

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through a collaborative relationship between the University of Maryland System (School of Social Work and Towson University) and the Delaware-Maryland Synod, ELCA (DE-MD Synod, ELCA), a research study was initiated to assess the opinions and views of Synod rostered leaders and general members regarding the three guiding principles of the Synod's vision statement: evangelism, leadership, and social ministry. More specifically, the study sought to assess opinions about programs and services offered through and/or by the Synod. Another focus of the study was to assess future directions and areas of focus for the Synod as related to the guiding principles in the vision statement. Additionally, rostered leaders were studied to better understand their overall mental health and coping, along with risk for compassion fatigue, burnout, and potential for compassion satisfaction.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge involving faith-based organizations and their congregants because the population studied included representatives from the entire DE-MD Synod, ELCA, defined as all congregations included within the Synod. Researchers typically focus research on one single congregation or several congregations, but rarely engage in a research study with such a large population.

To insure relevance, the researchers worked closely with a Research Advisory Board, comprised of the Bishop and eight members of the DE-MD Synod, ELCA representing both rostered, and lay leaders, as well as Synod Staff and general members from all three Synod clusters. The study was funded through private donations and the researchers were external from the church to increase objectivity.

Data was collected using an online, anonymous survey (paper surveys were available via request) during the summer 2006. Two surveys, one for rostered leaders and one for general members, were designed by the research team with input from the Research Advisory Board. A total of 534 surveys were completed (109 rostered leaders and 425 general members) with representation from all three clusters and 11 conferences of the Synod. While all of the results are informative and worth reviewing, this executive summary highlights the most important findings and recommendations, as determined by the research team and members of the Research Advisory Board.

Overall, both rostered leaders and general members surveyed agreed with the principles set forth in the DE-MD Synod, ELCA vision statement that was adopted five years ago. The researchers recommend that the Synod continue to promote its vision statement and highlight to others within the Synod and ELCA Churchwide that a majority of rostered leaders and general members in this study not only agreed with the statement and its components, but a significant percentage noted a positive change in their congregation in the past five years representing a move from a maintenance-focused church to one that is more mission-focused. While the cause of this change cannot be determined from this survey, a significant proportion of the responses to open-ended questions about this change suggest that congregants have seen congregations focusing more attention to outreach-ministry at different levels (international, national, community, and local), resulting in positive changes.

General members who completed the survey suggested that being the ‘voice of Lutherans’ to the larger community was an important function of the DE-MD Synod, ELCA and should be a focus over the next five years. Researchers recommend that the

Bishop and the Synod review how social stances and Lutheran views can be more effectively communicated and expressed to both Lutherans and members of non-Lutheran communities. Rostered leaders did not rate this as an important function for the Synod and the rationale for the difference is not clear. If general members were inferring that church leaders, in addition to those among the Synod Staff, act as a voice to the larger community, it would be important to further research rostered leaders' views on this leadership role and their comfort with being a voice of the Lutheran community.

Given the DE-MD Synod, ELCA's commitment to increasing diversity within the church and focusing increased attention on multiculturalism over the next five years, there is a need to ascertain additional information from individual congregations regarding why general members are not inviting people who are different from themselves to their congregations. When asked about inviting persons from a different race, of a different sexual orientation, or of a different faith, rostered leaders overwhelmingly reported having done so in the past five years, but general members had not, even though they personally reported they would feel comfortable inviting someone and that their congregation would welcome persons from the above identified categories. Perhaps congregations should evaluate whether or not congregants are inviting *anyone* to their church before interpreting this to mean that congregants are just not inviting persons who are different. Responses to questions regarding the Baltimore Urban Regional Partnership (BURP) were received positively amongst participants who were aware of the program. Unfortunately, most rostered leaders and general members who responded to the study were not aware of the program or its intended benefits for urban churches. The researchers recommend highlighting the positive outcomes reported about BURP as

a way to begin conversations within congregations about programs and initiatives designed to support multiculturalism and diversity.

