

The Circulation of the Saints: *One Final Look at How Conservative Churches Grow*

by

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ABSTRACT

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, organized religion in Canada experienced a significant decline in active participation. The percentage of people attending services weekly dropped from approximately 50% in 1960 to around 20% by 2000. However, not all religious groups shared in the drop-off. Conservative Protestants not only held their own as a proportion of the population but also experienced an increase in the involvement of their affiliates. The existence of such an anomalous pattern led the author to carry out an exploration of the nature of evangelical church growth in 1971. The study looked at the kinds of people who had joined twenty randomly selected Conservative Protestant churches in the western Canadian city of Calgary, Alberta between 1966 and 1970. Because of the persistence of the anomaly, three subsequent re-examinations of new additions were carried out that spanned the five-year periods of 1976-80, 1986-90, and 1996-2000. Churches that folded were replaced by new and vigorous grass-root congregations. What the research has consistently found is that about 70% of new additions have come from other evangelical churches, 20% have been the children of evangelicals, and 10% have come from outside the evangelical community. Although Conservative Protestant churches have been exhibiting considerable vitality, their collective growth is attributable more to retention than outreach. The author closes with some reflections on the implications of the findings for religious group growth.

Introduction

It is generally conceded that many established religious groups in North America have experienced significant numerical declines since the 1960s. U.S. groups including United Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians, have reported significant membership losses, as have their United, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran counterparts in Canada. However, not everyone has been losing. So it was that in 1972, Dean Kelley, who worked for the Mainline-oriented National Council of Churches, wrote his landmark book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. The reason was that he felt that Mainline Protestants could learn from the relative numerical success that was being experienced by evangelical denominations. Recent research, including the author's examination of thirty American denominations completed in 1998, as well as national surveys in Canada through 2000, shows that Conservative Protestant groups continue to be more likely than their Mainline Protestant counterparts to report numerical growth.

However, it has never been clear from Kelley onward as to why evangelical churches have been able to experience superior growth. Proponents of secularization, ranging from Emile Durkheim through Oxford's Bryan Wilson and fellow Brit Steve Bruce have assumed that all religious groups in modern and postmodern societies will eventually experience decline. There is no particular reason why evangelicals should prove an exception to the rule. In contrast, observers such as Rodney Stark and his colleagues Roger Finke and, earlier, William Bainbridge have maintained that secularization stimulates innovation, opening the way for new groups — including, it would seem, evangelicals — to move in and increase their “market share.”

Good explanations, we tell our students, need to be preceded by good descriptions, so that we know what it is that we are explaining. In the case of evangelical growth, there has been and continues to be a need for good descriptive readings on who it is that evangelicals are actually adding to their churches. Only then can we proceed to attempt to explain — let alone pontificate — about things like secularization and innovation.

Circulation of the Saints: 1966-1990

One year before Kelley set out to help Mainline Protestants understand why Conservative churches were growing, I initiated a research project in Canada that has been contributing to reflections on the nature of church growth for the past three decades. The project has come to be known by the title that the *JSSR* editor at the time, Benton Johnson, assigned to the first article reporting the initial results: “The Circulation of the Saints.” This project has been based in the Canadian evangelical hotbed of Calgary, Alberta, a city of close to 1,000,000 that was described by church growth expert Peter Wagner a decade ago as “one of four cities in North America where Christian revival is likely to happen during the 1990s.”

Launched in 1971, the project has focused on examinations of the backgrounds of people added to the rolls of twenty randomly selected evangelical churches between 1966-70, 1976-80, and 1986-90. Four churches that closed by the mid-80s were replaced by new, grassroots-type congregations, three of which were charismatic. This sub-sample made it possible to explore the possibility that the growth patterns of these newer congregations might differ from the earlier, somewhat more “routinized” evangelical churches.

In 1971, 1982, and 1992 we met with church personnel and went over the church list additions, name by name. New arrivals were classified as coming into the churches through one of three pathways: (1) *reaffiliation*, where the individual was regarded by the church as a Christian upon arrival (e.g., transfers); (2) *birth*, where the new member had at least one evangelical parent or guardian prior to age ten; and (3) *proselytism*, where the person did not fit into either of the first two categories and in effect came from outside the evangelical community.

