

Setting the Stage: Religious and Cultural Landscape in Canada

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Flourishing Congregations Institute Launch

Ambrose University

Calgary, Alberta

November 26, 2016

Defining a Flourishing Congregation ... A Start

As we launch this Institute we have not supposed or imposed a pre-set definition of “flourishing.” Part of our purpose has been to inductively arrive at an expansive multidimensional understanding of how various Christian churches understand what a flourishing congregation looks like across Canadian social contexts and within their various theological traditions. Still, pragmatically we felt we needed to begin with a baseline of criteria from existing literature to enter this project. We were and continue to be keenly aware that our initial and stipulative or starting definitions will evolve, even dramatically, as our research progresses. We discerned seven initial attributes of flourishing congregations in the literature (see e.g., Wagner 1976; Hoge & Roozen 1979; Hopewell 1987; McGavran 1990; Dudley, Carroll & Wind 1991; Dudley & Johnson 1993; Roozen & Hadaway 1993; Wind & Lewis 1994; Ammerman 1997; Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley & McKinney 1998; Schwarz 1998; Woolever & Bruce 2004; Bickers 2005; Scazzero 2010; Chaves & Anderson 2014; Marti & Ganiel 2014). We used these fairly well known and expressed attributes, indicators, or qualities as starting points for an emerging set of features in our research: a) quantitative growth in church attendance, membership, finances, and baptisms; b) active spiritual life among congregants: prayer, scripture reading, small groups, and volunteering; c) people are invited and welcomed into a vibrant sense of belonging and participation; d) worship services and mission are inspiring; e) leaders empower others to use their skills to lead and serve; f) faith-based outreach and service, within and beyond; and g) an active presence in the community at large.

Participating nominators and leaders self-declared that certain congregations brought to our attention met most or all of these criteria (see “Method” section below). In some cases they had other features in mind for “flourishing” that they felt ought to be included in the study. As we

had anticipated, and as will become clear from our data analysis to date, our conception of flourishing has broadened and deepened based on how our interviewees described flourishing congregations.¹ We expect this process of definitional and descriptive clarity to emerge as the research progresses. We also anticipate that this will provide us a more assuredly Canadian flavour to our understanding of and insight concerning flourishing in congregations. Furthermore, we anticipate that the concept “flourishing congregations” will be understood along a continuum of several indicators. What exactly those indicators and that continuum looks like is yet to be determined, as we move further into our analyses and engage in other phases of this program of research.

Method

Data collection took place between April and October 2016 in five Canadian regions: Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Southwest Ontario, and Halifax. In phase one of this study our sampling strategy involved approaching church and denominational leaders across Canada, asking them to refer us to flourishing congregations (as defined by them in concert with our preliminary set of descriptors described earlier). We reached out to nearly 400 individuals in this process. We then relied upon snowball sampling from those who agreed to participate, who put us in contact with other flourishing congregations. In phase one of this study we conducted nine focus groups with sixty-six individuals and we interviewed 109 church leaders. Many participated in a focus group and interview. Interviewees include twenty Catholic, thirty-six mainline Protestant, and forty-six conservative Protestant leaders.² We also interviewed two

¹ While we plan to parse out precise similarities and differences across Christian traditions for conceptualizing “flourishing congregation,” it is too early in our data analysis and project overall to offer many substantive observations at this point in time.

² Despite our best efforts to increase the Catholic contingency in our sample, this remains a work in progress. We are gradually working our way through various gatekeepers, recently seeing our efforts yield additional interviews. We are optimistic that with more time we will successfully increase this group in our sample.

leaders in parachurch organizations who regularly work with leaders of flourishing congregations, plus five academics whose research mainly focus on Christian congregations.

