

Appalachian Task Force Survey
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An online survey designed to assess the collective work of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in the Appalachian Region was available from February 18 to May 2, 2016. The survey was distributed virally by Appalachian Task Force staff; there were 60 responses. (See Appendix 1 for respondent demographic frequencies.)

Appalachian Identity

The survey fielded questions on Appalachian identity. Respondents were almost evenly split on whether they felt the majority of the people in their ministry context identified as Appalachian. Slightly over a quarter (27%) answered “very much”, but close to half (48%) answered “not at all” to “very little”. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Extent majority of people think of themselves as Appalachian (N=60)

Not at all	Very little	Somewhat	Very much	Don't know/Not sure
16.7%	31.7%	20.0%	26.7%	5.0%

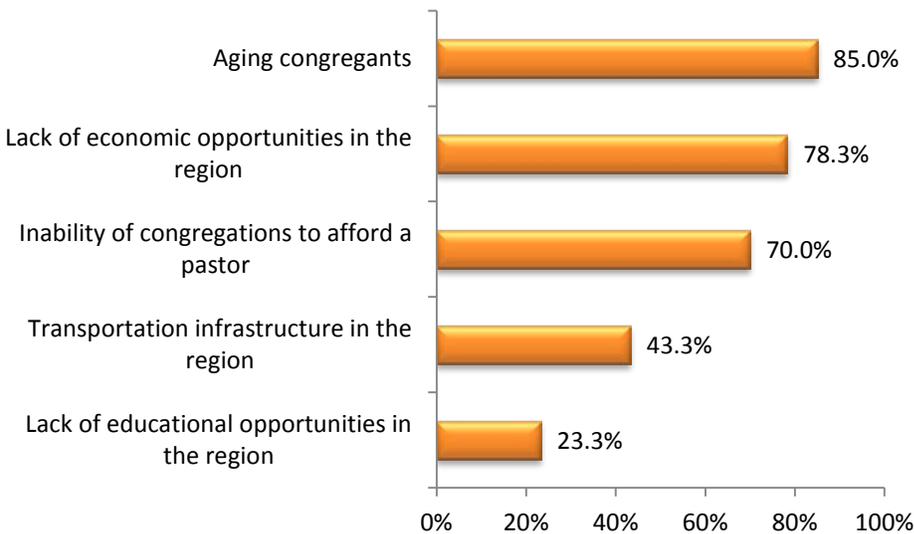
Those who answered “somewhat” or “very much” about identifying as “Appalachian” were asked to specify what the term “Appalachian” meant. Most answers had to do with the geography of the region. Common themes were about the mountains and the natural beauty of the land. Those who identify as Appalachian feel a special closeness to the land. In addition, there is an economic component to the term. While the land is rich in natural resources, poverty is a major challenge. Also, there was the theme of heritage and cultural endogamy. Being close with family and friends and somewhat distrustful of outsiders was mentioned. In addition, people were characterized as independent but helpful and proud. (See Appendix 1 for full comments.)

Those who answered “not at all” or “very little” said that the people in their areas identified according to their county or state (e.g., Clinton County, Western Pennsylvania) or some other geographical marker (e.g., Susquehanna Valley). Some identified as “transplants” or “suburban” while others were simply “country” or “rural” people. (See Appendix 1 for full comments.)

Challenges

Figure 1 shows the most significant challenges faced by congregations in Appalachia. Aging congregants is a challenge faced by congregations throughout the ELCA; however, the economic challenges are quite apparent in Appalachia because of the region's high rates of poverty.

Figure 1: Most Significant Challenges Faced by Congregations in Appalachia



There were 11 “other” comments about challenges faced by congregations in Appalachia. Two respondents mentioned the distance between ELCA congregations. Others mentioned substance abuse and a sense of fatalism in the region. (See Appendix 1 for full comments.)

Forty-seven respondents offered advice on what could increase the capacity of congregations to face the challenges in their ministry settings. The top five themes were the following:

1. Attract/Keep young people in the church/area (12 responses);
2. Economic improvement (8 responses);
3. Government/Agency/Wider church assistance with grants (7 responses);
4. Cooperation among congregations (6 responses);
5. Merge congregations (5 responses).

