

Chapter Eight

The Ten Key Findings¹

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I frequently come across people who tell me that they have “heard something” about my religion research, and then ask, “What have you found?” At first such a seemingly innocent question was somewhat annoying—after all, how does a person sum up 25 years of research in a few sentences? Increasingly, however, I have come to side with the person asking the question. There now is so much data and so many articles and books out there that I occasionally ask myself, “So, in short, what have you found?”

My initial response is, “A lot.” The adult surveys since 1975, the teen surveys since 1984, the *Anglitrends* study of the Toronto Anglican Diocese in 1985 and the *Unitrends* national study of The United Church in 1994, the research on evangelicals in Calgary that began in 1971—those add up to a tremendous amount of information that represents a rich and invaluable resource for churches.

I consequently am committed to laying out the highlights with more clarity than ever before. So here’s what I consider the **ten most important findings of my research for religious leaders.**

1 – Participation is Down—Sharply

Since at least the late 1940s there has been a pronounced drop in weekly church attendance in Canada. The earliest poll data available, provided by Gallup for 1945, indicate that some 60% of the population maintained that they were attending services on close to a weekly basis at that time. The 60% figure fell to around 50% by 1960, to about 30% by 1980 and now stands at just over 20%.

- ✍ Religious group differences are striking: the greatest decreases between the mid-'50s and mid-'90s have been experienced by the Roman Catholic Church in Québec (from 90% attendance to 25%) and the United Church (from 40% to 20%).
- ✍ Roman Catholic attendance outside Québec has dropped significantly over the past four decades yet still stands relatively high, at about 40%.
- ✍ Conservative Protestant attendance has risen since the mid-'70s and now is the highest of any group, at close to 60%.

**Table 46
Church Attendance in Canada: 1957-1993**

	% indicating attending "almost every week" or more		
	1957	1975	1993
Nationally	53	31	23
Roman Catholic	83	45	30
Outside Québec	75	49	42
Inside Québec	88	41	27
Anglican	24	24	16
United	40	28	20
Conservative Protestant	51	40	59
Source: Bibby, <i>Unknown Gods</i> , 1993:4-6; for 1993, <i>Maclean's</i> , April 12, 1993: 33ff.			

As service attendance has declined, so has personal religious commitment—although not to the extent of group involvement. In 1975, for example, some 65% of Canadians indicated that religion was very important to them. As of the 1990s, that figure has slipped to about 55%. The drop has been about 10 percentage points for both women (69% to 60%) and men (60% to 52%).

These trends are understandably disturbing to most religious leaders. **The fact of the matter, however, is that the worst is yet to come.** A simple analysis of current weekly attendance by age reveals that churchgoers are disproportionately old: weekly attendees come in at 37% for those 55 and over, 23% for people 35 to 54 and only 14% for those between the ages of 18 and 34.

It doesn't take a brilliant demographer to project the obvious: with the aging of the Canadian population over the next 20 years or so, a dramatic drop in attendance is going to take place—barring some equally dramatic, unforeseen developments.

- ✍ Many of today's 55-and-overs—the group most supportive of Canada's churches—will disappear from the scene.
- ✍ They will be replaced by current 35- to 54-year-olds, meaning the level of involvement for Canada's oldest churchgoing group will drop from almost 40% to about 25%.
- ✍ That middle-age group will be replaced by today's under-35 crowd—meaning involvement for 35- to 54-year-olds will decline from about 25% to a mere 15%.
- ✍ And today's adults under 35 will be replaced by today's teenagers and their younger sisters and brothers—the group with possibly the lowest amount of exposure to organized religion in Canadian history.

It's not exactly a pretty projection. There is good reason **to believe that in only 20 years—by approximately the year 2015—the proportion of people attending weekly will drop from today's 23% level to around 15%.**

Translated into actual numbers of people, in just 20 years' time:

- ✍ Nationally, the number of weekly attendees will fall from today's 4.5 million to 3.5 million.
- ✍ Regular Roman Catholic churchgoers in Québec will decline by one-half—from 1.2 million to 600,000.
- ✍ Anglican weekly attendees will drop from today's 220,000 to 100,000.
- ✍ The United Church will see its weekly attendees cut in half—from about 400,000 to 200,000.
- ✍ The mixed news for Roman Catholics outside Québec is that the church will lose about 200,000 regular attendees, but will still have over one million people attending weekly—easily the most of any Canadian group.
- ✍ The most positive news is associated with conservative Protestants, but it's not as positive as many people think. These evangelical groups will experience growth but it will be fairly modest. Evangelicals will add some 200,000 weekly attendees in the next two decades, bringing their weekly total to some 1.3 million people. The downside is that this kind of growth will fall far short of the hopes of "Vision 2000," and may be seen as a failure.

By the year 2015, on an average Sunday there will be three Canadians in a conservative Protestant service for every one person attending United, Anglican, Presbyterian and Lutheran services combined. Outside Québec, the Roman Catholic worshiping total will be about the same as that of the conservatives.

Obviously there are some geographical and congregational exceptions to these national patterns, both positive and negative. All mainline congregations are not declining, just as all conservative Protestant congregations are not growing. Collectively, however, the news is not very good for Canada's religious groups.

2 - Few People are Actually Leaving

The drop in weekly attendance has led many leaders to assume that people are literally being "lost" to the churches. If they are not showing up, the assumption is that, at best, they have dropped out and have simply become inactive. At worst, they have defected to some other group, possibly of the grassroots evangelical variety.

