

A Statistical Comparison of the Wisconsin
Synod: 1970, 1980, 1990...
and financial concern

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During the different decades of the 20th century the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has collided with some telling obstacles only to rebound, by the grace of God, and end up making some significant strides. On that note, one quickly thinks of our Synod and the smooth pace she kept during the 1920's in the face of the depression. James P.

Schaefer explained it this way:

President Brenner shaped the fiscal policies which are still with us today. When he was elected president in 1933, the Synod was deeply in debt and the depression full upon us. Could the Synod remain solvent? was not a trivial question asked at that time. Under his leadership, the Synod pulled itself out of debt and adopted the "balanced budget" policy (don't-borrow-to-pay-the-coal-bill-principle), still the prevailing philosophy. (p. 5)

Yes, the Great Depression was indeed an obstacle but the Lord blessed us with the right people in the right places at the right time in order to pull our Synod together in a nation that had a most difficult time making its own recovery.

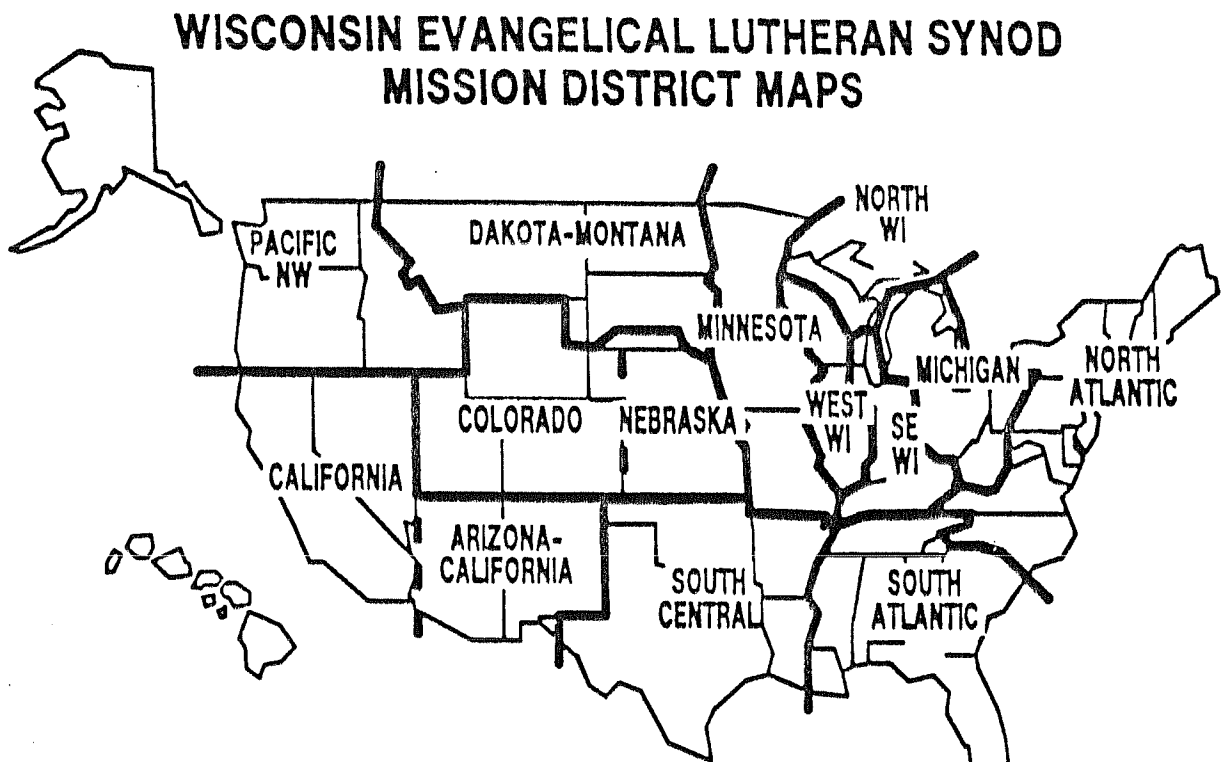
The late 50's and early 60's brought about a devastating blow in the split with the Missouri Synod. Many thought that this division might possibly be too large of a jolt for the WELS to handle. And yet, God's goodness shined through once again. As a matter of fact, in 1976, an entire church history paper was devoted to showing just how well our Synod had fared as she grew from a small midwest cluster of believers to

a nation-wide kingdom under God. (We will hear more about it later)

