

Flourishing Congregations in Canada: Preliminary Observations

Joel Thiessen, Ambrose University
Arch Wong, Ambrose University
Bill McAlpine, Ambrose University
Keith Walker, University of Saskatchewan



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Introduction

Our aim in this session is to take a 39,000 foot altitude approach to explore how leaders in Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant congregations conceptualize what a flourishing congregation looks like (or ought to look like) in a Canadian context. In pursuing this task we make two assumptions.

First, we are presenting leader perceptions of flourishing congregations. At this point in the study our research team cannot state with confidence what traits are actually and commonly evident in congregations that are flourishing. So far our research has been delimited to the window afforded by about 100 academics, denominational and congregation leaders. We can only state: “this is what a select set of leaders have reported to us about their congregations and experiences.” We will have more to say about this as we engage in other research methods (e.g., ethnographic, survey) and with a range of other participants (e.g., congregants, first hand observers). For example, if one of the leaders we interviewed identified diversity as a desirous trait of a flourishing congregation and claimed that their congregation is diverse, a sociologist might ask: How do congregants perceive and experience this or other kinds of diversity? Do members of different subgroups sit beside one another on Sunday mornings, or interact with one another in various ministry settings? What attitudes and behaviours does one find among congregants regarding other subgroups in the congregation? Later we talk about phase two and three in this project, which will help us to test the suggested perceptions and insights gleaned from phase one. Once more, this is merely a preliminary preview of some of our initial findings.

Second, the traits and characteristics associated with flourishing congregations that we will discuss depict what Max Weber (1949), one of the founders of sociology, called “ideal types.” An ideal type is a literary construct or expression of a particular concept; it may not actually

exist in reality, but serves as an analytical description, explanation, measure, and representation of a concept resembling what might be found in concrete cases. Ideal types are useful points of when one begins to explore concepts to possibly refine, clarify, and develop more precise understandings and measurements. Importantly, these ideal types are not intended to be normative or evaluative. In other words, we do not claim that a leader's definition or description of "a" of flourishing congregation is better or worse than definition or description of "b." We have simply developed "ideal types" or features of flourishing congregations based on what we heard leaders telling us. Of course, it is highly unlikely that there are any congregations that embody each and all traits associated with any ideal type (as interviewees clearly stated to us).

Early and Selective Findings

The following sections capture how interviewees conceptualized and operationalized what a "flourishing congregation" looked like to them. Given the preliminary nature of our analysis we hold these categorizations and descriptions rather loosely. Admittedly it is difficult to conclude whether or not these characteristics are precursors or conditions for a congregation to flourish. Perhaps some are the results manifest in congregations that flourish or perhaps the types and indicators should be seen as representing some combination of traits and states. Moreover, without probing further in phase two and three of this study (see "Looking Forward" section), it is hard to assess whether these are lived realities, aspirational goals, beliefs and values or a blend of the three. If they are lived realities or aspirational goals these can be empirically measured. If they are intrinsic values that are held dear by our participants, these become a bit more difficult to measure. Last, we are cognizant that the ways that congregation-based and denominational leaders describe flourishing congregations may reveal specific theological, sociological, and

practical assumptions and commitments. Part of our task in this project will be to clearly identify the varied and interrelated ways that these emerge.

Not Numbers ... Or is it?

In many of our focus groups and interviews, one of the initial responses to the question “what comes to mind when you hear the phrase flourishing congregation” pertained to the size of a congregation. Some were quick to separate or decouple the notion of flourishing from the relative size of a congregation. A United Church of Canada minister in Halifax stated:

I think we have to decouple flourishing from numbers. I'm not averse to numbers but I'm concerned that in our society what gets counted is the only thing that seems to matter. And there may be places that are flourishing where it's not possible for there to be numerical growth. The realities of the Maritimes is rural depopulation and that's true in other places as well. And it's possible for there to be flourishing congregations where there simply isn't the base for there to be a rapid growth in numbers. I think that the body continues to replicate and add to itself, but if we're only counting numbers we may be missing something.

Here we see an example of how, particularly for congregations in rural contexts and in the Maritimes, environmental conditions, such as declining population, contribute to a congregation's realities and how this, in turn, shapes how they think about what constitutes flourishing.

Others suggested that rather than measuring flourishing by numbers, one ought to look at transformed lives and communities. One church leader, reflective of others, signaled, “I would say it's not numeric. It's about people attending to what matters most, people being engaged, people being hoping, people owning their own faith, people celebrating that, people working to make the world a better place.” A denominational leader in the Presbyterian Church of Canada revealed:

I'm not convinced that [numbers are] as key anymore ... It's more fundamental than that. And so the transformational model of churches, incarnational churches they sometimes call them, I think becomes the more key approach I think for a vital church for now and for the future. When people in the wider community see Christians changing because they believe

that God has influenced their lives or if they see these Christians going out and giving up their time and their money and effort to make a change in the community, then both those roots are providing kind of an evidence for the existence of God.

Conversely, other leaders are adamant that a congregation that is not growing numerically – measured by things such as church attendance, membership or adherence, baptisms, conversions, or financial donations – is not flourishing. A leader of a conservative Protestant congregation with over 600 weekly attenders reflected, “In many ways I would say we believe that qualitative growth ultimately must show itself in quantitative growth.” A Catholic priest in Alberta said:

I think the first thing you would think of in a flourishing congregation would be the number, the attendees, the flourishing, we always think quantity ... as much as we would like to detach those material things from what we would consider a flourishing church, community or congregation, when a group is flourishing, there will be manifestations and often it is in numbers, often it is in the sense of service, what they offer to the community. So you can't help but connect those things that when a group is flourishing, you would need a bigger space, you would have more services to offer, the following would be larger and growing, there would be more programs that are truly helpful in empowering these people into Christian faith. So yeah, that would go hand in hand.

