

Montana Synod Ministry Review Report  
Synodical Relations and Research and Evaluation  
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At the request of Bishop Jessica Crist, Synodical Relations with the assistance of Research and Evaluation conducted the Montana Synod Ministry Review on July 17-18, 2008. Interviews were conducted in four sites in the synod including First English Lutheran Church in Billings, Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Great Falls, Atonement Lutheran Church in Missoula, and Pella Lutheran Church in Sidney. Twenty-six lay persons were interviewed, along with 29 pastors/lay pastoral associates, including the associate to the bishop.<sup>1</sup> Three additional pastors submitted comments in writing.

### **Background and Trends**

The Montana Synod covers approximately 154,000 square miles with 142 congregations in the state of Montana and 5 congregations in two counties in the state of Wyoming. In terms of territory, the Montana Synod is the fifth largest synod in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) behind Alaska (572,000 square miles), the Rocky Mountain Synod (421,000), the Southeastern Synod (197,000), and the Sierra Pacific Synod (172,000).

Several other synods have approximately the same number of congregations as the Montana Synod but they are smaller in terms of square miles, such as the Northeastern Minnesota Synod or the Southeastern Iowa Synod.

Fifty-three percent of the congregations in the Montana Synod describe their community context as farming or rural and another 25 percent indicate they are in small towns with under 10,000 in population. About 10 percent of the congregations report being in small cities of 10,000 to 50,000 and 12 percent say they are in medium-sized cities of 50,000 to 250,000. A few of the interviewees expressed their view that ministry in Montana is ministry on "the frontier" rather than "rural" ministry.

The overall population of the territory of the Montana Synod is growing at rates slightly slower than the United States as a whole. In 2000, the population of the synod (including the two counties in Wyoming) was 936,000.<sup>2</sup> The estimate for 2006 puts the population of the synod at 973,000, which is an increase of 4 percent. The projection for 2011 puts the population of the synod at just over 1 million. The population growth of the synod, however, is not evenly distributed. Most of the growth is in the western part of the synod, particularly in the Missoula area and north of Missoula in Kalispell. There will also be significant growth in the Bozeman area and, to a lesser extent, in the Helena area.

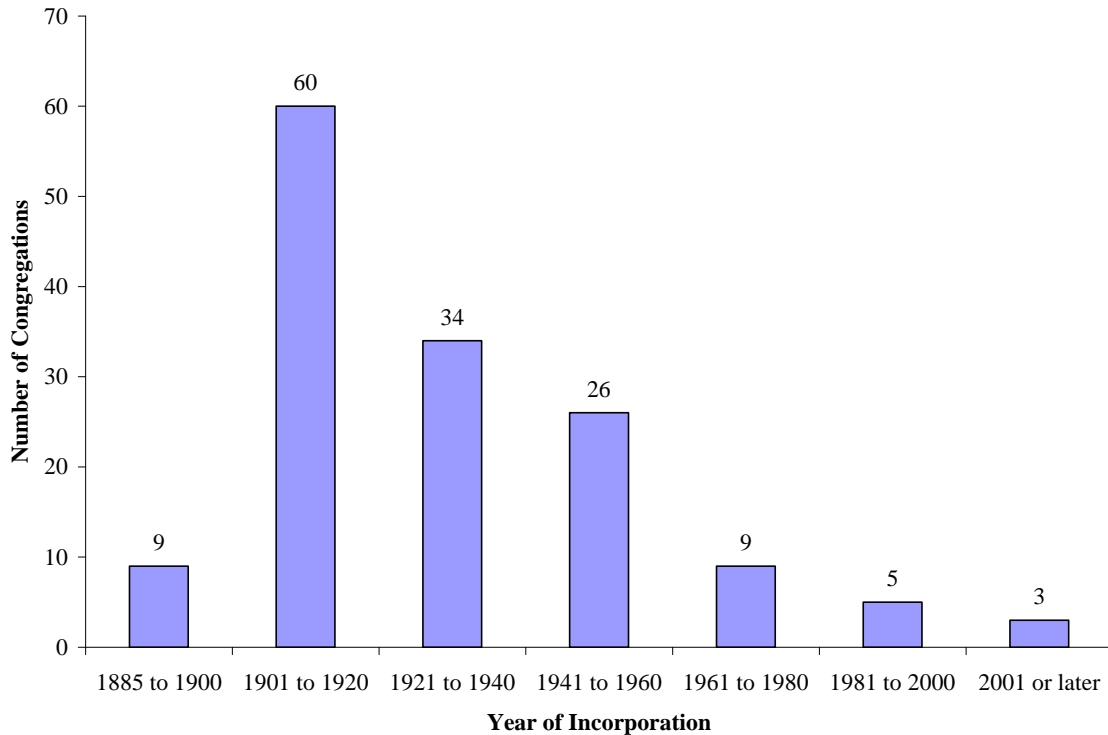
Nine congregations in the synod were incorporated between 1885 and 1900 with 60 congregations incorporated between 1901 and 1920. After 1920, the number of congregations incorporating slows significantly. (See Figure 1.)