Taking an appreciative inquiry approach our focus groups centered on questions such as:

When you hear the phrase “flourishing congregation” what comes to mind? Based on a series of themes discussed in the literature related to flourishing congregations (clear self-identity, committed leadership, desire to grow, hospitable community, and vibrant spiritual life), which of these themes stand out to you and what would you add to the list? Is there anything distinct or unique about the Canadian context (compared with the United States, western Europe, or the global south and east, for example), when thinking about flourishing congregations? Interviews went further to account for congregational history, critical turning points in the life of a congregation, descriptions of when one’s congregation is at its best, goals for the congregation over the next five years, and various pragmatic matters related to buildings and finances and partnerships.

In our two sessions this morning we want to share some of what we have learned to date. In this first session we will set the context by exploring how those in our study make sense of the distinct Canadian context for congregational life. In the second session we will offer some preliminary observations of how those we interviewed conceptualize what a flourishing congregation looks like (or ought to look like) in a Canadian context. To be clear we are at the preliminary stage in analyzing the data from interviews and focus groups. We are currently coding transcriptions and wanted to preview some of our initial findings through this presentation.

Institutional and Contextual Factors

Social scientific research on congregations reveals that congregations are shaped both by institutional and contextual factors. According to Hoge & Roozen (1979: 39), “Contextual factors are external to the church. They are in the community, the society, and the culture in which a church exists. A church has little control over them. Institutional factors are internal to the church and are aspects of its life and functioning over which it has some control.”

For example, contextual factors such as neighbourhood demographics (e.g. age, ethnicity, education, family status), the economic or political landscape, laws pertaining to religion, religious diversity, and the media can play an important role in growth, decline, or transformation of a congregation (Hopewell 1987; Dudley & Johnson 1993; Parson & Leas 1993; Roozen & Hadaway 1993; Wind & Lewis 1994; Ammerman 1997; Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley & McKinney 1998; Scheitle & Dougherty 2008; Woolever & Bruce 2008; Roozen 2011; Roxburgh 2011). So too can various institutional variables like leadership, programs, resources, processes and structures, theology, and a congregation’s distinct culture, history, and identity (Kelley 1972; Hopewell 1987; Dudley, Carroll & Wind 1991; Bibby 1993, 2004, 2012; Dudley & Johnson 1993; Roozen 1993; Roozen & Hadaway 1993; Wind & Lewis 1994; Iannaccone, Olson & Stark 1995; Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley & McKinney 1998; Barna 1999; Macchia 1999; Wilkes 2001a, 2001b; Woolever & Bruce 2004; Ammerman 2005; Bickers 2005; Carroll 2006; Bruce, Woolever, Wulff & Smith-Williams 2006; Scheitle & Finke 2008; McAlpine 2011; Roozen 2011; Reimer 2012; Bowen 2013; Chaves & Anderson 2014; Marti & Ganiel 2014; Haskell, Flatt & Burgoyne 2016).

Another way to think about the institutional and contextual factors is theologically, using the image of the church as gathered and scattered. It is the church as gathered where they have

control of what happens internally when it comes to the leadership, worship, and discipleship. The church as scattered is where we leave the doors of the church as God's baptized people to go into various contexts in the wider culture to bear the image of Christ, often times not able to control cultural variables to describe reality.

Research that explores church growth and decline suggests that church leaders and congregants in growing congregations tend to attribute their growth to internal factors that churches and its members have control over. Conversely, leaders and members of declining congregations are inclined to point toward external variables that they have little control over to explain their reality (McMullin 2013).

We focus our first session on the church as scattered, these contextual factors related to the religious and cultural landscape in Canada, which help to set up the overarching conversation about flourishing congregations in Canada. As we launch this Institute, a recurring refrain that we hear from many across the country is: "thank goodness this is a Canadian study on congregations." Though a heart-warming sentiment for our research team, the statement speaks to an underlying perception that there are distinct religious and cultural realities that set Canada apart from the United States, for instance, where most Canadian scholars and church leaders turn for congregational studies in the surprising absence of such research in Canada (only a few interdenominational studies on congregations at all in Canada – see Reimer 2012; Bowen 2013; Reimer & Wilkinson 2015; Bibby and Reid 2016). As just one example, a denominational leader in a mainline tradition recently came to minister in Canada from the United States. They said: "Of course stupidly when I first came here I thought 'well it's just about transferring the learning from one country to another.' Stupidly." Existing data reveals that Canada is far less religious than the United States; fewer participate in congregations, "religious nones" represent one-

quarter of Canadian adults and one-third of teens, liberal values on most moral issues are the cultural norm, skepticism runs higher toward religious organizations, and most oppose mixing religion and politics. Moreover, Catholicism and Mainline Protestantism are the main expressions of Christianity, immigration keeps many churches afloat, and few megachurches exist in Canada (see e.g. Bibby 2011; Noll 1992; Thiessen 2015).

