

Chapter Nine

Striving for Relevance in a Changing Nation

Dr. Gary Walsh

Introduction

It will be woe to us if we preach religion instead of the Gospel ... Woe to us if we preach inner piety [that] does not relate our faith to the world around us ... And woe to us if we fail to hand on to future generations the unsearchable riches of Christ which are the very heartbeat of the Church and its mission.

- Archbishop George Carey, 1991.

A unique period in the world's history is about to unfold as we approach the third millennium. For many individuals, groups and organizations this occasion is being used to mark a time of reflection and a renewal of purpose. It is a time to look to the past and acknowledge the endeavours that have brought us this far. It is a time to develop new strategies and mechanisms for overcoming challenges. It is a time to renew our commitment to the things that are most important to us.

The Body of Christ is no exception. As we stand on the threshold of the new millennium, the Canadian Church faces unique challenges to carry out its purposes. In recent years,

Christianity has, to a great extent, been pushed to the sidelines to accommodate secular philosophies that exclude God from daily life. Growing numbers of Canadians who would typically classify themselves as Christians now view the Church or Christianity as obsolete or irrelevant to their daily comings and goings.

In addition, the growing diversity of cultural and religious groups in Canada has given rise to a dominant pluralistic mentality that now views Christianity as just one religion among many. There is no special or “exclusive” status granted to Christianity because of its historical or traditional influence on Canadian culture. In fact, in many cases, Canadians may be even less open to Christianity than other religions because of its insistent claim to absolute truth.

How then can the Church of the ‘90s pass on “the unsearchable riches of Christ” to a society that is determined to exclude any recognition of an ultimate spiritual and moral authority? How can the Church exert a positive influence on a culture that has become deaf to its voice? The ideas that dominate our culture have exerted a powerful influence on the Church, and the growing trend to have a nation that tolerates diversity, even at the expense of truth, has profoundly complicated the ability of the Church to succeed in its mission of preaching the Gospel.

These challenges are significant and must be acknowledged. But they cannot, and should not, be considered without recalling the sovereign reign of God and without remembering how the mighty hand of God has moved among shifting cultures in the past to carry out the Divine intention.

The Church stands at a crossroads and must undergo a major transformation if it is to have a transforming impact on Canadians and their culture in the next millennium. This is the time for the Body of Christ to stand united in God’s empowering presence. We need to reflect on the past, create

new strategies to accomplish our goals and renew our commitment to live a genuine life of faith in the midst of an unbelieving culture. As stated by Archbishop Carey, our challenge is to preach the Gospel and to relate our faith to the world around us. That must be the primary mission of the Church as we enter the new millennium.

Background on Canadian Culture and Religion

Historically, Canada has never had a strong national identity. From its inception it has been a nation under the influence of the aboriginal culture and cultures beyond itself. Over the years, large numbers of people from other cultural groups have immigrated to Canada, thereby further increasing the diversity of Canadian life. This “cultural mosaic” that is our society has not only encouraged the development of many subcultures, but has also served to nurture the growth of religious pluralism (the presence of different faith groups with distinctive values and practices) that is prevalent in Canada today.

As a result, Canada has become a nation with no dominant religion and, in the past decade, a rising mood of secularism pervades the land—a worldview that excludes God from daily human life. The secularist lives for the present and evaluates his/her life and choices without any reference to God or to divine moral and spiritual absolutes. As such, it appears to be a fitting philosophy to guide the lives and serve the needs of a materialistic, “me-oriented” society.

In the 1990s, secularism and pluralism have dominated the views and attitudes of Canadians. Although Canadians are encouraged to “celebrate” diversity of perspective, people with a secular outlook on life are not only indifferent, but sometimes even hostile to the Christian message.¹ As a consequence, Christians are increasingly being forced to keep their message of truth out of the public realm and within the

confines of their churches. This struggle with secularism and pluralism is constantly being played out in our public institutions, such as schools and hospitals.

For example, the Lord's Prayer is no longer viewed as appropriate for a multi-cultural society and has been removed from most schools and classrooms in Canada. Many of the religious references to Christmas, as well as Christmas carols that mention the name of Jesus or Christ, have been banned from public settings. Public displays of the manger and Jesus' birth have been pushed out of the public square in the name of tolerance and multi-culturalism. Even the name, "Christmas," has been deemed inappropriate and, in many cases, schools and public institutions refer to the season simply as the Winter Celebration or Winter Holiday. Christians accustomed to an historic Christian presence in Canadian life find this new circumstance uncomfortable.