Most of the consternation about dropout and defection, however, is not warranted. As of the 1991 census:

- ✍ Some 8 in 10 Canadians continue to view themselves as Roman Catholics or Protestants—in 1971, the figure was about 9 in 10.
- ✍ Only 4% of Canadians identify with other faiths—essentially the same as 50 years ago.
- ✍ While 12% of Canadians currently say that they have "no religion," many appear to be younger, "temporary nothings" who frequently will turn to religious groups for marriage and birth rites—often "reaffiliating" with their parents' religion in the process.
- ✍ Intergenerational retention rates remain high:
 - ✍ Approximately 90% of Canadians from Roman Catholic homes continue to identify with Roman Catholicism;
 - ✍ 85% for mainline Protestants (United, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran);

≈65% for conservative Protestants (“evangelical groups” such as Baptist, Pentecostal, Salvation Army, Mennonite, Alliance, Nazarene, Reformed); and

≈75% for other faiths (such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism).

Regardless of their participation levels in religious groups, Canadians are still including religion when they define themselves. They may not be showing up all that much, but they’re still out there and they still are thinking that they are Roman Catholic, United, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Mennonite, Jewish and so on. The more “historic” the faith group, the more likely it seems that people continue to define themselves by it.

Think I’m exaggerating? Frankly, I’ve considered that possibility myself. Consequently, one corrective I’ve tried to use is to tell people what I’ve had in mind and ask them how well they recognize themselves in the descriptions I’ve been giving of them.

Specifically, in both the 1985 and 1990 national surveys, I asked Canadians who said that they are not regular churchgoers to respond to this statement:

Some observers maintain that few people are actually abandoning their religious traditions. Rather, they draw selective beliefs and practices, even if they do not attend services frequently. They are not about to be recruited by other religious groups. Their identification with their religious traditions is fairly solidly fixed and it is to these groups that they will turn when confronted with marriage, death and, frequently, birth. How well would you say this observation describes YOU?

In both surveys:

- ≈ Close to 90% of people who still identified with a religious group but were not attending regularly said that the statement described them either “very accurately” or “somewhat accurately;”
- ≈ The “accuracy” figures were just over 90% for inactive Roman Catholic, United and Anglican affiliates; and
- ≈ Around 85% for inactive conservative Protestants, Lutherans and Presbyterians.

For all the alarm about defection, these findings suggest that the vast majority of Canadians are “still at home.” As I have pointed out in *Unknown Gods*, even when groups would like to delete some of these inactive types from their membership rolls, the truth of the matter is that these people are hard to shed. They can be chastised, ignored and removed from church lists—and they frequently are. But they don’t really leave. Psychologically, emotionally and culturally they continue to identify with their religious traditions.

The research is decisive: **defection from the group of one’s parents is relatively uncommon.** People may not be highly involved in their group, but most retain psychological and emotional ties.

3 - Religion a la carte is Rampant

Canadians are fussy customers. We have a wide range of choices in virtually every area of life. We can take our pick from an array of possibilities when it comes to day-to-day shopping, entertainment, education, medicine, finance and politics, not to mention lifestyle, family structure, sexuality and morality.

Simultaneously, we keep saying that we have two primary personal concerns—we don’t think we have enough money and we don’t think we have enough time.

The combination of unlimited choices on the one hand and the perception of limited resources on the other has resulted in people practicing **selective consumption**.

When Canadians as a whole turn to religion, they don't change their posture. They approach religion with the same "pick and choose" mentality that they show pretty much everything else. For starters, they attend when they want. **But sporadic attendance is merely the tip of the religion a la carte iceberg.**

Other results are familiar to church leaders—Canadians tend to accept "the party line" when it comes to believing in God, the divinity of Jesus and life after death, but they essentially ignore teachings concerning sexuality, gambling and capital punishment. People want some services that groups provide, notably rites of passage. But they frequently prefer to pass on preparation classes, Sunday schools and study groups. And, of course, they are prepared to give religious groups only so much time and money. As one United Church board member in Calgary bluntly informed her colleagues in a consultation a few years back: "You people need to understand that I'm prepared to give this church two hours a week. If there's a board meeting on Wednesday night, don't expect to see me at church on Sunday morning!"

The selective consumption approach to much of Canadian life is not just the result of limited resources. **It has its roots in an accelerated amount of individualism.** As I have pointed out in some detail in *Mosaic Madness*, since the 1950s there has been a growing tendency for people from British Columbia to Newfoundland to emphasize the individual over the group or their group over the collectivity. The emphasis on the individual may have been important as a corrective to an excessive emphasis on the group in the pre-1960s. Still, as American sociologist Robert Bellah has pointed out in his book, *Habits of the Heart*,² individualism taken too far can

make social life at all levels—relationships, family, community, nation and world—extremely difficult. It's no accident that Canada has experienced considerable social fragmentation in recent years; individualism in excess can contribute to a socially debilitating style of "all for one and none for all."

Individualism has also been accompanied by an emphasis on relativism—the idea that "truth and right" exist only in the eye of the beholder. Make no mistake about it: relativism is pervasive. In 1990, the *Project Canada* national survey asked adults to respond to the statement, "What's right or wrong is a matter of personal opinion." Some 50% agreed. In 1992, among teenagers, the figure was considerably higher—65%. **External authority is out; personal authority is in.**

So Canadians interact with religious groups as fussy customers who want to pick and choose according to their consumption whims and personal sense of what is right. They tend to want only fragments of what the country's religious groups have to offer.

The problem is not that people seem to want so much; it's rather that they seem to want so little. Fragments are relatively unimportant consumer items, chosen over systems because they are more conducive to life in our present age.

