

# Becoming Less Fruitful: A Demographic History of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1928-2008

*A Research Report Submitted by Ryan C. MacPherson, Ph.D.  
to the President of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
February 25, 2010*

## Executive Summary:

1. Total baptized membership peaked in 1995 at 22,371.
2. Membership increases have resulted primarily from the surplus of births over deaths.
3. Persistent “back door” losses have exceeded evangelism gains.
4. **“Net evangelism” has been negative: the synod’s membership would not have grown were it not for a high birth rate that offset both deaths and “net evangelism” losses.**
5. **A sudden and sustained drop in the birth rate during the 1960s has resulted in a birth rate that today is less than 50% of its pre-1960 average.**
6. Meanwhile, the death rate has increased since the early 1990s as the population ages.
7. **Baptized membership has declined 12% since its 1995 peak and may plausibly be projected to continue declining, likely at an accelerating rate, unless:**
  - a. **the birth rate increases, tending back toward its pre-1960 level; and/or**
  - b. **“net evangelism” becomes positive (new members exceed “back door” losses).**
8. Recent and impending membership declines present financial implications that likely will reinforce current trends toward bi-vocational ministry and intensify current failures to place vicars and seminary graduates; unless one or both factors identified in Item 7, above, are reversed, similar pressure to “downsize” could impact missions, Lutheran elementary schools, and Bethany Lutheran College.
9. **A higher birth rate may be encouraged by addressing one or more of the factors that have conditioned a sustained drop in the birth rate – and the attitudes behind them:**
  - a. **delayed marriage;**
  - b. **divorce;**
  - c. **birth control.**
10. **Efforts to increase “net evangelism” may prudently be focused on these two issues:**
  - a. **How can pastors and the people assisting them draw *new members* into the church through the Means of Grace?**
  - b. **How can pastors and the people assisting them guard *existing members* against the devil, the world, and their own sinful flesh that would separate them from the Means of Grace?**

## Introduction

For eighty years, starting with 1928, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod has published detailed membership statistics in its annual reports.<sup>1</sup> An analysis of these statistics reveals much cause for both celebration and concern. On the positive side, the synod tripled in size during a seventy year span (1928 to 1998) in which nearly 28,000 children and 2,400 adults were baptized and about 7,300 people joined the church through adult confirmation. On the negative side, the synod's membership has declined every year since then, with the exceptions of 2002, when baptized membership increased by 89 (or 0.4%), and 2006, when baptized membership increased by 130 (or 0.6%). The synod's 2008 membership of 19,777 represents a 12% drop from its historic high of 22,371 in 1995.

**Demographic analysis reveals that these recent declines in synod membership have resulted primarily from the compounded generational impact of a sharply declining birth rate in the 1960s, which never returned to its pre-1960 level and in fact declined further during the 1990s.** This report has three aims. First, it explains the significance of the synod's declining birth rate in relation to other factors, such as the death rate and membership transfers. Second, this study identifies reasons that today's synod members should be concerned about the birth rate decline that began during the 1960s and intensified during the 1990s. Finally, some suggestions are made as to why the synod experienced such a sudden and sustained decline in births, and what future actions may help to reverse the synod's present pattern of annually recurring membership declines.

## Part I: The Significance of the Synod's Declining Birth Rate in Relation to Other Factors

Demography, the science of population patterns, relies on a simple formula to explain population changes. The current population equals the previous population plus births, minus deaths, plus immigration, minus emigration. In the case of a congregation, immigration would refer to membership "transfers in" and adult confirmations, while emigration would refer to membership "transfers out" and excommunications. Changes in the total population can then be summarized in terms of "natural increase" (births minus deaths) and "net migration" (immigration minus emigration). Since the Lutheran church places such strong emphasis on infant baptism, the number of child baptisms listed in the ELS annual reports may serve as a reliable estimate for the number of births.<sup>2</sup> From 1928 through 2008, the population of the ELS changed as follows:

---

<sup>1</sup> A resolution passed at the June 1929 synod convention began the practice of reporting annual membership statistics (starting with Jan. through Dec. 1928), which has continued to the present day. See *Synod Report* (1929), 79. I thank Paul Madson for translating the Norwegian minutes for me.

The synod's annual reports are shelved in the libraries of Bethany Lutheran College and Bethany Lutheran Theological Society, in addition to the ELS Archives. I thank Nick Kaminsky, a history major at Bethany Lutheran College, for organizing the data for me. During the course of our analysis, we identified some minor errors in a few of the annual reports and corrected them as best we could. A spreadsheet of our data, including notes about error corrections and formulas employed to calculate birth and death rates, will be filed in the ELS Archives.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, sometimes a child born in December may not be baptized until January of the next year, so the reported number of baptisms for a particular year may not exactly equal the number of births in that year. Nevertheless, the baptismal "birth estimate" should still be accurate enough for long term comparisons. For example, a December 1955 birth that is numbered in the synod report as a January 1956 baptism still fits within the decade of

<b>Dec. 31, 1928 Population</b>		<b>7,618</b>
Children Baptized	31,605	
Christian Funerals	-15,110	
<b>Natural Increase</b>	<b>16,495</b>	<b>16,495</b>
Adult Confirmations	10,251	
Net Transfers In/Out & Excommunications	-14,587	
<b>Net Migration</b>	<b>-4,336</b>	<b>-4,336</b>
<b>Dec. 31, 2008 Population</b>		<b>19,777</b>

The fact that net migration was negative deserves further attention. Although evangelism outreach efforts resulted in 2,875 adult baptisms and 10,251 adult confirmations from January 1, 1929 through December 31, 2008, these “immigration” increases to the synod’s membership were more than offset by transfers out and excommunications, resulting in the “net migration” loss of 4,336 souls during those years.<sup>3</sup> **The synod has thus been heavily dependent upon a high birth rate and low death rate for membership increases to occur.**

The synod’s death rate steadily decreased from 2.19% in 1928 to 1.07% in 1956. Though fluctuating from year to year, it generally remained close to 1% from 1956 until 1998. From 1998 through 2008, the death rate has fluctuated within a higher range: 1.19% to 1.37%. (See **Chart A.**) The general pattern may hypothetically be explained as follows: improved health care during the mid twentieth century likely resulted in longer life spans, whereas in recent years the larger proportion of elderly persons in the population has slightly increased the synod’s overall death rate.<sup>4</sup>

