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United Methodist Church

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INTERVENTION AIMED AT CONFERENCE- WIDE CHURCH GROWTH

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In 1987, the Nebraska Conference of the United Methodist Church began an ambitious process aimed at reversing its two decade membership decline. Contracting with Church Growth, Inc., headed by Dr. Win Arn, the conference's newly created Church Growth Committee introduced to its 432 congregations in the state an enterprise labeled "Daring a New Harvest." The plan consisted of an introductory Basic Growth Seminar, followed by a three-and-a-half year process called Love in Action (LIA).

"Daring a New Harvest" was launched with three regional Basic Growth Seminars across the state in which Arn presented church growth concepts and research, as well as his quality seminars and films. These day-long events were attended by a total of 871 persons from 248 congregations, with laity outnumbering clergy about four to one. Following the Basic Growth Seminar, congregations were invited to enroll in the LIA process, composed of a

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four-month diagnostic module and three nine-month program modules, each preceded by a regional training event led by Church Growth, Inc. personnel.

Reasons for Successful Enrollment

Although only half of the congregations represented at the Basic Growth Seminars enrolled in LIA, participation in both more than doubled the initial expectations of the Church Growth Committee. This success can be attributed to several factors. First, Bishop J. Woodrow Hearn, assigned then to Nebraska, was outspoken in his support of "Daring a New Harvest." The Church Growth Committee itself was created at his direction. The bishop sent a letter commending the venture to each pastor; presumably this was a powerful inducement to jump on board. Second, "Daring a New Harvest" was a project of the conference leadership. Both of the two top executives for the conference, plus the Director of Communications, were actively engaged in seeing that the endeavor was a success. The ten members of the Church Growth Committee included three chairs of some of the most important boards of the conference and the person who held the conference's top laity position, each of whom had been elected by the conference in 1987 as delegates to the quadrennial General Conference of the denomination. Third, the Basic Seminar and LIA were well advertised under the "Daring a New Harvest" banner. Letters and newsletters were mailed; phone calls were made. "Daring a New Harvest" became a conscious option in the minds of the clergy, the lay members of the annual conference, and the local chairs of evangelism. Fourth, the quality of the Basic Growth Seminar and the confidence exuded by Arn enthused and inspired those who attended, which raised expectations and hopes concerning LIA. Finally, the project had momentum, especially among the clergy. For a pastor to have her or his congregation sign up for LIA was similar to having the parish pay all its apportionments (a United Methodist apportioned "tax" for administration, retired clergy pensions and missions), that is, it was perceived as a sign of loyalty. The momentum overrode most of the misgivings that may have been felt at that time.

Financing the Intervention Process

With a legal agreement signed and 123 churches enrolled in the three-and-a-half-year LIA process, the Nebraska conference became one of Church Growth, Inc.'s biggest customers ever. The congregations were grouped into 73 parish/paying units, and Church Growth, Inc. charged the Nebraska Conference a flat monthly fee, totaling \$3000 per parish/paying unit over the

three-and-a-half years. However, enrolling churches were charged on a per-member, per-year basis by the conference, up to 2000 members. The obvious advantage was that LIA was made affordable for the small-membership church. Large-membership churches were willing to pay a higher fee because of connectional loyalties, and reasoning that being larger they had more to gain from growth.

Outline of the LIA Process

Executing LIA required, on the local level, the creation of four task groups, one for each module. A special role entitled "Director of Congregational Ministry" was created to chair the entire project. This position was usually filled by a non-staff volunteer, occasionally by more than one. The modules consisted of Church Growth, Inc.'s church action kits and celebration kits, as follows.

Module One:

Diagnostic Phase (May to August 1988)

Church Action Kit: "The Church Growth Opportunity Check-up" (plan for State of the Church day included)

Module Two:

Growing in Love (September 1988 to May 1989)

Church Action Kit: "Growing in Love"

Celebration Kit: "In His Steps . . . with Love"

Module Three:

Incorporation (September 1989 to May 1990)

Church Action Kit: "The Shepherd's Guide to Caring and Keeping"

Celebration Kit: "Celebrating God's Family"

Module Four:

Lifestyle Evangelism (September 1990 to May 1991)

Church Action Kit: "The Master's Plan for Making Disciples"

Celebration Kit: "Celebration of Friendship"

This was not the original scheme proposed by Arn. LIA had been previously offered and used in other settings in the following order: (1) Diagnostic, (2) Lifestyle Evangelism, (3) Incorporation, (4) Ministry of the Laity (not included in the model adopted by the Nebraska Conference). The Church Growth Committee expressed to Arn a concern that many of the congregations lacked the widespread convictional base about making disciples. Arn suggested that using the recently released kit, "Growing in Love" (and its corollary "In His

Steps . . . with Love") would strengthen that convictional base. Consequently the Love module pre-empted the Ministry of the Laity module, and Lifestyle Evangelism was placed at the end of the process. In this way, churches not immediately motivated to fulfill the Great Commission would have time to warm up to the idea.

In the local congregation, the Church Action Kits for modules two, three and four involved class-session training for various groups and individuals. Each of these courses utilized weekly video segments from the following films in Church Growth, Inc.'s Chuck Bradley series, *Who Cares About Love?*, *See You Sunday*, and *For the Love of Pete*.

It should be added at this point that the Basic Growth Seminar and LIA were viewed as denominationally and theologically neutral, which was an asset. The approach to growth was largely viewed as behavioral rather than ideological. In other words, the approach was not designed to alter a person's or a congregation's thinking or theology, but rather their activity. However, this was not entirely true. LIA did attempt to raise the value of making disciples, attracting and inviting the unchurched, welcoming and assimilating visitors and new members, and growing the church. According to W. Warner Burke, speaking from the field of organizational development, "For the organization to change significantly . . . its values must change."¹

Each module was preceded by a regional day-long seminar conducted by a member of Church Growth, Inc. staff, designed to train the pastor, Director of Congregational Ministry and the members of that particular module's task group. In reality, the seminars were more of an introduction to the basic concepts involved in the upcoming modules. More attention upon management steps necessary for executing such changes would have been useful to the trainees.

