

# Millennials

and Their Retention Since Confirmation

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A SURVEY OF LCMS CONGREGATIONS

PART 1 OF A BROAD STUDY OF YOUNG ADULT RETENTION

SUMMER - 2017

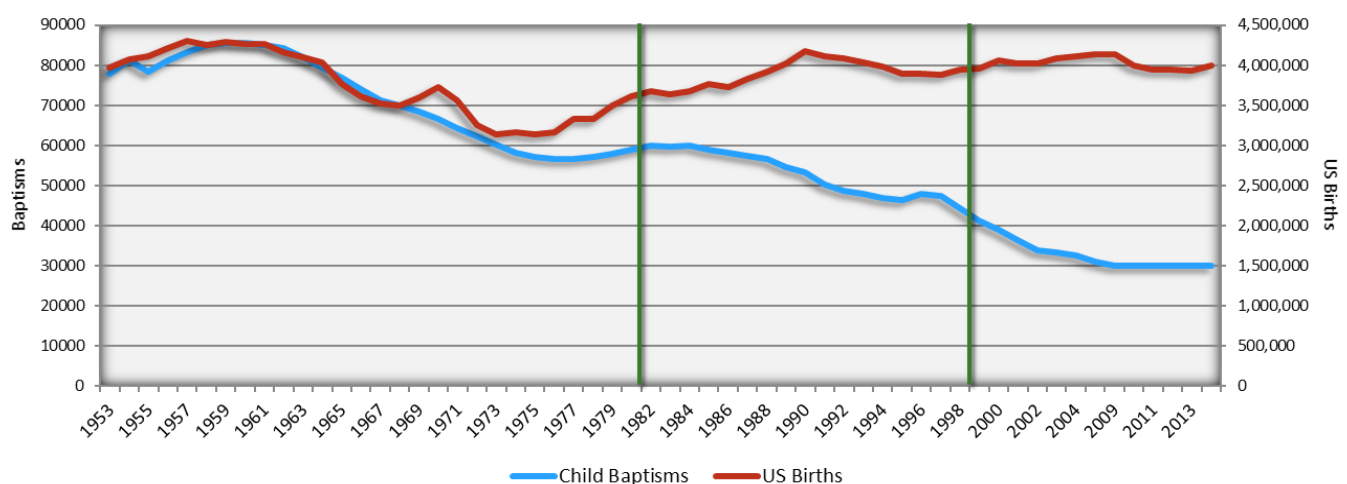
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## First Phase of a Study of Young Adults

Millennials are today's young adults, born between the years 1981-1999. Their generation is the largest segment of the U.S. Population, even outnumbering the Baby Boomers. However, Millennials are a relatively small component of church goers in all denominations, including the LCMS.

While there is often much blame heaped on Millennials for leaving the church, data suggests that their low involvement is not because they left the church, but because they were never in the church to begin with. While the U.S. population experienced a "second baby boom" from the Millennials, the church did not see much of that growth. When these young people were being born, there were fewer baptisms.

FIGURE 1-1: While Millennial births boomed, LCMS baptisms declined<sup>1</sup>



The low numbers of Millennials in the pews is not due to poor retention alone. However, retention of the Millennials that are in the church becomes paramount since there were already so few.

This report on Millennial retention presents the results of the first survey in a broader study of Millennials raised in the church. The purpose of this first survey was to learn from LCMS congregations about the confirmation processes and subsequent retention of these young people. Based on their birth years, most of these young people would have been confirmed between 1996-2012. To keep the survey from being too complex, it focused on specific years in the middle of that range (2004-2006). Respondents from a random representative sample of LCMS congregations provided details regarding those year's confirmation classes, and whether those young adults worship today.

Future phases of this study will include a direct survey of young adults themselves.

**\* Results from this survey will likely be amended or clarified by the subsequent phase(s) of this project. \***

<sup>1</sup> Birth data is from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS data was unavailable for 1981, so that year has been removed from this chart all together). This is a comparison of total numbers, not a comparison of rates. Baptism numbers are from Rosters and Statistics.

## About the Survey and Report

- The final sample of this online survey was 184 LCMS congregations
  - 10% response rate from a random representative selection of 1,800 congregations
  - Nearly a 6% margin of error with 90% confidence
- Respondents (usually the pastor) were specifically asked to review their confirmation records from 2004-2006, and answer questions about the young people on those lists
  - Assuming a typical confirmation age range of 12-14, most of these young people now range in age around 23-27 years old.
- Since many LCMS pastors were not at the same congregation a decade ago, we encouraged respondents to recruit help taking the survey from those who might know about these young people (many brought along parents, youth ministers, and church secretaries).

This report uses the following terms as defined below:

- **Present at the congregation**
  - Refers to whether the pastor (or other survey respondent) was a part of the surveyed congregation during the years 2004-2006. Since the survey was taken in 2017, many survey respondents (especially if they are called church workers) were not a part of the worshiping body thirteen years ago.
- **Local Retention**
  - Refers specifically to young adults remaining in worship at the same congregation where they were confirmed.
- **LCMS Retention**
  - Refers specifically to young adults remaining in worship at an LCMS congregation regardless of whether they stayed in the congregation where they were confirmed.
- **Graduation**
  - The survey asked about graduation, in all cases in this report, this is specifically referring to graduation from High School.
- **Size of Congregations (large, small, etc.)**
  - For this survey, congregation size refers to average weekly worship attendance, as opposed to membership.

## Respondents to the Survey

This was a key-informant survey of congregations. While pastors are often the preferred (and expected) respondent type to such surveys, in this case it was more important that the respondent have direct knowledge of congregation life during 2004-2006. Therefore, it was recommended that if the current pastor was not present at the congregation in those years, that he either designate another respondent or seek assistance with the survey from someone who was present. Still, nearly all respondents to the survey were the senior or sole pastors (86%).

Respondents were also asked to locate their confirmation records for the years 2004-2006 prior to taking the survey, as the survey asked them to reference those directly.

FIGURE 1-2: 70% of congregations have paper records from confirmations in 2004-2006, but nearly a quarter kept no useable records.

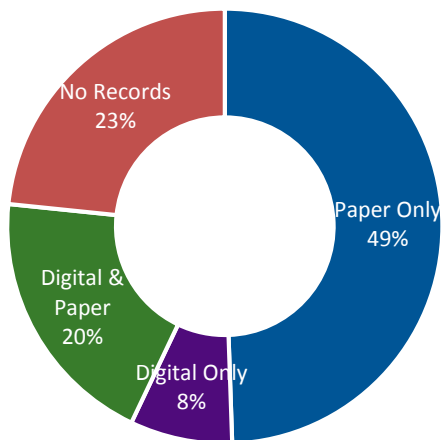


FIGURE 1-3: 92% of surveys were filled out by a Rostered Church Worker (pastor or DCE) ("Other" is mostly secretaries and youth workers)