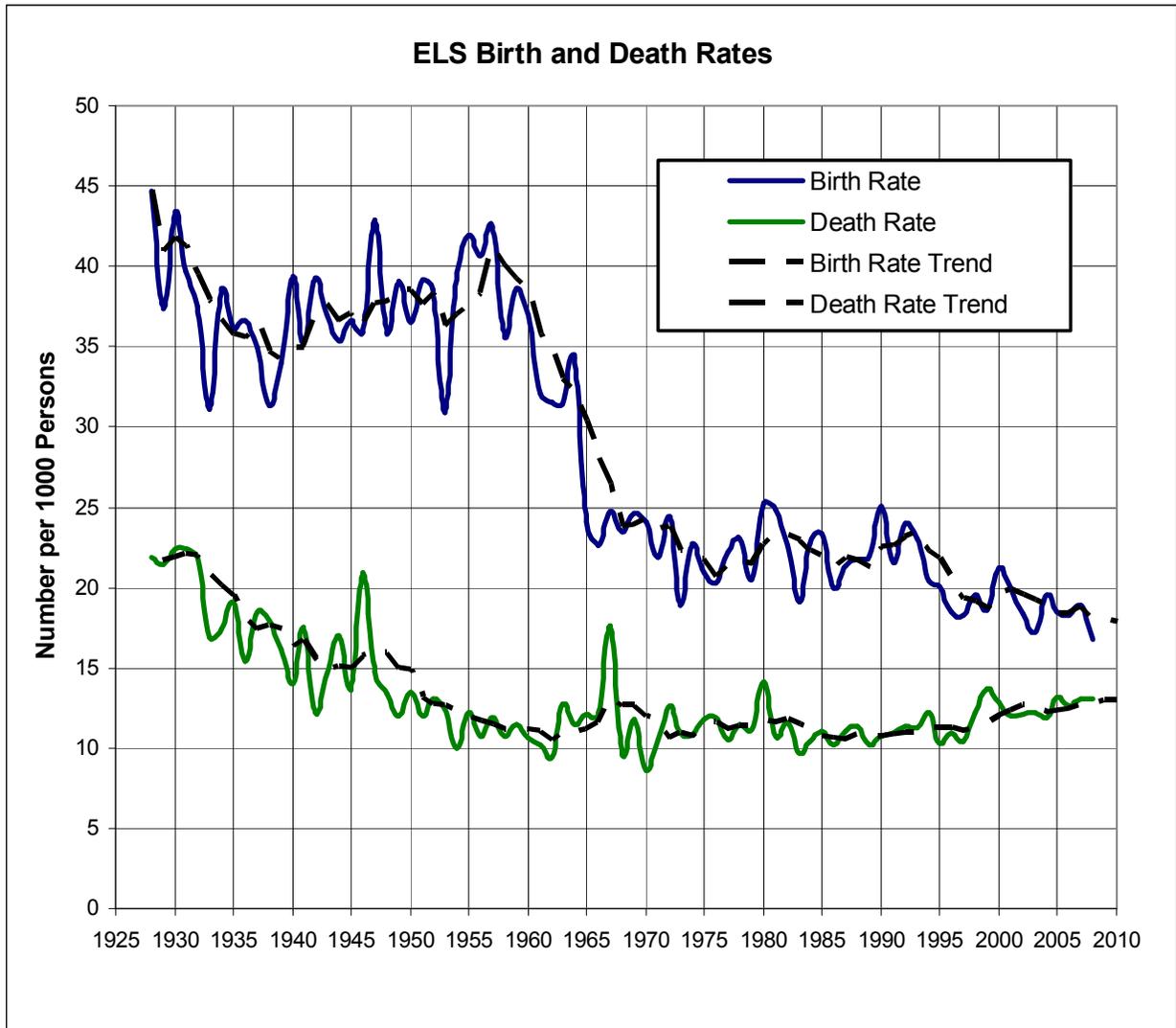
---

the 1950s, which can in turn be compared to the decade of the 1990s to detect long-term changes in the synod’s birth rate. The “children baptized” statistic also includes a small number of children older than newborns, such as the previously non-baptized children of families transferring into an ELS congregation. Again, such occurrences likely will not distort long-term trends. For example, in 1957, when the synod reported 560 “children baptized,” the net immigration numbered only 69. Perhaps some new members transferring in were children, but likely many of them already had been baptized in another church. Thus, the use of reported “children baptized” as a proxy for the birth rate should be regarded as an estimate suitable for tracking significant long-term population trends.

<sup>3</sup> An explanation of why net migration was negative is beyond the scope of this report, but a few possibilities may be briefly suggested. Youth confirmands sometimes leave the church during their teen or early adult years. Member congregations sometimes leave the synod for doctrinal reasons. Even families strongly committed to the ELS are likely to leave the synod when they move to a new town that does not have an ELS church, for example, if they transfer to a Wisconsin Synod congregation. It should, therefore, be remembered that not all losses from the synod are also losses from God’s Kingdom of Grace.

<sup>4</sup> Although no statistics are available to indicate the actual proportion of elderly persons in the synod’s population, a comparison of the synod’s baptized membership to its communicant membership confirms that the synod now consists of proportionately fewer youth and proportionately more adults. Prior to the decline in the birth rate that began in the 1960s, fully one third of the synod’s total membership consisted of baptized children who had not yet been confirmed as communicant members. That proportion dropped from its peak of 34.9% in 1954 to 20.8% in 2008. (See **Chart C.**)

## CHART A



**The most dramatic transformation in synod population dynamics resulted from a steep decline in the synod's birth rate during the 1960s, followed by a more moderate decline in the early 1990s.** From 1928 until 1960, the annual birth rate averaged 3.77%. After a decade of decline, the birth rate leveled off at a new, and significantly lower, level. From 1971 through 1993, the birth rate averaged only 2.22%. It fell further in subsequent years, and averaged only 1.87% from 1996 through 2008—less than one half of its pre-1960 level, and trending further downward. (See **Chart A**.) The lower plateau that was reached in the mid 1990s likely represents a compounded impact from the birth decline that occurred in the 1960s: those who had fewer children in the 1960s correspondingly had fewer grandchildren in the 1990s.

## **Part II: Reasons Why the Synod's Declining Birth Rate May Cause Concern**

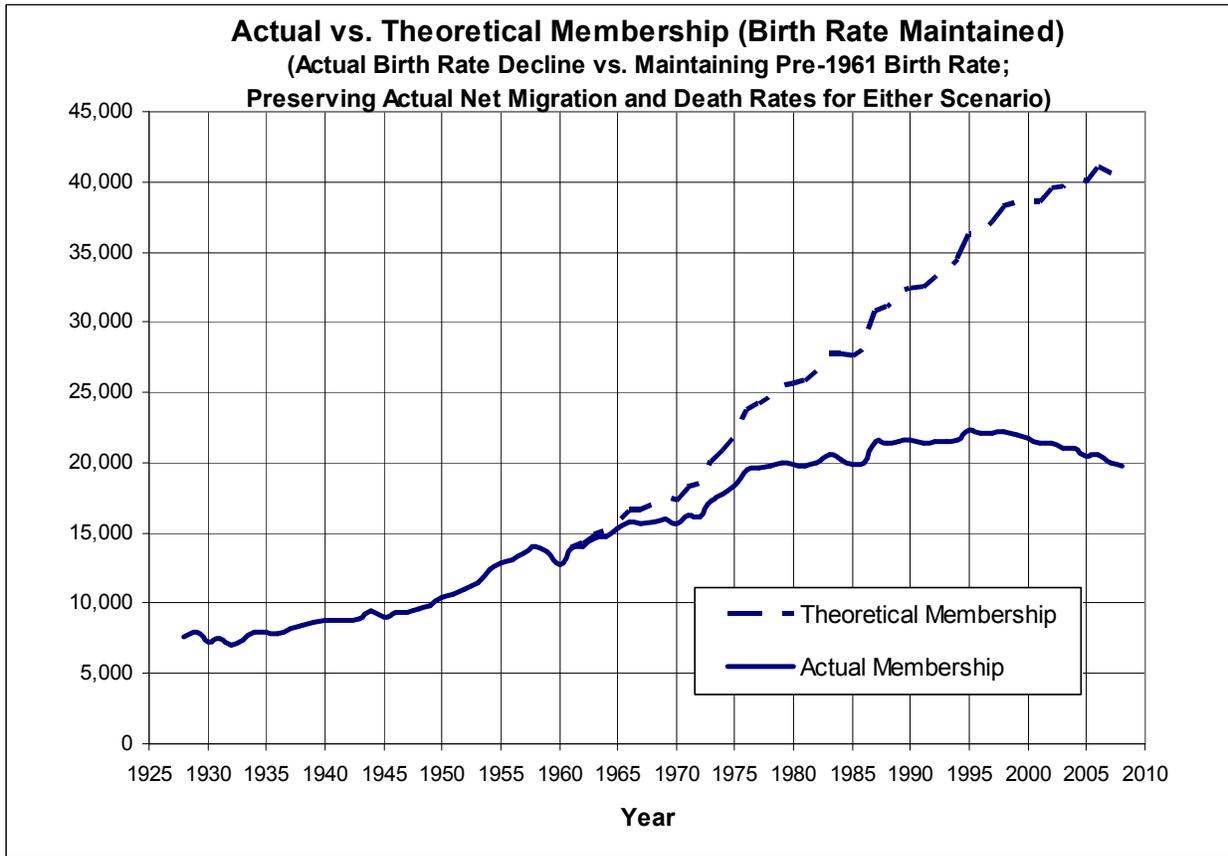
As indicated in the previous section, low birth rates in recent decades have resulted in stagnation and decline for the ELS's membership. Although the health of a church body should not be assessed *solely* or even *primarily* in terms of membership statistics, nor should demographic trends be dismissed as irrelevant. The spiritual intimately relates to the material, as indicated by the full nature of humanity (body and soul). Indeed, St. Luke's sacred history of the early church contained statistical data (e.g., Acts 2:41, 4:4). **To re-design the church's ministry according to a strategic plan designed to maximize numerical growth apart from faith nurtured by God's chosen Means of Grace (e.g., the Church Growth Movement) is folly; to fail to consider ways in which the Holy Spirit's designated Means of Grace may be administered to as many people as possible is apathy.** Both extremes ought to be avoided when concerns are raised regarding the synod's declining birth rate and the constraints this has placed upon the synod's potential for numerical growth.

The ELS recorded its greatest number of child baptisms in 1957: 560, representing a birth rate of 4.24%. By contrast, only 330 children were baptized in 2008, despite the fact that the synod's population was 6,176 higher than it had been in 1957. Thus, the 2008 birth rate was only 1.67%, the lowest on record. Had the pre-1961 average birth rate (3.77%) continued through 2008, the synod's baptized membership theoretically would have climbed to 41,050 by 2008, more than double its actual size for that year, 19,777.<sup>5</sup> (See **Chart B.**)

---

<sup>5</sup> This calculation is based on substituting the actual annual birth rates for 1961 through 2006 with 3.77%, which was the average birth rate for 1928 through 1960, while preserving the actual death rates and net migration rates for all years. This projection is conservative, since in all likelihood the total death rate would have been lower as a result of a higher birth rate shifting the population's average age downward.