The reason for returning to this sample every ten years is that we have wanted to see if there have been any significant changes in the recruitment patterns of Conservative churches, particularly in view of the numerical problems of Mainline Protestant denominations in Canada, as well as a national increase in the proportion of Religious Nones (4% in 1971, 12% in 1991). The issue has also continued to be of interest as evangelicals use new approaches to evangelism. In recent years, for example, many evangelical churches in Canada, like some American counterparts, have drawn on methods made popular by U.S. megachurches such as Willow Creek and Saddleback, as well as

programs such as Alpha. Contemporary music and seeker friendly and sensitive emphases have been widespread, and some churches have experienced fairly significant growth. In the language of Rodney Stark and his associates, Conservatives certainly think they are increasing their market share. We have wanted to know how far beyond the evangelical community such market gains actually extend.

The Circulation of the Saints: One Last Look

With recent evangelistic efforts in mind, we decided to go back to the twenty Calgary churches one last time, to take a look at the nature of their new additions from 1966 to 2000. In late 2001 and 2002, we once again went over records with congregational personnel, obtaining data on the characteristics of people who had come from outside the evangelical community. In the case of very large congregations and those with partial records, we sampled the years, since our interest was not in a complete census but rather in being able to estimate the percentage of people who had come in through each of the three dominant pathways.

We added one important feature to our last look at the Calgary churches — “ a back door camera.” To the extent it was possible to do so, we gathered information not only on *who arrived* from 1996 through 2000, but also on *who left and where they went*. This additional component of the analysis provided us with an extended look at the circulation patterns of saints — by standing not only at the front doors of congregations but also at their back doors. One potential benefit of such data is getting a sense of the extent to which other religious families are being affected by evangelical gains and losses — their tendency to lose people to Conservatives, as well as gain them.

A quick footnote on the participating churches. Twenty participated in the first study spanning 1966-70, with four no longer in existence by 1981, resulting in sixteen congregations being involved in the 1986-70 analysis. One of the obvious criticisms that could be made of the project is that the sample was increasingly comprised of older churches and that newer, vibrant, and growing churches were excluded. In part to address this issue, four replacement churches were selected for the 1986-90 analysis — all new, all largely independent, and three charismatic in nature. By 2001, two more of the participating congregations had disbanded, and were replaced by one recently established church and a second well-established church that is widely known for its remarkable growth in recent years.

The 1986-90 and 1996-2000 analyses consequently involved twenty churches once again.

All together, twenty-six different churches participated in the overall research project over the years. It is noteworthy that seven of the original fifteen churches relocated after 1970, while an eighth took on a new regional name. Significantly, the fifteen surviving congregations have tended to be or have become regional churches, close to major arteries, drawing people from across the entire city. The same can be said for most of the five new churches.

What also has been quite remarkable is the cooperation of the churches over the years: all 26 that were approached were willing to participate in the research, the first time around and ever since. For those of you who, like us, follow sports — that works out to a winning streak of 76 consecutive “yes’s”!

What We Found

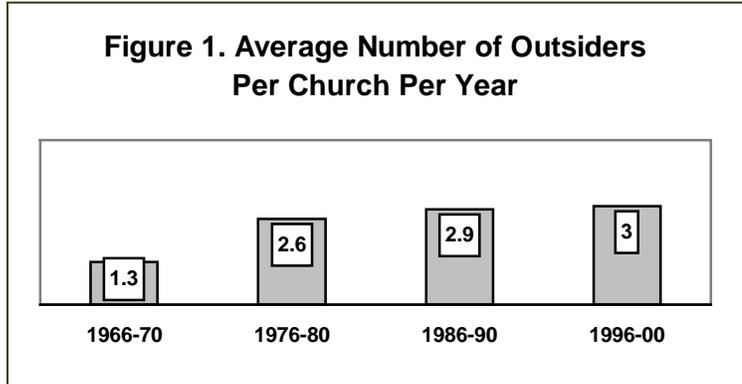
The pathway findings for 1996-2000 are very consistent with the “70-15-15” pattern of previous years in the case of the established sixteen churches. Some 71% of the new additions to these churches during the last five years of the century came from other evangelical churches, 16% were the children of evangelicals, and 13% came in from outside the evangelical community.