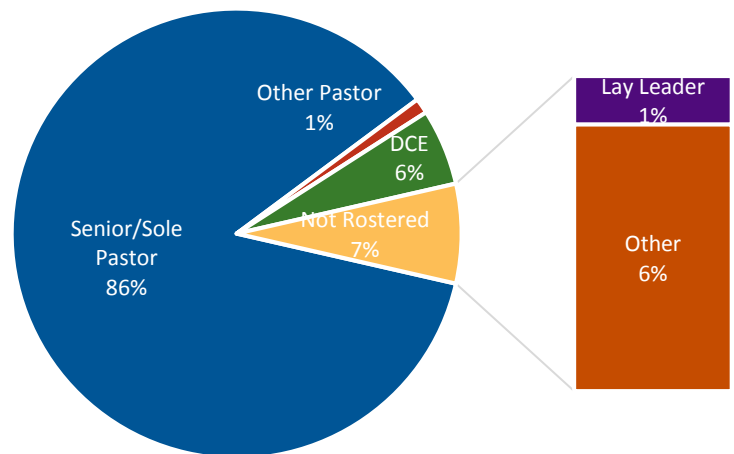
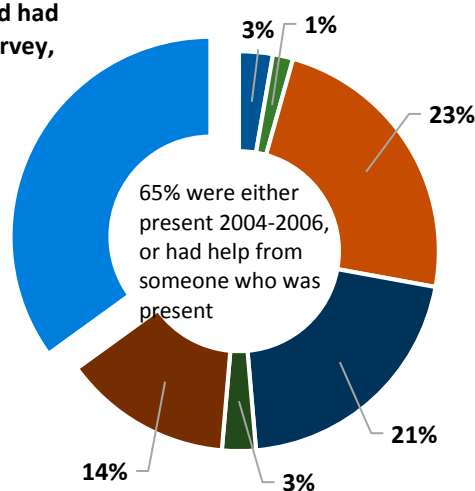


FIGURE 1-4: Half of survey respondents were present at the congregation between 2004-2006, and an additional 14% sought help on the survey from someone who was present.

Not present, and had no help with survey, 35%



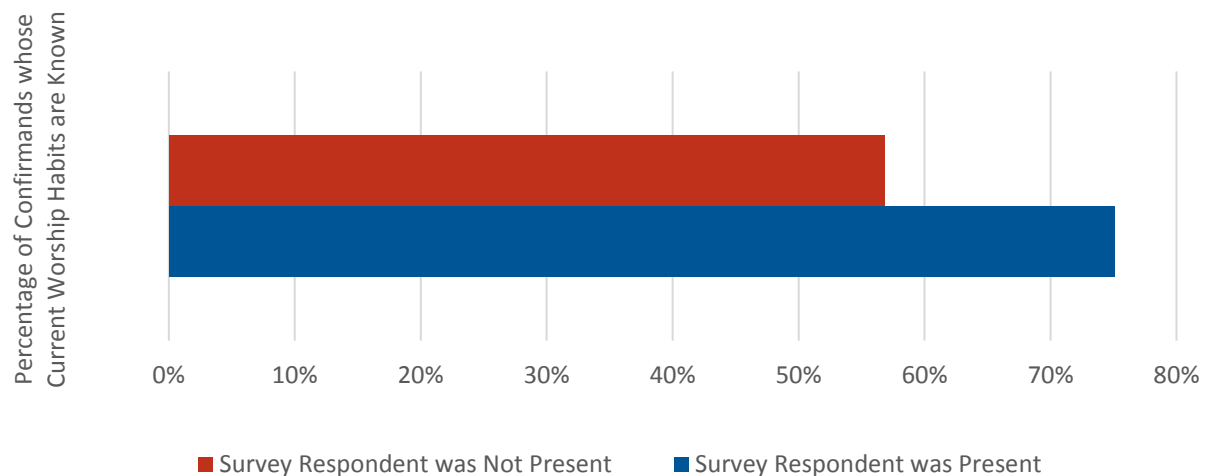
- Present, but did not work closely with the youth
- Present, but only interacted during confirmation classes
- Present, interacted in confirmation classes and as part of the worshipping body
- Present, intentionally built relationships
- Present, involved in other ways
- Not present, but had help with survey
- Not present, and had no help with survey

FIGURE 1-5: Survey Respondents

Respondent Role 2004-2006	All (184)	Pastors (159)
Not at Congregation at that time	89	81
Present at Congregation <i>(includes all below)</i>	89	73
Present, but did not work directly with the youth	5	3
Present, knew youth through confirmation classes only	3	3
Present, and knew the youth as part of the church body	43	40
Present, and intentionally built relationships with youth	38	27

Unsurprisingly, results from the survey reveal a direct correlation with the survey respondent being present in the congregation during the confirmation years and knowing whether or where the young adults worship today. What might be surprising, though, is that, among those who were not present during the confirmation years, there is little difference between those who had help on the survey and those who did not.

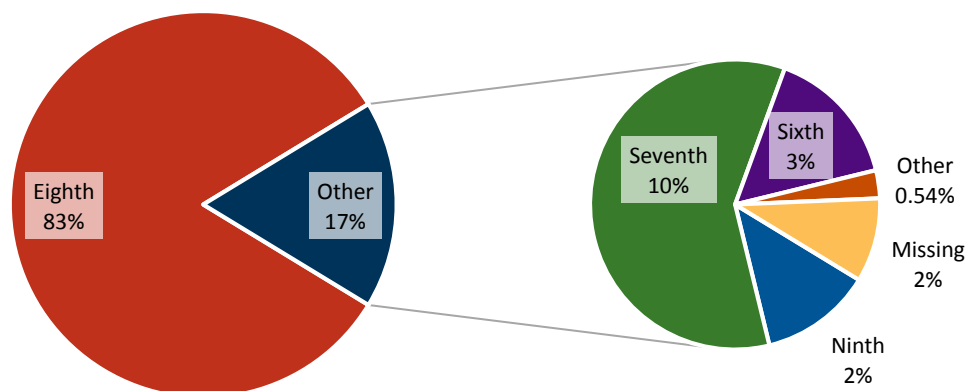
FIGURE 1-6: Respondents not present in 2004-2006 are less likely to know where those young people are today



## About the Congregations Surveyed

Nearly all congregations in the survey confirmed their youth in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, with 7<sup>th</sup> grade being a distance second place. While we do not have firm data to compare this with the LCMS as a whole, it is roughly in line with expectations. It also verifies that the confirmands are the Millennial adults about whom we are seeking to learn.

FIGURE 1-7: At what grade level did you confirm most youth in 2004-2006?



The survey also asked what kinds of changes congregations have made to youth related ministry or programming in recent years. Respondents could select any or all from the following items regarding confirmation process, Christian education, youth programs or staffing. Three in four congregations reported making at least one of the following changes since 2004, and nearly half made at least three of the changes.