Canada's Quest for Spirituality

In spite of these challenges, there is mounting evidence that secularism is failing to provide an adequate answer to the inner search for meaning that exists within each of us. Surveys show that there has been a massive upsurge in "spiritual interest" in the 1990s, even as the vestiges of organized or traditional religion have been forced from the public square.

In a *Macleans*/CTV poll at the end of 1997, 75% of Canadians said that developing their spiritual life was important to them. This response is relatively comparable to its 1995 poll, in which 82% of Canadians said they considered themselves to be "somewhat or very spiritual."

These are rather astounding statistics for a society that is committed to a philosophy of secularism. Yet they serve as a practical demonstration of the truth found in St. Augustine's

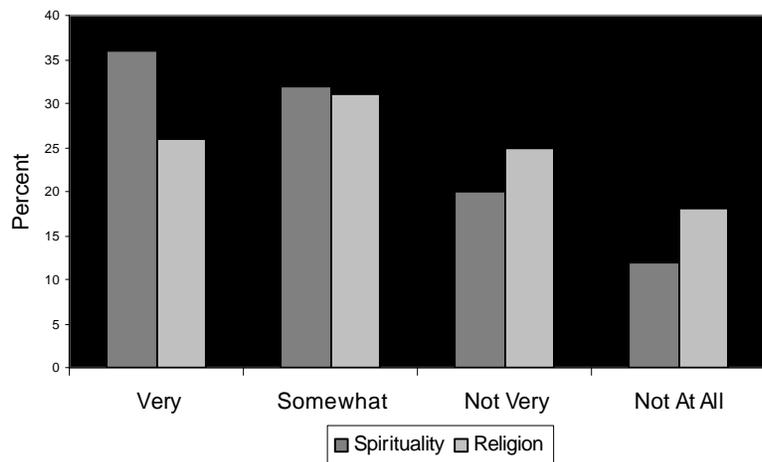
words, "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

Spirituality gives much-needed meaning to life, and it holds great allure for members of a society facing widespread uncertainty about the unity of their country, economic hardships, political uncertainty, family breakdown, and social problems. The sense that things are going wrong and spinning out of our control naturally leads many to search for an answer that lies outside our physical existence. However, it is clear from the rising interest in spirituality that secularism cannot provide an answer to the deep-seated need to find meaning in our daily lives.

Unfortunately, for many people, this search for spirituality has little to do with truth and rarely amounts to more than an unfocused quest for meaning. It is often difficult to even get people to define what is meant by the term "spirituality." In general, it is considered to be an individual search for the truth. It does not deal with the question of whether God or truth exists, but rather is a search for gods or other divine forces or truths that can be found in such diverse or obscure places as nature or in the community of a self-help group. Spirituality is essentially a personal faith journey that has little to do with a commitment based on the existence of God, special revelation, objective truths or a community committed to faithful obedience. In 1995, Canadian researcher, Dr. Reginald Bibby, compared the importance of spirituality and religion among Canadians and documented that the group that is the most interested in spirituality is also the least interested in organized religion.

This finding suggests a clear distinction between religion and spirituality in the minds of those who are interested only in "spiritual things." The exact nature of that distinction remains unclear. One wonders whether such a distinction is related to a reluctance to submit to any organized form of religion or to doctrinal beliefs.

Figure 24²
Importance of Spirituality Vs. Religion



Canadians and the Church

This privatization of spiritual belief may be the underlying factor explaining why 81% of Canadians say they believe in God and 68% of Canadians identify themselves as Christians (Angus Reid poll, 1996). The 1991 Census shows that 46% of Canadians are Roman Catholic, 36% are Protestant and 5% say they have some other religious affiliation, while 13% claim to have no religion.

In spite of the high degree of association that Canadians have with particular religious affiliations, only 21% of Canadian adults claim to attend a church or religious meeting of any kind regularly (Angus Reid, 1994), and this number appears to be dropping at about 1% per year. In fact, Dr. Bibby hypothesizes that weekly attendance at church will eventually drop to about 15%. This compares to the 1945 census data, which showed that 60% of Canadians attended religious services on a weekly basis.

