Those Who Are Being Saved

Report on the Results of the 2023 Lutheran Religious Life Survey

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 2:42-47

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About the Author

Lyman Stone is a member of the LCMS who converted as an adult from nondenominational Christianity. He and his wife have lived and worked as part of Lutheran mission teams in Hong Kong and Canada. They and their two daughters (3 and 1 years old) are members of an Indiana District church in Kentucky. Lyman is the Director of Research at the consulting firm Demographic Intelligence, and a PhD candidate in demography at McGill University. He is also a fellow at several policy research institutions, including the Institute for Family Studies and Cardus. He has testified on policy and demographic issues at hearings of the U.S. Congress and numerous state legislatures, has published articles on family and demography in almost every major paper of record in America and several in Asia, and is a regular speaker and advisor for international policy organizations working on issues of marriage, fertility, and the sanctity of human life. He is a frequent guest on Lutheran podcasts and radio shows. He has no formal training in theology and is not a professional church worker or pastor. Views expressed in this study are solely those of the author. His favorite hymn is "Oh God Oh Lord of Heaven and Earth." He tweets far too much @lymanstoneky and can be reached by email at research@lutheranlifesurvey.church .

What Is This Report?

This is the third report based on the Lutheran Religious Life Survey. This report discusses results from the 2023 survey wave; the 2021 and 2021 reports can be found online at lutheranlifesurvey.church , and are much more comprehensive. The 2021 report in particular also lays out the general theological ideas underlying this project as well as details of the survey. But as this report is much more narrowly tailored towards a few specific topics, some note here about those topics seems advisable. The LCMS contains within it considerable differences in outward form of worship, and some differences in theological beliefs about those forms as well. These differences have been analyzed in the 2021 and 2022 reports. This report takes a new approach to form of worship and theology related to the means of grace, and assesses how they relate to church demographics such as member age profiles, personal conversion histories, and congregational growth or decline. As an additional area of study, this report assesses certain racial attitudes within the LCMS. This second area of study was adopted specifically in response to recent synodical controversies which touched on questions of race and racism.

It is necessary to offer a brief account of the theology which informs this work. No Lutheran can confess that *our behaviors* make faith in others. We confess that faith is made through certain means of grace which are simply channels by which God works faith in us. It is not our own doing. But the story for us does not stop there. The work the Spirit does occurs through means, and the main vehicle by which those means arrive at humanity is Christ's church. And in His wisdom, our God has seen fit to make the activity of His church depend on human behaviors. God uses humans to baptize other humans. God uses human pastors to provide the true food and true drink which feed our souls. God uses human publishing houses to provide us with Bibles and human pastors (again) to announce the absolution of our sins. God works through the many and various vocations in which He has called His people. In some sense, then, this survey is exploring not the perilous question of "church growth," but the well-trodden ground of vocation. What traditions are we handing down to the young in our church? The faulty traditions of man, or the strong traditions of the gospel? Do we in fact operate as masks of God in the world, or do we not? The 2023 LRLS still only asks a few questions around these themes and is not the final word. As you will see, it is not easy to characterize the results acquired. But in exploring the connections that exist between theology, worship, and conversion, I hope that this report will provide encouragement to God's people, strengthening them in the good works which God has prepared for them to do.

It may also be useful to comment on format. This report does not provide an extremely detailed methodology section, as methods are essentially unchanged since the 2021 survey. As a result, detailed methodological discussions in the 2021 report still apply to this report. If the LRLS continues to provide useful information for LCMS churches, then in a few years those long-run exercises will be updated.

Finally, a note on question wording is in order. "Good" survey questions have a simple goal: to make respondents actually think about a question which will distinguish between meaningfully different subgroups. Thus, questions about explicit confessional statements make poor survey questions, because respondents will "recognize" creedal language and instinctively "agree" without reflecting on their actual beliefs. Survey questions strive to use common, everyday language in a way which nonetheless circumvents respondents' "automatic" or unthinking responses. For respondents, that means good questions often feel "hard." There are good arguments for both answers in many cases. Questions are worded with some degree of ambiguity, or presenting uncomfortable choices, making respondents weigh competing priorities. As a result, it is vital not to pass too harsh of judgment on respondents who give one answer or another, and equally vital not to read too much into just one question or another. Many respondents explicitly reported feeling uncomfortable having to choose between certain response options. This is normal. But by forcing uncomfortable choices, good survey questions can reveal important differences in attitudes. That is the goal of this survey.

"My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching. Bind them on your heart always; tie them around your neck. When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you. For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life."

Proverbs 6:20-23

Key Findings

This report primarily describes LRLS 2023 findings in just a few areas where the LRLS 2023 asked new or expanded questions, most notably congregational growth trajectories and personal conversion histories. Some key findings are:

- LCMS members dramatically overestimate the health of LCMS congregations: they are 3 times likelier to report growth than official attendance data suggests, and 70% less likely to report decline than official attendance data suggests.
- LCMS members in larger churches are the most likely to have incorrect, excessively optimistic beliefs about LCMS membership decline.
- About 3% of LCMS members are converts from outside of Christianity, 8% from other non-Lutheran Christian backgrounds, and 20% from other Lutheran or similar denominations.
- "Confessional" churches receive more converts than "Missional" churches, and "Traditional" churches receive more converts than "Contemporary" services. Smaller LCMS churches in rural areas or small towns receive higher rates of converts than large urban or suburban congregations. Younger converts to the LCMS are also much likelier to be women than lifelong LCMS members of the same age.
- Exposure to LCMS primary and secondary schooling is a major factor shaping conversion: many people become LCMS due to their experiences in LCMS schools, and LCMS children enrolled in LCMS schools may have higher rates of remaining LCMS.
- Large shares of LCMS members experienced serious religious doubts at age 18 or earlier, and in particular about 2/3 of converts into the LCMS from non-Christian backgrounds experienced serious doubts in their prior faith before age 30. About 10% of lifelong LCMS members experienced serious religious doubts before age 16.
- Conversion into the LCMS is most commonly associated with individuals finding a welcoming community which provides a sense of connection to history, and/or converts arrive via a romantic connection to an LCMS member. About 1/3 of converts into the LCMS experienced romantic attachments as a key element of their conversion, and an additional 1/3 were largely motivated by a search for community. A conviction that prior beliefs were wrong was only the primary influence on about 1 in 5 converts.
- More liturgical churches, and churches that respondents identify as "Confessional and Traditional," not only receive more converts, but are experiencing less severe declines in attendance and membership, and may have younger membership profiles.
- Belief in inherent racial hierarchies, whether divinely created or naturalistically evolved, is uncommon in the LCMS: only about 20% of members accept any version of these statements, and likely fewer than 5% are seriously committed to these views. Moreover, belief in racial hierarchy is most common among LCMS members who attend church irregularly or not at all.
- Young LCMS members have uniquely intense views prioritizing the visible means of grace as key factors in salvation, whereas older LCMS members are somewhat less likely to emphasize the visible means of grace.

About the Lutheran Religious Life Survey

The Lutheran Religious Life Survey (LRLS) was conducted in August 2023-November 2023 with the survey administered via the survey platform Alchemer. Ads were placed on Facebook promoting LRLS to individuals who connected with LCMS institutions on Facebook. Additionally, the LRLS was promoted via the personal twitter account of the study author, which has approximately 27,000 followers. Finally, the LRLS was distributed to a list of approximately 30,000 email addresses of LCMS pastors, churches, schools, missionaries, deaconesses, and other church workers, as listed on the LCMS Church Locator website. In total, 3,238 individuals began the survey. This yielded just over 2,000 valid responses from current LCMS members and regular attendees. LRLS questions were developed by Lyman Stone. The LRLS 2023 did not receive any external funding support.

Because the sample for the LRLS was recruited in part via an email list of church workers, as well as a convenience sample of individuals connected to the study developer via Twitter, it is not a properly random sample. This almost certainly biases results. The final sample greatly over-represents pastors and other church workers, over-represents males, and over-represents individuals who discuss church matters in online spaces such as Twitter.

Luckily, because precise statistics on the true number of pastors and church workers are available from LCMS Rosters and Statistics, and because other publicly available surveys can provide detailed demographic data by age, sex, frequency of church attendance, income, and marital status, and because the LRLS includes a question about *size of church* which can be compared to the true distribution of LCMS church sizes as represented by "Average weekly attendance" numbers from the LCMS website, these biases are at least partially fixable. Specifically, the LRLS uses weighting to "under-count" responses from over-represented groups, and "over-count" under-represented groups. Broadly speaking, the survey over-represented people with high frequency of church attendance, pastors, higher-income people, young men, married people, and people from larger churches. By weighting against these categories, the final *weighted* sample is likely to be a closer approximation of the true LCMS population. Nonetheless, despite this weighting procedure, biases certainly remain. Some groups, like low-attendance younger women, are extremely undersampled, and so even weighting cannot properly account for them. In other cases, biases may not be correctable via weighting: there is no baseline data available about internet usage among LCMS members at large in order to weight on this category. Likewise, a key question of interest in the LRLS asked respondents if their churches were "Traditional" or "Contemporary," another asked if they were "Missional" or "Confessional." These somewhat arbitrary labels denote subcultures within the LCMS; the LRLS did not give respondents any guidance about the definitions of these words, and thus they reflect the subjective interpretations of respondents. Subcultures are likely to share social networks, and thus pass along the survey within their network. As such, no effort is made to estimate the share of LCMS members who identify their churches as "Confessional" or "Missional," or "Traditional" vs. "Contemporary," since estimates from the survey for these figures are almost certainly unreliable.

In sum, the LRLS provides a snapshot of Lutheran congregational life which should be broadly representative across major demographic categories. It may not be able to estimate the prevalence of various denominational subcultures, but it can highlight cases where those subgroups are appreciably different. The LRLS 2023 repeated many questions from the LRLS 2021 and 2022, and for repeated questions results were broadly similar. Furthermore, because the same sampling strategies were used for all waves, it is extremely likely that many respondents took multiple survey waves. As a result, the two samples are not properly independent of one another. Because there was little change between the two surveys and because the samples overlap considerably, this report primarily focuses on new questions appearing in LRLS 2023.

Congregational Numeric Change

One new question in the LRLS 2023 asked respondents, "Would you say that the congregation you usually attend is growing, shrinking, or staying about the same size?" This question was added because many past LRLS questions asked about various components of changes to numeric congregational size, but none asked respondents' own perceptions on this topic. The 2023 wave aimed to rectify this shortcoming. **Figure 1** below shows how LCMS members answered this question in the first three columns, labeled "What LCMS members say about their congregations." About 30% said their church was growing, 50% said it was staying about the same, and 20% said their congregation was shrinking.

Figure 1: Perceived Congregational Growth
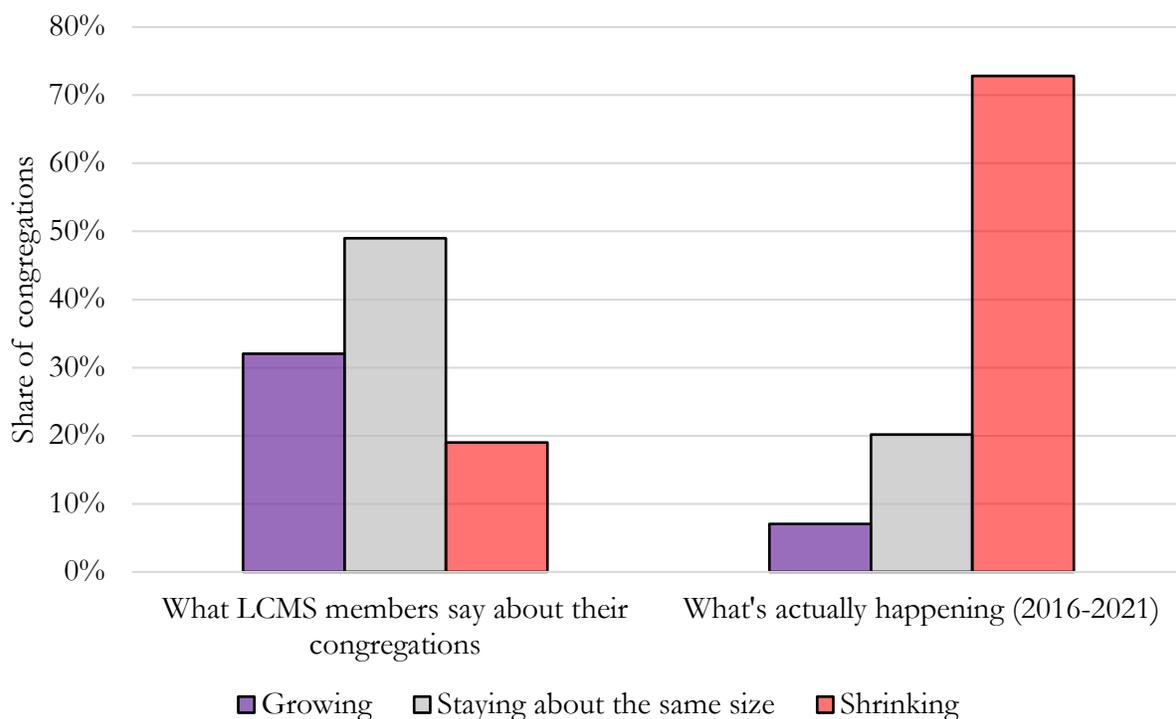
These results can be compared with actual attendance statistics. In this case, congregational attendance reports were downloaded from the LCMS website for all congregations. It is not immediately clear what time period respondents might have been thinking about in terms of identifying growth or shrinkage, but follow-up questions returned by 37 respondents who reported growth or shrinkage indicated that on average they had in mind growth or shrinkage over the last approximately 5 years. Thus, member-reported growth or decline is compared to 5-year growth or decline in congregationally-reported average attendance.

This comparison is stark. While over 30% of LCMS members say their congregations are growing, in reality just 7% of LCMS congregations reported 10% or more growth in attendance between 2016 and 2021. And while under 20% of LCMS members reported decline, the true reality is over 70%. It seems that LCMS members are woefully misinformed about the extent of synodical decline, and dramatically overestimate the numeric change in their congregations.

One possible caveat is that this analysis only had access to attendance data as of 2021. COVID-related disruptions may still have influenced attendance in 2021. This exercise will be repeated in the 2024 LRLS report, using 2022 data, enabling further assessment of this issue.

Why do members of the LCMS so greatly overrate the numeric trajectory of their congregations? Subdividing results by congregational size may give some clue. **Figure 2** below shows the share of LCMS members who report their congregations are growing or shrinking vs. the typical weekly attendance they report for their congregation.

