

SIGNS OF LIFE:

CATHOLIC, MAINLINE, AND CONSERVATIVE
PROTESTANT CONGREGATIONS IN CANADA

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Chapter 12

EVANGELISM: GO THEREFORE ...

Following His resurrection, Jesus met with his disciples in Galilee. As we know, Jesus began the well-known great commission passage in Matthew 28:19 with these words: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” Then, in verse 8 of the opening chapter in Acts, the disciples were informed that “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Catholics, mainline Protestants, and conservative Protestants interpret these texts and their implications in varying ways that intersect with several themes in this book. One of those themes is evangelism. Our purpose in this chapter is not to engage theological debates over what evangelism is or ought to be. Rather, we are interested in how church and denominational leaders define and talk about evangelism, how important evangelism is to those in congregations, the evangelism methods that individuals and congregations utilize, and the perceived strengths and obstacles for evangelism. We then unveil how many people new to the Christian faith seem to be in the pews, paying ongoing attention to similarities and differences across different social contexts. In our view, this is one of the most critical dimensions of congregational flourishing as we observe various signs of Christian decline in Canadian society. Crudely put, churches are and will continue to close their doors, in part, because of their inability to meaningfully and in sustained ways engage a shifting and changing Canadian culture and demographic at large (e.g., the growth of “religious nones”).

What do WE MEan and why doEs It MattEr?

By evangelism we are broadly referring to religious groups and individuals who seek to attract new people to the Christian faith

so that they believe, behave, or belong (as defined by the particular theological framework of the congregation or ministry). Both locally and globally, evangelism can take many forms but our interest in this chapter is on the local dimension of evangelism. Outlooks and approaches to the purposes and methods of evangelism and “shar-ing the good news” vary by theological tradition, as summarized in our 2018 article, “What is a Flourishing Congregation? Leader Perceptions, Definitions, and Experiences.” Many conservative Protestants characterized flourishing congregations as places where “we see people getting saved,” “people are coming to faith in Jesus,” “evangelism is ... the first priority,” and where individuals “can’t wait to tell” others about their faith. Past research reveals that conservative Protestants are the most likely to draw a clear line between “us” and “them” in the secular or non-Christian world, and to endorse and adopt practices to share Jesus with others (Flatt, Haskell, & Burgoyne, 2018; James, 2018; Rawlyk, 1996; Reimer, 2003; Reimer & Wilkinson, 2015; Roozen & Hadaway, 1993; Smith, 1998). The goal tends to be personal transformation and eternal salvation.

Among Catholics, in 1990 Pope John Paul II captured some of these ideas in “The Mission of the Redeemer,” where he outlined a larger and global call to evangelism, including whole-person and societal transformation. This call was rooted in personal attentiveness and response to the Spirit of God, the empowerment and responsibility of the laity to evangelize, and a local and global movement to unreached corners of one’s society and the entire world. Some of these ideas were further developed by Simon Jr. (2016), who stressed the new opportunities that are opening for the Catholic Church because of the work and global popularity of Pope Francis. Simon Jr. called attention to the need for an invitational culture, mission-minded outreach initiatives, technological innovation, and renewed attentiveness to new ways of engaging millennials in the 21st century (also see Hegy, 2011). Among Canadian Catholics, recent research shows Catholics speaking more of “new evangelization” by focusing on those who already identify as Catholic; yet are less active in their connection to their local parish (Bibby & Reid, 2016). Religious holidays and rites of passage are of considerable interest to draw relatively inactive Catholics into greater levels of involvement.

Mainline Protestants are less known for actively speaking about or encouraging evangelistic practices (Airhart, 2014; Flatt, 2013). In

our interviews we captured the sentiment that evangelism is not about “shoving it down their throat,” but rather “meet[ing] at a local pub and just talk[ing].” When some mainline Protestants do consider evangelism, the practice tends to be less about personal salvation and more about social change and transformation toward justice and equality for all. In many ways, the pursuit of social justice is seen as a public witness to one’s Christian faith and an invitation for others to consider joining in that faith.

