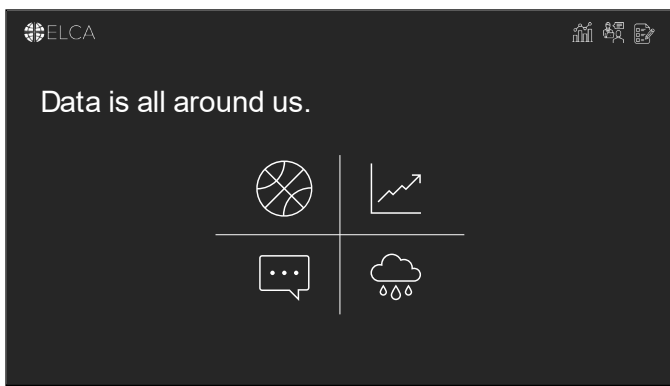


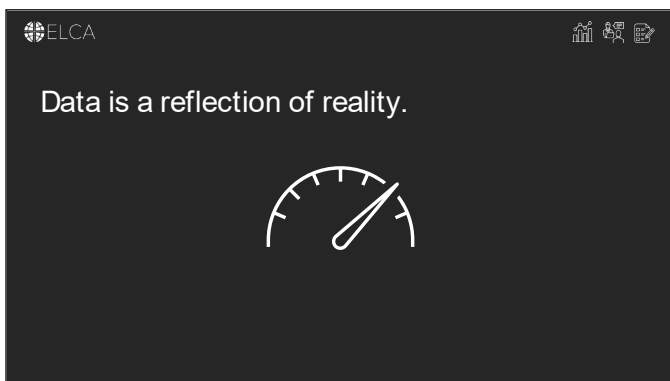
The work of Research and Evaluation centers on collaboration and the respect for the knowledge and perspectives of others. We are eager to listen and learn because we believe that everyone makes a valuable contribution by sharing their experiences. We also believe that everyone, including us, always has something to learn.

One of the ways we do that listening is through the collection and interpretation of data. Before we talk specifically about trends in congregations, synods, or across the ELCA as a whole, I want to take a step back and spend a few minutes talking about data itself: what it is, what it is not, and how we can use it most effectively.



Most of us encounter data every single day, whether we realize it or not. Common in the news right now are statistics about inflation and unemployment. Weather forecasts predict the chance of sun, clouds, and rain. Friends tell us their experiences with a vacation destination. And when the season is right, some of us follow the field goal percentages of local college basketball teams, always wishing they were just a little bit higher. In all these cases, we are trying to better understand the reality of the world around us.

But here's the important thing. None of us will ever have a perfect understanding of the reality around us, because we are limited. Data serve as a reflection of reality and through research, we gain access to a view of reality.



Let me offer a simple example. Think about the air in the room around you. It has a real temperature. But you cannot know that temperature just by looking at the room.

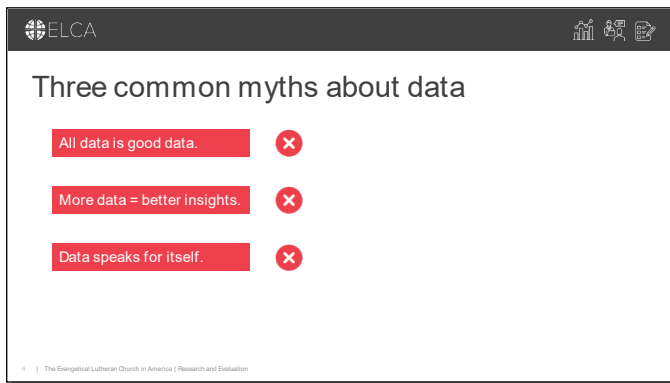
You might estimate it based on how it feels, but to understand it more accurately, you need a tool like a thermometer.

Even then, the thermometer reading is not the temperature itself. It is a measurement—a reflection

of reality.

The same is true of survey responses, interview transcripts, attendance figures, demographic data, and financial reports. These things help us understand reality more clearly, but they are not reality itself.

That distinction matters, because it shapes how we approach research and data interpretation, as well as the limitations of each.



I want to share a few myths about data that show up frequently in organizations, including the church, that point out these distinctions.

#### *Myth #1: All Data Is Good Data*

The reality is that not all data is high quality.

Good data depends on good methods, thoughtful questions, trustworthy collection processes, and careful interpretation.

For example, if we conducted a survey and received 1,000 responses, we might initially be thrilled. But if we later discovered that many of those responses came from a bot farm (which is a real thing) as opposed to from real people, the results would suddenly become much less meaningful.

All data reflects reality. Good data provides the clearest reflection. That's why we care deeply about how we collect and interpret information.

#### *Myth #2: More Data Always Leads to Better Insights*

In reality, more data does not automatically create clarity. In fact, sometimes more data creates confusion.

When organizations collect information without a clear purpose or question in mind, or without a plan for how they intend to use it, they often end up with what people call "analysis paralysis," where there is so much information that making a decision from the data actually becomes harder.