Figure 2: Perceived Congregational Growth by Congregation Size
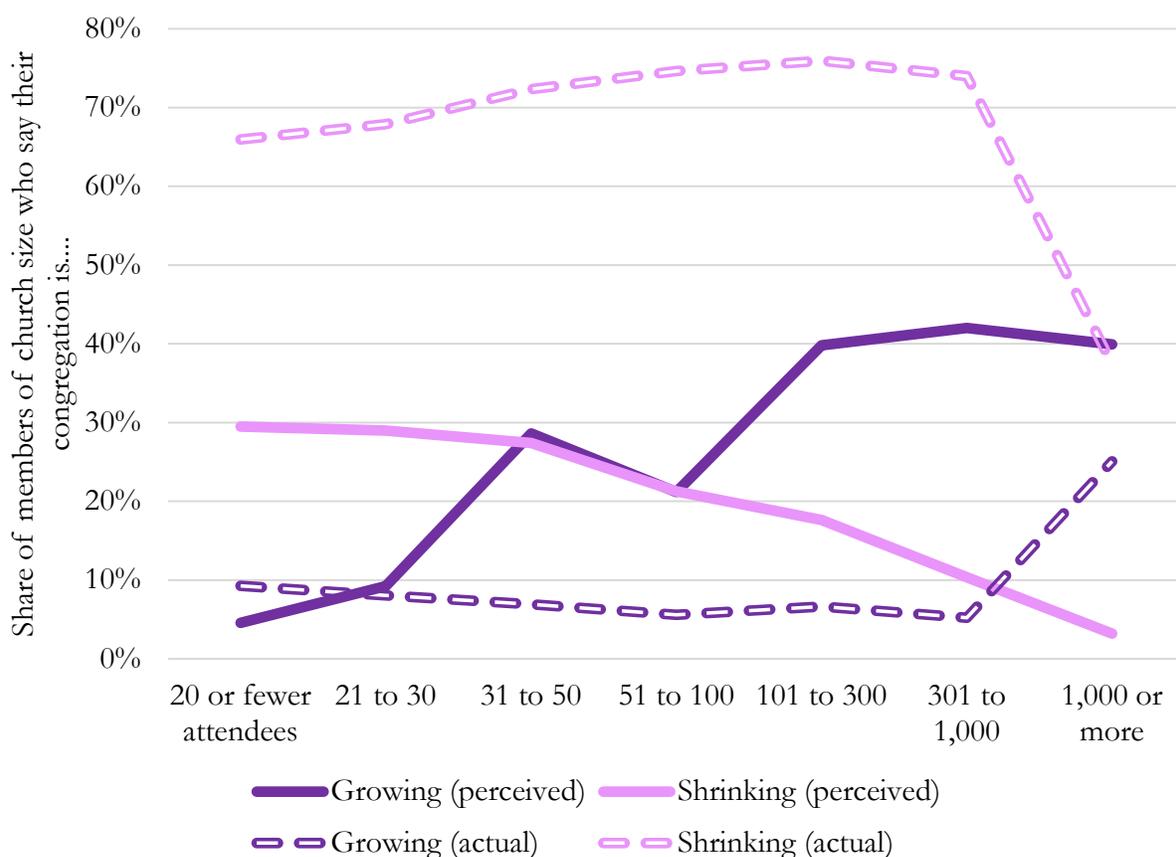

As can be seen, LCMS members overrate growth and underrate shrinkage for almost every congregational size. But this effect is most severe for the largest LCMS churches. That is, LCMS members in large (100+ weekly attendance) LCMS churches have the most systematically unreliable perceptions of LCMS congregational trajectories. Note that there are only 14 churches with reported attendance over 1,000 people per week, so that category is imprecisely estimated.

The key takeaway here is straightforward: LCMS churches with more than 50 and especially more than 100 members experience unusually high rates of incorrect beliefs about LCMS congregational health. The likeliest reason for this misapprehension is that these bigger churches may have attendance divided across multiple services making it harder for a typical layperson to assess attendance changes, humans in general are not

always very good at estimating crowd size, and churches of that size are likely to always have many attendees who are unknown to any given survey respondent, creating an illusion of a large group.

For the purposes of this report, an additional possible source of bias must be explored: church subculture. The LRLS 2021 and 2022 reports demonstrated that LCMS members who report attending churches which are both "Confessional" (as opposed to "Missional" or "Don't know") and which have a "Traditional" worship style (as opposed to "Contemporary" or a mix of the two) are meaningfully different in many surveyed items from respondents who did not select both "Confessional" and "Traditional" church descriptors. This report will elaborate on this distinction, but here must point to an important commonality: both groups have the same pattern of irrational optimism about congregational trajectories, as shown in **Figure 3** below.

Figure 3: Perceived Congregational Growth by Congregation Size
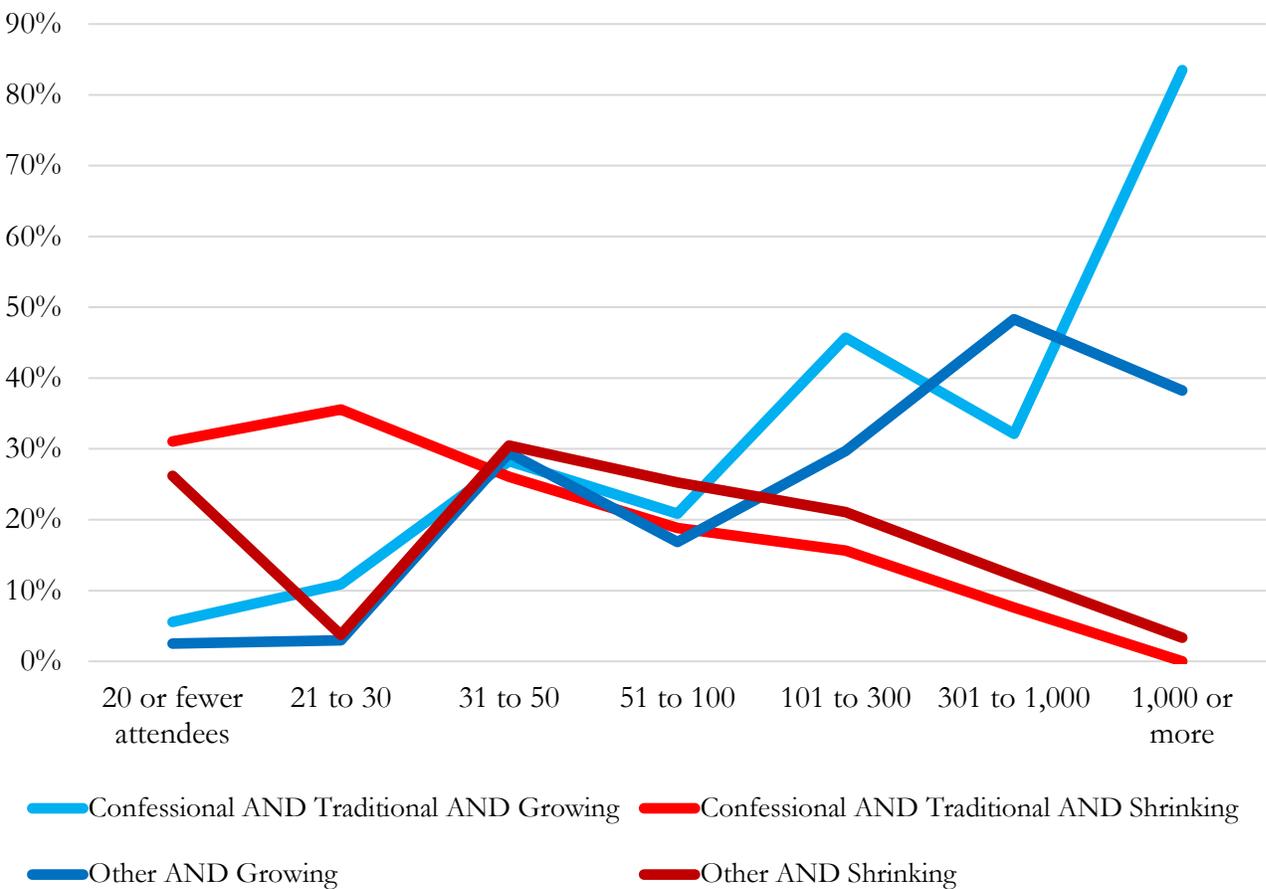
In small churches, both "Confessional+Traditional" and "Other" LCMS members are unlikely to report growth, and in big churches, they are extremely likely to report growth. Likewise, both are likely to report shrinkage in small churches, and unlikely to report it in big churches.

The important point here is: both "Confessional+Traditional" LCMS members and "Other" LCMS members have the same reporting bias. As such, although we should not take their reports of growth *literally*, we can guess that whatever biases of perception and recall may exist are probably *very similar across the two groups*. Both groups have biases, but because the biases are likely symmetric, we can compare the two groups fairly straightforwardly. Figure 4 does this, comparing perceived church growth for the two groups in the aggregate.

Figure 4: Perceived Congregational Growth by LCMS Subculture
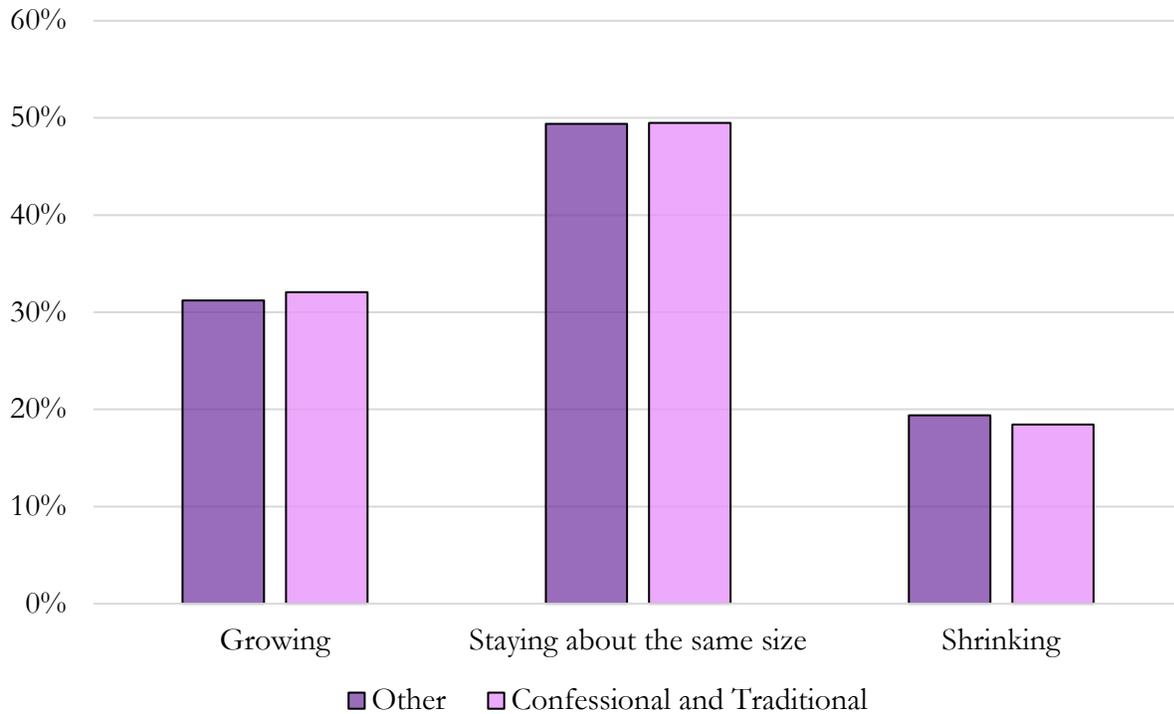
In terms of members' perceptions about their own congregations, there is essentially no difference between LCMS members in "Confessional+Traditional" churches, and those in other churches. Thus, at the level of members' own reports, there appears to be no difference in congregational numeric trajectories between major LCMS subcultures.

Conversion

The LRLS 2021 and 2022 reports offered detailed accounts of evangelistic behaviors within the LCMS. The LRLS 2023 survey, however, included a greatly expanded survey module exploring conversion experiences. As a result, it's possible to estimate what share of people in LCMS churches are converts into the LCMS, and to segment those converts by whether they converted from outside of Christianity, from within Christianity but not from a Lutheran background, or from some other Lutheran background.

As **Figure 5** shows below, "Confessional" Lutherans are more likely to report being converts than "Missional" Lutherans, much as "Traditional" Lutherans are far more likely to report being converts than "Mix" or "Contemporary" Lutherans. However, there are some distinctions by type of convert.

The vast majority of converts from non-Christian backgrounds end up in "Traditional" LCMS churches, and about 3 times as many self-identify as "Confessional" than as "Missional," a much bigger disparity than LCMS members generally. In other words: converts from outside of Christianity disproportionately end up in "Confessional and Traditional" churches within the LCMS. That said, overall prevalences are low: only about 2-4% of LCMS members are converts from non-Christian backgrounds.

"Confessional" or "Traditional" LCMS churches also have a greater density of converts from other Lutheran backgrounds, such as ELCA or WELS. "Traditional" LCMS churches have almost twice times as many converts from other branches of Lutheranism than "Contemporary" LCMS churches. Throughout the LCMS, perhaps 10 to 20% of members are converts from other Lutheran church bodies.

Figure 5: Prevalence of Converts by LCMS Subculture and Convert Background

■ Converts from outside of Christianity

■ Converts from within Christianity, but outside of Lutheranism

■ Converts from Lutheran or other similar backgrounds
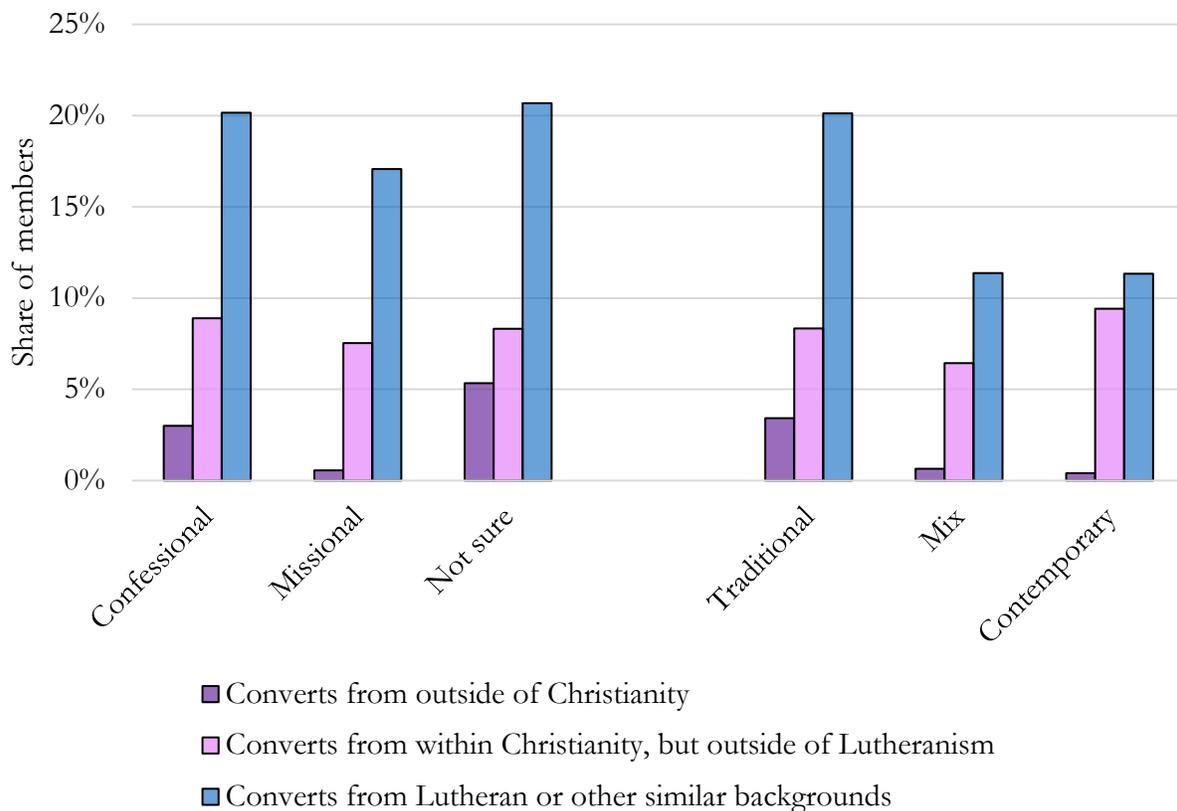
However, converts from other Christian bodies besides Lutheranism are more evenly distributed. At around 8% of total LCMS members, these converts from other Protestant bodies, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy do not display a strong association with any LCMS subculture.

The takeaway from these figures is straightforward: converts make up about 32% of self-identified "Traditional" or "Confessional" Lutherans, vs. about 15-25% of other Lutherans. This difference is driven partly by higher rates of conversion from outside of Christianity, but mostly by higher rates of conversion from other Lutheran traditions.

How does conversion relate to congregational trajectories? Surprisingly, not very much, as **Figure 6** shows below.