FIGURE 1-8: Individual changes made to youth related ministry

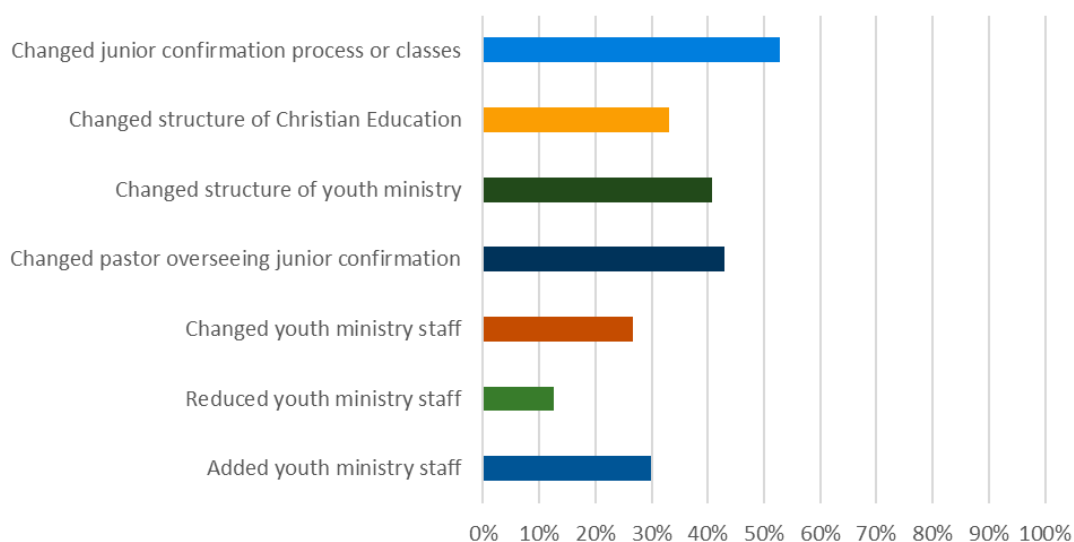
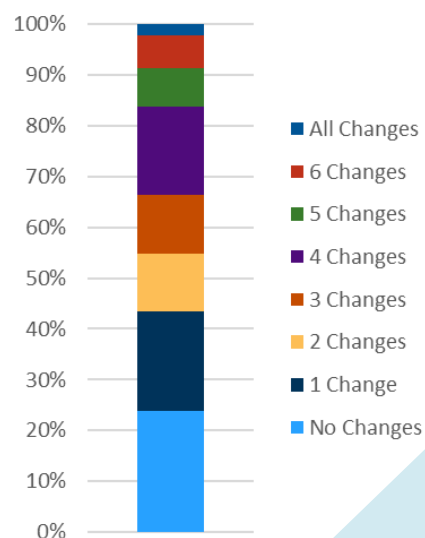


FIGURE 1-9: Cumulative changes



Congregations in the sample are mostly representative of the entire Synod in terms of size. The only exception to this is small congregations, which are under-represented. This is common in survey research of congregations. In our selection, we intentionally tried to oversample small congregations because of this tendency, and it still ended up being short.

FIGURE 1-10: SAMPLED CONGREGATIONS:  
Average Worship Attendance: 179  
Total Worshipers: 32,802

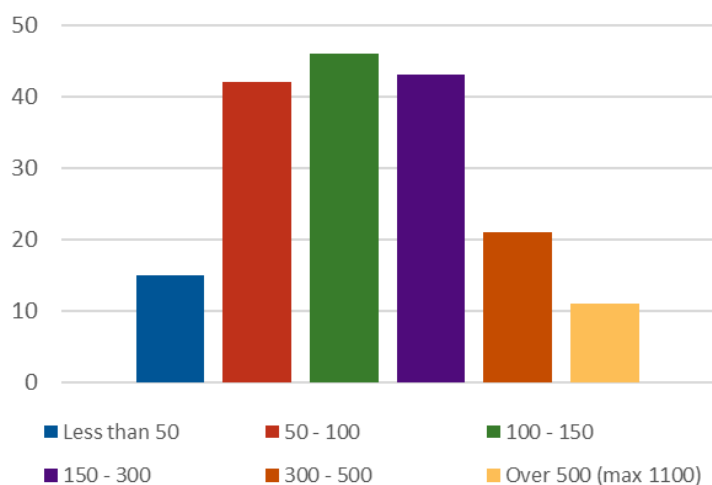
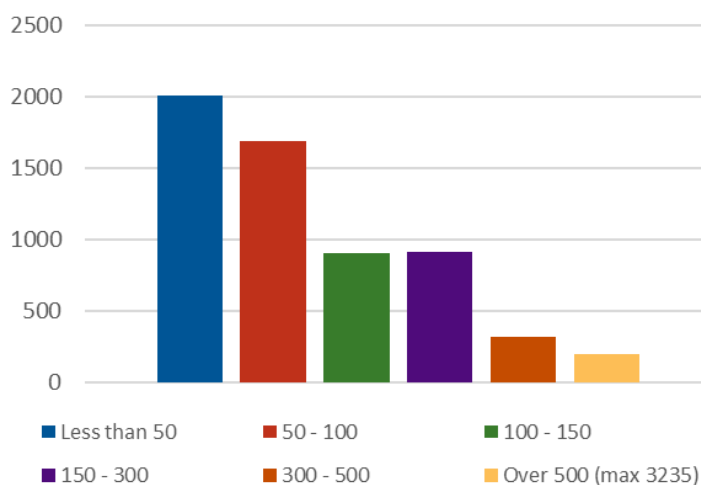


FIGURE 1-11: SYNOD AS A WHOLE  
Average Worship Attendance: 141  
Total Worshipers: 746,670



The sample also appears to be well-representative of the Synod in terms of the ages of members. Various surveys and congregational reports in recent years provide a rough breakdown of LCMS church adherents by age groups. The survey sample corresponds well with those findings. However, neither the sample nor the Synod matches the distribution throughout the U.S. population.<sup>2</sup>

FIGURE 1-12: Sampled congregations tend to have a greater number of older worshipers than expected

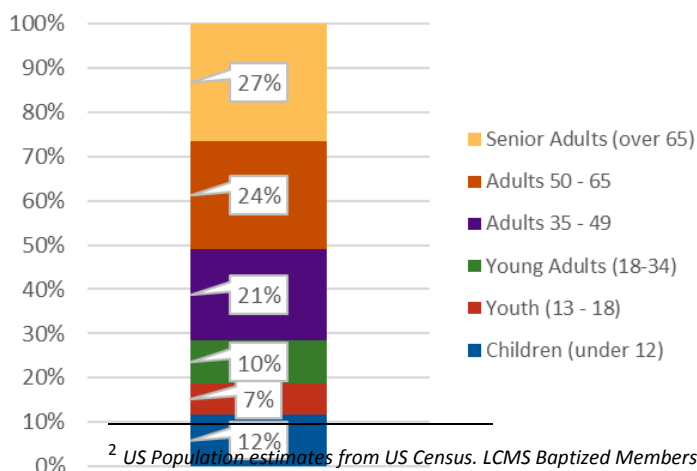
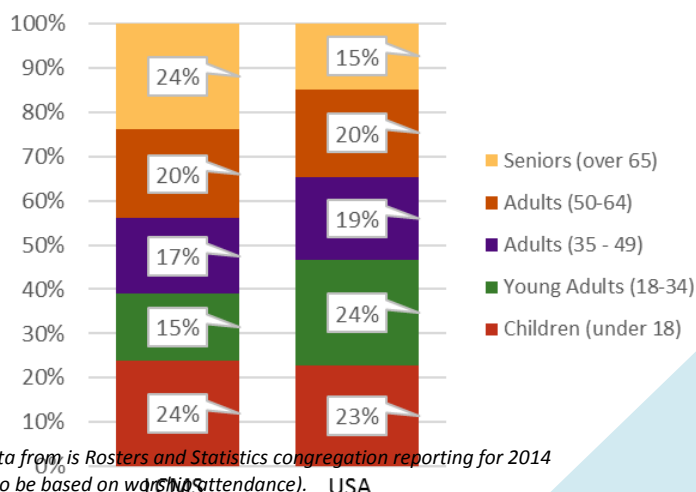


FIGURE 1-13: Synod and the U.S. Population  
(note: youth and children are combined here)



<sup>2</sup> US Population estimates from US Census. LCMS Baptized Membership data from is Rosters and Statistics congregation reporting for 2014 (these are based on Baptized Membership, whereas the survey ages were to be based on worship attendance).

