



# **An Introduction to the Life of the Eastern Synod**

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*Research for this presentation borrows heavily from a variety of sources, most notably, the collected works of sociologist Reginald Bibby/University of Lethbridge, Alta., a 1996 work entitled Religion in Canada: Its Development and Contemporary Situation by Roger O'Toole / University of Toronto, data collected by the Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance and the ELCIC Millennium Study of Leadership Needs by Rev. Dr. Kenneth Kuhn.*

### **THE CANADIAN CONTEXT**

Canada is a vast and physically diverse country but most of its small population of 30 million lies within 100 miles of that "longest undefended border in the world" which separates it from the approximately 280 million inhabitants of the United States. A constitutional monarchy confederated in 1867 under the religiously-inspired title of "dominion", this nation originates in the political fusion of "two founding races," French and English, though it now embraces a far broader mosaic of indigenous and immigrant groups.

Canadians in general continue to retain a deep-seated ambivalence toward Americans and "the American way of life". While hard-pressed to define what it is that makes them distinctly Canadian, most of this country's citizens would be quick to identify Canadians as being "different" from Americans. This wariness persists despite the numerous political, economic, legal and cultural changes which, in recent decades, have notably intensified Canadians' resemblance to their U.S. counterparts.

Like the United States, Canada is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world. South Ontario has been called the most religiously diverse region of any country in the world. A major contributor to this trend is the large number of immigrants to Canada who have settled in the Toronto, Ontario area.

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHICS IN CANADA

### DATA FROM THE 2001 CANADIAN CENSUS:

Canada's ten largest various faith groups:

Group	Membership	% of total population
Roman Catholic	12.8 million	43.2%
No religion	4.8 million	16.2%
United Church	2.8 million	9.6%
Anglican	2.0 million	6.9%
Other Christian, Apostolic, Born-again, Evangelical	780 thousand	2.6%
Baptist	729 thousand	2.5%
Lutheran	607 thousand	2.0%
Muslim	580 thousand	2.0%
Other Protestant	549 thousand	1.9%
Presbyterian	410 thousand	1.4%

Trends in membership of various religions (listed in alphabetic order):

Religion	1981 census data	1991 census data	2001 census data
Atheists, Agnostics , Humanists, no religion, etc.	7.4	12.3%	16.2%
Buddhism	0.2%	0.6%	1.0%
Catholic + Protestants	90.0%	83.3%	72%
Catholic	47.3%	45.2%	43.2%
Protestant	41.2%	34.9%	29.2%
Eastern Orthodox	1.5%	1.4%	1.6%
Other Christian 8		1.3%	2.6%
Hinduism	0.3%	0.6%	1.0%
Islam	0.4%	0.9%	2.0%
Judaism	1.2%	1.2%	1.1%
Sikhism	0.3%	0.5%	0.9%

Canada remains a predominately Roman Catholic nation. Islam now has many more followers than does Judaism. Buddhism will probably overtake Judaism by the time of the next census.

## The Lutheran Experience:

- The Lutheran church has historically gained membership through natural increase and immigration. Currently birth rates are relatively low, and immigration has shifted from Northern Europe, which has a large number of Lutheran Christians, to Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, that have fewer persons of Lutheran background. Thus traditional sources of denominational growth are not as strong as they once were.
- Statistics Canada indicates that the number of census Lutherans has been declining as a proportion of the population: from 3.3 per cent in 1971, to 2.4 per cent in 1991, to 2 per cent in 2001. In 2001, 606,590 persons identified themselves as Lutheran. Fewer than 300,00, however, are actually included on the membership roles of the two major Lutheran church bodies in Canada.
- Compare this, if you will to the 13,000,000 persons who claim a Roman Catholic religious heritage, 579,000 Muslim, 329,000 Jewish, 300,000 Buddhist, 300,000 Hindu, 280,000 Sikh, and you will have a sense of where the Lutheran church stands in relation to other religious bodies in Canada.
- The baptized membership of the ELCIC has declined from 210,390 in 1986 to 169,400 in 2006, a decline of almost 20 per cent.
- Loss of membership and congregations has been most acute in the province of Saskatchewan. Rural and smaller congregations are experiencing increased difficulties finding pastoral leadership.
- The organization of new congregations in the ELCIC has dropped from six per year between 1986-1992, to only about one per year 1993-2007.