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted by Victoria Flood and Kenneth Inskeep from Research and Evaluation-ELCA, Else Thompson from Human Resources-ELCA and Craig Settlage from Synodical Relations-ELCA.

<sup>2</sup> The 2000 figure is from the Census Bureau. The estimate and projection is from Claritas, Inc.

**Figure 1: Congregations in the Montana Synod by Year of Incorporation**

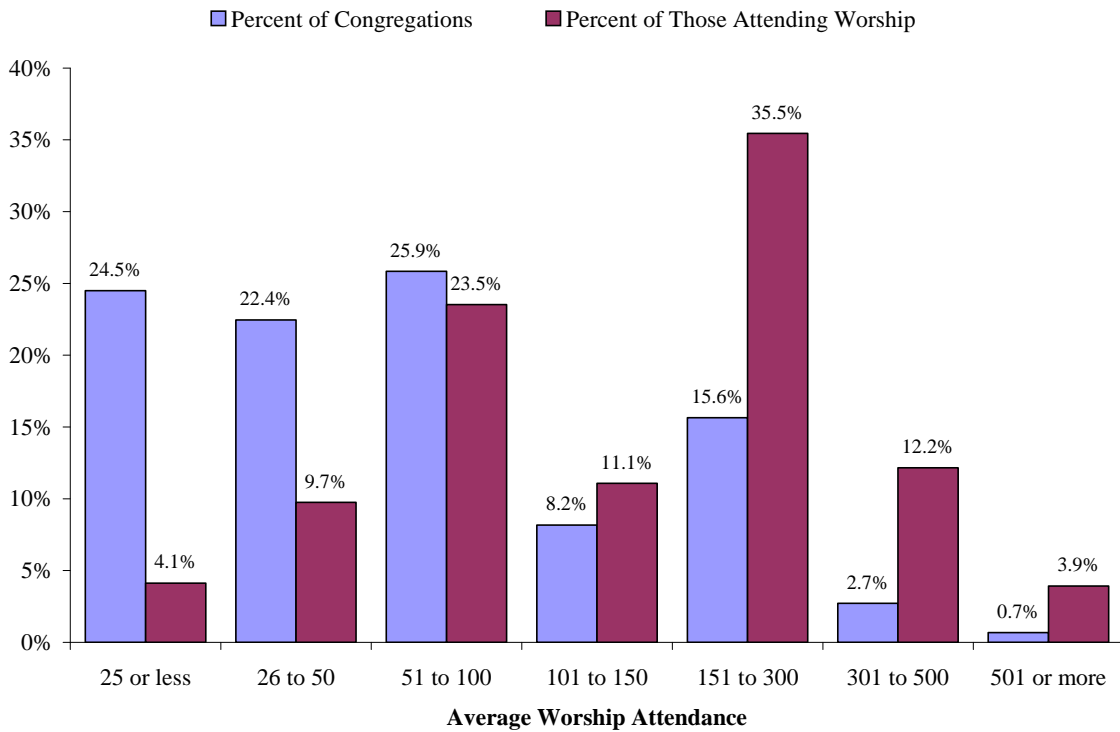


In 2007, the average baptized membership for a congregation in the synod was 340 with a median of 200 members. Average worship attendance was 87 with a median of 62. Forty-seven percent (N=69) of the congregations have 50 or less in worship with 25 percent (N=36) having 25 or less in worship. Three percent (N=5) of the congregations have 301 or more in worship with 1 congregation reporting 501 or more. (See Figure 2.)

