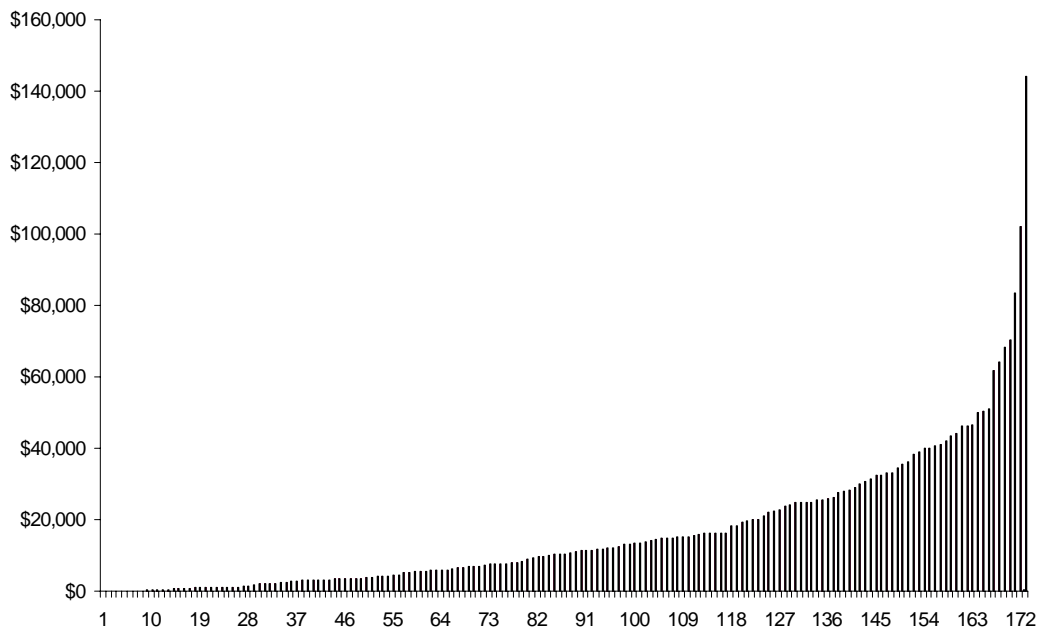


Figure 12 presents the distribution of Mission Support in the RMS. Twenty congregations (12%) in the synod provide 50 percent of Mission Support for the synod. (See Figure 12.)

Figure 12: Mission Support for Each Congregation in the Synod



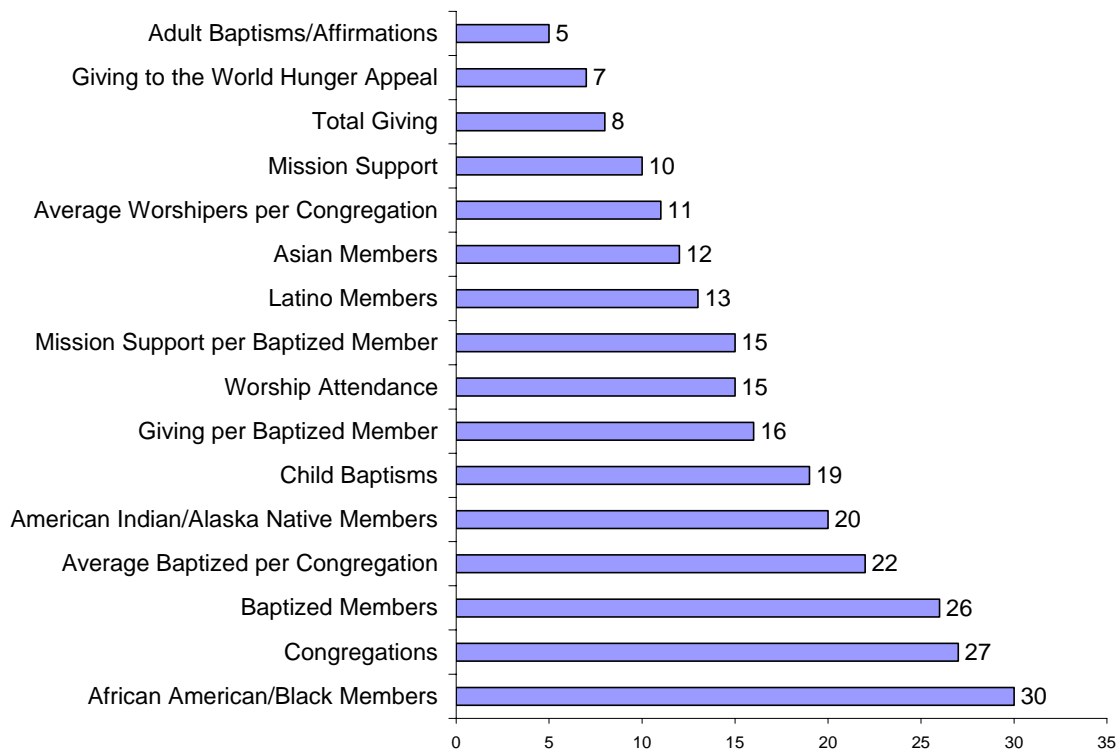
The amount given to the RMS synod and the churchwide organization of the ELCA has declined from \$3.3 million in 2001 to \$2.9 million in 2004. As a percent of total expenses, the decline has been from 7.2 percent in 1998 to 5.2 percent in 2004.