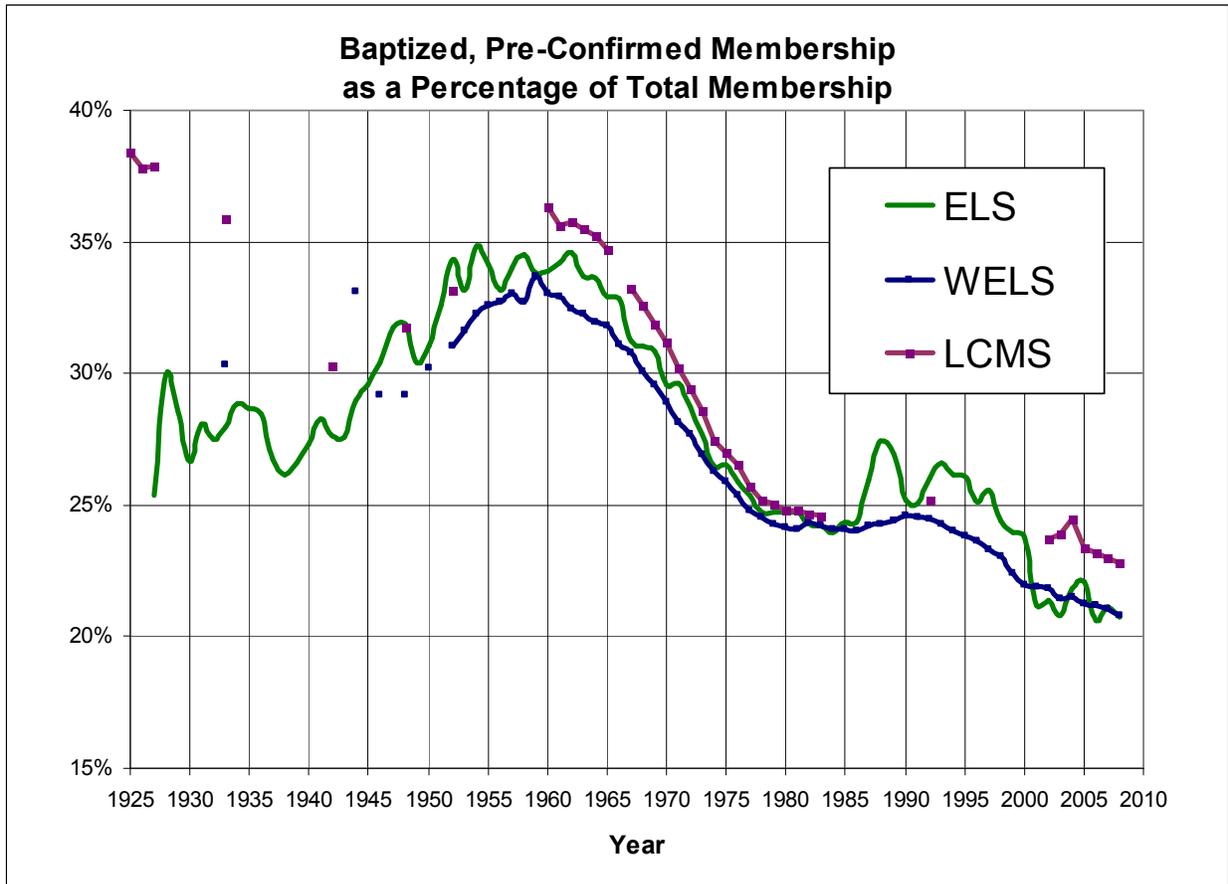
## CHART B



**Low birth rates also have resulted in a stagnating and then rapidly declining membership for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.** Total baptized membership peaked in 1990 at 421,396. The WELS birth rate from 1999 through 2008 averaged only 1.76%. Although births in the WELS continue to offset deaths, natural increase has not offset a persistently negative “net migration.” Consequently, WELS membership has declined nationwide every year since 1990.<sup>6</sup> The low birth rate also has accelerated the “aging” of the population as a whole. Whereas one fourth of WELS members in 1990 were baptized but not yet confirmed (i.e., about 14 years of age or younger), that ratio dropped to one fifth by 2008. A similar pattern holds for the ELS. (See **Chart C**.)

<sup>6</sup> WELS membership statistics from 1999 through 2007 previously were available at [www.wels.net](http://www.wels.net). More recently, they have been relocated to an intranet site requiring password access. I thank Raymond Krueger for providing me with 2008 statistical data for WELS and also for assisting in the compilation of WELS and LCMS data included in Chart C.

### CHART C



In local WELS congregations, even in areas experiencing rapid population growth due to immigration, having “fewer children in our community” has led to tough decisions about budget reductions. The pastor of a southern California church explained to his voters’ assembly in 2007 that “lower [Christian elementary school] enrollment reduces the teaching staff and lessens our ability to afford specialized part-time ministries, such as Minister of Music. ... Without specific planning and actions congregations gradually shrink in size and recede into a deathwatch.”<sup>7</sup>

**Numerical stagnation has also occurred in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.** As one concerned pastor noted, LCMS baptized membership showed no net gain from 1961 (2,464,436) to 2002 (2,463,747), in large part due to a declining birth rate—from 3.34% to 1.33%—during the 42 intervening years. “Our church body has been complicit in its own demise,” he explained, “by not emphasizing God’s plan for procreation in marriage. We’re contracepting ourselves out of business.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Lowell Smith, “Report of the Pastor,” Annual Report for the Fiscal Year 2006-2007 for Reformation Lutheran Church, San Diego, CA, 22 July 2007, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>Letter from Pastor H. R. Curtis to (LCMS) Reporter Editor, April 2006, <http://www.lcms.org/pages/rpage.asp?NavID=9773>. Pastor Curtis states that he obtained these statistics from the

**Two speakers at the 2006 Lutheran College Conference, involving educators from ELS and WELS colleges, expressed similar concern about the declining birth rate in the WELS.**

The low birth rate has resulted in a smaller “pool of available students” for enrollment at synodical colleges. “Our colleges are confessional Lutheran institutions serving a shrinking constituency,” noted the Rev. John A. Braun, who now serves as the executive editor of *Forward in Christ* (WELS). In order to continue operating, Lutheran colleges face difficult options: increase tuition, reduce costs (e.g., by cutting programs), or attempt to serve a broader constituency by recruiting students from outside of the synod’s fellowship.<sup>9</sup> Although Martin Luther College, as a ministry-training college, cannot appeal to a constituency beyond the synod’s fellowship, confessional Lutheran liberal arts colleges, such as Bethany Lutheran College and Wisconsin Lutheran College, can and have. Even so, President Timothy Kriewall of Wisconsin Lutheran College reported at the same conference that WLC administrators have focused great concern on “declining birth rates” – both within the synod and beyond. Nearly two decades earlier, Pastor Robert Hartman similarly had recognized that “the flattening of our [WELS] growth rate in the ‘80s ” (and, by extension, the decline in synod membership during the 1990s) may be attributed primarily to the “decline” in “children’s baptisms” during the 1970s.<sup>10</sup>

**Within the ELS, President Dan Bruss of Bethany Lutheran College likewise has expressed concern about projected enrollment declines.**

As Bruss learned from the Minnesota Private College Council, all area colleges—not just Lutheran or private ones—face an impending drop in enrollment due to state and regional demographic patterns. As a result of declining birth rates in the recent past, the annual number of students graduating from Minnesota high schools is projected to drop by 10.3% between 2003 and 2013, and by 11.7% in the surrounding five-state region.<sup>11</sup>

**While celebrating the record-high college enrollment for Bethany’s fall 2009 semester, policy members would be wise not to overlook the obvious trend downward.**

Fall 2009 enrollment includes ELS students from the birth cohorts of 1990, when 534 children were baptized, and 1992, when 511 children were baptized. However, the number of annual child baptisms has been below 500 for every year since 1992, below 400 for every year since 2004, and totaling only 330 for 2008 – representing a 38% decline in just eighteen years (1990-2008). When these younger cohorts enroll at Bethany in the coming years, a significantly smaller student body likely will result, especially given that similar demographic declines hold for the other two major BLC constituencies (WELS and LCMS), as well as the broader Midwest region across religious affiliations, as the Minnesota Private College Council has reported.

---

Concordia Historical Institute. See <http://lutheransandcontraception.blogspot.com/2006/03/lcms-contracepting-itself-out-of.html>.