Good research begins with good questions. When we know what we are trying to understand, the connection between the data we collect and how we use it is clear.

#### *Myth #3: Data Speaks for Itself*

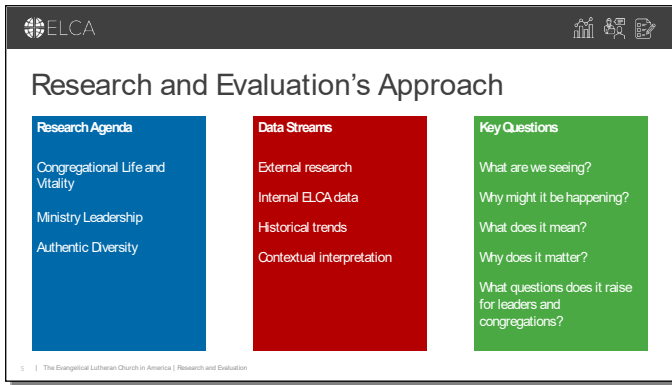
This one is tougher, because this refrain gets tossed around so often.

The reality is that data is passive. It doesn't say or suggest anything. Human beings interpret it.

Part of the work of research is identifying patterns, comparing data across contexts, thinking about a variety of explanations for what we are seeing, and asking what the findings might mean.

Sometimes data confirms things we have sensed anecdotally. Other times it challenges assumptions we previously believed were true.

In order to understand what data means and how it can be used, it needs to be interpreted.



That philosophy shapes how we approach research in the ELCA.

The work of Research and Evaluation generally falls into three broad areas:

- congregational life and vitality,
- ministry leadership,
- and authentic diversity.

Some of our projects are ongoing constitutional responsibilities, like the Annual Congregation Report and Pulse Surveys. Others emerge through partnerships with synods, churchwide units, and ministry leaders who are trying to better understand questions facing the church.

But regardless of the topic, our role is usually the same: to help the church make sense of where it has been, where it is now, and how it is changing.

We do that by bringing together a variety of data streams, from:

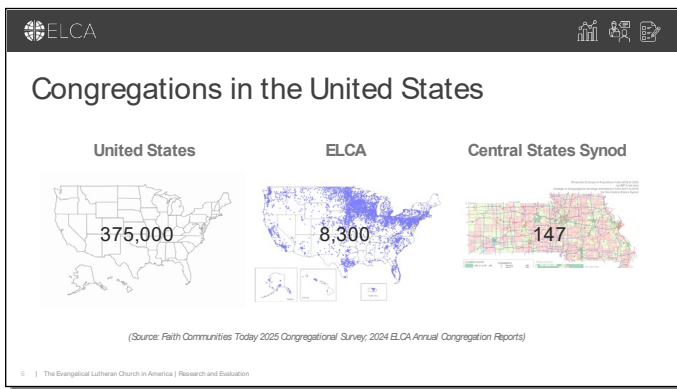
- external research, to
- internal church data, to
- historical trends,
- and contextual interpretation.

And perhaps most importantly, we try to move beyond simply reporting numbers.

With the help of research partners and colleagues, we try to answer the questions:

- What are we seeing?
- Why might it be happening?
- What does it mean?
- Why does it matter?
- And what questions does it raise for leaders and congregations?

Let me give you one example of what that process looks like. One question we often hear is: “What does congregational life look like right now?”

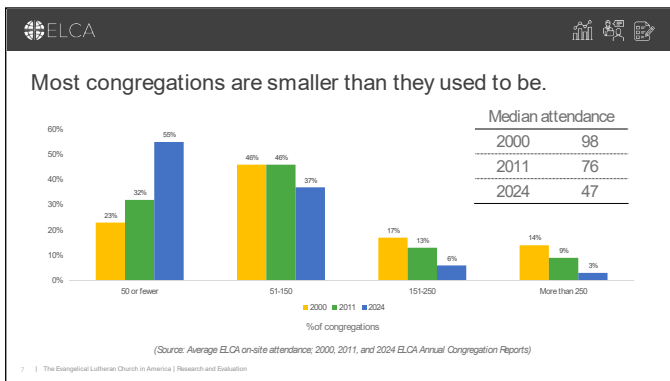


To answer that question well, we need to look not only at ELCA data, but also at the broader religious landscape. Research from Faith Communities Today—which studies congregations and worshiping communities across religious traditions in the United States—helps us situate ourselves in the broader religious context.