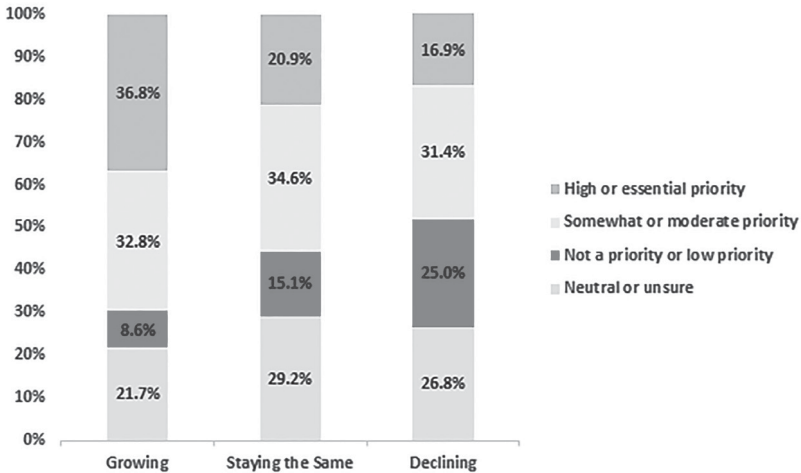
As we noted in the opening chapter, the proportion of Canadians who identify as Christian is on the decline (still the single largest religious group, however), and those who say they have no religion—“religious nones”—are the fastest growing “religious group” in Canada (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2020). There are many reasons for why people say they have no religion, which go beyond our purposes here (see Thiessen, 2015). However, as most denominations and some local churches experience declines, engaging with and drawing in those from outside Christianity can be an important source to both survive and thrive. From an empirical and organizational perspective, congregations who are not thinking toward this end curtail a possible source of new members and resources.

Prioritizing Evangelism

Beliefs matter. Beliefs alone do not determine individual or group behaviour; but as we have just seen, the different ways groups speak of evangelism, including the importance as well as potential strategies for evangelism, opens a window for making sense of data on evangelism in Canadian congregations. We begin by looking at whether those in the pews believe their congregation prioritizes evangelism. Starting with a comparison between congregations believed to be growing, staying the same in size, or declining, those in growing contexts are more likely to claim that their congregation gives a high or essential priority to evangelism (37%) compared with those staying the same (21%) or declining (17%). Conversely, those who say evangelism is a low priority or not a priority at all is higher among congregations believed to be declining (25%), followed by those staying the same (15%), and then growing (9%).

Figure 12.1

Evangelism Priority, by Congregations Growing, Staying the Same, or Declining in Size (“practices evangelism”)



As anticipated, denominational differences are important on this question too. Conservative Protestants and Catholics appear to be leading the way in terms of high or essential priority for evangelism (see Table 12.1). The range of responses on both ends of the continuum are yet another reminder that members of different denominations define and measure some elements of congregational flourishing in very different ways. In light of these data, how would you assess your own theological tradition, and your congregation more specifically, on this dimension of evangelism? How important or unimportant would you say evangelism is, and are you satisfied with your assessment? What theological or other considerations factor into your appraisal and subsequent degree of contentment?

Table 12.1

Evangelism Priority by Denominations (“practices evangelism”)

Denomination	High or Essential Priority	Low or Not a Priority at All
Pentecostal	37%	13%
Christian and Missionary Alliance	33%	11%
Catholic	28%	14%
Baptist	22%	16%

Box 12.1

Congregational Plants and Evangelism

Church plants are birthed for many reasons, and they take many forms and models. In our interaction with church planters combined with our review of the literature, a recurring refrain is that church plants open up fresh and innovative ways to spread the Gospel. Unhindered by past traditions, structures, and misconceptions, new church plants often launch with the intention to creatively and meaningfully engage those “outside the Church.” Efforts to accomplish such ends stress intentional relationship building with one’s neighbours, coworkers, friends, and service-providers that one

Denomination	High or Essential Priority	Low or Not a Priority at All
Anglican	17%	22%
Lutheran	16%	22%
Reformed	14%	17%
United Church of Canada	6%	34%

When we asked those in the pews to identify the top three most effective strategies for evangelism in their congregation (from a list of more than fifteen options), five strategies rose to the surface: children/family/youth ministries (41%), Alpha (26%), special occasions (e.g., religious holidays or rites of passage) (23%), small groups (21%), and women’s ministries (19%). We caution that these data do not tell us if these strategies *actually were* effective; only that these are people’s perceptions. Furthermore, if these approaches were successful, we need more and better data to unearth the particular mechanisms that led to such effectiveness. We plan to make headway on this front with planned case study research in the future, including careful attention to the ties between church plants and evangelism (see Box 12.1).