<sup>9</sup> John A. Braun, “Sunrise or Sunset? What’s Ahead for Confessional Lutheran Colleges?,” address delivered at the Third Triennial Lutheran College Conference, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN, 14 Aug. 2006, quoting 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Robert C. Harting, “The Growth of the WELS through the Years,” *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 8, no. 2 (1990): 31-39, at 37.

<sup>11</sup> The information Bruss reported to the Bethany faculty during the Fall 2006 semester is based primarily upon Minnesota Private College Research Foundation, “Demographic Challenges and Opportunities: Higher Education and Minnesota’s Future,” Apr. 2006, [www.mnprivatecolleges.org/research/reports\\_topic.php](http://www.mnprivatecolleges.org/research/reports_topic.php).

Already the impact may be seen among the synod's Lutheran elementary schools. On the one hand, the estimated percentage of school-aged children enrolled in synod schools increased dramatically from 10% in the 1960s to about 50% in the early twenty-first century before stabilizing in recent years around 40%. This suggests either a greater enrollment by non-members or a higher saturation of members enrolling in synod schools rather than elsewhere, or both. Whatever the case, the number of enrolled pupils has been decreasing since the late 1990s, due to an overall decline in the number of children in that age group. (See **Chart D**.<sup>12</sup>) **Given these trends, it would seem reasonable to anticipate declining high school and college enrollments for the ELS in the coming years.**

One does not have to wait long to see the sobering results. A report to the January 2010 joint meeting of the Manitowoc and Fox River Valley conferences (WELS) indicated that very few congregations were extending calls to vicars or recent graduates and that some congregations were downsizing. The report further stated that other areas of the synod were suffering a similar crisis. A three-pastor congregation in Arizona, for example, has placed each of its pastors on call lists, with the intent that when one of them leaves he will not be replaced; the congregation will support only two pastors from then on.<sup>13</sup> Paul Tweit has discovered similar trends among the Lutheran elementary schools of the WELS and LCMS, which together have closed about eighty schools in the preceding five years. Meanwhile, the ELS has scaled down its school-building initiative (Lutheran Schools of America). The synod also has increasingly turned toward a bi-vocational model of ministry as congregations fail to provide adequate financial support for their pastors.<sup>14</sup> To some degree, these trends have intensified during the recent economic recession, but that recession cannot account for the fact that membership declines already had challenged all three Lutheran synods in the 1990s, when the national economy was strong. **A depressed birth rate and a persistent pattern of negative "net evangelism" have had—and likely will continue to have—a more significant and long-lasting impact upon the church's ministry than transitory economic cycles.**

---

<sup>12</sup> CDS enrollment figures may be found in the annual synod reports, cited earlier. Prof. Silas Born, who oversees the synod's elementary education programs, cautions that there may be some discrepancies between the annual synod statistics and the periodic reports he receives from school principals. Although these discrepancies may result in slightly erroneous figures for individual years, the chart should be reasonably accurate as to long-term trends and comparisons, such as the tripling of enrollment from the 1960s to the 1990s, and the decline in enrollment from the late 1990s to the present.

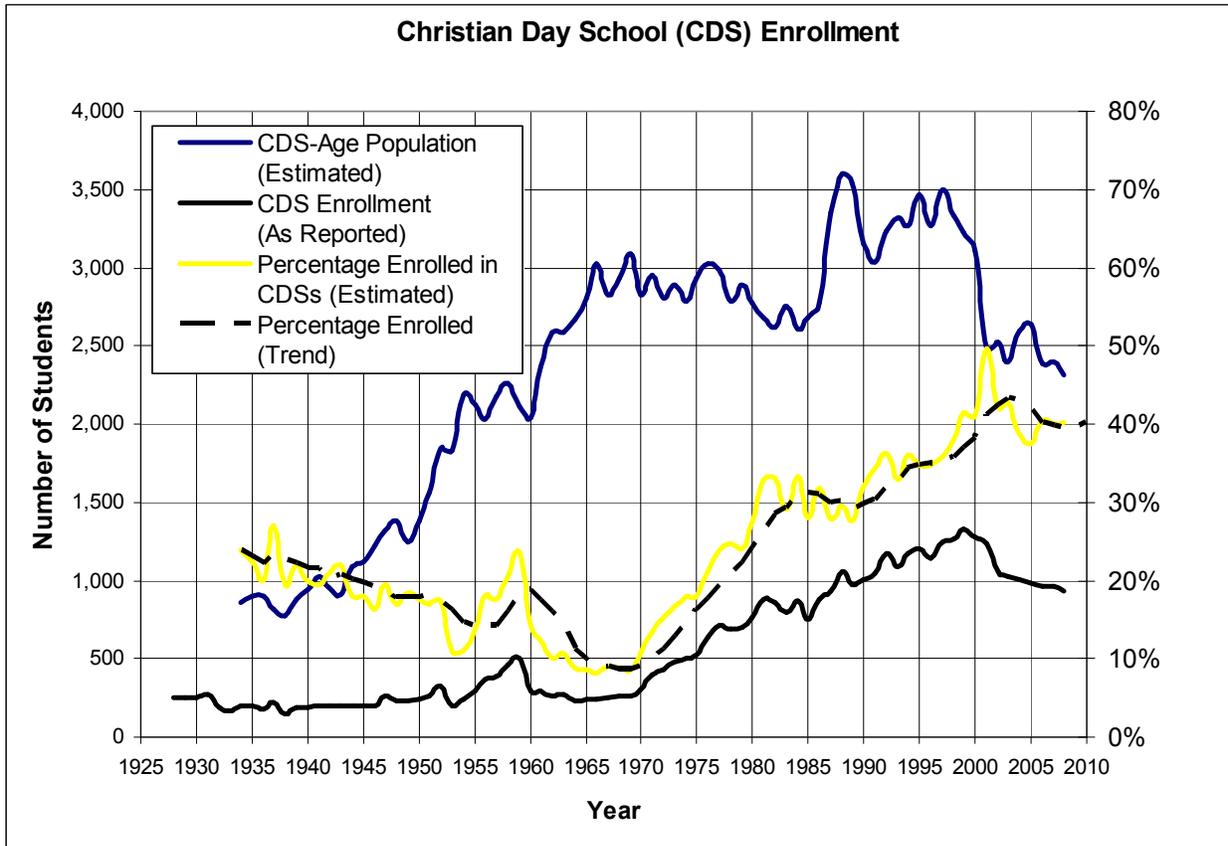
Prof. Born states (personal conversation) that no synod-wide statistics of congregations' school-aged populations are available. Therefore, the estimated population of school-aged children in the ELS for any given year has been calculated by proportionately adjusting the child baptism figures according to net migration year to year in order to calculate, for example, how many children baptized as infants 10 years ago would now be 10-year-old students who have thus far remained members of synod congregations, and likewise for other school-aged children (ages 5 to 14). This calculation involves the possibly erroneous assumption that net migration for school-aged children has been proportionate to net migration for the synod population of all ages.

The proportion of school-aged children enrolled in synod CDSs has been calculated by dividing the reported number of students enrolled by the estimated number of school-aged students in the synod. In addition to the assumptions identified above, other factors may compromise the validity of this calculation. For example, in the absence of synod-wide reports of the number of non-member students enrolled in synod schools, it is impossible to determine whether enrollment fluctuations represent a change in the number of ELS children enrolled or the number of non-member children enrolled. Nevertheless, the ratio of member children to enrolled (member or non-member) children still may be informative in its own right, and therefore it is included in this chart.

<sup>13</sup> I was a speaker for that conference and present for the report.

<sup>14</sup> Personal conversation, 19 Feb. 2010.

## CHART D



Population projections, of course, never can be certain, since only God truly knows what the future holds. Nevertheless, a demographic analysis of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod can reveal something about the past. **The statistics presented in this study indicate that the ELS experienced a sudden and sustained drop in the birth rate during the 1960s, with repercussions that are still being felt today.** It is prudent, therefore, to inquire about the causes of the birth rate decline during the 1960s.

### **Part III: Identifying Causes of the Synod's Declining Birth Rate**

**American families underwent three significant changes during the 1960s and 1970s:** a delay in marriage, an increase in divorce, and a more frequent use of contraception and abortion.<sup>15</sup> It is likely that all three of these factors impacted the ELS to some degree.