Declining participation in worship is often directly related to declining giving, but in the RMS total giving continues to increase and total income is ahead of total expense. The operating expenses of the congregations in the synod have increased, but modestly. In 2003, the congregations spent \$10.8 million in capital improvements, but that amount was down to \$4.3 million in 2004. Perhaps most telling is the fact that the congregations in the synod increased the amount in their endowments between 2003 and 2004 by \$850,000. Between 2002 and 2003, the endowment funds increased by \$3.8 million. Cash, savings, and bonds held by the congregations increased by \$1.3 million between 2003 and 2004 while Mission Support declined by \$239,000. While some congregations in the synod may be suffering financially, overall the congregations in the synod should have little difficulty in supporting the RMS office and the churchwide organization at, or above, current levels.

Synod Rank

Table 1 in Appendix 1 shows comparisons of the RMS to the ELCA as a whole and Figure 13 shows the ranking of the RMS among the 65 synods. Among all the synods, for example, the RMS ranks 5th in terms of the number of adult baptisms/affirmations of faith. The synod ranks 7th in giving to the World Hunger Appeal and 8th in total giving. The synod ranks 22nd in the number of baptized members per congregation and 26th in overall baptized membership. It ranks 27th in terms of the number of congregations and 30th in terms of the number of African American/Black members. In short, the RMS ranks in the top half of all the synods in the ELCA on these items.

Figure 13: Ranking of the RMS Compared to All ELCA Synods



The Rocky Mountain Synod Office

The RMS office is located in Denver. The staff of the synod includes the bishop, three assistants, a director of communication, and three support staff. The synod office also pays for the work of two full time staff for the advocacy ministry of the synod. The bishop's assistants are responsible for a wide range of activities including general support of congregations, the call process, stewardship education, relating to outdoor ministries, supporting youth and family ministries, supporting global mission, supporting campus ministry, specialized ministries, multicultural ministries, assembly planning, and starting new congregations. Most of the synods in the ELCA are organized similarly.⁵ In North Carolina, for example, the staff include the bishop, and three assistants who are responsible for providing congregational support, the call process, outreach, and finance and administration. Additional staff support a congregational resource center, communications, youth and family ministry, and there are several staff who provide general support. In the Southeastern Synod the bishop has nine assistants (three of whom are non-salaried/part-time staff). The staff is responsible for "transforming" congregations, starting new congregations, youth and family ministry, call process, stewardship, youth ministries, and communication. The list of staff functions is remarkably consistent from synod to synod and includes:

1. providing pastoral support for the pastors and congregations of the synod.
2. providing general support for congregations (resources, consultation, mediating conflict).
3. supporting and managing the mobility of clergy (candidacy and call processes).
4. providing stewardship education.
5. relating to agencies and institutions (outdoor ministry, campus ministry, social ministry, Lutheran social ministry agencies, colleges, universities, seminaries).
6. supporting and managing global mission and ecumenical relationships).
7. supporting and managing (with the churchwide offices of the ELCA) starting new congregations.
8. communication.
9. supporting and managing the administration of the synod office including synod assemblies.

Despite the consistency of responsibilities, the amount of money available to synod offices to do the work can vary widely. Table 2 in Appendix 1 shows the comparisons for selected synods. Unrestricted giving to the RMS synod in 2004 was just under \$3 million. For the Grand Canyon Synod, it was \$2.7 million. For the Western Iowa Synod, it was \$1.2 million. The 2003 figure for the North Carolina and Northeastern Pennsylvania Synods, which was the last year available, was \$4.9 million and \$3.4 million respectively.

