

## **Financing Structures of Cooperation: Mission Support in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

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Lutheran congregations in the United States have a long history of joining together for mission. The congregations of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) were organized into districts with a national office. The districts were primarily responsible for exercising “general supervision over clergy, congregations, and conferences” while the national offices were responsible for almost everything else. The responsibilities of the national expression of the ALC at the time of the merger (1988) to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) are described in the names of the various units including the Division for Life and Mission in the Congregation, the Division for Service and Mission in America, the Division for World Mission and Inter-Church Cooperation, the Division for Theological Education and Ministry, the Division for College and University Services, the Office of Communication and Mission Support, the Office for Church in Society, the Office of the ALC Foundation, the Pensions Board and the Publication Board. The congregations of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) were organized into synods that were responsible for a host of cooperative tasks but there was also a national expression of the LCA that was extensively involved in the life of the church. At the time of the merger, it included the Division for Mission in North American, the Division for Parish Services, the Division for Professional Leadership, the Division for World Mission and Ecumenism, the Office for Administration and Finance, the Office for Communication, the Board of American Missions, the Board of Pensions and the Board of Publications.

### TRENDS IN MISSION SUPPORT

The cooperative efforts of congregations from training clergy to global mission to developing resources for worship could not exist without funding (referred to here as “mission support”). Both the ALC and the LCA developed funding systems that were based on member gifts moving through congregations to the other expressions of the church. In the ALC, gifts were given directly to the districts or to the national offices, while in the LCA gifts went through the synods to the national offices. Tracking the flow of these gifts is complicated because of different categorization schemes, but it is possible to consistently group different types of support that were clearly intended for the districts or synods or the national expressions of the ALC and the LCA. These amounts can then be compared to the total amount given to congregations.<sup>1</sup> For example, “total contributions” to the ALC and the LCA in 1963 were slightly over \$302 million while \$19 million was remitted to the ALC budget and to the districts and conferences of the ALC and \$30 million was given to the LCA as “regular benevolence.” This means that 16 percent (\$49 million) of total contributions (\$302 million) were given to support mission of the wider church at the district/synod or the national levels in 1963. In 2000, total contributions to the congregations in ELCA were \$2.1 billion while total “mission support”—the portion remitted

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are based on the annual reports of congregations.

to the synods and churchwide offices of the ELCA—was \$133 million or 6 percent of all contributions. This downward trend in mission support is consistent over the years. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Total Contributions and Mission Support by Year

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<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Contributions</u>	<u>Mission Support</u>	<u>Percent</u>
1963	\$302,074,075	\$48,600,074	16.1%
1964	\$294,611,259	\$51,264,597	17.4%
1965	\$308,307,558	\$52,815,469	17.1%
1966	\$321,697,392	\$54,249,829	16.9%
1967	\$337,515,837	\$54,417,956	16.1%
1968	\$349,879,402	\$54,907,094	15.7%
1969	\$362,119,585	\$55,713,482	15.4%
1970	\$376,109,972	\$57,073,956	15.2%
1971	\$390,788,387	\$57,529,693	14.7%
1972	\$413,071,239	\$59,844,701	14.5%
1973	\$438,074,007	\$62,016,684	14.2%
1974	\$459,476,018	\$63,613,582	13.8%
1975	\$490,054,272	\$66,384,152	13.5%
1976	\$526,899,434	\$69,826,345	13.3%
1977	\$553,027,666	\$72,816,371	13.2%
1978	\$622,730,991	\$77,298,910	12.4%
1979	\$670,191,823	\$80,476,200	12.0%
1980	\$725,097,104	\$86,079,202	11.9%
1981	\$808,599,911	\$92,312,535	11.4%
1982	\$847,653,861	\$97,389,159	11.5%
1983	\$894,429,059	\$101,172,357	11.3%
1984	\$980,580,008	\$107,909,551	11.0%
1985	\$1,005,017,788	\$108,447,177	10.8%
1986	\$1,075,741,231	\$114,952,362	10.7%
1987	\$1,144,023,883	\$115,635,213	10.1%
1988	\$1,198,809,867	\$104,495,699	8.7%
1989	\$1,275,685,416	\$116,446,327	9.1%
1990	\$1,330,103,474	\$118,787,914	8.9%
1991	\$1,380,689,714	\$119,442,903	8.7%
1992	\$1,438,630,805	\$120,235,352	8.4%
1993	\$1,477,799,772	\$118,598,473	8.0%
1994	\$1,528,406,055	\$118,085,199	7.7%
1995	\$1,600,974,034	\$120,299,945	7.5%
1996	\$1,660,289,609	\$120,835,610	7.3%
1997	\$1,766,241,080	\$123,573,865	7.0%
1998	\$1,862,828,567	\$126,910,520	6.8%
1999	\$1,970,494,184	\$130,369,053	6.6%
2000	\$2,088,371,238	\$133,306,390	6.4%