**Delaying Marriage.** In 1970, the *Lutheran Sentinel* published a fictional dialogue between a pastor and a young couple desiring to marry when their parents felt they were too young to do so. One can infer from this article that ELS members were feeling pressured, both by their parents and the wider society, to delay marriage in order to finish college and become stably employed before starting a family.<sup>16</sup> Dr. Allan C. Carlson, an internationally renowned sociologist of the family, has attributed the delaying of marriage during the 1970s to student loan debt. Prior to the federal education loan programs that began in the late 1960s, students generally did not go to college unless they could pay for college. Today, college students typically graduate with tens of thousands of dollars in loan debt. Writes Carlson, "The unanticipated consequences of this method for funding higher education become especially evident when we consider its effects on family formation, notably marriage and childbearing." **Specifically, people assuming student loan debt tend to marry later, delay childbearing longer, and have fewer children during their lifetime.**<sup>17</sup> Bethany Lutheran College completed its accreditation process in 1974, thereby becoming eligible for its students to receive federal education loans.<sup>18</sup> This innovation for ELS students, both at Bethany and beyond, likely played some role in keeping the synod's birth rate low during the latter decades of the twentieth century. A lower proportion of the birth cohorts of the 1950s through 1970s (attending college in the 1970s through 1990s) seem to have entered marriage around age 25 than for the birth cohorts of the 1930s and 1940s. (Note the widening gap between "Births" and "Marriages" in **Chart E**.)

---

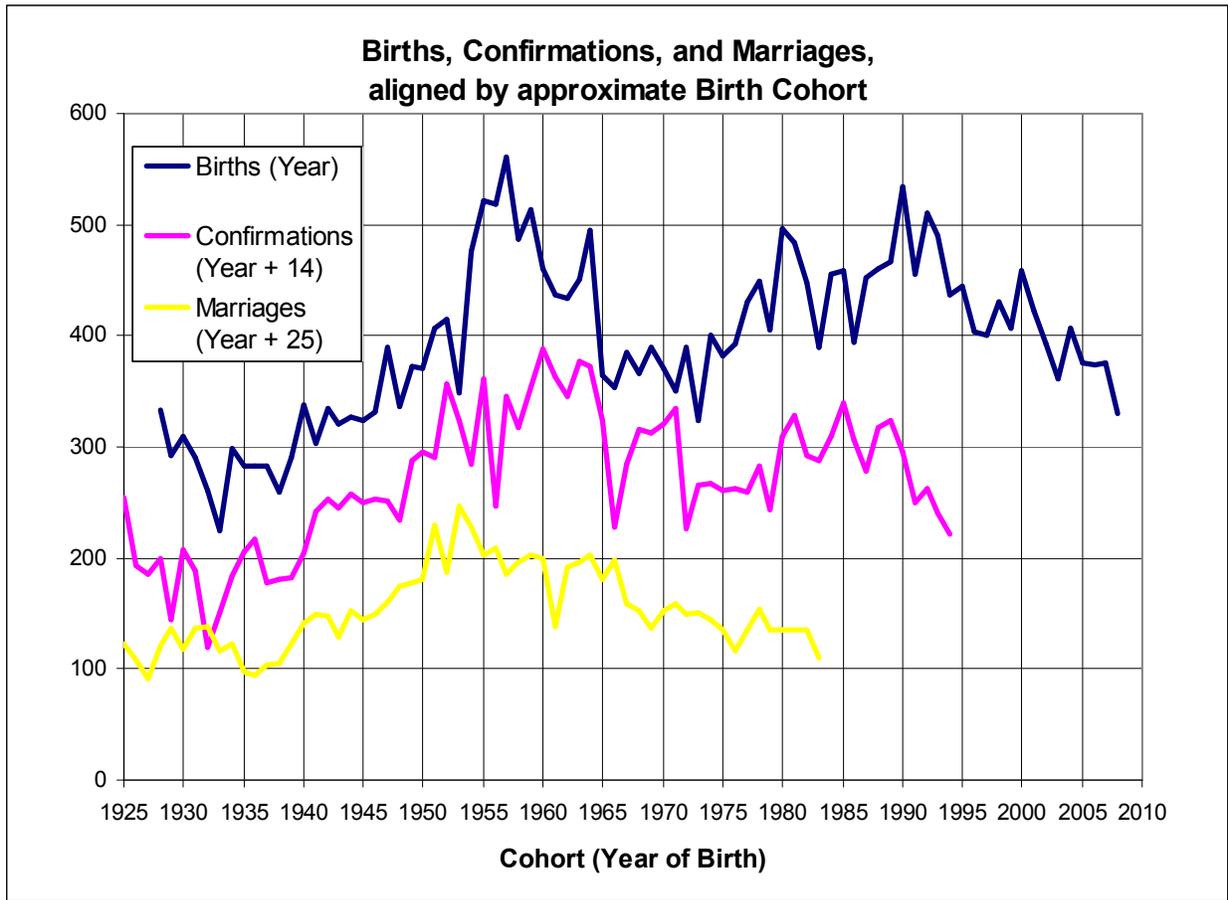
<sup>15</sup> See, for example, "The Second Demographic Transition from a Gender Perspective," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Sciences* 11, no. 2 (1998): 211-25.

<sup>16</sup> Ahlert Strand, "Too Young for Marriage," *Lutheran Sentinel*, 12 Feb. 1970, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Allan C. Carlson, "'Anti-Dowry'?: The Effects of Student Loan Debt on Marriage and Childbearing," *The Family in America* 19, no. 12 (2005), [http://profam.org/pub/fia/fia\\_1912.htm](http://profam.org/pub/fia/fia_1912.htm).

<sup>18</sup> R. M. Branstad, "Bethany Accreditation," *Lutheran Sentinel*, 13 June 1974, 175.

## CHART E



**Divorce.** In 1960, about 9 out of every 1,000 married couples in America divorced by the end of the year. By 1970, the number of annual divorces exceeded 14 per 1,000 couples, and by 1980 it approached 23.<sup>19</sup> This trend in the national divorce rate did not leave the ELS unaffected. In 1968, Pastor Victor I. Theiste, editor of the *Lutheran Sentinel*, identified the connection between a rising divorce rate and falling birth rate, warning that these general social trends could negatively impact the synod.<sup>20</sup> Another *Lutheran Sentinel* writer observed in 1985 that “a disproportionate number from our own synod” had succumbed to divorce.<sup>21</sup> Two years earlier, the Rev. Hugo Handberg had addressed the growing crisis of “clergy divorce” in other Lutheran churches, hoping to guard his fellow ELS pastors against that trend.<sup>22</sup> **If ELS members, like typical Americans, were getting married at a later age and remaining married for a shorter time than previously, this may explain to some degree why the birth rate suddenly dropped during the 1960s and remained low thereafter.**

<sup>19</sup> Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 260.

<sup>20</sup> Victor I. Theiste, “A Matter of Concern,” *Lutheran Sentinel*, 14 Mar. 1968, 74-75.

<sup>21</sup> David Thompson, “The Impact of Divorce,” *Lutheran Sentinel*, July 1985, 6-7, at 7.

<sup>22</sup> Hugo Handberg, “Clergy Divorce,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (Dec. 1983): 51-65.

**Birth Control.** A third factor undoubtedly was contraception, a practice which until the late 1950s had been repeatedly rejected as sinful by ELS theologians. In the 1920s through 1940s, prominent confessional Lutherans had warned against contraception, identifying it as intrinsically in violation of the First, Fifth, and Sixth Commandments.<sup>23</sup> Like Martin Luther, Martin Chemnitz, and Johann Gerhardt before them, they regarded God's punishment of Onan for "wast[ing] his seed" (Gen 38:9) as testimony that any contemporary form of contraception was unacceptable.<sup>24</sup> Within the ELS, it was said in 1948 that "birth control should be taboo."<sup>25</sup> In 1949, Pastor George Oliver Lillegard preached to his Massachusetts congregation at Harvard St. Lutheran Church that Onan's sin was on par with the modern offense of "birth control," which he thought should rather be called "race suicide."<sup>26</sup> Pastor Ahlert Strand similarly advised the synod's 1955 General Pastoral Conference to reject the birth control mentality of contemporary marriage guides and instead promote "the Biblical idea of families."<sup>27</sup> The next year, Lillegard—who now was a professor of biblical exegesis at Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary—saw his sermon distributed to a wider audience through a book published by Northwestern Publishing House.

In 1957, however, the tide began to shift. Although Theodore Aaberg, President of Bethany's Seminary, rejected birth control when practiced for selfish motives, he expressed some openness to birth control in "exceptional cases."<sup>28</sup> Alfred Rehwinkel, a highly respected conservative professor at the Missouri Synod's Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, soon after published *Planned Parenthood and the Christian*, which presented contraception as an *adiaphoron*, just as liberal denominations had begun doing in the 1930s.<sup>29</sup> **In the wake of Rehwinkel's book, the early 1960s witnessed a host of publications among confessional Lutherans that invited Christian married couples to consider contraception in the realm of "Christian freedom."**<sup>30</sup>

When Pastor Wilhelm Petersen affirmed the old standard in a 1962 *Sentinel* article—namely, "God has instituted marriage primarily for the purpose of bringing children into the

---

<sup>23</sup> Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), vol. 1, re Gen. 38:9; Walter A. Maier, *For Better Not Worse* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1935), 358–59; Louis Nuechterlein, "Series on the Christian Marriage Relation," *Concordia Pulpit* 11 (1939): 389–409, quoting 392, 393.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 38–44* (1544), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, et al. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 7:20–21; Lukas Osiander, *Commentary on Genesis*, re 38:9; Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. A. O. Preus, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), 2:405–6; Johann Gerhardt, *Commentary on Genesis* (1637), as quoted in Charles D. Provan, *The Bible and Birth Control* (Monongahela, PA: Zimmer, 1989), 68.