4 - Religion Continues to be Relational

There is little mystery as to why most people are involved in mainstream religious groups in Canada and elsewhere. **Religious involvement and commitment are learned like anything else. Relationships, led by the family, are religion's centrally important transmission lines.**³

- ✍ My ongoing research of evangelical churches in Calgary with Merlin Brinkerhoff, for example, has found that, to the extent that “outsiders” are recruited, they invariably come through friendship and marriage links with members.⁴
- ✍ It’s no different for other groups. The 1994 *Unitrends* survey found that some 75% of today’s active members in the United Church come out of United Church homes, with many of the remainder “marrying in.”⁵
- ✍ Recent Baby Boomer research findings have provided some of the latest and strongest evidence of the strong tendency of parents to pass religion on to their children.⁶

Conversely, **disaffiliation also tends to have social sources.** People whose family members and friends are not involved tend to follow suit. A fairly reliable rule of thumb is this: “the devout beget the devout; the non-devout beget the non-devout.”⁷

The research is conclusive for both conservative and mainline churches: **religious groups grow their own, primarily through their members’ families.**

Such family sources of religious commitment are readily evident in Canada, whether we are looking at identification, attendance or commitment. What’s more, little has changed from the 1970s through the 1990s:

- ✍ Almost 90% of Canadians in 1975 and again in 1990 were identifying with the same Protestant, Catholic, Other and None groupings as their parents, with little difference in the tendency to identify with the tradition of one’s mother versus one’s father.
- ✍ Over 80% of current weekly attendees in both 1975 and 1990 maintained that they had attended weekly when they were growing up; all but 5% accompanied by their mothers, 8 in 10 by both parents.

- ✍ About 85% of those who viewed themselves as “very religious” in 1975 indicated that their mothers also see themselves as very devout; some 70% of those who were “very religious” said the same designation applied to their fathers.
- ✍ In both 1975 and 1990, attendance and commitment were highest for respondents whose mother and father attended weekly and were strongly committed.

Parents are playing the key source role in imparting participation and commitment. The old cliché that “young people represent religion’s future” needs to be supplemented with a centrally important socialization point: parents are the key to the religious future of young people. Anyone who doubts such a conclusion needs only to reflect on the relationship between their faith and that of a mother or father—and the relationship, in turn, between their faith and that of a son or daughter.

Precisely because religion is “transmitted” through significant relationships, Canadians—like people elsewhere—do not readily abandon the religions of their childhood. And in those cases where they do, a relationship with someone, such as a friend or a marriage partner, is invariably involved.

Table 47
Intergenerational Identification: 1975, 1990 (in %s)

	1975		1990	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Identify with mother's religion	86	87	87	87
Identify with father's religion	88	87	82	86
Attended weekly as a child	86	81	81	81

Source: *Project Canada* series.

This tendency for religious identification to be grounded in family and friendships brings us to religious memory.

5 - Religious Memory is Everywhere

Almost 90% of adults and 80% of teenagers identify with one religious group or another. That's an important finding. At minimum, such identification means that **millions of Canadians—well beyond the 20% to 25% who currently are weekly attendees—have psychological, emotional and cultural ties with the country's religious groups.**

Consider these additional facts concerning people who do not attend services regularly:

- ✍ Almost 80% say that they attended monthly or more when they were growing up; close to 7 in 10 were accompanied by their mothers, more than 5 in 10 by their fathers.
- ✍ Approximately one-half of those who don't attend on a regular weekly basis nevertheless say that both religion generally and their own religious group heritage specifically are "very important" or "somewhat important" to them; fewer than 1 in 5 indicate that they are "not important at all."

The cultures of those religious traditions include symbols such as family Bibles, family pianos and family burial plots; in those cultures we learn certain choruses and hymns, worship styles, language, theological ideas; we are exposed to particular role-models and lifestyles.

Canadians subsequently feel familiarity in certain religious cultures and discomfort in others.

- ✍ A Protestant in a Roman Catholic service isn't sure what to do and when to do it.
- ✍ A Roman Catholic in some Protestant services looks in vain for candles and statues, and wonders why the service ended without the Eucharist being celebrated.

✍ A journalist who has long since thrown over the evangelical faith of her childhood acknowledges that she finds herself wanting to cry when she hears the sounds of *Amazing Grace*—like Kris Kristofferson, she finds that it takes her "back to something that she lost somewhere, somehow along the way."⁸

Obviously those feelings are not always positive. For some, the religion of their parents may be associated with memories and emotions that are unpleasant, sometimes painful.

Yet, even among the disenchanting, what is "normal" in a religious sense is hard to shake. Many are inclined to view the ideas and styles of other religious groups through the eyes of the group in which they were raised. Accordingly, even in wedding and funeral situations, for example, these Canadians feel more comfortable or less comfortable with certain hymns and prayers, words and phrases, symbols and rituals.

Canadians who attend sporadically simply don't wake up on a given Sunday morning and make a random decision as to where they will catch a worship service. **They head in the direction of what is religiously familiar.**

In the 1990 national survey, we asked adults who do not attend services regularly where they or their children turn for occasional services or other activities, such as Sunday schools. We found that:

- ✍ 85% of inactive mainline Protestants rely on mainline churches;
- ✍ 76% of inactive conservative Protestants turn to conservative churches and
- ✍ 97% of inactive Roman Catholics look to Catholic churches.

The vast majority of Canadians continue to have psychological, emotional and cultural links to their parents' religious groups. These links appear to be sustained not so

much by religious content as by family history and rites of passage. This is why denominational walls are still in place, in both the United States and Canada, despite common claims to the contrary.