We make two noteworthy additions to this discussion of strategies for evangelism. Nearly one-quarter of all respondents indicated that they were unaware of any effective strategies in use. Additionally, even if they were aware of strategies, just over one in ten believe that they do not have a responsibility to evangelize. As one person conveyed in an open-ended survey response, “I despise the seeking of converts. It’s arrogant and rude.”

meets on a regular basis. New congregations sometimes meet in spaces that do not look or feel like a church (e.g., pub or community centre), while others gather in older churches that are steeped in century old Christian heritage, rife with the “smells and bells” of mainline Christianity. And the specific liturgies practiced in some church plants center around blurred boundaries between leader and follower, conversational elements, service opportunities, and diverse expressions of spirituality.

Are church plants more evangelistically effective? Regrettably very little data exists on church plants in Canada (many anecdotes!). Recalling Jonathan Allen and Mountainview Church’s experience from chapter ten, they appeared to be more effective initially, yet over time their church started to attract more and more people from other churches. One of the most recent and comprehensive sources is “The State of Church Planting in Canada” report by Ed Stetzer and Daniel Im (Lifeway Research, 2015). They assert that evangelistic activities (e.g., evangelistic training, outreach Bible studies, sharing the Gospel with peers) are critical to new church success. These conclusions may very well be true, and comparative data with more established congregations along with tracking church plants longitudinally would enable us to assess these claims more definitively. Unfortunately, too few church plants agreed to participate in our research to enable us to offer some of that comparable data here.

For more information about some of the leading church planting networks in the country, including many tangible ideas and opportunities to lean into varied evangelistic approaches in the 21st century, check out Church Planting Canada (<http://www.churchplantingcanada.ca/>), C2C Collective (<https://c2ccollective.com/>), and New Leaf Network (<https://www.newleafnetwork.ca/>).

SharIng Our faith

We now narrow the focus from what congregations are doing to focus on individuals in the pews. How do they evangelize; if they evangelize at all? Previous research has revealed many evangelistic tactics from marketplace settings to interfaith dialogue, door-to-door invitations, revival services, neighbourhood block parties, church plants, coffee shops, and the list goes on (Boguslawski & Martin, 2008; Hadaway,

1991; Ingram, 1989; Rainer, 1996; Reimer & Wilkinson, 2015; Roozen & Hadaway, 1993; Wagner, 2010). With a scale ranging from never to daily, we asked respondents to indicate how frequently they verbally shared their faith with others, showed their faith through actions, and invited those they believed were non-Christians to their church. Admittedly, these are not the only or even best markers of evangelism. Depending on your theological tradition, you might find these markers too stringent, and others may not find these indicators not specific enough. Yet, these markers do give us an initial barometer to measure *some* elements of evangelism.

When we compared modes of evangelism based on growing, staying the same, and declining congregational contexts, no meaningful differences stood out. Instead, when comparing survey respondents on the whole, a distinction between “passive” and “active” forms of evangelism emerges. Based on a monthly or more frequency, respondents are more likely to show their faith to others (95%) versus verbally share their faith with others (71%) or invite others to church (17%). This last figure increases to a total of 46% if we include annually or more. Without knowing the exact content of what people are doing to show their faith, or how they are verbally sharing with others, our interpretation of this data is that the preferred mode of evangelism is to be nice to others (e.g., volunteer service), hope that one day others ask why someone is so nice, and then use such opportunities to tell others it is because of their Christian faith. Our assessment is reinforced by several of the nearly 100 survey respondents who offered written comments to this effect: “Action and example are more effective than preaching when it comes to spreading the good news” or “Preach the Gospel always. Use words if necessary” (sometimes attributed to St. Francis of Assisi). But how realistic is such an approach to effective evangelism? We have our doubts (mindful also that opening one’s mouth can also detract from evangelistic aims), but we will suspend those conversations for the time being until we look at the source of people in the pews later in this chapter.

