

The Strengths of the SELC

A survey conducted at the June 2009 SELC District Convention, Ann Arbor, Michigan

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Introduction

In the spring of 2009 the pastors and congregations of the SELC District of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod prepared to meet in convention at Concordia University in Ann Arbor, Michigan. One of the issues they would be asked to consider would be a report by Synod’s *Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod Structure and Governance*, which included sections and recommendations about the size and structure of the Districts of the Missouri Synod. These sections concerned the SELC District members because they questioned the viability, efficiency and effectiveness of small districts (at less than 60 congregations, the SELC is the smallest of the 35 districts in the LCMS).

During the same time period I happened upon the book *Small, Strong Congregations* by noted church growth consultant Kennon L. Callahan (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). Callahan asserts that the simplest futures for churches to consider are to be small, strong congregations or large, regional congregations (page 9). He suggests that “small, strong congregations are a significant part of the future to which God is inviting us. Small, strong congregations are flourishing across the planet. We will see more of them in the years to come” (page 21). The main part of the book consists in a discussion of nine areas in which he observes, and contends, that congregations that are small may also be strong in ministry, in spirit, and in health.

As I read Callahan’s book, I wondered to what extent his observations about congregations might also be true of small districts of churches like the SELC. I decided to conduct a survey at the SELC District convention to discover how the participants perceived the District. The research question for this survey was “Using Callahan’s characteristics of small, strong congregations as a base, what is the perception of the SELC District by SELC District convention participants?”

Method

I constructed a survey with 40 items based on Callahan’s conclusions about strong congregations. For most of the questions, I modified his concepts and statements by substituting “the SELC District” for “congregation.” Each item was to be evaluated on a seven-point scale ranging from a score of 1 for “Disagree Strongly” to 7 for “Agree strongly.” Participants were asked to circle one response for each statement. The working model was that each statement would assume that the SELC is a strong District; the responses would measure the degree to which participants agreed with the assumptions.

One hundred copies of the survey were inserted into the participants' convention packets. These packets were distributed to delegates and other participants at the beginning of the SELC District convention. No distinction was made in the distribution between pastors, laypeople, voting delegates, and guests. No demographic questions were included on the surveys, so there is no way of knowing how many respondents were in each of these categories.

I announced and reminded the participants three times during the course of the convention that the surveys were in their packets, and that they should return them to me. No other statements were made about the nature or purpose of the survey. Respondents were encouraged to return the surveys to me at any time during the convention; thus there is also no way of knowing when a particular survey was returned. This especially means that there is no way to know whether a particular survey was returned before or after the presentation and discussion about the report of the *Blue Ribbon Task Force*.

Eighteen surveys were returned. Only two or three respondents left any questions unanswered.

Each question was scored by totaling the responses indicated on the seven-point scale; that is, a response of 2 on the scale was given a score of two points, while a response of 5 was given five points. Scores were added and averaged for each question.

Results

In the tables below, an average less than 4 indicates disagreement with the corresponding statement, while an average greater than 4 indicates agreement. One immediate observation is that all of the statements had an average score greater than 4, indicating general agreement with all the statements by the respondents. For purposes of interpretation, in the tables that follow average scores between 4 and 5 will be interpreted as "mild agreement," average scores between 5 and 6 will be interpreted as "moderate agreement" and average scores between 6 and 7 will be interpreted as "strong agreement." Also note that although the tables are displayed under the chapter headings from Callahan's book, there is no table that corresponds to chapter 1, which was introductory.

Following some of the tables are bullet points noting written comments by some of the respondents. One of the respondents, identified in the comments as "Respondent A," wrote notes commenting on several of the questions, which are noted both at the pertinent table and in one compilation at the end of the tables.

Chapter 2 – Mission and Service

Question 1 – The SELC District has a closely-focused mission philosophy of church planting.	5.56	N = 18
Question 12 - The SELC District lives its mission theology as a gift to the world.	5.53	N = 17
Question 13 - The SELC District resembles a family.	6.06	N = 18
Question 24 - The SELC District Mission Board and congregations cooperate together in District mission efforts.	5.33	N = 18

Here respondents indicated **moderate agreement** with all the statements about how the SELC District goes about the mission of the church. In addition, there was generally **stronger agreement** to the statement that “The SELC District resembles a family.”