Some general observations about the census data:

Activity: An increasing percentage of persons identify themselves with a particular faith group, but are not active members. Statistics Canada's General Social Survey reports that "attendance at religious services has fallen dramatically across the country over the past 15 years."

- In 1986, 28% of respondents said that they attended religious services weekly.
- In 2001, this declined to 20%.
- Non-governmental surveys of both the U.S. and Canada have been conducted on a county-wide basis. The number of people entering church were counted on a given Sunday. They reveal that the true percentage of attendees is about half of the stated value. People tend to lie on matters such as church attendance.
- In 1986, only 26% of adults reported that they had not attended a religious service in the previous 12 months. In 2001, this number increased to 43%.

- Several denominations suffered significant declines in popularity, expressed as a percentage of the total population. In order of percentage change, they are:

Denomination	2001 Membership	Change since 1991
Presbyterian	409,830	-36%
Brethren in Christ	20,590	-22%
Salvation Army	87,790	-22%
Pentecostal	369,475	-15%
Other Protestants	549,205	-13%
Christian Reformed Church	76,670	-10%
United Church	2,839,125	-8%
Jehovah's witnesses	154,750	-8%
Mennonite	191,465	-8%
Anglican	2,035,500	-7%

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Dr. Reginald Bibby, a leading sociologist of religion in Canada, has noted an eight-point jump from thirty to thirty-eight per cent between 2000 and 2003 in Canadians who attend church at least once per month. Weekly attendance rose from twenty-one to twenty-six per cent in the same period. Mr. Bibby's findings are mirrored in major surveys by Allan Gregg, Gallup and others and are supported by Statistics Canada figures.

Quebec's Catholics are now showing up at a rate of thirty-four per cent for monthly-or-more attendance, compared with twenty-nine per cent at the beginning of the decade. Outside Quebec, Catholic attendance has gone from forty-two per cent to fifty-seven per cent. Protestant monthly-or-better attendance is now at forty-six per cent, higher than at any time since Bibby began surveying Canadians in 1975. (The Catholic Register)

At the November 2003 consultation, which Bishop Johnson participated in, year's Reg Bibby shared the bittersweet conclusion that we've bottomed out! It seems that mainline church membership is holding, and in fact there are small signs of growth. Although this may not be overwhelmingly good news, it's a start! Furthermore, Bibby points out that among those are inactive, denominational loyalty is still extremely high. In other words, denominations still matter.

Bibby suggests that we haven't realized this advantage because we have been labouring under three myths, namely that people are switching denominations, that people are dropping out, and that people are not receptive. He points out that people who are at the fringes of our denominations want more out of churches, not less. They want religion to address personal, social and spiritual needs. When asked the question, "would you consider the possibility of being more involved in a religious group if you found it to be worthwhile for yourself or your family?", a large majority of people said yes.

Bibby also reported that people who identify themselves as “no religion” are a fairly fluid group. One in three of them will become “something” in five years, and two in three will become “something” in ten years. Again, this is another group we can’t write off, but instead need to reach out to!

So, what is the contemporary situation of Canadian religion? On the surface, it is much as it has been for the last century. Although growing numbers disclaim religious affiliation, Christianity still claims the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of Canadians and the major Christian churches still dominate the religious scene. Christian sectarianism also thrives though it has been supplemented recently by more exotic minority faiths.

Although secularization has not entailed its destruction or abandonment, Christianity has come adrift from its former points of anchorage and has been transformed from a social institution into a cultural resource in a manner typical of advanced industrial societies.

Canadians now choose to define the nature and content of their religiosity by drawing from that "reservoir of rites, practices and beliefs" with which they are most familiar without responding to any institutional prerequisites or their consequences.