How then do church leaders describe the Canadian religious and cultural landscape, and how do these descriptions compare with some of the empirical realities from the literature?

A Faith Community in Exile in a Secular Canada

When we asked interviewees to comment on congregational life in a distinctly Canadian context versus the United States, Europe, or Australia, one of the first observations to arise across traditions and regions pertained to how secular they think Canada is; fewer Canadians believing, behaving, or belonging to Christians groups, negative public images toward Christianity, and the marginalization of religion from the political realm.

A conservative Protestant leader in southwestern Ontario lamented, “A significant number of Canadians don’t feel guilty about not going to church.” Others conveyed their perception that Canadians generally think religion, and Christianity in particular, is bad for society. Here we see two conservative Protestants exchange views in a focus group in Ontario:

[Respondent 1] We talk sometimes about good news. I think for Canadians, they don’t feel like Christianity, Jesus, the gospel, the cross – I don’t think they feel like that’s news ... And they don’t think the church is good. The church is that institution that ripped kids out of their First Nations village, lured them onto float plane with candy and took them away from their family, and their family never saw them again. Or they went back to their community after suffering sexual abuse and brought that pain and damage back to their home community. It’s the place where the priests have been pedophiles. So even though every profession has pedophiles, the church is in the media as being the one that somehow is sort of the icon of pedophilia. The church has earned a place in Canadian society where people are questioning its goodness.

[Respondent 2] I can't say yes to that enough. That feels precisely, in my mind the task of communicating the Christian message is taking something that's familiar and trying to make it actually unfamiliar again. And because I agree, I don't think the issue is the story out there, it is – it's somehow reframing, repackaging in a way that sounds unfamiliar or is detached from what I think many people see in Canada as, maybe not an evil institution, but I don't think people are neutral on the church. I think people have slightly indifferent, negative views of the church's past.

As interviewees made these claims they also consistently located Canada's religious past, present, and possible future somewhere between the United States and Europe. A United Church of Canada leader in the Maritimes noted, "We're not as secular as Europe or Britain but we're more secular than the U.S. So we have this – I refer to it as the HSM, the Holy Shit Moment – when a regional church knows post-Christendom has just arrived." Some that we spoke to shared how they turn to the United Kingdom for resources and insights, to anticipate where the Church in Canada may be headed. In one of our focus groups in Toronto a mainline Protestant leader indicated, "The U.K. is actually further along the curve when it comes to social enterprise in understanding social innovation ... we're actually following the U.K. ... we're about a decade behind." Later the same individual noted that some congregations in the United States are turning to their Canadian counterparts, "So we're like 'yes! The U.S. can learn from Canada, thank you very much.'" Members around the focus group proceeded to clap in response, affirming that Canada has something to offer the American Church in particular rather than the other way around.

One identified implication of a secular context is that religious belief and practice remains private, kept from the public realm. A mainline Protestant pastor in Calgary denoted, "I think in the States you can ask people what church they go to, you wouldn't do that in Canada; we're more private." A focus group participant in the Maritimes described his read of Canadians toward religion as, "A very private thing. It's not a public conversation. It's not something I need

to hear in dinner or when we're having coffee that you know which church I go to or what I think about those things. I hold those cards close to my chest." A Catholic leader in Calgary stated, "Canada is more passive and less outspoken." A conservative Protestant pastor in Ontario declared in a focus group, "I spent a year discipling some young adults who found it even difficult to even self-identify publicly as a Christian. In work situations, in social networks. So a whole lot of social pressure to keep that identity to themselves, let alone even talking about it."