Chapter 3 – Compassion and Shepherding

Question 2 - The relationship between the SELC District and its congregations can be described by the word “shepherding.”	5.00	N = 18
Question 5 - SELC District leaders shepherd pastors, congregations, and people with compassion.	6.28	N = 18
Question 23 - People of the SELC District encourage new disciples.	5.44	N = 18
Question 25 - The SELC District is characterized by healthy relationships among pastors.	6.33	N = 18
Question 37 – The word “compassion” describes the SELC District.	6.18	N = 17

Here respondents indicated a **moderate level of agreement** with statements about the relationship of the SELC District and its congregations, and with the way the District encourages new disciples. Respondents also indicated a **strong level of agreement** that “compassion” is descriptive of the SELC District and that relationships among its pastors are generally healthy.

Chapter 4 – Community and Belonging

Question 15 - SELC District leaders help advance the mission of the District and congregations with wisdom and caring.	5.89	N = 18
Question 22 - People of the SELC District see their participation in District life as enriching their personal ministry life.	4.94	N = 18
Question 27 - SELC District events and activities are helpful to congregations on several levels.	4.78	N = 18
Question 36 – The word “openness” describes the SELC District.	5.94	N = 17

Responses in this area expressed **mild to moderate agreement** to statements regarding a sense of belonging by individuals and congregations, and **moderate to strong agreement** to statements regarding an atmosphere of caring and openness in the District.

- *Respondent A commented on Question 15, “With some few, selected congregations – not with all”*
- *In a note to question 22, another respondent wrote “No connection to District.” Indeed, it is possible that pastors (who meet together regularly) and some lay people (who attend conventions or other District activities frequently) have a stronger feeling of connection to the District than congregational members who don’t participate in District events and activities.*

Chapter 5 – Self-Reliance and Self-sufficiency

Question 3 - The SELC District encourages creativity.	5.78	N = 18
Question 6 - The SELC District values leaders with creativity.	5.56	N = 18
Question 14 - The SELC District benefits from the resources of all its members.	5.11	N = 18
Question 26 - The SELC District has leadership resources that are reasonable for its ministry needs.	5.88	N = 17

Scores in this category express **moderate to strong agreement** with the statements.

- *Respondent A commented on Question 3, “But should it?”; on Question 6, “Too much emphasis”; on Question 14, “Many not given opportunity”; and on Question 26, “But not fully utilized. Have good people not being used”*

Chapter 6 – Worship and Hope

Question 39 – The word “warm” describes the SELC District.	6.35	N = 17
Question 40 – The word “welcoming” describes the SELC District.	6.24	N = 17

This chapter in Callahan’s book dealt with the worship atmosphere in a congregation. Although worship is a component of many District activities, it is not of itself an organizing purpose of the District as it is for a congregation. However, I decided to use these questions from this chapter to assess the respondents’ perception of the SELC District generally. Responses indicate **strong agreement** that the SELC District can be described by the words “warm” and “welcoming.”

Chapter 7 – Team, Leaders, and Congregation

Because this chapter, and the statements below, discussed a somewhat greater range of material than other chapters, I have shown the relevant statements in separate tables.

Question 4 - SELC District leaders are able to see a broad picture of ministry.	5.72	N = 18
Question 16 - SELC District leaders understand the diversity of gifts in the District.	5.50	N = 18
Question 17 – SELC District leaders help advance the mission of the District and congregations with wisdom.	5.50	N = 18
Question 18 - The SELC District values leaders who encourage others.	6.06	N = 18
Question 29 - SELC District leaders are active in ministries outside the District.	6.00	N = 18
Question 30 - The SELC District values leaders who appreciate the various congregations of the District.	5.78	N = 18
Question 31 - The SELC District has demonstrated its ability to share power with new leaders.	4.83	N = 18

These statements deal with how the respondents perceive the leaders of the SELC District. Note that “leaders” are undefined and unspecified. Responses indicate a **moderate to strong agreement** with the statements in this category, with the exception of question 31 which scored a level of agreement substantially lower than the others in this category.