Finally, the survey is representative of Synod in terms of the age of senior or sole pastor. As might be expected from a web-based survey, the one exception comes in the oldest age segment of pastors. The final sample skews slightly younger than the LCMS as a whole, though not to a significant degree.

FIGURE 1-14: SAMPLED CONGREGATIONS:

Ages of Senior/Sole Pastors  
Average Age: 52

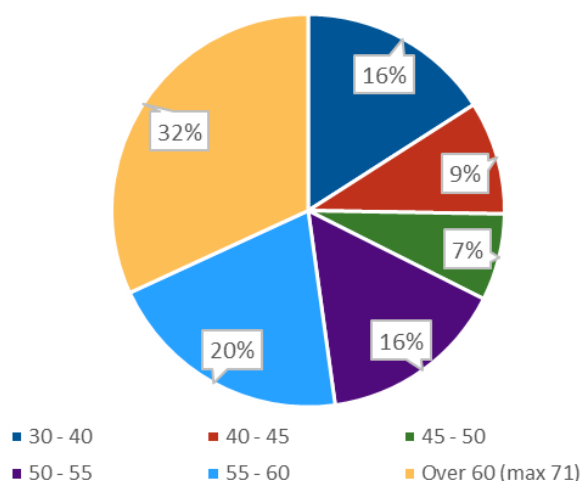
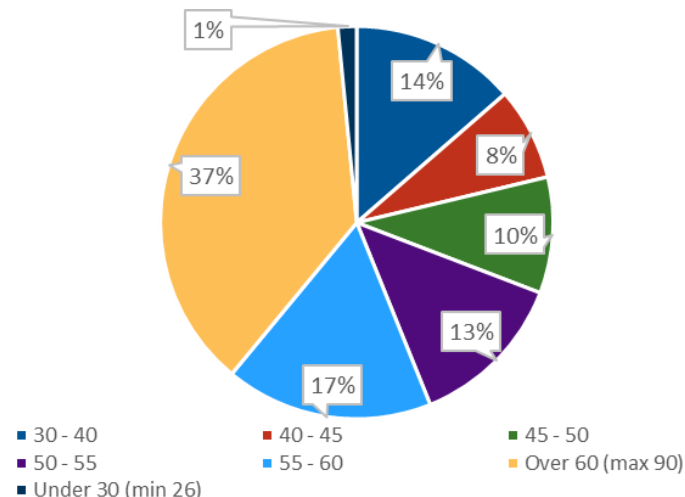


FIGURE 1-15: SYNOD CONGREGATIONS:

Ages of Senior/Sole Pastors  
Average Age: 54



## Limitations Due to Response Rate and Sample Representation

- Low response resulted in a somewhat elevated margin of error (+/- 6%).
- Over one-third of survey respondents were not present in the congregation a decade ago and took the survey without help from someone who was present.
- Nearly a quarter of congregations do not have useable records of confirmations from a decade ago.
- Small congregations are particularly under-represented in the sample.
- Congregations that responded to the survey have a lower number of young adults (and also children!) compared to LCMS congregations as a whole.
- Additionally, all results of this study are preliminary pending the conclusion of subsequent phases of research.

Still – this data is sufficient to provide insight into retention.

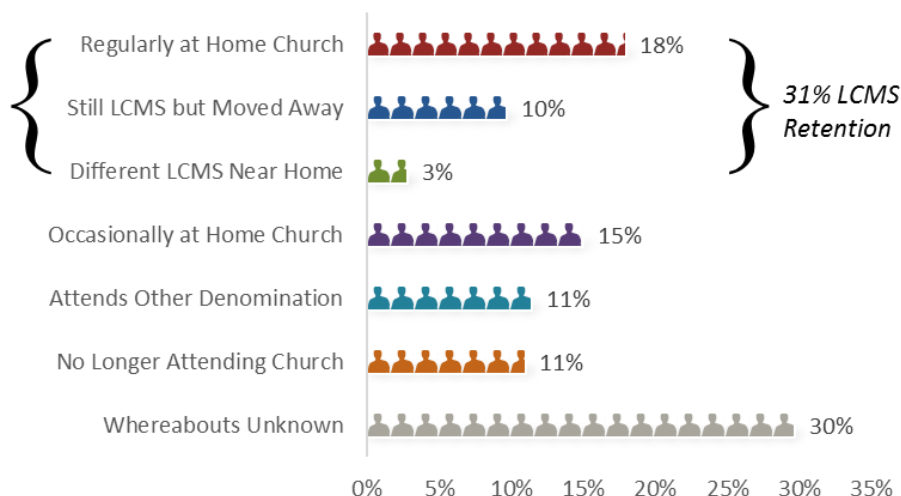


## Findings Related to Retention

The first question regarding retention is of numbers. We know that Millennials are significantly under-represented in the pews today, but, as shown earlier, that is more the result of never being in the church rather than poor retention. The question remains, to what extent were Millennials retained?

The 141 congregations in the survey that had confirmation records, provided numbers regarding the current worshiping habits of the young people confirmed in 2004-2006. There is a substantial number of confirmands for whom survey respondents do not know their current situation. While there are no grounds to label this entire group as all having left the church, it is likely that for many of them, contact was lost because they no longer worship at an LCMS congregation.

FIGURE 2-1: Where are the confirmands today?



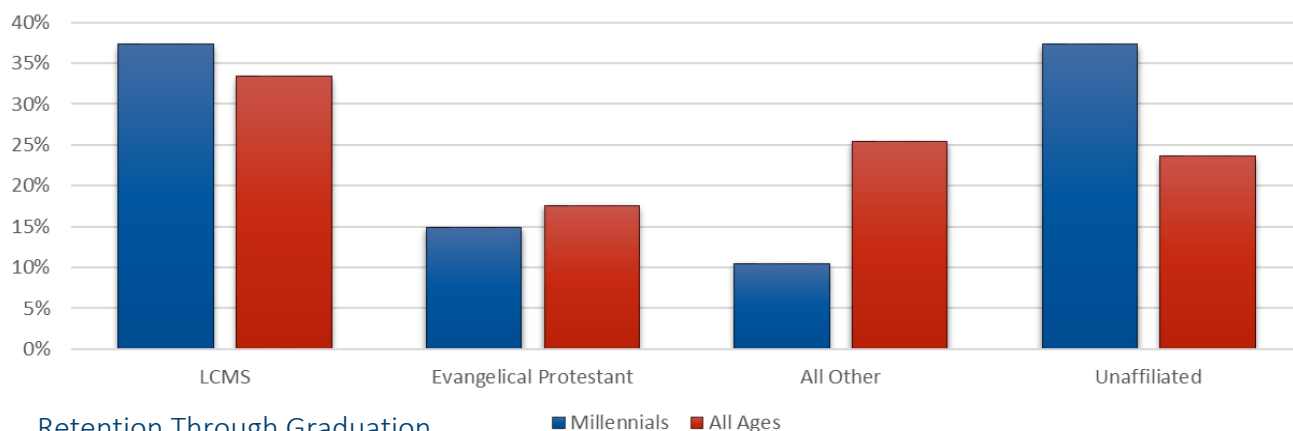
Congregations report that roughly 1-in-3 of young people confirmed in 2004-2006 worship at an LCMS church today. Another third lost contact with their home church (or rather, their home church has lost contact with them). The rest either attend another denomination (11%), worship only sporadically (15%) or do not attend church at all (11%).

