



## Churches Are Not Necessarily the Problem: Lessons Learned from Christmas and Easter Affiliates

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In 2002, Reginald Bibby surprisingly asserted that a renaissance of religion is, or soon will be, taking place in Canada. He pointed to ongoing evidence of widespread personal beliefs and practices relative to the sacred. Most Canadians continued to believe in a higher power, they prayed with some degree of regularity, many claimed to have experienced a supernatural entity, and many believed in life after death (among other indicators). In addition to personal religious beliefs and practices, Bibby also alleged that “organized religion [was] making something of a comeback, and that it [was] all to be expected” (2002, xii). He supported this claim by pointing to various statistics of increased or stabilized religious service attendance patterns among Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants, conservative Protestants, and those from non-Christian religious traditions. He also documented the many Canadians who consistently attended religious services for religious holidays and rites of passage each year, and stressed evidence that many of these infrequent attenders were open to greater involvement if certain ministry, organizational, and personal factors were addressed. For example, if religious groups offered more relevant preaching, livelier music, and more and improved programs (e.g., for children and youth), and if they focused on helping individuals to live their lives and to feel loved and cared for in a community, then some Canadians would consider greater involvement. Bibby claimed the pieces were in place then for at least a modest revival of religious groups in Canada, especially if religious groups adjusted the way that religion was supplied to better meet Canadians’ spiritual interests.

While I respect Bibby’s invaluable contribution to our knowledge of religion in Canada over the last several decades, I have some doubts about his renaissance thesis (see Thiessen and Dawson 2008; and Bibby 2008 for a response to these criticisms). I do not have space here to outline my concerns —except one, which is foundational for my purposes in this article. Bibby’s optimism relies heavily on the assertion that 55% of “less than monthly” attenders desire greater involvement in their religious group, when in reality only 15% actually indicated a definitive desire to do so (Bibby 2002, 220).<sup>1</sup> In fact, 40% said “perhaps” they would be interested in more involvement. In combining these responses Bibby glosses over the ambiguity surrounding the “perhaps” response. Do those who answered “perhaps” really want more involvement? And what would it take to make it happen? Even with those who did say “yes,” what was preventing them from pursuing further involvement? Had they tried to get more involved in one of the many religious options now available in Canada? These questions raise another related issue concerning the assumption that if only religious organizations adjusted their supply of religion, then we should witness the return of some infrequent attenders to active church involvement. But what about the “demand” side of the religious equation? Are there not factors beyond the control of religious organizations that influence people’s level of religious involvement and, if so, might those factors *better* explain levels of church involvement, or the lack thereof? The lack of meaningful answers to these questions led me to question whether Bibby’s projection was too optimistic.

<sup>1</sup>As of 2005, nearly 70% of Canadians attended religious services less than monthly (Bibby 2006, 192).



Drawing on data from interviews with 21 marginal religious affiliates (those who identify with a religious group and attend religious services primarily on Christmas and Easter, or for rites of passage such as weddings and funerals),<sup>2</sup> I aim in this article to test Bibby's conclusions regarding marginal affiliates and a possible religious renaissance in Canada. I will do this by addressing three questions. First, as we are about to see in the findings from this study, most marginal affiliates once attended religious services regularly (i.e., weekly). The question then is why they decided to stop attending on a regular basis. Second, why do marginal affiliates continue to attend religious services once or twice a year, particularly for religious holidays or rites of passage? Third, do marginal affiliates express any interest in being more involved in their religious group, and if so, what factors might lead to their increased involvement?

These questions should be of interest to church leaders and lay people in all streams of Christianity, but particularly in the evangelical community where there is a uniquely strong emphasis on evangelizing the "lost" (and some evangelicals would consider marginal affiliates as "lost") (see Bebbington 1989; Reimer 2003; Wuthnow 2004). Kurt Bowen's (2004) empirical analysis of religion in Canada verifies this assumption. In terms of religious belief and practice and social and civic engagement, he shows many more similarities between infrequent attenders and non-attenders, than between infrequent attenders and regular attenders. Therefore, an empirically based understanding of marginal affiliates may be useful to Canadian evangelical leaders who are trying to understand Canadian culture and minister to the 43% of Canadians who attend religious services yearly and 23% who never attend (Bibby 2006, 192). As such, upon answering the main research questions in this article, I will offer a series of implications and recommendations for religious leaders in light of the empirical information gleaned from this study.

## Methodology

To recruit participants for this project, Bibby generously agreed to send my letter of invitation, along with his own letter of endorsement, to 160 individuals in Calgary, Alberta, who had filled out his 2005 national survey.<sup>3</sup> Those who wished to participate contacted me directly via telephone or email. I then relied on a snowball sample of individuals from Bibby's sample who referred others from Calgary to participate. Those referrals, in turn, passed along others to participate in the project.

In total, 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including 21 with active affiliates and 21 with marginal affiliates (see Appendix A for the complete interview schedule).<sup>4</sup> Of the 21 marginal affiliates that I interviewed, 13 are male and 8 are female. Five are between the ages of 18 and 34, nine between 35 and 54, and seven are 55 or older. Six identify as Roman Catholic, five are part of mainline Protestant groups, four associate with a conservative Protestant tradition, and six are part of non-denominational traditions (most of which are rooted in conservative Protestantism) or do not pledge allegiance to any single stream of Christianity.

<sup>2</sup>This data comes from a larger project of 42 in-depth interviews, where I compared "active religious affiliates" (those who identify with a religious group and attend religious services nearly every week) and "marginal religious affiliates." I am grateful to the Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism for its funding of this project.

<sup>3</sup>For ethical reasons Bibby did not provide me with the contact information for participants; hence he made the initial contact.

<sup>4</sup>Since I deal only with marginal affiliates in this article, I will highlight only the marginal affiliate demographics.