Of the 123 congregations originally enrolled in LIA, 12 dropped out and one closed before completing the process, leaving 110. This represented 25 percent of the congregations and 41 percent of the membership of the conference. Though there were no guarantees, the Church Growth Committee expected to see measurable differences following LIA. However, the committee made no explicit and specific growth goals for the conference or the LIA churches.

The Nebraska Conference At the Conclusion of Intervention

¹ W. Warner Burke, *Organizational Development: Principles and Practices* (Glenville, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1982), 98.

The hopes of reversing the conference's membership decline have not yet been realized. Prior to 1988, the total conference membership had been declining at a rate from 1.13 to 1.60 percent annually. Then in 1988 and 1989, it seemed that the tide was beginning to turn with the membership decline reduced to less than one percent each year (0.88% and 0.85%, respectively). However, in 1990 the loss returned to 1.20 percent, and 1991's decline reached 1.66 percent, the largest in over a decade.

It may be helpful to compare the United Methodist Church in Nebraska with other denominations spread in a geographically similar way throughout the state. Between 1983 and 1987, the number of United Methodists in Nebraska fell from 122,823 to 116,286, a four-year decline rate of 5.3 percent. By comparison, the Disciples of Christ in Nebraska dropped from 16,533 members to 15,741 during the same time period, a 4.8 percent four-year decline rate. Between 1987 and 1991, United Methodists' membership lessened by 4.6 percent, while the Disciples' membership was being reduced at an 8.1 percent four-year rate (for three years). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which was formed in 1987 with 97,603 members in the Nebraska Synod, has been declining at only a 0.6 percent four-year rate (for three years).² So while the rate of decline for United Methodists improved during the years of LIA, it worsened for the Disciples of Christ. Neither approached the near plateau of the ELCA.

Among the nine districts in the conference, there were a few victories. In 1988, the Omaha district--one of two in the conference with an urban center--showed a net increase in members. The last time a district had increased in membership was 1977. In 1989, both urban-centered districts, Lincoln and Omaha, reported net gains. In 1990, it was again only the Omaha district showing an increase. However, in 1991 none of the districts witnessed net membership growth.

In examining the conference and the districts, we must be cautious in correlating growth or decline with "Daring a New Harvest" and LIA in particular. Obviously many factors influence growth and decline within a judicatory--demographic trends; the size and age of the congregations; the tenure, priorities and competencies of the pastors; the intervening work of the Holy Spirit and of prayer, etc. Many of the United Methodist congregations in Nebraska either have celebrated or will soon celebrate their centennial, and it is easier for an older church to slip into a maintenance mode. It must also be kept in mind that only a quarter of the 432 congregations were on board with LIA all four years, from 1988 through 1991.

² The Disciples of Christ and the ELCA four-year rates of decline since 1987 were based on membership changes for 1988, 1989 and 1990. They were then recalculated to produce a four-year rate.

The matter of comparing and contrasting the growth and decline of congregations enrolled in LIA and those not enrolled is complicated by the fact that in 1990, a second group of churches was allowed to enroll in LIA. At this writing, 37 congregations are just over half way through LIA. For the purpose of analysis and this article, the "second-wave" churches will be lumped with those which did not enroll or finish LIA in the first wave.

LIA Churches Prior to Love In Action

The Nebraska Conference is loaded with small-membership churches. According to Lyle Schaller, "Only a tiny fraction of Protestant congregations on the North American continent that have been averaging fewer than a hundred people at worship find it possible to grow substantially in size, regardless of the demographic context."³ The year prior to LIA, the average worship attendance for all 432 congregations in the conference was 98. Even though LIA churches were larger, averaging 155 at worship in 1987, 50 of the 110 LIA congregations were held to double digits in average worship attendance. Thirty-nine of these 50 were located in towns of less than one thousand population, and generally declining. Another five of the 50 were found in towns of population between one and two thousand. Though there are certainly unchurched persons to be reached in each of these communities, Nebraska is not southern California, at least in terms of population density.

Thirty-seven of the 110 LIA congregations reported an average 1987 worship attendance between 100 and 199 (to be subsequently designated "medium-sized"). The other 23 LIA churches (to be subsequently designated "large") ranged in average attendance in 1987 from 203 to 796, with an average of 389. The large LIA congregations generally showed a less negative record during the four years prior to intervention than medium-sized or small ones. While membership and church school attendance for large churches declined between 1983 and 1987, worship attendance increased nearly one percent. Medium-sized churches declined in membership and worship attendance but grew slightly in church school attendance. Small congregations declined significantly in all three areas during those four years. (See Table 1 and Figure 1 on page 45.)

Since the LIA churches were, on average, nearly twice the size of the non-LIA churches (155 versus 79 average worship attendance in 1987), one would expect them to have been in less trouble than their counterparts, even prior to intervention. Such was the case. Between 1983 and 1987, both LIAs and non-LIAs were declining in membership, worship attendance and church

³ Lyle E. Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 216.