Denominational comparisons on inviting others who one believes are not yet Christian to their congregations are illuminating. In Table 12.2, we capture the proportion of those who say they “never” participate in this activity. These data are generally consistent with earlier observations that conservative Protestants tend to be more proactive on the evangelism front when compared with mainline

Protestants. Catholics are the outlier, given that they were among the lead traditions mentioned earlier to indicate that their parish gives a high priority to evangelism. We think this is due to the “new evangelization” initiative, highlighted previously. Evangelism within the Catholic sphere is largely concentrated on parish-led programming to re-socialize lapsed Catholics back into greater involvement. This is a different approach than many conservative Protestants who tend to emphasize personal relationships with non-Christians as an avenue to facilitate potential conversion experiences, often in and through the local church.

Table 12.2

Inviting Non-Christians to Congregational Settings by Denominations (“invite people who you do not believe are Christian to your parish/congregation”)

Denomination	Never
Catholic	68%
United Church of Canada	57%
Lutheran	54%
Reformed	53%
Baptist	37%
Anglican	36%
Christian and Missionary Alliance	29%
Pentecostal	21%

One final question of interest to us can be expressed in the following way: What are the challenges that people confront when it comes to evangelism? As with earlier questions, respondents selected the top three challenges from a lengthier list of options. The lead five challenges are as follows: lack of confidence (42%), increased antagonism or resistance to Christian values and the Christian Church (34%), fear of rejection (29%), few nonbelievers as friends (25%), and lack of training (23%). Recalling from the opening chapter the data on the religious and cultural landscape in Canada, these findings are not particularly unexpected in a multicultural Canadian context where the proportion of Christians is on the decline and those who say they have no religion is on the rise. In some respects, Christianity no longer holds the privileged position it once held in Canada, and many are suspicious of Christians—evangelical Christians in particular—and

what they might be “up to” (see Bibby, 2017; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007; Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2020). Christianity is increasingly living on the margins of Canadian social life; this is the social context in which we must consider evangelism. It appears that those in the pews do not feel particularly equipped or confident in their ability to evangelize (also see Rawlyk, 1996), and we suspect this is, in part, a response to the increasingly secular, multicultural, inclusive, and tolerant context in which they operate.

For those who believe in the value of evangelism, however defined and measured, there are several important questions and opportunities that arise in light of these data. How central is evangelism in your congregation? Do you teach and preach on this topic? How is your church equipping and empowering its members to evangelize? How might you resource your members so that they have adequate training, grow in confidence, and diminish in their fear of rejection? In what ways do you encourage members to intentionally build relationships with those outside the Christian community? Do you provide opportunities for people to evangelize through a church-wide initiative, like Alpha or something akin to it? In what ways do you publicly acknowledge and celebrate new people to the Christian faith? Finally, do you monitor the addition of new Christians to your parish, and if so, what do you compare your figures from one year to the next? Do you note if those numbers are flat or in decline? Our reason for asking these questions is not to shame anyone into doing anything; but rather, if taken seriously, asking these questions and acting upon the answers to those questions might be pivotal to strengthening a congregation’s approach to and success in evangelistic practices.

From a sociological perspective, new conversions are one of only a few ways that congregations grow (the others being new births and retention, as well as transfer growth of some kind). Furthermore, personal invitation is the number one contributor to those who do join a new religious group (Olson, 1989; Posterski & Barker, 1993; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). Recall that one-quarter of survey respondents said they have few nonbelievers as friends. Theology aside, if congregations do not intentionally embrace and strengthen their evangelism approach, they effectively cut off one leg of the stool for potential growth. Of course, and as we have stated several times, all of this depends on how exactly you measure congregational flourishing; whether or not church growth factors into your evaluation; and

what your theological convictions are in terms of ultimate significance placed on particular attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes.

Box 12.2

Evangelism Practices

Evangelism is not formulaic, conversion is rarely sudden, and both evangelism and conversion experiences vary to a degree across theological and regional environments. In our interview and focus group research with church and denominational leaders we learned of the following contexts where new Christian converts or returnees joined congregations.