Statements such as these frequently intersected with reflections about religion and politics, which the literature shows is one of the major differences between Canada and the United States (see e.g. Reimer 2003; Reimer and Wilkinson 2015). A United Church of Canada leader in Halifax reflected during a focus group discussion, "I can't get over how many times I hear somebody in church say religion and politics are two separate things ... which is hilarious to think of the Gospel not being political." A Catholic leader in Halifax said during an interview that Canadians tend not to link Christianity with a specific political party; "I just found Americans to be very polarized. So when it comes to politics you're either right or left. You're either Republican or Democrat." Another leader in the Maritimes illustrated the Canadian distinctive well: "I can still remember the shock and gasps when Stephen Harper completed a speech with "God bless Canada" 'cause our politicians just don't do that normatively." In one of our focus groups in Ontario, the following exchange linked the media, politics in the United States, and Canadian perceptions toward evangelicals:

[Respondent 1] Canadians are happy to not have religion in politics.

[Respondent 2] I think we reap the media overflow from the States.

[Respondent 1] Absolutely.

[Respondent 2] So that some American says, "well I believe God says we should go into this country and assassinate this person or some guy talks about 2 Corinthians on stage, who's

apparently going to be in a very important position in the United States,” and it seems like certain people in Canada say, “oh well that’s Christians.”

[Respondent 1] Absolutely.

[Respondent 2] Right. Those key sound bites provide a filter then for the non-churched Canadians to view the churched Canadians.

[Respondent 1] I would say that’s one of my biggest battles, is understanding that people’s view of Christian Evangelical is shaped not by Canada but by what we’re hearing coming through the States.

[Respondent 3] With Republicans in the U.S.

[Respondent 1] Yeah and I mean that’s a very trying to separate that is a bit of a missional task.

[Respondent 2] Yeah that’s right. It is.

Reflective of the historical, cultural, religious, and political differences between Canada and the United States, an Anglican leader in Toronto spoke about a conservative oriented Episcopalian preacher visiting from the United States who “could not figure out how his congregation would consistently vote NDP. For him there was an identity between Republican values and evangelical Christianity.”

In sum, participants in this study described Canada as a very secular society, distinguished from the United States most in terms of the separation between religion and politics. In many ways these reflections are strongly correlated with the next substantive topic to arise in our research to date: Canadian values for diversity, inclusivity, and tolerance.

Canada: A Diverse, Inclusive, and Tolerant Nation

Layered within a secular Canada is a belief among many of those we met that Canada is a very inclusive and tolerant society, where exclusivity and offending others is deemed “un-Canadian.” At the same time there is a perception that Canadian rhetoric toward inclusivity is at times exclusivist towards Christianity in ways that leave Christians on the margins of Canadian

social life. In many of the following examples it is interesting to note how frequently politics once more enters the discussion.

In one of our interviews with a Catholic leader in Vancouver, he observed, “I think we’re very Canadian so we’re not a very polarized group. This group would probably vote to stay in the E.U. and it probably wouldn’t go for the extremes of a Trump sort of thing. They probably, if they got to vote for the president of the United States, they’d vote for Bernie Sanders. Yeah, so it feels very Canadian.”³ A mainline Protestant denominational leader in Ontario who has ministry experience in both Canada and the United States provided a reflection on politics and tolerance across the borders:

There [United States] the church is totally connected to the Republican Party, the word social justice is a swear word. Moving back here, I was really struck by how close Christian culture is, and how the spirit of tolerance. And I think the challenge for flourishing here is that tolerance is low accountability, but to be the church in a post-Christian context, kind of requires high accountability. And so you get this competing dynamics of accountability which I can see a struggle with the congregation that I’m part of, and also in my own work. But I think it’s a real blessing that the Canadian Church is not really connected to a political party in most of the country. That there’s much more capacity for a hospitable community to evolve, to have a commitment to social justice, I think is a beautiful thing.