So, here we are in the 90's. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is about to bump into another one of those nasty obstacles again. Actually we have been scraping against this one for some time but it won't be until the Synod in convention in Aug. 1991, when we might see and feel the crash. This time we face financial troubles. The WELS is a synod where doctrinal purity is maintained by careful and thorough instruction in her worker training schools. Through his gracious Word God has enabled us to continue building our Synod on the foundation of our worker training facilities which are rooted in the inerrant Word. But now we might have to do away with one or more of them due to insufficient funds. What is more, our home and world missions have been slowing down considerably in their opening or expanding new fields due to insufficient funds. What happened to our Synod's treasury? There is no easy answer to that question. However, it is to that point that I will address the latter part of this paper.

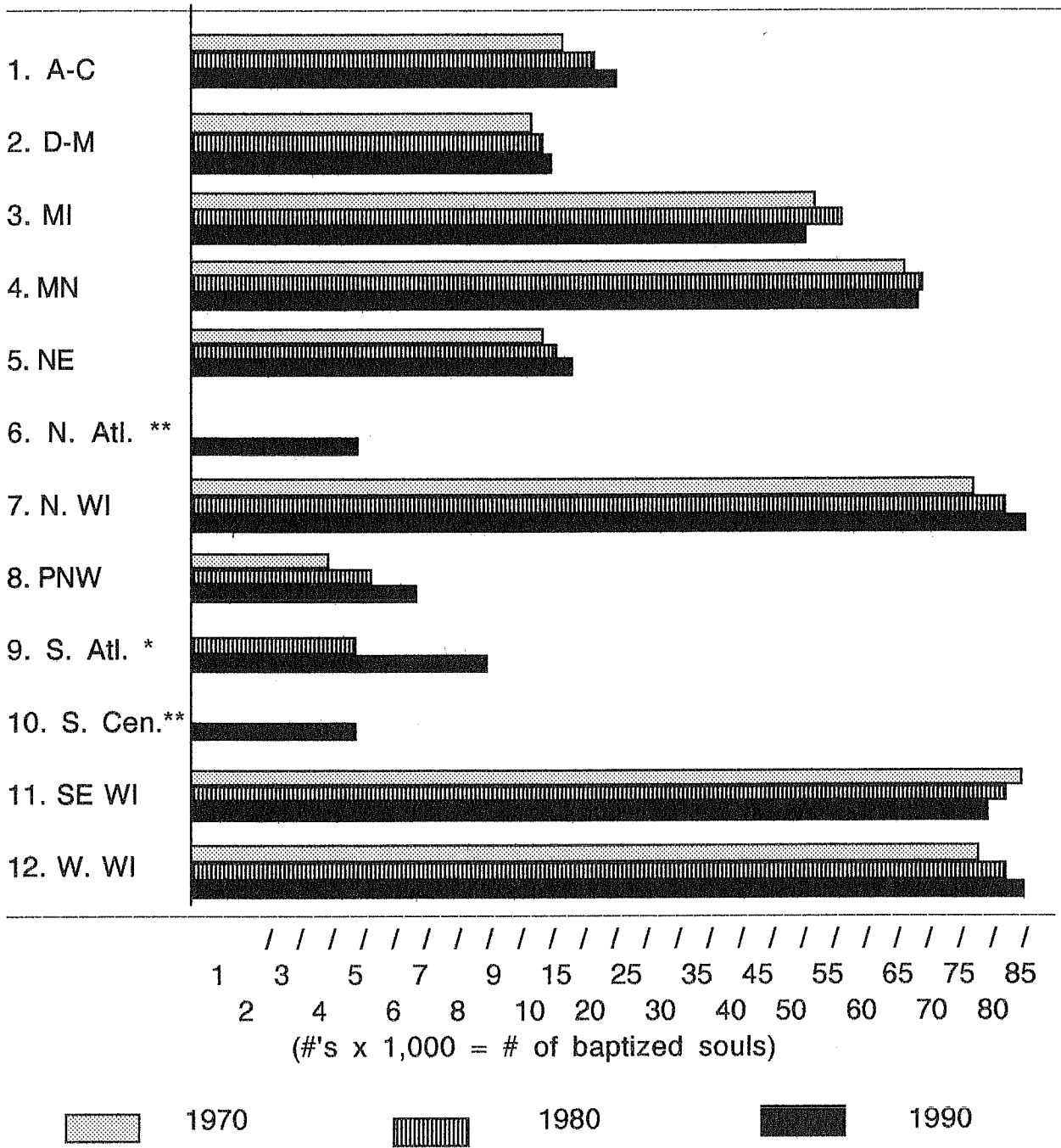
To accomplish the task of showing how difficult it is to put a finger on the reason behind our lack of finances I have compiled statistics and formulated them into a small study. In the past fifteen years the WELS has grown and expanded. One would think that this could only help our