The Canadian church is not only generally drawing smaller percentages of Canadians, but those attending are older. Polls show that older Canadians attend church much more frequently, feel closer to God and are more spiritually satisfied than younger Canadians.³ Dr. Bibby’s research also confirms that younger adults are less likely to be involved in religious groups and that religious groups are getting older.⁴ Since Canada’s population is aging, this problem will likely get worse unless challenged by a bolder and more relevant Canadian church.

Table 49 compares the weekly service attendance by major religious groups in 1975, 1985 and 1995 confirming that for the majority of Canadians there has been a decreasing emphasis on the importance of weekly church attendance. The most significant reduction in church attendance has occurred within the Roman Catholic faith, while the most positive indication of hope—a sharp increase in attendance over the past two decades—comes from within the conservative Protestant groups (Baptists, Pentecostals, Alliance, Mennonites, etc.). One reason suggested for this continued growth in attendance is that young people are more likely to stay involved in evangelical churches than in mainline churches.

Table 49⁵
Weekly Service Attendance 1975 Through 1995

	1975 %	1985 %	1995 %
Nationally	31	28	25
Roman Catholic	45	37	30
Québec	49	31	24
Outside Québec	41	40	38
Mainline Prot	23	16	19
Anglican	24	16	17
United Church	28	13	20
Conserv Prot	40	60	64

According to Dr. Bibby, the best demographic evidence available from Statistics Canada suggests that Protestant mainline churches (United, Anglican, Presbyterian and Lutheran) and the Roman Catholic Church inside Québec, will experience dramatic losses in terms of attendance over the next 20 years. In fact, by the year 2015, it is predicted that there will be a drastically revised religious landscape in Canada. Churches currently considered to

be the “mainline religions” will become marginalized and the Conservative Protestants, largely composed of evangelicals, will become the new “mainline” and thereby exert the greatest influence on Canadian society. Roman Catholic churches will remain prominent nationally, but will experience significant losses in churches within Québec.

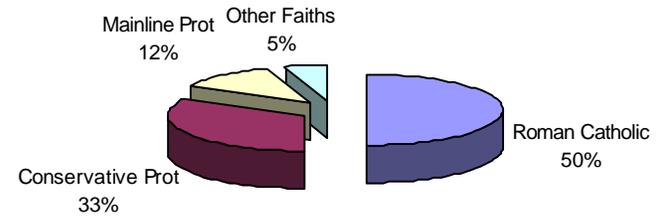
Although Christians are encouraged to assemble together regularly, it is perhaps a “sign of the times” that church attendance is no longer in public vogue. Modern priorities may echo the words of Bill Gates, the creator of most of our modern computer technology and one of the richest men in the world, who states, “Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion isn’t very efficient. There is a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning.”

Table 50⁶
Current and Projected Weekly Attenders (in 1,000s)

	Now	2015
Nationally	4,600	3,500
Roman Catholic		
Québec	1,200	550
Outside Québec	1,500	1,200
Mainline		
Anglican	220	100
United Church	400	200
Lutheran	80	50
Presbyterian	80	75
Conservative		
Baptist	200	225
Other	740	900
Other Faiths	200	175

From: Bibby, *Unknown Gods*, 1993:106.

Figure 25⁷
Weekly Attenders in the Year 2015



While a decline in church attendance is not the sole indicator of the health of our Christian culture, it is a primary indicator of Christian commitment and therefore the present situation, unless changed, does not bode well for the future of the churches in Canada. The church represents a primary place of Christian accountability, individual growth, participation in community, worship and intentional focus on God. Yet, a great deal of anecdotal evidence suggests that even “regular” church attenders or members are becoming far more irregular in their attendance habits.

Modern Trends Impacting Church Attendance

The decline in church attendance and the declining emphasis on the exclusive truth that Christianity possesses have undoubtedly been influenced by a number of societal philosophies and factors, some of which have already been noted. However, each of these philosophies or ways of thinking represents a barrier which the Church must recognize and understand if it is to overcome them and play a dominant role in Canadian society in the 21st century:

a) Pluralism

In its broadest meaning, pluralism refers to the existence of people with different beliefs in our society, cultures, races, religions and ancestries. Unfortunately, the term sometimes

contains the assumption that all differences are good and should therefore be encouraged or accepted equally.

As has already been described in this chapter, Canada is a cultural mosaic in which “tolerance” is given a much higher value than “truth.” Therefore, different cultures and religions are mutually respected, encouraged and even celebrated—whether they are true or not, or more fundamentally, without concern for whether or not truth exists. As a result, no particular religious tradition is given prominence and the concept of absolute truth tends to fall by the wayside.