Figure 6: Prevalence of Converts by Respondent-Perceived Congregational Growth
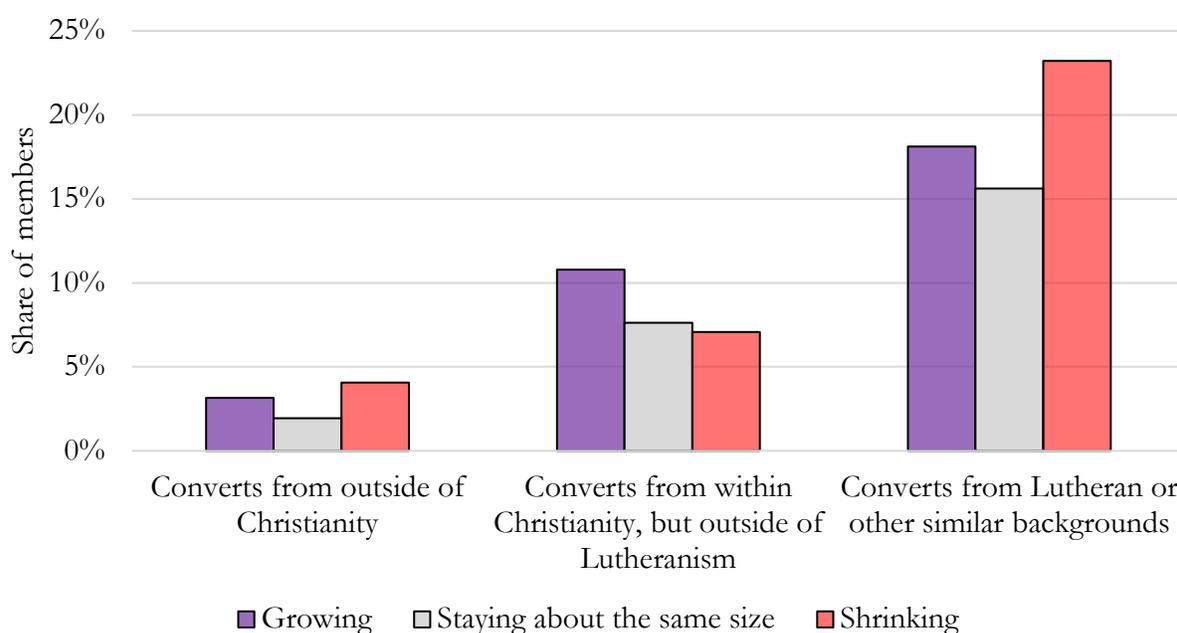
In congregations which respondents perceive to be growing, about 32% of respondents were converts to the LCMS. Of those, 3% were converts from non-Christian backgrounds, 11% from Christian non-Lutheran backgrounds, and 18% from other Lutheran or other similar backgrounds. But surprisingly, among respondents who attended churches they perceived to be shrinking, a similar 34% of respondents were converts: about 4% from non-Christian backgrounds, 7% from other Christian backgrounds, and 23% from other Lutheran or similar backgrounds. Thus, churches which respondents perceive to be growing or shrinking have similar densities of converts.

Convert shares also vary by congregational size. In general, converts are most common in mid-sized LCMS churches, and converts are rarest in very large LCMS churches, at least according to survey respondents' own self-characterizations. **Figure 7** below shows that both converts from outside of Christianity and converts from other Lutheran or similar backgrounds are most prevalent in churches with weekly attendance around 30-50 people, and least prevalent in churches with 300 or more people. On the other hand, converts from other branches of Christianity are most prevalent in larger churches, ranging from 50 to 1,000 attendees on a weekend.

What should be made of these trends? On one level, not much: sampling error could account for much of this trend, the overall sample size is not enormous, and respondents may not even have a good grasp of congregational size in some cases. Even if estimates are correct, this does not necessarily imply that one congregational size or subculture is better than another.

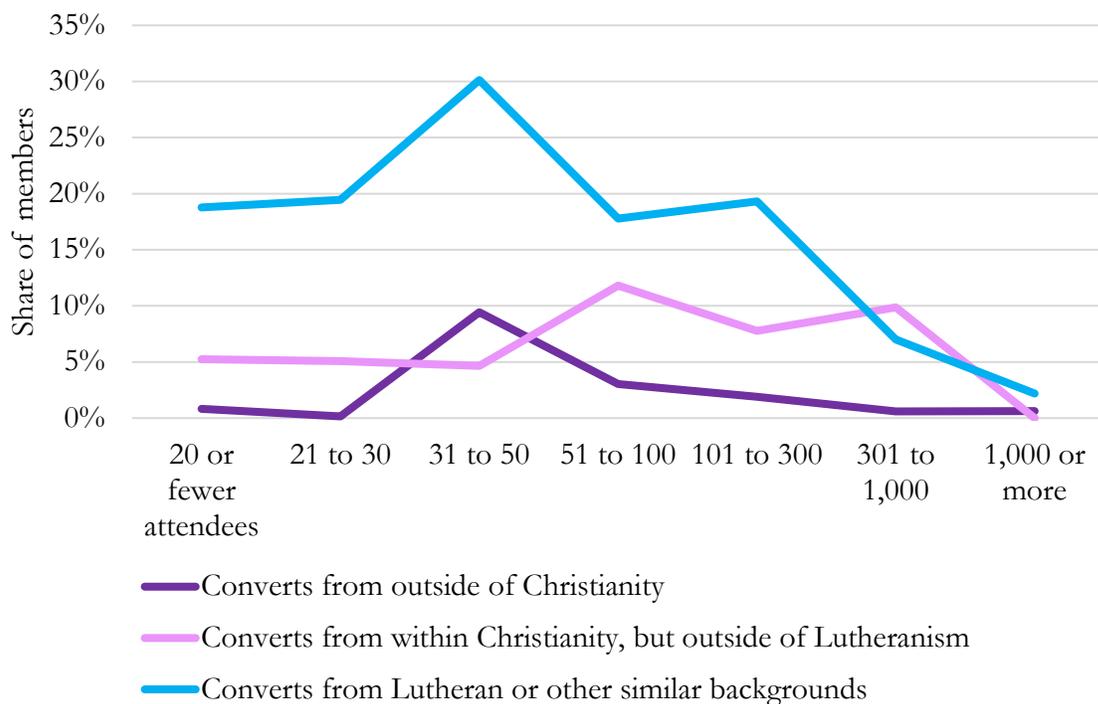**Figure 7:** Prevalence of Converts by Congregation Size

Converts from outside of Christianity

Converts from within Christianity, but outside of Lutheranism

Converts from Lutheran or other similar backgrounds

Figure 8: Congregational Statistics on Visitors and Adult Confirmations, by Congregation Size

Visitors as % of attendance   Adult Confirmations as % Attendance
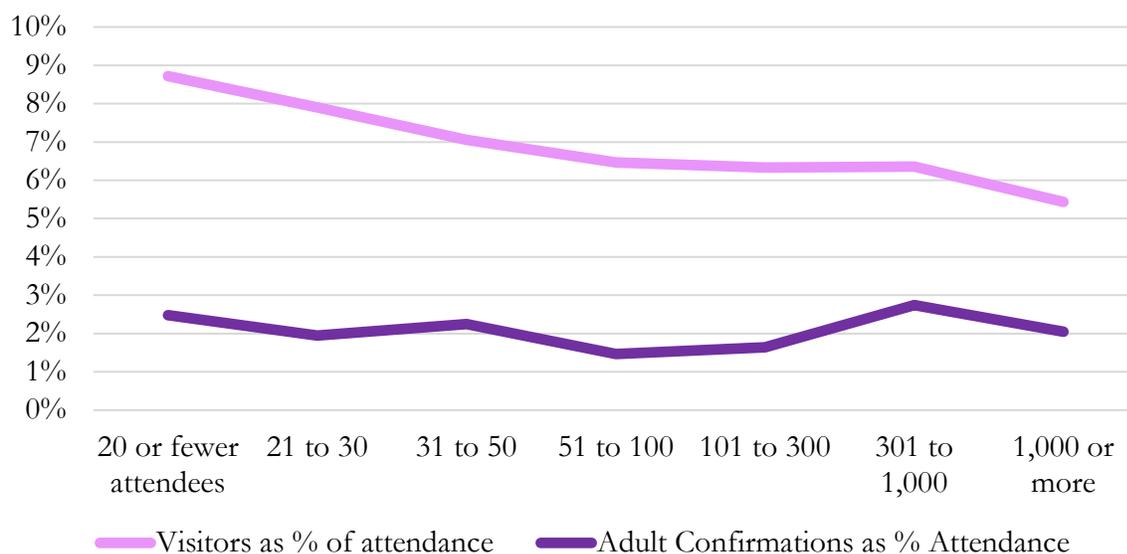
On the other hand, there may be reasons to take seriously the possibility that conversion into the LCMS does not favor the largest LCMS churches, and may even favor smaller LCMS churches. Using church reports on attendance, visitors, and adult confirmations from 2021, **Figure 8** shows that visitors are relatively most common in small LCMS churches (or, perhaps, that small LCMS churches are likelier to notice and record visitors). Rates of adult confirmation, meanwhile, a proxy for adult conversion, are highest for rather large churches (300 to 1000 attendees), but otherwise seem to slope downwards with church size: The smallest LCMS churches have some of the highest rates of adult converts per existing members.

Characteristics of Converts

Having demonstrated that converts in the LCMS are disproportionately located in small-or-midsized churches, and disproportionately in more "Traditional" or "Confessional" churches, next we assess the demographics of converts. To begin with, **Figure 9** below shows the share of LCMS members by sex and age group who are converts from outside of Lutheranism or other similar backgrounds; this figure includes converts from outside of Christianity as well.

Figure 9: Prevalence of Converts from Distant Backgrounds, by Age and Sex
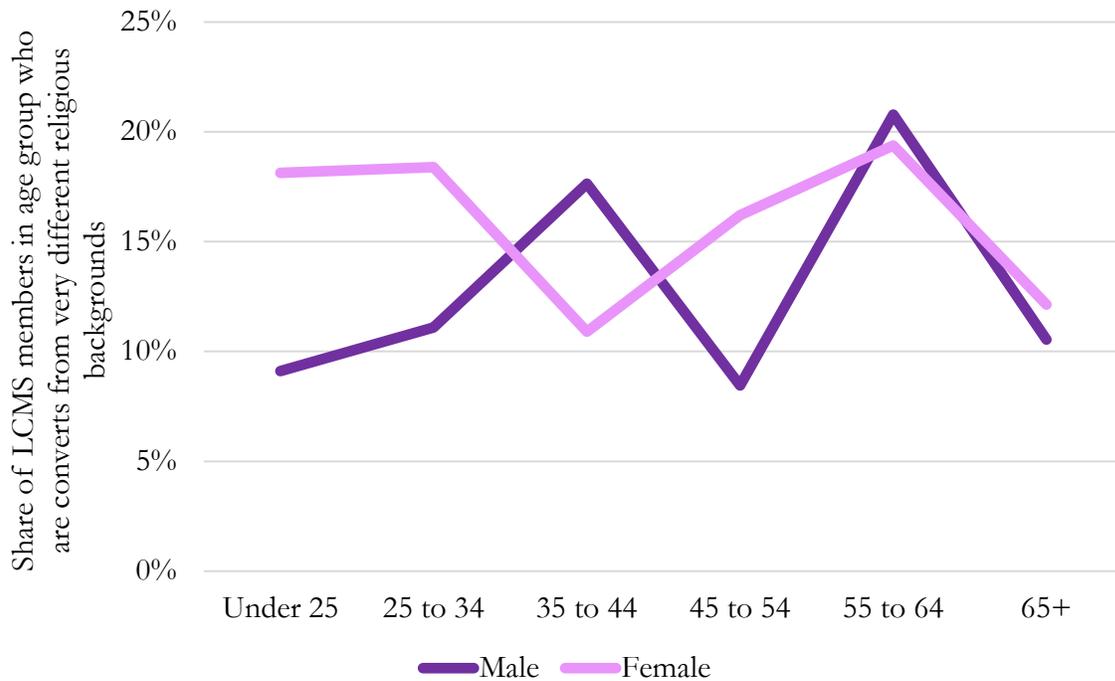
Overall, men and women in the LCMS have pretty similar likelihoods of being converts from non-Lutheran backgrounds. Young women in the LCMS may be slightly more likely to be converts, but the overall impression is that, when it comes to people converting from relatively dissimilar backgrounds, the LCMS does not have a strongly age- or sex-biased appeal.

On the other hand, **Figure 10** shows that there is a very stark sex difference in prevalence of conversion from relatively similar denominations and other Lutheran denominations.