- Respondent A commented on Question 4, “Older congregations belittled often in speech. Calling many ‘maintenance’ ministries is belittling and dismissive”; on Question 16, “Again, with some, not all”; and on Question 30, “Again, some, not all. Many congregations ignored. Why not ask

an older, smaller congregation to do an ‘This is the SELC’ instead of just the large Florida congregations!”; and on Question 31, “What new leaders? Same folks always re-elected” (“This is the SELC” refers to several brief presentations during the convention that would give the participants glimpses into some particular congregations and their ministries. One of these presentations was from a congregation in Ohio (established 1980) describing their recent major servant event, another was from a congregation in New Jersey (established 1928) describing a new outreach to Asian Indians, and a third from a congregation in Montreal, Canada, (established 1929) describing their outreach into various cultures in their community.)

- In a handwritten note at question 31, another respondent asked “what new leaders?” Certainly, the SELC District Board of Directors and Mission Board remain virtually unchanged after the elections at the Convention, as all the incumbents were re-elected and only two new members were added. This might indeed give the appearance that the SELC District is not willing to share power with new leaders; however, the nomination and election process for these positions gave congregations and delegates extensive opportunities to nominate candidates. In fact, the Convention Workbook (page 100) indicates that seven individuals were nominated for the office of District President (of these, 5 withdrew their own names from consideration before the convention), and that 28 individuals were nominated for the three Vice-Presidential offices (of these, 19 withdrew their names before the convention). Congregations had opportunity to suggest nominees to all offices for several months before the convention, and convention delegates were offered opportunities to nominate from the floor for each of the offices under consideration.*

Question 7 - The SELC District has demonstrated a spirit of continuity over its almost 40-year history.	6.28	N = 18
Question 19 - The SELC District has demonstrated its appreciation of informality over its almost 40-year history.	5.89	N = 18
Question 28 - The SELC District encourages its people to use their gifts in service to others.	5.83	N = 18
Question 38 – The word “caring” describes the SELC District.	6.18	N = 17

Responses in this category show a **moderate to strong agreement** with these statements, which address some dynamics of leadership in the District over an extended period of time.

Chapter 8 – Space and Facilities

Question 8 - The physical facilities of the SELC District are adequate for its mission.	5.24	N = 18
Question 20 - The physical facilities of the SELC District are more a blessing than a burden.	5.39	N = 18
Question 32 - Lack of certain physical facilities for the SELC District has not translated into lack of effective mission.	5.78	N = 18

Responses in this category show a **moderate agreement** with the statements. They also indicate a somewhat **stronger agreement** with the statement that a lack of physical facilities has not translated into lack of effective mission.

- *Although physical facilities are important aspects of congregational life, the SELC District owns no real property or buildings, nor pays rent. The SELC District office is located in the office of the pastor who is the District President, often at the congregation that he serves. Officers and executives of the District work from their own homes and congregations. Thus, these responses may indicate that respondents feel that not having an office building or property is not a hindrance to the ministry and mission of the SELC District.*

Chapter 9 – Giving and Generosity

Question 9 - Stewardship in the SELC District is led by mission and compassion.	5.22	N = 18
Question 21 - Stewardship in the SELC District is marked by solid financial leadership.	5.72	N = 18
Question 33 - Stewardship in the SELC District is developed with positive reinforcement.	5.22	N = 18

These responses indicate **moderate agreement** to the statements about stewardship in the SELC District.

Chapter 10 – Living with the Spirit of Promise

Question 10 - People of the SELC District are able to celebrate our identity as a District.	5.00	N = 18
Question 11 - People of the SELC District anticipate the discovery of new life together.	4.78	N = 18
Question 34 - People of the SELC District look forward to our future with anticipation.	4.78	N = 18
Question 35 - People of the SELC District live as people of the Resurrection.	5.76	N = 18

Responses in this section indicate a **mild to moderate agreement** with the statements.

- *Scores on questions 11 and 34 may reflect a certain anxiety about the future of the SELC District, in light of implications in the report of the Blue Ribbon Task Force that the SELC District may no longer exist in the restructuring plan.*
- *Respondent A commented on Question 10, “Many don’t know! Don’t appreciate”; and on Question 34, “Uncertainty!”*

In addition to the comments noted above, several respondents added these general comments at the end of the survey.