The four newer churches, however, report adding larger proportions of outsiders. In part this seems to be a reflection of two of the churches being founded with the explicit goals of ministering to people not involved in churches, and consciously using relationships to make contact with such individuals. In the first instance, the goal

| Period | Reaffiliation | Birth | Proselytism | Totals |
|------------------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|------------|
| All Twenty | 69% | 14 | 17 | 100 |
| Est. Sixteen | | | | |
| 1996-00 | 71 | 16 | 13 | 100 |
| 1986-90 | 72 | 13 | 15 | 100 |
| 1976-80 | 70 | 17 | 13 | 100 |
| 1966-70 | 72 | 19 | 9 | 100 |
| Grassroots Four | | | | |
| 1996-00 | 60 | 7 | 33 | 100 |
| | | <i>1986-90</i> | | <i>71</i> |

has been primarily a pastoral one, and has had the effect of bringing people together who want and need ministry. Formal membership and traditional evangelism are not stressed; people simply become members of the group. The second church also appears to play down traditional conversion, emphasizing ministry. It has had considerable success in attracting couples and younger families.

Still, even with this infusion of outsiders, the collective recruitment of outsiders was once again modest. Beyond percentages, the actual number of "outsiders" recruited *per church per year* was a scant 1.3 between 1966 and 1970, 2.6 for 1976-80, and 2.9 between



1986 and 1990. For 1996-2000, the average reached a slightly higher 3.0. What has to be sobering for these twenty churches is that this rather dismal outreach picture has persisted over time, despite the fact that almost all of the congregations have claimed to be engaged in a wide array of new and improved evangelistic efforts. Nor have the churches been particularly small: three, for example, have had active cores of about 1,000 people each.

As in previous years, the key link between outsiders and churches is relational in nature. To the extent that people are recruited from outside the evangelical community, the key bridges are friends and family members, and occasionally a children's program. Relatively few outsiders are believed to have come on their own.

Table 2. Key Links Between Outsiders and the Churches: 1996-2000

| | |
|-----------------------|-----|
| A friend | 47% |
| Spouse/fiancée | 35 |
| Another family member | 7 |
| Came on own | 7 |
| Children's programs | 2 |
| Other | 2 |

Church informants claim that no less than 50% of outsiders had "no religious backgrounds" — partly a theological issue that we will return to later. Some 3 in 10 had Mainline Protestant ties, just under 2 in 10 came from Roman Catholic settings, and only about 3 in 100 had links to Other Faiths.

Table 3. Previous Affiliation of Outsiders: 1996-2000

| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| No Religion | 50% |
| Mainline Protestant | 31 |
| <i>United</i> | 14 |
| <i>Lutheran</i> | 7 |
| <i>Anglican</i> | 3 |
| <i>Presbyterian</i> | 2 |
| <i>Not specified</i> | 5 |
| Roman Catholic | 16 |
| Other Faiths | 3 |

The view from the back door was clouded by the fact that so few congregations kept good records on

Table 4. Destination of People Who Left: 1996-2000

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Another evangelical church | 76% |
| <i>In Calgary</i> | 26 |
| Non-Baptists | 28 |
| Baptists | 3 |
| Mainline Protestants | 5 |
| Roman Catholics | 2 |
| No longer active | 7 |
| Other | 1 |
| Unknown | 9 |
| TOTAL | 100 |

what had happened to people who had left. What is immediately from the evidence that is available is that the majority of losses (some 3 in 4) are to other evangelical churches in the same city. Such switches are sometimes associated with a desire to attend elsewhere — a tendency that commonly is seen as the end result of “church shopping”; in this instance, people find a more attractive church while attending their current one. In other cases, the move to another church is associated with a residential move to another part of the city; one may continue to drive back to the previous church, but also may decide to switch churches.