There are approximately 375,000 congregations and worshiping communities in the United States across a variety of faith traditions. Roughly 8,300 of these (or

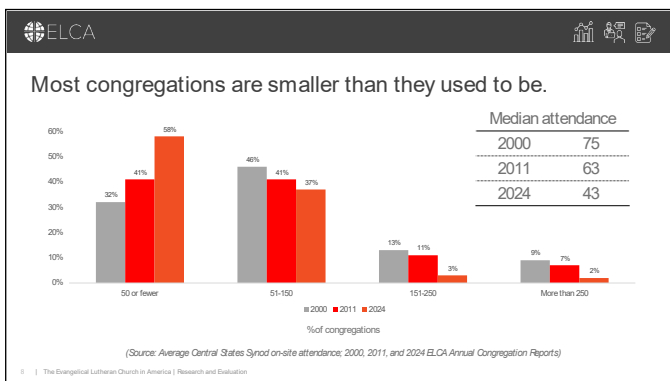
about two percent) are part of the ELCA. And 147 of these are part of the Central States Synod. And, of course, each of you is a vital part of your own congregation. As participants in congregations, we are all part of this much larger religious context that serves as, according to the researchers from Faith Communities Today, a **“tangible segment of society that anchors much of the philanthropic, public social support, mental health, and spiritual and moral wellbeing of the country.”**

This same reporting also shows that the typical American congregation has become significantly smaller over the last 25 years. In 2000, the median congregation had approximately 137 people in worship each week. Today, that number is closer to 70.



When we compare that with ELCA data, we see a very similar trend. In 2000, the median ELCA congregation had roughly 98 people in weekly worship. At that time, roughly one quarter of congregations would have been considered very small, with 50 or fewer people in weekly worship. By 2024, the median number had fallen to 47, and more than half of ELCA congregations have 50 people or fewer in worship on a typical weekend.

Over the same period, larger congregations (those with 250 or more people in weekly worship) have gone from relatively uncommon in 2000 (14% of all ELCA congregations) to virtually non-existent in 2024 (3%).

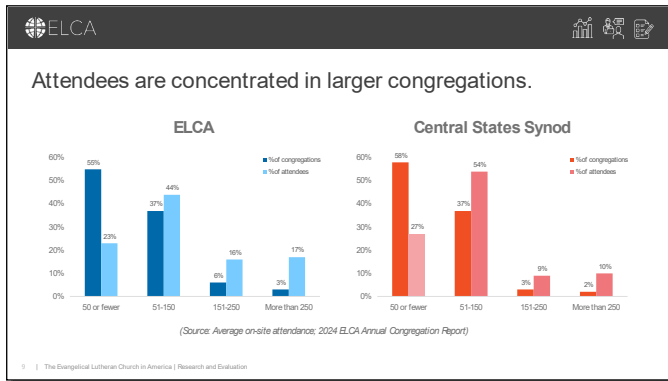


The trends are similar in the Central States Synod, with median worship attendance going from 75 in 2000 to 43 in 2024, and the proportion of very small congregations increasing from 32% to 58% over that time.

The fact that all these trends are similar is important, because it helps to define our understanding of “normal.” Many leaders or attendees of smaller congregations assume they are unusual or that they are failing in some way. But the data suggests

something different: small congregations are not the exception in the ELCA. Increasingly, they are the norm. It is also important to point out something that you likely already know: small congregations matter

enormously, as they maintain the church's visibility, presence, influence, and impact across a broad geography. And, even if the number of attendees is small, those attendees tend to have deep community roots and relationships.



This data on congregation size also reveals another interesting pattern. Although most congregations are relatively small, a substantial proportion of worship attendees tend to be concentrated in larger congregations. In the ELCA, one-third of attendees worship in the largest 10 percent of congregations. In Central States, nearly 20 percent of worshippers attend the largest 5 percent of congregations.

That means the “typical congregation” and the “typical attendee experience” are not always the

same thing.

Many worshippers experience churches with multiple staff members, larger programming structures, and broader resources, even though most congregations do not actually function that way. This matters because it shapes expectations about ministry, staffing, communication, and congregational life. And it reminds us that different kinds of congregations often have different strengths, challenges, and needs, and that their leaders may require different types of training.

It is through this sort of interpretation that research becomes more than statistics. The goal is not simply to say: “Here are some numbers. Hope you can make the best of them.” The goal is to ask: What do these patterns mean? What assumptions do they challenge? And how might they shape understanding, expectations, and decisions moving forward?

In closing, I want to make two additional points.

Research is a mirror.

- Where are we?
- What is normal?
- What is changing?
- What do we need to ask next?

You are not alone in a changing church.

- Most challenges in congregations reflect broad shifts in the religious landscape.
- Recognizing this can enhance clarity, wisdom, and compassion.

Research does have limitations. Ultimately, even the best research does not tell the church what to do. Rather, it acts as a mirror to help us see more clearly: where we are, what is normal, what is changing, and what questions we may need to ask next.

Research is not a replacement for discernment. Rather, it is one of the tools that helps faithful discernment happen.

And one of the things we most frequently find ourselves saying to congregations and leaders is this: You are not alone in a changing church.

Most of the challenges congregations experience are not isolated failures. They are part of larger shifts happening across the religious landscape.

Recognizing that does not eliminate the challenges. But it can help leaders and congregations respond with greater clarity, wisdom, and compassion as they discern what faithful ministry looks like in their own context as they move forward.



Let's keep the conversation going.



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So, let's continue the conversation. My colleagues and I are eager to be in communication with you, to answer your questions and ask some of you, and to learn together.