

# Being Lutheran: The Next 500 Years

Rev. Dr. Matthew Richard

There is no doubt that the Lutheran Reformation has had a tremendous influence on the Church, the economy, and world affairs for the last 500 years. However, what does the Reformation hold for us in the next 500 years?

By only looking at the Lutheran church's decline in America, it might be easy to conclude that she will not survive the next 500 years. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) has lost over 1.2 million members and over 1,500 churches since its beginning in 1988 (about a 23 percent decline). And, though not as drastic as the ELCA, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has also lost members, especially since the early 2000s.

But do not let the loss of numbers deceive you into thinking that the Reformation has somehow become irrelevant. You see, the losses in numbers in the ELCA are primarily due to liberal decisions within the church body regarding its support of things such as same-sex marriage. But what of the LCMS? The main reason for the decline in the LCMS is attributed to a decrease in the number of babies. Yes, LCMS Lutherans are having fewer children than they once did (down 70% percent from the 1950s). To the point: It is misleading to believe that the reason for the decline in the Lutheran church is due to a deficiency in theology or a problem in the church's liturgy. That is to say, the decline is *not* due to the Lutheran church's not being hip enough or contemporary enough. Rather, the primary reason for the membership decrease in the Lutheran church in America is due to abandoning our theology (i.e., the ELCA) and simply having fewer babies (i.e., the LCMS).



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**Southeast Circuit, North Dakota District**

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So what can we expect over the next 500 years for the Lutheran church? Though I cannot predict the future, it is encouraging that recent research shows that younger adults are now craving and yearning for churches with a clear, robust theology combined with the ancient liturgy – churches like the LCMS. David Kinaman, in his book *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church... and Rethinking Faith*, states, “After countless interviews and conversations, I am convinced that historic and traditional practices, and orthodox and wisdom-laden ways of believing, are what the next generation really needs.” We hear these sentiments echoed by other authors as well. Gracy Olmstead, in her book *Why Millennials Long for Liturgy*, writes, “The millennial generation is seeking a holistic, honest, yet mysterious truth that their current [contemporary] churches cannot provide. [...] Protestant churches that want to preserve their youth membership may have to develop a greater openness toward the treasures of the past.”

What does this mean? It means that the historic church of the Lutheran Confessions, with its rich and clear theology combined with the historic and sacred liturgy, is positioned quite well for the next 500 years. In fact, while there is a temptation for the Church to try to look relevant through superficial worship practices, we can know that our traditional practices (i.e., *Lutheran Service Book*) are what the next generation needs. While there is a temptation to adopt liberal theology (supposedly to keep up with the ideologies of our culture), we can know that the “wisdom-laden ways of believing” (i.e., *Book of Concord*) are what the next 500 years need.

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