- *One respondent wrote “Leaders and active members value our district. We need to convey that to some of our congregations.”*
- *Another respondent wrote “The above answers differ depending on the perspective of which I considered them. I believe the SELC is very caring, compassion, mission minded among pastors and leadership of district. There is not the same passion – generally speaking – in the parish I serve, although with God’s help I am certainly striving to improve care, compassion, mission to others, etc.”*
- *One more respondent (identified as “Respondent A” in comments to the tables above) added notes to several of the questions. These notes are mentioned in the pertinent tables above, but are collected together here:*
 - *To question 3: “But should it?”*
 - *To question 4: “Older congregations belittled often in speech. Calling many ‘maintenance’ ministries is belittling and dismissive.”*

- To question 6: *“Too much emphasis”*
- To question 10: *“Many don’t know! Don’t appreciate”*
- To question 14: *“Many not given opportunity”*
- To question 15: *“With some few, selected congregations – not with all”*
- To question 16: *“Again, with some, not all”*
- To question 26: *“But not fully utilized. Have good people not being used”*
- To question 30: *“Again, some, not all. Many congregations ignored. Why not ask an older, smaller congregation to do an “This is the SELC” instead of just the large Florida congregations!”*
- To question 31: *“What new leaders? Same folks always re-elected”*
- To question 34: *“Uncertainty!”*

Comments

The statements in the survey were constructed to reflect concepts that Callahan considers to be strengths in a small congregation. As a result, the level of agreement with any of the statements corresponds to the perceived level of strength in that area. The results displayed above indicate that the respondents to this survey perceive that the SELC District is generally strong in all the categories surveyed.

The following difficulties and cautions are to be noted, however:

- The survey was constructed based on Callahan’s ideas and observations regarding the strengths of small congregations. These are the ideas and observations of a single author. It is possible that other authors may not agree with Callahan’s observations, or that they may propose other categories and observations to be considered.
- The method of distributing the surveys may not have been designed to gather the greatest number of responses. If there had been a time when all the participants were instructed to fill out the surveys and turn them in together, no doubt there would have been a greater number of respondents. The schedule of the convention did not allow for this to happen. If the purpose of the survey had been explained to the participants there may have been a greater number of respondents. However, I surmised that the issue of the future of the SELC District was likely to be a concern to many of the participants, and I did not want to “taint” the results by saying something like “I know

we're all concerned to show that the SELC District is a great district, so please fill out this survey."

- Callahan's book is about small, strong *congregations*. The SELC District is not a congregation, but a District of many congregations. Thus, it would not be strictly accurate to say that because the participants of the survey agreed with Callahan's concepts, therefore the SELC District is small but strong. Additional theory and research would be needed into the characteristics of small, strong judicatories in order to assess more accurately the strength of the SELC District.

Nevertheless, I offer this survey into the discussion of the nature and future of the SELC District because it indicates that respondents perceive certain strengths in the SELC District that are not part of the general discussion of District configuration. Very few of these strengths are included in the list of district responsibilities in the Bylaws of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod or in resolutions that deal with district viability. These bylaws and resolutions seem to deal with a district from an organizational point of view, while Callahan's comments and observations come from a different direction. That his categories deal with concepts such as belonging, compassion, and the life of promise indicates that he looks at a congregation as community more than organization. Perhaps this is why he can say that small, strong congregations have a bright future. The very large congregations that can function like an efficient organization may have a strong future; but small congregations that can function as strong communities have a strong future as well.

Perhaps, in the end, this is what this survey indicates. Participants perceive that the SELC District is not so much about organization as it is about community. In fact, this is the kind of idea that SELC pastors, people, and even those outside the SELC District have been noting for years. We hear all kinds of comments that "there's something different about the SELC", or "this is a unique district" or "there's a different atmosphere in the SELC than in other districts." Perhaps the difference is in community. Through observation of District conventions, Board of Directors meetings, circuit pastors' conferences and other gatherings it seems that the SELC District operates as an organization out of necessity, because it is a District of a larger organization; but it is the concept of community that the members of the SELC District embrace, and it is that community that holds the district together. The fear of many in the SELC District with regard to district reorganization proposals may not be so much that we'd have to get used to a different structure, but that the community would be torn apart in the process.