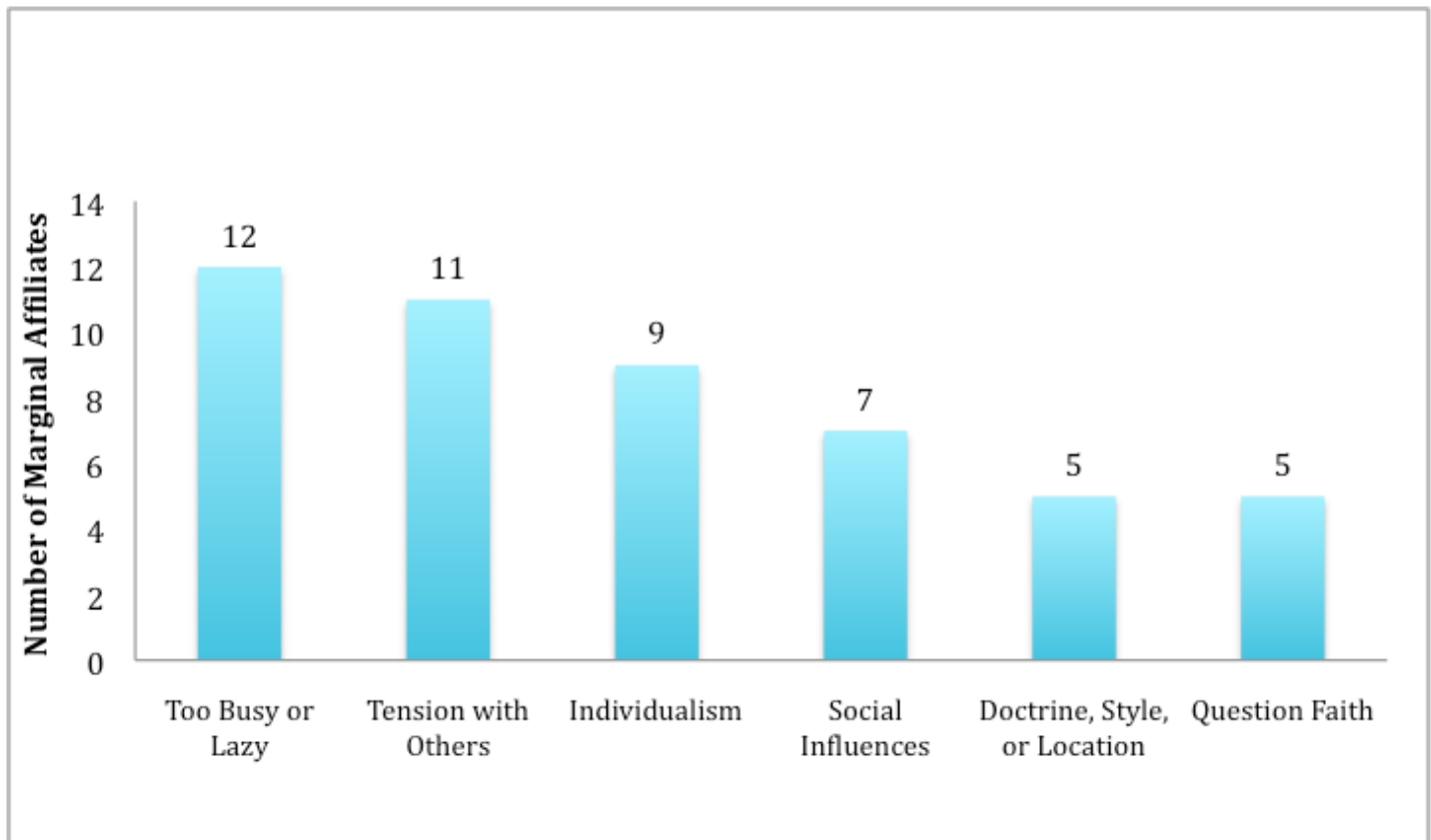


Throughout the interview process I used NVivo 8, a qualitative data software package, to sort, organize, code, and analyze the data. This process involved transcribing each interview and then identifying major overarching categories that emerged from the data. Throughout the data collection process I coded and re-coded, analyzed and re-analyzed earlier transcripts in light of discoveries from later interviews. Once all of the data was coded in NVivo, I tabulated the number of responses that corresponded with the codes that I created.

## Reasons for Decreased Involvement

One of the first things to recognize about marginal affiliates is that most had attended religious services on a weekly basis at some point in their life. Of the 21 marginal affiliates interviewed, 17 attended religious services regularly with one or both of their parents in their childhood, while 3 others attended with neighbours or friends. Only one person attended mainly for religious holidays or when he visited his grandmother. This suggests that most marginal affiliates made conscious decisions to attend less frequently but not to abandon their religious ties altogether. The question that concerns us here is why marginal affiliates who once attended regularly in their younger years decided to no longer attend on a regular basis.

**Figure 1.** Reasons why marginal affiliates decreased their levels of church attendance





They provided six main reasons for their decreased involvement (see figure 1). More than half stopped their ongoing involvement at least partly because they were too busy or, as they expressed to me, they were too lazy. One man expressed that his church involvement decreased because of university commitments: "When I was attending school, there wasn't even time, most of the time, to even make yourself a good meal. You were always studying." One woman, now in her eighties, reflects on her younger years after her husband unexpectedly died of a heart attack. She was a university student, caring for her children now as a single mother, and was working in order to pay the bills. Church attendance could not possibly fit into her schedule. Another woman spoke of losing her father at a young age and working several jobs while attending university to help her family financially, leaving little time for church involvement. Now she largely attributes her infrequent involvement to a lack of desire to drive in from the outskirts of the city to church after her family already commutes during the week for work and other commitments. Others similarly point to the hectic pace of life between work and parental responsibilities that leaves them with little time for themselves or to run errands and perform chores. Such people value their Sunday as a day of rest where they do not need to get up early, dress up, and rush out of the house (see Wuthnow 2007, 215).

Second, many experienced some form of interpersonal and intra-organizational tension. Some had negative experiences with religious leaders or fellow congregants. One man in his late forties from a conservative Protestant tradition shared this experience: "There was, I guess, a lot of emotional turmoil in my life, and I sort of reached out to the church for support and got nothing back. In fact, I got chastised several times by the pastor for my lack of strength in the face of those things and was completely taken aback by it, shocked by it, very hurt by it . . . I was coming to terms with a lack of outreach by my church, and it was just, like, 'Okay. Hold it. Enough is enough.' " Relatedly, some did not believe that their church possessed a warm or safe atmosphere, an observation raised by several single women who felt alienated in churches that are dominated by male leadership and that normalizes people who are married and have families. One woman recalls a church that she tried to attend regularly, after not attending church for quite some time: "I started going every Sunday for a while, and I found out that it was no place for a single woman. The priest was afraid to look at you or talk to you. The families were afraid to look at me or talk to me. I just didn't fit in, so I just felt so isolated that I stopped going." I asked her whether people in the church said or did specific things that made her feel this way:

There was no talking. They just didn't even see me. People didn't see me. They saw husband, wife, kids. Old ladies. Old men. Things like that. Teenagers. That sort of thing. But they didn't see a woman in her thirties . . . that was just a little too dangerous. They didn't quite know what to do with me. Was I going to steal their husband? Was I going to do inappropriate things with the priest? What's she all about here. So they just kind of didn't even really look at me or talk to me. So I was kind of on my own. And I would see other people talking to one another and stuff, but they wouldn't talk to me. I would smile and be kind of friendly. I didn't know what to do with them, either, I guess.

Just under half say that some form of individualism led them away from active church involvement. Some suggest that they attended less when their parents gave them the option to attend during their teen years, never to return. Similarly, some participants who are parents themselves stopped attending when their own children



complained about going to church. These observations corroborate the hypothesis advanced by British scholar David Voas (2010) that parents today are less committed to ensuring that their children conform to their values and beliefs. To support this assertion, Voas points to changing values among parents that de-emphasize strict obedience and loyalty to church, in turn emphasizing independence and tolerance. Giving choice to children about whether or not to be involved in the religion of the parents reflects a relatively recent (i.e., within the last fifty years) and large shift in consciousness, one that favours diversity, pluralism, and relativism at the expense of exclusive and absolute values and beliefs. As in Britain, these values are particularly acute in the highly liberalized democracy of Canada (see, e.g., Adams 2006; Bibby 1987, 1993, 2006).

Other signs of individualism are evident as many indicate that they do not want to submit individual behaviour to the rules and authority of the church, choosing instead to develop their spirituality beyond the church walls. As one woman highlights, “People are finding the truth, and they’re finding that it’s not found in a church. It can be under a rock. It’s in the rock. It’s within ourselves.” This finding validates much of what scholars have said about religion and spirituality for some time, that personal experience and “common” beliefs and practices<sup>5</sup> increasingly exist to the exclusion of organized religion in a social context (see, e.g., Barna 2005; Bruce 2002; Davie 1994; Heelas et al. 2005; Luckmann 1967; Roof 1999; Wuthnow 1998).