Figure 10: Prevalence of Converts from Closely Related Backgrounds, by Age and Sex
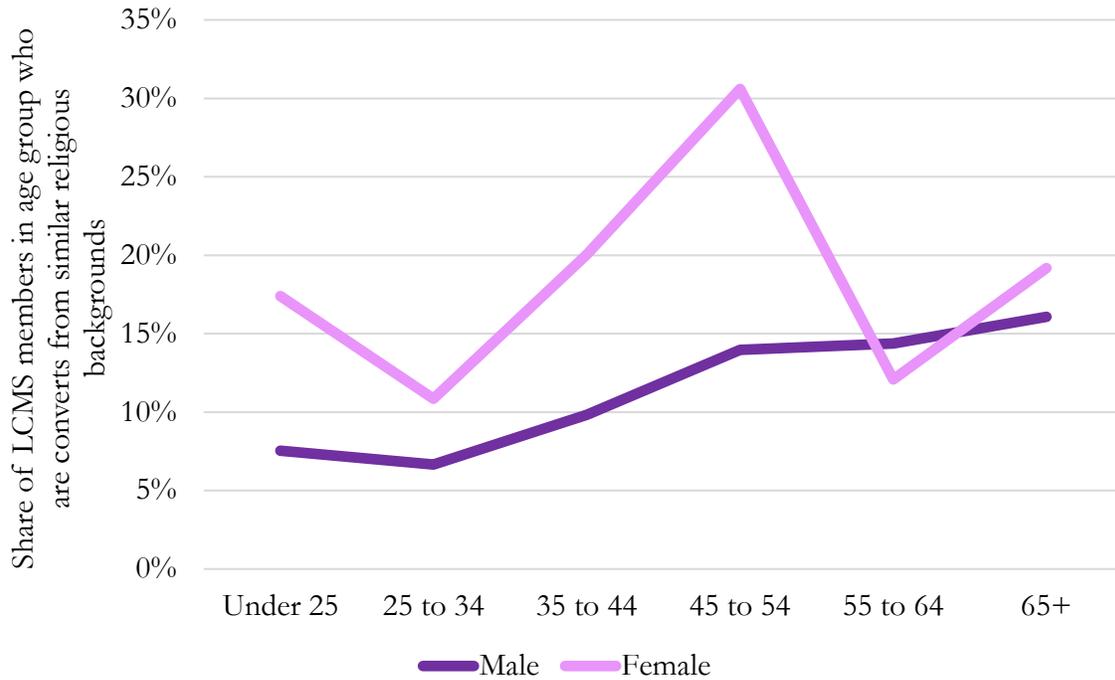
Whereas 10-30% of female LCMS members under age 55 are converts mostly from other Lutheran denominations, for male LCMS members the figures are just 5-15%. Evidently, the LCMS receives rather large numbers of young- and middle-aged female converts from other Lutheran denominations. **Figure 11** below simplifies this trend, showing the female share of lifelong LCMS members and of converts, by age.
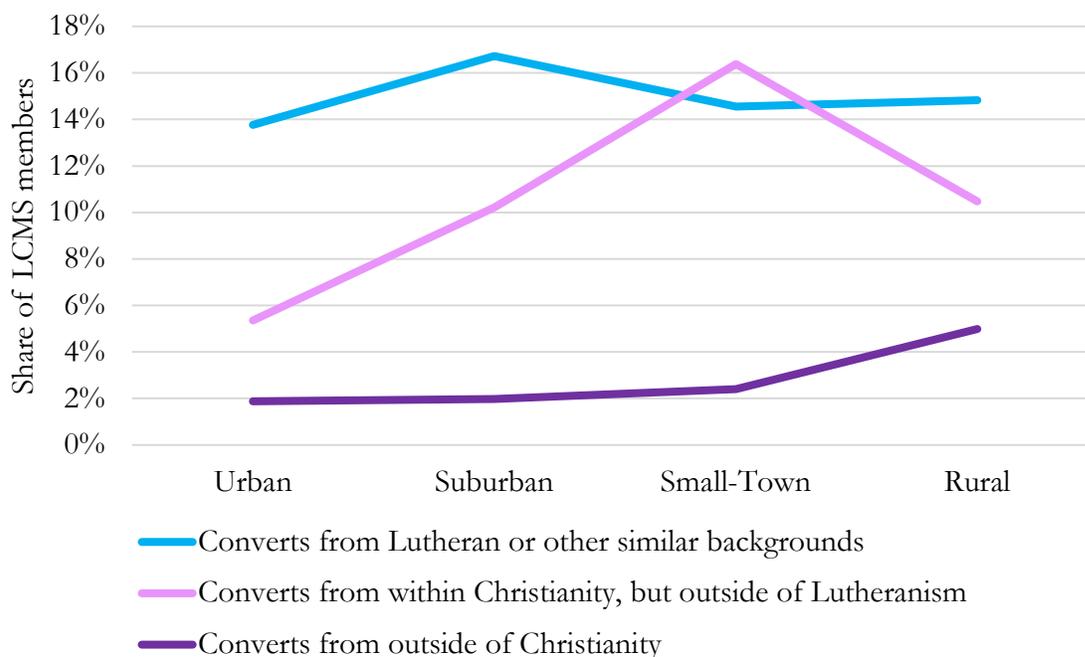
Figure 11: Female Share, by Age and Conversion History
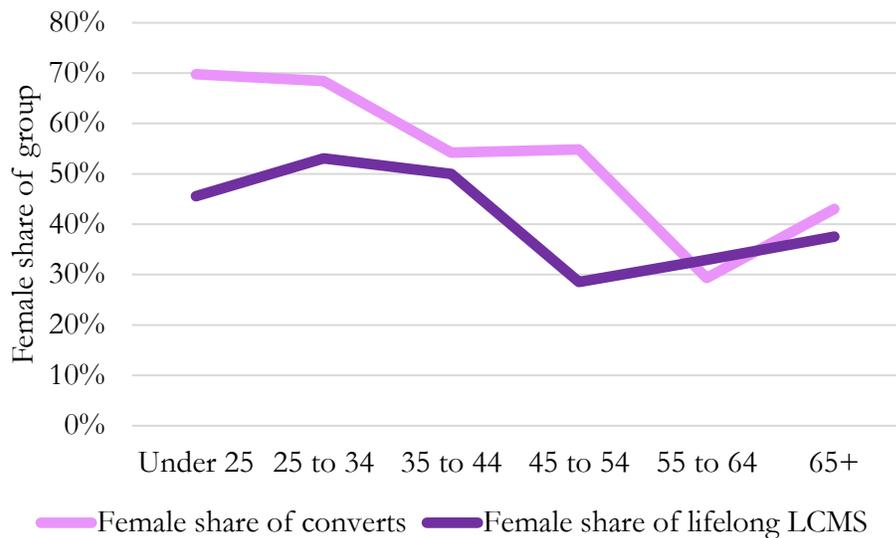
Considering all converts together, there is a clear age gradient. Young LCMS converts are overwhelmingly female, even as lifelong Lutherans are approximately sex-balanced at young ages. At older ages, male converts predominate. Likewise among lifelong Lutherans, there are more older men than older women.

Turning to geographic variation, LCMS converts from non-Christian backgrounds appear most common among respondents who reported living in rural areas, and least common among those living in urban areas, as shown in **Figure 12**.

Figure 12: Prevalence of Converts by Community Type

- Converts from Lutheran or other similar backgrounds
- Converts from within Christianity, but outside of Lutheranism
- Converts from outside of Christianity

There is little difference in rates of conversion from other Lutheran denominations. However, converts from other branches of Christianity are most common among respondents who reported living in small towns, and least common among those in urban areas. Broadly, this seems to suggest that LCMS members who live in urban areas are likelier to be lifelong LCMS members, whereas small-town and rural LCMS members are likelier to be converts. This runs directly counter to a common assumption that urban churches might draw individuals with more diverse backgrounds: it seems in fact that small-town and rural LCMS churches have memberships with the most diverse religious histories.

Finally, convert demography can also be broken out by educational attainment. For this group, only those aged 25 or older are included, since younger individuals are often still in school. **Figure 13** below shows that converts into the LCMS are most prevalent in the least-educated groups of LCMS members. That is to say, converts into the LCMS tend to have lower educational attainment than lifelong LCMS members. LCMS members average 16 years of schooling (i.e. a bachelor's degree), whereas converts from other Lutheran backgrounds average 15.8 years, and converts from other Christian backgrounds average 15.2 years. On the other hand, the 2-5% of LCMS members who are converts from non-Christian backgrounds average 16.2 years of education. Thus, converts into the LCMS from other Christian backgrounds tend to be less educated than lifelong Lutherans, while converts into the LCMS from non-Christian backgrounds tend to be more educated than lifelong Lutherans.

**Figure 13:** Prevalence of Converts by Educational Attainment
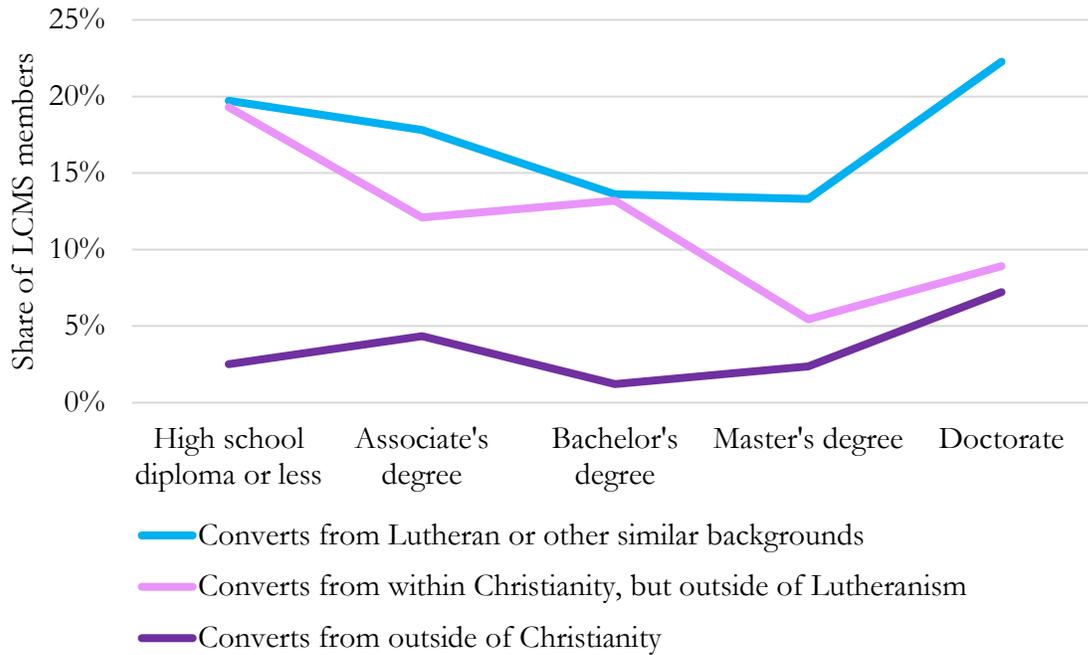
On the whole, conversion into the LCMS shows two distinct patterns. Conversion from relatively distant traditions (and especially from non-Christian backgrounds) tends to be balanced between the sexes, similar across ages, disproportionately rural, and highly educated. On the other hand, conversion from more similar traditions (and especially other Lutheran denominations) tends to be more skewed towards young women, tends to be less educated, and is slightly less rural.

Reasons for Conversion

The LRLS 2023 also asked converts about what factors influenced their conversion to the LCMS. To start with, the LRLS explored educational backgrounds. **Figure 14** shows that just over half of lifelong LCMS respondents reported having attended an LCMS school at some point between Kindergarten and high school graduation, vs. 9% of converts from other Lutheran backgrounds, 4% from other Christian backgrounds, and 2% from non-Christian backgrounds. These latter shares may seem low, but only about 0.05% of all non-Lutheran school enrollment in America is in LCMS schools. This implies that converts from non-Christian backgrounds are about 40 times as likely to have been in LCMS schools than the average American, converts from other Christian backgrounds are about 80 times as likely, and converts from other Lutheran backgrounds are about 180 times as likely.

Furthermore, it is not the case that 50% of LCMS children enroll in LCMS schools. The LRLS asked about Lutheran school enrollment of children in the respondent's household; only about 40% had ever been enrolled in LCMS schools. This 10 percentage point gap suggests that it is likely that LCMS children enrolled in LCMS schools are likelier to remain LCMS as adults than LCMS children not enrolled in LCMS schools. Likewise, that converts into the LCMS are astronomically likelier to have attended LCMS schools than might be expected from random chance implies that LCMS schools are a key element in personal conversion histories.

Figure 14: Prevalence of Lutheran Educational Background by Conversion History
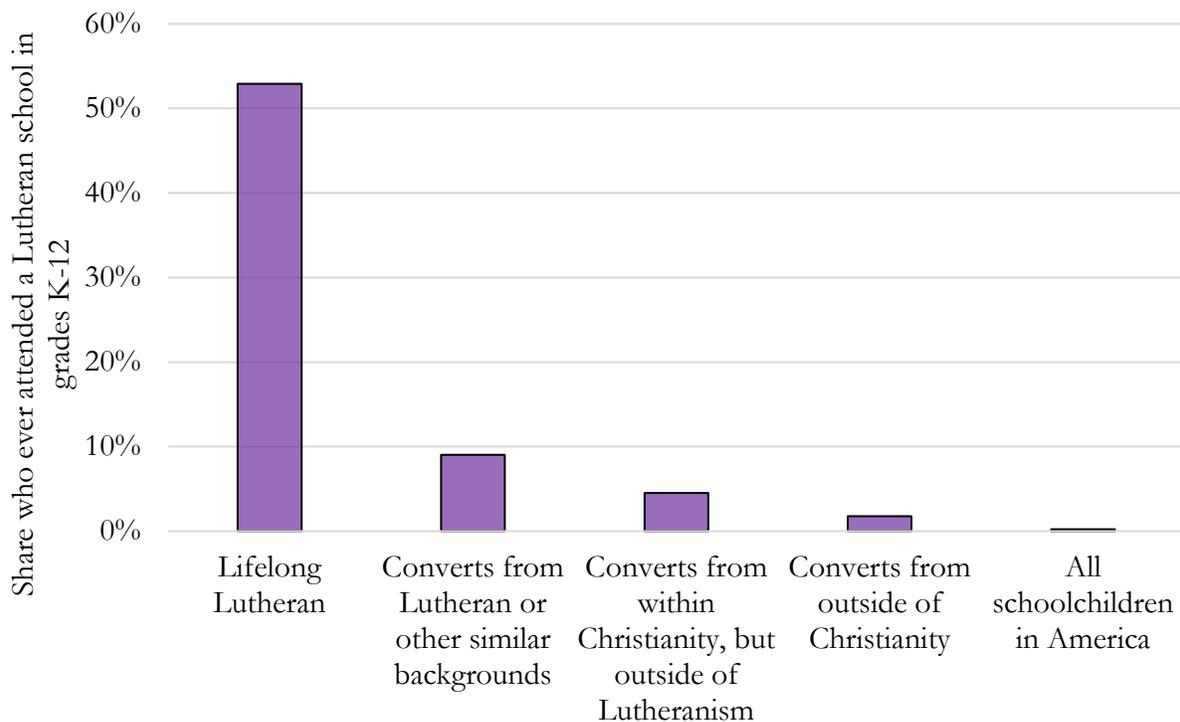
Additional support for the thesis that LCMS schools influence conversion histories can be found in congregational data, shown in **Figure 15** below using 2021 congregational reports.

Figure 15: Visitor, Baptism, and Confirmation Data by Church School Status
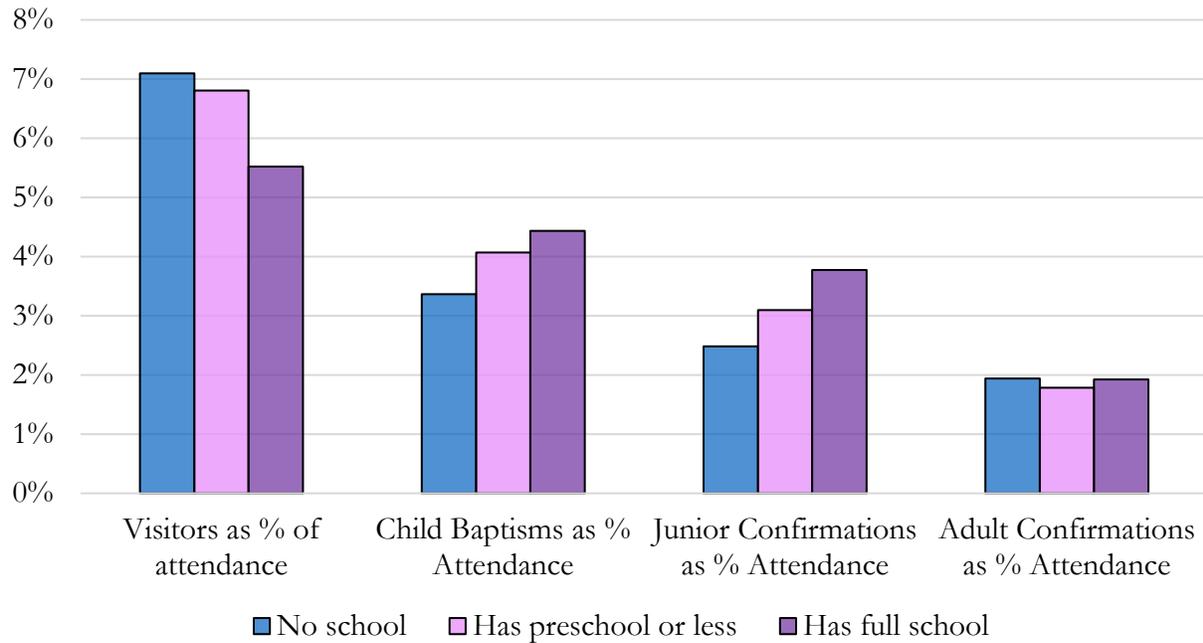

Churches with schools receive relatively fewer visitors than churches without schools. We might therefore expect them to have fewer adult confirmations, yet it is not so: the rate of adult confirmations is essentially identical for churches with full schools, just preschools or daycares, or no school. Thus, although churches with schools receive fewer visitors, the same number become members, implying that adults who visit churches that have schools are likelier to ultimately become members. In raw terms, churches without any school or with just a preschool will have about 190 visitor-attendance episodes for each 1 adult confirmation, whereas for churches with schools, there will be 1 adult confirmation for about every 150 visitor-attendance episodes.

Turning to children, it is unsurprising that churches with schools have more child baptisms and junior confirmations: churches may maintain schools precisely because they have many children in the congregation. But what is more striking is that junior confirmations as a share of child baptisms vary across school status. In churches with no school or just a preschool, junior confirmations amount to about 75% of child baptisms. But in churches with more than just a preschool, confirmations amount to about 85% of child baptisms. This 10 percentage point effect is, again, consistent with the notion that retention in and conversion into the LCMS may be associated with exposure to LCMS schools.

The influence of schools is also striking when reviewing data collected in LRLS 2023 about personal religious doubt. Respondents were asked when in life they had first experienced serious doubts about their religious beliefs. **Figure 16** below shows the results.