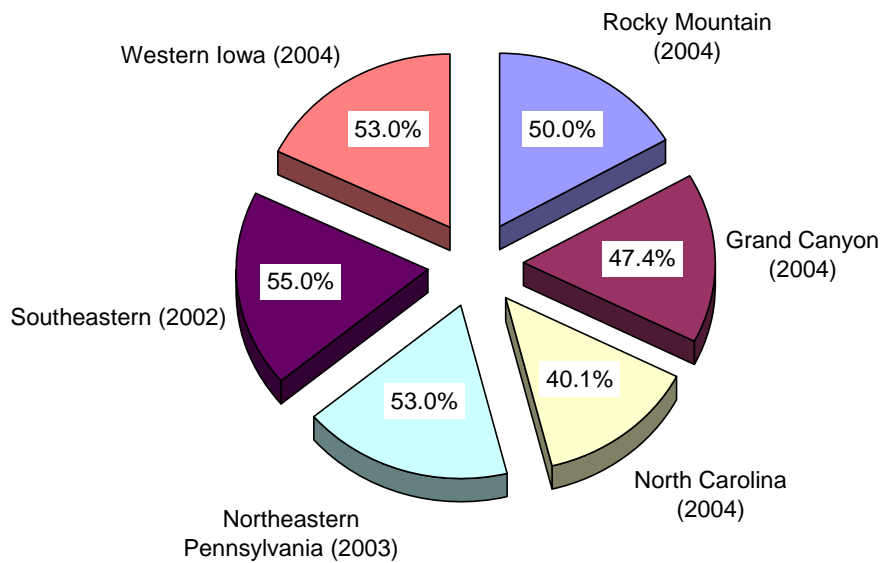
A majority of this money is expected to be shared with the churchwide organization of the ELCA. The ELCA Constitution specifies 55 percent should be passed on to the churchwide organization. This "rule" was established by the Constituting Convention of the ELCA in 1988 but there is not formal mechanism for enforcement. In 2004, the RMS sent 50 percent of the unrestricted

⁵ The *Constitution* of the ELCA lists the responsibilities of synods.

congregational giving on to the churchwide organization. Figure 14 shows the percentage from the other selected synods.⁶

Synods also receive income from sources other than congregational giving. For the RMS in 2004, 6.2 percent of its income came from the churchwide organization in the form of churchwide grants and shared/deployed staff reimbursements. The comparable figure for the Grand Canyon Synod is 3.3 percent. North Carolina and Northeastern Pennsylvania did not receive grants or reimbursements from the churchwide organization.

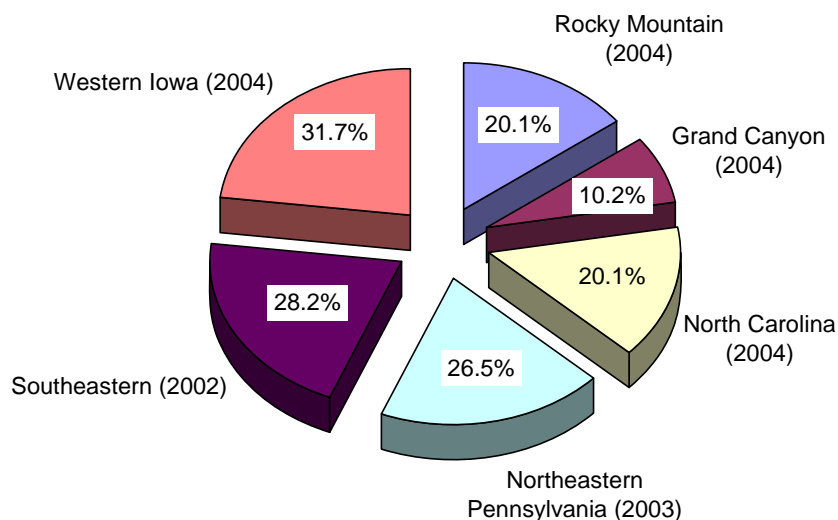
Figure 14: Churchwide Mission Support as a Percent of Unrestricted Congregational Giving



How synods spend their income can vary significantly. Table 2 in Appendix 1 shows comparisons for the selected synods. As a percent of its total expenses, for example, the North Carolina Synod gives 24.5 percent of its money as grants to agencies and institutions in the synod. This compares to 12.0 percent in the RMS and six percent in the Western Iowa Synod. Figure 15 shows the percent of expenses dedicated to staff salaries, benefits, and staff travel for the selected synods.

⁶ Comparable data was not available for the Minneapolis Area Synod.