<sup>25</sup> Justin A. Petersen, "The Parsonage," *Clergy Bulletin* 8, no. 3. (Nov. 1948): 19–27, at 20,

<sup>26</sup> George Oliver Lillegard, *From Eden to Egypt: Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1956), 313.

<sup>27</sup> Ahlert H. Strand, "Some Thoughts on Marriage Counseling," *Clergy Bulletin* 15, no. 6 (Feb. 1956): 45–49, at 45.

<sup>28</sup> T[heodore] Aaberg, "Regarding Birth Control," *Clergy Bulletin* 16, no. 8 (Apr. 1957): 58–59.

<sup>29</sup> Alfred M. Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood and Birth Control in Light of Christian Ethics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 1959. Oddly, Rehwinkel overlooked Margaret Sanger's vitriolic attacks against marriage and Christianity, and her open support of atheism and socialism, when portraying her as a heroine in the crusade to legalize contraception in America. A reviewer for *Christianity Today* was shocked that Rehwinkel would endorse birth control. E. P. Schulze, "Limitation of Offspring," rev. of *Planned Parenthood and Birth Control in the Light of Christian Ethics* by Alfred Martin Rehwinkel, *Christianity Today*, 1 Feb. 1960, 40–41.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Graebner, "Birth Control and the Lutherans: The Missouri Synod as a Case Study," *Journal of Social History* 2, no. 4 (1969): 303–32; Mark Braun, "Changes in the Wisconsin Synod," *Charis: A Journal of Lutheran Scholarship, Thought, and Opinion* 5, no. 1 (2006): 10–34, at 14–15, 22–23.

world” –his readers were struggling to preserve their proper priorities amid a Sixties culture that favored personal gratification over marital commitment, and misconstrued companionship as an alternative to childbearing, rather than recognizing marital companionship as a mutually supportive relationship foundational for raising children.<sup>31</sup> Already the Synod’s birth rate had declined 25% from its 1957 peak; by the end of the Sixties, it would decline another 25%, never again to return to its pre-1960 levels (**Chart A**).

Meanwhile, the FDA had authorized the distribution of the oral contraception pill in 1960, and the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the last state prohibitions against contraception in 1965.<sup>32</sup> By 1968, when Pope Paul VI repeated a traditional Christian argument against birth control, few Lutherans seemed to remember that just one generation ago their own forefathers had been in agreement with the Catholic Church on this matter. Within the ELS, both pastors and laypersons were now encouraged to regard the matter as an *adiaphoron*.<sup>33</sup> Empowered by the modern pharmacy, Lutherans, like others in America, became less “fruitful” and therefore did not “multiply” as much as they had in the past.<sup>34</sup> Contraceptive intercourse has, by all available measures, become the norm for marital relations nationwide.<sup>35</sup>

It is difficult to determine the degree to which abortion also may have contributed to the synod’s declining birth rate. Abortion became increasingly legal on a state-by-state basis during the 1960s, culminating in nation-wide legalization as mandated by the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*. During the 1970s, the U.S. teen birth rate declined significantly despite a steady rise in the pregnancy rate; as data compiled by the Guttmacher Institute reveals, abortion had become so common that overall births declined even when overall conceptions increased.<sup>36</sup> A Bethany Lutheran College student who interviewed her parents in 2007 about their memories of the 1960s learned that her parents did not fail to notice the trends developing around them:

---

<sup>31</sup> Wilhelm Petersen, “The Children in the Home,” *Lutheran Sentinel*, June 28, 1962, 186-87, at 186.

<sup>32</sup> *Griswold v. Connecticut* 381 U.S. 479 (1965).

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Kuster, “Should the Church Be Concerned with the Population Explosion?,” *Lutheran Sentinel*, 25 June 1970, 187-89; Roger M. Dale, “Abortion Examined in the Light of Scripture,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1973): 1-38, at 7. Among WELS pastors, a permissive evaluation by Kirsten became the standard reference. See Hans Kirsten, “Birth Control as Ethical and Pastoral Problem,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (1968): 24-42; Wayne M. Borgwardt, “Methods of Birth Control in Light of Scripture,” paper presented to Fox Valley [WELS] Pastoral Conference, 1977, [www.wlsessays.net](http://www.wlsessays.net); Allen Quist, *The Abortion Revolution and the Sanctity of Human Life* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1980), 41-42; John W. Covach, “The Moral Implications of Attempts to Control Human Reproduction,” presented to the Cypress Conference of the South Atlantic District [WELS], 23 Sept. 1985, [www.wlsessays.net](http://www.wlsessays.net); Robert Otto, “Are All Methods of Birth Control Acceptable for The Christian?,” Southern [WELS] Pastoral Conference, Zion Ev. Luth. Church, Bristol, Wisconsin, 14 Jan. 1986, [www.wlsessays.net](http://www.wlsessays.net).

<sup>34</sup> The allusion is to Gen 1:28. Of this passage, the Lutheran Confessions write: “The nature of men is so formed by the word of God that it is fruitful not only in the beginning of the creation, but as long as this nature of our bodies will exist.” Apol. XXIII (XI), 8.

<sup>35</sup> 98% of American women, ages 15 through 44, who have ever had sexual intercourse also have used some form of contraception. 75% of women who had sexual relations during the three months before their interview had used contraception. Only 9% were refraining from contraception while sexually active despite their lack of intention to conceive a child. The remaining women were either seeking pregnancy (5%), pregnant or experiencing postpartum temporary infertility (6%), sterile due to other factors (4%), or else practicing natural family planning (1%). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Fertility, Family Planning, and Reproductive Health*, Tables 53, 56, and 57.

<sup>36</sup> Guttmacher Institute, *U.S. Teenage Pregnancy Statistics National and State Trends and Trends by Race and Ethnicity* (rev. Feb. 19, 2004), Table 2.1, <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/USTPTrends.pdf>.

Both my mother and my father mentioned abortion and the “sexual liberation” as well as this misuse of legal and illegal drugs. “Morally, this era saw the introduction of birth control for women, leading to experimentation with sex.” It was now a status symbol to disregard this wonderful blessing of marriage and sex.<sup>37</sup>

Amid the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision legalizing abortion nationwide, a Missouri Synod pastor published a book expressing a general disapproval of abortion but also conceding that in cases of rape, incest, or threat to the mother’s health or life, abortion should not be categorically regarded as a sin, particularly insofar as such factors may adversely impact her mental health prognosis.<sup>38</sup> Although pastors within the ELS occasionally wrote against abortion, it was not until 1978 that the synod formally adopted a doctrinal statement defining abortion as sin.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, two Lutheran women personally known to the author had abortions during that era, and they likely were not the only ones. **Suffice it to say, the widespread acceptance of contraception and perhaps occasional instances of abortion functioned to dramatically decrease the ELS birth rate during the 1960s and to hold down the record-low birth rate levels during the 1970s.**

Conventional wisdom, however, may suggest that declining birth rates during the 1960s should be expected. This was, after all, the tail end of the American “baby boom.” **Two factors, however, should lead observers to hesitate before mapping the synod’s demographics onto the broader American story of a baby boom generation.** First, statistical analysis reveals that ELS birth rate fluctuations did not fit the national pattern from 1928 through 1960, and thus any supposition about the ELS participating in the nation’s baby boom must be scrutinized carefully. Rather than echoing the rise in the U.S. birth rate during the 1940s and 1950s, known as the “baby boom,” the ELS simply maintained an already high birth rate. Not until the 1960s—when both the synod and the nation as a whole experienced sudden and sustained drops in the birth rate—did the ELS start to mimic the national tendency in a statistically significant manner.<sup>40</sup> (See **Chart F**.)<sup>41</sup> In other words, it was novel, rather than ordinary, for the ELS birth rate pattern to fall into step with the national birth rate decline of the 1960s. Explaining the ELS decline as a typical American experience therefore begs the question of why

---

<sup>37</sup> Anonymous Student, Essay for History 208, Bethany Lutheran College, Spring 2007 (quotation retained by instructor Ryan MacPherson; name discarded to protect personal privacy).

<sup>38</sup> John W. Klotz, *A Christian View of Abortion*, Contemporary Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 45-53.