**Figure 16:** Occurrence of Religious Doubts by Conversion History
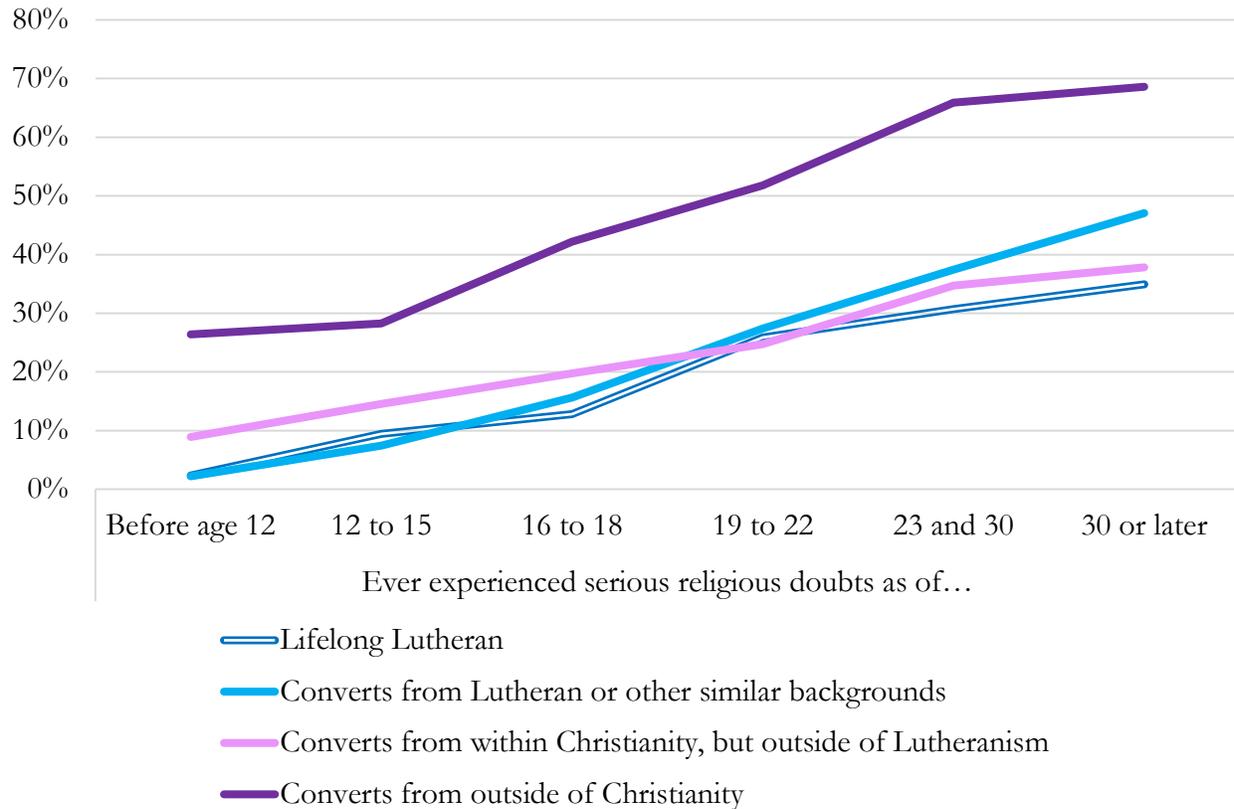
For all groups besides converts from outside of Christianity, majorities report never having had a period of serious religious doubt (i.e. the share who had ever experienced doubt never exceeded 50%). This is quite surprising, as it implies many converts from within Christianity converted to the LCMS without ever experiencing serious doubt about their prior beliefs. This issue will be revisited later in this report.

What's striking is that about 1-in-4 non-Christians who ultimately converted to Lutheranism had already begun doubting their old faith before age 12, and about 1-in-10 among converts from other branches of Christianity. By age 18, over 40% of non-Christians who would ultimately convert to the LCMS had experienced serious doubts, 20% over non-Lutheran Christians, 15% of non-LCMS Lutherans, and 12% of lifelong LCMS members. Thus, religious doubt begins very early in life. Of people who would *ever* experience a period of serious religious doubt and questioning, 45% experienced it before age 19, and almost 70% before age 22. In other words, ages 10 to 22 (and especially 10 to 18) are extremely decisive ages for faith formation. Children begin to experience serious religious doubts at very young ages. It is therefore plausible that LCMS schools might have a key role in addressing those doubts. It should be noted that there is virtually no difference in the timeline of religious doubt between lifelong Lutherans who attended LCMS schools and those who did not: LCMS education does not prevent doubts from forming, but may have a role in shaping how children respond to those doubts.

Thus, LCMS schools are probably one key factor in shaping young peoples' likelihood of conversion into the LCMS. Another key factor is personal doubt: converts, especially from non-Christian backgrounds, are likelier to report that they experienced serious doubts about their prior faith earlier in life.

Next, the LRLS asked respondents what specific factors influenced their conversion. Respondents were provided a list of possible factors, and could select as many as applied to them. This approach has obvious biases: respondents may prefer not to report certain influences on their behavior, or may not correctly recall what influences exist. Nonetheless, this kind of direct question is a valuable starting point for understanding what kinds of experiences tend to occur alongside conversion into the LCMS. **Figure 17** below shows the factors identified by converts from other Lutheran traditions vs. other converts.

Figure 17: Prevalence of Specific Conversion Influences

■ Converts from Lutheran or other similar backgrounds   □ All other converts
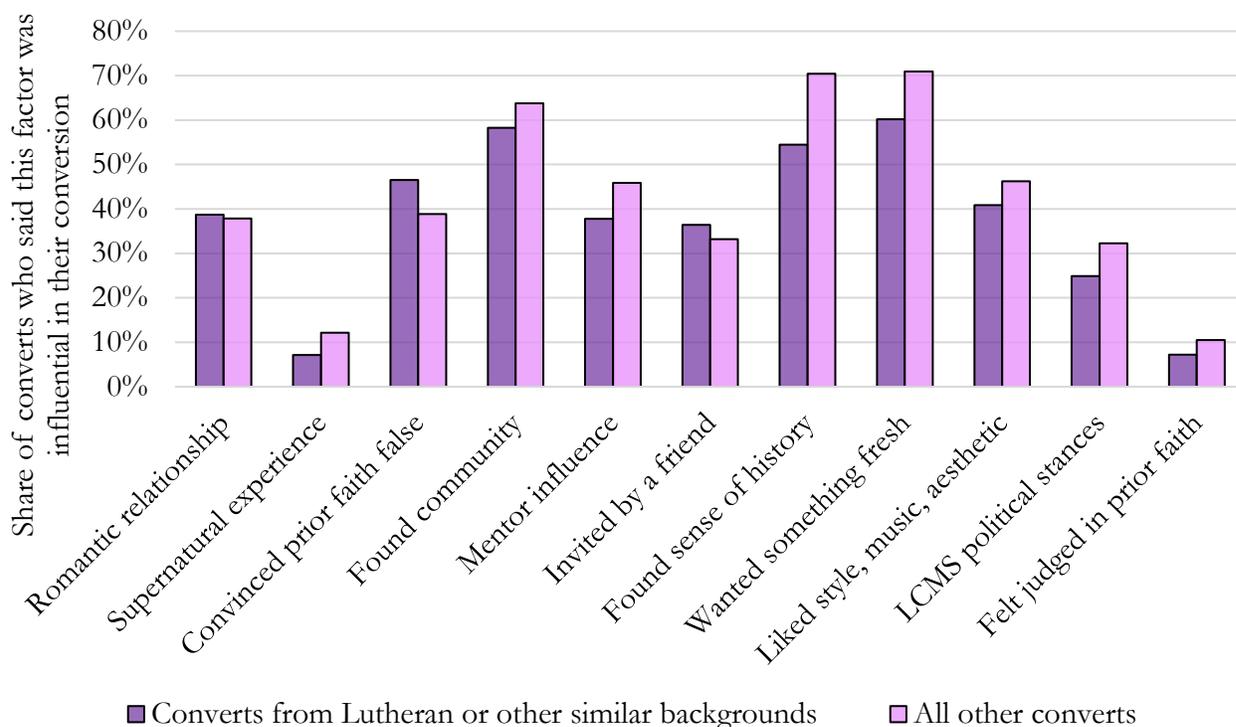
On the whole, converts from other Lutheran traditions give fairly similar lists of factors that shaped their conversion experience compared to converts from more distant traditions. The most common things both groups of converts reported that attracted them to the LCMS were that they found a sense of history or rootedness, they wanted something fresh and different from their prior experience, and that they found a community. But there were some important variations: converts from more distant traditions were likelier to say that they found a sense of history, wanted something fresh, were influence by a mentor, liked the LCMS style or music, and preferred LCMS political stances. On the other hand, converts from other Lutheran denominations were likelier to report that they were convinced that their prior faith was false or that they were invited by a friend.

A few important notes stand out. First, very few LCMS converts of any kind report a supernatural experience as part of their conversion story. Likewise, very few people convert into the LCMS because they felt judged in their prior faith. Neither supernaturalism nor judgmentalism appear to be strong factors in LCMS conversion accounts, according to the converts themselves. Community, history, and freshness or distinctiveness are the dominant theme. The simple summary is: the LCMS' unique appeal to converts is that it offers a unique kind of historically rooted community.

Equally notable to this dynamic is the fact that just 1/3 of converts report being invited to church by a friend. Most converts into the LCMS do not arise from "relational evangelism" in the sense of people inviting their friends to church. LCMS converts are more likely to report a *romantic relationship* was a factor in their conversion than they are to report an invitation by a friend was a factor. Almost 40% of converts had a romantic tie to the LCMS before or during conversion. Meanwhile, only about 40% of converts said that becoming "convinced their prior belief was false" was an influence on their conversion.

This does not mean those converts still retain their old beliefs. In fact, they do not: all groups of converts show strong agreement with LRLS-surveyed statements of Lutheran doctrines. Rather, social conversion preceded doxic conversion. Even among LCMS converts who reported being convinced that prior beliefs were wrong, invitations by friends, romantic ties, mentorship, and a sense of community all show up as extremely common influences. Most LCMS converts become integrated into LCMS communities long before they adopt LCMS doctrines. Thus, the typical LCMS adult confirmand is likely to be an individual who has been at least somewhat socially integrated with congregation members for a long time: a sibling, spouse, friend, coworker, or recurrent guest, who only belatedly arrived at agreement with the Lutheran confessions.

However, converts into different LCMS subcultures do have different experiences of conversion. **Figure 18** shows the prevalence of specific conversion influences broken out by whether the convert reports attending a traditional, contemporary, or mixed-style service.

Figure 18: Prevalence of Specific Conversion Influences by Church Subculture
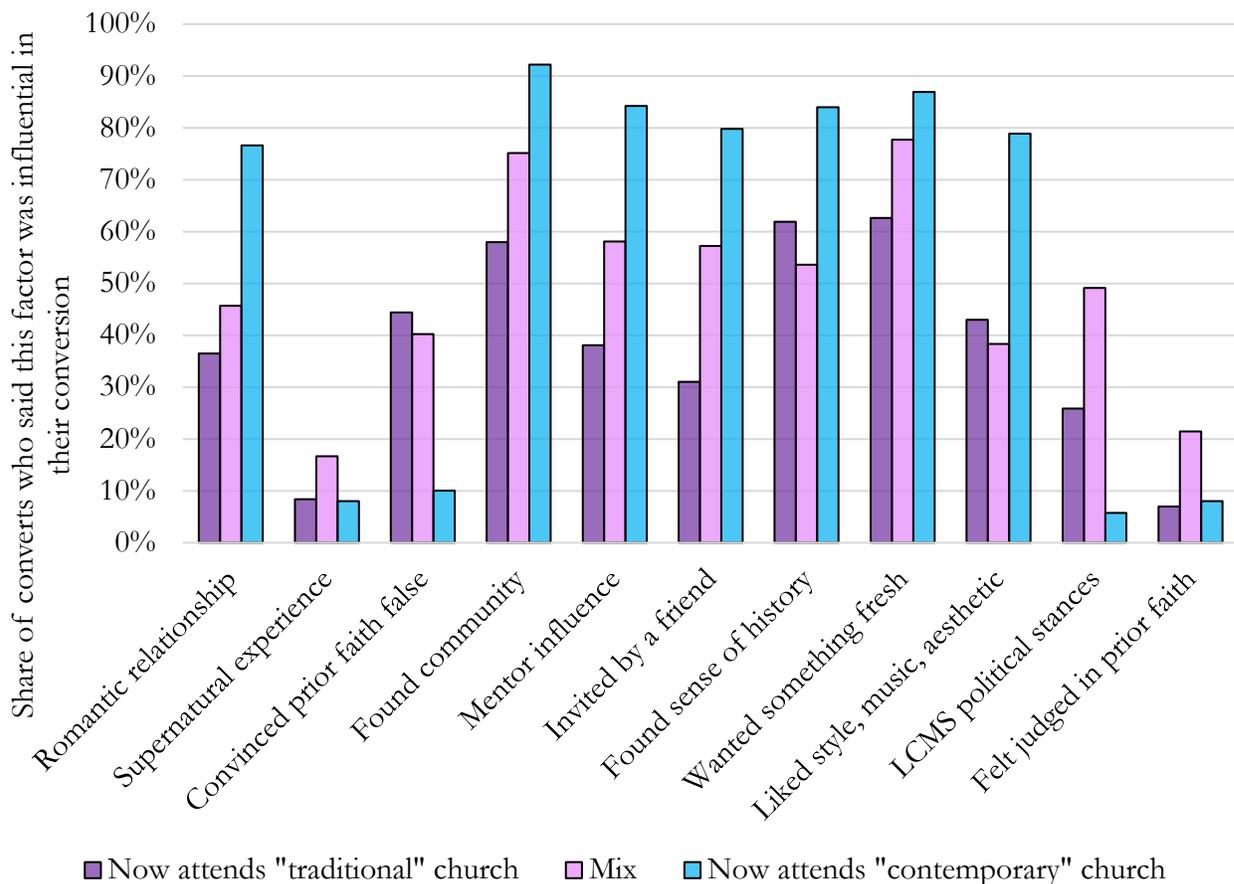
Almost 80% of converts who attend contemporary services report a romantic relationship around the time of conversion. Over 90% report a strong sense of community. Indeed, converts in contemporary settings are very likely to agree that all community-related factors greatly influenced their experience. Additionally, about 80% of converts in contemporary services reported liking the style, music, or aesthetic as a factor in conversion. On the other hand, just 10% of these converts said that a conviction that their prior beliefs were false was a key factor in their conversion. To reiterate, these converts in contemporary services do report high agreement rates with statements of Lutheran belief today; they are simply reporting that this was not a decisive factor in their conversion.

On the other hand, converts in traditional services also report high rates of community and relational experiences: over 35% report a romantic attachment and almost 60% report that finding a community mattered to them. That said, converts in traditional services were not very likely to report invitation by a friend or the influence of a mentor. They were also less likely to report finding a sense of history, a preferred aesthetic, or something fresh and unique. This is very surprising, since traditional LCMS services in fact offer a more culturally differentiated aesthetic and style of worship than contemporary LCMS services, and traditional services often consider themselves to be presenting a more historically rooted kind of community. In practice, converts in contemporary services often experience those services as nonetheless creating a sense of rootedness in history, and converts to traditional services do not report that traditional liturgy was a key aesthetic motivation for conversion.

Rather, converts in traditional services are far more likely to report that they were convinced that their prior faith was false. This reason was still just 45% of converts in these services, but no single reason captured much more than 60% of converts in traditional services, so 45% is a relatively high rate in comparison. Among converts in traditional services, then, doxic conversion often precedes social conversion. These converts may have first encountered the LCMS via Lutheran publications, podcasts, or theological writings, and so often become convinced of LCMS doctrines before encountering LCMS congregations, or very shortly thereafter.