Fourth, people reduced their church involvement because those around them either stopped attending or discouraged active participation in a church. In some cases good friends moved away, leaving marginal affiliates with no close friends in their congregation and the eventual decision to leave their church. Others abandoned church involvement because friends or family members disapproved, and some left because they had more close friends who did not attend church than did and could experience belonging and community with them. This finding indicates that religious rituals are not necessarily enough to keep some people actively involved in a congregation if there is not a sufficiently strong personal connection with others in the group. This observation adds to the growing sociological evidence that people’s social ties contribute to their level of religious involvement (see Iannaccone 1994; Nemeth and Luidens 2003; Olson 1989, 1993; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Stark and Finke 2000; Wuthnow 2004).

Fifth, some expressed concerns over church location, style and relevancy of church services, and doctrine. When it comes to location, a few people stopped attending because their church moved from one rental property to another in a different part of the city, or their church closed because of dwindling attendance or insufficient numbers of ministers, or because they could not drive and no churches were in the neighbourhood.

In terms of the style and relevancy of religious services, a couple of people left because the music was either too traditional or too modern, and others were displeased that sermons were not relevant to everyday experiences. As one man expresses:

How relevant is this to my life today? You know, if you were some Joe Blow who’s trying to get a job or working in Calgary and, you know, that kind of stuff, how relevant is this? How relevant is the doctrine and how relevant is, you know, the virgin birth and all these kind . . . How relevant is this to my life, you

<sup>5</sup>Following Grace Davie, I use the term “common” instead of “private” because “the phrase ‘privatized religion’ is misleading to the extent that it overlooks the origins of our beliefs and the context in which they are held. Belief is not self-generated, nor does it exist in a vacuum; it has both form and content—albeit unorthodox form and content—which are shaped as much by the surrounding culture as by the individual believer” (Davie 1994, 76).



know? I mean, if I'm living a really hectic life, and I'm balancing career and children, a family . . . you know, all this kind of stuff, the church . . . their challenge is to become relevant to their day-to-day life . . . instead of depending on dogma, like a lot of churches have been, you know: "You believe in me because that's the way it is." You know? They've got to become more relevant and bring you in, you know.

Doctrinal issues were problematic for some, as people questioned the legitimacy of televangelists and their theology between donating money to televangelist efforts and receiving personal blessings from God in return, the exclusion of women from leadership, exclusive claims to salvation, and strong opposition to homosexuality and abortion. As one woman put it, and summarizing what many other expressed, "I think that some religions . . . you're either in the box or you're out." Several other marginal affiliates echoed this woman's thoughts, and directed their comments repeatedly toward Roman Catholics and evangelicals. They noted sexual or financial scandals, wars (e.g., Roman Catholic involvement in the Crusades in the Middle Ages or the current public perception that the "war on terrorism" is rooted in American evangelical opposition to Islam), and corrupt leadership as problematic correlates to these religious groups. These findings resonate strongly with recent empirical discoveries by Kinnaman and Lyons in their book *unChristian* (2007). Through survey and interview data in the United States, they document six leading criticisms by non-Christians towards those who identify as Christian and attend religious services regularly. Non-Christians perceive Christians, particularly evangelicals, to be hypocritical, anti-homosexual, sheltered within a Christian subculture, too political, judgmental, and motivated to make friends with non-Christians only because they wish to convert them. Christians are known not for what they stand for, but for what they stand against. They are perceived as closed-minded, arrogant, and highly exclusive relative to the surrounding culture. Such perceptions are based in large part on people's first-hand experiences with Christians, like the marginal affiliates that I interviewed. These perceptions also reflect the experiences of well-known Canadian journalist and author Pierre Berton (1965), who criticized churches in Canada for the above reasons.

Finally, marginal affiliates left their churches because of personal experiences that caused them to question their faith in God, and consequently their perceived need for the church. A few individuals had lost a family member to accidents or diseases. One Roman Catholic man recounts how the death of his brother in a car accident at the age of 24 was a catalyst for declining involvement at church:

When you get a phone call so early in the morning . . . saying that something happened . . . you do go to church after that. But then, after a while, you start questioning it: "Why did this happen?" and "Was there a reason for it all?" And, you know, there's no answers because . . . you don't normally get answers, right? . . . indirectly, somewhere along the line, you do get an answer, but you don't know that it was . . . I kind of tapered off.

Others, like the following Anglican, speak of the natural inclination for young adults to question everything in life, including religion, which leads to a gradual change in one's worldview:

I think that at that age, when you're young like that in the world, you tend to rebel a bit against it . . . And you question religious doctrine. You question why this is like that, you know? And I probably went



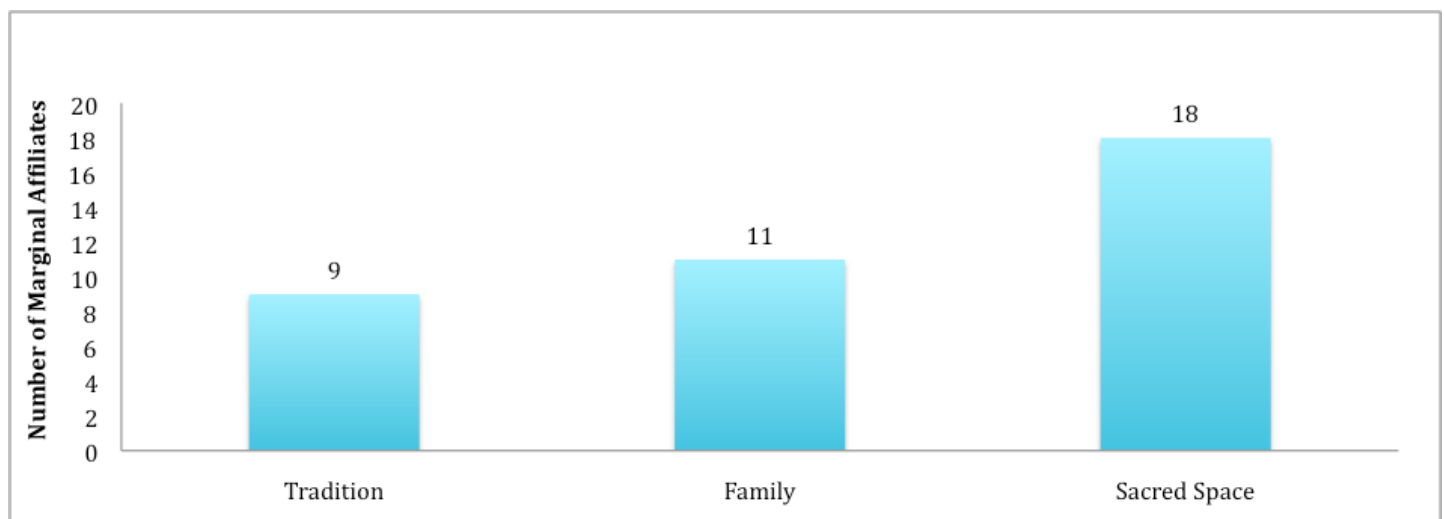
through a lot of questioning . . . just like normal kids do when they're that age. You know, you scratch your head. If you think a little bit, you think, this doesn't seem right. You know, this is stupid. And all in the name of bloody religion. You know? So I went through a lot of that. Yes, yes. Yeah, there was a lot of questioning . . . I didn't find myself going to church on a regular habit.