Some of the respondents made a direct connection between the lack of economic/educational opportunities and the retention of young people and young families. Since there are no good jobs, young people leave for college and never come back. One person mentioned the transition of the economy from agriculture to tourism. Some felt the government needs to help with more grants for development in the region. Others said any type of cooperation with other Lutheran churches or full-communion partners would help. Some said mergers were the solution, although that might be difficult for some congregations. (See Appendix 1 for full comments.)

Forty-one respondents offered advice about how the synods could help the congregations face these challenges. The following are the top three themes:

1. Help congregations to collaborate/cooperate with other congregations and organizations (9 responses);
2. Reduce clergy debt/increase clergy compensation (4 responses);
3. Increase grants to congregations (4 responses).

Specific ways that synods could help congregations collaborate with each other include facilitating the sharing of clergy, sharing of resources, pairing larger congregations with smaller ones or rural with urban congregations. (See Appendix 1 for full comments.)

The survey included a question about a specific mission for ELCA congregations, synods or the wider church in Appalachia. The respondents were evenly split between those who believe there should be a specific mission and those who do not or are not sure. (See Table 2.)

Table 2: Should there be a specific mission for either ELCA congregations, synods or the wider church in Appalachia? (N=60)

No	Yes, to some extent	Yes, to a great extent	Don't know/Not sure
13.3%	21.7%	30.0%	35.0%

There were 33 open-ended responses on what the mission in Appalachia should be and what specific role the congregations, synods, churchwide organization or other institutions should play. Here are the most common themes:

1. Connecting people/organizations to resources (8 responses);
2. Proclaim the Good News (from a Lutheran lens) (5 responses);
3. Improve the economy, address systemic poverty, help with grants (4 responses);
4. Increase self-esteem of both the people and their small churches, eliminate negative stereotypes (4 responses).

There also were a few comments about contextualizing any mission to the specific realities of Appalachia. A few others stated that the issues facing Appalachian ELCA congregations are the same issues that ELCA congregations in other rural areas face. These small, rural churches need to be lifted up and supported. (See Appendix 1 for full comments.)

Thirty respondents provided comments about what assets exist for accomplishing mission in Appalachia. The most common assets listed were the following:

1. Ecumenical partners (7 responses);
2. Funding/grants from governmental agencies (e.g., HUD), other institutions (e.g., The Lily Foundation, Thrivent), or the churchwide organization (e.g., ELCMA, ELCA World Hunger) (7 responses);
3. Lay leaders (6 responses).

As for raising up lay leaders, the TEEM program was mentioned as was licensing lay worship leaders. There also were two comments about merging congregations, "But until there are common sense closures and mergers, with re-appropriation of assets already held, little effect would be seen from the

outside help.” Finally, one respondent mentioned involving faculty from the universities and journalists from small town newspapers. (See Appendix 1 for full comments.)

Thirty-three respondents named specific ministries in Appalachia they felt were having a significant or important impact. The most common ministry was related to food (10 responses). These included food pantries, after-school feeding programs and community gardens. The next most common response was about partnering or sharing with other ministries (6 responses). Some were ecumenical. Three respondents mentioned the *High Country Coalition* of Boone County, North Carolina. Other comments were about disaster relief, quilting, Habitat for Humanity, VBS and Sunday School. (See Appendix 1 for full comments.)

The final section of the survey asked for any additional comments. There were 22 responses but no repeated themes. Some issues noted were the following:

- Pastors in rural Appalachia will need training to handle multi-point parishes;
- Brave decisions need to be made to merge, close and re-appropriate assets from congregations that are no longer viable;
- Poverty, unemployment and addiction are issues that need to be addressed.

Conclusion

A survey to assess the collective work of the ELCA in the Appalachian Region was available online from late winter through spring 2016. The online survey was made available by the Appalachian Task Force, and there were 60 responses. Respondents were evenly split on whether they felt the majority of people in their ministry setting identified as “Appalachian”. Common markers of identifying as “Appalachian” were related to the natural surroundings and poverty of the region. The most common challenges in the region are aging congregants and the lack of economic opportunities. Suggestions offered to increase the capacity of the congregations include more cooperation and collaboration, along with economic assistance. Synods can facilitate this cooperation/collaboration by helping congregations form multi-point parishes, but also with mergers and closures. One suggestion for economic improvement is transitioning from an agricultural to a tourism economy. Another alternative is to seek more grant assistance from governmental and faith-based institutions.