It makes no sense to take a collection of contrary beliefs and assume that because we live in a pluralistic society each belief must be true. Supporting the pluralistic idea that all religions have the right to exist and be free from discrimination is quite different from saying that we cannot debate and evaluate the claims of each religion to determine if they are legitimate or true. Unfortunately, most Canadians do not distinguish between these two points of view and assume that they have to give up a belief in absolute truth for the sake of participating in a misguided form of tolerance.

Christians can live, and even thrive, in a pluralistic society. We can coexist among all religions. But we must not forget to carry the message that true tolerance does not eliminate the existence of absolute truth and should never be sacrificed for truth.

b) Secularism

Secularism is a philosophy or collection of beliefs that excludes God and the existence of moral and spiritual absolutes. Billy Graham refers to it as one of the most discouraging historical trends that has developed over the last century. Its message of life without God led to the “dechristianization” of former Christian strongholds in Europe and has now become its dominant belief.

Over the past decade, secularism has become a dominant force in Canada as well—primarily because many see it as the answer to problems presented by religious pluralism. It seems highly unusual, if not utterly unrealistic, to expect that secularism should provide a solution to religious differences, but secularists claim that religion must be removed from public life and confined to private life if we are to have harmony in a religiously pluralistic society. In essence, secularism mistakenly preaches that we are only able to give equal respect to all religions by excluding all religions from having a public role.⁸

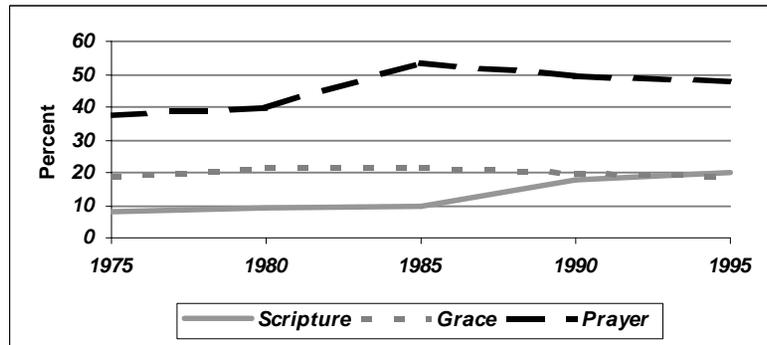
This situation has been likened to that in which various people are trying to agree on what sport, if any, to play. Some people want to play hockey, some soccer, some basketball and some want to play no sport at all. Finally it is announced that because we can't play a sport that pleases everyone, the only solution is to not play any sport.

In reality, secularism accepts the preference of those who don't want to play a sport and rejects the preferences of all others. We must remember that secularism is not a position that is above all others, it is a position alongside the others; that is, it is one way—not the only way and certainly not the best way—to deal with religious pluralism.

c) Privatization of Faith

In the past decade there has been a broad shift to the privatization of religion. Canadians simply seem to prefer to create their own understanding of God. According to *Evangelitrends*, the private religious practices of Canadians are now far more prominent than their public practices, such as attending church. Sizable numbers of Canadians report that they pray privately (roughly 50%), say grace before meals (approximately 20%) and read the Bible or other Christian writings (also about 20%).

Figure 26
Conventional Practices (Weekly or More)



Although many Canadians consider themselves religious or even Christian, and although they may adhere to private religious practices, their actual understanding of faith is cloudy at best. They may state that they believe in God, Jesus, heaven and the Christian faith, yet have little or no evidence of it in their lives because they have little understanding of what the Bible says about the Christian faith. They have little knowledge of their beliefs because they are not worshipping and receiving the spiritual instruction that is required to produce a mature Christian faith.

Unfortunately, privatized religion is often composed of a “mix and match” of various religions and doctrines. It is a faith that is based on the individual’s own understanding of God and unmediated by doctrine or the community of faith.

Dr. Bibby comments: “The vast majority of Canadians still call themselves Christian, but they are grasping bits and pieces of the traditional creed—‘the fragmented god.’ We now see a high level of belief in almost anything imaginable, but there is no rhyme or reason to it. And when we try to measure the sort of guidance these private beliefs play in people’s lives, there is really nothing there. There is no moral authority, so it really doesn’t add up to anything.”¹⁰

d) Relativism/Moral Ambiguity

The pervasive reality and inescapable problem of our culture is relativism—the idea that absolute truth is non-existent and therefore all claims to truth are considered to be nothing more than “subjective opinions.” As a result of this modern belief, truth is essentially up for grabs in Canadian society. This notion of subjective truth is demonstrated in a more practical way by a survey which showed that two out of three young Canadians live with the assumption that right and wrong are matters of personal preference.