Figure 15: Percent of Total Expenditures for Staff Salaries, Benefits, Travel



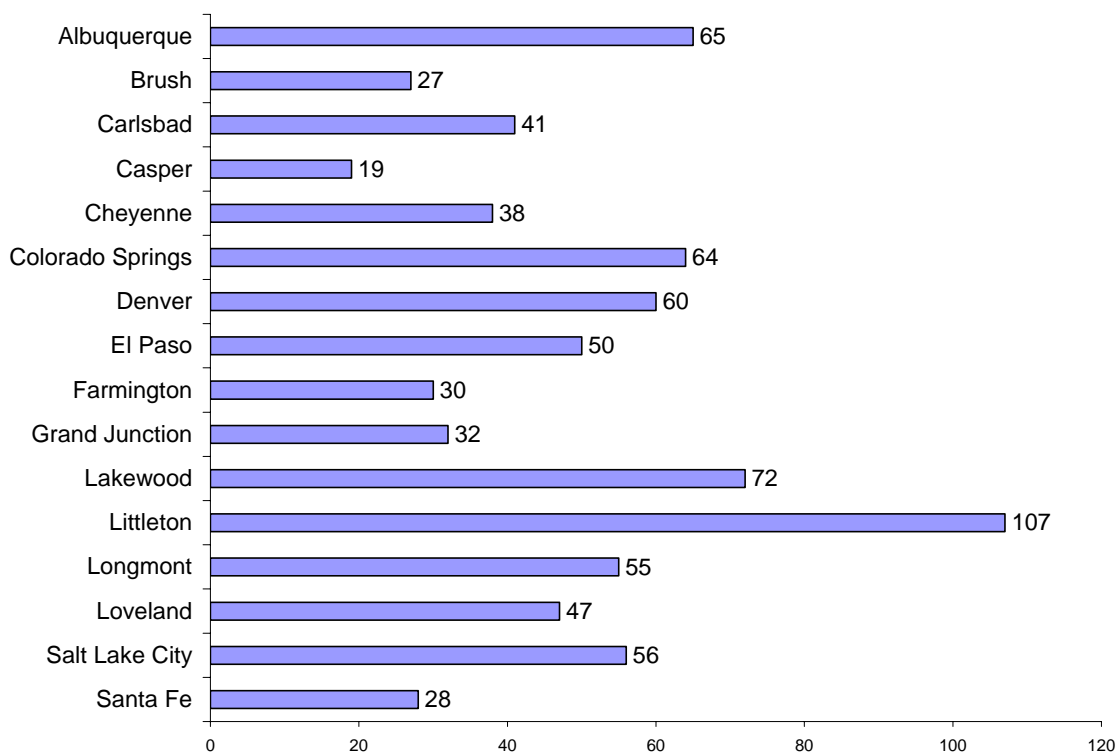
A CALL TO CONVERSATION

Conversations were held during the winter of 2005-2006 in sixteen different sites in the synod. The sites included in Colorado were Brush, Colorado Springs, Denver, Grand Junction, Lakewood, Littleton, Longmont, and Loveland. In New Mexico, the sites included Albuquerque, Carlsbad, Farmington, and Santa Fe. In Texas, the site was El Paso. In Utah, the site was Salt Lake City, and in Wyoming the sites were Casper and Cheyenne.

Overall, about 800 attended the conversations (which is about 2.7 percent of the regular worshipers in the synod). (See Figure 16.)

Of the participants in the conversations, 25 percent were clergy and 75 percent were lay. Forty-eight percent were female and 36 percent were members of congregation councils. (See Appendix 3.) One hundred percent said they attend worship services weekly. The average age was 45 years, which is younger than the average age of attendees in the ELCA as a whole. The average length of congregation membership was 15 years.

Figure 16: Attendance at the Conversations by Site



Vision, Passion, Action Congregational Survey

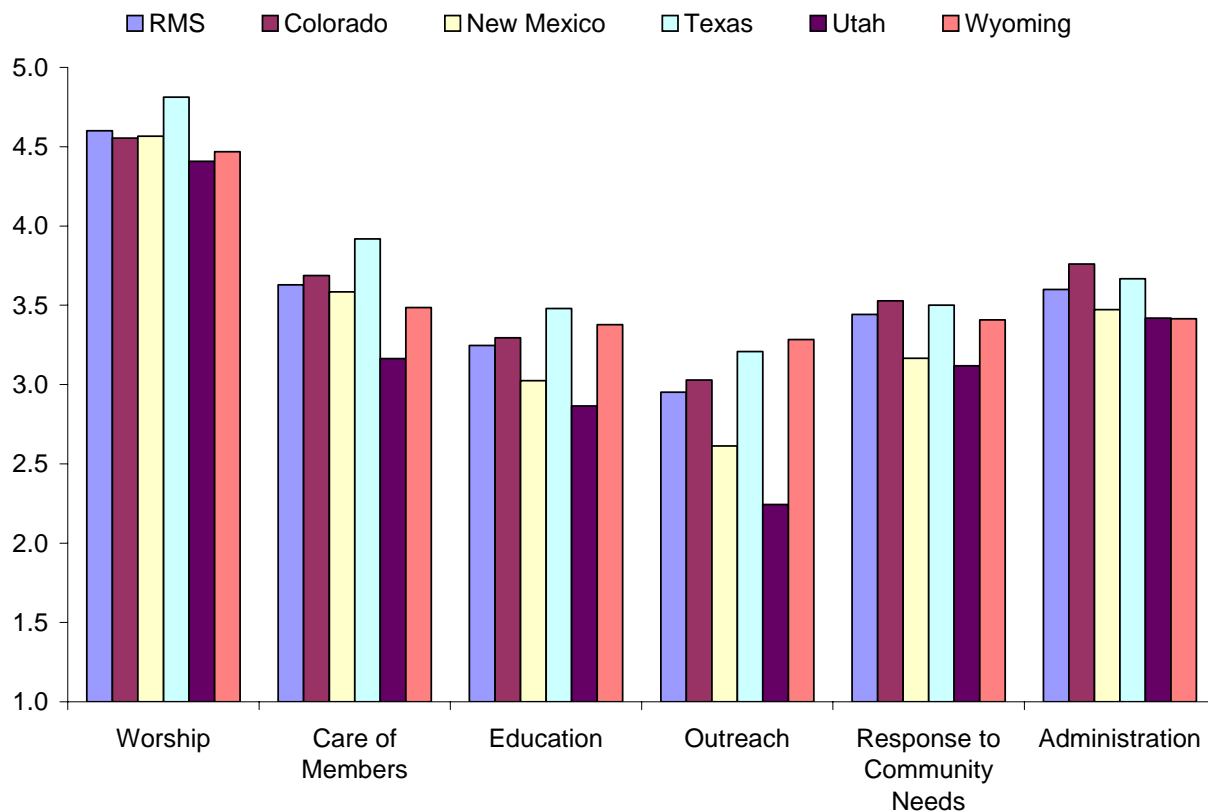
Prior to the actual conversations, congregations were asked to prepare by discussing and completing a questionnaire. The questionnaire covered a variety of topics.⁷ Ninety-eight congregations (56%) returned questionnaires including 66 in Colorado (185 questionnaires), 12 in New Mexico (36 questionnaire), four in Texas (11 questionnaires), seven in Utah (21 questionnaires), and nine (27 questionnaires) in Wyoming.⁸ (A summary of each site is presented in more detail in Appendix 2.)