The 11 factors offered to converts can be simplified using a method known as clustering. This approach identifies subtle patterns linking together responses across questions, and then identifies underlying factors that explain those patterns. Individual respondents are then scored on those factors, and assigned to groups based on which factors predominate. This method yields four groups of converts into the LCMS: converts drawn in by "fresh community" (30% of converts), converts drawn in by "romance and friendship" (36% of converts), converts drawn in by "sound doctrine" (18% of converts), and converts drawn in by "acceptance and forgiveness" (16% of converts). These cluster names were developed by following up with a small number of respondents who fit the profile for each cluster, and asking them, "Do you feel that [name of cluster] is a good description of what drew you to the LCMS?" While respondents were not uniform in accepting these labels, these labels did achieve supermajority acceptance in all groups resampled. **Figure 19** below shows what share of converts fell into each conversion experience group and LCMS subculture; all bars combined add up to 100%, meaning 100% of converts. As already shown above, "Confessional and Traditional" churches have higher prevalences of converts to begin with.

**Figure 19:** Converts by Conversion Experience Group and LCMS Subculture
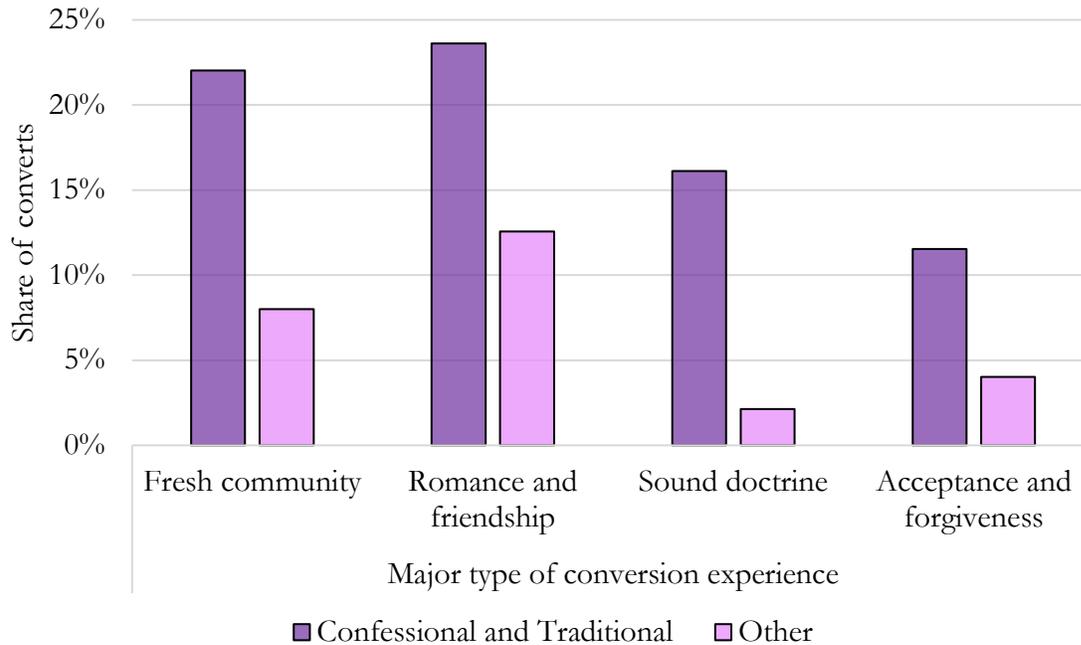
The single most common conversion experience in the LCMS is someone who converts to join a Confessional and Traditional church, with romantic ties or close friendships forming the key influence on that experience (24% of all converts). The second most common conversion experience in the LCMS is someone who converts to join a Confessional and Traditional church in search of a new, fresh kind of community, likely a more historically rooted one (22% of converts). The third most common conversion experience is conversion, again, into a Confessional and Traditional church, in search of sound Lutheran doctrine. Then fourth, is conversion into other LCMS churches (i.e. those that respondents identified as missional, or as liturgically contemporary or hybrid) with romance and friendship as a key influence. Fifth is conversion into Confessional and Traditional churches in pursuit of acceptance and forgiveness, and sixth is conversion into other LCMS churches in pursuit of fresh community.

Another way to subdivide the data is by respondent-perceived congregational growth trajectories. As noted above, respondent reports of congregational growth may not be accurate, but are probably not asymmetrically biased within groups. As a result, while overall numbers may be too positive, the relative trends are probably approximately correct. **Figure 20** shows how converts are distributed, by conversion experience group and perceived church growth trajectory.

Converts seeking fresh community are about twice as likely to report being in a growing congregation as a shrinking one. Approximately the same is true for converts seeking acceptance and forgiveness. Thus, conversion for these reasons may be associated with something like the average LCMS congregational growth experience, since **Figure 1** showed that LCMS members are about 60% likelier to report growth than shrinkage, and converts (being definitionally a source of growth) probably are clustered in less-declining congregations.

But converts who arrived at the LCMS via romance and friendship actually report slightly greater prevalence of shrinkage than growth. Thus, conversion for romance or friendship is associated with adverse congregational growth trajectories.

Figure 20: Converts by Conversion Experience Group and Church Growth Trajectory
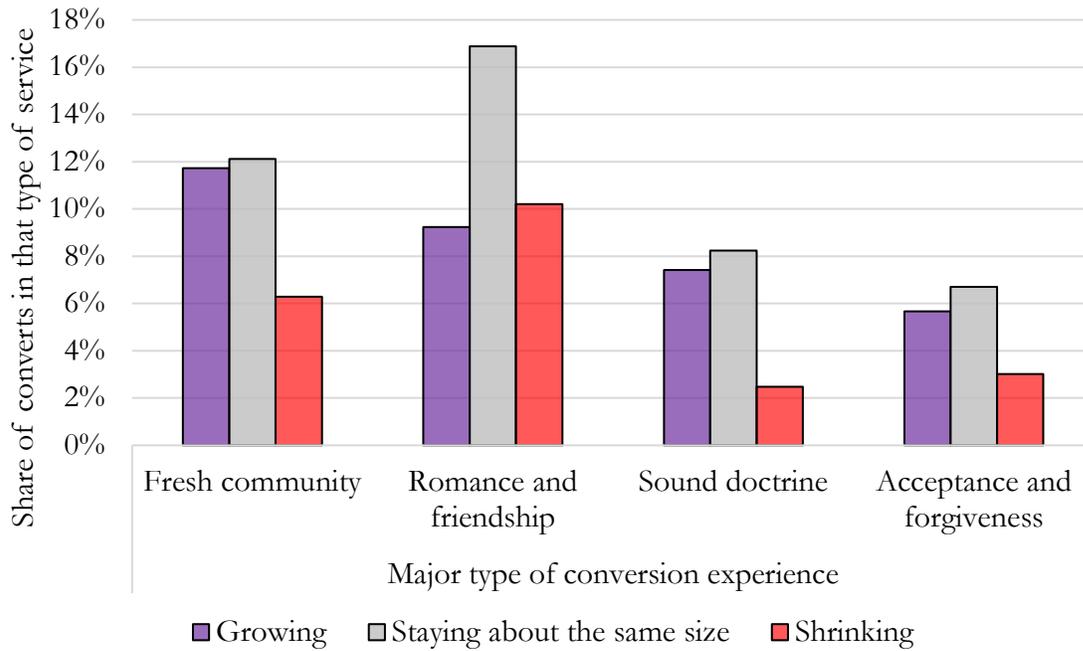
Finally, converts seeking sound doctrine are almost four times as likely to report congregational growth as shrinkage. This could plausibly suggest that converts seeking sound doctrine actually are sorting into congregations with less negative congregational growth trajectories.

Figure 21: Converts Type Shares of Congregational Growth Trajectory Groups
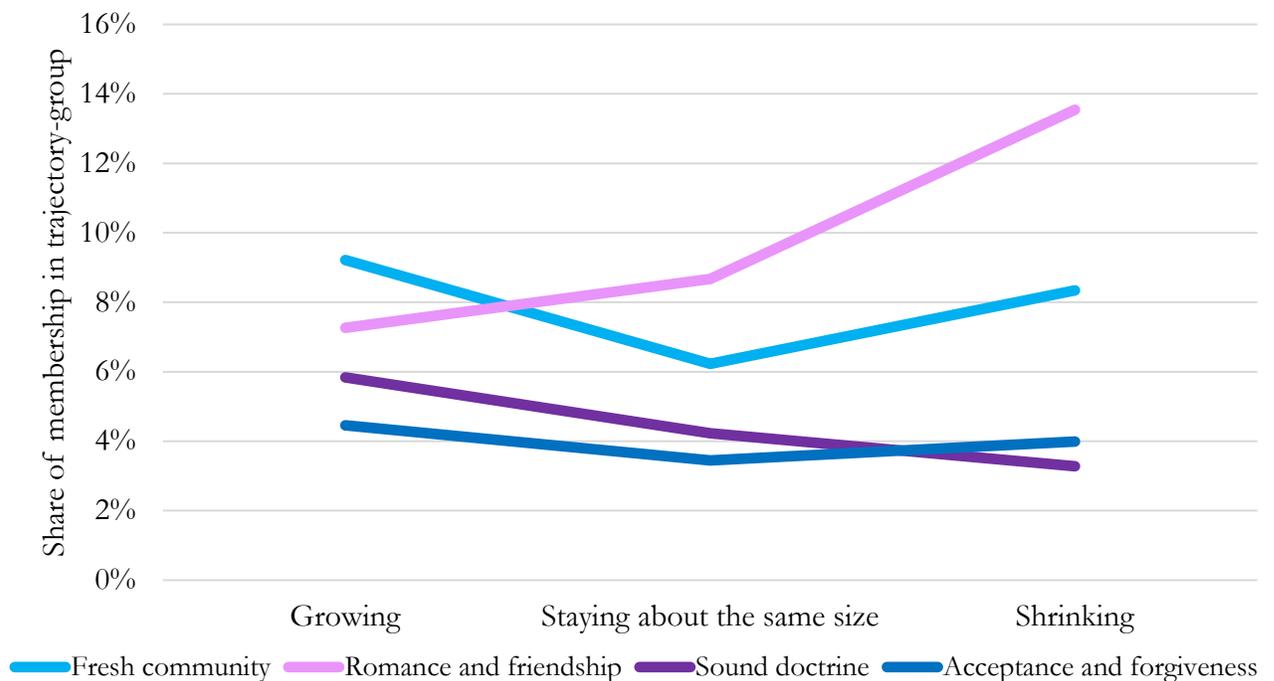
Another way to explore this question is to ask: what share of the LCMS members in self-reported growing, stable, or shrinking churches fall into each convert category? **Figure 21** above shows this data. In congregations which respondents believe are growing, converts seeking fresh community are 9% of members, those who arrived via romance and friendship are 7%, those seeking sound doctrine 6%, and those seeking acceptance and forgiveness 4%. But in congregations which respondents believe are shrinking, almost 14% of members are converts via romance and friendship, a similar 8% are seeking fresh community, 4% are seeking acceptance and forgiveness, and a diminutive 3% are seeking sound doctrine.

Put bluntly, growing LCMS churches are those that appeal to potential converts through sound doctrine and correction of error, and shrinking LCMS churches are those that appeal to converts through personal friendships and romantic ties.

There is some additional evidence in favor of the notion that churches that emphasize distinctive Lutheran doctrine may receive more converts and have more positive growth trajectories. By comparing data collected in 2017 to identify a small subset of LCMS churches with highly liturgical worship styles to recent attendance and membership reports, it's possible to assess if LCMS membership decline is more or less severe in the very most liturgical churches. These churches are a small subset of LCMS membership, representing less than 10% of weekly attendance synod-wide, but were identified based on strict conformity with traditional liturgy at least as of 2017, so make an ideal test case for the idea that the most determinedly "Confessional and Traditional" churches might be different. And, as **Figure 22** shows below, they really are different.

Figure 22: Membership and Attendance in Highly Liturgical vs. Other Churches
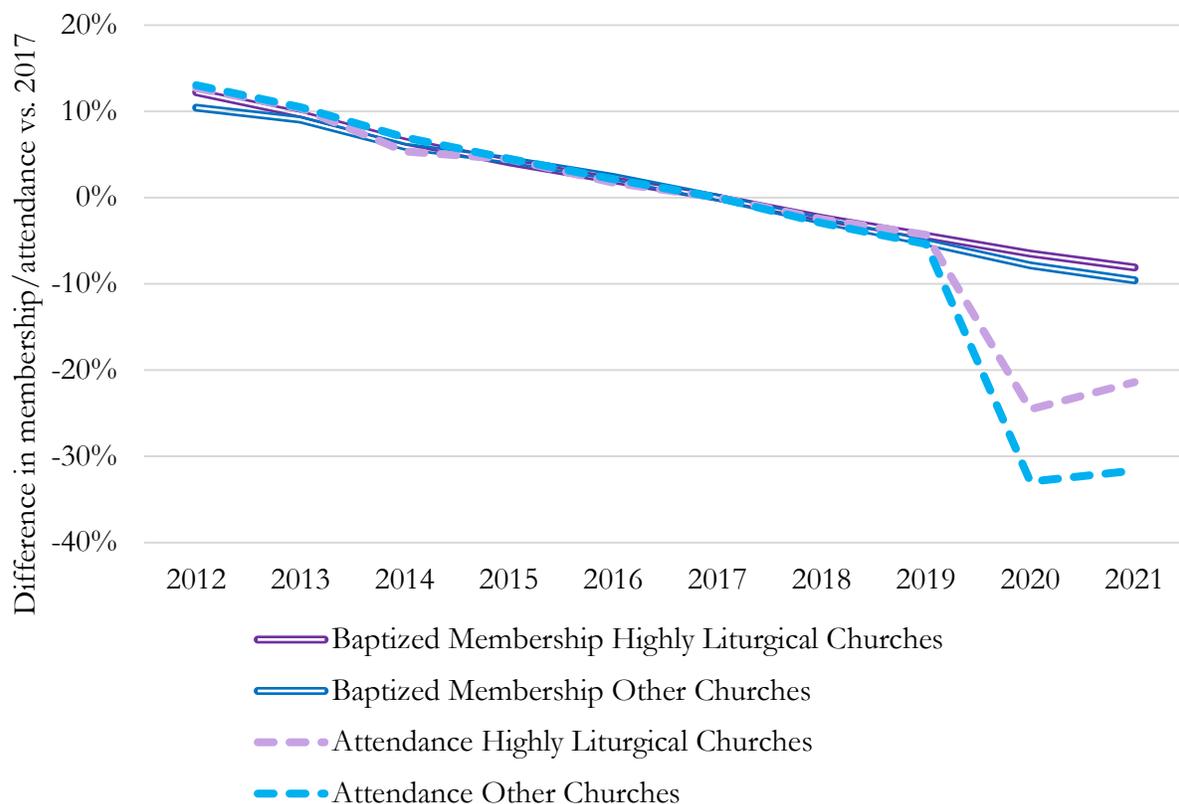
There is virtually no meaningful difference in membership and attendance trajectories from 2012-2017, though this is partly a statistical artifact, since the two groups were defined by traits observed in 2017. Starting in 2019, highly liturgical churches began to show signs of slightly less negative changes in membership and attendance. Then in 2020 and 2021, the highly liturgical churches experienced far, far less negative changes in attendance and membership. The attendance effect could relate to attitudes towards online services, which don't count for most attendance totals: highly liturgical churches may have resisted going online, encouraging more in-person attendance. The result may have been higher attendance rates for a fixed membership base in 2020 and 2021. However, highly liturgical churches are also (according to their own reported membership characteristics) somewhat older than other churches, on average, and so their members should have had higher COVID fatality rates. And yet, their *baptized membership* also declined by less than among other churches, when it should have declined more. This implies that highly liturgical churches not only retained higher attendance for a fixed body of members, but actually had more positive membership changes even before accounting for their likely-higher death rates during COVID. This is strong evidence that, at least in recent years, highly liturgical LCMS churches have seen less severe numeric declines, which is in turn consistent with the results shown in previous figures suggesting that "Confessional and Traditional" churches receive more converts.