financial growth as well. As was mentioned before, there was a church history paper written on statistical church growth in the past. In May of 1976, Timothy A. Meier wrote a paper on statistics he had compiled from fifteen years prior to his time. His comparative study showed how the WELS was changing in complexion. He shows how God's Word spread to all corners of our nation and into the world during the years 1961-1975. My comparative study will encompass the next fifteen years from 1975-1990. Following the comparisons we will again ask ourselves, "What happened to the Synod treasury?"



BAPTIZED MEMBERS WELS

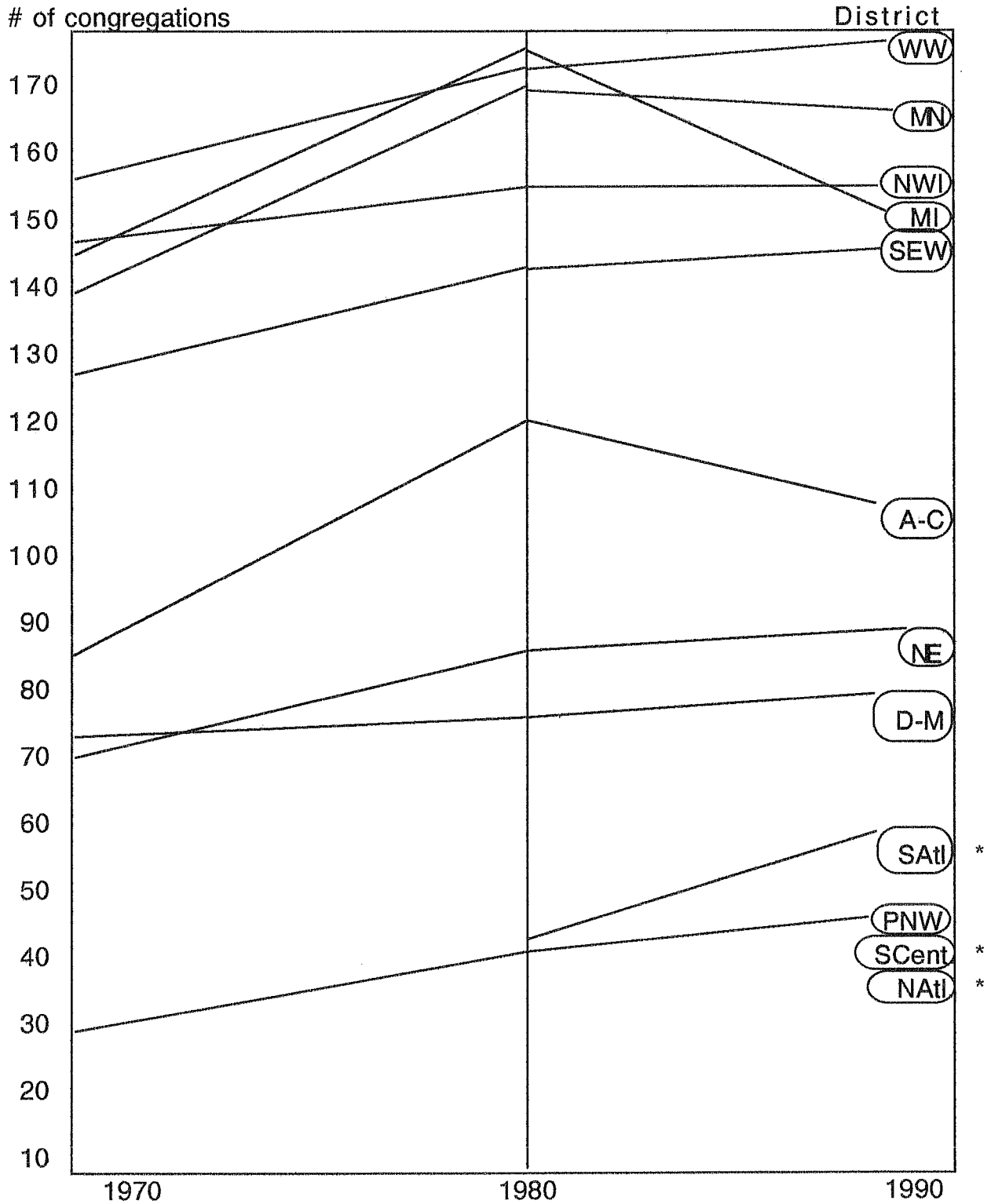
12 Districts



* Not a Distr. in 1970

** Not a Distr. in 1970 or 1980

Congregations in the WELS



* S. Cent. / N. Atl. NOT official districts in '70 and '80. - S. Atl. NOT in '70

As we can see from the two preceding graphs, our Synod has been blessed without question. God carried the WELS across troubled waters in the early 60's. It resulted in the growth of the Synod's membership rolls as well as a significant increase in the number of congregations that were born throughout the United States, not to mention world fields. Nine out of the twelve districts in the Wisconsin Synod increased in baptized membership. This growth increased proportionately, in these cases, during the two decades from 1970 to 1990. During this same time-frame three of those twelve districts were newly formulated to flesh out the eastern and southern portions of our nation. The South Atlantic District entered the Synod followed closely by the North Atlantic and the South Central Districts. (See map on page 3) While these three districts were spreading the Gospel and opening home missions in the 80's, six of the other nine veteran districts experienced an increase in congregational expansion between 1970 and 1990. We, as a Synod, can only thank God for his Spirit-filled Word which has and will continue to enlighten so many souls who will join to praise him in heaven.

What seems to be the concern then? We appear to be growing on all fronts. Yes, all fronts but one... \$\$\$. The dollar sign says it all. Ironic that the one topic which makes more members scowl than any other is the