Figure 17 presents the responses of the congregations on the topics of providing worship, care of members, providing a ministry of education, a ministry of outreach, responding to human need and providing proper administration of the church and its property. Those people completing the questionnaire were asked to respond on a five point scale from “1-We struggle with this” to “3-We do this well” to “5-We are great at this.”

⁷ Some congregations completed a single questionnaire together as a group. Other congregations distributed the questionnaire to individuals and returned multiple copies. This analysis aggregated group responses using the congregation as the unit of analysis.

⁸ The “open-ended” questions were not completely analyzed for this report since the same basic questions were asked during the actual conversation meetings. The responses at the conversation meetings were fully analyzed.

Figure 17: Response to the Questionnaire for the RMS and by State



Congregations within the synod perceive themselves as doing very well in providing services of worship “at which the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered in accordance with the Confessions of the church and by a person duly qualified to do so.” The overall score for the synod on the 5 point scale was 4.6. The congregations drop a point to 3.6 overall on the matter of providing for the care of members “through both lay and ordained involvement . . .”. The congregations also gave themselves a 3.6 on providing for the proper administration of the church and its property “so that these are maintained in good order . . .” .

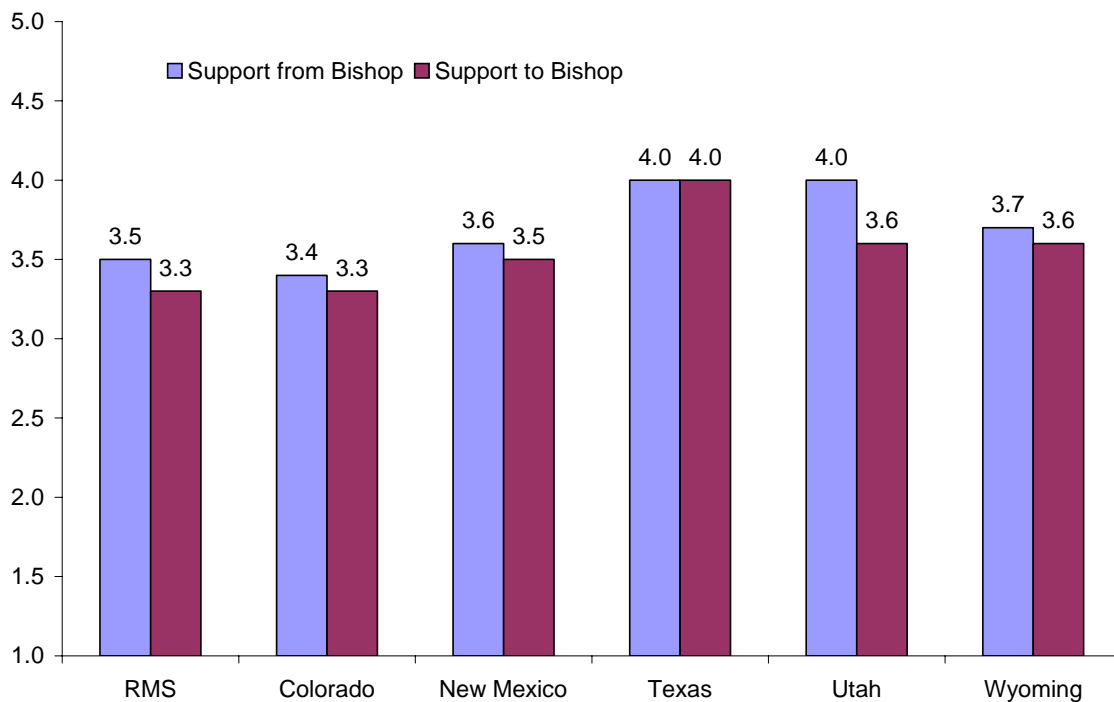
With regard to responding to “human needs in the community and among members” the congregations gave themselves a 3.4. In “providing a ministry of education” the congregations gave themselves a score of 3.2. They gave themselves the lowest overall score (3.0) on providing a ministry of outreach “to the community around the church and to the wider community so that the church may proclaim the gospel to all people both in number and diversity.”

