

ELCA numbers drop, contributions grow: Decline in membership for 14th straight year

News in the [August 22, 2006](#) issue

The largest Lutheran denomination in the U.S. has reported that its baptized membership was 4.85 million in 10,549 congregations last year, a one-year decrease of about 1.6 percent and the 14th straight annual decline in membership.

Income continues to grow, however, for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, up nearly 3 percent from the previous year to more than \$2.67 billion, according to statistics released this month by the Chicago-based denomination.

Though the ELCA's confirmed membership also decreased in 2005—to 3.63 million people—the average regular giving to the church grew to \$598, an increase of 4.8 percent over 2004. Regular “mission support”—monies passed from congregations to their regional synods and to national programs—declined less than 1 percent.

The decreases in net membership totals reflect a pattern seen by many U.S. church bodies in the same period, said Lowell G. Almen, who heads the ELCA Office of the Secretary. The ELCA reported a high of 5.24 million members in 1991.

Reports by congregations pointed to fewer new members in 2005, the disbanding of 31 congregations and “roll cleaning” in many churches. The removal of long-inactive members from church rolls resulted in a loss of some 208,000, compared to a loss of 192,000 the year before.

Among churches unhappy with their ELCA affiliation, 22 congregations with a combined membership of 14,083 withdrew in 2005. One church with 111 members was removed. The average percentage of baptized members participating in Sunday worship has fluctuated in recent years between 30 and 31 percent, but dropped slightly last year to 29.68 percent, officials said.