Of course, this narrative that associates flourishing with numbers is easier for some. Most Catholic leaders that we interviewed highlighted the following sentiment: “Oftentimes Catholics think in terms of let's set up a parish and people will come to us because it happens. We have no problems with our numbers.” A Catholic priest in British Columbia said, “We're not too worried about growth really. I mean it's going to grow, but we're not focused a lot.” We heard countless narratives of Catholic parishes with well over 1000+ weekly attenders where their greatest concern was not having enough seats for all those who want to attend mass.¹ The reasons? Catholic schools which are believed to link students and their families to regular mass attendance, and immigration; themes that we will explore in greater detail later.

¹ In reality, Catholics have the stronghold of megachurches in Canada (2000+ weekly attenders), or at the very least large churches (1000+), which warrants extensive research moving forward (see Bibby and Reid 2016).

The phenomenon of flourishing churches planting churches is a noticeable refrain among some representing congregations who value quantitative metrics. This was most common among newer church plants and with some ethnic congregations who we encountered in our first phase of research. For instance, some leaders shared that two churches were birthed out of their congregation in the past five years, and their goal was to birth another two in the next five years. A pastor of a multiethnic congregation in Ontario stated that his congregation “basically just exists to multiply – to just keep giving birth. Even as they plant, they already have a strategy to plant within a year or two again. And it’s that whole concept. It’s not a church that is worried about, ‘okay how we pay the bills or how we pay this or that to survive.’ It’s a multiplying concept.”

Several questions arise for us. We plan to delve into these as this study progresses: What are the underlying narratives at work between the two differing expressions of flourishing here? Are smaller congregations less inclined to associate numeric growth with flourishing with vice versa among larger congregations, or is there a more nuanced middle position? Are some seeking to detach Canadian understandings of flourishing from perceived American ones; where megachurches are far more common? Do denominational and church leaders distance themselves from numbers as a way to psychologically cope with the reality that their congregation, and many around them, struggle to sustain numbers or grow numerically? Or are there possible theological reasons for connecting or disconnecting flourishing from numeric growth?

Clear Self Identity

A unifying narrative among many of the leaders who we interacted with involved the possession of a clear self-identity. These congregations were described as having a firm grasp of who they were and what the congregation was, is, and aspires to be. For the leaders that we heard

that, a clear self-identity included a realization that congregations do not strive to become like the church down the road nor do they try to be all things to all people; they are unique in some respects. To this end several shared that their identity might be captured on a t-shirt or a bus advertisement, ensuring that their core purpose was memorable. By extension participants indicated that congregations who are not clear on their central purpose and identity struggle to flourish, especially in a Canadian context where many congregations fight to remain relevant and keep the doors open in a progressively secular setting. This Catholic leader spoke about congregational identity in this way:

When you develop a sense of identity, you begin to have that sense of conviction, sense of direction. It helps you in your leadership. You can't help but grow. People find it attractive when a group or a person knows what it's all about right? And they want to belong to something that they can relate to. And they do tend to be hospitable because people who know themselves as an organization, I think will truly want to reach out and share the good news. A vibrant spiritual life must and should be a given in a Christian context because that is what we're about. I think that self-formation and self-identity is really key. Congregations who say yes to everything and who can't say no because they are so afraid of hurting emotions, are usually the ones who suffer because they have no self-identity. They just want to be everything to everyone. And it's also dangerous to spiritual life because if you're to follow Christ, Christ did not say yes to everything as well. Christ had a very strong handle on what's good, bad, what's right, wrong, and he led people. So, that is critical, that self-identity, because if you know who you are and you're secure about it, then everything else just flows. But if you're constantly searching and you can't make a decision, none of these would ever happen.

As for the content of a congregation's identity and *raison d'être*, this varied. We heard responses that ranged from theological particulars, to an ethnic or multiethnic focus, to a neighbourhood/parish church, to a single or multigenerational congregation, to an evangelistic emphasis, among other areas. Yet one recurring theme arose across the theological continuum: a congregation's identity is rooted in the spiritual life, in various religious beliefs and practices, and ultimately around Jesus. For instance, Catholics in this research singled out the sacraments of the Church as core to congregational identity. A conservative Protestant leader in Ontario

proclaimed, “I think there is an identity being rooted in Jesus. They have that very clear sense of their identity as a congregation extending from Jesus, mission, life, presence among them.” We say more about these identity markers in the next section on “vibrant spiritual life.”

Still, not all participants agreed with a blanket correlation between clear self-identity and congregations that flourish. One focus group participant carefully noted that congregations may have a clear self-identity yet not flourish: “If you look at [the traits] without the descriptors, [they] could actually be a symptom of an unflourishing church ... so I’ve met congregations on the verge of closure that have a clear self-identity.” The inference was that a congregation’s self-identity could be anchored around beliefs and practices that do not generate numeric growth or healthy organizational dynamics or transformed individuals. This begs the question: are there certain beliefs, practices, structures, and/or ideologies that bind flourishing congregations together? Can one advance a case that while congregations have what they believe to be a unique self-identity, there are shared identity-related realities that bind many churches together? Thus far, our sense is that at the macro-level there are some unifying commonalities in how church leaders think about the identity of flourishing congregations. The remaining observations capture these similarities across traditions and regions.²

Vibrant Collective Spiritual Life

A cornerstone feature of a congregation’s identity is its value for and opportunities to develop a vibrant collective spiritual life; in the words of one leader, “to smell like Jesus.” Though this statement is full of meaning and assumptions that we intend to probe further as this research project develops. We listened to a range of stories detailing the role that prayer, Scripture, the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines reportedly play

² We eventually hope to articulate differences across traditions and regions too, though it is too early to say anything substantive about this yet.

for leaders and their congregants in flourishing congregations.³ For instance, some interviewees identified particular seasons of intense prayer and fasting as catalysts for flourishing in their contexts. Two specific themes stand out to us regarding a vibrant collective spiritual life: religious experience and transformed lives.