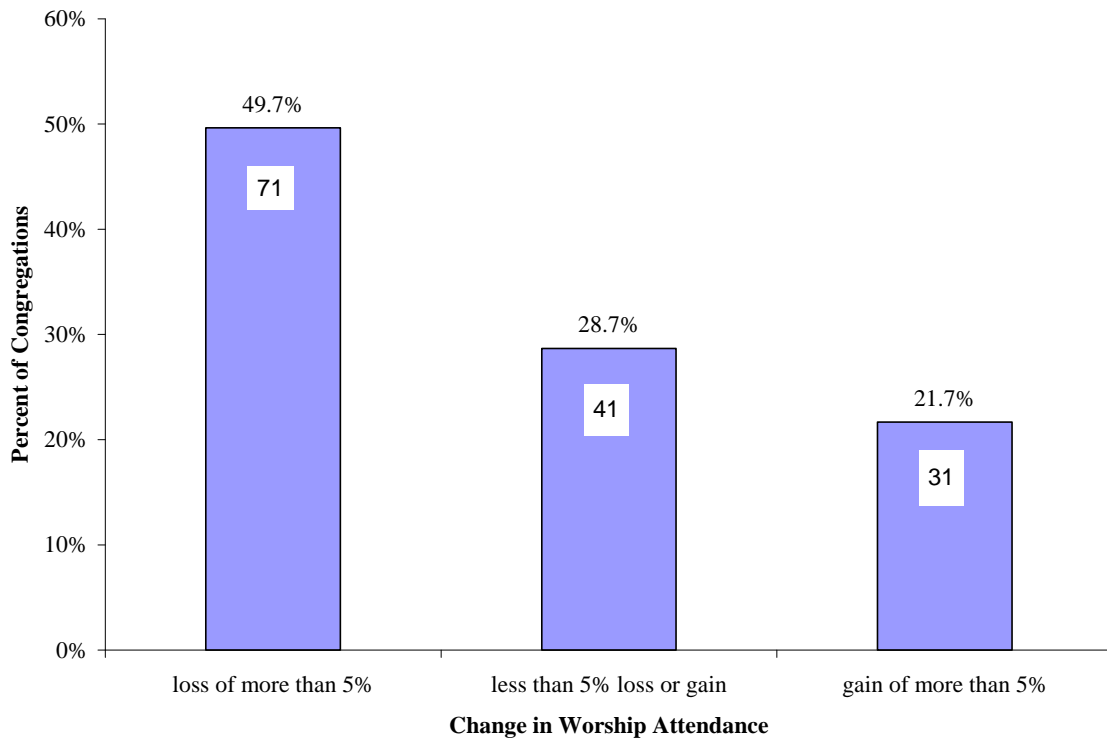
The 69 congregations with 50 or fewer in worship include about 14 percent of all those who worship in the synod's congregations on a typical Sunday while the 5 congregations with 301 or more in worship include about 16 percent of the worshipers. (See Figure 2.)

In terms of change in worship attendance, 50 percent (N=71) of the congregations in the Montana Synod lost 5 percent or more of those who were attending worship in their congregations from 2004 to 2007, while 22 percent (N=31) of the congregations gained 5 percent or more. (See Figure 3.)

**Figure 2: Percent of Congregations and Those in Worship by Size of Congregation Based on Attendance in the Montana Synod in 2007**



**Figure 3: Percent Change in Worship Attendance for Congregations in the Montana Synod: 2004 to 2007**



## Strengths of the Synod

### *The People*

Several of those interviewed, particularly in the more rural areas of the synod, praised the members of the synod's congregations as one of its significant strengths. Members were described as strong, resilient, self-sufficient, and "faithful people" with a "strong sense of community." People have a respect for, and an appreciation of, the church. Faith matters and the church plays a very important role in the community. In many cases, the church alone remains at the center of what it means to be the community. Congregations represent stability and hope and pastors are viewed as important community leaders. People appreciate family values and they see their community as a large extended family. They want to maintain the strength of that family because it is so important to their lives. This does not mean life is not hard or stressful. However, there is a longing for and respect for healthy families, in addition to a strong respect for the church. These sentiments may be felt less strongly in the more urban parts of the synod, but many felt they are basic to Montana culture.