In sum, converts into the LCMS report a variety of reasons and influences. Community and personal ties are by far the most common factors shaping conversion histories. However, converts into less-declining congregations are disproportionately likely to report doctrinal reasons for conversion. In general, Confessional and Traditional churches receive more converts than other churches, and converts into these churches are more likely to report that their conversion experience was overtly doctrinally informed.

Racial Ideas

The primary focus on the LRLS 2023's new questions was on religious background and congregational details. However, since the last few years have seen significant public debate in the LCMS about the role of various racial ideas, the LRLS 2023 also included two new questions about race. Because race is a sensitive topic, it is also a very difficult topic to survey. Respondents may be hesitant to report their true views on the topic. Thus, questions must be worded in a way which is neutral and oblique. The downside of this approach, however, is that responses to questions may yield only a vague sense of actual underlying beliefs.

Amid a larger battery of questions about various opinions, LRLS 2023 respondents saw two questions addressing ideas about human diversity, with which they could Strongly agree, Strongly disagree, or choose intermediate options:

1. God made the world with an order and hierarchy of peoples, nations, and ethnicities.
2. The process of evolution and natural selection has led to different groups of humans having different traits, which leads to some groups having considerable natural advantages or disadvantages.

Both of these questions inquire about a respondent's beliefs about hierarchies or inequalities between human populations. The first ascribes ethnic hierarchies to the order of creation, and the second ascribes inequalities between human groups to evolution. These represent two quite different kinds of ideas: the first sees ethnic hierarchy as a fundamental feature of theistic creation, whereas the second question is not religious at all. In principle, these questions query what can be called "Theistic racial hierarchy" and "Naturalistic racial hierarchy."

What neither question queries is "racism" or "white supremacy." Individuals could agree or disagree with either question, and still have a wide range of actual beliefs about race. A person could agree that God made the world with a hierarchy of ethnicities, but that this hierarchy was broken by the fall and cannot be identified or restored, and so humans are effectively all equal. Or they could believe God made a hierarchy, and Brazilians are at the top of it. They could believe God made some races higher than others, and that those races have duties of compassion to others. Or, they could believe that God made the white race superior, with a duty to rule. The LRLS cannot distinguish between these attitudes, either among respondents who endorse theistic racial hierarchy or naturalistic racial hierarchy. Thus, the LRLS cannot measure "racist" beliefs nor "supremacist" beliefs, white or otherwise. It can only measure the extent to which respondents assert the existence of racial hierarchies or inherent advantages, and these beliefs are probably not identical with racist or supremacist attitudes.

That said, while they are not identical, they may be correlated. Many people who agree with a statement of racial hierarchy may be innocent of any personal racism—but it can be safely assumed that most actual racists or supremacists *would* agree with at least one of these statements. Thus, these questions can be used to estimate an upper, maximum measure of the extent of racist or supremacist attitudes within the LCMS.

And it turns out, as shown in **Figure 23**, that agreement with racially hierarchical statements is fairly uncommon in the LCMS. In terms of theistic racial hierarchy, just 6-7% of LCMS members strongly agreed with the statement offered across both Confessional and Traditional LCMS members and other LCMS members. Including respondents who agreed but not strongly, theistic racial hierarchy commands just 20% agreement among LCMS members, while majorities disagree with this statement. As already noted, many people might affirm the statement yet reject actual racist attitudes. In follow-up discussions with 2 respondents who "Strongly agreed" with the theistic hierarchy view, one gave exactly this explanation. Follow-ups with 5 "Agree" respondents yielded 3 who did not interpret the question to imply racism. As such, it's likely that actually less than 10% of LCMS members affirm genuinely racially hierarchical beliefs about creation.

Affirmations of naturalistic racial hierarchy are even rarer: just 2% of LCMS members strongly agree that evolution has led some groups of humans to have inherent advantages, and less than 20% agree at all. It's likely that the reference to evolution triggered stronger disagreements, since many respondents also disagreed with other questions about evolution.

Figure 23: Opinions About Racial Hierarchy by LCMS Subculture
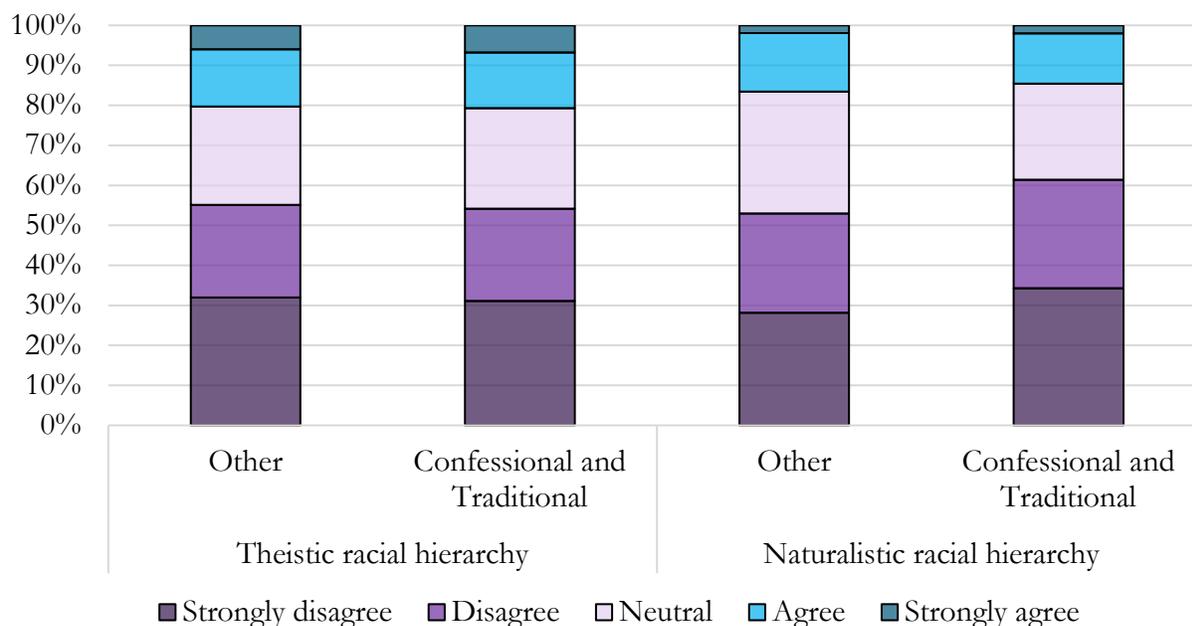
However, 10-20% of LCMS members agreeing with some form of racially hierarchical belief may seem disconcerting, even though it is a quite small minority overall. It may also seem surprising to regular churchgoers: can one in five or one in ten people in attendance really be harboring the view that God or evolution has created a hierarchy of races?

Prior figures in this report are weighted to reflect LCMS members. But not all members attend with equal frequency—some attend every week, some rarely or not at all. As a result, the characteristics of people present on a Sunday morning can vary quite significantly from the characteristics of all members. For simplicity, each person is given a score between 0 and 4 for each of the two questions: 0 indicated strong disagreement with racial hierarchy, 4 indicated strong agreement. These values were then summed, such that each individual scored between 0 and 8. Individuals with a score of 0 strongly disagreed with both statements of racial hierarchy, while individuals with a score of 8 strongly agreed with both. **Figure 24** below shows the average score for LCMS members with each attendance rate, and then separately shows scores for LCMS church workers.

Figure 24: Racial Hierarchical Belief Index Scores by Attendance and Member Type
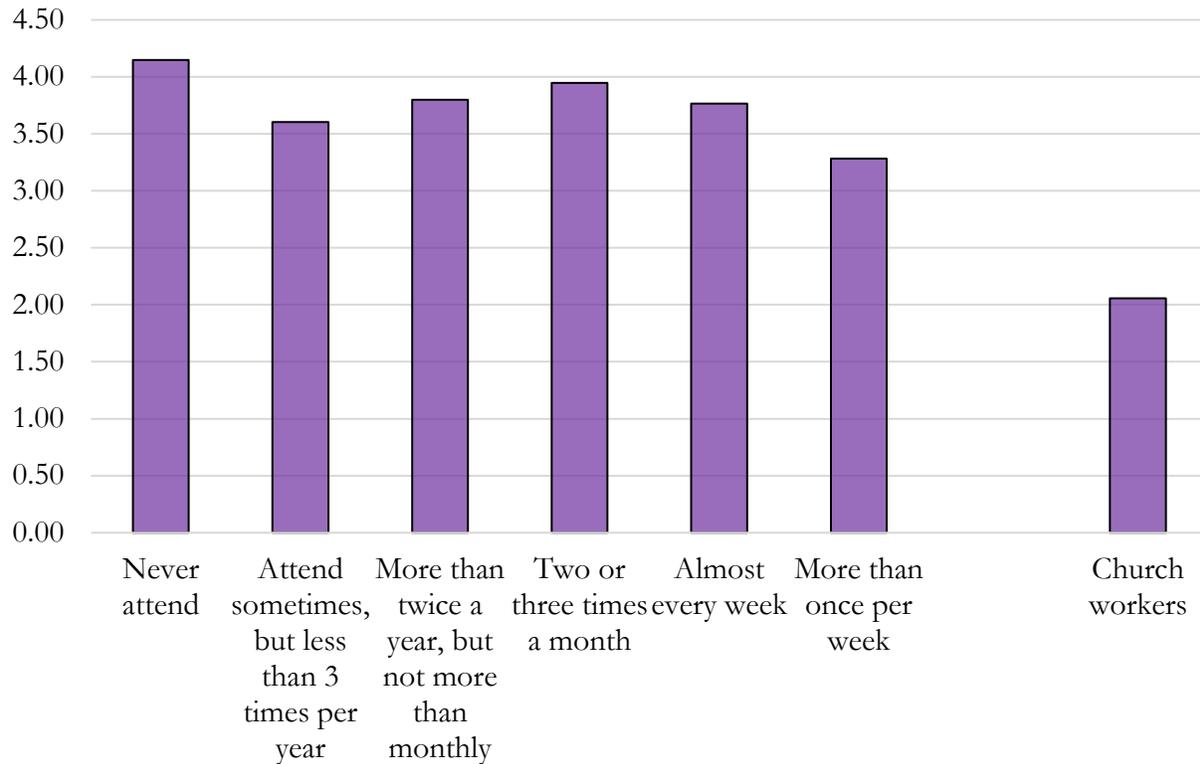
Average scores for non-church-worker members range from 3 to 4 or so, suggesting that all groups have high rates of ambivalence on these questions. But in general, the highest scores (indicating strongest belief in racial hierarchies) are among LCMS members who attend church with the lowest frequency, whereas the lowest scores (indicating most disagreement with racial hierarchies) occur among the most frequently-attending LCMS members. LCMS church workers show even more disagreement with racial hierarchies than laypeople.

Thus, on the whole, belief in racial hierarchy in the LCMS is associated with weaker congregational attachment. At the same time, LCMS laypeople and church workers have appreciably different views on these subjects. It is clearly the case that LCMS laypeople are much likelier to believe in racial hierarchies than LCMS church workers. Since the LCMS as a matter of public confession rejects the existence of these hierarchies, this could be an important area for improved catechesis.

Beliefs About the Means of Grace

Finally, in this last section, a discussion is offered on a longstanding area of interest in this and prior LRLS waves: beliefs about the means of grace. LRLS 2023 included an expanded battery of questions to probe what LCMS members believe about the means of grace (i.e. communion, baptism, absolution, preaching, scripture, and, one which was not surveyed, the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren). Because theological arguments often depend on precise language even as survey questions require the use of imprecise, conversational language, it is grossly unfair to characterize a respondent's beliefs based on the answer to just one or two questions. Many respondents interpret questions in different ways, a topic discussed in great length in the LRLS 2022 report. Thus, LRLS 2023 used seven questions to construct an index. **Table 1** below shows the weights assigned to questions to construct that index.

**Table 1:** LRLS Questions Used to Construct Index of Means Beliefs and Response Weights

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
When I receive communion, I believe that I really am eating and drinking Jesus' body and blood.	0	1	2	3	4
It's important to baptize babies, because baptism gives eternal salvation.	0	1	2	3	4
Even if you were born into a Christian family, to have sincere faith as an adult you should have a point in your life where you decided to embrace Jesus as your personal Lord and savior.	0	-1	-2	-3	-4
While there might be some rare exceptions, in general, the only people who should receive communion are people who are members of the church.	0	1	2	3	4
The Bible says that the main way the Holy Spirit saves people is by working through the public ministry of Word and Sacrament in visible churches.	0	2	4	6	8
God sincerely wants all people to be saved, and so anybody who confesses their sins, is baptized, and receives communion in the church will be saved.	0	1	2	3	4
People have way too much confidence that they can predict how the Holy Spirit will work to create faith.	0	-1	-2	-3	-4

Thus, respondents received more positive scores if they "Agreed" that they believe they "really are eating and drinking Jesus' body and blood," or that "Baptism gives eternal salvation," or that only church members should commune, or that anybody who confesses, is baptized, and receives communion will be saved. Respondents received *double* positive weights for agreement with "The Bible says that the main way the Holy Spirit saves people is by working through the public ministry of Word and Sacrament in visible churches." On the other hand, negative scores were assigned to the belief that true faith requires a "decision to embrace Jesus as your personal Lord and savior," or that "People have way too much confidence that they can predict how the Holy Spirit will work to create faith."

All of these questions are ambiguous. Respondents left comments about many of them explaining their reasoning, and follow-up contact with respondents confirmed that interpretations of these questions varied. However, ambiguity was item-specific, not general: respondents who disliked the wording of one of these questions usually felt at least 4 or 5 of them were very clear and had obviously "correct" answers. Of 28 respondents that received follow-up on these questions, just 3 felt that 5 or more of these questions were very ambiguous and had no correct answer. All 3 of those were pastors, consistent with the results of LRLS 2022, which showed that LCMS pastors are resistant to explaining LCMS teachings using conversational English. Thus, scores on the final index for pastors may require some caveats, as LCMS pastors often do not interpret survey questions in ordinary, conversational ways.

In general, higher scores on this index of beliefs about the means of grace point towards an individual who puts a greater priority on the visible means of grace in terms of how they believe humans receive eternal salvation. Lower scores identify an individual who puts much less of a priority on visible means, and believes salvation may more frequently occur apart from or detached from visible means. As such, this score can be summarized as "Means-Prioritizing." **Figure 25** below shows the share of laypeople, pastors, and other church workers who had various index scores.