Widely disregarded as a source of authoritative meaning systems, Canadian religion must now cater increasingly to the specific and highly selective needs of a capricious citizenry. Thus, its condition may best be characterized as precarious and unpredictable. It is a challenging time, to be sure.

## **LUTHERANS IN CANADA**

The first Lutheran church in Canada was built in 1755 by German immigrants who accompanied Lord Cornwallis to Halifax. It was called St. George’s church, but it is currently known as the little Dutch church, part of the Anglican church now. The oldest still existing congregation in Canada is Zion Lutheran, in Lunenburg - established in 1772.

The number of Lutherans in Canada increased after the American Revolution when many Americans of German background emigrated to Canada. Not long after, waves of German immigration poured into Ontario. By 1861 there were enough congregations to organize a Canada Synod. A little later, as the West was opened, large numbers of German, Scandinavian and Icelandic Lutherans were among the founders of the country.

## **THE ELCIC**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) came into being January 1, 1986, the result of a merger between The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC) and the Canada Section of the Lutheran Church in America. The ELCC (formerly the Canada District of The American Lutheran Church) had been formed as an autonomous church in Canada in 1967 and was joined by the Eastern Conference of the former Canada District in 1968.

The 1986 merger was originally meant to be a three-way merger, but the Missouri Synod, which has now become an autonomous Canadian church known as the Lutheran Church-Canada, or LC-C, broke off from the merger talks, citing, in the language of the divorce courts, “irreconcilable differences”.

ELCIC membership comprises approximately 180,000 baptized members gathered in 630 congregations in 8 provinces and 2 territories of Canada (there are no ELCIC congregations in Newfoundland or Prince Edward Island or in Nunavut).

The ELCIC currently has approximately 635 active clergy serving as follows: 480 serve as parish pastors and the rest serve in specialized ministries (e.g. military, health care and campus chaplaincies, professors, bishops, administrators, counsellors). The ELCIC relates to two seminaries (in Saskatoon and Waterloo), one college and two high schools.

The ELCIC is a member church of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), World Council of Churches, Canadian Council of Churches, and the Lutheran Council in Canada (which is the forum for bilateral cooperation with Lutheran Church-Canada, the LC-C). The ELCIC works cooperatively with ecumenical coalitions in Canada in support of advocacy and justice work.

Related to the ELCIC are congregations that retain a close association with the European Lutheran churches from which their members came, including the churches of Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Finland; their pastors are also pastors of the ELCIC.

Mission and development with overseas churches is done cooperatively with the LWF and with the LC-C through Canadian Lutheran World Relief (CLWR). In addition, the ELCIC supports twelve missionary units and volunteer in mission units serving in partner churches in nine countries.

The ELCIC relates to the Evangelical Lutheran Women, Inc. and to ELCIC Group Services, Inc., which manages the church’s pension and benefits plan.

The largest gathering of the ELCIC is the Canadian Lutheran Youth Gathering, involving up to 1,600 youth and adults meeting biennially for inspiration, study, worship, and celebration. The ELCIC meets in biennial conventions in odd-numbered years, with each parish represented by one delegate and entitled to a second (lay) delegate if its baptized membership is over 800. There are 200 clergy delegates (elected by conferences) and approximately 300 lay delegates. The purpose of conventions is for business and fellowship. There is a National Church Council of 20 members, including four officers, three of whom serve as volunteers. The national bishop is chief pastor and chief executive officer. All officers serve renewable terms of four years. Synod bishops serve as advisory members to National Church Council.

The five regional synods have responsibility for implementing the mission of the church within their territories, and for shepherding congregations and pastors. Each synod has four elected officers (with only the bishop serving full-time in office) and an elected synod council. Synods meet in biennial conventions in the year between national conventions. The synods are further divided into conferences for the purpose of fellowship, study, and implementing mission.