A Catholic leader in Ontario mentioned that a flourishing congregation in Canada is evaluated on its ability to discover “all of the fringes of what the teachings are and what can they – not so much get away with – but how can they be so inclusive of many other areas and levels ... If I go to Detroit, the answer is black or white. If I come to Windsor across the road, well we live in the greys. And right across Niagara Falls and New York, it’s the same, St. Catherine’s. It’s pretty much the same across Canada from my experience.”

³ Our data collection took place in Spring 2016 and we heard numerous references to Donald Trump and the aversion in Canada to vote for Trump due to Canada’s value for diversity, inclusivity, and tolerance.

There is a sense among some interviewees that Canada's propensity to be inclusive and tolerant has contributed to a reverse discrimination of sorts toward Christianity. A leader of an ethnic congregation in Winnipeg recalled his early days in ministry in Canada:

Actually one of my shocks here when I came and I was involved in the serving or welcoming the new citizens and, few years ago what I – citizenship they gave bibles to new Canadians. And so when I first hosted that we welcome people I said, "Where are the bibles?" Because we are excited to give the bibles. Oh they said, "Oh they are no longer allowing that because it is – don't want to offend other religions." I said, "Oh I thought I came to Canada a free country where I can express my" – you are free to reject or accept whatever giving you but don't prevent me from doing what I think is just good. I mean I give you this literature if you don't to then I respect that. But don't stop me from distributing this free literature saying, "Oh I want to offend you." So that's really shocked me and I said, "No way we are in a free country I left the Philippines I thought that they are still have you know well we are free there but I thought Canada is really a free country why can I not – why am I restricted to do this?" And even you know don't distribute literatures in the malls because you don't want to offend the people. I said, "No we are free country we thought that this."

This participant's account intersects with a broader narrative that we heard, of Christianity seemingly on the margins of Canadian social life. This new terrain is unfamiliar for some. A United Church of Canada minister in Halifax offered this reflection: "We're trying to learn what it means to be displaced to the margins but we don't have a lot of history of telling that story. And that really gets in the way 'cause we don't know who we are. We used to be part of the political establishment in running things. We're not there anymore but we don't have a tradition of storytelling, evangelism, and whatever you want to call it which makes it really hard." A denominational leader in the Anglican Church of Canada discussed the challenges that arise from the margins:

We're not invited into the conversation discourse. For example, you know, the big topic of physician assisted death. If they think it's going to be controversial they're going to get someone to say something sensational. But to be part of that conversation ... we're on the margins in terms of having a voice. And we have to fight our way into having a voice about issues that affect the people that we minister to and with ... But we want to be involved in that conversation about who we are and what we hold and value and why, and how does that speak to us as a people of faith?

Others, like the following mainline Protestant leader, extended this sentiment further, suggesting that other religious traditions are given preferential treatment in society over and against Christians: “The larger society is actively casting us off, is actively moving us to the margins. For example, I think that it would be much more likely that a Shambhalic Buddhist would be invited to do something in the midst of a civic ritual or ceremony. Or, now, an Aboriginal person, a Mi’kmaq person, would be much, much more likely to give leadership in some kind of a civic ritual than a church leader.”

Several respondents framed this Canadian context as a great opportunity to minister from the margins of Canadian social life. Some respondents made Biblical comparisons to Jesus and Christianity on the whole that, in their view, seemingly flourished from the margins rather than the center of social and cultural life. During one of our focus groups in Ontario a respondent encouraged all in the group to “look around at the church on the borderland versus the church at the centre … we have to figure out how it is we serve on the borderland which is historically where church has been the best. And I think those are all fairly unique Canadian opportunities.”

During a focus group in Calgary, a conservative Protestant leader signaled:

I was down in the States for a couple of years not too long ago … to hear the cultural conversation there was interesting, hearing them feel like, “oh the church is going to go into exile because the country is becoming less Christian.” And I was like, “dude, get over it, it’s actually a good thing, it’s fine” … bringing it back to Canada then …it feels that the assumption is that we’re not in a Christian culture, we’re in a post-Christian culture in a lot of ways. And that actually creates opportunity, once you start thinking of it that way, there’s actually more space.