Participants expressed that flourishing congregations created opportunities for individuals to meaningfully experience God; these were centrally available to congregants in weekly services. Several interviewees spoke about a distinct energy that was felt in flourishing congregations in weekly services, though few described what this “energy” looked or felt like – one would just know it when they sensed it. A United Church of Canada minister expressed that, “It just has energy. You feel it.” For Catholic leaders, a purposeful, thoughtful, and considered liturgy (with the highpoint of the Eucharist) stood out above all things for the vibrant collective spiritual life. One Catholic priest, characteristic of several of his peers, shared the following question and response concerning people experiencing God in weekly Mass:

How can we create an atmosphere where we can provide a God-moment encounter for people walking through the front door? So whether it’s as soon as they grab that front door and they walk in, there’s got to be a feeling there in the air from the person they first meet to get a smile, to perhaps it’s the way that the worship happens or if it’s a special event and it’s the music and it’s the message. So it all comes back to where can we reach them where they’re at, so that they’re touched by the Spirit and then how do we recognize what the next thing is that they need so that they can start to conform, be drawn to the Lord? So I just throw that out there for ourselves is when someone has a God moment, lives change ... I think that that’s still an important thing to try and facilitate the God moment.

The end of this statement captures the sentiments of many who we interviewed, that meaningful experiences with God leads to transformed lives. Expressed differently, while denominational and congregational leaders are interested in helping congregants foster attitudes

³ Reinforcing earlier literature on congregations that are theologically oriented in a conservative direction, a recent study of mainline Protestant congregations in Canada reveals that those churches that are growing score notably higher on various religious/spiritual belief and practice indicators compared with congregations that are declining (Haskell, Flatt & Burgoyne 2016).

and behaviours associated with a vibrant collective spiritual life, the ultimate expression of a vibrant spiritual life is a transformed personal life. An Anglican leader described the following goal in their congregation's activities:

Lives changed; changed lives, for me. It's not about being friendly. I can go to the rotary club, find friendly people. I need to see, the litmus test for me is, is your life changed? Is it growing? Are you grounded? Is there maturity? Is there sanctification? ... I mean people just said, 'I wasn't coming to church and I've been here for a year and a half. My life is so different it's just amazing.' Whether we get those stories out, that's an encouragement to me; that maybe people are able to deliver about those testimonies and how they're done. But the point is it's happening. For me that's one of the things I'm looking for ... I need to see lives change because I see so much broken, otherwise. That's it.

One of our central aims for later phases of this research will entail a broader and deeper examination of various religious beliefs and practices among congregants themselves.

Discipleship

One of the earliest observations offered by several participants in our research was that flourishing congregations “produce disciples.” Several congregations that we encountered expressed a desire for their church to embody something akin to the following approach by a conservative Protestant congregation in Calgary:

The way we program our teaching, the way we outline our schedule and the way we teach our leaders and coach our leaders towards how they lead their organization, how they lead their part of the organization, their small group or their serve team or whatever we call them, that would be it. And I think that fundamentally shifted four years ago when we really decided, you know, discipleship. We want to see every person in our church making a disciple. That's our vision statement. Not anything other than that. So that means every person has a job. Everyone has a role. And it's very clearly what we're building; we're building disciples. And not discipleship as defined as people who have made a commitment to Jesus, but discipleship defined as an entire spectrum from the anti-theist to the apostolic leader.

Some denominational and congregational leaders articulated a specific pathway to “disciple” members of their congregation. These processes involved members moving their way through various courses, volunteer initiatives, and shared church-wide experiences into deeper

commitments in their faith tradition and with their fellow congregants. It is important to note here that discipleship was understood by many as a lifelong process; where one is constantly “being disciplined” and growing in their faith, whether as a recent convert or someone who had been a Christian for five decades.

At the same time many expressed that discipleship was the crux of their challenge. This was heightened in a modern and secular Canada with many competing narratives for people’s allegiances and where there may be diminished levels of commitment to congregational life. They grappled with how best to define and measure discipleship in 21st Century Canada. Most troubling to many, how does a congregation actually disciple people in the faith. A Catholic priest in Ontario outlined his desires for his congregation to grow in its discipleship capacity:

What I would like it to look like is, that the parishioners have a real sense of their discipleship. That they are disciples. And that in the living out of their lives, whether it’s in the context of their family, their work, or their school, they see the way that they live, the way that they engage in a relationship is an expression of their relationship with the person of Jesus. And that they’re living that relationship so that they have a sense of their own – that they are disciples with call to make Christ present in the world. If everybody in my parish had that understanding and appreciation of who they are of their identity, then I would say that would be a very positive parish.

Upon sharing these things, this leader suggested that his congregation was far too consumer-oriented toward their religious beliefs and practices and that they were unwilling to incur the costs and sacrifice necessary to be “true disciples.” This latter reflection is significant because it reveals that even those who defined their congregations as flourishing still saw areas and opportunities for growth and development. Part of our objective, as this research develops, is to carefully examine the specific processes, pathways, and narratives that congregations use for discipleship. We also want to explore the relationship between discipleship and other aspects of flourishing congregational life delineated in this paper.

Leadership

Previous literature has been clear that leadership is an important variable to consider for congregations to flourish (e.g., Saarinen 1986; Dudley & Johnson 1993; Parson & Leas 1993; Roozen & Hadaway 1993; Stark & Finke 2000; Holling 2001; Wilkes 2001a, 2001b; Bickers 2005; Scheitle & Dougherty 2008). Four aspects to leadership stand out in our early on analysis.