But Canadian philosopher and apologist, Michael Horner, states that people seem only to invoke relativism when issues of morality or religion are at stake. “We don’t hear people claiming that mutually exclusive statements are true when it comes to the stock market.” Further, as Horner argues, the idea that relativism is exclusively and absolutely true shows that it is no more tolerant than any other exclusive claim to the truth. In fact, it is worse—because it hides its claim to be the absolute truth behind the facade of denying the existence of absolute truth.

Relativism has led to an abundance of moral ambiguity in our society. In the past, most families and individuals looked to the church and religion as the primary provider of moral guidance for their lives. But for the past few decades, the Christian belief in absolute right and wrong has been challenged daily by a culture that promotes the notion that any absolute claim to truth is nothing more than mere opinion.

As a result, even many Christians no longer believe that truth and morality are absolute. In fact, many also fail to believe in the authority of Scripture or the deity of Christ, and it is apparent that some orthodox doctrines and central truths of the Christian faith are treated skeptically. A survey

done by the Barna Research Group reveals that Christians lack basic doctrinal knowledge about their faith:

- ✍ 80% of born-again Christians agreed with the statement that God helps those who help themselves.
- ✍ 49% of Christians agreed that the Devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.
- ✍ 39% agreed that if a person is generally good they will earn a place in heaven.
- ✍ 30% agreed that Jesus Christ was a great teacher, but did not come back to physical life after He was crucified.
- ✍ 29% agreed that Jesus Christ was human and committed sins like other people.¹¹

There is one truth in relativism that must be acknowledged. All of our views are partial, incomplete and fragmentary, and therefore our reasoning occurs within the limitations of our abilities, our history and our culture. But recognizing this does not mean that absolute truth does not exist. Real truth is God’s truth.¹²

e) Relevance to Our Lives

The 1994 Angus Reid poll of religion in Canada suggests that people are looking for a personal experience with God and they come to church because they want to learn about the link between their faith and their life. The reasons given for attending church (in order of significance) were to: 1) gain guidance on how to live, 2) have spiritual needs met, 3) get help to instill personal values in their children and 4) worship God.

However, many people in our society see the Church’s teachings as meaningless and irrelevant as a result of the influence of pluralism and secularism. Others blame the hypocrisy that exists in the lives of some Christians. A few

highly visible failures create a widespread perception of hypocrisy. The result is a “credibility gap” that Christians have to overcome to have their message heard.

f) Urbanization

As we enter the third millennium, the world’s population will total 6 billion people—about three times the number present at the dawn of the 20th century. Approximately 50% of them will be under the age of 25. Globally, at least one-half of these people will live in large cities—many of them uprooted from their past, away from their families and experiencing a poverty.

There is a strong relationship between the size of the community and church attendance. People with marginal commitment to the church in a small town, often abandon that commitment in a larger centre where they are free from the peer pressure of participation that would be more evident in a smaller town. As Canada’s population becomes increasingly urbanized, it is likely to continue to have a negative impact on church attendance. Table 51 documents the influence of increased urbanization on church attendance.

In addition, churches in large cities have to compete with sporting, shopping, entertainment and other leisure options for people’s free time. Some Canadians simply feel that they do not have

**Table 51¹³
Attendance by
Community Size**

	1975 %	1995 %
Over 400,000	26	22
Catholic	59	31
Protestant	23	22
100,000-400,000	27	19
Catholic	60	22
Protestant	25	28
10,000-99,000	33	21
Catholic	56	29
Protestant	20	20
<10,000	39	31
Catholic	48	34
Protestant	33	37

time to maintain a job and a family and enjoy leisure time plus go to church.

Implications for the Church

In such a diverse nation as Canada, it is a challenge to witness to the truth of the Gospel when few Canadians are willing to recognize the authority of any one particular religion or truth. In the midst of these cultural changes, the Church must address the following questions:

- ✍ How can the Church exist and carry out its mission in such a society?
- ✍ How do we live as Christians and communicate our faith in a relevant manner in a multi-cultural, pluralistic society?
- ✍ How do we as a Church deal with the significant differences that exist?
- ✍ How do we exhibit deep religious conviction with an open and tolerant spirit?¹⁴

To answer these questions, Christians must look to the core of their faith—the unfathomable love of Jesus. His love must shape the way we hold to our faith and the way we present it to others.