While it is true that this sample of participants represented an older group who are, for the most part, past the child-bearing and child-rearing age, congregation leaders should recognize the importance of developing and promoting family-friendly programs as a method of attracting new members, and younger members, to the church. Older congregation members can be educated through communication, materials and workshops about how to talk with their younger family members about family-friendly programs affiliated with the Synod and ELCA Churchwide. One of the primary reasons general members listed as having initially attended their current congregation was ‘family members’, therefore, family members are indeed an important factor to consider when trying to attract new members to the church.

While youth ministry was noted as important to both general members and rostered leaders surveyed, when asked about group membership and participation within the DE-MD Synod, ELCA youth ministry programs, only a small number of general members responded participating in such programs. Further, the respondents did not view the overall results for perceived outcomes from the current youth programs positively. It is recommended that along with education about family-friendly programs, the DE-MD Synod, ELCA consider increasing their attention and resources for youth ministry programs. Another related program that was suggested by several participants was a need for young adult ministry programs to engage persons age 18 years to 30 years of age.

With regard to social trends for the DE-MD Synod, ELCA on which to focus over the next five years, it is recommended that the Synod further investigate the different

opinions expressed by rostered leaders and general members. Both groups identified youth ministry as a social trend to focus on; however aging population and church in society were the other two most common responses from general members and health and healthcare and race, ethnicity, and culture were the two most other most common responses from rostered leaders. Certainly, youth ministry is an area for the Synod to focus on over the next five years.

The majority of rostered leaders and general members who responded to this survey reported increasing their personal financial giving over the past five years. Age was not a predictor of giving – the majority of both older (defined as over age 45) and younger (defined as 45 and younger) respondents reported increases in their giving over the past five years. The financial situation of the DE-MD Synod, ELCA and ELCA Churchwide should be more transparent to general members, so they may be more inclined to increase their giving. Respondents reported that they were not always clear with regard to how their offerings were being spent by their congregation, DE-MD Synod, and ELCA Churchwide. General members reported that a primary reason that their giving had increased over the past few years was due to participation in a capital and/or stewardship campaign. Several members noted in the open-ended questions that they were more inclined to give additional money when they knew specifically what it was being used for (i.e. fix the physical building of the church, fund a social ministry program, etc.). While not the traditional way of increasing financial giving, stewardship campaigns and other types of programs that are aimed at raising money for tangible outcomes can be initiated and then transitioned into campaigns for ongoing giving as people gain a better understanding of personal financial giving and the role of God in their lives.

While a number of participants made positive comments regarding conflict resolution in their responses to the open-ended questions, the question regarding how effective the Synod Staff was in helping congregations to resolve a conflict needs further investigation and improvement. Given the significant problems reported by general members surveyed, related to loss of members and clergy within the Synod, this should be a priority in the coming years.

A significant proportion of congregations represented within this study either did not have an active mutual ministry committee or survey respondents did not know if their committee was active. Given the recent problems reported by general members within this study related to conflict between rostered leaders and congregant members, an active mutual ministry committee could be of benefit with regard to conflict resolution. The researchers recommend that committees be established prior to a crisis so members can benefit from having time and experience to know and understand their pastor and develop a more trusting relationship within the congregation.

Overall, the rostered leaders surveyed were doing well with regard to stress, coping, and their overall mental health. This finding should be promoted throughout the Synod as well as to ELCA Churchwide as many researchers suggest that church leaders are becoming more adversely affected by burnout and increased mental health concerns. Rostered leaders in this survey were balancing demands from their work and family life and using positive, and active coping skills to reduce distress related to their call.

In conclusion, this study is one example of how community faith-based groups can successfully partner with university researchers to conduct more objective research, as compared to internal evaluations. With people becoming more advanced in their use of

technology, it was a strength that this survey was completed online with an option to complete the survey via paper. The majority of participants opted to complete the survey online. Finally, results from this study can be used as a baseline for future research within the DE-MD Synod, ELCA, and the results can guide Synod leaders as they plan the future of the church in its quest to become mission-focused.