Because of the importance of the point, let me elaborate a bit. I'm well aware of the claims of people such as George Barna, Leith Anderson and Lyle Schaller, along with Don Posterski and Irwin Barker, that denominations have lost much of their importance to people today.⁹

However, two issues have not been sufficiently resolved:

1. If one thinks not of denomination but of "religious families"—mainline Protestants, conservative Protestants, Roman Catholics and other faiths—switching typically involves fairly short theological and cultural trips.
 - ✍ While Dean Hoge and his associates, for example, have recently suggested that denomination is not very important to people who were raised as Presbyterians, their own data show that some 70% of their sample retained the "Presbyterian label" as adults.¹⁰
 - ✍ Highly-regarded researchers Kirk Hadaway and Penny Marler have concluded that "the majority of church members (in the U.S.) never change denominations...when Americans do switch, they often remain within the same broad denominational family."¹¹
 - ✍ Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney similarly have noted that, although at least 40% of American Protestants have switched denominations at one time or another, the figures for those remaining within "denominational families" come in at about 80% for conservative Protestants and 70% for mainliners. They maintain that such findings point to "levels of stability

for the larger religio-cultural traditions in America today."¹²

- ✍ Consistent with U.S. findings, data collected by Don Posterski and Irwin Barker in 1992 on some of Canada's most active church members show that about 70% of current mainliners and 65% of conservative Protestants were raised in those "families." Further, less than 20% give denomination a "low" ranking as a factor to be considered when switching congregations.¹³ My own research pegs the Roman Catholic retention level at almost 90%.¹⁴
2. Researchers might be confusing **tolerance zones** with **comfort zones**.
 - ✍ Dean Hoge and his team have found that the tolerance zones of American Presbyterian Baby Boomers, for example, have expanded over the years, but personal comfort zones "are surprisingly narrow and traditional," extending for the great majority "no further than mainline Protestantism," and for many "no further than Episcopalians!"¹⁵
 - ✍ Similarly, the *Unitrends* national survey found that although about 95% of United Church members say they would feel comfortable in an Anglican worship service, the figure drops to 70% for a Roman Catholic mass and 35% for a Pentecostal service.

Some of you are undoubtedly saying, "But I know for a fact that there are people in my congregation who come from other traditions." Maybe. Or maybe not.

First, ask yourself if their previous group was actually **outside, not just your denomination, but also your "religious family"**—mainline Protestant, conservative Protestant, or Roman Catholic?

Second, **don't assume that current involvement means that a permanent switch has taken place.** People may attend a given church for highly practical purposes, such as location, children, friendships, a minister and so on. Some Roman Catholics, hurt by their church's attitude toward women priests or divorce, may be attending the local United Church. That's not to say they have switched their affiliation. They're "just attending somewhere." If the home church changes, these temporary residents may well move back.

The distinction is more than an academic one. If people feel no lasting attachment to a denomination or faith "family" beyond a given congregation, their "fickleness" has important implications for their future involvement in the denomination. Their apparent "switch" may be only a temporary stopover en route back to the group of their childhood.

As of the 1990s, this pattern of "involvement without actual identification" characterizes:

- ✍ Only about one in 50 people who worship in Roman Catholic churches;
- ✍ One in four who attend mainline Protestant congregations; and
- ✍ One in three people who attend conservative Protestant churches.

Religious memory typically has strong family roots. As such, it is not easily erased.

6 – Receptivity to Spirituality is Extensive

Ironically, precisely at a time when interest and involvement in organized religion seems to be hitting unprecedented lows, there is considerable evidence to suggest that fairly large numbers of Canadians are highly receptive to the very things that religion historically has addressed.

People across the country—both young and old—continue to be intrigued with mystery. Many have experiences that call for answers that often are not readily available.

- ✍ Some 50% think that they have personally experienced an event before it has happened (precognition).
- ✍ About 40% believe that we can have contact with the spirit world.
- ✍ More than 90% find themselves asking what happens after we die. One in four adults and one in three teenagers think that they, themselves, will be reincarnated.
- ✍ Over 80% maintain God exists, but there's more—some 45% of adults and 35% of teens maintain that they, themselves, have experienced God. And remember, for the teenagers that's only "so far"—they haven't even hit 20 yet!

Such beliefs and experiences suggest that significant numbers of Canadians who are not involved in a church are anything but closed to the mysteries of life and death.

Canadians also indicate that they are searching for meaning. It's not necessarily an everyday, pressing thing but, from time to time—perhaps when facing a birth, an illness or the death of a relative or friend, perhaps when coming to grips with a career or marital change, maybe when hitting "a decade birthday" of 30, 40, 50 or 60, the questions are raised.

- ✍ Nine in 10 people say they find themselves asking questions such as, "What is the meaning of life?" "Why is there suffering in the world?" and "How can I find real happiness?"
- ✍ Some 50% report that the question of life's meaning and purpose is something that concerns them "a great deal" or "quite a bit."

- ✍ About 80% or more indicate that they anticipate turning to religious groups for ceremonies relating to birth, marriage and death. Sure, some are responding to family pressures and tradition and are in reality customers shopping for churches with wide aisles and air conditioning. But, as many a minister has reminded me over the years, at least some of these people have a sometimes poorly articulated sense—yet a sense, nonetheless—that “God needs to be brought in” on these events.
- ✍ Although fewer than one in five teenagers attend services regularly and only 10% say they place a high value on religious involvement, about 25% report that spirituality is very important to them and 60% explicitly acknowledge that they have spiritual needs.

Organized religion may be in trouble, but large numbers of Canadians who are not highly involved in a church show a remarkable openness to the supernatural and to spirituality.