For reference, the Pew Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2014,<sup>3</sup> revealed a similar retention

rate for Millennials raised in the LCMS. In the data (see below), Millennial retention is slightly higher than other generations (however, this difference is smaller than the margin of error). This suggests that retention of Millennials has at least been at the same rate as other generations. Additionally, the large “unaffiliated” segment found by Pew lends support to the notion that confirmands in our survey’s “whereabouts unknown” category, most likely no longer attend church.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the Pew Religious Landscape Survey: <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

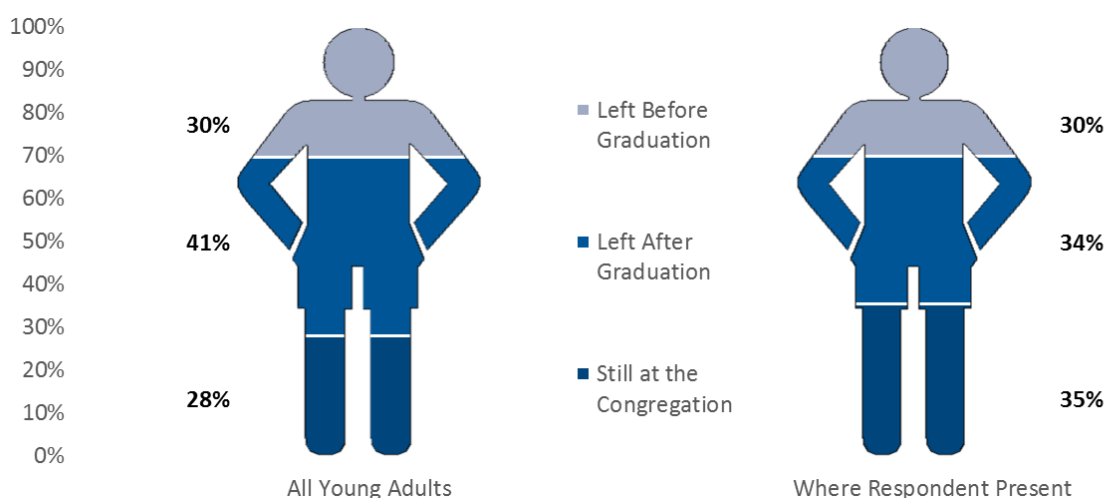
FIGURE 2-2: Pew Religious Landscape Data (2014)



### Retention Through Graduation

So when did these young people stop coming to church? Graduation is often believed to be an important moment in a young person's spiritual journey. No longer under their parent's rules (or the incentive of discounted tuition), young people are free to make their own choices regarding worship. Therefore, the survey asked approximately how many confirmands stopped attending church prior to graduation. Based on the numbers provided, most who did leave (57%), stayed through graduation.

FIGURE 2-3: Retention Through Graduation



Within the data, there are significant differences in retention rates for congregations where the respondent (again, almost always the pastor) was not at the congregation when these students were confirmed. However, the charts above reveal that these differences in retention are entirely due to losses that take place after graduation. Changing pastors had not impact retention until graduation.

There is a factor that does have an impact, schools. Congregations that operate or associate with schools confirmed a greater number of youth, and retained more of them through graduation.<sup>4</sup>

FIGURE 2-4: Number of Junior Confirmations

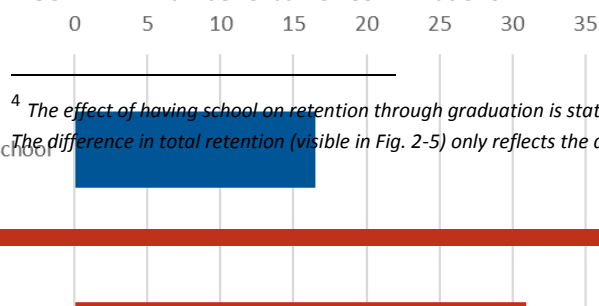
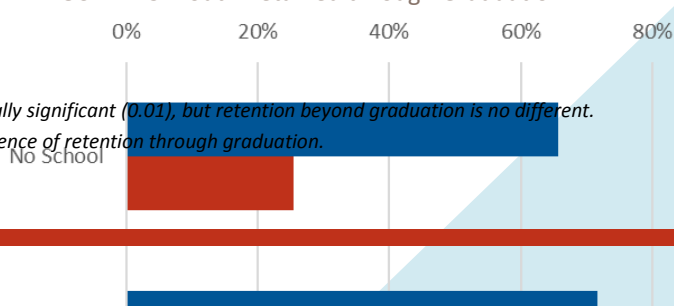


FIGURE 2-5: Youth Retained through Graduation



<sup>4</sup> The effect of having school on retention through graduation is statistically significant (0.01), but retention beyond graduation is no different. The difference in total retention (visible in Fig. 2-5) only reflects the difference of retention through graduation.

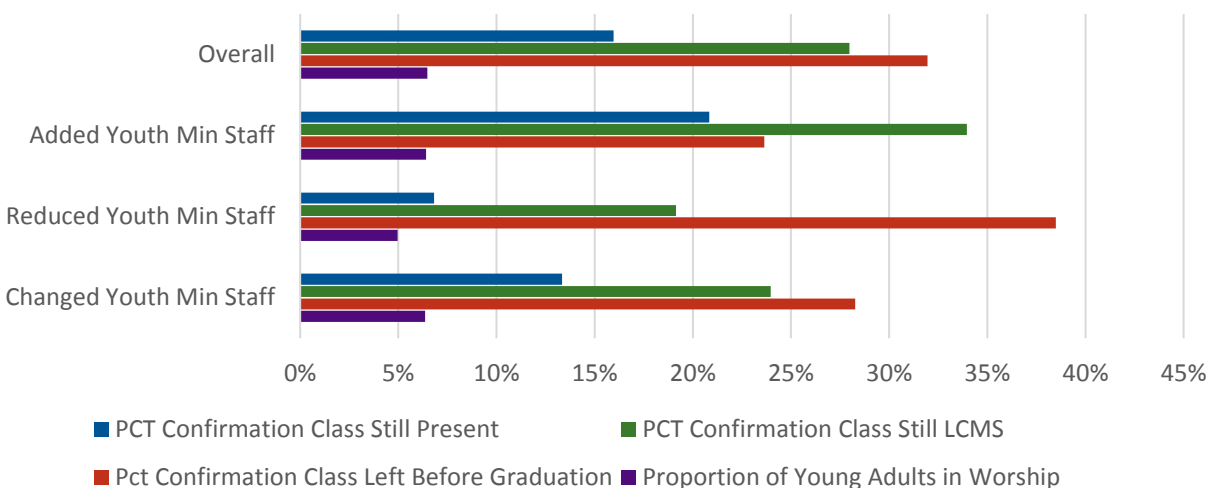


## Congregation Leadership and Retention

### Ministry Staff for Youth

Early in the survey, congregations were asked how their youth related ministries and programs had changed since 2004. Over half of congregations had made more than one of the changes in the list, but the data shows that most of those changes had no effect on overall retention. The major exception to that were the items related to staffing youth ministry.