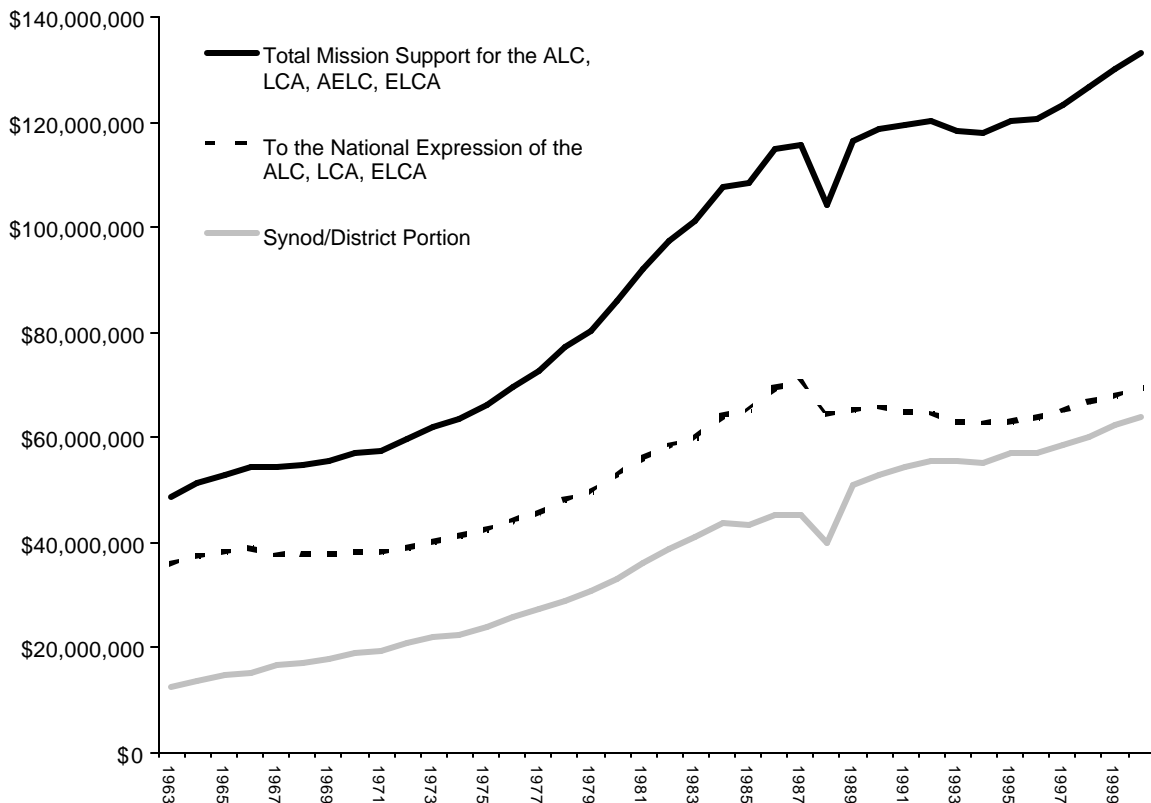
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Source: Yearbooks of the ALC, LCA, and the ELCA.

## THE DISTRIBUTION OF MISSION SUPPORT

Administratively, the ALC districts were smaller and therefore operated at lower costs than the synods of the LCA. ALC activity at the “middle judicatory” level was also more spread out than in the LCA. In 1963, \$17 million of the \$19 million that was remitted for mission support was used by the national divisions of the ALC, while under \$2 million was used at the district level. (This is about a 90/10 split.) During the same year for the LCA, \$30 million was remitted for mission support and \$19 million was used nationally with \$11 million for synodical work (a 60/40 split). In 1988, the synods of the ELCA adopted the structural characteristics of synods in the LCA and the ELCA organized more middle judicatories than in either of the predecessor bodies. In 1990, \$66 million of the \$118 million given for mission support was used nationally and \$52 million was used synodically (a 55/45 split). By 2000, \$133 million was given in total and \$69 million was use by the churchwide organization with \$64 million used synodically (a 52/48 split). In other words, not only has mission support declined as a percent of total giving, but the proportionate distribution has shifted toward the synods. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Total Mission Support, the National and Synod/District Proportion from 1963 to 2000



Source: Yearbooks of the ALC, LCA, and the ELCA.

## MISSION SUPPORT AND CONGREGATIONS

There are 10,816 congregations in the ELCA and they are organized into 65 synods.<sup>2</sup> Each local congregation decides the level of support they will provide for the synodical and national expressions of the church. Support per congregational member is highest in North and South Carolina (\$134 and \$132 per baptized member respectively) and lowest in Eastern and Western North Dakota (\$46 and \$44 per member respectively).<sup>3</sup> The median contribution per congregation is about \$6,800. It is highest in the Grand Canyon Synod at \$15,500 and the Greater Milwaukee Synod at \$14,400 and lowest in the Eastern and Western North Dakota Synods at \$1,800 and \$1,570. Overall, about 50 percent of mission support is provided by about 14 percent of the congregations so that mission support can change dramatically with shifts in the giving patterns of relatively few congregations. (See Appendix 1.)