The Church of the Next Millennium

In the midst of so many changes in the world, it is the unique function of the Church to declare by word and deed that there are some things that never change. It is the message that God—the supreme, unchanging, omnipotent Creator of the universe—loves humanity and wants us to know Him in a personal way.

- Billy Graham¹⁵

As the Church enters the 21st century, it is in dire need of seeking a renewed vision of how we can carry out our mission of proclaiming God's love and truth to a secular culture. It is obvious from the evidence that we have just examined that the Church must adapt to the societal changes that are occurring in Canada and discover new ways to overcome these barriers without compromising its message.

The most successful churches in the next millennium will likely be characterized by:

- ✍ A commitment to Biblical teaching/principles and to proclaiming absolute truth,
- ✍ Unity,
- ✍ Community,
- ✍ Renewal and
- ✍ Engaging the culture.

A Commitment to Biblical Teaching/Principles and to Proclaiming Absolute Truth.

In the midst of uncertain relativism and moral neutrality, people are looking to the Church to affirm what is true—to proclaim and affirm the essentials of the Christian faith. According to Don Posterski, “It represents a sense of stability within a world which is otherwise open to negotiation and uncertainty.”¹⁶

One reason so many people in Canadian culture state that they believe in God, Jesus, heaven and the Christian faith yet have little or no evidence of it in their lives, is because many of them have little understanding of what the Bible says about the Christian faith. According to Dr. John Stott, a mature church is a product of the Word of God and therefore needs to preach it in all its fullness. Therefore, the first task

of the Church must be to present God's clear and undiluted message to the world.

In his book, *A Peculiar People*, Dr. Rodney Clapp also argues that in order for the Church to experience renewal and exert a renewed influence in its culture, it must become:

A total institution, possessing its own language, its own history, its own practices...When the church understands itself properly, it always has a subversive element. It refuses to be conformed to the dominant ideology of the culture in which it exists. The early Church created and sustained a unique culture. The peculiar people of God manifested a peculiar culture for God.

Canadian Christians will need to overcome the disappointment over not being the privileged faith community, revise the nature of the Christian mission and get on with the subversive task of witness and service in a needy community.

Unity

Jesus speaks of the power of unity in John 17:21. We have given lip service to unity, but practically speaking have far to go.

Recent vision work by the leaders of the *Evangelical Fellowship of Canada* (EFC) reveal a growing conviction that the medium is the message. Believers from across the land and from across the theological spectrum are calling for unity. Great interest is expressed in accentuating the things we have in common rather than focusing on the things that divide.

Community

Our society is increasingly at a loss for the experience of community. We have become a nation of individualists, obsessed with our own private lives. Yet, there is an inherent desire for community that pervades our lives. The vital Church is a vibrant facilitator of community in the face of the increasingly impersonal forces of society. In fact, according to Charles Truehart, the new Church will likely be the "clearest approximation of community ... that a whole generation is likely to have known or likely to find anywhere in an impersonal, transient nation."¹⁷

The Church is meant to be a community of support for faith commitments as well as physical and emotional needs. But this fellowship of believers is also expected to meet the needs of others in the neighbourhood or wider community.

Many Canadians are looking for a place to belong—not only to be involved, but to have their emotional and faith needs met. Research from many sources indicates that most people become Christians through friendships. People will enter into a community circle if that community encourages experience with God and offers relevant direction for daily living.

"The Church is a powerful institution in our society because it encapsulates the individual in a community that becomes an essential part of the individual's own identity. ...The community can become," in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's memorable words, "a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer."¹⁸

Renewal

“...Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD Almighty” (Zechariah 4:6).

As the Church seeks a renewed sense of mission and commitment, it is a time for commitment to serious prayer and fasting. We have to remember that every success, every advance, no matter how slight, is possible only because God has been at work by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives us the message, leads us to those already prepared and brings both conviction of sin and new life. When we understand that truth, we will realize the urgency of prayer.

Engaging the Culture

God's love and His plan for individuals hasn't changed and neither has the human heart. The Great Commission remains unchanged, as does God's call to the unsaved. Yet evangelism only accounts for 10% of the growth in evangelical churches, something which demonstrates the failure of the Church to carry out its mission of spreading the Gospel.