It is in this context that keeping rural congregations open, despite all the difficulties and challenges, is so important to people of the synod. Because of the strong relationship of congregations to the wider sense of community, many people expressed the view that losing a church potentially means losing the community itself.

### *The Synod Office*

Bishop Crist was frequently praised for her leadership. The staff was also regularly praised. Many feel that Bishop Crist and Pastor Peters are a "good fit" for the synod. They have demonstrated their care and compassion for the people and ministries of the synod for a long time and they have gained (earned) credibility. They have strong reputations for working hard for the church both within and beyond the borders of the synod.

The interviewees also repeatedly noted that Bishop Crist and the staff are accessible. When calls are placed to the synod office, a person answers the phone. Calls and E-mails are returned in a timely way and, in general, communication is good. As one pastor put it: "They know you and get back to you. I can't overstate how important that is." Many believe the "sense of collaboration and cooperation" within the synod has grown and it is true that the financial support for the synod and the wider mission of the church has increased steadily since 2003. The Montana Synod staff "does a great job."

It appears, at least to many, that the call process is also working well and the visits Bishop Crist makes to congregations are widely appreciated. The synod office is helpful and visible during the call processes and most expressed appreciation about how well the synod works to match leaders (pastors and lay pastoral associates-LPAs) with congregations. Several expressed strong thanks and appreciation for the LPA program.

Finally, the Northern Rockies Institute of Theology (NRIT) was regularly mentioned as a major asset to the rostered leaders as was the Montana Synod Pastoral Conference and the synod's first call theological education program.

## Challenges Facing the Synod

### *Distance*

Perhaps the single most mentioned challenge facing the synod was distance—distance in all of its manifestations. As noted earlier, congregations are widely spread out over the territory of the synod. This distance makes traveling from one congregation to another a significant challenge for the bishop and her associate. It also makes it difficult for pastors and congregations to work together or to sense a common commitment to a common purpose. Some of the clusters seem to work well, overcoming the distance, but others do not. Some suggested a review of the clusters on a cluster by cluster basis and an evaluation of their effectiveness, with suggestions on how to improve the level of cooperation among the synod's congregations in some areas. It was also suggested that it would be helpful and welcome if the bishop or staff person would meet with cluster pastors and LPAs on an annual basis, in addition to the Annual Meeting. This would provide a time for listening and reflecting together on local ministry issues. The idea was that the bishop could meet with six clusters a year, while the bishop's assistant met with the other six in rotation.

Distance seems to increase the sense of isolation, and it was suggested that both pastors and congregations have to regularly confront and battle isolation. While isolation seems to fit with, and even reinforce, the “Montana cultural value of rugged individualism”, it can also stand in the way of pastors and congregations coming to the aid of one another. There is, at least among some, a sense that the people of Montana have been left alone or even abandoned, particularly in the more rural areas of the state. The population is decreasing, and young people are moving away. As one person put it, “Young adults tend to disappear. They go off to college and they never come back.” This loss hits a community hard, especially those committed to “family.”

It also feels to some that the wider church has moved away. Presented as evidence is the very topic of sexuality/homosexuality and the “endless” discussion of the matter by the wider church. A few said that it is time to make a decision one way or another so it is clear to people where the church stands. Still, there is fear that a decision will lead many people to leave the ELCA.

### *Small Congregations and the Challenging Frontier*

All congregations, but particularly small congregations within the synod on the “challenging frontier”, are under considerable pressure. The number of people attending worship in these small congregations is already low and declining. For example, in the congregations with 25 or fewer in worship in the synod in 2007, average worship attendance declined from 19 to 15 from 2003 to 2007. And, the population in western Montana is expected to hold steady only in a few small towns while it will decline nearly everywhere else. Congregations and the synod are working hard to provide leadership for these congregations, and the LPA program has been critical. Still, the perception is that no enough pastors come and too many go.