## HYPOTHESES

In an attempt to better understand the trends in giving, a series of hypotheses were developed with regard to mission support decisions.<sup>4</sup> Most of these hypotheses can not be fully tested with existing data, but it is possible to draw some conclusions.

***One.** Some congregations no longer need the synod or the churchwide organization because they create their own resources, make their own global mission connections, seek out their own pastors, and so on. These congregations are not “mega” congregations, but they are vital and growing. They are exercising some level of independence.*

Congregations can be profiled, using existing data, on criteria that are close to those suggested in the hypothesis. We know if a congregation is growing, whether it has given financial support directly to another congregation (making its own connection), and whether it has created its own Sunday school materials as its total curriculum or to supplement its curriculum. One thousand seven hundred and forty-five congregations grew 10 percent or more in average worship attendance between 1998 and 2000. Of these congregations, 227 also providing financial support directly to another congregation and were using their own Sunday school materials as part of their curriculum.

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<sup>2</sup> These report is based on data for 10,660 congregations with data.

<sup>3</sup> The median household income in North Dakota is \$31,764. For North Carolina the median household income is \$35,320 and for South Carolina it is \$33,325. Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>4</sup> The hypotheses are primarily the work of Mark Moller-Gunderson, but I have taken some liberty with the original versions.

These *self sufficient* congregations represent about 2 percent of all ELCA congregations but they account for about \$5.7 million or 4 percent of mission support. On average, these congregations give double what is given by the other congregations in the ELCA. (See Table 2.) But, in each of the size categories, these congregations are the most prosperous—the biggest with the most resources. As a percent of total giving, they actually give less in mission support (5.7%) than a typical congregation in the ELCA (6.4%).

While in most of the size categories, the *self-sufficient* congregations give more than other congregations in total dollars, in the 501 to 800 average worship attendance category, they give less. The hypothesis suggests that it is the large, but not the largest congregations that are most likely to decide on a level of mission support based on their perception of the value of the exchange *e.g.*, what is given compared to the value of what is received in services and this data provides some support for the thesis at least with regard to this particular size of congregation. At the same time, there are only 28 of these congregations in the ELCA while there are 71 *self-sufficient* congregations in the 801 or more size category and these *self-sufficient* congregations give an average of \$14,000 more than the other congregations in this largest size category. In short, we know that the *self-sufficient* congregations that average 501 to 800 in worship attendance do not perform well with regard to mission support and, as we will see, neither do the very largest ELCA congregations (with average worship of 2,000). But, mission support is very dependent upon the large congregations in the middle—those congregations that worship more than 800 and less than 2000. These 74 congregations in the middle give an average of \$80,595 to mission support and almost every synod is highly dependent upon these gifts. These congregations, 71 of which fall into the *self-sufficient* category, are less than one percent of all ELCA congregations, but they account for nearly five percent of mission support.

Twenty of these *self-sufficient* congregations are among the top five best giving congregations in their respective synods. Thirty-six are among the top 10 in their synods. On the other hand, seven are among the bottom 10 givers to mission support in their synods.

In overall dollars, the *self-sufficient* congregations are critical to the mission support of the ELCA, but proportionally there is room for growth. If all the *self-sufficient* congregations gave at the average 6.4 percent level they would provide an additional \$688,000 for mission support. Much of this room for growth is among the congregations that worship between 501 and 800.

Table 2: *Self-sufficient* Congregations and Mission Support by Average Worship Attendance in 2000

<u>Average Worship Attendance</u>	<u>Congregation Type</u>	<u>Mission Support</u>	<u>Number</u>
* 50 or fewer	<i>self-sufficient</i>	\$3,123	9
	all others	\$2,111	2,274
* 51 to 150	<i>self-sufficient</i>	\$8,864	58
	all others	\$7,333	4,922
151 to 350	<i>self-sufficient</i>	\$19,592	89
* 351 to 500	<i>self-sufficient</i>	\$38,498	33
	all others	\$37,011	412
501 to 800	<i>self-sufficient</i>	\$45,885	28
* 801 or more	<i>self-sufficient</i>	\$90,824	10
	all others	\$76,730	71
* Total	<i>self-sufficient</i>	\$25,327	227
	all others	\$12,196	10,433

Source: Annual Congregational Reports, ELCA.

**Two.** *Very large or “mega” congregations have a long history of independence. They tend to operate autonomously or even form mini-denominations. As a result, mission support from these congregations will be low.*

In religious research circles, *mega* congregations are typically defined as congregations with an average worship attendance of 2000 or more. By this definition there are seven *mega* congregations in the ELCA and six of them are in the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. (See Table 3.)