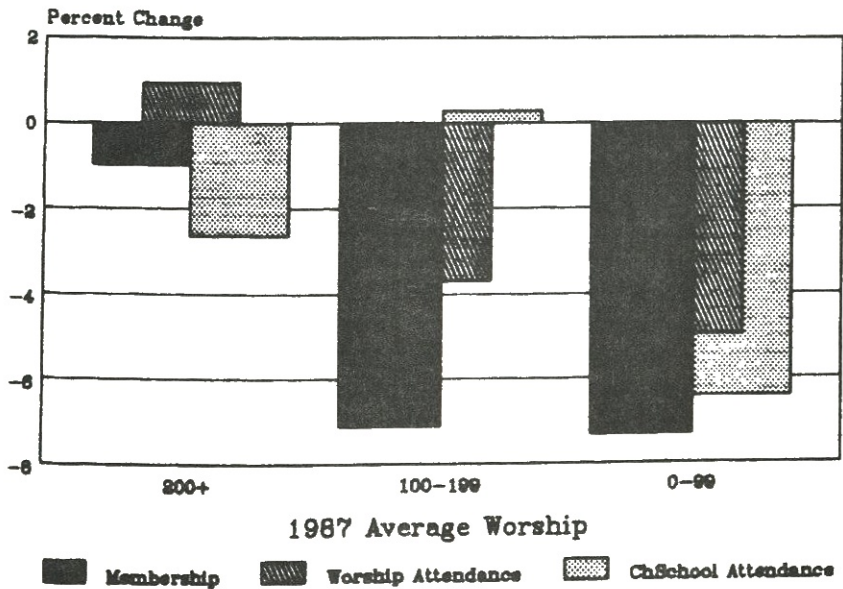
Table 1 and Figure 1

LIA Churches, 1983-87

Prior to Intervention

Divided by 1987 Av. Worship Attendance

	Members	WorshipAtt	ChSchoolAtt
200+	-1.0%	0.9%	-2.7%
100-199	-7.1%	-3.7%	0.3%
0-99	-7.3%	-5.0%	-6.4%



school attendance, but the rate of decline for the non-LIAs was about double that for the LIAs. The greatest difference was in church school attendance, with the non-LIAs falling at almost three times the rate of the LIAs. (See Table 1 and Figure 2 on page 47.) Consequently a comparison between the two groups at the conclusion of the LIA process must take into account their differences prior to the intervention.

LIA Churches At the Conclusion of Love In Action

The 110 congregations formally concluded the intervention process in May 1991. Though for each local church there may have been dozens of factors influencing advance and decline, my intention was to discover significant measurable differences between LIAs and non-LIAs, and differences between pre- and post-intervention in the LIA churches. The rate of four-year decline in membership improved only 0.2 percentage point for LIA churches from 1987 to 1991, while the rate of decline for non-LIA churches during that same period improved more -- by 1.1 percentage points -- but never caught up with LIA churches. While the rate of membership decline was slowing, the decline in worship attendance accelerated. The rate of worship attendance decline in a four-year period worsened by two percentage points for the whole conference but the non-LIAs experienced more deterioration than the LIAs. (See Table 2 and Figure 3 on page 48.)

As given in Table 3, church school attendance for non-LIAs continued to fall at the same seven-percent pace as during the previous four years, and for LIAs the four-year rate of decline changed slightly from 2.4 to 2.5 percent. Even given that membership statistics are less helpful than worship and church school attendance averages (particularly because straight membership figures do not take into account unfortunately necessary roll-cleaning binges, by which an inflated membership number is once again made realistic), what we find is not particularly encouraging for the Nebraska Conference. Looking at worst-case attendance, the most one can say is that the rate of decline did not increase quite as much for LIA churches as it did for non-LIA churches. This is hardly a victory when it is remembered that the LIA churches were twice as large as the non-LIA to begin with (in membership and average worship attendance) and that generally the smaller the congregation, the greater the rate of decline.

The LIA process has yet to make a significant impact on the number of professions of faith. In 1987, the LIA churches received 2.5 members by profession of faith (conversion plus biological growth) for every one hundred members. In 1991, that ratio had grown to 2.70. Translated for a church of 300 members, that is an increase from seven professions in 1987 to eight in 1991. However, the non-LIAs increased their ratio almost as much from 2.22 to 2.46 professions per one hundred members.

Table 2 and Figure 2

LIA and Non-LIA Churches Prior to intervention, 1983-87

	Members	WorshipAtt	ChSchoolAtt
LIA	-3.8%	-1.5%	-2.4%
Non-LIA	-6.4%	-2.9%	-7.0%

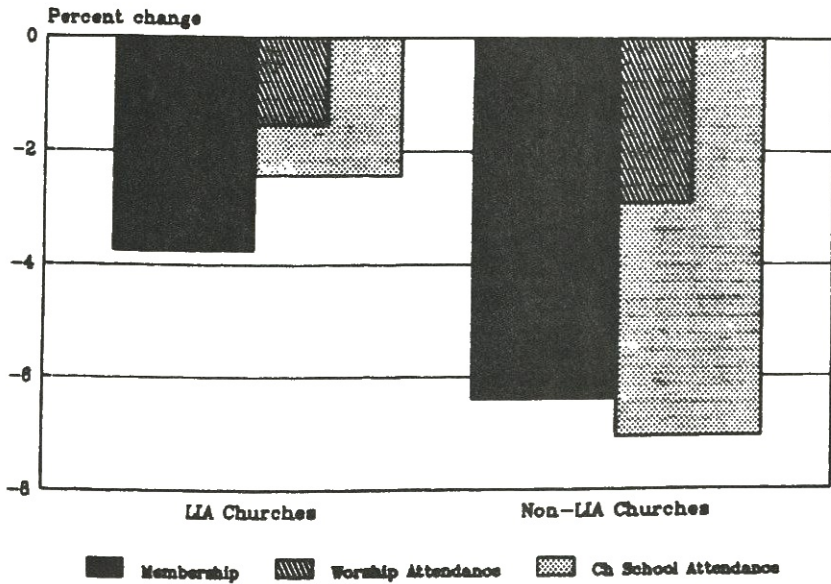
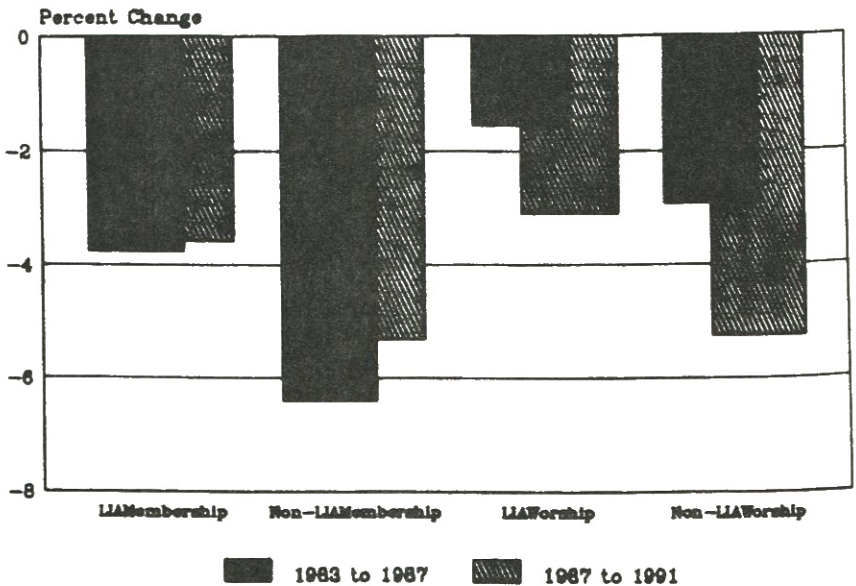