A respondent in a focus group in Winnipeg expressed his reflections on the opportunity of ministering from the margins: “For me it’s the advantage of knowing you’re in exile. I think most my family’s American and they’re dealing with kind of the falling of the empire and they’re trying to hang on … It’s so much more difficult for them I think to actually have an

integrated, growing, vibrant, spiritual life/faith. In a backdrop that's just so, grey and kind of loosely Christian but not really identifiably so. So I think it's a huge advantage."

Later we will see some of the specific ways that respondents link "living in exile" in a tolerant and diverse social context with their understanding of what it means to be a flourishing congregation in Canada in the 21st Century.

Cooperation versus Competition

Part of the Canadian ethos for inclusivity translates into the assertion among some leaders that Canadian congregations are far more cooperative and collaborative versus those in the United States. Such collaboration takes on multiple forms from partnering with other congregations within one's denomination, to collaborating with congregations in other Christian traditions, to coming together with other faith groups altogether, to partnering with various secular agencies toward a common cause that will benefit one's community.

One participant in a focus group in Ontario discussed the breaking down of denominational walls in Canada: "I am seeing or sensing the softening of denominational walls and maybe a willingness to relinquish them to do stuff together more ... I just think we're all kind of shifting in that direction a little more. Post-denominationalization maybe. I doubt they're going to disappear, but partnerships across tribal lines have become very, very important. I know church planting, whether the AGC and the Christian Missionary Alliance and us, we get together and co-plant churches – people love that. Who cares who ends up getting that congregation or what the label is on the door after the fact. That seems to be hot right now." This topic arose in a focus group in Winnipeg as well, as participants reflected on the challenges or opportunities connected with being "in exile" in Canada: "I also think that there's a greater generosity between the Anglican, Catholic, and range of evangelical traditions in Canada than what I experienced in the US. There

are far sharper lines dividing things, even within tribes. And there's the same dividing – we have to band together and appreciate each other for the simple stake of encouragement if nothing else.”

From our data collection and analysis thus far it appears that pan-religious collaborations are more commonly found in United Church of Canada settings. Below is an exchange centered among a few participants in the United Church of Canada in one of our focus groups.

[Respondent 1] Think about celebrations in December, we're going to get to a time where Halifax is comfortable celebrating Christmas and Diwali, Hanukah, and whatever month Ramadan happens in and Eid, we'll celebrate that. And that'll be a great moment 'cause it's both/and.

[Respondent 2] It's getting there.

[Respondent 1] Well the way to there has been none of the above, right? [agreement around the room] ... One of the things I've found really helpful and hopeful in this regard is the values and vision series that [ABC Church] and Shambhala in the Unitarian Church and sometimes a synagogue have done together. So we've had all candidates debates for a federal election, municipal election. We organized an event on doctor-assisted death and people showed because we weren't one faith or we weren't just Christians. And I think that that has been a way to re-enter, however humbly, the public sphere.

[Respondent 3] This is kind of this interesting cultural moment for Canada in church as this sort of multi-cultural project continues, right? And we're watching those tensions bubble over and boil over in the States and in England in particular. But for us there's this interesting space now, because we've done that ground clearing, is whether the church and other faith leaders take it upon themselves to create more spaces for conversation. So you're going to continue to diversify the population but one of the issues is that what happens when everybody retreats to their own enclave in their community, you don't know your neighbour. Why does your neighbour do those things? Who is your neighbour? Whereas the more we do work or we engage other faith communities to come together to talk and begin to break down the stereotypes that are often perpetrated on a very surface level in the media, the more you create opportunities for real capacity, community relationships to form and new things to happen and that'll be a huge gift to Canada instead of Canada turning into a light version of what we're seeing in the States along the attitudes around immigration and who's in and who's out.