FIGURE 2-6: Impact of Youth Related Staff Changes



Congregations that added youth ministry staff experienced much higher rates of retention than the average congregation, and a lower rate of youth leaving prior to graduation. The exact opposite is true for congregations that reduced staffing for youth related ministry. Congregations that eliminated or did not fill positions experienced a lower retention rate, and a higher rate of leaving prior to graduation. Additionally, changing youth ministry staff also seems to have a negative impact on retention, but not to the same extent as reducing ministry staff.

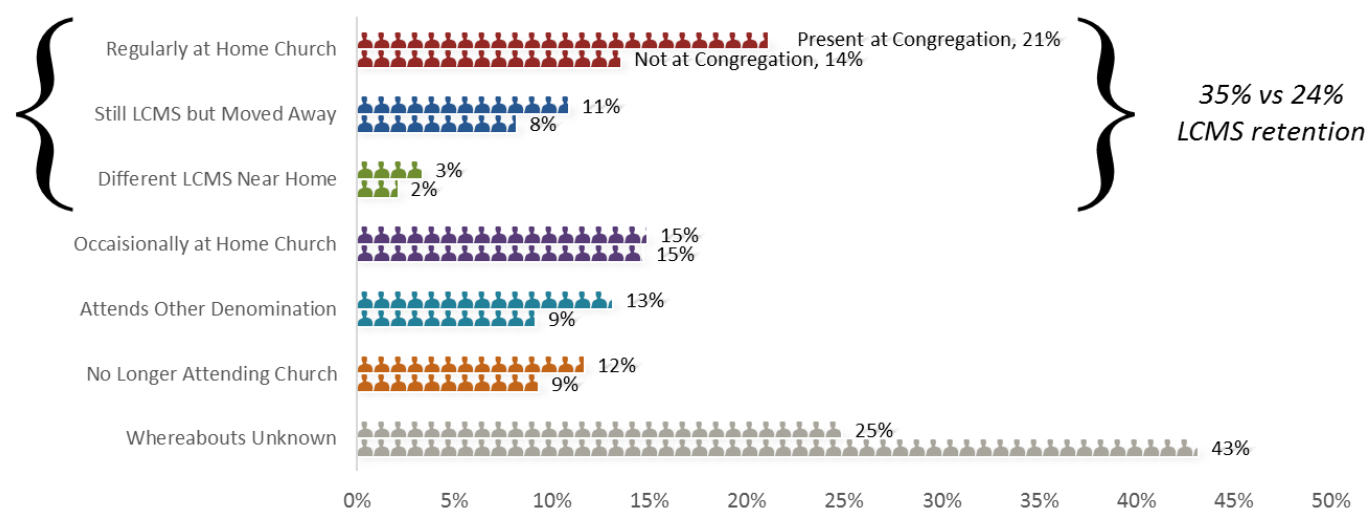
There is, however, no significant impact on the current proportion of young adults currently worshipping at these congregations. This is important to point out because it diminishes any possibility of cross-correlation with high involvement of young people.

The link between adding or reducing youth ministry staff may be tempting to easily to explain, but we must consider the fact that the data does not provide any order of causality. It may be that the reductions of staff were the result of ongoing poor retention, but it may also be that not filling the position pushed youth away.

### Keeping the Same Pastor over Time

The issue so far was with youth related staff, but the data has already revealed that the pastoral role is another significant factor effecting retention. The following chart emphasizes the differences in outcomes for confirmands based on whether the current pastor was present at the time of their confirmation or called sometime since then.

FIGURE 2-7: Impact of Having the Same Pastor



That there is a substantial difference in the “whereabouts unknown” segment should not be surprising. That is undoubtedly due to the new pastor having less time to build relationships with the young people. However, that segment cannot account for the major difference found among those who regularly worship at their home church.

Though there is less certainty regarding LCMS retention of young people from congregations that have changed pastors, the data is clear that local retention when the pastor changes is substantially lower.

### Assimilating Young People by Putting Them in Leadership

Finally, regarding church leadership, there is a clear and substantial link between having young congregation leaders and retaining young adults. Survey respondents were asked to give the age and role of their youngest leader. Fewer than two-thirds (roughly 57%) of congregations indicated that their youngest leader was under the age of 32.

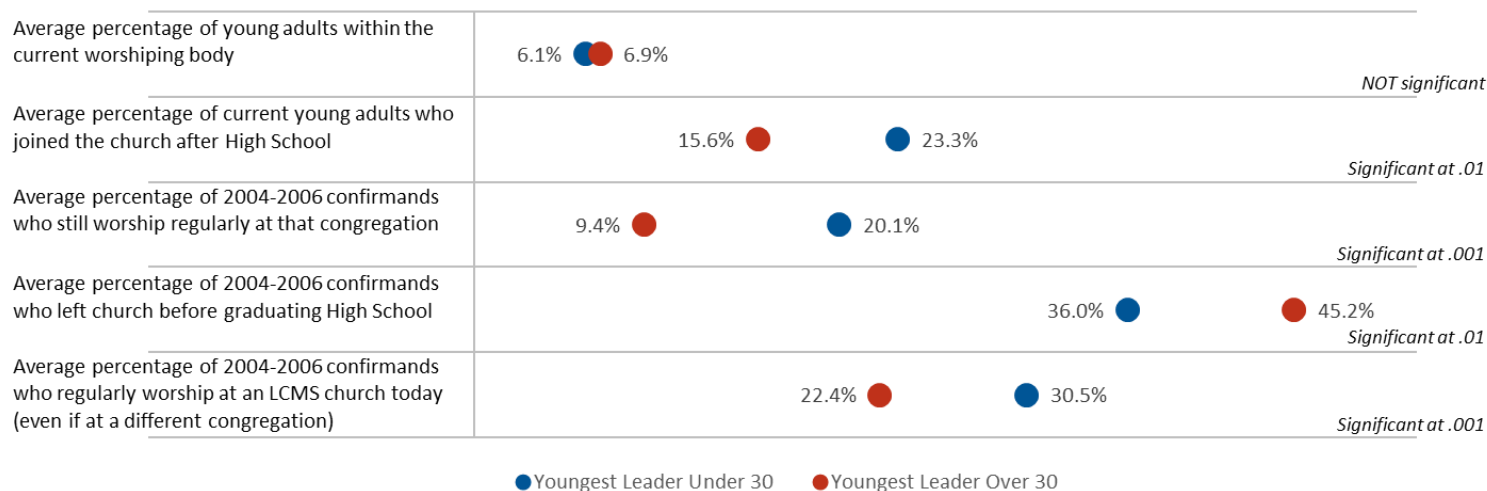
FIGURE 2-8: Congregations with a Youngest Leader Under the Age of 32<sup>5</sup>

Leadership Role	Congregations	Average Age*	Age Range*
Committee / Board / Council	22	26.0	17-30
Youth Ministry	15	26.1	19-32
Elder	14	28.4	25-32
DCE	12	25.5	22-32
Trustee	10	28.2	21-32
Officer	9	29.0	25-32
Teacher	7	26.7	22-30
Children's Ministry	6	24.8	19-30
Ordained	6	30.8	28-32
Worship / Music	4	25.5	25-26

<sup>5</sup> Average Age and Age Range data specifically refer to the 1 youngest leader at each congregation if age 32 or younger (the above date is not reflective of the ages of all leaders at congregations).