Given the reality of selective consumption, the obvious question that arises is “how much” and “what kind” of religion do Canadians want...and need?

The “consumer report” I offered in *Fragmented Gods* about fussy customers seems to fly in the face of those who maintain that religion should speak to all of one’s life. But then again, maybe not. Perhaps an important reason why people “pick and choose” is because they aren’t sure what churches have to offer. Maybe some people aren’t aware that some of their interests and needs can be addressed by churches.

Equally serious, **it may well be that the groups themselves have incomplete menus.** Their ministries do not provide a balanced emphasis on God, self and society.

Table 48
Perceptions of Spirituality

“When you think of someone who is genuinely spiritual, how important do you consider the following characteristics to be?” (% indicating “Very Important” or “Somewhat Important”)	
Living out one’s faith in everyday life	78
Having a basic knowledge of one’s faith	76
Believing in a supernatural being or higher power	69
Raising questions of purpose and meaning	69
Engaging in private prayer	69
Struggling to find a faith to live by	64
Engaging in public practices such as worship services	59
Spending time with people who have similar beliefs	54
Telling others about one’s beliefs	46
Experiencing the supernatural	26

Source: *Project Canada Survey series*

7 - Most People are Not Looking for Churches

I find that church leaders are often preoccupied with the question, “What will it take to get people back in the churches?” It’s the wrong question to ask.

The research is clear: **the majority of Canadians are not in the market for churches.**

- ✍ Only about 20% of adults and teenagers attend every week—and the level is dropping.
- ✍ When it comes to sources of enjoyment, religious group involvement is ranked last nationally by both young people and adults.

Canadians are also not “in the market for religion.”

- ✍ While interest in meaning and mystery is widespread, only about 25% of adults and 15% of teenagers say that they place a high value on “religion” as such.

✍ The teen research, for example, finds over and over that young people express an openness to things spiritual and disinterest in things organizational.¹⁶

Canadians are, however, in the market for the things that religion historically has been about.

✍ They are more than interested in “a product” that speaks to the unexplained and the unknown by offering answers that lie beyond the human plane. They are open to—in fact, are fascinated by—explanations of a supernatural variety.

✍ They are trying to make sense of what life is for and to find out how to make their own existence more meaningful. Many find that their lives do not add up to particular significance.

✍ One in three explicitly acknowledge that they should be getting more out of life.

✍ Canadians also want to feel good about themselves, to have solid self-esteem and a sense of personal worth; they want to be able to minimize personal strain and pain; experience happiness and fulfillment, new beginnings and life-energizing hope.

✍ And besides staying alive and living well, there is nothing that Canadians young and old say they value more than good relationships. They want to love and be loved and to experience good ties with the people they associate with.

No, most Canadians are not looking for churches—or religion. **But they do express spiritual, personal and social needs.** Therein lies religion’s “great opportunity.” It’s almost an ideal match-up.

✍ Canadians indicate that they have spiritual needs; the churches have much to say about God and spirituality.

✍ Canadians indicate that they have personal needs; the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, says much about personal dignity and fulfillment, resources and joy, new beginnings and hope.

✍ Canadians indicate that they have social and relational needs; a religion like Christianity attempts to teach people how to experience optimum relationships that start with family and friends and extend to outsiders, to the enhancing of social life regionally, nationally and globally.

Unfortunately, the obvious connection is not taking place.

Many observers assume, in a naïve, matter-of-fact manner, that if increasing numbers of Canadians are not having their spiritual, personal and relational needs met by the country’s religious groups, they must be having them met in other ways. Academics, for example, have spoken of “privatized faith,” while the media have given considerable attention in the post-1950s to a variety of new religious expressions. *Maclean’s* devoted a front cover story to “The New Spirituality,” with writer Marci McDonald telling the nation that “a massive quest for a new spirituality [is] currently gripping mainstream North America,” and proceeded to discuss how it possibly is being met—everywhere but in traditional churches.¹⁷

The research to date, however, provides little evidence that Canadians who are no longer turning to churches for needs pertaining to God, self and society are automatically turning elsewhere.

✍ While some are curious about new religious ideas and may explore and adopt some New Age offerings, for example, most are extremely reluctant to abandon their traditional religions. The result is that large numbers of people are failing to have their spiritual needs met.

- ✍ Personal issues such as the need for positive self-esteem, new beginnings and hope for better things have been central religious themes; but they appear to remain elusive goals for many Canadians. While self-worth, forgiveness and hope can be instilled without religion's help, religion nonetheless has been an important ally whose contribution is being sorely missed.
- ✍ Interpersonally, churches have at minimum aspired to and encouraged values such as compassion, generosity and respect. It is not at all clear that the task of instilling such basic civility values has been assumed by any alternative source such as school, media or home.

No, Canadians are not looking for churches. But there is good reason to believe that they continue to be very much in need of the God-self-society themes that churches are about.

8 - Most Churches are Not Looking for People

It's not easy to say, but needs to be said: the research suggests that **one of the main reasons why Canada's churches are not ministering to a larger number of people is because they typically wait for people to come to them.**

Look at the data:

- ✍ More than 80% of today's weekly attendees were, in fact, attending that often when they were growing up; just 4% of the people who were attending "yearly or less" now are attending regularly.
- ✍ As many as seven in ten additions to congregations are active members of the congregations in the same "denominational families." Two in ten are the children of members, and only about one in ten have come from other religious families. When outsiders do appear, friendship and marriage seem to be the key links.

