

Executive Summary

2017 Millennial Research

Project Summary

Millennials are the largest segment of the U.S. population, but only a small component of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS). LCMS Youth Ministry partnered with LCMS Research to conduct an unprecedented study of young adult retention in the LCMS and in the larger Christian church. The study consisted of two phases. First, congregations were surveyed about the current retention of young people who were confirmed

between 2004-2006. Second, we conducted a survey of young adults who had been or are now connected with the LCMS. The results showed important indicators for improving retention from Confirmation and ministering to Millennials and generations after.



Background

In 2016-2017 LCMS Youth Ministry did several small research projects which left lingering questions about Millennials in our church body. This research showed that Millennials were baptized in smaller numbers than generations before, despite an increase in infant births nationwide. 50-65% of congregations reported zero Junior Confirmations in at least one year of the 2012-2014 reporting cycle. The lower numbers of Millennials found in LCMS congregations began with retention issues in the Baby Boom Generation. Additionally, a 2016 survey of Young Adult Volunteers at the LCMS Youth Gathering raised questions about what factors may play into retention of young people in the LCMS. Our 2017 research sought to answer some of these questions and allow us to have practical ministry suggestions for congregations, church leaders, and young adults.

Goals for Study

- Collect data specific to young adults who grew up in the LCMS, regardless of their current faith affiliation, focusing on their home congregation, family, current beliefs and what influences their relationship with the church.
- Compare research finding from a specifically LCMS perspective with findings with studies in broader American Christianity (Fuller Youth Institute, National Study of Youth and Religion, LifeWay, etc.).
- Initiate a conversation in the Church about the care for the Millennial Generation. Repent where needed, correct, and capitalize on our strengths to serve Plurals/Gen Z and future generations.

Research team

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Process

For our first phase of research, 1800 congregations were included in a random sample with a ratio designed to reflect the size and location of the LCMS overall. 184 congregations responded, usually through a pastor or DCE. The survey contained questions about the congregation and specifically on the Confirmation classes of 2004-2006. Assuming the standard confirmation age of 12-14, these young people would now be 23-27 years old. Since many pastors or DCEs were not at the congregation during those years, respondents were encouraged to recruit help from staff or parents who might know more about these young people.

In our second phase of research, we conducted an online survey of young adults. LCMS Youth Ministry used social media to promote the survey and encouraged people to tag individuals in our target group in posts. Congregations who had participated in the previous study as well as LCMS Districts were encouraged to encourage participation in the survey. 2,046 young adults took the survey. The average age of those that took the survey was 24 years old. Nearly twice as many women as men (F:66% M:34%) responded. 88% were confirmed between 6th-9th grade.

The survey took between 15-20 minutes to take and asked young adults about their life, current faith practices, and theology. The questions were designed to apply to both active LCMS members and those who have distanced themselves from the church. The only distinction between these groups was that those who were inactive or who had left the church were given additional short answer questions.

It is well-known that many in our culture, especially young people, hold views that are opposed to the Bible and the church. This study seeks to help the church learn more about these differences. This is not in any way to suggest the church is considering changing its stance or turning away from sound Biblical teaching. Rather, this study is an exercise in careful listening so that church leaders and ministers are equipped to defend doctrine while compassionately engaging the whole spectrum of viewpoints found throughout this diverse generation.



We identified seven groups within the 1,934 who took the survey who were confirmed in the LCMS.

- LCMS – (1,579)
 - **Active LCMS** (1,393) – worship at an LCMS church at least once a month
 - **Nominal LCMS** (186) – do not attend worship monthly, but consider themselves LCMS Lutherans
- Not LCMS Today – (355)
 - **Evangelical Protestant** (163) – those attending evangelical protestant denominations (WELS, SBC, PCA, etc.), or a non-denominational church
 - **Mainline Protestant** (63) – those in mainline denominations (ELCA, PCUSA, UMC, etc.)
 - **Non-Protestant Christian** (11) – those who are now Catholic or Orthodox
 - **Unaffiliated** (92) – those who identified themselves as atheists, agnostics, spiritual but not religious (SBNR) with not church activity, or belonging to a different faith
 - **Unclassifiable** (26) – these people indicated they were “Spiritual but not religious”, but reported active church attendance and did not fit statistically with other groups.