Congregations with young adult leaders did better in all measures of retention. They were more likely retain young people through graduation, they produced a greater number of confirmands that remain in the LCMS, they retained more in their own church body, and they even attract more young adults today.

FIGURE 2-9: Impact of Having Young Congregation Leaders



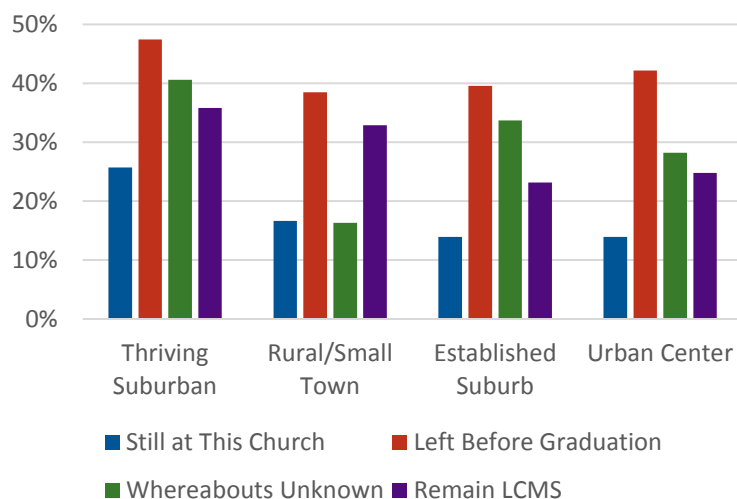
It is also important to observe that there is no correlation between having young leaders and having lots of young adults in worship. That there is no relationship here means that the influence cannot be explained away as a general characteristic of congregations with large numbers of young adults. In fact, having a higher proportion of young adults in worship does not correlate at all with retention rates. On the other hand, having young adult leaders is among the strongest factors identified through a regression analysis on overall retention, which strongly suggests that its influence is direct.

## Community Type and Congregation Size

Any discussion of the impact of community type and congregation size should always be predicated by the fact that these are elements of the congregation that cannot be acted upon. A small rural congregation

cannot simply pass a vote and become a large suburban congregation. Nor should one want to. That said, it is important to know what the data says about community and size, because they are significant factors.

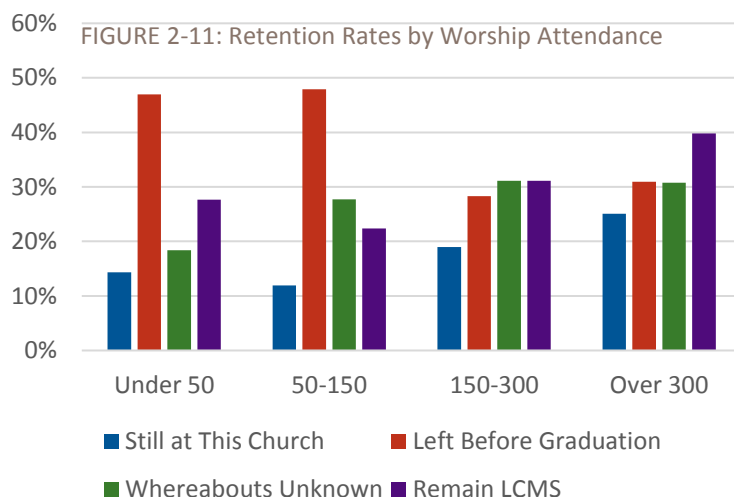
FIGURE 2-10: Retention Rates by Community Type



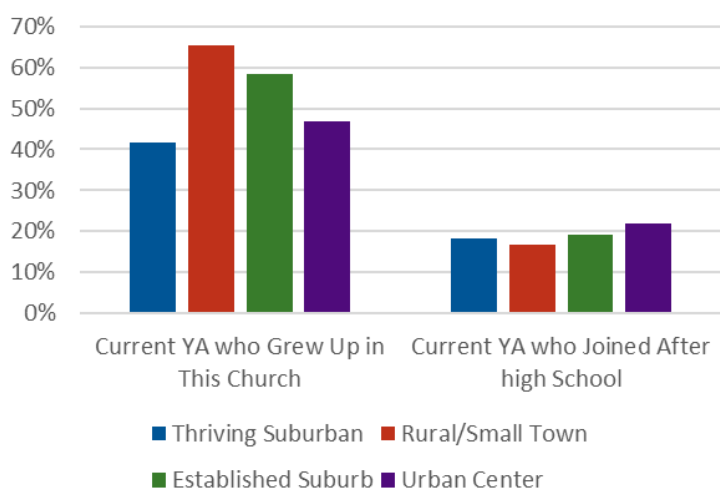
Rural and small town churches have done a much better job than other communities in staying connected with their young people (i.e. they have very low numbers of “whereabouts unknown”). However, suburban churches have done the best retaining young people overall. Interestingly, suburban churches have slightly higher rates of losing youth prior to graduation (though not statistically significant).

Likewise, larger congregations have done better retaining young people. They also confirm more, which helps overall numbers even more. Of note, the effect is more pronounced in LCMS retention than in local retention. This means that large congregations were more likely to produce young people that will leave their home church but seek out other LCMS congregations. On the other hand, small churches have significantly more young people leave prior to graduation.

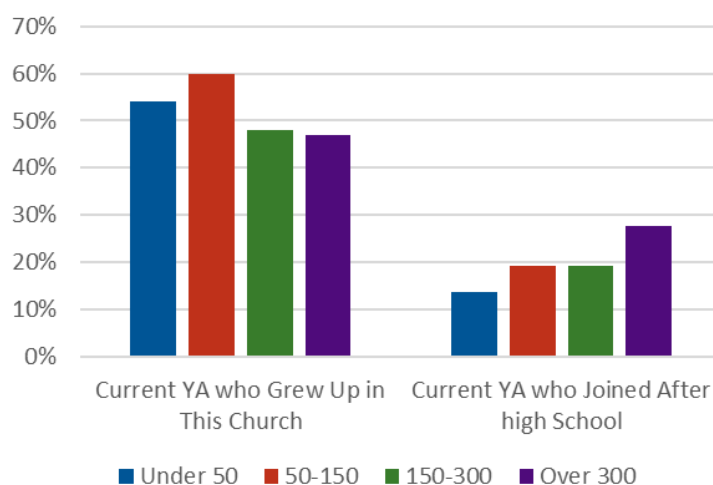
Both size and community type also have an impact on the nature of the current young adults worshipping at a given church. Young adults currently attending rural and small town churches are much more likely to have grown up and been confirmed in that same church. While many young adults in worship today grew up in their current churches, large congregations tend to have the largest proportion of young adults who have joined the church in adulthood.



**FIGURE 2-12: Retaining vs. Attracting Young Adults by on Community Type**



**FIGURE 2-13: Retaining vs. Attracting Young Adults by Worship Attendance**



Given these differences it may seem peculiar that there is no effect on the overall proportion of young adults in worship based on congregation size or community type. How can these factors improve retention and attraction of young adults, yet not result in a measurable net change to the presence of young adults? There is not enough data to know precisely. One explanation may be that there are simply too few young adults in most congregations to be able to measure any impact. It may be important to note, though, that in controlling for the influence of size, the presence of young adults in worship had to be analyzed as a proportion of the entire worshipping body as opposed to total numbers. Therefore, another likely explanation could be that these congregations are also growing equally in other age segments, leaving the overall proportion of young adults unaffected.