Table 3: *Mega* Congregations and Mission Support in 2000

<u>Region</u>	<u>Congregation</u>	<u>Average Worship</u>	<u>Total Giving</u>	<u>Mission Support</u>	<u>Total Benevolence</u>
St. Paul	St Andrew's, Mahtomedi	3,015	\$4,015,742	\$0	\$166,908
Minneapolis	Mt. Olivet, Minneapolis	5,910	\$5,180,762	\$150,000	\$232,902
St. Paul	Hosanna, Lakeville	2,500	\$3,825,628	\$61,500	\$474,263
St. Paul	Prince of Peace, Burnsville	4,200	\$3,803,356	\$0 <sup>5</sup>	\$275,518
Minneapolis	Calvary, Golden Valley	2,260	\$3,830,514	\$160,000	\$1,046,834
St. Paul	North Heights, Roseville	3,383	\$6,494,855	\$10,000	\$945,880
Grand Canyon	Community Church of Joy, Glendale, AZ	3,243	\$4,238,582	\$10,500 <sup>6</sup>	\$287,132

Source: Annual Congregational Reports, ELCA.

<sup>5</sup> Mission support rose to \$40,000 in 2001 for Prince of Peace, Burnsville, Minnesota.

<sup>6</sup> Mission support rose to \$65,500 in 2001 for Community Church of Joy, Glendale, Arizona.

The sheer size of these congregations makes them significant in terms of mission support. Nearly 25,000 people worship in these *mega* congregations on a typical Sunday and they account for over \$31 million in total giving. At the same time, the mission support activity of these large congregations is considerably below that of a typical ELCA congregation. These seven congregations, in 2000, gave \$392,000 or 1.2 percent their total giving for mission support. This amount was down from the \$613,795 that was given (4.4% of total giving) in 1990. Only two of the congregations—Hosanna (in the St. Paul Area Synod) and Calvary (in the Minneapolis Area Synod)—gave more to mission support in 2000 than in 1990.

The total benevolence of these congregations, however, is about 11 percent of their total giving. In short, they give, but not for mission support. If their mission support was at the 6.4 percent level, it would total \$2,008,294—an increase of \$1,616,194 above the current level. Nevertheless, with only two of the four mega congregations in the St. Paul Synod providing any mission support, they accounted for 3.2 percent of all mission support given through the synod. In Minneapolis, the two *mega* congregations in the synod account for 8.1 percent of mission support.

The hypothesis is supported. *Mega* congregations give, but they tend not to give to the denomination in the form of mission support.

***Three.*** *Some congregations will feel so strongly about a particular issue that they will take action by withholding, redirecting, or placing mission support dollars in escrow as a protest or in an attempt to influence the actions or decisions of the wider church.*

#### ***WordAlone***

It is possible to gage the impact of particular issues on mission support only to the extent that congregations declare their positions. In the case of *Called to Common Mission* (the ecumenical agreement between the Episcopal Church U.S.A. and the ELCA) some congregations joined together to register their opposition. They formed a loose network called *WordAlone*. As of March, 2002, 278 congregations were listed as congregations with some relationship to *WordAlone*. Of those 278 congregations, 151 gave less in mission support in 2000 than in 1995 and 109 gave more. Eighteen congregations gave the same amount in 2000 as they gave in 1995. Thirty-five congregations gave \$0. Those congregations that gave less in mission support in 2000 than in 1995 gave a total of \$1,042,691 less. Those congregations that gave more in mission support in 2000 than in 1995, gave a total of \$627,166 more. Overall, these congregations gave 4.1 percent of their total giving for mission support in 2000 (2.3% below the typical level). It was 8.2 percent in 1990 (0.2% below the typical level). If these congregations gave at 6.4 percent level of total giving, they would give \$549,000 more in mission support.

Differences in mission support between ELCA congregations that were and were not associated with *WordAlone* are presented below by congregational size in average worship attendance. (See Table 4.)

Table 4: Mission Support for the *WordAlone* Congregations Compared to All Other ELCA Congregations by Size

<u>Average Worship Attendance</u>	<u>Word Alone</u>	<u>Mission Support</u>			<u>Change per year</u>		<u>Congregations</u>
		<u>1990</u>	<u>1995</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>90-95</u>	<u>95-00</u>	
50 or fewer	yes	\$2,003	\$1,615	\$1,094	-\$78	-\$104	56
	no	\$2,362	\$2,217	\$2,140	-\$29	-\$15	2,227
51 to 150	yes	\$6,611	\$5,935	\$4,126	-\$135	-\$362	106
	no	\$7,330	\$7,079	\$7,421	-\$50	\$68	4,874
151 to 350	yes	\$14,516	\$14,161	\$11,625	-\$71	-\$507	71
	no	\$17,812	\$18,782	\$21,353	\$194	\$512	2,254
351 to 500	yes	\$24,159	\$23,147	\$18,428	-\$203	-\$944	16
	no	\$30,017	\$32,740	\$37,819	\$545	\$1,016	429
501 to 800	yes	\$31,534	\$36,925	\$32,471	\$1,078	-\$891	18
	no	\$42,336	\$45,814	\$55,831	\$696	\$2,003	228
801 or more	yes	\$60,891	\$74,819	\$86,364	\$2,786	\$2,309	11
	no	\$60,686	\$64,650	\$77,229	\$793	\$2,516	70
Total	yes	\$12,473	\$12,884	\$11,343	\$82	-\$308	278
	no	\$10,909	\$11,260	\$12,505	\$70	\$249	10,382

Source: Annual Congregational Reports, ELCA.