The congregations were also asked if their rostered leaders meet with others and support each other, if they conduct occasional joint worship services, shared in social ministry work, youth ministry work, facilities or other physical resources or in training leaders. It appears many of the respondents did not know if the rostered leaders meet or if social ministry or youth ministry was shared. As a result, if a majority of respondents indicated an activity was shared, it was counted as shared even though it is likely that this method over estimates the amount of actual sharing. In any case, 74 percent of the responding congregations indicated that their roster leaders meet;

56 percent said they conducted joint worship services; 55 percent shared in youth ministry work; 51 percent in shared social ministry work; 48 percent shared facilities; and 31 percent shared training.

The respondents were asked “How supportive do you feel the Office of the Bishop is of your congregation and its ministries?” and “How supportive are you of the Office of the Bishop and its ministries?” The response scale went from “1-not supportive” to “3-neutral” to “5-very supportive.” Many of the respondents noted their response did not reflect their own personal views but their perceptions of the views of the typical members of the congregation. As one pastor put it: “Personally, I feel very supported, but the congregation does not reflect this,” or “I am very supportive, but the congregation holds negative views related to the loss of the previous pastor.” Figure 18 presents the responses by state. The averages are highest in Texas and Utah and lowest in Colorado. In each state except for Texas, the perception is that the support for the bishop is lower than the support from the Bishop.

Figure 18: Support From and To the Office of the Bishop



Finally, the congregations were asked to describe the ways the congregation has been involved with the RMS office over the last three years. The vast majority of responses had to do with the call process, the synod assembly, youth events, and interim ministry.

The Conversations

The conversations took place in small groups with the clergy typically in a separate group(s). Members of the same congregation were asked to mix into different groups. The groups were provided with index cards and asked to discuss a question and then write a word or two that describes their response to the question. Many cards could be written in response to a single

question. At the conversations these cards were collected and sorted into categories, posted, and reviewed for the entire group. (Appendix 4 presents the responses in detail by site.) Roughly 8,000 cards were analyzed in total. Despite the wide range of responses, certain themes emerged for each question and though these themes may have received a different emphasis, they were typically characteristic of each site and of both the lay and clergy groups. There was also considerable overlap from theme to theme which made discrete coding a significant challenge. The top ten themes on each question, however are presented below. Each of these themes received consistent attention (with the approximate number of responses within parentheses).⁹ It is also clear that there were many more responses on questions related to congregations than the synod. This probably indicates that people have more to say about their congregations because they know them so much better than the synod. For example, the top ten list on what in the congregation is life giving involved the summary of about 740 responses while the question of what is life giving in the synod involved 420 responses.

What is God calling your congregation to be? (N=630)

1. evangelistic and growing, to do outreach, and to support and bring to faith those outside the church. (160)
2. open, welcoming, tolerant, forgiving, and accepting of diversity. (100)
3. servants, serving others, helping the disadvantaged, giving aid to those most in need. (80)
4. caring, loving, hopeful, peaceful, compassion, and comforting. (60)
5. faithful witnesses and disciples, Christ-like, Gospel-based, guided by the Holy Spirit. (70)
6. equipping leaders, teaching, educating, leading, learning, growth in faith and discipleship. (40)
7. good stewards, thrifty, financially supporting the church. (40)
8. a recognizable community, a source of stability in the community, a beacon in the community. (30)
9. a mentor to children, youth, and young families. (30)
10. active, vital, relevant, purposeful. (20)

In your congregation, what is life giving? (N=740)

1. fellowship, serving, and caring for other members of the congregation. (170)
2. worship, communion, corporate prayer. (150)
3. outreach, serving the community. (80)
4. youth, children. (80)
5. lay or pastoral leadership. (60)
6. music, choir. (60)
7. acceptance, diversity, friendliness. (40)
8. spiritual gifts, passions, talents, involved and vibrant people. (40)

⁹ The number in parentheses is the approximate number of times an item was mentioned. Because the exact focus of some responses is impossible to determine from a single word or short phrase, because multiple responses were included on a single card, and because the categories themselves can substantively overlap, our counts are inevitably imprecise. As a result, we rounded off these numbers to the nearest 10. We are, however, very confident of the relative importance of these items.