In short, while there may be merit to the argument that religious organizations will thrive if they change the ways that they offer religion to their constituents, the data from this study suggest that there are many factors beyond churches' control that must also be considered. Four of the six reasons provided for declining involvement in one's congregation have to do with factors over which religious groups have very little control (too busy or lazy, individualism, social influences, and questioning one's faith). As for the two other explanations that are directly connected to the supply of religion (tension with others; and doctrine, style, or location), they appear to be more important for keeping existing participants in a religious group rather than attracting new affiliates (or converting marginal affiliates to active affiliates).

## Why Attend?

So, why do marginal affiliates attend religious services when they do? They provided me with twenty motivations and reasons for why they attend religious services. These range from maintaining membership status for reduced funeral and burial rates, to the fear of going to hell, to avoiding the commercialism of Christmas, to reinforcing their morals and their belief in God, to feeling good about themselves.<sup>6</sup> Without diminishing any of these or the other responses given, I will concentrate on the three explanations offered most frequently: tradition, family, and to connect with a higher power in a sacred place (see figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Leading reasons why marginal affiliates attend church



<sup>6</sup>See Lamoureux Scholes (2003), Walliss (2002), and Zuckerman (2008) for additional research findings on motivations for those who attend religious services for religious holidays and rites of passage. Each study points to non-religious reasons as the main predictors for selective church attendance.



Starting with tradition, many marginal affiliates observe religious holidays or rites of passage because they cannot imagine doing things any other way. This is not unlike other traditions that individuals and groups hold on to such as cooking the Thanksgiving turkey the same way as our parents or attaching the toilet paper roll face down. This is just the way that things have always been done, and people cannot even conceptualize what a different way would look like. As one man discussed, he and his family attend church and then go for Chinese food every Christmas Eve, and the Chinese food is as important as the church service to this family tradition. The question that this raises is why tradition has such a strong hold on people's actions. Why is it so difficult for people to abandon tradition, particularly for those who attend religious services occasionally? Space does not permit me to answer in detail here, except to note the strong relationship between tradition and personal and group identity. Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) is useful here because she talks of a "chain of memory" that binds people together over time and space in a fragmented modern world. Ongoing religious identification and attendance at services for religious holidays and rites of passages is a way of maintaining a sense of self as part of a larger whole, a way of connecting individuals to others from the past, in the present, and toward the future—all stabilizing elements for individuals who knowingly or unknowingly are fearful of the growing sense of disconnection they have with others and even themselves (see Berger 1967; Giddens 1991).

Family also plays a role in people's decision to attend for religious holidays and rites of passage. Several people spoke of family pressures to get married in a church. When I asked one Catholic woman in her early thirties if it was important to her that she was married in a church, she said "No, it wasn't," but her mother-in-law would have been extremely disappointed if her husband had not been married in a church. Put differently, and as Sherkat (1997) conjectured and several others in my sample noted, family pressures are a source of motivation for people to observe rites of passage in religious settings.<sup>7</sup> This is especially true when parents pay for the wedding.

Another facet of family life is also important. Some indicated that attending services on religious holidays is a time to spend with family, particularly in a day and age with both parents working, children participating in a number of extracurricular activities, and extended families separated because of work. Needless to say, people value the reward of good healthy familial ties, which Giddens (1991) emphasizes are important "trust systems" and sources of stability and identity in an uncertain world. Thus for some individuals, they will avoid offending a family member (e.g., in-laws or grandparents) by marrying in a church, for example.

A third reason that people attend is that they connect to a higher power in a sacred place, which one Anglican gentleman in his fifties surmises is "a basic human need to want to believe in something bigger and higher than yourself." For some people their connection to God is enhanced because they are surrounded by others who share the same basic beliefs about God, for others this connection to God helps them to better centre themselves, and for some they feel that their rites of passage are more legitimate because they are performed in front of God in a sacred space. While almost everyone that I interviewed agrees that connecting to a higher power can happen outside the walls of a church, one woman especially highlights the special connection to God in a religious and sacred space: "I feel a closer connection . . . when I'm actually in the church . . . or a chapel or whatever . . . It might sound funny, but it just feels more holy, a little bit more . . . stronger . . . a closer connection.

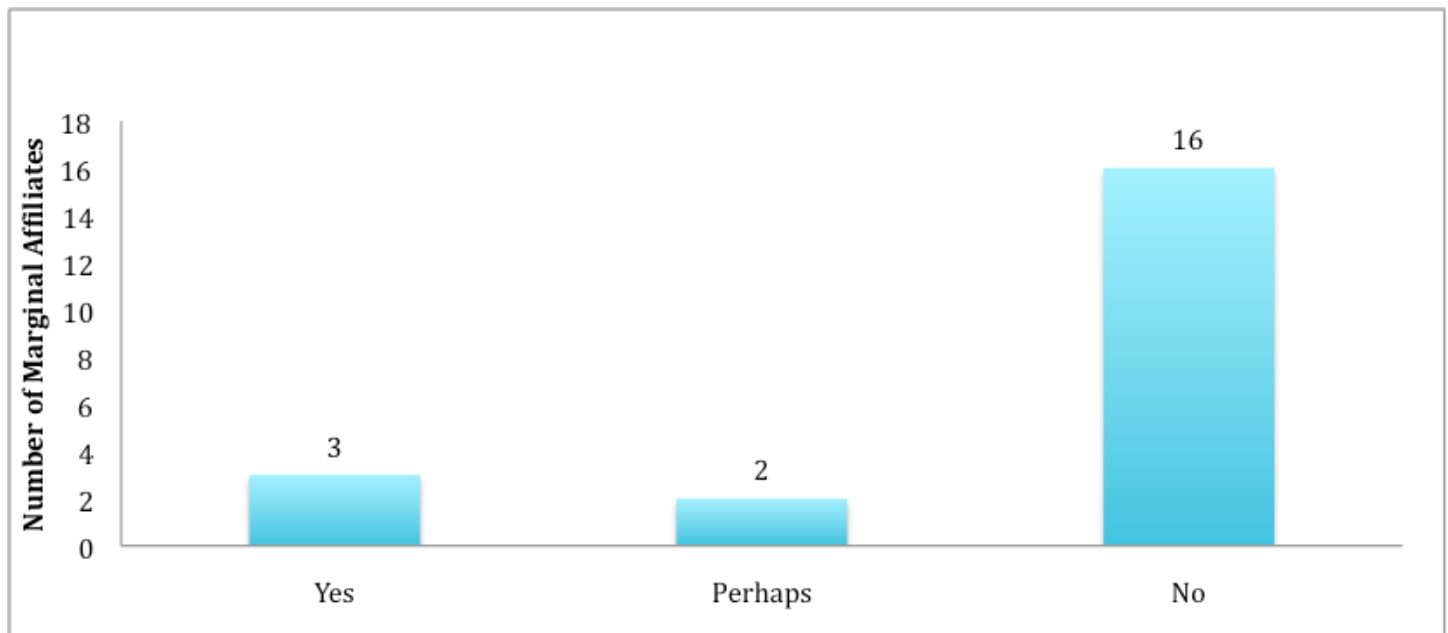
<sup>7</sup>Emile Durkheim (1915, 190) asserted that people are religious because of a felt moral obligation to others in the group, including one's ancestors. Zuckerman (2008, 9) provides evidence that people baptize their children to please family members, not God.



