

The bishop writes: Who's growing, who's not

The statistics from the ELCA Department of Research and Evaluation on our synod just arrived. For the period from 2003 through 2006, we had 43 congregations that were growing (worship attendance grew by more than 5% over that period). Forty-seven congregations were stable (change between -5% and +5%). The ELCA says we have 182 congregations, so that means just slightly more than one-half of our congregations are declining (attendance declined more than 5% from 2003-2006). All this in a synod that for eight years at least has tried to focus on mission. We are “Sent to Share and Serve.”

Not all of the declining congregations are small. Not all of the growing congregations are large. When the individual congregations in the declining category are looked at, there are reasons for where they fall - pastoral vacancies, church conflicts, part-time pastoral service, unwillingness to adapt to the changed neighborhoods around them, etc. When we look at individual congregations in the growing category, we find emphasis on prayer and small-group Bible study and excellent pastoral leadership. The church with the largest percentage growth was Epiphany Lutheran in Columbia Hills, Md. Their attendance went from 14 to 36 (157.1%) in that period, largely because they have a regularly called pastor, Jack Trautwein, who preaches well.



H. Gerard Knoche

What seems worth a try to me is to pair some of the growing churches with some of the declining churches of approximately the same size. Then there could be discussion about what has worked in bringing new folks to the growing congregation and keeping them active. If the process worked, maybe we would have only one-third of our congregations declining next year at this time. Churches which aren't growing are dying. The gospel I preach is about resurrection and new life. I hope you will join with me in praying that we might see the resurrection lived out in our synod and greatly rejoice at what God has done among us.

Peace and joy,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gerard".

H. Gerard Knoche, bishop