## THE EASTERN SYNOD

The Eastern Synod, where I serve, stretches from SSM Ontario to Halifax, Nova Scotia, roughly 1/3 of the land mass of Canada. It is made up of 200 congregations divided into 8 conferences. It has approximately 75,000 members. Most of our congregations worship in the English language, but we do have congregations who primarily worship in one of eleven additional languages.

The flow of benevolence funds is from congregations to synods to national church. There are requested benevolence commitments, but there are no binding assessments of commitments. Perhaps not surprisingly, we find that we are struggling financially at the synod and national levels of our church and within some of our congregations.

In 2004, ninety Eastern Synod congregations out of 208 gave fewer dollars than they did in 1986, even before inflation is factored in. The 2004 benevolence offering total of \$1,680,940 is equivalent to about \$1,051,000 in 1986 dollars, compared to the \$1,572,000 actually received in that merger year. This means that we are operating the Synod (including our contributions to Waterloo Lutheran Seminary and the ELCIC national office) on 2/3 of the purchasing power available to us eighteen years ago.

In 1987 congregations contributed 8.9% of their total receipts to regular benevolence. In 2006 that figure was 5.7%, a drop of almost one-third. In 2006 had congregations given at the same rate they did in 1987, we would have had \$828,000 more to spend on a shared synodical ministry programme.

In recent years this has led to a situation where:

- campus ministry funding has been reduced to the point where there are no longer any full-time campus pastors serving on our behalf.
- vacant faculty positions at our seminary have had to go un-filled.
- annual support offerings to the ELCIC have been drastically reduced for several years
- capital maintenance and improvements to our three synodically owned camps have been reduced or deferred indefinitely
- we have had to pass on several opportunities to establish new congregational mission starts in a variety of urban settings
- Staffing levels at the synodical office have been reduced and now we are relying more and more upon part-time and adjunct staff.

But there is also much good news. In recent years the Eastern synod has begun to reclaim its missional identity. Important work has been done to reframe our leadership development programme. New recruitment and continuing education programmes have been developed and in some instances adopted as churchwide programmes within the ELCIC. But most exciting is a renewed vision for our mission which has developed and grown to the point of a clearer articulation at our 2006 Synod Assembly. And I'd like to close this time with a walk through that vision statement.

# **A Renewed Vision for Mission in the Eastern Synod 2006-2008**

## **A Church in Mission for Others**

The gospel calls the church to be in mission for others, not for ourselves. Recognizing this, we of the Eastern Synod intend to design and implement mission plans based on the gospel's call to meet the needs of others. We will encourage congregations to engage in a similar programme of mission planning and evaluation. We will likewise encourage our members to more fully claim their daily vocations as being avenues for ministry within the wider community.

## **A Plan for Strengthening Our Mission**

In order to strengthen our mission focus and direct it to serving others the Eastern Synod will:

- Encourage each congregation to have a congregational mission plan.
- Create appropriate vehicles for church-wide reporting and review of congregational mission initiatives.
- Promote the use of such programmes as Natural Church Development, Transformational Ministry, etc.
- Identify congregations to examine and test new mission models and initiatives.
- Include training for mission plan development in the First Call programme.

In addition we will routinely evaluate all Synod Council work, the work of the synod committees, working groups and committees in light of the following six mission priorities:

1. We will strive to be a synod that is passionate about our relationship with God, in Christ.

As a synod, we will encourage one another to be diligent in studying and living out God's word, sharing our faith with others and seeking new ways and opportunities to worship and pray with one another. We will encourage and equip our congregations to bring renewed energy and passion to their services of worship and proclamation of the Word.

Some of the things we might do to help this happen:

- Engage in bible study at Synod Council meetings and at Synod Assemblies.
- Renew the emphasis on faith sharing programmes offered by the Learning and Witness Congregational Life Working Groups.
- Encourage congregational use of programmes such as Natural Church Development.
- Assist conferences in planning large festive worship experiences.
- Identify and promote devotional and study materials for church councils.
- Use The Eastern Synod Lutheran as a vehicle for individuals to share faith stories.
- Encourage participation in the synod's spirituality conferences for lay and clergy and in Luther Hostel.
- Work with the Worship Congregational Life Working Group, Worship Conference Resource Persons, the National Program Committee for Worship and Waterloo Lutheran Seminary to develop resources and training to equip our congregations to renew their corporate worship.
- Include worship and spirituality training as part of the First Call programme.