You know, it's the house of God . . . it's what it resembles. It's a symbol . . . it just feels like I'm in it and not outside of it."

## Desire more involvement?

**Figure 3.** "Do you desire more involvement in your religious group?"



A major part of Bibby's optimism for religion in Canada rests on the projection that marginal affiliates desire more involvement in their religious group (see Bibby 2002, 2004, 2006; Bibby, Russell, and Rolheiser 2009) and that changes to the supply of religion will help facilitate future growth. While I have never been convinced of this argument or his interpretation of his own data, I wanted to test his theory further with qualitative data. I asked marginal affiliates if they desire greater involvement, and if so, what would make greater involvement worthwhile (see figure 3). Only three individuals have a clear desire for greater involvement, while two people indicate that there is a chance that they would become more involved in the future. The rest unmistakably say that they do not desire greater involvement and that they are content with their selective consumption of religion.

In terms of what would make greater involvement worthwhile, we can logically return to the things that pushed people away from their church in the first place. If people are less busy or less individualistic, have more social influences that encourage greater participation, and have fewer experiences that cause them to question matters of faith, then maybe we would witness greater involvement. If we see shifts in the supply of religion, in areas of interpersonal and intra-organizational tension or in the location, style, or doctrines of individual congregations, then maybe people would respond with more participation. Many marginal affiliates offered responses in these directions. Still, though they think that addressing these areas might lead people in general to pursue greater



involvement, most admitted that changes in such areas would not lead to increased participation on their own part.

To be fair to Bibby and to those I interviewed, there are a few who do express a potential interest for more involvement. Among the three individuals who desire more involvement, and the two who “perhaps” long for greater participation, six factors were mentioned as catalysts for possible increased attendance: (1) if friends and family members were more supportive (mentioned by three respondents); (2) if they were less busy (discussed by two respondents); (3) if they were at a different stage of life (either kids are born or kids move out) (highlighted by two respondents); (4) if a church was nearby (stated by one respondent); (5) if a weekday service were offered (raised by one respondent); and (6) if the style of service was different (referenced by two respondent). Admittedly it is foolish to offer broad sweeping conclusions based on so few individuals, but these observations do warrant some commentary.

What stands out is that the leading explanations have to do with demand-side variables, things over which the churches have absolutely no control. Regarding social ties as restrictive to religious choice, one woman reveals that her husband is unsympathetic and borderline antagonistic to her desire for greater involvement and that this is the greatest thing that keeps her from pursuing more involvement. Another individual, a man in his early fifties from a conservative Protestant congregation, talks about social restrictions:

My social group . . . doesn't really allow for it . . . for me to continue on. I'd almost have to abandon family. So you have to have a really strong belief, be it them or anybody else, any other religion . . . if I wanted to be a Mormon, I believe I'd have to cut ties with my family. I'd have to change my whole lifestyle, my whole life, who I am, what I am, where I come from. Yeah, nothing against ['XYZ Church'] or anybody else. It wouldn't matter who it was. I think that the group that . . . or the life that I have, I'd have to abandon it in order to partake . . . in the other thing.

As for busyness, individuals in this study readily accept the old adage that we make time for the things that are important for us, and therefore greater religious involvement must not be as important to them as other things. When I asked if they would attend more if they had fewer commitments elsewhere, were less involved in other social groups, participated in fewer leisure activities, or volunteered less, they clearly stated no. Still, they do acknowledge that it is difficult to make religion a more important facet of their life given the strains of work, parenting, household chores and errands, and the desire for some “down” time.

A different stage of life was a reason offered by several people. One woman, whose husband tragically died some time ago, and who is raising two children on her own, thinks when her children move out and she is on her own, she will ponder the meaning of life more regularly. She already expresses a desire for a more intense spiritual connection with herself, with God, and with others, and expects to pursue these quests when she has more time in life. Wrestling with the meaning of life and one's existence is sometimes associated with baby boomers that live in a transitional phase of life where their kids move away, they ponder their own existence in the world, and their parents age (see, e.g., Bibby 2006; Roof 1999).



Another individual indicates that she will pursue greater involvement when she has children:

I guess I just want them to be brought up the way that I was brought up, and, for sure, I want them to believe. I guess I feel kind of like when you're still learning and forming an opinion on everything, like, it's good to go. But it doesn't really fit in my life, now, but I would. If I had kids, I would go.

Despite some signs that having children will lead to greater involvement (Bibby 2002, 221–23), Roof's (1999, 117–8, 233) research indicates that even if people do return, they tend not to stick around for long and their orthodoxy wanes with time. David Eagle's (2010) examination of data from the Canadian General Social Survey and Statistics Canada's National Survey of Giving and Volunteering and Participating also suggests that, at least since the 1950s, religious "nones" do not eventually turn into religious "somethings."

As for supply-side factors, some marginal affiliates identify location as an important factor for greater involvement in their church, particularly for elderly individuals who cannot or prefer not to drive, or for people who are tired of driving long distances to work each week, unwilling to drive long distances again to church. However, except for one person, none of these individuals suggest that living closer to a church will increase their participation. For the one who does, I respectfully appreciate that she is unable to drive, even though, from this sample, her situation does not reflect the realities of most.

For churches that are interested in repairing a supply-demand disconnect, this is an example of where they can actually help by coordinating rides to and from church, something that active affiliates in my sample would be more than willing to help out with if it meant that a marginal affiliate could turn into an active affiliate. Part of the problem, however, is that marginal affiliates do not raise their needs with their congregation, and it is difficult for the congregation to intuitively know of such needs when marginal affiliates appear only once or twice a year. In this circumstance, it is not that churches are aware of needs and just not meeting those; they are not even aware of them, and for this, the responsibility for disconnect between marginal affiliates and churches rests primarily on the shoulders of marginal affiliates.

This same woman also comments that if churches held services on a week night, when she is already in the grind of work and out of the house, then she could still enjoy some relaxing time at home on Sundays or complete house chores. Others pointed to this possibility too, but again they conceded that if they really wanted to be more involved in a church, they could find a church with mid-week services. For this woman, she admits that she has not looked at all for a church with alternate service times, once more raising uncertainties about the intensity of marginal affiliates' desire for more involvement and the realistic possibility that they will seek greater participation.

Finally, two individuals mentioned the style of worship service. One Roman Catholic woman comments, perhaps surprisingly to some, that the music style at her church is too modern. She says that it feels "like a Billy Graham crusade, and I'm kind of sceptical about, you know, how much of that is really true . . . showing your belief in God more openly. I'm kind of a quiet person, and so being open about all that . . . I hesitate." She prefers the older, traditional ways of performing weekly rituals. Again, others commented on the style of music (that it is



too traditional), but not to the point that they would pursue more involvement if churches all changed their music style.

Another woman, from the United Church, desires for the sermons to be more intellectually stimulating, which in part means that they should be less about Jesus:

I think if they stopped talking about Jesus so much. I mean, the cross of Jesus is still cool, but he's been dead for two thousand years, and I have nothing. Like, what would Jesus say about a mortgage, *really*? I don't know. And I just get frustrated with this idea that Jesus was somehow unique or had all these revelations that no one's ever thought of before and that you really need Jesus in order to have, like, an orderly society, which is incredibly racist.