First, strategic leadership appears to be a strength possessed by many of those who we interviewed where church structures and polity and congregants enabled and “let leaders lead.” A conservative Protestant pastor in Ontario compared flourishing congregations with those who were not thriving in the following way: “Strategic leadership ... the majority of churches don’t know how to do it ... The churches that are succeeding, all of them, have strategic leaders who know how to line up the dots ... How to get there. That’s it. That’s what strategy is. And across the country I’d say that majority of pastors are not strategic. They grab this and it didn’t work, but they don’t see that in itself it’s just a tool. It’s just a part of all the other tools and you’ve got to have a path that you choose to lead that strategy.” Part of what we would like to eventually do, perhaps in a comparative context between flourishing and non-flourishing congregations, is test some of the assumptions made by this leader and others regarding strategic leadership.

Strategic leadership seemed to be manifest among leaders who had the posture and skillset to effectively lead an organization. Countless leaders who we spoke with claimed to have confidently and skillfully helped their congregation name and locate themselves from a branding and marketing perspective (identified by participants as a need in the Canadian religious marketplace where many Canadians have negative perceptions of religious organizations – see e.g., Bibby 2011; Wilkins-Laflamme 2014; Angus Reid Institute 2015). In turn these leaders described how strategic leadership was essential to guide their congregation through change and

transition into new congregational realities and experiences. Interestingly, we discovered several books written by those that we interviewed, documenting their experiences, theology, and philosophy of church leadership.

Second, Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant denominational and church leaders frequently spoke about strong lay leadership, collaborative leadership, and/or cultivating a culture of leadership development in their organizations. Our team heard numerous narratives where congregants took an active role to shape the congregation's identity, vision, mission, dreaming, and activities. Many we interviewed were quick to point out their perception that Canadian congregations valued cooperation and consensus within and between congregations far more than those in the United States. In their eyes a congregation cannot realistically change or pursue its vision and mission without buy-in from those "on the ground." A leader from one of the Catholic Diocese visited offered the following reflections:

One of things that is very striking about your average Roman Catholic congregation – the stereotype would suggest that the parish priest does everything. This story, my first months in this role, and I was calling around to the parish and really it was lay persons that was given power over these certain offices ... the flourishing congregations are usually the ones that know how to designate, and designate well.

A conservative Protestant pastor shared this narrative with our research team:

We just had a couple of – because we haven't had a property and facilities committee in place for a while – we had a single person trying to do this and it's a fairly substantial building to have one person do it. So we got this committee in place and put the right people around the table and shared their vision, launched it. And so I've been at the last two meetings and so they've got a meeting tonight and so I called them and said, 'I won't make it.' They said, 'Oh that's okay we don't want you there anyways.' And which is exactly what I've been hoping for.

Other leaders aspired for a denominational and congregational culture of shared leadership. An

Anglican Bishop recalled the first few months in his new position:

There's this high desire for the Bishop to make decisions for congregations. I don't wanna do that. Or I'm willing to play a kind of circuit breaker, intervener role as necessary. But as

much as I can, I wanna hand our decisions to people ... I think it is with as much power and authority given a Bishop. So the role of the Bishop is supposed to be a unifier. So when we commission new clergy, what is said in that service is that this is a ministry we share. The Bishop shares with the person, that priest. I mean it's wonderful to have that.

Strong lay involvement and leadership development partially explains why many of those interviewed claimed to cultivate a “yes” culture in their denominations and congregations (path-goal theory; see House 1996).⁴ As one example, a conservative Protestant leader in Calgary claimed, “We create a lot of freedom; we seek to create a lot of parameters. I want to say yes as much as I possibly can to requests and initiatives. We are not terribly afraid of failure, if something doesn’t work, okay, we will learn, we will move on and try something new.” We discovered time and again that denominational and congregational leaders said that they rarely put up roadblocks to ideas that emerged among those lower than them in the hierarchy. For example, denominations provided resources for new church plants to begin, and congregational leaders gave the laity freedom and permission to start new ministry areas. A “yes” narrative to trying new things looked to be essential to the DNA of many congregations that we were exposed to through their leaders. Conversely, several leaders demonized denominational and congregational structures that they believed stifled the prospect of organizational flourishing.

Amidst narratives on leadership development and a “yes” culture, there are some traditions that experience decline in membership, attendance, or financial giving. Interviewed leaders from this broader denominational reality of decline revealed an acute awareness that leadership development from within was an imperative for organizational vitality, sustainability, and longevity. A mainline Protestant denominational leader in the Maritimes highlighted this point in response to an ongoing crisis in her tradition:

⁴ House’s path-goal theory stated that the leader motivates followers to accomplish identified objectives. He assumed that the effective leader has the skills to improve the motivation of followers by clarifying the paths and removing obstacles to high performance and desired objectives.

We have a number of parishes that are unable to afford full-time clergy leadership. And even some of the larger parishes that have had multiple staff are declining in number of staff. Instead of three clergy, they're at one or two or one and a half and that kind of thing. So we recognized we need to be more intentional about identifying lay leaders and empowering and releasing them. And we've really struggled with the priest does everything. And it is the center of the parish and if you don't have a priest, you're nothing. Don't have a full-time priest who lives in your community, you're nothing. So we're transitioning from that thankfully I think into a more Biblical model of really shared ministry and recognizing that.

This participant went on to describe the positive impact for congregations that had resulted from this intentional focus on leadership development.