The difficult environment also creates conditions that readily produce conflict. Several pastors told stories of moving on after being unable to productively manage differences within their congregations or differences between certain key members of the congregation and themselves. Some expressed the view that the role of the pastor is changing in the minds of many, both clergy and lay, from “call” to “employment”. When expectations are not clearly stated or delineated it can lead to “a bad

experience” on the part of everyone involved. At least one person suggested there should be “firm guidelines” that clearly establish expectations. Some also expressed the belief that first call pastors often do not have the experience they need to manage these complex situations. First call pastors need special attention and support. Another suggested alternative was the wider use of “intentional interims” who would serve congregations for a transitional year. It is the perception of some that there simply are not enough pastors available to serve congregations in the smaller communities. Still, there was considerable consensus that “the synod office does the best it can under the circumstances.”

### *A Lutheran Voice*

Another of the most frequently noted concerns for those interviewed was the challenge of effectively carrying out a distinctively Lutheran ministry in a changing culture. People asked, how do we understand the Christian faith—our Lutheran witness—in the context of the Rocky Mountains? Many felt that ELCA Lutherans can serve the wider culture and local communities as a “bridge”, but not enough people know about Lutherans and the ELCA so attention should be given to telling the story of this church. The challenge of evangelical “praise” churches, particularly in their outreach to youth is real. Some held that the role of the ELCA in the 21st century is to provide a non-fundamentalist Christian presence that proclaims the Good News—in congregations, through the synod, and churchwide offices. Many are hoping that the synod office will tell the story of ELCA Lutherans in Montana.

### *Other Challenges*

Several mentioned the challenge of starting new congregations in the growing areas of the synod. Others mentioned evangelism and they believe a synodwide strategy for evangelism is very important. The “transformational” congregations in the synod could serve widely as resources to other congregations in the synod.

Also, stewardship education within congregations was mentioned frequently. Some believe there should be an additional Montana Synod staff person, instead of a regional person, to work with congregations in the synod on stewardship and mission interpretation. Also, much more emphasis should be put on stewardship of time since congregations depend so much on volunteers who are harder and harder to find.

Another challenge is fluency in Scripture. A few said the Book of Faith Initiative is very important because it gives Lutherans tools that are badly needed. Lutherans need to study the Bible more and they need help in knowing how to study and interpret the Bible.

Finally, there was a call among some for developing more youth programs. Congregations are looking for help in keeping young people involved after they are confirmed.

## Summary and Conclusions

As in most places holding together and building up the community of the church is a challenge. Yet in the Montana Synod, it is a special challenge made more difficult by vast distances. At the same time, we encountered a positive spirit and a longing for community. The people we interviewed see themselves and their congregations as part of the Lutheran church and they see themselves playing significant roles in the wider community. At the same time, it was not clear that there is a shared vision of what that role should be or how it would be shaped to be distinctively Lutheran. What is the role of the congregations of the Montana synod in the state of Montana and the two counties in Wyoming? Is there a sense of “we?” How do the congregations with more assets help and work side by side those with less? What does it mean to be a vital congregation in the Montana Synod? What are the synod’s priorities?

Bishop Crist had proposed five priorities for the synod to the Synod Council in September of 2007. While we did not directly address these priorities in the course of our interviews, we did not hear them mentioned regularly. The priorities included valuing worship and preaching, being a church that is welcoming and hospitable, valuing education, sharing ownership of the church, and looking outward, not just inward. We believe these priorities have the potential for being widely embraced. But defining what they mean, which is critical to their achievement, will demand a renewed commitment among all the congregations of the synod. Perhaps this defining task is a place to begin—for the synod council and the various clusters of congregations. What does it mean, for example, to value worship and preaching? What does it mean for a congregation in the Montana Synod to be welcoming and hospitable, to share ownership of the church or to look outward? Then, once these priorities take on practical meaning, how can they be realized? At the very least, congregations will need to recommit themselves to finding ways of overcoming the distance between them both geographically and culturally. If this can be done, the congregations of the synod can truly begin to help each other and hold each other accountable for making a difference in Montana and Wyoming for the sake of the Gospel. And, Montana and Wyoming will be better for it.