Table 3 and Figure 3

LIA and Non-LIA Churches Prior to and During Intervention

	Members	WorshipAtt	ChSchoolAtt
LIA 1983-87	-3.8%	-1.5%	-2.4%
LIA 1987-91	-3.6%	-3.1%	-2.5%
Non-LIA 83-87	-6.4%	-2.9%	-7.0%
Non-LIA 87-91	-5.3%	-5.3%	-7.0%



Among the 50 small LIA congregations in 1987, the decline continued to accelerate. Between 1987 and 1991, the membership decline rate--when compared to the previous four years--worsened half a percentage point. The rate of worship attendance decline snowballed by an alarming 6.9 percentage points to 11.9 percent, and the church school attendance decline accelerated as well. (See Table 4 and Figure 4 on page 50.)

By and large, it is probably expecting too much from these small churches that most of them should achieve net numerical growth. Even C. Peter Wagner has come to admit that for many single-cell churches, "it's O.K. not to grow."⁴ Even so, many of them had much to gain from LIA, and their evangelistic efforts need to be applauded, even when church growth is not the result.

On average, medium-sized churches retarded their rate of decline in membership and worship. However, church school attendance lost its modest four-year rate of increase, dropping by 6.7 percent from 1987 to 1991. (See Table 5 and Figure 5 on page 51.)

The large churches appear to have benefited statistically only in church school attendance from LIA. Membership continued to fall but at an increased rate. The former small increase in worship attendance shifted to a small decrease. However, church school attendance improved from a 2.7 percent four-year decline up through 1987 to a 2.7 percent four-year increase at the end of 1991. (See Table 6 and Figure 6 on page 52.)

It is interesting to note that during the four years of intervention, the rate of change for medium-sized churches improved in membership and worship attendance but worsened in church school attendance, while for large congregations, the trends were opposite, improving in church school attendance and worsening in membership and worship attendance. However, there exists an important distinction between these contrasts. While the rate of decline in worship attendance slowed for medium-sized churches during the intervention years compared to the previous four years, positive effects were experienced in fewer congregations. Of the 37 medium-sized LIA churches, 18 of them reported an increase in worship attendance between 1983 and 1987, but only 13 showed worship attendance growth between 1987 and 1991. This would suggest that if the intervention process played a positive role, the anticipated effects only "took" in a minority of congregations. Similarly, for church school attendance twenty LIA medium-sized churches had formerly experienced growth, but at the end of LIA only 13 reported a four-year net increase.

⁴ C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth: The Secret of Pastor/People Partnership in Dynamic Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), 18.

Table 4 and Figure 4

Small LIA Churches Worship Attendance under 100 Prior to and During Intervention

	1983-87	1987-91
Membership	-7.3%	-7.8%
Worship Att	-5.0%	-11.9%
ChSchool Att	-6.4%	-9.6%

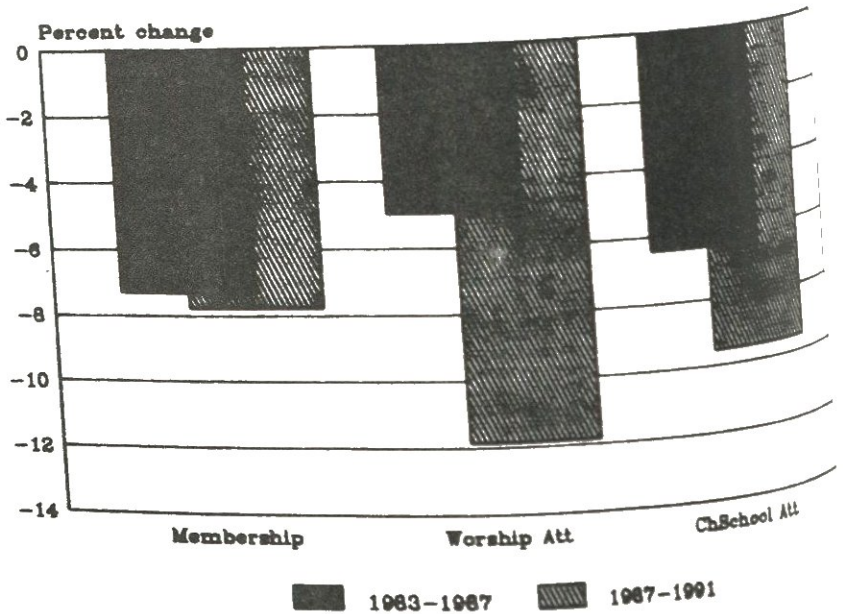


Table 5 and Figure 5

Medium-sized LIA Churches Worship Attendance 100-199 Prior to and During Intervention

	1983-87	1987-91
Membership	-7.1%	-4.7%
Worship Att	-3.7%	-2.6%
ChSchool Att	0.3%	-6.7%