#### ***Reconciled in Christ***

Lutherans Concerned of North America sponsors a program called *Reconciled in Christ*. The program encourages congregations to adopt an “affirmation of welcome” for gay and lesbian persons and thereby become a “reconciled in Christ” congregation. There are 195 ELCA congregations listed on the Lutherans Concerned website as Reconciled in Christ congregations. Because the ELCA currently maintains a policy that is welcoming to gay and lesbian persons but does not allow for non-celibate gay persons to serve as ordained ministers, the “full” participation of gay and lesbian persons in the church is of considerable debate. Does the continued ban on the ordination of non-celibate gay impact the giving of Reconciled in Christ congregations?

Of the 195 *Reconciled in Christ* congregations, 60 gave less in mission support in 2000 than in 1995 and 122 gave more. Thirteen congregations gave the same as in 1995. Seven congregations gave \$0. Those congregations that gave less in mission support in 2000 than in 1995 gave a total of \$251,565 less. Those congregations that gave more in mission support in 2000 than in 1995, gave a total of \$662,859 more. Overall, these congregations gave 7.9 percent of their total giving for mission support in 2000 (1.5% above the average). It was 9.7 percent in 1990 (1.3% above the average).

Table 5: Mission Support for the *Reconciled In Christ* Congregations Compared to All Other ELCA Congregations by Size

Average Worship <u>Attendance</u>	Reconciled <u>In Christ</u>	Mission Support			Change per year		<u>Congregations</u>
		<u>1990</u>	<u>1995</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>90-95</u>	<u>95-00</u>	
50 or fewer	yes	\$3,947	\$3,563	\$3,443	-\$77	-\$24	33
	no	\$2,330	\$2,181	\$2,095	-\$30	-\$17	2,283
51 to 150	yes	\$9,232	\$9,450	\$10,034	\$44	117	112
	no	\$7,271	\$7,000	\$7,289	-\$54	\$58	4,868
151 to 350	yes	\$25,491	\$27,166	\$30,751	\$335	\$717	42
	no	\$17,597	\$18,520	\$20,933	\$194	\$512	2,625
351 to 500	yes	\$30,521	\$21,294	\$41,554	-\$1,845	\$4,052	5
	no	\$29,798	\$32,521	\$37,071	\$545	\$910	440
501 to 800	yes	\$59,310	\$67,500	\$91,550	\$1,638	\$4,810	2
	no	\$41,400	\$44,981	\$53,815	\$716	\$1,767	244
801 or more	yes	\$142,530	\$154,000	\$185,000	\$2,294	\$6,200	1
	no	\$60,714	\$64,931	\$77,138	\$1,048	\$2,441	80
Total	yes	\$13,582	\$13,956	\$15,922	\$75	\$393	195
	no	\$10,909	\$11,260	\$12,505	\$70	\$232	10,465

Source: Annual Congregational Reports, ELCA.

Overall, the impact of particular issues on the mission support giving of congregations is important but only somewhat predictive because some congregations continue to give despite their differences with the wider expressions of the church.

**Four.** *Small congregations (an average of 50 or less in worship with total giving of \$100,000 or less) that are not growing often struggle to provide the resources for full time clergy leadership. The mission support from these congregations will be low.*

There are 2,005 congregations (19%) in the ELCA that average 50 or less in worship with total giving of \$100,000 or less and have not grown in the last three years. Fifty percent of these congregations are in rural areas and another 21 percent are in towns of less than 10,000. Eight percent are in urban areas of 250,000 or more.

These congregations face difficult times. Average worship attendance has declined by 35 percent from 73 in 1990 to 54 in 2000. Since 1998, worship attendance has declined by 17 percent from 65 to 54. Total giving has increased somewhat from an average of \$49,395 to \$55,551 but mission support has declined from nine percent of total giving to seven percent of total giving. It appears that this decline is because of an increase in the amount of total giving that is required by operating expenses.

In 1990, these congregations gave a total of \$8.3 million for mission support (7.0% of the total), but by 2000 the amount given was at \$7.3 million (5.5% of the total). At the same time, these congregations

give more in mission support as a percent of their total giving than the average for all ELCA congregations.

The hypothesis is supported, yet these congregations still give at higher than average levels and many are maintaining their mission support by using reserves.

*Five. Some congregations set a percentage for mission support and give that percentage despite all other circumstances. These congregations are a significant source of mission support.*

The number of congregations that gave 10 percent or more of their total giving for mission support in both 1990 and 2000 was 1,783. These congregations provided \$38 million (or 29% of all mission support) in 2000. In 1990, they accounted for 27 percent of all mission support. Only a select group of 1001 congregations have given 10 percent or more of their total giving to mission support in every year since 1990. In 2000, this group gave \$24 million or 18% of all mission support.