**Figure 25:** Index of Means Beliefs Distribution by LCMS Member Type
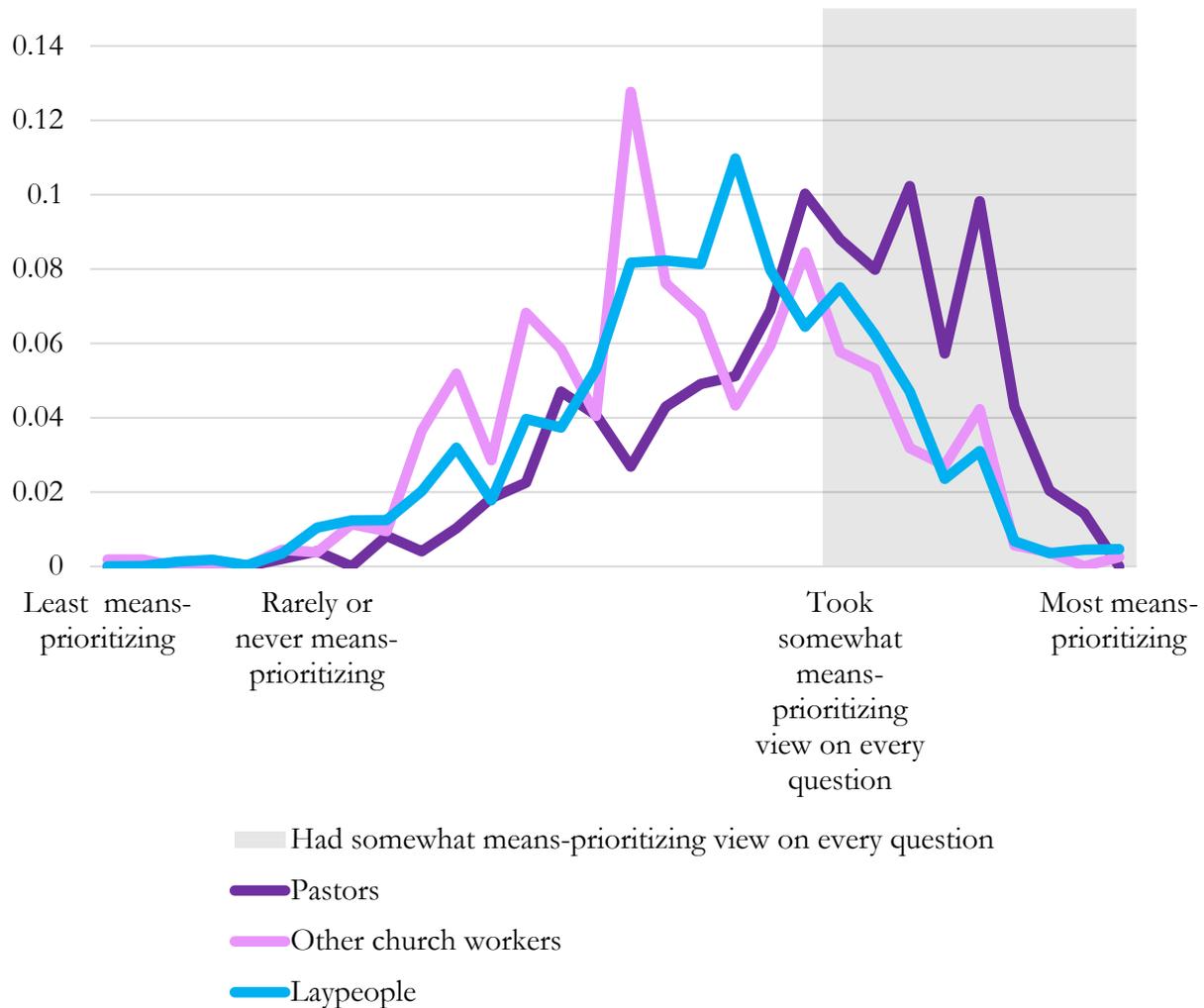
Pastors are very noticeably shifted to the right of laypeople, indicating more visible-means-prioritizing views. Other church workers may be very-slightly shifted to the left of laypeople, indicating that other church workers may place slightly less emphasis on the visible means of grace than ordinary laypeople. However, that difference is rather small.

On the whole, 50% of pastors gave a means-prioritizing answer to all 7 questions, vs. 26% of laypeople and 22% of other church workers. Almost 75% of pastors gave the equivalent of a means-prioritizing answer to all but one question, compared to 51% of laypeople and 41% of other church workers. Less than 3% of all groups gave reliably non-means-prioritizing answers. Large shares of all groups gave mixed answers: selecting means-prioritizing answers on some questions, and not on others.

Pooling all member types together, we can also assess if there are differences between "Confessional and Traditional" LCMS members and other LCMS members, and indeed there are. As shown in **Figure 26**, about 33% of "Confessional and Traditional" LCMS members selected uniformly means-prioritizing answers, and 59% did so all but once; for other LCMS members the shares were 16% and 40%.

Figure 26: Index of Means Beliefs Distribution by LCMS Subculture
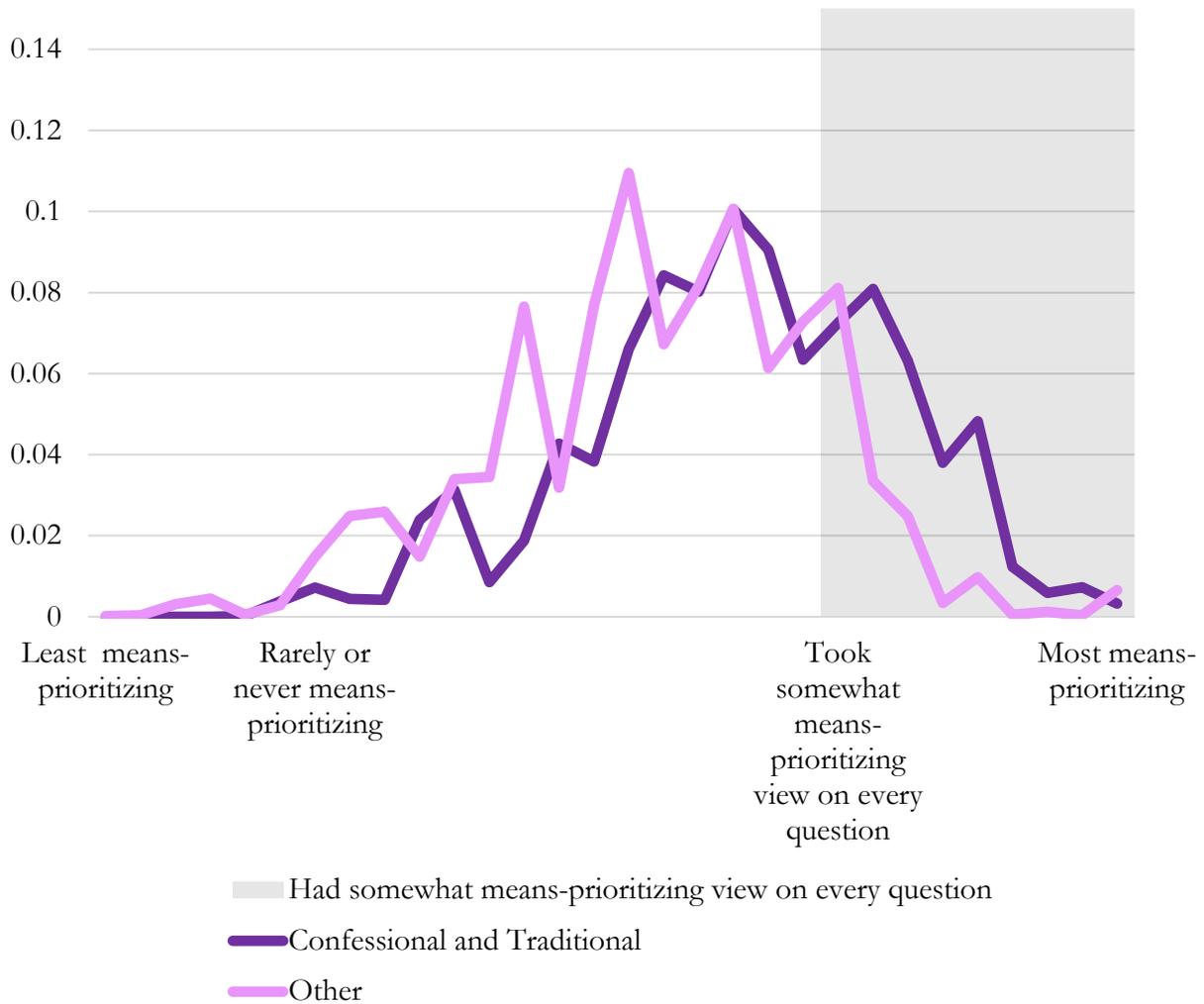
There are also differences across conversion history. For lifelong Lutherans, 25% select uniformly means-prioritizing answers, and 51% select almost-entirely such answers. For converts from other Lutheran traditions, the values are similar at 24% and 47% (though an elevated rate, 4%, select uniformly non-means-prioritizing answers). But 33% converts from outside of Lutheranism select uniformly means-prioritizing answers and 58% select such answers all but once, and 47% of converts from outside of Christianity report uniform means-prioritizing answers, and 60% report such answers all but once. Thus, converts from more distant traditions have somewhat more means-prioritizing beliefs than lifelong Lutherans, LCMS or otherwise.

Finally, **Figure 27** below provides average estimated index scores for numerous groups. Values of 12 or higher indicate groups where the average person selected a means-prioritizing score in at least 5 and generally 6 of the 7 questions. Estimates provided all represent a regression output which controls for all other listed variables.

Figure 27: Average Means Prioritization Index Score by Groups, with control variables

Group Controlled Average Index Score
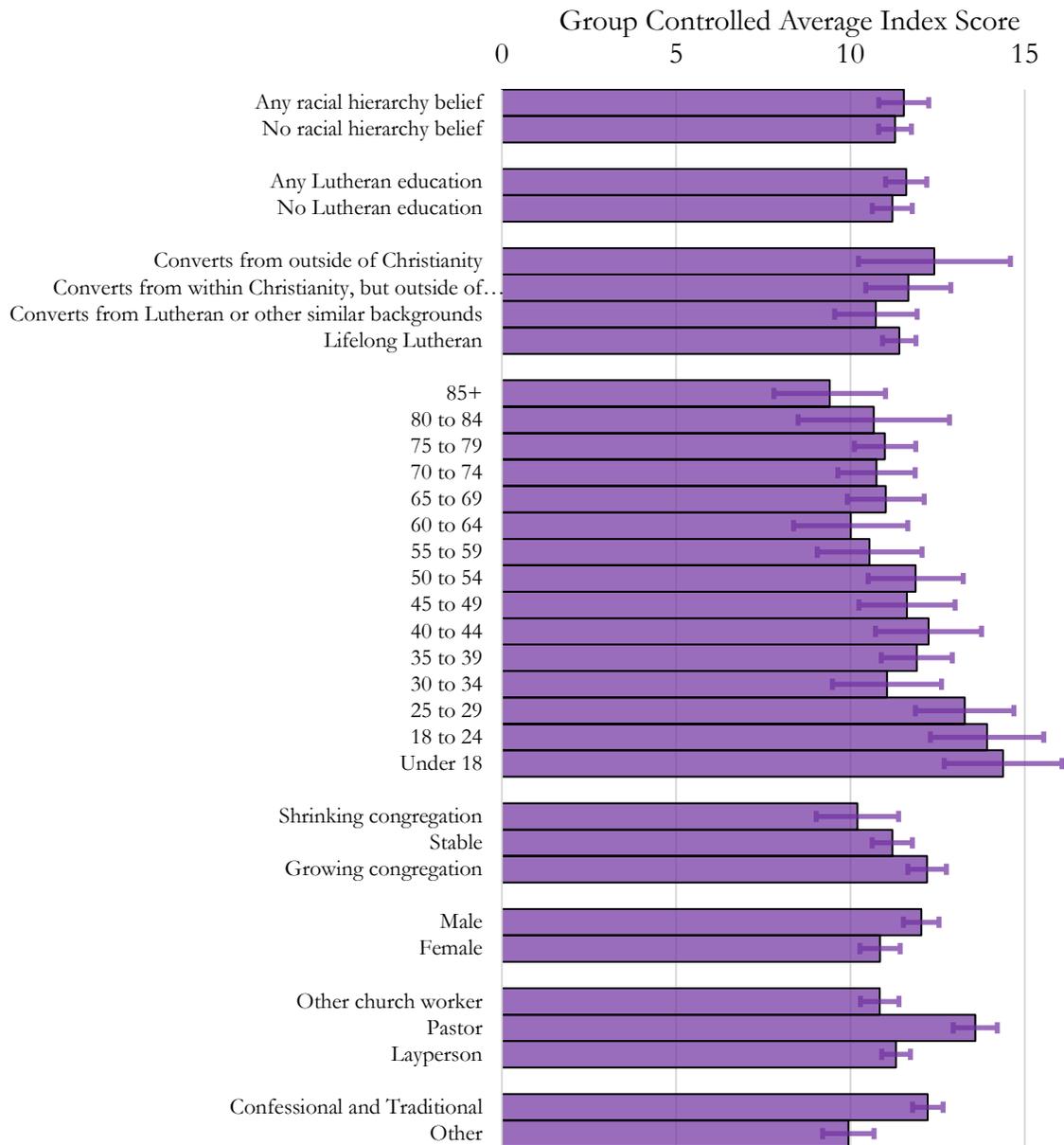
In general, there's no difference in means-prioritization between individuals with racially hierarchical beliefs and those without. Having had Lutheran education in primary or secondary school also has no effect. Differences by conversion history are a bit larger, but not highly statistically significant due to modest numbers of converts in the sample.

Where large differences first appear is by age. LCMS members under age 30 all average index scores over 13, and those under 18 (a small sample) average scores over 14. Meanwhile, older Lutherans, especially those 60 and older, have rather low averages: around 10. Thus, the younger generations of LCMS members have stronger agreement with means-prioritizing statements.

There is also a correlation between perceived congregational growth trajectory and means-prioritization. Individuals who place more emphasis on the visible means also report being in faster-growing churches. There is also a modest sex difference: male LCMS members report somewhat more means-prioritizing attitudes than female LCMS members.

As already discussed, pastors differ very substantially from laypeople, and "Confessional and Traditional" LCMS members differ appreciably from other LCMS members.

This final graph reaffirms the sense already seen throughout this report that more traditional LCMS congregations may be experiencing less severe numeric declines. LCMS young people have more confessional-typical attitudes, people with more means-emphasizing views are likelier to be converts and in growing churches, and likelier to identify as "Confessional and Traditional."

Conclusion

Converts make up a considerable share of LCMS members, though most of them come from other Lutheran denominations or from other conservative Protestant denominations. Converts from non-Christian backgrounds are a small share of LCMS membership. Nonetheless, converts from relatively theologically distant traditions are likely to convert as a result of a conviction that prior beliefs were faulty, arising from a period of serious spiritual doubt. These converts in turn adopt highly doctrinally-informed Lutheran beliefs, and are likely to worship in growing, "Confessional," and "Traditional" churches.

However, a nearly universal truth within the LCMS is excessive optimism about congregational growth trajectories. LCMS members routinely overestimate the growth of their congregations. This overestimation may help explain the relatively passive attitudes towards numeric decline identified in LRLS 2021 and 2022: huge shares of LCMS members simply do not realize how severe the synod's decline has become, and as a result see no urgency in stewarding our denomination's resources for what is likely to be a stormy and challenging future.

In terms of understanding why the people who convert to the LCMS do so, many of the classical accounts of "relational evangelism" fall flat. Mentors and friends do not appear as key figures in conversion. On the other hand, romantic ties, a sense of historically rooted community, and the pursuit of sound doctrine all appear as key factors in LCMS conversions. Romantic ties are a common component of conversion into the LCMS, yet are strongly associated with congregations seeing numeric decline: the LCMS cannot marry its way to growth. On the other hand, churches with a greater density of converts who identified doctrinal reasons for conversion, or churches with more distinctively "Lutheran" approaches to liturgy, are showing greater resilience in the face of general synodical decline.

Some readers may be concerned that these sometimes sharper-edged versions of Lutheranism which appeal to theologically motivated converts could be associated with synodically condemned views on race, but it is not so. Belief in racial hierarchy is relatively uncommon in the LCMS, and has no correlation with liturgical style or individuals holding more distinctively Lutheran theological positions. There simply is not a correlation between individuals who adhere more overtly and emphatically to something like "historic Lutheran orthodoxy" or "Lutheran distinctives" and individuals who espouse belief in racial hierarchies. Rather, LCMS members with more racially hierarchical beliefs are overwhelmingly likely to be laypeople under 35 who only irregularly attend church.

Finally, there is a generational change ongoing within the LCMS. Younger LCMS members espouse much greater emphasis on the visible means of grace than older LCMS members, a trait shared in common with "Confessional and Traditional" LCMS members. This generational change is consistent with the conversion and growth data cited above: virtually all available evidence points to the notion that, in 30 years, the LCMS will be a more liturgically traditional church than it is today, with doctrinal positions more differentiated from the Protestant mainstream than it has today. To the extent that doctrinal differentiation is associated with growth and conversion, this statement could point to the possibility that, by the latter 21st century, the LCMS could experience an appreciable improvement in net conversion rates, though this is more speculation than forecast.