Quest in Search of God

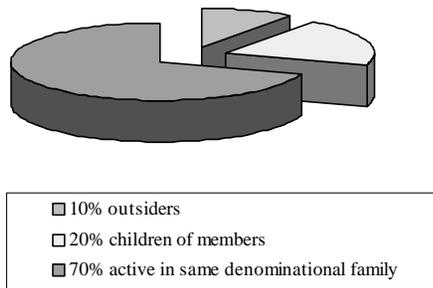
Novelist Don DeLillo's bestseller *Mao II* characterizes our culture as crowded with lonely, isolated individuals and controlled by religious cults and terrorist groups. The book begins with a mass marriage of thousands of young couples by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, leader of the Unification Church. The event actually occurred in Madison Square Garden in 1982. In DeLillo's account the stadium is filled with anxious, confused parents straining to identify a son or daughter in the swirling mass of anonymous couples. One father muses over the event and reflects: "When the Old God leaves the world, what happens to all the unexpended faith?"

For many, the "Old God" has left the world, but faith and the need to believe have not disappeared. So unexpended faith is swirling about looking for somewhere to root itself, some new "god" to satisfy its hunger. The Church is not seen as a credible alternative.

-Alan Roxburgh, minister and former Director of the Center for Mission and Evangelism at McMaster Divinity College.¹⁸

- ✍ Canada's religious groups continue to have considerable cultural homogeneity: some 85% of Anglicans, along with 80% of United Church and Presbyterians, still have British roots; about 85% of Lutherans come from a limited number of European countries.¹⁹
- ✍ Many congregations and denominations appear to exist primarily to provide services for their active members; consistent with such an argument, congregations, for example, tend to "rise and fall" in accordance with their attractiveness to members who change residences.

Figure 23
Sources of Additions to Congregational Membership



I've maintained in *Unknown Gods* that, from an outsider's point of view, many religious groups look very much like "religious clubs," with fairly predictable clienteles and cultures.

If you have any doubts about such conclusions, do what I occasionally do—randomly attend the services of a variety of congregations. You'll discover the troubling reality almost everywhere. **Many churches function as if they are oblivious to the possibility that a stranger could be present.** They call people by first names. They discuss finances. They show no respect for the clock. Of course, if one assumes that only the initiated are present, there's no need to use surnames, to play down dollar problems, or to worry about punctual starting and closing times.

The problem I personally have with "the club" concept is that such churches run the risk of failing to reach out beyond the initiated, in terms of either membership or ministry. Homogeneous churches are not especially appealing to outsiders who, because of ethnicity or class or religious culture, do not "fit in."

But there is still more that needs to be said. **It's not at all clear that outsiders are always wanted.** As one United Church minister put it in a recent conversation with me,

"People in my congregation say that they want more members. If they were really being honest, what they'd say is that they want more money but not more members."

Overly harsh? Perhaps. Still, ethnically, theologically and culturally, a disturbing number of congregations and parishes constitute what amount to "religious clubs" and "family shrines." Their appeal to outsiders is limited, their enthusiasm for the uninitiated in question. In the pointed words of theologian Letty Russell, "Christian communities fear difference sufficiently that they usually spend a considerable amount of time tending the margins or boundaries of their communities, not in order to connect with those outside, but rather to protect themselves from strangers."²⁰

There is another way some churches have found themselves not looking for people. Ironically, some mainline Protestant congregations have made a virtue of not recruiting people, celebrating their paucity of numbers. They pride themselves on being—to use a bit of business jargon—"lean and mean." Once in a while, they have even taken explicit shots at yours truly, relegating him to something of a—gulp—mindless bean counter.

To minimize the reality of declining numbers is to minimize the more serious issue: **declining numbers suggest the very real possibility that fewer and fewer Canadians are having their spiritual, personal and social needs met.** Muriel Duncan, the Editor of *The United Church Observer*, puts things this way:

Many of us are still repenting a history of forcing our beliefs on those with less power. So how do we now share our joy in Jesus in a just and positive way? Can we go humbly to those outside our churches...who are open to mystery? Can we open our churches to them so we can search together for answers and community, for faith?²¹

Many of Canada's churches are not doing a particularly good job of aiming their resources at Canadians who need to be involved and/or require ministry. Locked doors, inaccessible stairs, cold shoulders and private gatherings too often send a less-than-subtle message to outsiders. The disparity between the needs of the population and the numbers touched by the churches suggests that far too many congregations are not "looking for people."

People not looking for churches, churches not looking for people. These two realities sum up the tragedy of the current situation: **many Canadians are not associating their needs with churches and many churches are not associating what they have with what Canadians need.** Churches and Canadians are badly in need of connection.

9 - Part of the Problem is Culture

In retrospect, I think that *Fragmented Gods* drew our attention to a basic but very important point: **a major reason why Canadians respond the way they do to organized religion is culture.** The sharp decline in church attendance since the 1940s is directly tied to the inclination to:

- ✍ Adopt a belief here and a practice there;
- ✍ Want religion to speak to some areas but not others;
- ✍ Resurface for baptisms, christenings, weddings and funerals; and
- ✍ Not really come, but not really leave.

In short, Canadians today tend to selectively draw items from increasingly diversified religious smorgasbords, reflecting broader cultural developments.

"Don't take it personally," was my message to clergy at the time. "What's happening to religion is happening in every other sphere of Canadian life. Selective consumption,

People Who Need to be Reached

I recently read your book, *Unknown Gods*. I am a member of that huge group of ex-church members you feature in your book—one of the Baby Boomers who withdrew from church life in utter confusion, at the age of 19. Apparently I have never been missed. Nevertheless, I cannot escape from the feeling that I AM a spiritual being, with spiritual needs.