Findings and Conclusions

Our research, including our overall retention, mirrored the research done in the greater religious research community.

Both surveys were designed through the distinct lens of Lutheran theology and ecclesiology. Yet, there was no meaningful difference between what we found and what other research had shown. The retention rate of young people in the LCMS is consistent with what is found in other surveys. 1/3 of young people confirmed in 2004-2006 were retained in the LCMS into young adulthood. Another 1/3 were occasionally at their home congregation, a part of another church body or known to no longer attend church at all. The whereabouts of the final 1/3 were unknown to the church leader who took the survey or to those helping them.

Parents and congregations must prepare for and engage young people during time of transition and crisis.

Only 55% of active LCMS young adults agree that their home congregation ministered to them during times of life transitions. This was the strongest response of any group. We saw this impact particularly after high school graduation. Active LCMS young adults report that their weekly worship attendance dropped from 88% to 66% after high school graduation but it recovered in to 74% by age 22-30. In contrast, those no longer attending church report that their weekly worship attendance dropped from 68% to 16% after graduation and that number drops to almost zero in young adulthood. Transitions such as graduation are critical moments where congregations and parents can help a young person find a new church home or establishing a new, adult relationships with their existing congregation.

Young adults reported that crisis situations were often places where faith and community are deepened or lost. 15% of young adults noted a crisis event as a pivotal faith moment. These pivotal faith moments could be positive or negative, often depending on the response of family and/or the church to the crisis. 9% of non-LCMS respondents mentioned having their doubts or questions ignored or dismissed. Congregations and parents should not be surprised by transitions or crisis. Instead, they should develop deep and open relationships. Further congregations should work with parents to train and prepare for how to utilize these moments for deepening faith and community.

Ministry should prioritize long-term relationships, embracing its particular context.

Of the congregations who responded to our survey, 23% reported that they did not have accurate records of Junior Confirmations. Only 28% reported having digital records. Congregations cannot be successful in ministering to individuals over their lifetime if there are no usable records. Along with good record keeping, church workers and laity need to actively hand off and take on people during congregation transitions. When the pastor who confirmed the young people in 2004-2006 was still present at the time of the survey, there was a 35% LCMS retention rate. If there had been a pastoral transition in from 2004 until the survey, the LCMS retention rate was only 24%. Pastors who had been present in 2004-2006 had a 25% rate of not knowing where a confirmand was today in contrast to 43% if there had been a pastoral transition in that time.

Within the congregational study, we asked if there had been any significant changes to programs, curriculum, and staffing across Christian education since 2004. We found that changes in programs and curriculum showed no meaningful increase or decrease in retention. However, congregations that added youth ministry staff

experienced higher rates of retention (in the LCMS) into adulthood (34%) than congregations with no change (28%) and congregations which reduced youth ministry staff (19%). Adding staff also decreased the rate of young people leaving before high school graduation. 23% left the congregations who added staff, 32% with no staffing change, 38% for congregations who reduced youth ministry staff. We recognize that the data does not speak to causality. However, it gives a strong indication that both strong resourcing for youth ministry and the presence of long-term relationships with church leaders has a positive impact on retention.

Congregations cannot control some of the factors that increased or decreased retention. Small and rural congregations had a higher rate of knowing where young adults are currently worshiping. Larger and suburban congregations had a higher rate of LCMS retention. Large congregations also tend to have the largest proportion of young adults who have joined the church in adulthood. This merely means that congregations ought to embrace their unique context.

Parents play a critical role in young adult's faith development and retention.

Parents remain the number one person who impacts the faith lives of young people. Nearly 1-in-3 young adults listed a parent as one of the most influential people in their lives. While that influence was usually positive, those who left the LCMS were more than twice as likely to say a parent had a negative influence (13% vs 5%).