9. educational activities. (30)
10. small groups. (30)

In your congregation, what takes life away? (N=710)

1. conflict, gossip, petty people, cliques, bickering, pessimism, prejudice. (240)
2. apathy, lack of participation/volunteers, complacency, boredom. (120)
3. fear of change, resistance to change. (90)
4. lack of funding, financial support. (80)
5. burnout, fatigue. (40)
6. lack of vision, unclear roles, no priorities, lack of follow through. (40)
7. aging membership, lack of youth or programs for youth. (30)
8. “poor” theology, emphasis on the wrong issues, “political correctness,” divisive social and theological issues. (30)
9. lack of, or poor professional leadership. (20)
10. poor communication. (20)

What is God calling us as the synod (all congregations together) to be? (N=500)

It is clear the participants in the gathering focused on the RMS synod office in response to this question. The participants believe the synod office should . . .

1. provide leadership that is visionary, guiding, building, nurturing, unifying, and distinctively Lutheran. (120)
2. provide general congregational support (sometimes specifically mentioning resources), and help congregations network and connect. (100)
3. be a Lutheran voice in the wider community. (60)
4. promote outreach and evangelism, and start new congregations. (60)
5. promote, advocate for, and support social ministry, responding to need, disasters, and poverty. The office should also advocate for social justice. (40)
6. be faithful, theologically sound, spiritual, and truthful. (30)
7. be inclusive, and embrace and support diversity. (30)
8. promote stewardship and be good stewards. (30)
9. facilitate and manage the mobility of professional leaders, and find and support professional leadership. (20)
10. be a link to the wider national and global church, helping congregations understand the mission and ministry of the wider church and to represent the synod’s congregation in the wider church. (10)

In our synod, what is life giving? (N=420)

1. synod gatherings, assemblies, corporate worship. (70)
2. support for pastors, support for the call process. (50)
3. social ministry, hunger network, disaster response, advocacy. (50)
4. youth, youth gatherings. (50)
5. open dialogue, communication with, and input from, congregations. (50)
6. support for congregations (resources, education, networking). (50)
7. leadership from the synod office. (30)
8. outdoor ministry, campus ministries, colleges, seminaries. (30)

9. outreach, support for mission congregations. (20)
10. diversity of the synod. (20)

In our synod, what takes life away? (N=440)

1. lack of communication. (70)
2. the geographic and demographic distances of the synod. (70)
3. synod office not open to change, too many rules, things take too long. (70)
4. bickering, political divisions, the debate over controversial social issues. (60)
5. lack of financial support for the synod. (50)
6. lack of response to, or recognition, or neglect of, congregations. (50)
7. lack of leadership, a vision, a strategy. (20)
8. unresolved conflict. (20)
9. shortage of clergy, call process. (20)
10. not understanding synod's role or about the synod. (10)

SUMMARY

Hopes For the Future

God's Calling for Congregations

In response to the question of what God is calling their congregations to be, the conversation participants focused primarily on evangelism (growing congregations) and outreach. The participants also believe God is calling their congregations to be open, welcoming, tolerant, forgiving, and accepting of diversity. God is calling their congregation to serve others, to help the disadvantaged, and to give aid to those most in need; to be caring, loving, hopeful, peaceful, compassionate, and comforting. And, finally God is calling the congregations of the synod to be faithful witnesses and disciples, Christ-like, Gospel-based, and guided by the Holy Spirit.

God's Calling for the Synod Office

In response to the question of what God is calling the synod to be, the participants in the conversation focused primarily on leadership. They want the synod office to provide visionary, guiding, nurturing, unifying, and Lutheran leadership. They see the synod representing Lutherans in the wider community, promoting evangelism, starting new congregations, promoting inclusiveness, stewardship, social ministry, responding to disaster and poverty, and in helping congregations understand and appreciate the broader national and global church. They also expect the synod office to provide clergy and congregations with support, to help congregations connect and network, and to facilitate and manage the mobility of the professional leadership within the synod.

The Present

Among all of the synods in the ELCA, the RMS synod ranks among the top ten in the number of adult baptisms/affirmations of faith, in giving to the World Hunger Appeal, in total giving, and in Mission Support.

On Growth and Evangelism

The membership of the RMS is declining, and along with the increase in the population of the synod, the number of Lutherans as a percent of the population has declined significantly since 2000. Attendance losses, however, are not shared across the board. Congregations worshipping less than 50 declined in worship attendance by 24 percent while congregations with 750 or more in worship grew by 2.7 percent. At the same time, on the pre-conversation survey of congregations, the responding congregations gave themselves a 3.0 on a five point scale (their lowest ranking) in providing a “ministry of outreach to the community. . .so that the church may proclaim the gospel to all people and grow both in numbers and diversity.”

On Being Open, Welcoming, and Tolerant

The single most frequent theme mentioned in the conversations was in response to what takes life away in your congregation. Repeatedly, the participants cited conflict, gossip, cliques, bickering, pessimism, and prejudice. It is difficult to know from the frequency of this response the extent of congregational conflict in the synod or the extent to which conflict actually becomes the primary focus of congregational life, but the theme was mentioned enough to warrant concern. This theme of conflict is also, most likely, related to fear of, and resistance to, change.