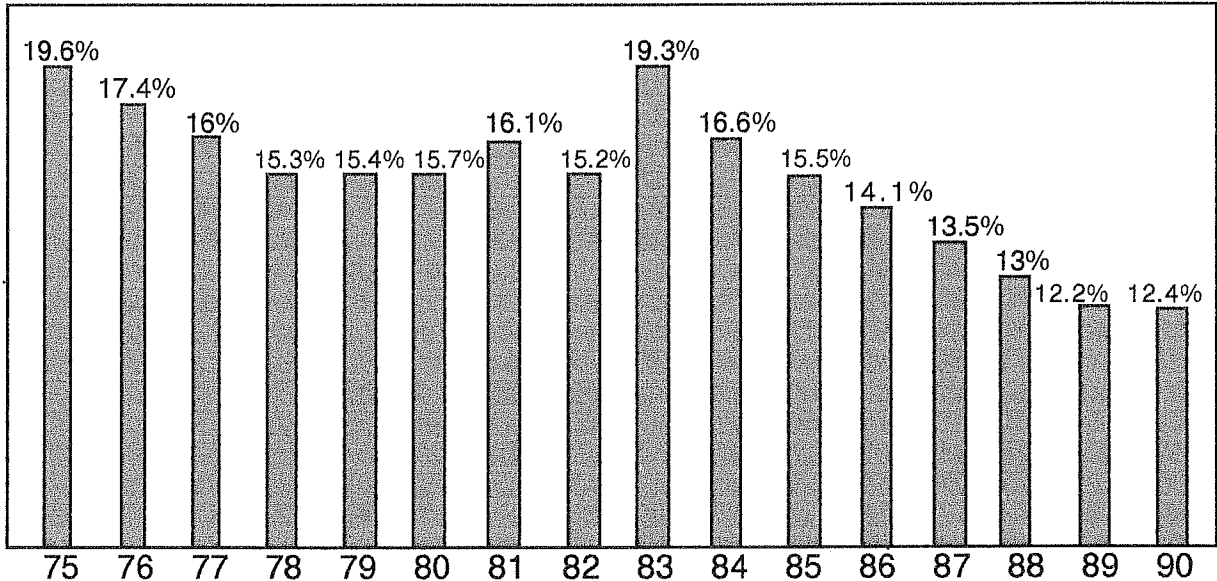
same topic that gives us continual trouble. One would almost think that the law is working on the consciences of sinful people. But then, as it was once said, "For every handful of members complaining about the word 'money heard from the pulpit, there is probably a pastor who abuses the issue of financial stewardship." Whatever the case, let us now turn our attention to more comparative statistics to see how the last fifteen years have gone financially and just what the future might hold for us if we continue in the direction we're going.

KEEPING FUNDS CLOSE TO HOME

Every year a congregation establishes a budget under which it carries out its fiscal planning and spending. One trend that has taken place in our Synod in the past fifteen years is that congregations are budgeting more of their overall contributions for home purposes and less for support of our Synod. For example... let's look at a congregational budget as a loaf of bread. A slice or two is given to the Synod to support the worker training and world mission efforts she provides. But through the years that slice has become smaller and smaller. The actual amount of money hasn't necessarily decreased but, due to inflation, its buying power has. In most cases both the percentage of overall contributions and actual monies given to Synod work have decreased. (See below)

WELS CONGREGATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Portion of the congregational budget subscribed to Synod 1975 - 1990



We're not out of the woods just yet. The fact that the pre-budget subscriptions to Synod are decreasing is compounded by another problem. The congregations, on the average, are not meeting their subscriptions. In other words not only are we "promising" smaller and smaller amounts of money to the Synod but we make matters worse by not giving her what we told her she could count on spending during that year.

In the early 70's we, as a Synod, had a track record of giving more money to Synodical offerings than what we had subscribed.

For example:

<u>1975</u>	<u>Subscription</u>	<u>Offering</u>	<u>Overage</u>	<u>Percentage Performance</u>
	\$7,042,363	\$7,164,252	\$121,889	101.7%

Up until 1980, our people graciously kept up similar percentage performances. Moved by a love for their Lord, congregations out-gave their subscriptions regularly. In 1976, we were blessed by the Lord to return 104.1% of what we had initially promised. Still, in the last ten years ('80-'90) the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction. Unable to meet the figures that were hoped for we have experienced "shortfall" percentage performances in the '80's, the lowest performance turned in at the close of 1983 with the rate of 95%. (See next page for stats) In general, it seems obvious that congregations are keeping a larger percentage of their budgets closer to home.