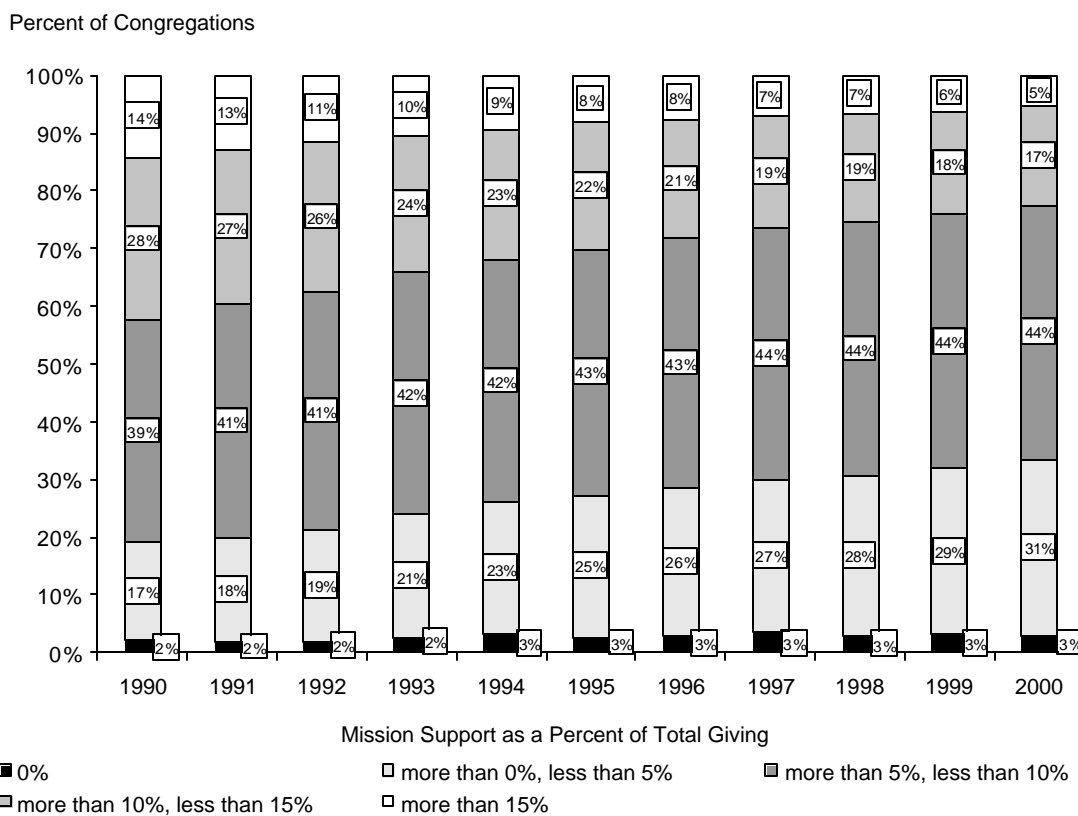
The hypothesis is supported. These congregations are very critical to the funding of mission support.

*Six. Some congregation voice no protest or express no outward discontent with the wider church. At the same time, they appear to be participating less and less including giving less and less for mission support.*

In a very important sense, this hypothesis is true. As noted, the percent of total giving that congregations give for mission support has declined significantly over the years. (See Table 1.) The number of congregations that give more than zero and less than five percent of their total giving for mission support has increased from 17 percent to 31 percent while the number that give more than 10 percent has decreased from 42 percent to 23 percent. (See Figure 2.)

This overall decline in mission support cannot be attributed to either a decline in total giving or a rise in expenses. There has been an increase in operating expenses in the smallest congregations (or a substantial decrease in total giving) so that congregations with 50 or fewer in attendance are spending considerably more than they are receiving in total giving. (See Table 6.) On the other hand, in the congregations with average worship attendance of more than 150, giving has kept pace with expenses or exceeded it while mission support as a percent of total giving has declined.

Figure 2: Percent of Congregations by Percent of Total Giving for Mission Support from 1990 to 2000



Source: Annual Congregational Reports, ELCA.

Table 6: Operating Expenses and Mission Support as a Percent of Total Giving by Congregational Size for 1990 and 2000

Average Worship Attendance	Operating Expenses			Mission Support		
	1990	2000	Change	1990	2000	Change
50 or fewer	100.5%	106.0%	+5.5%	8.2%	6.7%	-1.5%
51 to 150	85.5%	87.0%	+1.5%	9.5%	6.9%	-2.6%
151 to 350	75.0%	74.0%	-1.0%	10.3%	7.5%	-2.8%
351 to 500	71.4%	70.2%	-1.2%	9.6%	6.9%	-2.7%
501 to 800	70.3%	67.3%	-3.0%	9.5%	6.5%	-3.0%
801 or more	71.9%	71.8%	-0.1%	7.9%	4.7%	-3.2%

Source: Annual Congregational Reports, ELCA.