I found myself wondering just what you could tackle as your next topic. Possibly you could look at WHY so many people have spiritual needs, but stay away from the churches. Could it be that my friends and I are not unusual or abnormal in feeling unwanted by, unwelcome at and unacceptable to Christian congregations? Maybe you would like to do some research and publish a book called, *Rejecting Gods*, for most of the people I know who are ex-church members seem to have experienced just that—judgmental attitudes, rejection, condemnation.

I am still confused by church teachings, still haunted by the questions, still yearning for answers that are useful to me.

-A December 1994 letter from a reader.

pluralism, individualism and relativism are being felt everywhere. Just ask retailers, or educators, or the media, or politicians."

There was, and is, much truth to such a position. There's no doubt about it: religion's effort to claim Canadians' time and money, beliefs and outlook, values and behavior, encountered some formidable competition in the late 20th century. Cultural developments, including the proliferation of choices, the increase in exposure to higher education and

the rise to prominence of electronic media as the major source of reality creation, have all had a dramatic impact on religion's role and influence.

Still, it would be a serious error to equate culture's impact on religion as totally negative. Culture is only partly to blame. To place undue emphasis on culture's negative role is to invite—it seems to me—at least three inappropriate responses.

1. Those who value faith can in effect **give up**. They can sit back and proclaim that the real problem is the era in which we live. Depending on their theological and historical outlooks, they will use phrases, such as “last times,” “post-Christian era” or “post-modernism,” to depict the bleak situation. After all, if it's culture's fault, it's not their fault. In fact, it's not apparent to such people that much can be done at all. It might be wise not to fight the inevitable too tenaciously, but rather accept the reality of the times and function as faithful remnants.
2. Perhaps worse, some might unconsciously **give in**, bowing to the selective consumption tendencies of the populace. Believing that “times simply have changed” and that “expectations have to be lowered,” such people might make the organizational adjustments necessary to cater to a la carte-minded customers, further fragmenting the gods in the process.
3. Or they can **take too little** from culture—assuming that culture and its creators, including media, education, government and business, have only a negative impact on religion. Here culture becomes something of an relentless enemy. This view overlooks the extent to which culture actually predisposes Canadians to religion, by stimulating, for example: their interest in the supernatural; their quest for more fulfilling lives; their

questions about living and dying and about the possibility of healthy and satisfying relationships; and the importance of justice and fairness, values and ethics.

In short, the problems of organized religion in Canada lie only partly with culture. Certainly culture defines the environment in which the churches “live and move and have their being.” But that's only part of the story. Culture does not dictate the outcome of the game. Equally important—perhaps far more important—is how churches themselves function in cultural environments.

10 - The Heart of the Problem is Churches

If the opportunity and need for ministry to larger numbers of Canadians is there, yet the number of people that are being touched by religious groups is actually decreasing, it's hard to escape the obvious conclusion: **churches today are collectively failing**. What makes the situation so disturbing is they are failing at a time when conditions suggest they should be flourishing.

Let's not mince our words: religious groups **are** organizations. If they are to function effectively, they have to operate as sound organizations. No one should act surprised to find that organizational efficiency makes efficient ministry possible, while organizational ineptitude makes ministry difficult.

We don't show such bewilderment when we reflect on the ups and downs of the corporate sector—be they Cadillac-Fairview or the Canadian Football League. When companies succeed or fail, we assume that such outcomes have something to do with their performances. We further assume that, even in difficult times, the best companies find ways to stay alive and even thrive. **Survival and success are not organizational accidents.**

If Canada's religious groups are not ministering to significant numbers of Canadians at a time when large numbers of people are exhibiting both openness and need, then a number of organizational questions need to be raised. In *Unknown Gods*, I focused on four lines of inquiry:

1. Structural Issues

- ✍ Religious groups are typically top-heavy with volunteers. This can seriously jeopardize organizational efficiency. Perhaps insufficient attention is being given to optimum use of such unpaid workforces.
- ✍ Coordination between national bodies and local congregations appears to be a problem for many religious groups, frequently making the implementation of effective programs very difficult.
- ✍ Considerable attention and energy is devoted to ongoing issues relating to social and cultural change. These include considerations of the role of women, sexual orientation, worship practices and theological reflections. In the process, large amounts of time and energy that could be used to minister to others are instead turned inward.
- ✍ The image of religious groups in Canada has been severely tarnished in the '80s and '90s by televangelist scandals, sexual abuse cases and controversies over homosexuals and homosexuality. Further, women—in many instances—have continued to feel highly marginalized. The churches, in the eyes of many Canadians, are not associated with openness, generosity of spirit and sheer joy. Such negative perceptions have made ministry to Canadians all the more difficult.

2. Product Issues

Historically, religion has had much to say about three centrally important areas: **God, self and society**. Ideally, the three themes are interwoven, with God first and foremost, giving the other two themes of self and society a unique tone.

- ✍ The finding that Canadians are fascinated with supernatural ideas, yet often don't associate that interest with churches, suggests that the God emphasis is sometimes missing.
- ✍ Although many Canadians are searching for personal meaning, hope and fulfillment, the fact that they frequently don't associate those kinds of quest with what churches have to offer suggests that the combined God and self emphasis is not always readily apparent.
- ✍ Canadians young and old value nothing more highly than relationships. That they often don't associate enhanced social life—from immediate ties to global concerns—with what churches have to offer suggests that the combined God, self and society emphasis is not obvious in some settings.

3. Promotion Issues

The three-dimensional product of God, self and society is potentially powerful. But it is not at all clear that Canadians are aware of that integrated "product."