Alpha Canada (<https://www.alphacanada.org/>) was the most cited organization and resource for congregations. Connected to a global network of Alpha ministries started by Anglican priest, Nicky Gumbel, in England, Alpha Canada is premised upon a series of sessions that explore the Christian faith. Food, talk, and discussion are the three pillars of each session. Several Catholics, mainline, and conservative Protestants that we interviewed highlighted Alpha's integral role to not only evangelism in their church, but also discipleship, leadership, innovation, engaged laity, and hospitable community. In 2018, almost 30,000 Canadians "began or restored a relationship with Jesus" through Alpha (Alpha Canada, 2018).

Alpha is not the only initiative that congregations draw upon. We also heard of block parties, English as a second language programs, daycares, and rites of passage (e.g., performing a funeral, wedding, or baptism) as additional catalysts for connecting new converts or returnees to their congregations. Personal invitations and general advertising were instrumental here. Individuals who attend these activities most often do so because someone from these congregations invited them. Additionally, congregations advertise and market these programs through social media and door-to-door mailings. Marketing enables congregations to at least get on people's radar beyond their church walls. These initiatives do not mean that just because you invite someone, they will attend; we lack solid data to know the exact "return on investment." But as Wayne Gretzky reminds us, "You miss 100% of the shots you do not take."

Sharing stories is another important dynamic to evangelism. Our research suggests that new converts tend to be the most consistent and passionate storytellers of religious transformation. They lead the way in inviting their friends and families to things like Alpha, and when given the opportunity, to share their stories with their new religious family. A feature of congregations who valued evangelism as a marker of congregational flourishing was consistent opportunities during worship services or brief online recordings for church members to hear testimonies of conversion-based transformation among others in their congregation. New conversion-based stories can have a ripple effect on a congregation too, which we return to at the end of the chapter.

the Myth of Church Growth

It is one thing to ask about how important evangelism is within a congregation, or how frequently and in what form individuals seek to share the “good news.” Yet, how effective are such efforts? How many new Christ-followers are in the pews? Past research suggests that approximately 10-15% of those in congregations had no Christian upbringing (Bibby, 2003), and that most growth within individual congregations comes from transfer growth or re-affiliation of some kind or another (Vermeer & Scheepers, 2020; Wilkinson & Schuurman, 2020). In our survey we asked respondents which of the following five options best described them:

1. Used to attend a congregation regularly, stopped attending regular religious services for a period of time, and have since returned to regular church attendance;
2. This is the first church of any Christian tradition I have attended;
3. Came to this church after relocating to this area;
4. Came to this church from another church in the area;
5. Raised in this congregation.

Depending how strict one wishes to measure conversion, the most stringent indicator includes only those who are attending their first Christian congregation. If one wishes to broaden conversion metrics to include those who used to attend religious services, left for a period

of time, and then returned (e.g., lapsed Catholics in the “new evangelization” discourse), we have a broader indicator of conversion.

However one slices and dices the data, when it comes to conversion there are virtually no differences between growing, staying the same, or declining congregations: 3%-4% say this is the first church they have ever attended, plus an additional 11%-12% say they have returned (our data does not capture tradition of origin, so it is possible they left and returned from within the same denomination or they changed traditions along the way). These numbers are in line with classic estimates of converts within congregations. Table 12.3 compares across denominational lines and captures the proportion of respondents who say this congregation is the first Christian church they have ever attended, as well as those who have returned to regularly church attendance after a lengthy absence. Here too we find that relatively few in congregations are new to the Christian faith, depending how one defines this concept. Still, there is some variation across denominational lines, with conservative Protestants leading the way among those who are attending their first church ever, and Anglicans and the United Church of Canada ahead among congregations receiving returnees.

Table 12.3

Conversions by Select Denominations (“Which of the following best describes you?”)