INFLATION IS NOT HELPING

We have statistically proven that there isn't as great of a percentage of revenue coming into the Synod's coffer as there once was. And yet someone might argue that the dollar amounts have not decreased that significantly. Because of the congregational and member growth in the past twenty years the decrease in percentages has not slowed down the number of dollars coming across Synod's desks. True... but don't forget

BUDGET SUBSCRIPTION PERFORMANCE

<u>Year</u>	<u>Subscriptions</u>	<u>Dollar Increase or (Decrease) Over Previous Year</u>	<u>Percentage Increase or (Decrease) Over Previous Year</u>	<u>Offerings</u>	<u>Dollar Increase or (Decrease)</u>	<u>Percentage Increase or (Decrease)</u>	<u>Overage or (Shortfall) for Year</u>	<u>Percentage Performance</u>
1975	7,042,363			7,164,252			121,889	101.7%
1976	7,511,540	469,177	6.66%	7,816,206	651,954	9.10%	304,666	104.1%
1977	8,247,332	735,792	9.80%	8,220,222	404,016	5.17%	(27,110)	99.7%
1978	8,810,655	563,320	6.83%	9,150,514	930,292	11.32%	339,859	103.9%
1979	9,456,061	645,406	7.33%	9,789,766	639,252	6.99%	333,705	103.5%
1980	10,969,543	1,513,482	16.01%	11,126,049	1,336,283	13.65%	156,506	101.4%
1981	12,233,442	1,263,899	11.52%	12,069,823	943,774	8.48%	(163,619)	98.7%
1982	12,979,993	746,551	6.10%	12,579,992	510,169	4.23%	(400,001)	96.9%
1983	13,468,431	488,438	3.76%	12,798,085	218,093	1.73%	(670,346)	95.0%
1984	13,990,543	522,112	3.88%	13,814,052	1,015,967	7.94%	(176,491)	98.7%
1985	14,341,171	350,628	2.51%	14,100,846	286,794	2.08%	(240,325)	98.3%
1986	14,914,765	573,594	4.00%	14,693,741	592,895	4.20%	(221,024)	98.5%
1987	15,462,639	547,874	3.67%	15,066,307	372,566	2.54%	(396,332)	97.4%
1988	15,834,949	372,310	2.04%					

about inflation! A dollar in 1970, could send a missionary farther and train a seminarian longer than it can in the 1990's. It is relatively simple math to understand that with inflation rising ('70-'87) at an average of 6.46%/year we need to increase Synod giving more than 5.99% during the same time-frame. What does falling behind mean? In the past twenty years inflation has sky-rocketed land and construction costs across the country. Depending of the area of the country, 1970 prices for a 3-4 acre lot cost *approximately* \$25 to \$50,000. In that same county twenty years later (1990) land for church and parsonage construction sells to the tune of *approximately* \$150 to \$200,000! \$50,000 in 1970 was powerful... in 1990 it has been significantly weakened by inflation. If we, as a Synod, don't keep up with inflation rates then we're losing the power to open missions, educate our workers, run our training schools and continue our needed parish programs. Inflation is compounding our financial woes!

PARA-SYNODICAL AGENCIES

Money itself isn't the only element to the question, "What happened to the Synod's treasury?" We would be quite remiss if we blamed our people for their lack of contributing as if that were the sole reason for the decrease in mission monies. Quite frankly, there are just so many more institutions and agencies available for our people to support as they

express their love to the Lord. These agencies are considered "para-synodical" because while they are not a part of the Synod's budget, they strive to accomplish the same goals as does Synod, namely, nurture God's people and reach out to the dying world with the saving Gospel. One concrete example of the increase of these institutions is the growth of the area Lutheran high schools. In 1970, there were seven high schools supported by the people of our synod. Now, twenty years later, there are twenty such high schools which cost our people millions of dollars per year to operate. Similarly, the early '70's saw the opportunity to give funds to a select few projects that needed financial aid. Special ministries and special world mission projects were among them. (ex. language programs, foreign radio or furlough house funds, funds for the hearing or sight impaired etc.) However, modern day projects and needs not funded by Synod are so overwhelming that now a book is published yearly with over 120 major projects that people of our Synod are being asked and encouraged to contribute to. Sin in the world and end times have taken their toll on God's people in a big way. There are countless agencies and institutions needing our help. Still, we must ask ourselves where and how our contributions can *best* send the Gospel out so God's primary work of winning lost souls is accomplished. To say that a

