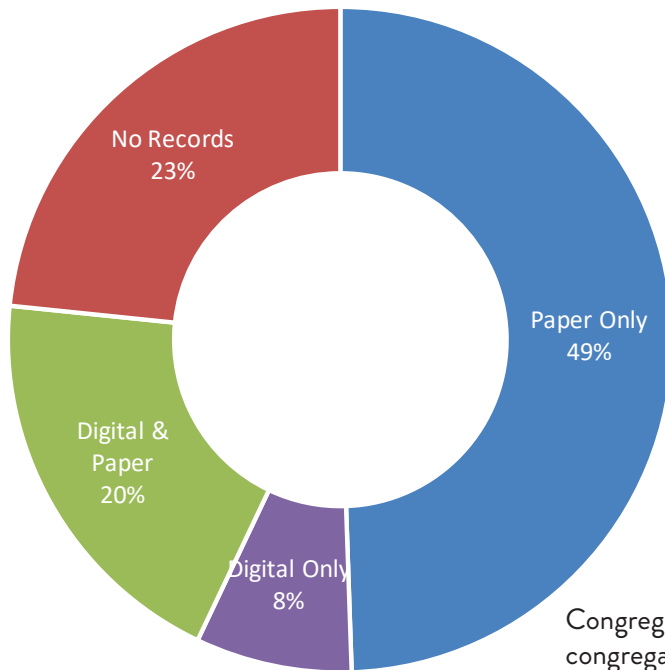




# Unintentional Neglect: KEEPING TRACK OF A GENERATION

*by Dr. Kevin Borchers*

**M**aybe you remember a time from your childhood when you were shopping with one of your parents, either in a store or at a mall. While Mom was busy with her shopping, your childhood sense of curiosity or adventure resulted in you becoming separated from her. Maybe something you wanted caught your attention and you went to check it out, or the center opening of that circular rack full of clothes looked to be the perfect hiding place, as long as you remained silent and still. Before Mom knew it, you were gone. You were just being a child, but in her eyes, you were lost. Panic set in and all attention was focused on finding you and making sure that you were safe and sound.



Congregational Survey's Response to 2004-2006 Record: 70% of congregations have paper records from confirmations in 2004-2006, but nearly a quarter kept no useable records.

*We know we should do a better job of keeping track of where our youth and young adults are after they are confirmed and graduate from high school. We also know we could be more diligent in staying connected with them. However, so many other things get in the way or prevent us from fulfilling our responsibility to tend the flock, and they just slip through the cracks and are gone.*

A similar story involving teens and young adults has unfolded in many churches for decades. Sadly, though, the children being lost are Confirmation age up to young adults, and many are not being found. Our recent research showed that one-third of the young adults between the ages of 24 to 28 who were confirmed in an LCMS congregation continue to actively participate in that same church or another LCMS congregation once they reached adulthood. However, that same research uncovered that nearly 25% of the congregations responding to the survey kept no written records of Confirmations and did not know if the young adults were actively living out their Confirmation vows in an LCMS, or any other, Christian congregation. Not knowing if or where younger members of our congregations participate in the life of the Church in adulthood is a serious spiritual matter for which local congregations can take steps to support.

Responsible parents would never willingly avoid knowing where their 14- to 18-year old daughters or sons are. Not knowing their children's whereabouts would be neglectful. When parents do lose track, it is usually unintentional. In the same way, congregations that lose track of young adults or have no knowledge if or where those young adults are worshiping and living out their faith often do so unintentionally. Their confirmed young people simply slip through the cracks and go missing. No one ever meant for it to happen. It was unintentional. For this reason, we have referred to it as "unintentional neglect," and it's something we can improve upon in our care for God's children.

In Confirmation classes we often talk about sins of commission—the thoughts, words, and actions that

we know go against God's will, and sins of omission—those things that we know are right but we fail to do. Unintentional neglect as we shepherd God's children is like those sins of omission. We know we should do a better job of keeping track of where our youth and young adults are after they are confirmed and graduate from high school. We also know we could be more diligent in staying connected with them. However, so many other things get in the way or prevent us from fulfilling our responsibility to tend the flock, and they just slip through the cracks and are gone. We did not mean for it to happen, but it did. So what do we do about it?

The key is relationships—both building and maintaining them. We need to remember that our connection with them as parents, pastors, DCEs, church staff, and volunteers in our Sunday schools, youth and young adult ministries, and as members of the family of faith in which our sons and daughters grow in years and are formed in the Christian faith does not end when they reach certain milestones. As families of faith, congregations united by Christ in Word and in Sacrament, we can work together, each one called by God to be members of His family, to keep the family connected. This is true whether they are at home or away, living with parents or on their own.

Unintentional neglect is avoidable if we capitalize on the opportunities we are given. Relationships with children, youth, and young adults often begin through some programmatic activity or event sponsored by the church like Sunday school, Confirmation instruction, or youth group. However, those relationships must be nurtured organically, as one would care for a seed planted

in a garden, by making time to connect person-to-person with each daughter, son, and parent. Dedicated time and building trust are required so that we know them and them us. Just as Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27).

Not only do congregations need to build relationships, especially pastors and others directly involved in the professional ministry of the church, but they also need to keep and maintain accurate records. Those in professional ministry can and often do receive Calls to other congregations. Ministry volunteers move elsewhere for various reasons. Clear and accurate records make it possible for replacements, both Called and volunteers, to have the information they need to continue to maintain a congregation’s ministry connection with its sons and daughters. Without such information, they enter into that ministry situation lacking some important information they need for the task of tending the flock.

One way congregations can work to address this issue is by keeping accurate records in a membership database that is regularly audited and up-dated. Contact information for members of each year’s Confirmation class and their families could be included. This general information could be supplemented by maintaining a record of connection with the congregation, which could possibly record the frequency of worship attendance, participation in the Lord’s Supper, and participation in youth ministry or other congregational ministry-related activities. This could provide a means for tracking individuals’ ongoing connection with the congregation.

Once again, personal relationships maintain these connections, but quality record keeping can provide us with reference points to note any changes in those relational connections. Such record keeping practices provide ministry leaders with information that can be utilized to not only better maintain relational ministry connections, but also provide support for ministry transitions, be those changes in Called staff or the transition of the young person to college or another similar move.

Ultimately, the devil and our sinful nature stand behind the unintentional neglect that leads everyone involved to sin. Therefore, let us first repent of our sins and remember the forgiveness won for us by the sacrificial death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on the cross. Let’s remember that it is by His resurrection that we receive newness of life. By His ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit, we are led and enabled to turn from our sins and live the sanctified lives to which He calls us.

We recognize that even the best-kept set of records cannot—and our most intentional efforts are not—guarantee that a young person will remain connected to the Church. That is most assuredly the work of the Holy Spirit. Our work in ministry, whether administrative or relational, has but one purpose: to support God’s work in the lives of our children, brothers, and sisters through His means of grace.

We pray that God would empower and equip us to be more mindful of those whom He has placed in our care. May the Holy Spirit enable us to reverse any tendencies toward unintentional neglect and to be His servants, intentionally called to care. ■

“There is not [an LCMS church] close to where I am currently living/attending school. I emailed a leader of our congregation inquiring of the nearest church and never received a reply. I have also reached out regarding simple things like receiving offering envelopes and never got an answer.”

20-year-old female  
currently attending an ELCA church