It is precisely because the slide in mission support is so “across the board” (and gradual and persistent) that it is so difficult to explain or counter. If there was one aspect of the “relationship” between congregations and their continued cooperation with the wider church that could be “fixed,” then fixing it would be in order. Instead, the problem appears to be “nothing in particular” and therefore “everything in general.” Whatever the problem is, it began before the existence of the ELCA as a church body and

it has continued throughout its life. The problem also appears to be part of the wider culture. The decline in membership and giving in support of the national denominations in the mainline churches is well documented.<sup>7</sup> Other voluntary based service organizations are also suffering through membership and a decline in support. The Boy Scouts of America, for example, lost 2.4 percent of their membership in the Cub Scout age youth between 1999 and 2000 and 2.0 percent of their membership in the Boy Scout age youth. Membership in the Future Farmers of America declined by 35,000 between the 2000-2001 and 1999-2000 program years.<sup>8</sup>

The complexity of the problem and the fact that it is gradual and persistent is often obscured by the particular issue of the day. The slow decline of mission support at the rate of 0.3 percent per year is undramatic and of no contest when it comes to the immediacy of a debate about an ecumenical agreement like *Called to Common Mission*. Things that are often presumed to matter are actually of little consequence. For example, congregations using Gospel Light resources (a relatively conservative publishing house) as opposed to Augsburg Fortress (the publishing house of the ELCA) for their vacation Bible school gave an average of \$16,567 in mission support which is essentially the same amount given by those using Augsburg Fortress materials (\$16,229). Congregations using Group Publishing gave even more at an average of \$19,974.

At the same time, there is evidence that being more connected matters. The *Initiatives for a New Century* were a major churchwide emphases beginning in 1998. Congregations that reported that had undertaken activities “which are in direct response” to the *Initiatives* gave more money for mission support. (See Table 7.) More *Initiative* activity was also correlated with slightly higher levels of mission support.

Table 7: Participation in the *Initiatives* and Mission Support by Congregational Size

Average Worship Attendance	Initiative Activity			
	0 years	1 year	2 Years	3 Years
50 or fewer	\$2,016 (1,876)	\$2,436 (275)	\$2,655 (97)	\$3,363 (35)
51 to 150	\$6,929 (3,267)	\$8,069 (975)	\$8,302 (499)	\$8,197 (239)
151 to 350	\$20,021 (1,490)	\$21,353 (596)	\$23,397 (342)	\$23,620 (197)
351 to 500	\$34,423 (225)	\$39,885 (114)	\$39,565 (71)	\$40,506 (35)
501 to 800	\$48,385 (139)	\$58,444 (57)	\$59,165 (27)	\$72,154 (23)
801 or more	\$67,752 (48)	\$109,540 (16)	\$72,852 (11)	\$91,658 (6)

Source: Annual Congregational Reports, ELCA.

<sup>7</sup> See *Church and Denominational Growth* edited by David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway, Abindon, Nashville, 1993; and *Money Matters* by Dean R. Hoge, et al., Westminster John Knox, Louisville, Kentucky, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.scouting.org/excomm/00annual/11.html> or [http://www.ffa.org/about\\_ffa/membershipinfo/html/yeartodate.html](http://www.ffa.org/about_ffa/membershipinfo/html/yeartodate.html).

*Seven. Congregations that are growing that see strong support of the wider church as central to their definition of the church will give more.*

We simply do not have enough information to test this hypotheses. It is possible to note, however, that gains in mission support are most likely to occur in congregations with no gain or a loss in average worship attendance. (See Table 8.)

Table 8: The Number of Congregations by Percent Change in Average Worship Attendance and Percent Change in Mission Support between 1998 and 2000

Percent Change in Mission Support	Percent Change in Average Worship Attendance							
	no gain or loss		gain up to 5%		5 to 10%		gain of 10% or more	
no gain or loss	2.5%	(98)	3.0%	(118)	0.3%	(12)	1.3%	(51)
gain up to 5%	30.5%	(1,183)	28.9%	(1,121)	8.3%	(322)	14.3%	(554)
gain of 5% to 10%	43.6%	(1,686)	44.1%	(1,709)	11.2%	(433)	18.6%	(721)
gain of 10% to 15%	17.3%	(671)	18.2%	(707)	4.4%	(172)	5.7%	(220)
gain of 15% or more	6.1%	(237)	5.8%	(219)	1.0%	(40)	1.4%	(56)
Total	100.0%	(3,875)	100.0%	(3,874)	100.0%	(979)	100.0%	(1,602)

Source: Annual Congregational Reports, ELCA.

*Eight. Congregations that are adversely affected by local economic factors will give less in mission support.*

While individual congregations are no doubt impacted by local economic factors, it is difficult to confirm this hypothesis with the data at hand. Most of the economic data reported by the federal government is reported at the county or state level. It is possible to aggregate the congregational data—both mission support and average worship attendance—so that we can establish a county level of mission support per average worship attender. This per capita amount can then be compared to per capita income at the county level and observed over time. (See Table 9.)