- Lending support to the former scenario is the interesting finding that switching within the city is far more common among evangelicals who are part of non-Baptist groups, such as Pentecostal, Alliance, Evangelical Free, and Nazarene denominations.
- Baptists, in contrast, have not very frequently left one Baptist church in the city to attend another one.

Given these patterns of switching in and switching out that are being reported by church informants in this one Canadian city, there is value in drawing on a national aerial photograph of switching, to provide some perspective and add greater clarity to these findings. For example, when we are looking at the religious backgrounds of people involved in evangelical churches, we obviously are only talking about the background composition of those churches. We might find lots of “religious nones,” for example, but that tells us very little about the proportion of “religious nones” who have chosen to become involved — and hence the relative success groups are having at recruiting such outsiders. A corrective is to “run the table both ways” — to look at the inclination of people to switch to various groups, and then to look at which groups have ended up with which people. My *Project Canada* national surveys of Canadians carried out every five years from 1975 through 2000 permit such analyzes.

First, an examination of the prevalence of switching shows that, at least in percentage terms, it is relatively rare.

- About 5% of people raised as Mainline Protestants or no religion now identify with evangelical groups.
- Very small percentages of those from homes where their parents were Catholic or Other Faith have switched to the Conservative Protestants.
- Perhaps significantly, since 1975, evangelical groups have exhibited an improved level of retention (71% vs. 59%), while Mainline Protestants have not (78% vs. 89%).

Table 5. Switching: Mother's vs. Current Religion: 1975 and 2000

| <i>Mother's Religion</i> | | <i>Respondent's Religion</i> | | | | | Totals |
|--------------------------|------|------------------------------|--------|-------|-------|------|--------|
| | | RC | MLProt | CProt | Other | None | |
| RCs: Out Q | 2000 | 80% | 4 | 1 | 3 | 12 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 82 | 9 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 100 |
| RCs: Quebec | 2000 | 89 | <1 | <1 | 1 | 9 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 87 | <1 | <1 | 3 | 9 | 100 |
| Main Prots | 2000 | 6 | 78 | 4 | 3 | 9 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 3 | 89 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 100 |
| Con Prots | 2000 | <1 | 18 | 71 | <1 | 11 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 4 | 34 | 59 | <1 | 3 | 100 |
| Other Faiths | 2000 | 7 | 4 | <1 | 71 | 18 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 17 | 9 | <1 | 68 | 6 | 100 |
| Nones | 2000 | 11 | 11 | 5 | <1 | 74 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 11 | 11 | 5 | <1 | 74 | 100 |

Looked at from the standpoint of the composition of groups — the same vantage point of the Calgary informants — 1 in 3 Conservatives in 2000 had come from outside evangelical boundaries. One in 4 had Mainline Protestant parents, 1 in 20 came from “no religion” homes, and 1 in 33 had Roman Catholic parents.

Table 6. Switching: Current vs. Mother's Religion, 1975 and 2000

| <i>Respondent's Religion</i> | | <i>Mother's Religion</i> | | | | | Totals |
|------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| | | RC | MLProt | CProt | Other | None | |
| RCs: OQ | 2000 | 88% | 9 | <1 | <1 | 2 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 86 | 7 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 100 |
| RCs: Q | 2000 | 98 | <1 | <1 | <1 | 2 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 98 | <1 | <1 | 1 | 1 | 100 |
| Main Prots | 2000 | 4 | 90 | 3 | <1 | 3 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 5 | 87 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 100 |
| Con Prots | 2000 | 3 | 24 | 67 | <1 | 5 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 4 | 21 | 75 | <1 | <1 | 100 |
| Other Faiths | 2000 | 24 | 24 | <1 | 53 | <1 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 23 | 7 | <1 | 71 | <1 | 100 |
| Nones | 2000 | 32 | 21 | 4 | 4 | 39 | 100 |
| | 1975 | 48 | 20 | 2 | 4 | 26 | 100 |

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Can75 and Project Canada 2000 Surveys.

These national data suggest that switching is fairly uncommon. But to the extent people do switch to evangelical groups, they tend to be individuals who were raised as Mainline Protestants. Otherwise evangelicals, like other groups, are highly dependent on their children for numerical

growth.