In a slightly different vein, we also heard of multi-staff congregations, mostly conservative Protestant, hiring various staff from within their congregations. The belief was expressed that effective leadership is aided when hiring those who have a strong understanding of the local church's culture, and who have existing rapport and respect among congregants. In some cases congregations had hired leaders from within with a succession plan in mind, such that, for example, an associate pastor was hired with the long-range intent of this person eventually becoming the lead minister.

A third element of leadership that arose across traditions and regions was "spirit-led" leadership where leaders were seen as consciously being "in step" with where they believed God was leading their congregations. The following exchange in a focus group, initiated by a denominational leader, captured this point well:

Churches that really flourish are churches where you sense the pastor has the ability to hear God's voice ... there's an evidence that you are really being spirit led, not institutionally, denominational, leadership led. But that there's really a spiritual component to the leader that comes through really clearly. I mean that of all leadership, not just one who's preaching at the front. And I think people really rise up and respect that when they sense that- oh okay, hold on.

Another denominational leader affirmed this line of thinking in response:

People need to know that you've been with God. You don't have to be alpha male, top dog, best strategic guy on the planet. They just want to know that you've been with God ... early

on I thought it was competency that people wanted. And there is a threshold of competency that's needed. But after awhile it wasn't anything explicitly they said. You could tell they were looking for that.

A local pastor then interjected:

It's this responsiveness to the Spirit of God. And it's not just leaders. I look at our whole leadership team too. And this is something we're trying to cultivate, that discernment piece. Otherwise it's just Robert's Rules of Order ... procedure and process as opposed to, what is God up to? Are we discerning that piece and responsive to that?

In concrete terms those interviewed reported that an active prayer life was invaluable for religious leaders; along with being obedient to what they believe God is calling their congregation to be or do.

Fourth, many of those we interviewed were in organizational cultures that helped them to thrive personally and professionally. Leaders who had some semblance of work-life balance, who had sabbaticals embedded into their work rhythm, who were personally and professionally supported and empowered by their church governance, and who were encouraged to and utilize training opportunities to hone their craft (e.g., formal education, courses, seminars, and books on leadership) were seen to be supported. Of note, participants who reflected on their own seminary training, highlighted the need for seminaries to offer required courses on leadership skills and development for clergy in school (among other skills, such as conflict resolution).⁵ As one interviewee stated, "We're really seeing leaders that are being ordained are not necessarily equipped with all the skillsets that they need for today's context." At the denominational level some, like the following Anglican Diocese, were taking this development into their own hands: "We bring people together to learn about leadership and congregational development in teams from parishes."

⁵ Though not a focus in this paper, we encountered a number of clergy who had no formal religious education prior to assuming their current post as a lead or executive pastor. Instead these clergy had educational or professional experiences in business, marketing, or leadership.

Several questions arose regarding leadership that we intend to explore further as this research unfolds. For instance, what habits, experiences, or narratives may set strategic congregational leaders apart from leaders who are less strategic? Do congregants in flourishing congregations feel as empowered as the leaders in our current research suggested, and what are the processes and experiences of those who are being developed as leaders within local churches? What are the specific conditions, people, contexts, and structures under which leaders tend to say “yes” to other leaders in training or innovative ideas?

“Outside the Box”

Picking up on the “yes” ethos among leaders in flourishing congregations, several leaders from across the Christian spectrum and Canadian regions discussed the need and ability to think and act “outside the box,” in order to flourish. One pastor articulated it this way: flourishing congregations have “the willingness to change. Letting things grow. There’s no growth without change.” We heard numerous stories of entrepreneurial initiatives, risk-taking endeavors, and dreams and schemes for the future, along with narratives that “failures” are seeds for new ideas and growth. One Anglican leader asserted, “I think a flourishing congregation is a congregation that can contemplate imaginatively a variety of different possibilities ... that imaginative capacity would be a starting place for me when I think of flourishing congregations.” In one of our focus groups, one respondent declared, “Willingness to risk I think is probably something that's really important in flourishing congregations. It's okay to try something and have it not work.” In response, another church leader at the table added, “Not working means that it didn't explode and there's not 500 people involved. Oh it was a failure, right? But it's getting over that and going sometimes things are only going to be a flash in the pan and they need to be for other things to happen. That's okay.” To name a few examples, these “out of the box” initiatives

included church planting ventures, new liturgical styles and expressions in worship services, purchasing multiple properties to provide social services in the community, or pouring funding into a ministry idea that may or may not be successful.

One possible way to account for the prevalence of risk-taking among flourishing congregations is the perceived dire state of the Christian Church in Canada in an increasingly secular context. Some persons in our research interactions suggested that Christianity was ever more marginalized in Canadian society than in the United States. As a result congregations simply could not continue to do things as they always had, in terms of expecting people to walk through the doors each week. Particularly observed in Vancouver, this compelled many, where over 40% of people say they have “no religion” (Statistics Canada 2013), to try all kinds of things because, in their words, “they had nothing to lose.” As it turns out, we spoke to leaders of church plants from the last two decades who run weekly attendances in excess of 2,000 each week. They had incorporated all kinds of creative and innovative expressions for very specific niche markets (e.g., young professionals who live in high rise condominiums).

Hospitable Community

Sociologically, we know that social ties play an instrumental role in a person joining a religious community and remaining part of that group (see Stark & Bainbridge 1985; Stark & Finke 2000). As people feel accepted, loved, cared for, and embraced by people in a congregation, they are more likely to join and continue their association with that congregation. Most in our informants reported that their congregations were hospitable communities, where people genuinely enjoyed one another’s company (an idea or claim that we will test with congregants in later phases of research). What stands out to us from our interviews are the

processes that leaders identified as means to help people join and remain involved in their church. A conservative Protestant pastor stressed that their congregation has:

A clear and effective model of ministry. Everyone's not just clear on who we are, where we're going conceptually, but how this works. How our discipleship process works? How we reach people for Christ. How did people get integrated into our church? How do we launch people to live missionally? How does it work? What steps do you take? There's a very clear how between churches that are either not flourishing or aspiring to be flourishing. I encounter more churches that wish, that want to be flourishing but don't know how, than churches that are. And I don't think that the difference is motivational. The difference isn't that some churches want to be flourishing more than others. It's that some churches have figured out and engaged their people and how. And others haven't.