Table 9: Correlation Coefficients between Per capita Change in Mission Support and Per capita Change in Income between 1990 and 1999 by County\*

Per capita Mission Support with Per capita Income	Pearson's r	Significance	Counties
All counties with ELCA congregations	-.02	.47	1,653
North Dakota	.03	.82	52
South Dakota	.18	.19	54
Minnesota	.08	.94	87

\* includes only the 1,653 counties where an ELCA congregation was present in both 1990 and 1999.

Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, Department of Commerce and the Annual Congregational Reports of the ELCA.

The correlation coefficients are all very low and statistically insignificant. In other words, there is no consistent pattern between county changes in per capita income and changes in per capita mission support. This suggests that local economic factors balance out particularly when the unit of analysis is the county and it is likely that the impact would be even less in larger geographic territories such as synods. Some congregations suffer from economic downturns, but other congregations are just as likely to go unaffected.

The hypothesis is not supported.

## CONCLUSIONS

Mission support as a percent of total giving has declined consistently and substantially over the years. In addition to this decline, the proportional distribution of mission support between the synods/districts and the national offices has moved toward the synods.

Of the various hypotheses developed to account for decline in mission support, several clearly explain more variation than others.

1. Growing congregations that make their own connections and create their own resources are critical to the mission support of the ELCA. The mission support decisions of these *self-sufficient* congregations varies by size, however. *Self-sufficient* congregations with 801 or more in average worship attendance give considerably more in mission support than those congregations that are not in this *self-sufficient* category. But, congregations with between 501 and 800 in average worship attendance give considerably less. If all the *self-sufficient* congregations gave at the average 6.4 percent level they would provide an additional \$688,000 for mission support. Much of this room for growth is among the congregations that worship between 501 and 800.
2. *Mega* congregations (2000 or more in average worship) give, but they tend not to give to the denomination in the form of mission support. If their mission support was at the 6.4 percent level, it would total \$2,008,294—an increase of \$1,616,194 above the current level. Nevertheless, with only two of the four mega congregations in the St. Paul Synod providing any mission support, they accounted for 3.2 percent of all mission support given through the synod. In Minneapolis, the two *mega* congregations in the synod account for 8.1 percent of mission support.
3. With *WordAlone* and *Reconciled in Christ* congregations representing “issue” driven congregations, the complexities of the hypothesis becomes clear. Overall, the *WordAlone* congregations gave 4.1 percent of their total giving for mission support in 2000 (2.3% below the typical level). In 1990, they gave 8.2 percent (0.2% below the typical level). If the *WordAlone* congregations gave at 6.4 percent level of total giving, they would give \$549,000 more in mission support.

The *Reconciled in Christ* congregations gave 7.9 percent of their total giving for mission support in 2000 (1.5% above the average). It was 9.7 percent in 1990 (1.3% above the average).

4. There are 2,005 congregations (19%) in the ELCA that average 50 or less in worship with total giving of \$100,000 or less and have not grown in the last three years. Fifty percent of these congregations are in rural areas and another 21 percent are in towns of less than 10,000. Eight percent are in urban areas of 250,000 or more. These congregations face difficult times. In 1990, these congregations gave a total of \$8.3 million for mission support (7.0% of the total), but by 2000 the amount given was at \$7.3 million (5.5% of the total). At the same time, these congregations give more in mission support as a percent of their total giving than the average for all ELCA congregations.
5. The number of congregations that gave 10 percent or more of their total giving for mission support in both 1990 and 2000 was 1,783. These congregations provided \$38 million (or 29% of all mission support) in 2000. In 1990, they accounted for 27 percent of all mission support. Only a select group of 1001 congregations have given 10 percent or more of their total giving to mission support in every year since 1990. In 2000, this group gave \$24 million or 18% of all mission support.
6. The hypothesis that some congregations voice no protest or express no outward discontent with the wider church while at the same time appear to be participating less and less including giving less and less for mission support is the strongest and most telling hypothesis. The decline in the level of mission support is widespread and across the board. It is gradual and persistent which is precisely why it is so difficult to explain or counter. If there was one aspect of the relationship between congregations and their continued cooperation with the wider church that could be “fixed,” then fixing it would be in order. Instead, the problem is “nothing in particular” and therefore “everything in general.” It began before the existence of the ELCA as a church body and it has continued throughout its life. It is part of the wider culture and the culture of this church. It occurs at a constant rate of about 0.3 percent per year and this rate has remained unchanged from at least 1963.
7. The hypothesis states that growing congregations that see strong support of the wider church as central to their definition of the church will give more. We simply do not have enough information to test this hypotheses. It is possible to note, however, that there are 276 congregations that grew 10 percent or more in average worship attendance between 1998 and 2000 churches that also gave 10 percent or more of their total giving for mission support. These congregations account for 17 percent of the congregations that grew 10 percent or more and 2.7 percent of all congregations.
8. While individual congregations are no doubt impacted by local economic factors, it is difficult to confirm the hypothesis that these local economic factors have a significant impact on mission support. The scant evidence we have suggests that local economic factors balance out particularly

when the unit of analysis is the county (and the impact would be even less when the area of geography grows larger as with synods). Some congregations suffer from economic downturns, but other congregations are just as likely to go unaffected.