

“Last Sunday, my new pastor shared about his story and struggles he has had in life. He really touched me during his sermon, he showed me a side of a pastor that I have never seen before. It made me realize that they, too, are not perfect. And to be perfectly honest I have never wanted to truly go to church before in my entire life. But now I am excited for church and can’t wait ‘til I get to hear another sermon.”

20-year-old  
LCMS Lutheran



## 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, we surveyed congregations about the current retention of young people who were confirmed between 2004 and 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 conducted several small research projects, which left lingering questions about Millennials in our church body. This research



# Executive Summary

## 2017 MILLENNIAL RESEARCH



showed that Millennials were baptized in smaller numbers than previous generations, despite an increase in infant births nationwide. Zero junior confirmations were reported by 50-65% of congregations 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 the retention of young people in the LCMS. Our 2017 research sought to answer some of these questions and allowed us to provide 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 findings from a specifically LCMS perspective with findings from 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/Generation Z and future generations.

### The 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. Of those surveyed, 184 congregations responded, usually through a pastor or DCE. The survey contained questions about the congregation and specifically the confirmation classes of 2004–2006. Assuming the standard confirmation age of 12–14, these young people would now be in their mid-twenties and thirties. 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. Congregations who had participated in the previous study, as well as LCMS districts, were asked to encourage participation in the survey. A total of 2,046 young adults, with an average age of 24, took the survey. Nearly twice as many women as men (F:66% M:34%) responded. Eighty-eight percent were confirmed between sixth and ninth grade.

The survey took 15-20 minutes to complete 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 the questions for these groups was that those who were inactive or who had left the church were given additional short answer questions.

In our third phase of research, we conducted nine 90-minute focus groups. These focus groups addressed issues of welcoming, leadership, support and diversity. The invitation for attending the focus groups was offered to both active LCMS young adults and those who had left the LCMS. Only those currently active in the LCMS chose to attend. The focus group questions helped give definition and nuance to many data points seen in the first two phases of research.

It is well-known that many in our culture hold views that are opposed to the Bible and the church. In learning 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. 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 Roman Catholic or Orthodox
- Unaffiliated (92) — those who identified themselves as atheists, agnostics, spiritual but not religious (SBNR) with no 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

The third phase of research was designed to give nuance to the first two phases through focus groups. From July to August of 2018, nine young adult focus groups were conducted (some online and some in person) with 39 young adult discussants. These discussions followed a question guide designed by Ken Ohlemeyer, who also trained several different focus group leaders. The topics included focused discussions on subjects such as what young adults look for in a church to be warm and welcoming, what does diversity mean in the context of a church, what do young adults think of the church, and how can the church better engage with young adults. While efforts were made to lead focus groups with those who had left the church, all those who attended these focus groups were active LCMS young adults.

## **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 has shown. The retention rate of young people in the LCMS is consistent with other surveys. One-third of young people confirmed in 2004–2006 were retained in the LCMS into young adulthood. One-third were occasionally at their home congregation, a part of another church body or no longer attend church at all. The whereabouts of the final one-third were unknown to the church leader, or those helping them, who took the survey.

**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 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 when congregations and parents can help a young person find a new church home or establish a new adult relationship with their existing congregation.

Young adults reported that crisis situations were often times when faith and community were deepened or lost. Fifteen percent 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. Nine percent 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. Congregations should work to train and prepare parents 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 without usable records limit their ability to track and minister to members, especially those on the margins. 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 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. Twenty-





three percent 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 worshipping. 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 faith development and retention.**

Parents remain the number one person who impacts the faith lives of young people. Nearly 3 in 4 young adults (72%) listed at least one 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 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. Fifty-seven

percent 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 reported both a higher rate of young adults retained in their home congregation and 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 and changed 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. Also, 38% of Nominal LCMS young adults disagree that homosexual activity is OK while 87% of Active LCMS young adults disagree. Forty-seven percent 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 be a Lutheran Christian. ■

“People stay in the church, in my experience, because of the innate sense of belonging. If you find that you no longer need that stable community, having found it elsewhere, there is not much incentive for members to stay.”

25-year-old female  
Atheist