As presented so far, there is very little evidence to suggest that marginal affiliates long to participate more in their religious group, and as I hypothesized, any signs that they might pursue greater involvement point more toward demand rather than supply-side explanations. However, there is more information that helps to sharpen our interpretation of the few who show any possible desire for more involvement. I asked these select few if they have attempted to deal with their personal circumstances or find a congregation that supplies religion in the ways that they desire. For those with social ties that bind their religious activity, the risks are simply too great to push the matter with family and friends. As mentioned earlier, busyness is frankly interpreted as one of those things that people could adjust if they thought that more religious involvement was worthwhile—and it is not. And for those who are waiting until a different stage of life, there is little that religious groups can do to change their situation.

An examination of supplier factors yields similar results. None of the marginal affiliates who indicated a definite or possible desire for greater involvement have sought to find a congregation that meets their individualized criteria, and they admit that they have not put forth a strong effort to try to make it work at their existing church. This is shocking (presuming, that is, that the desire is as intense as we have been led to believe) since the things that these people are looking for can be found in other congregations in Calgary (and the same applies to many others in urban centres too). There are churches that offer mid-week services, lively music, dynamic and relevant preaching to everyday concerns of finances, family and work life, and relationships. There are some churches that are theologically strict, while others are rather liberal on contested issues of homosexuality, abortion, or salvation. This could suggest, as I hypothesized, that the intensity of respondents' desire for greater involvement is not that great and thus that we should not expect to see marginal affiliates more involved in the future. Yet, it might also suggest that people feel restricted by the social and religious capital that they already possess. In this, the Roman Catholic does not consider a Protestant congregation that might meet each of their desires because the cultural shift is too great, or the conservative Protestant will not consider a mainline Protestant congregation. Of the three respondents who cite supply-side factors as barriers for more involvement, one does not have a desire to look for a different congregation, one is open to any denomination (Roman Catholic or Protestant), and one limits herself to Roman Catholic parishes, but, until I raised the possibility in the interview, had not considered attending a different congregation. For this last participant, the Catholic theology of attending a parish in one's community has limited her from even considering a church in a separate district.



When we evaluate the possibility of a religious renaissance, it seems clear that the desire for more involvement is just not there for most marginal affiliates, and if there is a hint of desire, either people have not tried very hard to satisfy that desire, or factors beyond what the churches can control prevent people from attending more often. This is not to dismiss that some marginal affiliates may actually become active affiliates over time, nor does this disregard anecdotal stories that people have about family, friends, and neighbours who have become active affiliates over time. However, on the whole, it is presumptuous and misguided, based on past and current data, to assume that marginal affiliates are likely to become active affiliates. This way of thinking is especially wrong-headed if premised on the idea that changes to the supply of religion should almost inevitably entail a “fit” between religious suppliers and religious consumers.

## Implications for Churches

In what follows, I offer six practical suggestions for religious leaders as to how they can use the information presented in this article. On one hand I realize that I have a difficult task to offer optimism because my main conclusion is that there is very little that churches can do to draw in affiliates who are not currently involved regularly; demand-side explanations are more appropriate for understanding religious behaviour, in my estimation. Still, the role of interpersonal and intra-organizational tension is a significant area where religious groups do have control, and it is towards this topic that I direct my comments in this section, drawing in large part on the work of Kinnaman and Lyons (2007). I want to be clear that there is no universal or quick-fix solution (even in the recommendations that follow), and remedies must be contextualized and interpreted relative to the local congregational settings across the country. But if there is a chance for religious organizations to survive and thrive, I think the following suggestions give churches the best chance.

Recently I was asked what the greatest challenge is for churches in Canada today. I responded by saying that it is the lack of demand for the things that religious groups offer. Many Canadians are content with their fragmented consumption of religion. As Bibby rightly suggested in 1987 (pp. 134–5), it is difficult to convince a person to eat five meals a day when they are content with three. As I think the evidence in this article suggests, there are many more powerful factors outside religious groups’ control that explain why marginal affiliates are not more involved and why they are not likely to become more involved in the future. Therefore, the first thing that I would say to religious groups is that it is not necessarily your fault that more people are not involved in your congregation; do not blame yourselves for faulty supply, when really demand is the critical problem.

These things said, I do not dismiss the fact that religious groups need to offer a great religious product. I completely agree with Bibby (2004) that lively music, relevant preaching, strategic program offerings, and an overall spirit of excellence need to pervade religious groups if they are to have much hope in Canada. Research by Miller (1997) and Heelas et al. (2005) both document the effectiveness of such initiatives, especially in evangelical settings. However, I am equally quick to say that for the most part, offering religion that is “done well” will mainly enable religious groups to keep their own, and possibly attract the occasional outsider, but that we should not expect mass conversion (especially for marginal affiliates to become active affiliates) in response. I think the quantitative and qualitative evidence is clear on this point.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>I do not deny that the Holy Spirit can and does work in ways that transcend social scientific observation and analysis, but as a sociologist looking at empirical data, it is difficult to argue for a renaissance of religion in light of the empirical information at hand.



The second noticeable challenge that religious groups face are the negative public perceptions held by many towards Christians. Recalling the negative perceptions that many marginal affiliates have of Roman Catholics and Evangelicals, religious groups should carefully heed William I. Thomas's (1966, 301) idea that "situations that are defined as real are real in their consequences." The public has a justifiable negative perception of Christians because of past and present scandals by a few, the strong and offensive presence of the Christian Right in the United States (that some fear characterizes Evangelicals in Canada), and the general belief that Christians are judgmental and hypocritical, often based on personal experience. Whether or not Christians and individual congregations reflect these qualities (and some do) are irrelevant so long as the general public believes these things to be true. The challenge for religious groups is to change people's perceptions and their realities (see Stackhouse 2002). In this regard, Christian groups are probably at least decades removed (to be conservative) from shedding this negative perception in Canadian society, and a lesson in public relations might serve religious groups well as they move forward. To their credit, some individuals and their congregations are doing everything they can to distance themselves from the negative perceptions about the church (e.g., speaking out against religious groups that center their identity and message on condemning homosexuals, or chastising televangelists who deceive people in order to make a great profit), but the negative social perception is so deep that they have much work to do.

I agree with Kinnaman and Lyons (2007, 37–8), who offer four explanations for why perceptions matter. First, social perceptions influence how people respond to a group, which the paragraph above clearly demonstrates. Second, social perceptions give a group a healthy dose of reality so that their self-perceptions are not misguided. From informal conversations with individuals in Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and conservative Protestant settings, there are some who have little idea how outsiders perceive them. Hopefully this article heightens their sense of the gravity of the situation. Third, social perceptions can change; thus it is worthwhile to try to change another's perception. Countless sociological studies on people's perceptions about other racial or ethnic groups are a perfect example of how people's perceptions change with exposure to those who are different. In the same way, if religious individuals and groups are intentional about increasing their positive exposure to other individuals and to entire communities, incorporating some of the practical suggestions offered here, then there is no reason to believe that people's perceptions of Christianity could not change with time. Fourth, what people think about Christianity reflects personal stories, once more reflecting how people's personal experiences with church members are instrumental to their perception of the Christian community. The question becomes, what can religious groups do to change the social perception towards Christians?

