



For Lutheran Church of the Cross in Berkeley, Calif., to grow, Cary Bass-Deschenes, its pastor, would like to see more lay-led initiatives and more lay involvement in worship.

## Small congregations share strengths, struggles

By Karris Golden

When Thomas Batterman retired from full-time parish ministry, he began serving as a supply pastor in the Dayton, Ohio, area. The call often takes him to serve small congregations in crisis. It has been an eye-opener for him: “Out here, the future of the local congregation looks bleak.”

By “out here,” Batterman is referring in part to the isolation such ELCA members sometimes feel. “They don’t feel connected to the national church because the national church isn’t talking about the problems they face,” he said. “Diversity is worthwhile ... but to some of these small congregations, diversity is someone under 50—or a family with children walking in.”

These small congregations grapple with aging and dwindling membership, decreased giving, maintaining expensive infrastructure and a leadership vacuum. Of particular concern is staffing—some can’t afford a full-time pastor and can’t find a part-time one. Stressed budgets mean some church buildings are only open for weekly worship services.

According to ELCA Research and Evaluation, there are correlations between declining worship

**104**  
Average number of worship attendees  
at an ELCA congregation.

**50**  
Highest number of worship attendees  
at a “small” congregation.

**37.6**  
Percentage of ELCA congregations with  
50 or fewer worship attendees.

**31**  
Average number of worship attendees  
per small congregation.

*Source: ELCA Research and Evaluation*

attendance, giving shortfalls and staffing costs in small congregations. While the number of ELCA congregations declined between 2010 and 2015 from 10,008 to 9,326, the number of congregations that can’t fund a full-time pastor remained above 2,000—which is projected to grow.

Nearly a third of ELCA congregations don’t have and/or can’t afford a full-time pastor. They employ temporary solutions, such as fill-ins from other churches and retired pastors like Batterman.

### The problem with buildings

These issues exist in both rural and urban settings, said Cary Bass-Deschenes, pastor of Lutheran Church of the Cross in Berkeley, Calif.

An average of 38 people attend weekly worship services at Cross. “Most of the members here weren’t raised Lutheran,” he said. “We’re not very affluent. Some of our members are homeless, and some have been homeless.”

Cross earns rental income by sharing space with a Finnish congregation, a teen shelter and more than two dozen 12-step program meetings.

But Bass-Deschenes believes low attendance, building maintenance and other budget strains could eventually take their toll. Without changes, his full-time position won't likely be sustainable.

"For the church to continue on and grow ... I'd like to have more lay-led initiatives and more lay involvement with worship," he said.

Similar challenges exist at Church of the Abiding Savior in Durham, N.C., which averages 39 people at worship services. In recent years the congregation experienced a sharp decline in giving and worship attendance. More than half the members left.

Remaining members pursued new life as a "renewing congregation" with a grant from the churchwide organization as part of the ELCA's strategy to revitalize flagging congregations (see page 22).

Timothy Taylor became full-time pastor of the struggling congregation in May. "We're standing up again and learning how to be the church," he said. "Our purpose is to specifically regrow the church where it is planted."

The struggles of a small congregation aren't easy, Taylor added. Members want to draw new people, support youth programs, develop outreach initiatives and more. They often seek to retain some of the congregation's history and heritage. "We fall in love with our buildings," he said. "I'll ask, 'If the building burns down, will the church cease to exist?' If the answer is 'yes,' it's time to think differently."

Taylor is working with members to create a strategic growth plan. What he tells Abiding Savior's members applies to anyone, he said.

He often asks, "Why in God's name are you here in this place?" Look elsewhere for a "social club," he adds, because the church is a place to do God's work in the community.

### Committed to mission

Despite its size, St. Paul Lutheran, a small congregation in Cedar Falls, Iowa, balances its budget and gives generously to a variety of local, national and international causes. The congregation sees it this way: they own a mission of service and outreach, said member Sofie Michalicek.

Many members are in their 90s and weekly worship attendance hovers at 40—fewer when snowbirds go to Texas and Florida for the winter. For more than a decade, St. Paul has been served by a part-time pastor and Sunday organist.

"I believe what has helped us over the years is that we live within our means, on a modest budget," Michalicek said. Members pitch in to cover cleaning and maintenance.

Still, while ministry and mission bear fruit, Michalicek worries that St. Paul may be "surviving," not "growing." Membership has alternated between a plateau and slight decline over the past decade.

Growth is possible. With a median age of 34, Cedar Falls is a university town and part of an urban area.

"Our membership continues to age, and we don't have many new members coming to fill the pews," Michalicek said. "I'm afraid we'll continue in that way."

At age 33, she is a noticeable exception. The lifelong member even served two terms as council president during her early 20s. St. Paul is a home to her, and she believes fellow members feel the same.

"Our church building is important to us. It's nothing extra fancy," she said. "It would be hard to imagine getting ready for church and not going there. But if we lost our building, for whatever reason, there would be sadness, and we'd find a way to go on together somewhere else."



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