Today's Active LCMS Young Adults were the most likely to see a high level of faith practiced by their parents. This included frequent Bible reading at home, praying as a family, regular church attendance of both parents together (continuing even today), and at least one parent having a service or leadership role in the church. Of all the other profiles, parents of Nominal LCMS are least likely to be leaders in the church, read the Bible with their children, and attend worship regularly now or in the past. Young people cannot emulate faith behavior they don't see. When parents don't prioritize worship and congregational engagement, young people won't either.

Today's Active LCMS were also the most likely to report having a good relationship with parents in high school. They report they related well with parents in general, specifically with dad. They felt they could talk to both parents about life issues and could talk openly with at least one parent about faith. They felt safe bringing up their questions and doubts to their parents. When parents are open to tough conversations about life and faith, young people are more likely to stay in the church.

Engaging youth and young adults in service and leadership increases retention in the LCMS.

The congregational survey asked the age of their youngest leader and what role that leader has. 57% of congregations reported their youngest leader was under 32. The leadership roles described were not exclusively staff or board members. Many were lay leaders with meaningful roles such as volunteer youth leaders, Sunday school teachers, and board members. This age proved to be an important threshold related to retention.

Congregations with a leader under 30 years old showed increased retention compared to those with only older leaders. Churches with a leader under 30 report a higher rate of young adults retained in their home congregation. They also show a lower rate of young adults leaving before graduation. Having a leader under 30 increased the number of young adults who are still worshiping in the LCMS, even if they have moved, changing

congregations. This impact is not influenced by congregations simply having more young adults overall. Having young leaders helps retain children and teens through graduation and into young adulthood.

Congregations must be safe places for young people to wrestle with life and faith in order for them to faithfully reach out to today's culture.

Throughout the survey we saw a strong dividing line over social and theological issues for those within the LCMS, in other church bodies, and outside the church. "Object to the LCMS over a social issue" was the top reason mentioned in open-ended responses for Mainline Protestant (64%) and Unaffiliated (59%) and was third highest response for Evangelical Protestant (26%) young people. Active LCMS young adults hold very high rates of agreement with LCMS doctrine. For example, 40% of Nominal LCMS young adults disagree with ordaining women while 78% of Active LCMS young adults disagree. 38% of Nominal LCMS young adults disagree that homosexual activity is ok while 87% of Active LCMS young adults disagree. 47% of Nominal LCMS young adults disagree with a woman's right to abortion while 85% of Active LCMS young adults disagree.

Active LCMS young adults also showed signs that they had been able to ask hard questions and have challenging conversations within their church. We also found 72% of Active LCMS young adults agreed there was a person at church who was "safe" to talk with. Active LCMS were least likely to report feeling judged by the church (85% Unaffiliated; 57% Nominal LCMS; 57% Mainline Protestant; 29% Evangelical Protestant; 25% Active LCMS). They were also the most likely to say my church looks out for my best interest (18% Unaffiliated; 44% Nominal LCMS; 37% Mainline Protestant; 42% Evangelical Protestant; 57% Active LCMS.) In an increasingly post-Christian world, young people need our support to address the new or unique challenges to being Lutheran Christian.

Future Research and Resourcing

In summer 2018, we will be engaging young adults in focus groups to better understand many of the lingering questions from this research. Some questions we hope to address are

- What are we inactively teaching our young people within our church? 27% of active LCMS young adults think it's important for church to be racially diverse while 74% think it is important for the church be a "close-knit community." When young adults reported that their questions were unwanted, often they were describing their peer groups lack of interest. The research team is curious about what this might mean for the elasticity of LCMS congregational communities.
- What is the importance of peer groups? This was one aspect of retention which we did not have much conclusive data. The second top reason (28%) for LCMS young people leaving to Evangelical Protestant churches was "No people or support for people my age in LCMS churches." This alone was not enough for us to determine the importance of other young adults in the congregation. Direct information is needed to determine the importance of peer groups in reaching and retaining young adults.

At the completion of this research, both the data and resources based on it will be provided for congregations, church workers, and laity.