On Discipleship and Serving Those in Need

Based on the pre-conversation survey of congregations, the responding congregations gave themselves a 3.4 on a five point scale on responding to human needs in the community and among members. In terms of providing a ministry of education, the congregations gave themselves a 3.2. Both these scores are considerably below the 4.6 for providing services of worship and the 4.1 for the proper administration of the church and its property.

On The RMS Office

The responses to the questions on the *Vision, Passion, Action Congregational Survey* about the support to, and from, the Office of the Bishop, were not negative, but they also were not exceptionally positive. There were also occasional comments during the conversations about the perceived rigidity of the synod office. The synod office has taken steps to improve communication, but many continue to believe more improvements can be made.

Overall the congregations in the synod should have little difficulty in supporting the RMS office and the churchwide organization at, or above, current levels. In general, endowment funds, cash, and other investments are increasing.

On Geography

The participants in the conversations said the geographic distances of the synod keep the synod from operating to its full potential.

In Need of Attention

Evangelism and Worship

Clearly the area of proclaiming the gospel to all people and growth in numbers and diversity is a challenge for the congregations of the RMS and it needs attention. **What keeps the congregations in the synod from reaching out?** The questionnaires completed by congregations before the conversations also clearly show congregations in the synod believe they do very well in providing worship, but **what is the relationship of worship to evangelical outreach?** In response to the question of what is life giving in their congregations, the most mentioned themes were worship and fellowship. **To what extent or in what ways do these life giving themes function to exclude as well as include?** As noted above, participants in the conversations frequently said God was calling their congregation to be open, welcoming, tolerant, forgiving, and accepting of diversity.

Being Open, Welcoming, and Tolerant

As note above, it is difficult to know the extent of congregational conflict in the synod or the extent to which conflict actually becomes the primary focus of congregational life, but conflict and resistance to change were frequent themes. **To what extent does this conflict stand in the way of congregations reaching out to their communities or even working with one another to accomplish God's mission?**

Discipleship

Providing a ministry of education which seeks to equip members for their service in the world and for growth in their spiritual life is key to shaping a Christian identity and to accomplishing the mission of the church. Judging by how congregations scored themselves, this is an area where improvements can be made. Only 11 percent of the regular attenders involved in Sunday school in 2004 were adults. **What can be done to engage more people in learning about the faith and becoming disciples?**

The RMS Office

The occasional comments made during the conversations about the rigidity of the synod office should be explored. Also, the synod office should continue to take steps to improve its ability to communicate. Perhaps most important, however, is the belief among the participants of the conversations that the synod office should provide leadership that is visionary, guiding, building, nurturing, unifying, and distinctively Lutheran. **What are the expectations of congregations of the synod office when it comes to leadership?**

Geography

Given the synod's vast geography, how is it possible to overcome the challenge of working together?

CONCLUSIONS

The *Vision, Passion, Action* conversations made it possible for many people in the RMS to meet and talk with one another about their congregations and the future of the synod. During the course of those meetings many very positive (and some not so positive) things were said about congregations and the synod office. Perhaps most significantly, the conversations produced many questions including:

- What keeps congregations from reaching out to new members?
- Does conflict get in the way of the mission?
- How can congregations produce more disciples?
- How does the synod overcome its vast geography?

And, there were questions beneath the questions.

- What is our Lutheran identity and how does it shape the mission?
- Is there a sufficient level of agreement about what it means to be Lutheran in the RMS?

Again, the Rocky Mountain Synod ranks 5th among all ELCA synods in adult baptisms and adult affirmations of faith. Many members did not grow up Lutheran. As one respondent put it, “We don’t all have Lutheran DNA.” Even those from a Lutheran background come from different traditions. What does this mean for mission and ministry in the RMS? How does being a Lutheran give us a different point of view than other Christians in the region? How does this identity shape the way the church is the church? How does it shape what we do? How does it shape the way we reach out and welcome others?

These questions of identity also raise deep questions about the way Lutherans understand Church. As ELCA Lutherans, we say the Church is more than just congregations—the Church is wherever Christians gather to do the work of God. The Church includes congregations, clusters or conferences, synods, and the churchwide organization. How do these different expressions of our church fit together to make a whole? What is their common mission in the world? What is the responsibility of each to the wider mission of the Church and to each other? What can one expression expect from another? How can congregational giving be up, while Mission Support is down? How is it possible that such a unique view of being Church, at least in America, is not well understood by the typical members of our congregations?

All members of the RMS—members of congregations, rostered leaders, synod staff, council members—must work together to answer these questions. The synod council and the office of the bishop should offer leadership to guide this process but all the members of the synod are responsible for answering these questions. It is very likely that the journey together will better prepare the synod for its mission to those people of Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming who need Lutherans to speak for, and represent, a loving God who longs to set us free.