[Respondent 1] It's been fascinating over the last two years. We cancel all the meetings during Lent and we have conversation with our faith neighbours and the basic premise of the conversation is help us to understand what it means to be you in Canada today. And I don't know what's more interesting: the response from other Christians leaders that are interested

in having these conversations, or the response from the people from other faiths to say, “You’re serious? You’re really interested?” This sense of those impenetrable walls. And I think one of the roles that flourishing congregations might provide is that safe space where things of the spirit and things of religious practice can actually be talked about because we take them seriously. We don’t necessarily do them in the same way but we take them seriously.

[Respondent 2] I guess the counter or the difficulty in some of that that I’ve certainly experienced in my community around even trying to engage other Christian communities in conversation is that some are so set in a particular theological framework that they won’t engage with a woman who’s in ministry. They won’t engage with the United Church because they don’t believe the United Church is actually Christian because of our belief system and our stance on things. And so that doesn’t mean that we don’t try to engage in that but it certainly makes it very difficult. And I think it strikes me that most often the media representation of the Christian church is narrow-minded, homophobic, judgmental, not particularly inclusive, and not particularly welcoming to people of other faiths. And so when that’s the dominant image that’s put forward, it’s no wonder they don’t want us to be invited to do anything because we’re simply going to tell everybody else that they’re wrong until they think like us. So that’s been an experience.”

The concluding reflections in this exchange suggest there is not a uniform openness or embrace toward inclusive cooperation. In later phases of our research we want to explore this and other related themes further. For example, do flourishing congregations embrace cooperation and collaboration as much as is suggested in phase one of this research? How is this narrative expressed in concrete terms? Are there indicators of competition in congregational life relative to other congregations within or across denominational or religious lines, and if so, how is such competition played out? How do congregants approach and experience cooperation and/or competition? These questions intersect with a longstanding theoretical argument in the sociology of religion, rational choice theory, that groups which exist in a competitive religious marketplace are positioned to thrive as they seek to sharpen their religious product and supply of religion (e.g., Stark and Finke 2000). We hope to test some of these claims out in the Canadian context.

Immigration

It is no secret that one of the hallmarks of Canadian social life is its openness to immigration and multiculturalism broadly speaking. As a Catholic leader in Vancouver stated, “Diversity, I think, is a very positive component of parish life because basically that really reflects what Canada is when you think about it.” Later we will explore interviewee beliefs regarding the sociological and theological ties between diversity and flourishing congregations. For now we simply want to highlight a couple of the implications that immigration has for congregational life.

Most obviously, as immigration to Canada from the global south and east continues to rise – from places where the global epicenter of Christianity exists – Canadian congregations benefit, particularly in Catholic and some conservative Protestant settings (see Statistics Canada 2013; Reimer and Wilkinson 2015; Bibby and Reid 2016). Sometimes immigration results in a series of mono-ethnic congregations. A Catholic priest in Vancouver, characteristic of stories we heard in other Catholic contexts, proclaimed, “In Vancouver I think we’ve got about 30 national parishes. You know like the Croatians, the Italians, the Poles, you know we've got about 30 different parishes that are about six Chinese parishes I think right now and Korean parish. So we emphasize more the cultural values of the people and once they come here they still have their own worshiping congregations and their languages and stuff. I think that's one thing that we're different that way.” Part of the Canadian belief is that immigrants can “come as they are” without the need to necessarily or fully assimilate, which extends to congregational life. Of course, other congregations see the impact of immigration via multiethnic church settings – a theme we explore later.

A recurring refrain that we heard was that foreign-born Christians appear to be more conservative and countercultural to Canadian values than Canadian-born Christians. Some leaders went as far as to lament that Canadian-born Christians were not more countercultural and conservative in their religious attitudes and behaviours. An Anglican leader in Toronto shared:

My congregation we have at least twenty-nine nations represented, and the people with the strongest biblical world view are immigrants, they're not home-grown generally speaking. The people who are home-grown adopted the secular values and that's why we have the most liberal, abortion, lack abortion laws in the world as well, our stance on euthanasia plus a number of other items reflect a European secularism, born of the enlightenment so, you're dealing with quite a wide range. When I go into social situations it's the home-grown born Canadian people who have the least biblical knowledge often. Particular if they're above forty years of age, and the school system of course is now socially engineering the next generation, so they'll be even further removed from any sort of biblical memory. If we understand that then our approach to mission needs to radically change ... one of the problems for us as a denomination in Canada is we still haven't grasped the reality that the secular, agnostic, atheistic world view is now the predominant viewpoint. And so your approach to evangelism your approach to church growth radically has to change. It can't be by baptism, marriage, and osmosis, which is the historic kind of state church model of the Anglican Church.