One of the criticisms levelled at church members is that they are too inward-looking, and that they condemn and ostracize outsiders. The third statement that I would make to religious leaders then is to look outward in your ministry and to locate these efforts at the centre of your church initiatives. Dave Gibbons, in his book *The Monkey and the Fish* (2009), builds on the work of sociologists who speak of a "third culture." This is the culture of an individual who is conversant in two different ways of life and understands how to bridge the gap between those worlds, forming a third hybrid culture in the process. The challenge for religious groups is to become conversant in their own understanding of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God *and* the larger Canadian culture that they minister in, and then develop a bridge between the two. How can religious groups direct ministry efforts to outsiders? Perhaps it is by offering free oil changes to single mothers each month. Maybe there are



practical ways of helping immigrants adjust to life in Canada. Maybe religious groups can offer activities for kids and families in the neighbourhoods, particularly to help with “latchkey” children who spend hours each day on their own while both of their parents work. Perhaps religious groups can shovel snow and do yard work for seniors. Possible ideas are limitless, but if religious groups want to shed the negative social perceptions in society toward their group, there is no denying that they need to invest more of their time engaging outsiders, *beyond* the walls of the church. Their assistance to those outside their congregation needs to be real, personal, and repeated to have any significant impact on people’s lives. Again, Bibby is correct to stress that attention to the supply of religion is important to keep insiders around. A group cannot effectively minister to outsiders if it does not properly care for insiders. But the evidence in this article indicates that unless religious groups are more intentional about ministering to outsiders, they have little chance of thriving in the twenty-first century and beyond.

A related point that Kinnaman and Lyons (2007) make is that Christians are criticized for befriending non-believers only with the hope of converting them. If Christians realize that others are not interested in being converted, they tend to abandon them in hopes of finding other “fresh blood.” When focusing ministry efforts to outsiders, religious groups must pay careful attention to loving people without strings attached, for if they do not, they risk further (and justified) ammunition for those who are critical of Christians.

A fourth comment to religious groups concerns the centrality of relationships and social ties. The fact that breakdowns in interpersonal relationships contributed to many marginal affiliates leaving behind ongoing involvement in their church suggests that religious groups need to do a better job in how they relate to people. This applies to religious leaders and lay people alike. Religious leaders need to be conscious of how they interact with lay members, being approachable on issues that matter to congregants and mindful of the ways they deal with conflict in their church. The *way* that people approach issues can be as important as the content of the conflict itself. Religious leaders also need to try to instil a culture of healthy and caring interactions between and among leaders and members. I am sure that many religious leaders already seek to pass on these values, but individuals in the congregation still offend others and are poor representatives of the Christian message. Religious groups cannot be held responsible for such individuals. But as we know, it takes only one bad experience with one individual to colour a person’s perception of all churches or religious organizations. Therefore, religious leaders and lay people must be extra careful to treat people well in all circumstances, and to encourage those they influence to do the same.

In addition to interpersonal relationships with insiders, religious groups should encourage members to build relationships with outsiders. We know from Stark and Bainbridge’s (1985) work, for example, that religious converts typically arise from social networks that people have with current members of a religious group. Not only could relationships with outsiders help some groups possibly grow through converts, as Evangelicals and sectarian groups are better known for, but individuals will have the opportunity to change others’ perceptions of Christianity, one person at a time. As individuals model love, compassion, grace, and mercy, others’ negative perceptions of Christians as exclusive, judgmental, or hypocritical may gradually give way to new perceptions. Walking alongside others, in their high and low moments, demonstrates a commitment to long-term relationships, which we know is a desire for many Canadians (see Bibby 2002, 2006; Bibby, Russell, and Rolheiser 2009).



Fifth, Gibbons (2009) indicates that social justice is a logical way to engage outsiders, particularly young people who are interested in grassroots movements for social change. It is hard to argue against the good things that religious groups can and do contribute to society (e.g., volunteering and charitable giving). The trouble is that religious groups are more often known for the bad things that they do, making the task of emphasizing social justice initiatives that much more important. What are religious groups doing to make a difference in the world and how are these things *central* to their identity and message to the outside world? In my sample, several active affiliates converted to the United Church of Canada, in part, because of the appeal to their social justice initiatives toward the marginalized in society. Conversely, several Roman Catholic and evangelical marginal affiliates abandoned regular involvement in response to perceiving their groups' boundaries as strict and hostile toward outsiders. Religious groups, if they want to keep and attract people, need to downplay their hostile approach to society and emphasize the bridges that can be built with Canadians.<sup>9</sup> This can be achieved through religious organizations that, as a group, seek to make a positive impact in the world, as well as through individuals in their relationships with outsiders. How are religious groups helping the less fortunate in society? What are religious groups doing for the oppressed? Are religious groups taking action on the environment? Would people in neighbouring communities notice if churches left their vicinity? These are the questions that religious groups should ask if they want to be attentive to the social needs of those around, and if they earnestly desire to change social perceptions as a strategy to lessening the gap between "insiders" and "outsiders."

Finally, ongoing attention needs to be given to religious socialization. We know that what children learn in the home plays a significant role in whether or not the child will adhere to those beliefs and practices later in life. Although churches cannot control how or if parents reinforce religious teachings in the home or even if parents bring their children to church, groups can and should equip parents with the tools to do so. Leaders may wish to remind parents of their religious responsibilities to their children, which does not mean pawning their children off to the church to be socialized there, but seeking an integrated approach between the church's efforts and their own initiatives in the home. Perhaps this reinforcement comes through sermons, maybe it is in specific courses designed to equip parents to effectively raise their children with religious values in contemporary culture, or maybe it is through family events that bring parents and children together for fun or specific religious purposes. Regardless, a concerted effort between parents and churches is required, particularly since fewer teens claim to believe in God, more teens say that they have "no religion," and increasing percentages of teens never attend religious services (Bibby, Russell, and Rolheiser 2009).

Religious groups should also give ongoing attention to children and teens. One of the reasons that Evangelicals are more successful in retaining their own is because they offer children and youth programs that are relevant, experiential, and meaningful. Providing space for children and teens to explore their faith, to ask questions, or to challenge religious beliefs in a safe, non-judging atmosphere is paramount; otherwise teens will leave and explore their questions in non-religious settings. The centrality of relationships to teens' lives should also

<sup>9</sup>I realize the complexity of this statement, for religious leaders. By its very nature, religion is based on distinctive beliefs and practices, believed by many to come from an unchangeable god. I am not suggesting that religious groups should change their beliefs per se, since boundaries are essential to group identity and commitment, but maybe some distinctive beliefs do not need to be the focal point of that group's message. The religious group should ask: what is core to our message? Are anti-homosexual beliefs a fundamental belief to the group? What about opposition to women in leadership? Must groups build a platform based on distinctions between "us" and "them"? True, all social groups have boundaries and rules for who belongs and who does not. Yet, I think the evidence is clear that emphasizing an exclusive approach is not working well for religious groups in Canada, and thus I think groups need to reevaluate what their core message is and how they will communicate that message to Canadians.



intersect well with church objectives. Fostering a space for teens to establish meaningful relationships, with leaders as mentors as well as with friends and peers, or to bring friends into religious fellowship should be encouraged. Understandably, religious supply is critical when it comes to teens. Lively music, relevant teaching and mentoring, and honest and personable exchanges will go a long way to keep or attract teenagers.