For instance, flourishing congregation leaders said that they had a clear and systematic process for identifying newcomers (we saw in-depth flow charts of such processes), making personal contact via telephone or coffee in the week following a first visit, and then helping newcomers to work their way into the congregational networks via small groups or volunteer opportunities.

Unlike one or two generations ago, fewer Canadians have a Christian memory of any kind.

Therefore, leaders of flourishing congregations believe that they must strategically take it upon themselves to help the newcomers learn the culture, beliefs, rituals, and customs of the local congregation. In this regard Catholic infrastructure, such as its schools or Right of Christian Initiation of Adults, provide examples of intentional ways to help socialize people into local congregational life.

Of course as individuals are drawn into the fellowship of a local congregation there are ways to deepen one's connection to other members. Leaders shared with us various ways that this occurred within their particular contexts, from small discussion or Bible study or prayer groups, to volunteer opportunities, to personal stories and testimonies that are shared in the weekly liturgy. One Roman Catholic priest in Ontario used the metaphor of family to describe hospitable community in his parish and the importance of participation, especially in the liturgy:

Everybody in my eyes, the concept of a flourishing congregation would be everyone has a place in the family. Doesn't matter if there's thirty people or thirty thousand people, everyone has to have a place in that family ... in terms of liturgy, I think it's important that people feel part of the preparations. We have ministers of hospitality, we have people who read, we have a children's liturgy. And again I encourage everyone to become involved in the parish at some level.

What are the indicators that people feel connected to their congregation? As this priest suggested, it could be that members are actively engaged in their church community and that they feel a sense of pride in their congregation. He said: "A manifestation of a sense of belonging is their engagement in the community life, first, either through a formal ministry. Secondly, their frequent attendance that whenever they are here, you really see them and you can sense a sense of pride in them that they love this parish, that they really want to be counted as people who belong here."

From past research we know that as people feel a stronger sense of connection to the congregation, they are more likely to reciprocate with higher levels of involvement, volunteering, and financial contributions for the overall well-being of the congregation (Hopewell 1987; Dudley, Carroll & Wind 1991; Roozen & Hadaway 1993; Wilkes 2001a, 2001b; Woolever & Bruce 2004; Ammerman 2005; Bickers 2005; Bruce, Woolever, Wulff & Smith-Williams 2006; Carroll 2006; Scheitle & Finke 2008; Reimer 2012; Bowen 2013).

Neighborhood Presence and Involvement

As those we interviewed associated a hospitable community with a flourishing congregation, leaders, particularly Protestant ones, were adamant that this hospitality extended beyond the walls of the congregation. In their minds and experiences, flourishing congregations have an active presence and involvement in the welfare and justice of their neighborhood. Often framed in explicitly theological language such as "incarnational presence" or "being the hands and feet of Jesus," those we interviewed strongly resisted any notion that a flourishing congregation could

exist solely for itself; congregations ought to be actively involved to better their communities, something that leaders of most congregations we interviewed believed was a reality in their contexts. One Maritime conservative Protestant pastor puts it this way:

We run a program here in the community as well as downstairs for preschool children in the winter. So this area downstairs is the playground and it is open two or three mornings a week to preschool families. So, in terms of the community, the café, the ice cream and the indoor playground are a big community thing and we host community health programs here we well from the community health team. So, it is not exactly a community centre but there is a lot of coming and going.

Upon hearing stories such as this one, we often encountered participants who raised the question, “Would our community notice if we were no longer here?” This was frequently followed by an affirmative response.

There are several lines of inquiry that we would like to explore regarding congregational activities in their neighborhoods. What motivates congregations to be actively involved in their surrounding communities? Is this impulse primarily driven by theological commitments? Is there something about brand image at work where congregations seek to challenge negative Canadian perceptions toward organized religious groups by getting actively involved among those in the community who are skeptical or even hostile towards Christianity? Do people find their ways into active involvement in these congregations due to a particular congregation’s involvement in their larger community? This last question is prompted by one congregation we visited who goes through the community and picks up and disposes garbage that the city refuses. A lady showed up to that church and when asked if she knew someone at the church she said, “Oh no. I just figured any church that is willing to take care of my garbage is worth visiting.” We wonder whether this narrative is the norm or the exception, or somewhere in-between.

Evangelism

Along with participating in “good works” in society, leaders across traditions and regions consistently singled out evangelism as an important marker of a flourishing congregation. One interviewee said:

When I think of flourishing ... there is a real sense that people are coming to faith and are growing in their faith, and evangelistic communities have typically measured conversion and that's a really difficult thing to play with. And so we really look in terms of where baptism occurs and where it occurs in a discipleship journey, and does it lead to ongoing discipleship? Where there's baptism that leads to ongoing discipleship, people are flourishing and where that's happening lots of congregations are flourishing.

For those leaders who stressed quantitative aspects of flourishing, they did not mince words on the centrality of congregations who grew by way of new conversions. A denominational leader declared, “If you go to a church of 100 and you reach 10 people that's significant. And if you go to church of 1,000 and you reach 50 people, you should not be celebrating. You should be crying.”