A Catholic interviewee reinforced similar ideas, noting that Catholicism in Canada would struggle more deeply if it were not for immigration:

And right now the main thing in the Catholic Church is immigration. You know like the, in 10 years I think almost half a million Catholic immigrants and that's the reason why we're growing. Because the birth rate is going to flatten out pretty soon and so the immigrants is really what – and most of those immigrants that come, they have a strong devotional life. And the Pentecostal side is important or the Charismatic is – you know the whole thing of the various spiritual groups and that's really important I think in terms of people's personal faith. You know their relationship to Jesus kind of idea there. And they've got different interests or different ways of going at it but that's where they get their identity especially as far as their experience of God and their lives and the Holy Spirit and Christ.

Research is clear that in the foreseeable future religion in Canada, in many respects, will rise and fall on denominations and congregations' abilities to respond to the influx of Christian immigrants. We, of course, are very interested in the dynamics at work as congregations navigate

and negotiate these changing demographics (we say more about this in our summary and discussion of how those in this study conceptualize flourishing congregations).

Few Churches are Large

Last, those who participated in phase one of this study noted that Canadian churches are generally smaller than their American counterparts. In some cases there is even a strong aversion to joining or growing large churches in Canada, possibly a reflection of our perceived “meek and mild” Canadian self-understanding. A Catholic leader in Halifax noted, “I would say a dynamic too of it and this isn’t a Catholic- Protestant thing, but just smaller churches in general ’cause, you know, here’s Halifax, a city of 400,000 plus whatever we are. We have no evangelical church over 1000 people. I don’t know of where that would ever be the case in the U.S.” Another leader in the Maritimes commented, “One of the things I always have to do when I’m reading sort of literature that comes specifically out of the U.S. is go ‘we’re not a country of mega churches.’ Like that’s not, for the most part, at least we in the United Church are not like hugely multi-staffed. Most of us are one with maybe some other paid support but not a lot. And so for me I think that’s a very different piece.”

These leaders are partially correct. Recent estimates suggest there are approximately 150 Protestant churches in Canada with over 1000+ in weekly attendance versus 7,000 in the United States (Bird 2015). Still, the majority of congregations on both sides of the border have congregations with fewer than one-hundred in weekly attendance. An intriguing observation about the source of growth in larger congregations arose in this quotation from a conservative Protestant pastor in Ontario that large congregations “are growing often at the expense of the smaller churches that are feeder churches of the bigger ones.” This is certainly our hunch and our initial interviews and focus groups with leaders of larger congregations in Canada suggests that

transfer growth is a key explanation for their numeric success. But we hope to gain greater clarity and precision about this and other realities based on church size in later stages of this study.

Conclusion

To conclude, congregations are impacted both by institutional and contextual factors. The purpose of this opening section was to present some of the contextual factors at play in the Canadian religious and cultural milieu, as perceived by participants in this study. In short, we heard that participants believe they are in a secular society; that religion and politics do not mesh well in the Canadian context; that Canadians value inclusivity and tolerance in a diverse and plural society; that Christians now operate from the margins of Canadian society; that cooperation rather than competition is highly esteemed; that immigration is believed to be a lifeline to Canadian congregations; and that few Canadian congregations are ostensibly large in weekly attendance. Together we think these views among leaders help to shape their conceptualization of what a flourishing congregation looks like, the subject of our next session. Importantly, most of the traits that we will discuss next deal with institutional variables. Yet we think these variables are very much conceptualized against the backdrop of some of the contextual variables highlighted thus far.

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