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Statistical contemplation

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During January, WELS congregations participate in an annual census. Through their pastors and elected leaders, congregations submit statistics for inclusion in the WELS Statistical Report. The report includes items like baptized and communicant membership, average worship attendance, and number of confirmations (both children and adult) during the year.

The WELS Statistical Report will never climb to the top of the *New York Times'* best sellers list; no one will turn its pages as if it were a novel filled with interesting characters and compelling plot twists. Yet statistical reports are worth reading. More important, the statistics are worth contemplating.

The Lord had contemplation in mind when he directed Moses to prepare a statistical report of the people of Israel after they left Egypt. Specifically, the Lord wanted Moses and the leaders of Israel to count the men 20 or older who were fit for military service (Numbers chapter 1). They identified 603,550 men fitting that bill, suggesting an overall population in the neighborhood of 2 million.

As they contemplated the statistics, the people of Israel couldn't help but draw some conclusions. First, God had richly blessed them. Only a small group of 70 had moved with Jacob to Egypt 430 years earlier. In spite of the Egyptians' brutal oppression, the people of Israel had multiplied. Second, God always keeps his promises, even when it seems impossible. He had, as promised, made childless Abram into a great nation.

That's the way to contemplate congregational statistics. We note with thanksgiving the blessings God grants in the year past, giving him all the credit. We do so even if the blessings aren't the specific ones we wanted to see. We thank God for those he led to be in worship each week and for the people he added to our number. We give him thanks for keeping his promise to strengthen his people in faith through Word and sacrament.

Contemplation of congregational statistics also can be helpful when it leads people to assess the ministry being carried out. Please don't misunderstand. Statistics are only statistics. God doesn't call his people to specific results when they proclaim his Word. He doesn't insist, for example, that they must increase congregational membership or Bible study attendance by 10 percent or face his judgment. The Lord does, however, call for faithfulness. He desires activity. He asks for effort. He wants his people to offer their very best. Sometimes statistics move leaders to ask important questions about activity: "What are we doing to reach the people in our community without a church home? What are we doing to serve those on the membership rolls who have wandered away?"

Ask those questions seriously and there will likely be reason to repent. We may need to confess laziness, because we've done only the bare minimum. We may have to acknowledge to God and our fellow believers that we filled our schedules with busywork instead of focusing on the important work of reaching people with the good news. We may have to admit that we haven't given much thought to improving the ways we serve people with God's Word.

Our value does not rise or fall on the basis of our accomplishments or our shortcomings. Thank God! God has declared us valuable because of what he has done for us in Christ, not because of what we have done for him. Knowing the Lord's unconditional love for us and his unbreakable promise to bless our labors in his name, we can make aggressive ministry plans, focused on activity and improvement. We can use his gifts faithfully and then watch him do what he always does—bless!

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