Discussion: Canada, the United States, and a Few Asterisks

These most recent Calgary findings are consistent with findings for evangelical groups in the rest of Canada as well as the United States. Research suggests Conservative churches are frequently more successful than other religious families in holding on to (a) their children and (b) their geographically-mobile members and adherents (see, for example, Hadaway and Marler 1993; Bibby 1997 and 1999). Such findings reveal that recruitment from the ranks of people who already identify with them (their “affiliates”) is common to all denominations. To the extent Conservative Protestants exhibit greater growth than Mainliners and Catholics, it appears to be due primarily to greater success at *retention* rather than *evangelism*.

Yet, there undoubtedly is more to the story. I have previously suggested that a “70-20-10” pathway distribution is not necessarily unhealthy; if the total population of new members is sufficiently large, the “70-20-10” or “70-15-15” distribution may be just fine, perhaps quite normal. A healthy congregation, after all, will add new members through all three pathways. The important issue is not that the proselyte proportion has to exceed the levels of the reaffiliation and birth pathways. Rather, the overall pool of new additions needs to be of sufficient size to ensure that 10% or 15% of outsiders translates into numbers that reflect attempts to reach people outside the evangelical community.

In addition, as we have just seen, the national surveys suggest that some one in three Conservative Protestants are outsiders — not the 10% or 15% that the Calgary study has been uncovering. The reason is simple: many people who come from other evangelical churches originally appeared as outsiders. However, they are passed on to the next evangelical church as recycled “sinners” who, in our research, have been counted as “saints.” The national figure suggests new members in any evangelical church setting include perhaps 10% who have come *directly* from outside the evangelical community, and another 20% who have come *indirectly* via other Conservative churches. The remaining 70% are the infamous life-long, “circulating saints.”

It also is worth reminding observers that the fact Conservative Protestants have been able to retain 8% of the Canadian religious market from 1871 through now, versus suffer debilitating losses through assimilation like many other smaller groups, points to considerable vitality that is readily evident in the early years of the new century. The 2000 Project Canada national adult and youth surveys have found that evangelicals in the pews are inclined to report growing churches, that teenagers are not only attending in larger numbers than anywhere else but actually enjoying church, and that young adults are being retained in numbers that are the envy of other groups. In the Canadian religious economy, Conservative Protestants tend to be running successful businesses.

All that said, local churches in one of the country's evangelical hotbeds that are recruiting an average of only three outsiders per church per year when they claim that their primary goal is outreach still have a long way to go.

The findings are now decisive: if congregations in general want to grow, the number one source of new people is geographical mobility, followed by the retention of children — with evangelism a noble but distant third, a luxury that many resource-strapped churches can only superficially afford to pursue.

Ironically, many observers over the years have been working from the assumption that evangelicals have been growing because they have been able to attract disenchanted and uninvolved Mainliners and Catholics. For their part, evangelical leaders have frequently agreed, often because they haven't carefully catalogued the people who have been joining their churches.

All along, much of the growth has been internal, the product of evangelicals outdoing the opposition in holding on to their children and their geographically mobile members. Ironically, what Canadian evangelicals have been doing well since at least the early 1970s has begun to be replicated by Mainline Protestants and Catholics — namely, a greater emphasis on ministry to children and teenagers. There are signs that such “youth ministry” is beginning to produce results: since the early 1990s, Mainline and Roman Catholic losses have levelled off. What's more, there are signs of greater interest and involvement on the part of teens and young adults.

To the extent that Mainliners, Catholics, and Other Faith groups contribute to a budding religious renaissance in Canada, it will be largely because they learn the secret to Conservative church growth that even the evangelicals have been slow to understand — that growth does not lie primarily in recruiting outsiders. On the contrary, the key to growth lies in learning how to tap one's pool of affiliates who are slow to turn elsewhere. But there's a hitch: large numbers of those non-involved Mainliners and Catholics say they are receptive to greater involvement *if* they can find it to be worthwhile. Evangelicals have been able to respond well to their constituents. It remains to be seen if Mainliners, Catholics, and others can follow suit.

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