Churches are challenged to communicate their message to a society that is indifferent—or even hostile to its message. Unfortunately, most Canadian evangelistic efforts are geared to people who already understand the Christian culture, language and basic Biblical concepts. This doesn't work in a culture where people may *think that they know* the basics, yet have no true or accurate understanding of them. Nor does it work in a culture where Christianity is just one of many religious options.

Efforts to engage our culture should be characterized by persuasion, an openness to listen to what others have to say, and an openness to change. We need to listen to others if we want them to listen to us—and we need to listen so that we can learn from them. The good things that are heard when

listening to others need to be affirmed. Things that are untrue need to be questioned. Christians must have confidence that the world, history and our present social changes are in God's hands. It is only then that we can be free from fear and completely free to engage those with different philosophies.

In short, the new Church has to be culturally relevant, it must understand people's needs and it must appeal to both the Christian and secular heart and mind. Sunday morning worship must be connected to the realities of everyday life, and leaders must be prepared to address the tough issues, and to present the teachings of Jesus in a way that is relevant to daily life. The Church must also strive to meet the needs of those in the community and to provide community for those who seek fellowship. At the same time, the Church must refuse to conform to the dominant ideologies of the culture in which it exists.

Conclusion

“Any funeral planned for Canadian Christianity is premature.”²⁹

At the end of the day, the ministering person must evaluate the demographics, check with the political scientists, measure the mood and evaluate the context of Canadian culture in the '90s. But a person called to the ministry of reconciliation will never be satisfied with these factors as a final evaluation of what is going on.

The person who understands the way of salvation and the call of God upon the Church is the person who understands that our God reigns. Governments come and go. Ideologies come and go. Trends come and go. Those who see with eyes of faith see that God is working mightily in the affairs of state, in the changing nuances of culture and through His community of people who choose to trust and obey.

If one looks only from a human perspective, one could easily be discouraged with the prognosis of Christian faith in the land. But people formed in the ways of faith, prayer and salvation are always looking for that higher dimension of reality. When Jesus stood before Pilate, he said, “*My Kingdom is not of this world...*” (John 18:36). Followers of Jesus today are still seeking to see and understand this Kingdom—which is not based in any city or nation.

While certain cultural trends have moved away from the affirmations to which Christians adhere, spirit-led people are moving into new realms of ministry, churches are being planted, groups are learning to partner together in the name of Jesus and the tone of evangelicalism is a note of praise to God. The 1997 Canadian Church Planting Congress marked an historic moment in terms of cooperating across all traditional lines for the good of the Kingdom in the ministry of church planting. What a sacred moment as leaders of denominations, congregations and other ministering organizations accepted challenges to plant geographically accessible and culturally relevant churches everywhere in Canada. It is so easy to let walls develop and to have our most gifted, energetic people pouring energy into projects that perpetuate organizational life but do not represent a Kingdom strategy. Observers were thrilled to see the commitment of these conference participants to Kingdom strategies and a willingness to align organizational life with that larger vision.

The global interface sponsored by EFC’s Task Force for Global Mission was another historic event in 1997. Some 90 organizations were represented, and again people who face the tough realities of organizational life were willing to entertain dreams and visions of Kingdom strategies that would stretch around the world.

It is dangerous to identify litmus tests of the health of Christendom. Someone would want to evaluate personal

holiness. Another would bring tests for justice and peace. Someone else would say that we are healthy when corporate prayer is a priority. And the list would go on. I value each of these. In addition, we are watching for willing Christian leaders to see beyond the realities of their own organizational lives and to begin to pour energy into strategic alliances for Kingdom purposes. When we see this happen, we begin to believe that we are moving into a season of marvelous renewal within evangelicalism.

The Billy Graham Association is prayerfully considering whether it should plan a millennial conference on evangelism. When Billy Graham asked the EFC what concerns might come to the floor in such a conference, this was identified as the crucial issue in the life of the movement. We must demonstrate a willingness to make our individual agendas the servant of the larger Kingdom agenda.

The struggle may be easier to observe within the world of foreign missions. It does not take much insight to see the folly of transferring contextually-based denominational structures to other places in the world where there is no knowledge of their history and no awareness of the reason why this organization should be distinct from the one next door. This kind of thing has happened and to some degree is still happening.