## Conclusion

To summarize, among those who primarily attend religious services for religious holidays and rites of passage, most attended church regularly in the past. However, at different stages in their lives they made conscious decisions to decrease their religious involvement, which, with the exception of tension with others in their religious group, can largely be attributed to a range of factors that are beyond religious organizations' control. In terms of why marginal affiliates continue to attend for religious holidays and rites of passage, reasons of tradition, family, and sacred space were offered. Each of these explanations is important because of how they shape individuals' sense of self in a fragmented and chaotic world. As for whether marginal affiliates might become more involved in their religious group in the future, the data from this study suggest that we should not hold our breath. Still, I appreciate Bibby's (2002, 2004) hopefulness for a possible religious resurgence among marginal affiliates. He is quite correct to suggest that there is a possible connection that can still be made between religious groups and their marginal affiliates, and the suggestions offered in this article hopefully aid religious leaders in thinking critically about how they minister in contemporary Canadian society. 🌱



## Appendix A: Interview Schedule

### Part 1 – Background

#### (1) Description of Project & Demographic Information

- a. How old are you?
- b. What is your highest level of completed education?
- c. What type of occupation are you currently involved in?
- d. Are you married? If so, how long have you been married?
- e. Do you have any children? If so, how many, and how old are they?

#### (2) Tell me a bit about your upbringing:

- a. Where did you grow up? Did you have any siblings? What was your parents' occupation while you were growing up?
- b. Growing up, was your family affiliated with any religious group? If so, which group? If not, skip to question (f)?
- c. How often did your family attend religious services?
- d. Would you describe your family as religious? Explain.
- e. Growing up, would you say that religion was important to your family and was it important to you personally?
- f. Thinking back to when you moved out of your family's place, what effect, if any, did that have on your religious journey? Did your interest in religion increase, decrease, or stay the same? Did your level of involvement in religious organizations increase, decrease, or remain the same?

### Part 2 – Current Religious Attitudes and Behaviours

#### (2) Current religious affiliation, beliefs, practices, and level of importance attributed to each:

- a. At present, are you affiliated with any religious group?
- b. How often do you attend religious services?
- c. Do you participate in any other activities associated with your religious group? If so, which activities, and how often are you involved?
- d. How did you decide to affiliate with this group? (If they are having trouble thinking of reasons—were there certain beliefs or practices that were appealing? Did you know others already involved with this group? Preacher? Music? Programs?)
- e. Could you indicate for me how important your religious affiliation is relative to other aspects of your life (e.g., family, job, or social activities)? Explain.
- f. Have you ever seriously considered affiliating or getting involved with any other congregation, denomination, or religious group? Why or why not?
- g. Overall, what, if any, beliefs and practices shape your religious life? Are there certain beliefs and practices that are more important to you than others?
- h. In general, would you say that religion is important to you? If so, what does this statement mean for you and in what ways is religion important for you? If not, why not? Explain.



## Part 3 – Rational Choice Theory

### (4) Religious Costs and Rewards:

- a. People attend religious services for different reasons. Why do you think that people in general attend religious services?
- b. Why do you attend religious services?
- c. Do you think you gain something specific from attending religious services?
- d. Do you think you gain anything in particular from your religious beliefs and practices outside of attendance at religious services? (If nothing, skip to section 4).
- e. Keeping in mind some of these benefits, what are some of the sacrifices that you have made along the way? In other words, what are the “costs” associated with obtaining these benefits?
- f. Do you believe in the afterlife? If so, do you desire life after death? What do you think is required to obtain life after death?
- g. How confident are you in the religious beliefs and practices that you adopt?

### (5) Dependable and Responsive

- a. Do you have a sense that you can depend on God and/or another spiritual entity? If so, how? Can you provide an example? If not, why?
- b. Do you believe that God and/or another spiritual entity is concerned about, and acts on behalf of humans? Explain.
- c. To what extent do you feel that you belong to or identify with a particular congregation? If they do not feel connected to a congregation, ask: do you remember a time when you did feel like you belonged to or identified with a particular congregation? If the answer is still ‘no,’ skip to section 6.
- d. With this congregation in mind, do you have a sense that you can depend on others in the group (either among leadership or lay people), that others in the group could be relied upon in times of need? If so, how? Can you provide an example? If not, why?
- e. Do you believe that your congregation is concerned about, and acts in the interests of its members? Explain.
- f. How confident are you in the religious beliefs and practices that you adopt?

### (6) Role of others in shaping one’s religious life:

- a. Would you say that religion is primarily an individual journey, or one that ought to be shared with others? If shared with others, what sort of activities do you have in mind? How are these beliefs reflected in your religious journey?
- b. Of your closest friends, how many of them are from your local congregation? How many of them share the same religion as you?
- c. How influential do you think religious groups should be in shaping people’s religious beliefs and practices? How influential is your religious group in shaping your religious beliefs and practices?



## Part 4 – Secularization and Greater Involvement

### (7) Secularization and Greater Involvement:

- a. There is some research that suggests that attendance at religious services is on the decline. Presuming for a moment that this is true, what do you think explains this?

*Marginal Affiliates:* How would you explain your own level of participation?

- b. Some Canadians have suggested that they draw selective beliefs and practices from their religious tradition, even if they do not attend frequently. They indicate that they do not plan on changing religious traditions, but they will turn to religious groups for important religious holidays and rites of passages. Why do you think that this is the case? How well does this describe yourself or others close to you?
- c. It is well known that attendance at religious services is higher on religious holidays and for rites of passages. What do you think explains this?

*Marginal Affiliates:* How well does this explain your attendance patterns? What draws you to religious services on such occasions? What meaning and significance do you find in these activities?

- d. In a related manner, some of those that we have just discussed indicate a desire for greater involvement in their religious group. Why do you think that this is the case? How, if at all, does this desire for greater involvement apply to you?
- e. If participants are interested in greater involvement, what factors do you think would make greater participation more worthwhile? If participants are not interested in greater involvement, why not (and then skip to question (g))?
- f. If religious groups received the responses that you have just provided and they adjusted their supply of religion to provide some of the things that you mention, how likely would you be to increase your level of participation?
- g. There are other theories that suggest that many religious groups already offer such things as good preaching, music, and programs, and have relaxed their doctrinal positions to accommodate to the wider culture, yet people are still not pursuing greater involvement in their religious group. Why do you think that this is the case?
- h. For yourself (if they desire greater involvement), are there any efforts that you have made to find a suitable congregation to participate in, one that meets some of your criteria? If so, describe one of those instances.



## Part 5 – Social and Civic Engagement

### (8) Religious Involvement in the context of other Social Involvements:

- a. Overall, do you think that religion is a positive or a negative social force in society? Explain.
- b. Do you believe that people need religion in order to be moral or ethical beings?
- c. Are there other organizations, social activities, or volunteer initiatives that you dedicate your time to? If so, what does this commitment entail? If they have trouble thinking of any, suggest things like sports activities, book clubs, political activities, social protests or movements, and regular meetings with friends and family.
- d. How important are these involvements for you? Is there any correlation between these involvements and your religious involvements? Put another way, does your religious involvement influence the type or amount of time given to other activities, or would you be more involved in church activities if you were not involved in any of the above activities?



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