congregation that budgets less money to Synod and more to these projects is NOT doing the Lord's work is a statement that can't be made in good conscience. Only the Lord can judge the hearts of his people.

One question we, as a Synod, must ask ourselves is whether or not we are taking Christ's commission seriously. Are we "going into all the world" with the Gospel? This is one of the primary functions of our Synod which is accomplished on our behalf. We are all personally carrying out Christ's great commission by supporting Synod with our dollars. It is a decent and orderly method of doing home and world mission work. The same is true of the combined efforts of congregations who pool together to support training facilities to put out pastors and teachers to shepherd our churches. For these reasons we maintain a "Synod". It is NOT a political body hovering over its people with a skeptical eye as many believe. It is NOT a religious government who taxes us with its "pre-budget subscriptions" or "Synod Mission Offerings" as many resent. "Christians are gathered into respected congregations, worshiping in respectable churches, and these, again, are united into synods to make an organized attack on heathendom everywhere."(Wacker, p.2) People must realize the true focus and purpose of Synod and *our called workers are responsible to teach them.* Maybe part of our problem is that too many

pastors and teachers have anti-synod attitudes which they conveniently foster among their members. In either case, we would be wise to check our motives behind the budgets we set up. Maybe if we would ask the question that H. Wicke asked in his paper on stewardship of our gifts to Synod...

Are we intent upon building a synod or intent upon adding the work of our hands to the prayer of our lips when we say: "Thy kingdom come"? Are we preaching the Gospel merely to enlarge the organization or are we bringing fruits of faith to bear upon the souls of men, in order that they too may come to the conviction that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses them from sin and makes them fit citizens of heaven? Where is the emphasis, and are your gifts being put to use in the proper way? (p. 1)

CONCLUSION

There have been many different papers written about this very topic. Pastors, teachers and laymen have addressed the issue of Christian stewardship from different angles, always keeping Gospel motivation as the emphasis. Pastor H. Muenkel spoke to the Minnesota District in 1964 and proved that Synod's method of gathering the Lord's offerings made no difference. Whether the Synod prescribed what each member in Synod should give ahead of time (quota system) or congregations prescribed to Synod what they were willing to give her (pre-budget subscription)... the results were the same. "While we are very orthodox and conservative confessional Lutherans, we are still a long way from putting our

pocketbooks where our mouths are!"(Muenkel, p. 6) "The problem?" he concludes, "Our Old Adam."(p. 7) Mark Krueger found the same answer to his question 10 years later when he wondered what the damages of the LCMS split had inflicted on the WELS. "God abundantly blesses... despite the frailties of man."(Krueger, p.11)

And the list of papers seeking solutions goes on and on but the answer is never clear other than that we, the members of the Wisconsin Synod, are sinful. There is never one precise reason why our Synod struggles to keep its head above water financially. A mixture of remedies might work but only if God, who alone can view the heart, were to write the recipe. Until then, we must motivate our people with the pure Gospel message and continually educate them about what our Synod really is and **does**.

In closing, I would just like to review the main thrust of this paper. As a history paper on a small portion of the WELS the facts and figures in the comparison of statistics was of prime concern. Countless hours were spent to compile the numbers of members, congregation and finances. These, in turn, brought about another concern that became evident by looking at the graphs. Certainly our gracious God has pulled our Synod through some sticky situations in the past decades. We hope and pray that his grace and favor will be as abundant in today's financial crisis.

*These were
10/1/08
Mike*

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