The good news, however, is that it is happening less frequently than was previously the case. And if the Canadian experience is any indication, we may be walking into a whole new era of partnership, alliances and deferring to each other for the good of the Kingdom.

Every organization participating in the ministry of evangelism is itself experiencing waves of change. Surely this is the moment to join hands and configure our ministries in such a way as to reap the maximum benefit for Christ and His Kingdom as we move forward!

We believe that this is a “kairos” moment within evangelicalism in Canada. Never have the walls been so low. Never have leaders been more eager to co-operate. Never have congregations been more ready to celebrate diversity while respecting the essentials. And never before has the need been greater.

One must believe that the God who reigns is not even nervous about the cultural symptoms that tend to resist faith and salvation. Our God was able to bless and multiply the Church during the Roman Empire, during recent decades in China and under every oppressive regime within which the Church has grown and thrived. Barriers to belief in Canada are more than conquerable, and we are eager to watch the vision unfold!

Action Points

Dr. Walsh asks a series of pointed practical questions:

“How can the Church pass on ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ’ to a society that is determined to exclude any recognition of an ultimate spiritual and moral authority, and how can the Church exert a positive influence on a culture that has become deaf to its voice? How can the church exist and carry out its mission in such a society? How do we live as Christians and communicate our faith in a relevant manner in a multicultural, secular society? How do we exhibit deep religious conviction with an open and tolerant spirit?”

✍️ Take the questions to your Bible study or informal discussion group and invest a session exploring these important issues.

✍️ Take the questions to the Lord of the harvest in a season of quiet, waiting prayer to see if His answers may be different than those we might expect to offer.

✍️ Review Dr. Walsh’s challenge to be the “Church of the next Millennium” and respond in one concrete way to each calling, (such as):

✍️✍️ *Commitment to Biblical Absolutes:* Affirm and list 10 things you know to be true, not maybe or negotiable, about the Gospel. Share one of these with a non-Christian friend today.

✍️✍️ *Unity:* The next time you meet a Christian for the first time, don’t ask which denomination he/she participate in, but turn the conversation to a point of unity such as prayer for the lost.

Action Points

☞☞ *Community*: Invite into your home, engage in social activity or express care in a practical way to non-Christians at least as many times as you do to Christians this next month. Keep track!

☞☞ *Renewal*: Go out of your way to participate this month in a renewal service or congregation even if you are not entirely sure you will be comfortable with the experience. Further, the next time a Christian associate criticizes an expression of renewal, turn the conversation rather to personal renewal currently needed or recently experienced.

☞☞ *Engaging the Culture*: Facilitate a discussion with the leadership of your congregation identifying the felt needs of contemporary Canadian culture. Respond by: (1) changing one aspect of your worship experience to better engage our culture, (2) instituting an expression of “servant evangelism,” (3) offering a new service to your community.

Chapter Notes

¹ Billy Graham, “Rediscovering the Primacy of Evangelism,” *Christianity Today*, December 8, 1997.

² Dr. Reginald W. Bibby, *The Bibby Report: Social Trends Canadian Style*. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1995, p.134.

³ Angus Reid Group, reported in *Context* (Mississauga: MARC/World Vision), Vol. 4, Issue 4, pp.6-7.

⁴ Dr. Reginald W. Bibby

⁵ Dr. Reginald W. Bibby, p.134.

⁶ Dr. Reginald W. Bibby, p.128.

⁷ Dr. Reginald W. Bibby, p.129.

⁸ *Pluralism in Canada*, a paper of the Social Action Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, November 1997. p.6.

⁹ Dr. Reginald W. Bibby, p.131.

¹⁰ Dr. Reginald Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1987.

¹¹ Barna Research Group reported in *Western Report* “Every Man His Own Church,” June 10, 1996, p.35.

¹² Essay on Christian Theology in Secular Culture

¹³ Dr. Reginald W. Bibby, *The Bibby Report: Social Trends Canadian Style*. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1995, p.127.

¹⁵ Essay on Christian Theology in Secular Culture

¹⁶ “Rediscovering the Primacy of Evangelism,” *Christianity Today*, December 8, 1997.

¹⁷ Don Posterski, *Healthy Churches, the Canadian Way*.

¹⁸ Charles Truehart, “Welcome to the New Church,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1996. p.10.

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* New York: Harper & Row, p. 21.

²⁰ Dr. George Rawlyk, *Atlantic Baptist*, January, 1995.