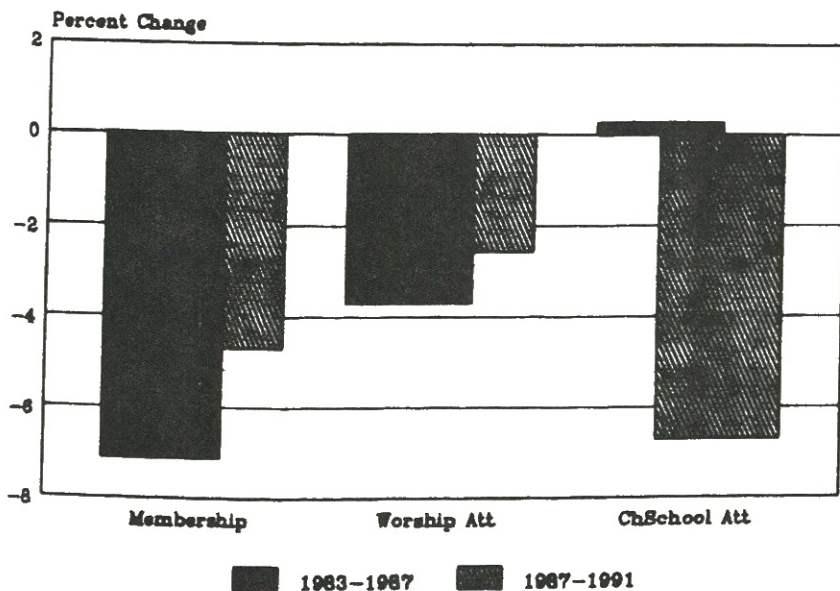
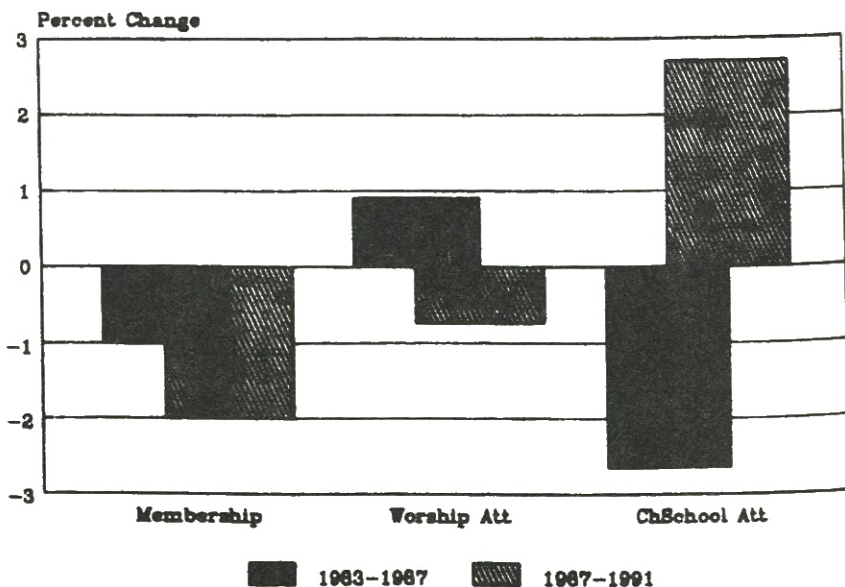


Table 6 and Figure 6

Large LIA Churches Worship Attendance 200 and Up Prior to and During Intervention

	1983-87	1987-91
Membership	-1.0%	-2.0%
Worship Att	0.9%	-0.7%
ChSchool Att	-2.7%	2.7%



On the other hand, for the larger LIA congregations, the number reporting four-year increases in church school attendance rose from seven from 1983-87 to 14 from 1987-91. In terms of worship attendance, the number reporting a four-year increase dropped from 13 to 12. Twenty-four of the 50 smaller LIA churches reported worship attendance increases from 1983 to 1987, but that number was reduced to 18 from 1987 to 1991. The number of small churches indicating four-year church school attendance growth held even at 18.

There is a scarcity of comparative data on LIA. Church Growth, Inc. sent selected statistical results from a Two-Year Growth Process (pre-LIA) from the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod, Kansas District. Forty-five churches, representing 26.9 percent of the congregations in the district, began the process in 1983 and concluded in 1985. The general report was that "all participating churches experienced growth in one or more vital areas,"⁵ meaning membership, worship attendance and Sunday school attendance. In all three categories, a majority of congregations reported increases. The Nebraska United Methodists did not fare as well. (See Table 7 and Figure 7 on page 54.)

Population Trends

Any discussion of church growth and decline must take into account basic demographic data. The U. S. census data reveals that between 1980 and 1990, the state of Nebraska grew a barely perceptible 0.5 percent. What actually happened was more of a shift than growth. Only ten of Nebraska's 93 counties yielded population growth, at an average rate of 7.5 percent for the decade. The other 83 counties declined at an average decadal rate of 8.1 percent. As a matter of fact, most (87 percent) of the growth of the ten growing counties took place in three counties, Douglas, Lancaster and Sarpy, representing the greater Omaha and Lincoln areas. By 1990, nearly half (46 percent) of the population of the entire state lived in one of those three counties. (It is revealing to note that of the 303 United Methodist pastors assigned to Nebraska parishes in 1991, only 65, or 21 percent, were serving in Douglas, Lancaster or Sarpy County.) Thirty-two of the 110 LIA congregations were located in a growing county of Nebraska.