We were caught off guard to hear how many congregations in Catholic, mainline Protestant, and conservative Protestant settings had active evangelism focused programs – most notably the Alpha program, which was started with Nicky Gumbel in London, England. This program was designed to guide people who are invited to explore Christianity through a series of talks and discussions on core Christian beliefs and practices. The prevalence of an evangelistic focus, and the Alpha Program specifically, was surprising to us for two reasons. First, several traditions who, sometimes, are not associated with an evangelistic focus (e.g., Catholic and mainline Protestant) raved about how central and effective this program was to their congregation's activities. Second, given the general Canadian aversion to “pushy evangelism” (see e.g., Adams 2006; Reimer 2012; Beyer & Ramji 2013; Thiessen 2015), we had not anticipated that Canadian congregations would indicate that they had taken up overt evangelism strategies. Those we

interviewed did acknowledge the perceived Canadian aversion to evangelism in the form of verbal proclamation (which a number lamented, particularly in ethnic congregations and evangelical settings). A denominational leader, from a conservative Protestant context, said: “I would add Evangelism as a separate point. Because that is the elephant in the room in Canada. Nobody likes it, nobody wants to do it, nobody wants anything to do with it.”

What remains to be seen from phase one interviews and focus groups is how effective these evangelism initiatives were perceived to be. Are new people joining the Christian faith and local congregations in response to the Alpha program? Are flourishing congregations growing in large part due to conversion, and if so, what percentage of these congregations’ growth might one attribute to conversion growth (in contrast to transfer growth, for example)? We have our doubts that congregations are growing mainly due to conversion, based on existing data regarding evangelical congregations in Canada (Reimer & Wilkinson 2015). Revelations from many leaders that the majority of their congregations were filled with those born and raised within their congregation or those who have transferred from another congregation has added to our suspicion about the effectiveness of evangelism. Few informants reported percentages higher than 5-10% of those who were converts resulting from evangelistic initiatives of one sort or another. But our anticipated phase three surveys directly working with congregants themselves should help us to test these ideas further; perhaps including a closer examination into the modes and mechanisms that evangelism is practiced and experienced in congregations across Christian traditions and Canadian regions.

Diversity

A recurring refrain that we heard in focus groups and interviews was that flourishing congregations are diverse communities or ought to be. As we pressed participants about what

exactly they had in mind, they mainly pointed toward any or all of the following: race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and age. They also framed language about diversity in theological language about God's kingdom. During one focus group someone expressed:

I think that if you don't have a fairly rich diversity within your church, it should reflect the demographic diversity of the community. If you don't have that diversity either social, economic diversity, or ethnic diversity, or both, I don't think you can actually say this is a flourishing congregation on biblical grounds. I think you can have a large congregation, but if you don't have that diversity, I'm not sure you're reflecting the kingdom.

Another member of the group, a conservative Protestant pastor, stressed, "I think a flourishing congregation is one that's diverse in its generation, in its ethnicities. I think a comment was made in the focus group – it reflects the community it's in ... If your church is all white and it's surrounded by tons of different ethnic populations, I wonder what's going on there. Like if there's an unawareness about that, that's really sad."

Recent research has revealed that ethnic diversity is more common in Canadian congregations than in the United States (see Bird 2015; Reimer & Wilkinson 2015). Ethnic diversity was a narrative that we heard loud and clear in all Catholic interviews, and to a lesser extent in some conservative Protestant settings. This narrative was also prominent in the major urban centers of Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary, revealing the impact that contextual and demographic variables had been having on congregational life.

In addition to ethnic diversity, a leader in Winnipeg talked of the millionaire sitting alongside the unemployed in his congregation; while other leaders spoke of members of the LGBTQ community actively participating as full members in their congregation (especially in United Church of Canada settings and in millennial-based congregations). Some leaders said that the various expressions of diversity discussed thus far was a lived reality from their leadership group

through to those sitting in the pews; while for others agree that diversity was important but that diversity remained an aspiration that their congregations had pursued.

Amidst the discussion about diversity, several leaders articulated their commitment to a congregational culture where questioning and uncertainty regarding one's faith was welcomed, and even preferred. A homogeneous congregation that stifles diverse questions, doubts, and experiences was stigmatized as a congregation that surely was not flourishing (even if its numeric metrics seem impressive). A United Church of Canada minister reflected:

In our community, who would be flourishing, would be curiosity, openness, questions, non-prescriptive theology, more descriptive ... Our experience is that people are seeking belonging and then they want to figure out how it's worked and then they finally figure out what they believe. Which might be unique to our community, but it's certainly thriving because people are welcome to question and they come aware that that's biblical and essential to a flourishing faith. That may not be perceived by others as the right way but certainly our community is a seeking kind of community. So the thriving to me or flourishing is: there's a certain element of doubt that is curiosity that is like Thomas, and is willing to question.

A denominational leader in the Anglican Church of Canada put it this way:

To be transparent and have candor and even in the midst of disagreements to not have that kind of nicey-nice and suck it up and stew later. But we can put it on the table because we're adults and healthy and we can have a conversation even if we disagree. And we don't have to leave the table and no one's asking anyone to leave the table. And I think that's key to a flourishing congregation in terms of those conversations. Are we able to have healthy holy conversations and that kind of thing?

With diversity and the openness to people openly and honestly grappling with their uncertainties in community, conflict was inevitable. We gathered from many of our conversations that flourishing congregations were characterized by strong conflict resolution skills. By this we understood that interviewed leaders believed that to effectively help their congregation to navigate conflict they need to do so skillfully and in theologically sound ways (as measured by their views of what this might look like). Below are two lengthier reflections,

the first from a denominational leader in the Anglican Church of Canada, and the second from a local United Church of Canada Minister.