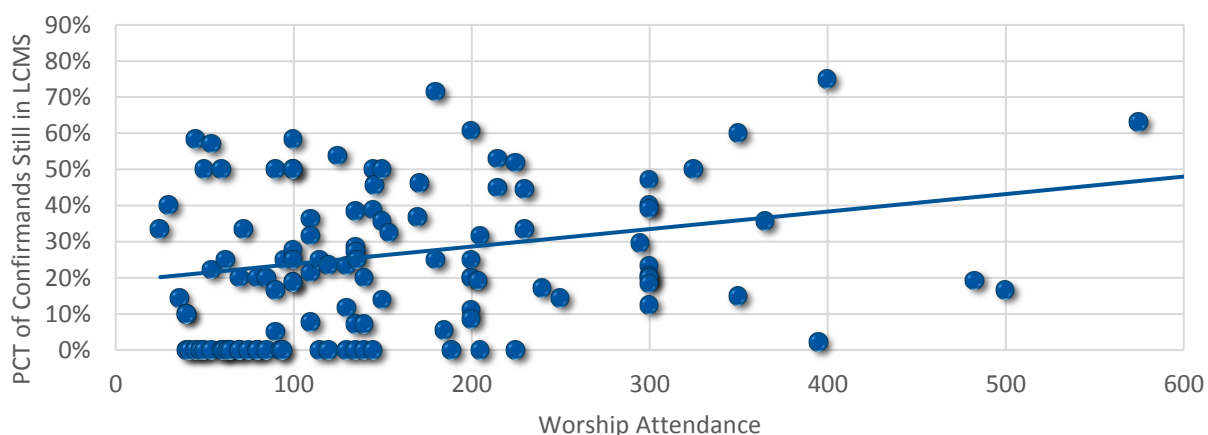
## Four Predictors of High LCMS Retention

So far, analysis of the data has revealed several correlations with improved retention. But in what ways do these factors all relate? Analyzing the major factors of retention in one comprehensive model revealed, four main predictors of LCMS retention.<sup>6</sup> These are factors in the data that influence retention directly. In other words, congregations where these factors are present were much more likely to have had higher retention rates.

### Being a larger congregation

Based on average weekly attendance, large congregations both confirm higher numbers of young people and retain more of their confirmands in the LCMS, regardless of whether they stay at their home congregation.

FIGURE 2-14: Scatter plot of congregations (with trendline) by LCMS retention and worship attendance



### Having a large number of young adults who joined after high school

This is an interesting link, because it involves behavior of different young adults at one congregation but at different times (confirmed teens who remain in the Synod even if they left their home church and young adults that were attracted to that church after high school). In other words, congregations that currently attract young adults, were congregations that produced more lasting Lutherans.

### Having a reduced number of confirmands leave before graduation

This may seem somewhat tautological, but there is a nuance worth pointing out. Churches that lose more young people prior to graduation also see more young people leave in adulthood. Retaining young people through graduation is not a sure sign of on-going retention, but it does improve overall rates.

### Having younger adult leaders, specifically, younger than 32 years old

While not the strongest factor in the model, this may be the most important because it is actionable. Putting young adults in leadership is something that congregations can do to improve retention. Young adults are more likely to remain in congregations or to be attracted to congregations where they know they can have a role today.

<sup>6</sup> These predictors were confirmed as statistically significant (0.01 or better) in a regression analysis model (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.614$ ).



## Additional Factors in the Survey with No Direct Impact on Retention

There were many other factors of the survey that were hypothesized to correlate with retention, but ended up showing no statistically significant impact. It would not be efficient to go into detail on every factor that was not significant, however, there are a few worthy of attention.

### Age of Senior/Sole Pastor

Despite the importance of having young leaders in the congregation, there is no impact on retention based on the age of the senior or sole pastor at a congregation. This may largely be due to there being relatively few young pastors. In only 14 of the congregations was the senior or sole pastor of the congregation the youngest leader, and in all but two of those the pastor was over the age of 32. Another reason the age of the pastor has no effect may be because the benefit of keeping the same pastor over time (which results in having an older pastor) counter-balances any benefit of having a young pastor.

### Having a large proportion of young adults in worship

Once again, it is a bit perplexing to find that having many young adults in the worshiping body neither correlates with their retention nor with high rates of attracting them. There are many possible reasons this is the case. As explained earlier, this variable had to be treated proportionately to control for congregation size, so the change would not be detectable if they congregations were also growing in other age groups.

### Presence of local colleges

Congregations were asked how many (if any) colleges were within a 45-minute drive. Based on the data provided, there is no effect on retention based the presence of colleges. There may be a slight positive impact on attracting new adults. It is debatable whether that is statistically significant, but even if so, the effect is not as much as might be expected.

### Changes to confirmation process or youth ministry

As has already been stated, there was little impact made on retention based on whether a congregation had made changes to youth related programming. The major exception, as mentioned earlier, is if that was a change to the number of youth ministry staffing.

## Conclusions

Results should be regarded as preliminary findings until subsequent phases of the study are complete.

### Confirmed LCMS Millennials: 1/3 Retained; 1/3 Lost; 1/3 Unknown

- Around a third of those confirmed between 2004-2006 still worship at an LCMS church
- For nearly half of the others, their home church does not know where (or if) they worship today
- Most of those who left their home church did so after they graduated high school

### Impact of Size and Community

- Rural communities demonstrate a high level of connectedness (fewer “whereabouts unknown”), and do see that many confirmands remain the LCMS, even if they leave home
- However, churches located in thriving suburban neighborhoods were the most likely to retain confirmands, within the congregation but also in the LCMS as a whole
- Smaller congregations see significantly more attrition prior to graduation, while confirmands from larger congregations are the most likely to remain in the LCMS

### Staff and Leadership Makes a Difference

- Congregations that have the same pastor that they had in 2004 consistently had much better rates of retention
- Congregations that have added staff to youth ministry since 2004 show significantly higher levels of retention (and especially at retention through graduation)
- Congregations that incorporate young adults into the leadership of the church are both more likely to have retained confirmands and are more likely to attract new young adults

### A Profile of a Typical Congregation with Higher Retention

- Is likely a large congregation in a newer suburban community
- Operates or is associated with a school, which helped it retain more until graduation
- Has added ministry staff with responsibilities for young people in the past decade
- Has had a consistent pastor for over a decade
- Has incorporated young people into leadership roles in the church
- Continues to attract young adults

## Next Steps

In late summer 2017, LCMS Youth Ministry and LCMS Research sent out a second survey young adults, that survey is still open as of the writing of this report. It was distributed over social media, but also utilized a network of committed pastors, parents and young adults to encourage responses from confirmands who have left the Synod.

- In the first weekend of that survey being out, we heard from over 1,000 young people, and at least 250 of those being young people who left the LCMS church.
- At this time, that survey now has over 350 responses from young adults who left the church, and nearly 2000 total responses.
- Based on the volume of answers provided to open-ended questions, these responses appear to be both thorough and earnest.
- Responses also include several hundred others who identify themselves as LCMS Lutherans, but have not attended worship more than once or twice in recent years.
- Many respondents, including nearly half of those who have left the church, also provided some form of contact information (phone number or email address) welcoming further discussion with the Synod.

Future steps may likely include one-on-one interviews or focus groups to delve even deeper into the mindsets of Millennials and their attitudes toward the church.