2. We will strive to be a synod that nurtures leaders who encourage and equip other leaders.

Challenges are evident in all expressions of the church's life. To be effective, our synod's ministries need to identify, call, mentor, and equip the leadership we require to meet these challenges. Moreover, we ought to take seriously the Priesthood of all Believers and the role of the laity in our church's life. To this end, our synod needs to take greater responsibility for providing training that is appropriate to our tasks.

Some of the things we might do to help this happen:

- Include leadership development training in continuing education programmes such as First Call, synod sponsored conferences, and Luther Hostel.
- Review recruitment and candidacy materials to ensure we are developing leaders with the gifts we need.
- Invite Waterloo Lutheran Seminary to reflect on this as part of their curriculum review.
- Learn from the training models developed by ELW Inc..
- Consider establishing a system of mandatory continuing education requirements and credits.
- Provide assistance to help ineffective rostered leaders improve their skill levels, and if necessary, to explore other vocational opportunities.

3. We will strive to be a synod that works in partnership with others.

As a mission focused synod, we will work to strengthen our existing partnerships and develop new ones within and beyond our synod. This includes partnerships with congregations, conferences, other synods, the ELCIC, as well as ecumenical, interfaith and community organizations.

Some of the things we might do to help this happen:

- Encourage Synod Council members to become more involved in the life of the conferences.
- Develop interpretive materials to assist in sharing synodical ministry stories.
- Consider developing a new logo for the Eastern Synod.
- Identify and promote models for congregations to use in intentional dialogues with other faiths.
- Consider appointing an Anglican representative to the Synod Council.

4. We will strive to be a synod that reflects the diversity of our society.

We recognize that our synod's congregational membership does not always reflect the demographics of the communities in which we live. We commit ourselves to be proactive in reaching out to our communities, inviting all people to be involved in the worship, work and service life of our congregations and the Synod.

Some of the things we might do to help this happen:

- Develop a congregational profiling tool with a study guide to help congregations look at their community demographics and adjust their mission plan accordingly.

- Become more intentional in considering diversity in our synodical appointment processes.
- Develop an intentional approach for congregations to use in seeking out lapsed members.

5. We will strive to be a synod that is generous.

As a generous synod, we will faithfully share our resources of time, talent and treasure in partnership with the ELCIC, our Companion Synod the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Guyana and other partner churches. We will strive to allocate resources in ways that provide evidence of our commitment to being in mission for others. We will encourage our congregations and general membership to become more generous in sharing their resources both with and beyond the synod.

Some of the things we might do to help this happen:

- Strengthen our relationship with our Companion Synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Guyana.
- Encourage generous support of the Global Hunger and Development Appeal.
- Consider implementation of a church-wide apportionment system (congregation, synod, national church) that is based on sharing a percentage of annual congregational income.
- Publicize stories of existing examples of exceptional generosity within the synod.
- Identify and promote stewardship education materials for children and youth.
- Include stewardship education as part of the First Call programme and other continuing education events.

6. We will strive to be a synod that is engaged by challenging questions.

As a synod we will promote a spirit of reflective and respectful deliberation on significant questions of life and faith. We will regularly and critically evaluate the programmes and structures of the synod to assess their relevance to those questions. Although the engagement of these questions might change us, we will faithfully explore them and modify our mission in light of them.

Some of the things we might do to help this happen:

- Encourage clergy clusters and congregations to have discussions around questions that are challenging to life and faith.
- Make the discussion of difficult questions a focus at continuing education events sponsored by the synod.
- Include the discussion of such questions as a regular part of the Synod Council agenda.
- Encourage the role of seminary faculty in assisting the synod in exploring these questions.
- Include training for engaging such discussions as a part of the First Call programme.