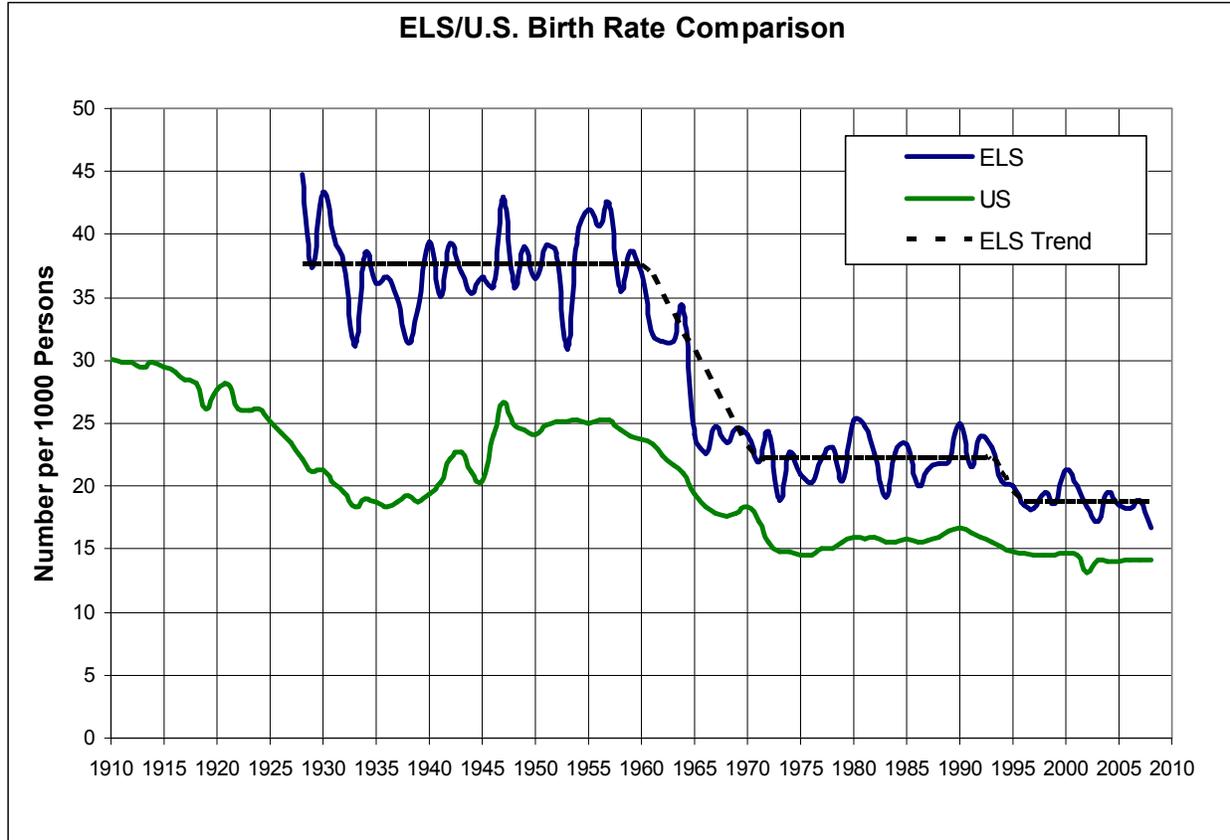
<sup>39</sup> L[uther] Vangen, “Is the Bible Silent on Abortion?,” *Lutheran Sentinel*, 24 June 1971, 181-83; cf. Hans Kirsten, “Confessional Lutheranism’s Answers to Today’s Problems,” Reformation Lecture, Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, MN, 28-29 Oct. 1971, rpt. *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1971): 1-34, at 29; Rodger M. Dale, “Abortion Examined in the Light of Scripture,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1973): 1-38; Erling Teigen, “The Sanctity of Human Life: A Sermon,” *Lutheran Sentinel*, 25 Jan. 1979, 25-29, at 28; “ELS Statement on Abortion” (1978), [www.blts.edu/essays/doctrine/abortion.htm](http://www.blts.edu/essays/doctrine/abortion.htm).

<sup>40</sup> Statistical analysis reveals that for 1928–1960, only 15% of the year-to-year variation in the ELS birth rate may be attributable to corresponding changes in the U.S. birth rate, a result that falls short of statistical significance. For 1961–2008, by contrast, 79% of the ELS birth rate variance is accounted for by corresponding changes in the U.S. birth rate, a result that is statistically significant. In laymen’s terms, the ELS behaved like a unique population prior to 1960, but the ELS behaved like a typical subset of the U.S. population after 1960. (Calculated as  $r^2 = 0.15$  vs.  $r^2 = 0.79$ , employing the Pearson coefficient of correlation,  $r$ , and comparing to  $r_{crit}$  values for the 95% confidence interval.)

<sup>41</sup> U.S. population statistics are from the National Center for Health Statistics, Center for Disease Control and Prevent, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/>.

ELS families became so quickly “Americanized” at that particular time, rather than earlier, later, or not at all.<sup>42</sup>

## CHART F



Thus, the ELS never experienced the mid twentieth-century baby boom; it only experienced a birth decline, and in fact a steeper decline than the broader American population. The hypothesis that the post-1960 decline in ELS birth rates is a natural result of the end of the baby boom era also lacks persuasiveness for a second reason: the very concept of a U.S. “baby boom,” though accepted by many people without question, lacks clear support.<sup>43</sup> Even the broader American population did not so much experience a baby boom in the 1940s and 1950s as a period of ordinary fertility that was preceded by an abnormal fertility decline (a “birth dearth”) in the 1920s, when “flappers” avoided marriage, married couples divorced at

<sup>42</sup> Families within the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod “Americanized” much earlier. The birth rate trend in that synod closely paralleled the national trend from 1910 through 1968. See Alan Graebner, “Birth Control and the Lutherans,” 325-27 and Figure I.

<sup>43</sup> The term “baby boom” was coined by reporter Sylvia F. Porter in a 1951 *New York Post* article describing the record-number of births during the prior year. Significantly, she did not so much address the *birth rate* as the record *number of births*, which is a function of both the birth rate and the total population. The national birth rate had peaked five years earlier, but the *number* of births continued to increase due to a larger population as a whole. Porter predicted that these babies would lead to an economic boom as they matured into consumers. Although popular opinion attributes the baby boom to the end of World War II, Porter explicitly argued against any such correlation. Sylvia F. Porter, “Babies Equal Boom,” condensed from *New York Post, Readers’ Digest*, Aug. 1951, 5-6.

then record-high rates, and birth control was in vogue.<sup>44</sup> The return toward normal fertility during the so-called “baby boom” of the mid twentieth century was followed again by abnormally low fertility in the 1960s to the present. (See **Chart F**.)

The first “birth dearth,” as some scholars call the inverse of a “baby boom,” resulted in large part from Margaret Sanger’s campaign for “birth control,” a term she coined in 1914.<sup>45</sup> This decline reversed after scientists warned during the 1930s that the American population was destined toward extinction. The reversal was especially strong among Catholics, who generally experienced a greater rise in fertility than non-Catholics during the 1930s through 1950s.<sup>46</sup> But then in the 1960s, scientists sounded the alarm again, this time as fear of overpopulation spread.<sup>47</sup> A writer for the *Lutheran Sentinel* in 1980 thought such fears were ungrounded.<sup>48</sup> Today, once more, demographers warn that America’s birth rate is too low to sustain our principal cultural institutions, including everything from universities and service industries to Social Security and Medicare. **In fact, were it not for immigration, the U.S. population would actually be poised for decline, a rapidly accelerating decline once the baby boomers reach the age of life expectancy.**<sup>49</sup>

### **Declining Memberships amid the Appearance of Growth**

The ELS, like its sister synod, the WELS, already has begun to decline in membership. Although the birth rate still exceeds the death rate in both synods, the gap between the birth and death rates has narrowed so much that natural increase no longer offsets the annually recurring “net migration” losses. (See **Chart A**.) **This downward trend sometimes goes unnoticed, however, since other, more obvious, signs signal fast-paced growth.** For example, both Bethany Lutheran College and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary have enrolled record numbers of students in recent years. The college campus has visibly been transformed to accommodate this growth, adding a new math and science building (2002), an apartment-style dormitory for women (2005), and a new academic building (in progress, scheduled to open for the fall of 2010). The seminary classroom is filled nearly to capacity, and the faculty has been challenged to place vicars and graduates in congregations due to a relative oversupply of students.