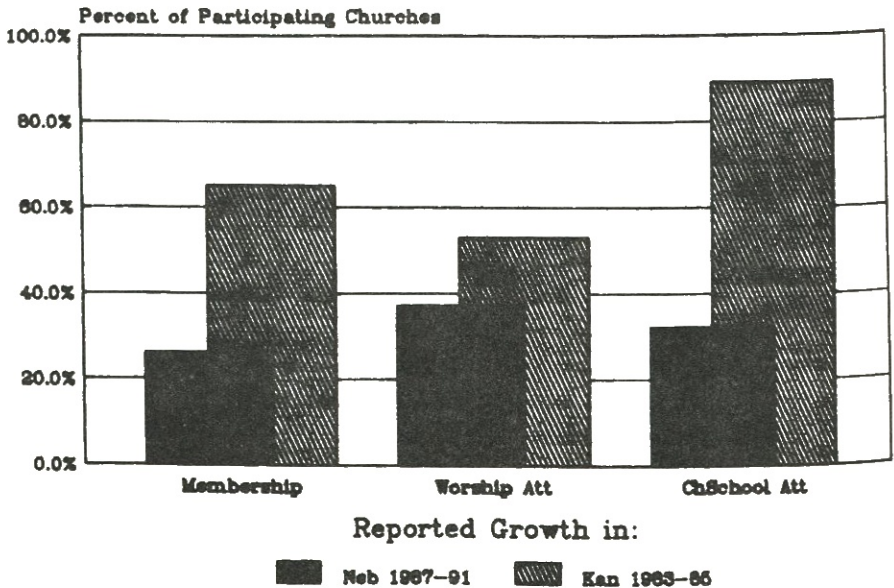
The other 78 LIA churches were located in counties where the population declined in the 1980s. For them, net numerical growth was less likely, especially among the small congregations. In such cases, Wagner suggests that these

⁵ "Preliminary Growth Results for LC-MS, Kansas District," photocopy, n.d. 1.
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Table 7 and Figure 7

Kansas LC-MS and Nebraska UM Participating Churches Reporting Increases

	Members	Worship Att	ChSchool Att
Kan	65%	53%	89%
Neb	26%	37%	32%



churches "do not need to be loaded with more guilt because they are not growing; they need to be cared for and counseled."⁶

Turn-around Congregations and Other Growth Churches

Using the following criteria, 20 of the 110 LIA churches I have labeled "turn-around" congregations: any measurable increase in both worship attendance and church school attendance from before the intervention process to its completion in 1991, with at least one of the two areas showing an increase in growth rate over the previous four years. Another three LIA churches experienced growth in the two categories but at a decreased rate in both. Together, these 23 will be termed "growth" churches of the LIA intervention.

Of the 23 growth churches, 12 of them could be found in a growing town of a growing county. Two more were located in growing towns of declining counties. This points toward the conclusion that the LIA process was much more likely to enhance net numerical growth in an area where the population was increasing. However, that the combination of LIA and a growing population only increased the likelihood of growth and did not cause or ensure it is made obvious by the following two observations. First, the other twenty LIA congregations in growing communities of growing counties did not achieve growth in both worship and church school attendance. Second, there were nine turn-around churches in declining communities of declining counties; they deserve special attention and study in the future to determine the factors related to their growth.

A common theme among the turn-around churches was the spiritual enthusiasm, initiative and managerial skill brought to process by the lay leadership. Their roles in LIA seemed to light their fires for ministry. One pastor, who serves both a large and a small church, commented that the success of LIA in the large church was due to an abundance of capable lay leadership. The evaluation was also made by this pastor that the small church was handicapped with a lack of suitable leadership for such a programmatic effort.

Growth churches were also more likely to be found among the large churches. Seven of the 23 large LIA congregations (30.4 percent) were growth churches in worship and church school attendance. Eight of the 37 medium-sized churches (21.6 percent) reported turn-around growth. Eight of the fifty small churches (16 percent) yielded both worship and church school attendance growth. Obviously, congregational size influenced growth, but it did not always determine it or prevent it.

Another factor concerning the LIA growth churches is that seven of 23 experienced growth both during the four years previous to LIA as well as at the end of it. Six of them did so in growing communities or growing counties. Contrast this with the 24 LIA congregations which experienced dual attendance growth only prior to intervention and 16 LIA churches which did so only during the intervention. They were less likely to be in areas of increasing population. This comparison would seem to indicate that short-term growth is much easier to achieve than sustained growth. Where the population declines significantly and steadily, long-term increases in membership and attendance cannot ultimately be maintained. However, it may be that where the population decline outpaced the church decline, a local congregation may be growing in terms of the percentage of the population in its ministry area, and it may be possible that the percentage of unchurched persons is shrinking.

The Influence of LIA

LIA served as an intervention of training for each congregation that participated. Using Burke's criteria for organizational development, an intervention is one that:

1. Responds to an actual and felt need for change on the part of the client
2. Involves the client in the planning and implementing of the change (intervention)
3. Leads to change in the organization's culture.⁷

It may be argued that the second of Burke's criteria was met insofar as the Church Growth Committee represented the client, the Nebraska Annual Conference, but not for the local church. The basic design of LIA was altered for the conference as a whole but was not adjustable for the needs of the individual congregations. The assumption was that the tailoring would happen as local congregations implemented the modules. Church Growth, Inc. staff reminded the task groups at the training seminars to "adapt, not adopt."

Regarding the third of Burke's criteria for intervention, the best response would be "sometimes." In my sample interviews with clergy and laity from the growth LIA churches, there were cases in which LIA reportedly made a profound and positive impact upon the culture of the congregation. Generally,

it was described as a "consciousness raising" or a "new awareness" of ministry to unchurched people in the community. Not only were new groups and church school classes started, the leadership seems to have caught a vision for why they need to be started and how they can be used to help meet people's needs, and either become a point of entry into the church or a way to keep people from leaving through the back door. New and effective visitor follow-up programs are being carried out. Another worship service has been added to the weekly schedule in several churches. Even among congregations which have not shown significant numerical growth, there are cases in which the culture of the congregation has been positively shaped, giving impetus to new ministries, outreach, and hope for the future.

One of the most successful aspects of LIA for a number of congregations was the impetus it gave to starting new groups. Most churches formed new groups and classes in the Growing in Love module to take the 13-week course. Some of them continued as permanent groups after the 13 weeks. Individuals whose Growing in Love group was temporary often became more receptive to group participation in the future. As a result of the Incorporation module, one church interviewed had started a new group on Sunday mornings for divorce recovery. By the next year, a second group for blended families had spun off the first. Unchurched persons were among those attending both of these groups. Another congregation reported so many new Sunday morning groups and classes that a few were being held off site to accommodate them.