When conflict arises because inevitably it will, the congregation can handle it, can deal with it a respectful and mature manner. Does not devolve into horrible cliques or factions. Does not try to kill the leadership or kill the messenger for the presence of the problem. Can see the conflict as an opportunity for clarifying self-identity, increasing commitment in leadership, increasing growth and orienting towards the future, etcetera, etcetera; can actually see the things that arise in community life which we inevitably do as opportunities rather than threats ... if internally you've got a congregation that is terrified of conflict and terrified of failure and terrified of risk, terrified of taking creative risks and possibly messing something up, then these will be superficial signs

If I think about the flourishing congregations that I carry in my head and the stories I'm carrying in my head right now, they have all done something good in relation to conflict ... They've just relaxed about conflict. They just have relaxed and said, 'You know, sometimes we're going to have to ask people to change seats on the bus,' so leadership issues. And sometimes they'll get pissed off and leave the bus and that's okay. I think of the moment in this congregation that – two moments in this congregation where we really started to grow and flourish a little bit in numbers but more so in maturity and dynamism was when we spoke frankly about some real conflict at the ending of the previous staff configuration team. We dropped into talking circles with real sharing of pain, different points of view, but listening with respect. And then that was replicated when we did a year and a half process moving towards same sex marriage. And there was a disagreement in the congregation and the congregation had been split over the ordination of gays and lesbians. So there was that. It was like a bomb planted underground, you know? And it wasn't so much diffusing the bomb as a controlled explosion of it so that the energy came out that could be managed and actually turned into energy for the life of the community. I think one of the things that is characteristic of so many of our not flourishing congregations is we're frozen by the fear of the conflict. And we have a deep intuition that we ain't getting from where we are to where we want to be without some people getting ticked off and maybe leaving. And finding a way into thawing that frozenness and living with courage and confidence is really very liberating.

As our project unfolds, we have several questions that we want to explore regarding diversity. Are flourishing congregations actually diverse, and if so, along what social lines? Do members of different subgroups interact with members of other subgroups in a congregation, and if so, in what context and manner do they do so? How do members feel and act toward people of “other” groups in the congregation, however defined? How are diverse perspectives among and

between church leaders and congregants presented and approached in settings where leaders value questioning and uncertainty?

Discussion and Conclusion

Three conclusions stand out from this early sampling of our exploratory research into flourishing congregations in Canada. First, Canadian church leaders are keenly aware of the secular context that they find themselves in. In this context where congregations struggle to attract and retain members. In the minds of some, Christianity is moving further to the margins of Canadian social life. This narrative figured prominently for leaders of flourishing congregations who had honed their congregations' identities to respond to and engage this cultural milieu. Leaders who had equipped and empowered other leaders with an eye toward the future of a particular congregation in a sea of congregations that were fighting for survival. Congregations who took risks and tried new things, from evangelism initiatives to open conversations as part of weekly liturgies, were aware that the status quo would not suffice for them; and congregations that demarcated clear structures and processes to help people join and get involved in congregational life. Overall, these leaders perceived that Canadian congregations were desperate in the context of an increasingly secular context and they acted accordingly to pursue a state of thriving rather than merely surviving.

Second, interview and focus group participants seemed acutely aware of the prevailing negative images that many Canadians have toward Christians and congregations. We wonder whether this awareness has served as a part of the motivation for leaders of flourishing congregations to intentionally strengthen and improve their image with current and possible members. Collaborative leadership is part of the way that flourishing congregations accomplish this. So, too, are shifts to include more space for dialogue and conversation in weekly

congregational gatherings. Active involvement in neighborhoods, using the Alpha Program to engage those outside of Christianity, and forming hospitable communities for newcomers in particular were all evident in perceptions expressed by leaders as they thought of flourishing congregations. Collectively, denominational and local pastors knew that flourishing congregations in Canada were experiencing a “brand” problem and they were intentionally pursuing strategies to gradually change people’s perceptions and experiences in and through their congregations.

Third, lived experiences and aspirations of diversity is interesting to note. Of course, Canada has a longstanding value for diversity and tolerance in its many forms, and leaders of congregations who we spoke with evidently do as well. Leaders connected to selected Canadian congregations in this research saw diversity as a hallmark of a flourishing congregation. This could reveal the influences of Canadian culture, various theological frameworks, or both. It seems that there is something at work here that possibly sets Canadian congregational understandings apart from those in the United States.

We do not claim that each of the findings discussed are new. These findings and insights do confirm some of what we already know from the literature. This study is different in that it moves us toward a better understanding of flourishing congregations in a distinctly Canadian context, as identified and experienced from Canadian church leaders across the Christian spectrum. How and why do congregations flourish in Canada when the general story of religious decline pervades? This study begins a process to investigate and identify the narratives, processes, contexts, and legitimation structures of flourishing congregations in a pervasively secular Canadian environment.

Looking Forward

As we continue to analyze our data and begin to disseminate our findings from phase one interviews and focus groups, we look ahead to phase two research wherein we propose to invite nine congregational case studies in Calgary, Alberta with three Catholic, three mainline Protestant (Anglican, United Church of Canada, Presbyterian), and three conservative Protestant (Christian and Missionary Alliance, Baptist, Evangelical Covenant) congregations to work with us. Our central question in phase two will be: what are the social narratives, experiences, processes, conditions, and theological reasons that contribute to people joining and getting involved in flourishing congregations – Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant – in Canada?

In phase three we have planned a national survey with 1500+ who attend flourishing congregations across Canada. Our central aim in this survey will be to test a number of the questions and hypotheses raised in this paper, as well as new questions to emerge in our current data analysis from phase one plus the findings from phase two. We anticipate that this survey will give us a window into some of the demographic realities and perspectives among congregants themselves that may validate or challenge some of what we have heard from leaders in phase one of the project.

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