

ELCA numbers drop below 5 million: Baptized membership

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The nation's largest Lutheran denomination, above the 5 million mark in baptized membership since the merger of three Lutheran bodies in 1987, slipped swiftly below that in the past two years—sharply punctuating losses experienced by most mainline Protestants in recent times.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America wound up with 4.98 million members at the end of 2003 as inactive members were expunged from church rolls, some congregations closed their doors and some withdrew from the ELCA. Baptisms, new adult members and start-up churches were hardly enough to offset the losses.

Over the past 13 years the ELCA suffered a total net loss of a half million members, though the annual drop was relatively gradual. But one half, or 250,000, of those losses occurred in 2002 and 2003 alone, said Lowell G. Almen, secretary at the ELCA's Chicago headquarters in a report released last month.

"The statistical back door is far too large in our congregations," said Almen, a veteran Lutheran administrator. "Back-door losses muffle front-door gains." The net decrease last year was more than 53,000 members, or about 1 percent.

An ELCA news release said the reports from the denomination's 10,657 churches showed the losses were due to a decreasing number of new members, "the disbanding of 36 congregations and 'roll cleaning' in many remaining congregations." Eight congregations with a total of 11,020 members withdrew in 2003.

Some denominations give only communicant (adults and teens) membership numbers. By that standard, the ELCA decreased by 33,402 last year to a confirmed membership of 3.72 million. The narrower count of communicant members who actively contribute to their churches also dropped by 44,730 to 2.35 million. The drop in the latter category was even bigger in 2002—for a two-year slide of 110,641

members.

Almen's office had some good news to soften the blow. The combined income from donations and investments reported by local churches was nearly \$2.6 billion, up 2.45 percent in 2003 from the previous year. Regular giving by members in unrestricted offerings grew by 3.5 percent last year, the fourth yearly increase in a row.