On the other hand, some persons I interviewed, including some from the turn-around congregations, claimed very little benefit from their involvement in LIA. For example, one congregation put effective leadership into the project but witnessed little, if any, positive changes. Another congregation was suffering from a deep split on almost every issue. LIA made minimal impact because the conflict was not being creatively handled. In other words, LIA was not the needed prescription for growth in that context. Now that the conflict is being healed, growth is happening but apparently quite apart from the LIA process. A majority of congregations with which I had contact failed to implement one or more of the modules, either in whole or in part. For those congregations which gained little benefit, a common complaint was that LIA was too expensive.

Another complaint against LIA among a significant minority centered on its conservative style, language and theology. Compared to the level of inclusive language practiced in some United Methodist congregations, the Church Growth, Inc. staff and materials were sexist. Some clergy claimed that the language of "getting people saved" and "winning people to Christ" was too conservative, antiquated and irrelevant to the needs of today's baby boomers. However, even then, some of these congregations claimed they benefited, even numerically, from the published by PLAGE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange, 1993
the LIA brought to being sensitive to outsiders and following up

on visitors. I perceive now an undercurrent of negative momentum among clergy, making criticism of LIA popular. Some of this may be substantive, but much of it seems to be a way of transferring blame to LIA itself, rather than face a failure in local implementation.

A great number of congregations never made the cultural shift, and for them LIA was nothing more than a passing phenomenon. In organizational development theory, the missing phase of planned change is what Burke calls "Institutionalization of the change,"⁸ what Kurt Lewin calls "refreezing."⁹ Burke is helpful at this point.

Thus, according to Lewin, bringing about lasting change means initially unlocking or unfreezing the present social system. This might require some kind of confrontation . . . or a process of reeducation. Next, behavioral movement must occur in the direction of desired change, such as reorganization. Finally, deliberate steps must be taken to ensure that the new state of behavior remains relatively permanent. These three steps are simple to state but not simple to implement.¹⁰

David A. Nadler offers the insight that unfreezing means helping people in an organization be "receptive to change," which usually happens when they are dissatisfied with the status quo.¹¹ Churches were dissatisfied with the general lack of growth, and they desired institutional survival, causing receptivity toward LIA. LIA as an intervention brought an important infusion of ideas, values and behavioral possibilities. The difficulty comes in perpetuating those ideas, values and behaviors into the organizational identity and operation of the congregation. Nadler recognizes that

The forces of equilibrium tend to work to cancel out many changes. Changing one component of an organization may reduce its congruence.

⁸ Burke, 51.

⁹ Burke, 48.

¹⁰ Burke, 48.

with other components. As this happens, energy develops in the organization to limit, encapsulate, or revise the change.¹²

Another consideration concerns the type of intervention attempted. For the most part, it consisted of group training through the seminars and materials, and data collection in the Diagnostic module. An "800" number was made available to everyone to help troubleshoot questions and problems. Other types of intervention may also have been needed. As previously mentioned, a congregation rife with conflict needs a peacemaking intervention before most kinds of training will be of much value. (Arn had communicated to the Church Growth Committee before an agreement was signed that LIA was not particularly effective in conflict situations.) Burke identifies many intervention possibilities within the field of organizational development. Among the many options which may have been needed by some congregations in the Nebraska Conference are "process consultation" and "team building" for congregational leaders, "individual consultation" and "job redesign" for church staffs, "personnel systems" for lay ministry volunteers, and making changes in "organizational design" in the local church.¹³ The LIA churches probably relied too heavily on the LIA process and could have supplemented its training with other intervention steps. Among the 12 action steps for change described by Nadler, a few may have been particularly helpful, such as building in greater participation in change, developing and communicating "a clear image of the future," and knowing how to enlist the "support of the key power groups."¹⁴ As mentioned earlier, from the beginning LIA had momentum. Expectations were high, and this produced energy to implement the LIA process. Burke sees this as essential in planned change. "The key is to raise expectations that something can be done and that there is potential for improvement."¹⁵

Though reaction to the diagnostic module was mixed, the second module, *Growing in Love*, was very popular. Praise was nearly unanimous for this 13-week elective and the all-church celebration, "In His Steps . . . with Love." However, my interviews and the feedback given to the Church Growth Committee indicate that most churches had difficulty executing the third module, "Incorporation." Effective implementation required a great deal of creativity,

¹² Nadler, 197.

¹³ Burke, 228.

¹⁴ Nadler, 201-204.

¹⁵ Burke, 211.

initiative and leadership. For all too many congregations, the energy disappeared during this phase. In some cases, the newly created task group did not feel that, as an ad hoc committee, it was sufficiently authorized or empowered to produce the changes needed to make effective assimilation of new people part of the congregational life. For most of the small, aging churches in small communities, the possibility of multiplying new groups was perceived to be slim.

There were some churches, though, that implemented the Incorporation module particularly well. In more than one instance, the process was extended into a second year, which postponed the final module for a year.

Most of the churches which did not do much with the Incorporation module apparently did little with the fourth one, "Lifestyle Evangelism." Reports that came to me indicated that some (perhaps most) of the groups which had received the training were not carrying it out. That is, they had learned how to use their social networks to invite others to Christ and the church but were not practicing it. Those churches need to find out from their members what changes in the church need to be made that would help them feel free to extend an invitation to a friend, relative, co-worker or neighbor.

In retrospect, it seems that three-and-a-half years is a long time to maintain momentum for even a good program. Consequently, none of the persons surveyed claimed that their congregation had extensively implemented the Lifestyle Evangelism module. In previous LIA models, Lifestyle Evangelism was the heart of the process and--as mentioned earlier--was second on the batting order, immediately following the Diagnostic module.