Denomination	First Church	Returnee
Pentecostal	8%	12%
Baptist	5%	12%
Christian and Missionary Alliance	5%	12%
Anglican	3%	18%
United Church of Canada	3%	18%
Lutheran	2%	10%
Reformed	2%	5%
Catholic	1%	9%

Alongside the relatively low proportion of new Christians in

congregations, nearly 70-80% of attenders represent what we may call “transfer growth” in one form or another. This is significant because

it appears that growing congregations attribute numerical increases primarily to those people who leave one church for another, whether in their own city or when they relocate from one city to another. There may be variations in select congregations, but on the whole little church growth seems to be due to new Christians (in growing contexts, 3% say this is the first church they have ever attended, plus 12% are returnees). Church growth that is largely a result of those new to the Christian faith or returnees is generally a myth (there are exceptions of course).

Returning to a guiding question in the opening chapter of this book, what counts for congregational flourishing in your mind? If congregations grow numerically, is that the best or only measure of flourishing, or does the source of flourishing also matter? We are not inferring a “correct” answer to this question; but rather, we invite you to grapple with what you believe to be the right answer in your context and then to behave accordingly. If you think “good” growth should primarily come from evangelism versus transfer growth, how does what you do in your congregation reflect that desire? We think these are worthwhile questions to grapple with for the church that is interested in a more nuanced handling of the “flourishing congregation” question.

Signs of nEw LIfe

Quantitative metrics are not the only or even the best way to assess congregational flourishing. Still, if congregations experience sustained declining numbers in attendance, volunteer contributions, or financial giving, they will eventually cease to exist because they lack the human and financial resources to remain viable. Evangelism alone is unlikely to support a declining church; but it may help. What is more, adding new members does not strictly help a congregation from a numerical perspective. New people to the Christian faith have the potential to add new energy to a congregation. For example, as those new to Christianity share stories of their transformation with the rest of the congregation (for example, during a weekly worship service), others in the church start to reflect on their own transformation in a fresh way. Perhaps they ask new questions or reconsider their practices. Pope John Paul II noted these things in the 1990 piece cited

earlier. Sociological research reveals that new converts are often the most zealous in a religious group (Dawson, 2006); they are the most committed to this newfound cause, to tell others about their faith, and to invite others to join them.

On a parallel track, our team hears anecdotal stories of recent immigrant congregations in Canada with members from Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia who are actively evangelizing and gaining new converts. These individuals go on to invite their friends and family to their newfound church community. We admit that there is a need to develop and analyze data from the diaspora congregations to adequately assess this phenomenon. Joel recalls a friend from the Caribbean who would go up and down his street telling others about Jesus or the upcoming “outreach” church event in hopes that others would follow Jesus. Our suspicion is that these overt public acts of evangelism reveal a relative unawareness of pervasive Canadian customs and norms that frown upon such public displays of religiosity and proselytization (see Thiessen, 2015). Moreover, some of these communities include immigrants from contexts where Christianity is the majority religion; while others arrive in Canada from contexts where Christianity was marginalized. Whether coming from settings where Christianity is the majority or minority religion, people from both settings enjoy a freedom to live and practice their faith in public ways in Canada’s open, tolerant, and multicultural space.

We wonder if the diaspora churches have lessons to teach more established Canadian congregations about evangelism. Imagine the ripple effect of such a contagious faith that, over time, could help to transform a congregation. Like spring buds on a tree after a long winter, those new to Christianity are one sign of new life in a congregation. How might your church experience new life via intentional energy and effort to “go therefore?”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider your favourite restaurant, one that you liked so much that you encouraged those around you to eat there. In what ways is this example similar or dissimilar to telling others about your Christian faith?

2. Theologically, what importance do you attribute to evangelism? Explain.
3. What tools or resources do you think would assist you in areas of evangelism? What are the greatest concerns, fears, or limitations that you confront?
4. Think of the last person you knew who was new to Christianity. What was that process and transformation like for them? What impact, if any, did that conversion have on you and those around you?
5. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus stated, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." How do you interpret this text in the scope of your congregation's ministry, and what activities do you envision your church might need to stop, start, or continue to live into this great commission from Jesus?

SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS (1-5 SCALE, WITH 1=STRONGLY DISAGREE AND 5=STRONGLY AGREE)

1. Our congregation gives a high priority to evangelism.
2. I feel well equipped to share my Christian faith with others.
3. I invite others who I believe are non-Christian to my congregation.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

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