---

<sup>44</sup> The U.S. divorce rate doubled during 1900 to 1920 from 4 per 1,000 married couples per year to 8. Balswick and Balswick, *The Family*, 260. During the following decade, the *Lutheran Sentinel* quoted with concern from the 1932 *Kirchliches Jahrbuch* that the divorce rate in that country also had risen: “The conception of freedom is for the most part understood today only in the negative sense of release from restraint. Duty is a heavy burden. To be free means to have right but no duty. That the bond of marriage should be frequently broken in such an atmosphere is not to be wondered at.” See “Divorce Increases in Germany,” *Lutheran Sentinel*, 4 Jan. 1933, 15.

<sup>45</sup> Alex Baskin, “Margaret Sanger, the *Woman Rebel*, and the Rise of the Birth Control Movement in the United States,” in *Woman Rebel*, ed. Alex Baskin (New York: Archives of Social History, 1976), i-xii; Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women’s Eyes: An American History with Documents*, 2d ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009), 2:480-83.

<sup>46</sup> Allan C. Carlson, *Conjugal America: On the Public Purposes of Marriage* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), chap. 2.

<sup>47</sup> The most influential work was that of an economist: Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968). For a recent critique, see Allan Carlson, “Weapon of Misinstruction,” review of *The Population Bomb*, by Paul Ehrlich, *Touchstone*, March 2006, 12-14.

<sup>48</sup> *Lutheran Sentinel*, 10 Apr. 1980, 111-14.

<sup>49</sup> “America by the Numbers,” *Time*, Oct. 30, 2006, 41-54.

**The declining number of baptized souls within the synod also has gone unnoticed due to recent reports that overstate the synod's population.** A 2008 compilation of the synods comprising the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference listed the "approximate sizes" of the ELS and WELS as 21,000 and 415,000, respectively.<sup>50</sup> Dec. 2007 statistics, however, listed the synods' baptized memberships about 5% lower, at 19,945 and 394,241, respectively. The overstatement found in the 2008 CELC article resulted from the continuing use of statistics from 1993, the year of the CELC's founding. Similarly, admission materials circulated by Bethany Lutheran College have persisted in representing the ELS as a synod of "22,000 members" (accurate for the late 1990s) during years when the actual membership was about 10% lower (*ca.* 2005).<sup>51</sup> *Wikipedia*, too, has an overstated membership statistic: 21,729.<sup>52</sup>

**In summary, a person who has not carefully read the official synod statistics as published in an 8-point font in the annual *Synod Report* is unlikely to have a realistic picture of the synod's membership trends.**<sup>53</sup>

### Concluding Suggestions

The demographic analysis presented in this report suggests that two factors would reverse the recent and impending declines in ELS membership. First, a restoration of the Synod's birth rate would allow a sufficient surplus of births over deaths to maintain both natural increase and also counter-balance the persistent pattern of "net evangelism" losses. Second, this is an era, like *all times* in church history, that calls for a renewed attention upon outreach to the lost and preservation of converts through the Means of Grace. In addition to the procreative mandate of Gen 1:28 that God gave to the first married couple, Christ also has called his church to "Go and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20). **Therefore, the synod's efforts to bring in new members and retain existing members also should receive close attention together with a renewed appreciation for God's gift of children through marital procreation.**<sup>54</sup>

Had the net migration loss of over 4,000 souls been prevented during the eight decades under study—i.e., if membership gains would have at least "broken even" with membership

---

<sup>50</sup> Gaylin R. Schmeling, "The Fifteenth Anniversary of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 48, nos. 2-3 (June/Sept. 2008): 278-83, at 279.

<sup>51</sup> I communicated this concern to the Admissions Dept. at that time, and the discrepancy has since then been corrected.

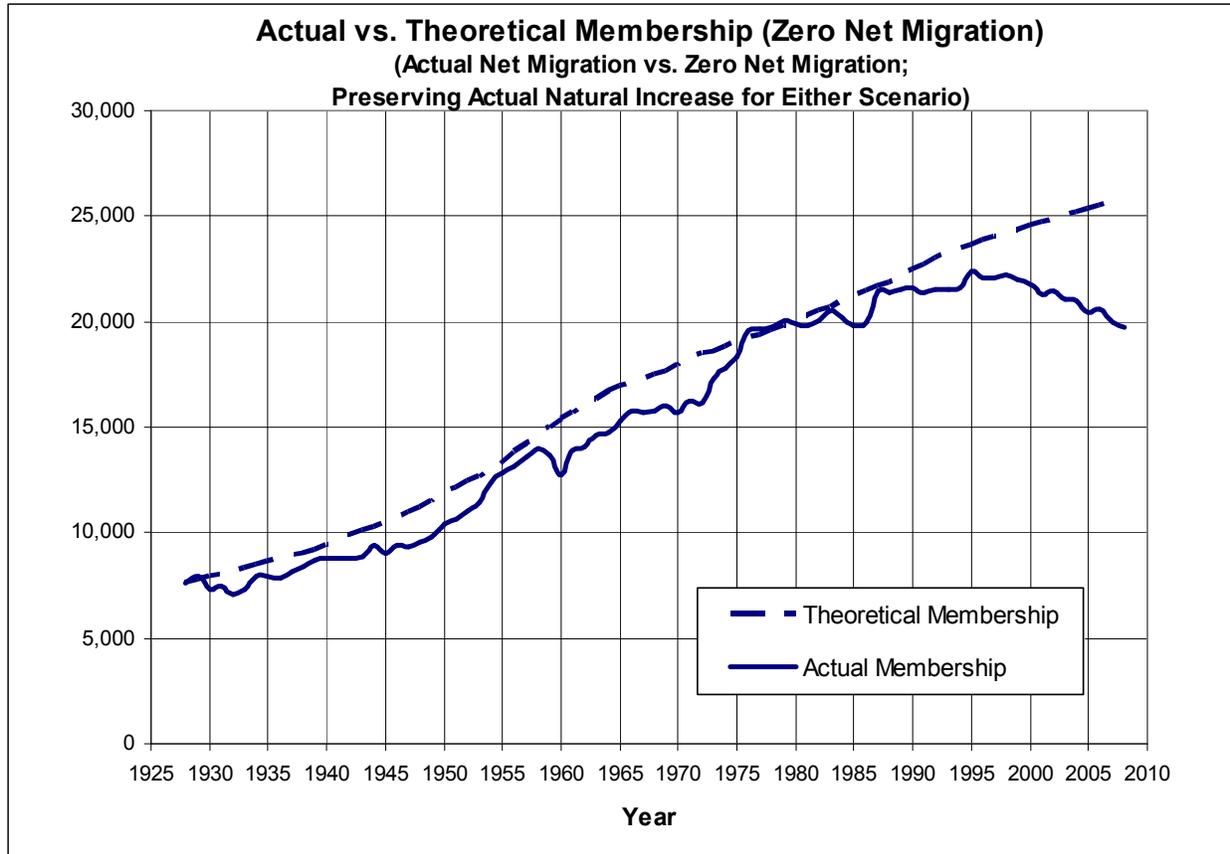
<sup>52</sup> "Evangelical Lutheran Synod," *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelical\\_Lutheran\\_Synod](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelical_Lutheran_Synod) (accessed 21 Jan. 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Only once has the *Lutheran Sentinel* presented an analysis of the synod's annual statistics to the laity. That article, published in 1975, noted that congregations averaged 1.37 adult baptisms per year. In that article, *Sentinel* editor Erling Teigen raised the question: "Do we learn something about our commitment to the Lord's command, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations'? How high a priority are we placing on proclaiming the Gospel to those who have lost it or have not heard it before?" E[rling] T[ei]gen, "Editorial Briefs," *Lutheran Sentinel*, March 27, 1975, 82-83.

<sup>54</sup> "Our Synod also collects annual statistics for each congregation. Sometimes, those numbers disturb us. As a synod we have been declining in membership and giving." Cory Hanke, "Jesus and the Woman at the Well," *Lutheran Sentinel*, April 2007, 5. Pastor Hanke emphasizes that the ministry must be guided not by our fears concerning the demographics, but by our faith in Christ's ability to fill the deepest needs of the people whom we serve.

losses—the synod today would number over 25,000 souls, even after experiencing the dramatic birth rate decline discussed in this study. (See Chart G). **Thus, while the synod’s declining membership may be attributed primarily to the sustained decline in the birth rate after 1960, the persistently negative “net evangelism” pattern from 1928 through 2008 remains a significant secondary factor for consideration among those seeking to reverse the downward trend.** (Compare Chart B with Chart G.)

### CHART G



**Christian procreation and Christian evangelism, in fact, have a close relation, and not just because religious instruction begins in the home.** More births lead to more baptisms, followed by more confirmations and more students enrolling at institutions such as Bethany Lutheran College, where they can prepare to serve their congregations in the work of evangelism.

**“The harvest is plentiful,” said Christ,  
“but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore,  
to send out workers into his harvest field.” (Mt 9:37-38)**

**“Be fruitful and increase in number.” (Gen 1:28)**