For those churches which do have one or more groups practicing the strategy of reaching out through their social networks, we can expect that their best growth is yet to come. Their first steps may be hesitant and faltering, but if they can get past that stage, the future looks bright. Additional groups can be trained, especially including a congregation's most contagious witnesses, its new members and new Christians. Unfortunately, it appears that the number of congregations which will get to this level will be small.

Recommendations

The LIA Action and Celebration kits continue to be an important resource for the LIA churches. The Growing in Love course can continue to be offered as a superb elective. Local boards, committees and councils responsible for the creation of new groups, classes and ministries can receive excellent training through the materials used in the Incorporation module. Additional groups can be trained to use their social networks as a bridge for witness through the "The Master's Plan for Making Disciples" kit. Key sections of the diagnostic manual can be used annually as instruments for measuring progress. The celebrations,

"In His Steps . . . with Love," "Celebrating God's Family," and "Celebration of Friendship," can be recycled periodically with great benefit.

Although LIA has valuable contributions to make for many kinds of churches in a variety of contexts, I would recommend that Nebraska United Methodism not limit itself to a one-size-fits-all approach. The strengths and opportunities of congregations in rural areas differ from those in the cities. And, as Schaller has repeatedly demonstrated, the challenges of congregations vary widely according to their sizes.¹⁶ In the future, I would like to see churches in the Nebraska Conference utilize consultants more often, who can respond to specific internal and environmental dynamics. The conference's Church Growth Committee and Division on Evangelism would do well to recognize that they have categories of constituents (local congregations) with divergent needs, deserving a variety of intervention strategies and goals for church growth.

I would also propose to the Nebraska Conference that it monitor the growth of turn-around and other growth churches in the years to come. The best results in LIA-influenced growth may be yet to come for some congregations. Regardless of whether it was involved in LIA or not, a church which is growing -- or at least beating the odds in the face of a shrinking population -- needs to be noticed, studied, publicly recognized and imitated.

It may be that the momentum to sign on with LIA was not all positive. It created the motivation to begin the process but not enough ownership to keep up with the hard work of implementing the modules. A possible solution might have been to have launched a pilot project with a smaller number of churches and to have evaluated its effectiveness and limitations before opening it up to the entire conference. Then congregations not really wanting such a program may have been less likely to enroll in the first place rather than pay the fee and forfeit the benefit by failing to carry it out.

We also have to question whether a growth process which has greater potential for benefiting large churches, and which may be less than ideally suited for small congregations, should have been offered on a per-member payment basis. The high cost for the larger churches was enough to inhibit some of them from participating in LIA. Small churches which were sufficiently motivated could have been clustered into parish/paying units and, with sacrifice, come up with the money. Small churches willing to make that kind of investment would have been more likely to make LIA work for them. Alternatives, priced and made to fit small churches, also need to be sought and offered.

¹⁶ Lyle E. Schaller, *Looking in the Mirror: Self-Appraisal in the Local Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 14-37.

For congregations whose members express a high commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission, I would recommend LIA but suggest that the Lifestyle Evangelism follow immediately after the Diagnostic module, as in the original LIA design. For churches needing to first bolster their motivations to reach out beyond the membership, Growing in Love can help. However, I would discourage putting the Incorporation module between Growing in Love and Lifestyle Evangelism. One possibility would be to use the same small groups for the two modules, with perhaps Growing in Love offered as the fall course, and the Master's Plan for Making Disciples offered in the spring.

Of course, churches can purchase any of these kits independently and directly from Church Growth, Inc. without enrolling in LIA. What is lost is the stimulus and accountability of participating simultaneously with other congregations. Also, LIA offers the impact of day-long cluster seminars with church growth consultants for as many people as the room will hold. Besides being another avenue for the infusion of growth thinking, such events give priority to the project. However, congregations sufficiently motivated and led for growth will benefit from the Church Growth, Inc. kits apart from the LIA process.

My recommendation for Church Growth, Inc. is to maintain accurate records on the judicatories with which it contracts LIA, if for no other reason than to substantiate LIA as an effective training intervention for enhancing church growth. Such research might lead to a fine tuning of the process and the development of new kits designed especially for small congregations. Win and Charles Arn have proven to me through their products that they are equal to the challenge.

Finally, I must say that I have appreciated my involvement with LIA and Church Growth, Inc. As a member of the Church Growth Committee and the pastor of an LIA church, I would register my disappointment that the growth results were not outstanding. However, what I have learned has made me a better pastor. I would hope that a significant number of pastors and lay leadership would concur that LIA has helped shift our roles in the church away from maintenance and toward outreach and growth. My rising interest in the field of church growth led me to take a sabbatical year from the conference to pursue a Master of Theology degree from Asbury Theological Seminary's E. Stanley Jones School of Evangelism and World Mission.

Early in the LIA process, during the Growing in Love module, I realized that in the small Nebraska town where we lived I had no friends who were not already part of a church. Learning of a small group of men that gathered late Wednesday evenings to play folk and bluegrass music, I asked if I could bring my guitar and sit in once in a while. This began an acquaintance with Rick, an unchurched man about my age in whose garage the jam sessions were held. As

our friendship grew gradually, I prayed for opportunities to share my faith and love for Christ or to answer any question Rick might have. In a few months time those questions came through his new girlfriend, Lauri, after midnight one Wednesday evening before we all left to go home. A couple of months later, on Easter Sunday, Rick, Lauri and her kids came to the worship service. To my knowledge they have not yet become Christians or involved in a local church; by summer they had moved to Denver. The following fall I heard from them again. Lauri's father had died; there was no funeral. Rick, Lauri, her mother and grandmother met in our town and asked if I would meet with them to listen to their memories, answer their questions and pray with them. We have since moved, and I have lost contact with Rick and Lauri, but I pray that our friendship has brought them at least one step closer to Jesus and his people.

For me, this was an intentional step in a new direction. It has not brought church growth -- yet. But as thousands of us Nebraska United Methodists continue to take such steps, our congregations will, by God's grace, experience growth.