- ✍ Many Canadians, looking at church buildings from the outside, literally do not know "what they do in there." Architecture typically reveals little to the uninitiated onlooker—the guideline for church signs, for example, seems to be "keep it inconspicuous." Most churches in Canada are better known by the buildings, businesses and parks around them than by what goes on inside.

- ✍ Advertising is usually limited to “the church pages,” read by “church people” who are looking for “their churches.” It is not exactly an ideal way to expand clientele.
- ✍ Efforts to “get the word out” to outsiders—through means such as visitation and the distribution of brochures, books and videos—tend to take the largely outdated “total market approach,” aiming at the entire population. The results, unfortunately, tend to be predictably poor.

Signs of the Times

SIGN. An attention-getting device for the local church. Usually presents to the public the name(s) of the resident clergy, the times of worship and the subject of last week’s sermon. Signs are commonly placed in highly visible locations, after which some church group or other plants a bush or tree in front of them.

Andrew Jensen, *GOD: (n) The Greatest User of Capital Letters. A Modern Churchgoer’s Dictionary*, (Wood Lake Books, 1994:73)

4. Distribution Issues

Groups that think they have something to offer Canadians who express spiritual, personal and social needs have to develop ways of connecting with those people. They have to make sure they are getting “the product out of the warehouse to the customer.”

- ✍ It seems clear that much alleged ministry to Canadians is being done from the safety of sanctuaries.
- ✍ Ministry to the world, nation and outsider is frequently delegated to the denomination or “national church.”
- ✍ Many congregations seem to have become ends in themselves. They exist for each other and become

preoccupied with themselves and their way of “doing” religion. Lay ministry means nothing more than getting involved in running the church.

In sum, cultural conditions are making ministry in the ‘90s tough. But cultural conditions also are such that much can be done by well-run religious organizations.

Some critics invariably protest that I am overestimating both the need and the opportunity. Perhaps. But it surely is incumbent on those who value faith to do everything they can to respond, **before setting limits on what they can and need to accomplish.**

No, not everyone will respond to churches that seek to reach out and minister. Maybe, even with solid, well-planned efforts, the pool of people receptive to what churches have to offer spiritually, individually and relationally will turn out to be only 50% of the population, or perhaps 40%—maybe only 30%.

But my point is that **churches are well positioned—indeed probably best positioned—to respond to the central God-self-society requirements of Canadians.** And there’s no doubt that the number of people who have such needs easily outnumbers the people who currently have contact with the churches. What is needed, and needed urgently, is for Canada’s churches to do a much-improved job of making contact with Canadians and addressing their spiritual, personal and social concerns.

As things stand, to the extent that religious groups are failing to respond to the needs at hand, the real losers are not the churches. The real losers are Canadians.

Change is needed. It also is possible. That’s an understatement. The key pieces of the connection and ministry puzzle have been uncovered by research. What is required now is the assembly.

Action Points

☞ Bibby suggests that churches today are collectively failing and survival and success are not organizational accidents. How do you respond to this statement? What changes to the Church are needed to effectively touch Canadian spiritual needs in your community? How long has it been since your congregation made deliberate changes in worship style, policies or programs to reach your community?

☞ Finding 8: “One of the main reasons Canada’s churches are not ministering to a larger number of people is because they typically wait for people to come to them.” This being the case, the ratio of “population-to-church” referred to in Chapter 2 is relevant only to the degree the churches in a given neighbourhood reach out rather than wait for people to come.

☞ Count the “go” structures and programs active in your church and those structures and programs designed for people to come to. What will be your next step?

☞ If Canadians are inclined to pick and choose the aspects of their faith they will allow to affect their lives:

a) Which aspects of historic interest in “religion a la carte” can best be used to reconnect with unchurched Canadians in your community?

b) How can you then lead such persons to understanding Christian discipleship more fully and becoming devoted followers of Christ?

Chapter Notes

¹ This chapter has been reprinted by permission of author Dr. Reginald Bibby and the publisher Wood Lake Books Inc., 10162 Newene Road, Winfield, BC V4V1R2.

² Ward, 1994:96-97.

³ See, e.g., Nash and Berger, 1962; Parsons, 1963; Kotre, 1971; Hunsberger, 1983; Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1990; Bibby and Posterski, 1992.

⁴ See, e.g., Bibby and Brinkerhoff, 1994.

⁵ See Bibby, 1994:16.

⁶ See, e.g., Roozen, McKinney and Thompson, 1990; Roof, 1993; Bibby, 1993:12-22.

⁷ See, e.g., Mauss, 1969; Hunsberger, 1980; Ozorak, 1989; Hoge, Johnson and Luidens, 1993:243.

⁸ Cited in *Fragmented Gods*, 1987, p.5.

⁹ See, e.g., Barna 1991; Anderson 1991; Schaller 1994; Posterski and Barker, 1993, p.53.

¹⁰ Hoge, Johnson and Luidens, 1994.

¹¹ Hadaway and Marler, 1993, p.97.

¹² Roof and McKinney, 1987, p.167.

¹³ Posterski and Barker, 1993, pp.53-54.

¹⁴ Bibby, 1993, pp.33-36.

¹⁵ Hoge, Johnson and Luidens, 1994, p.120.

¹⁶ Bibby and Posterski, 1992, p.53.

¹⁷ *Maclean's*, October 10, 1994.

¹⁸ Roxburgh, 1993, pp.125-126.

¹⁹ Includes “North American”.

²⁰ Russell, 1993, p.176.

²¹ Muriel Duncan, *United Church Observer*, November 1993, p.8.

