

The Growth of the “Nones”

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Statistics Canada released the 2021 Canadian census data at the end of October. I was particularly interested in the data about religion. It came as no surprise that there is a sharp decline in the number of people with any religious affiliation. Anyone involved with the church has seen it with their own eyes.

The data shows that while 53% of people still report being Christian in 2021, it's down sharply from 77% in 2001, a drop of 24% in twenty years.

Some of this may be due to a rise in immigration of people with other religions. The number of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs has more than doubled in the last 20 years, but those three groups only account for less than 10%.

The most significant data is the sharp growth in the number of people who claim no religious affiliation at all. They are the “nones” who participate in no religion. In 2001, 16.5% of Canadians claimed this status; in 2021, the number more than doubled to 34.6%. Over a third of Canadians identify as atheists and agnostics, humanists, and those with other secular perspectives.

I see three primary reasons for this significant increase in the number of religiously unaffiliated people.

First, studies show that people who reported a religious affiliation in the past now report no such affiliation. Religious beliefs have no significant impact in their lives. Even among those who claim to believe in God, nearly 20% say they rarely or never participate in group or private religious activities. There have always been people without a religious affiliation; now it is more acceptable to report it.

The second reason is generational. Only 19% of people over 65 said they had no religion; younger generations report less participation—36.5% for those between 15 and 64, and 42.5% of people 14 and younger.

The third reason arises from the second. Fewer people have any memory of what it means to participate in a religious ceremony or community. I have noticed it myself in funerals; people no longer remember the prayers or hymns which only 20 years ago were still commonly known. A generation or two has grown up without ever being part of a community of faith.

The census also shows a regional difference. Over half the population of British Columbia reports no religious affiliation. 52.1% of BC's population has no tie to a religious community. Again, this was no surprise. I have often thought that it would be amazing to find 2,000 people in church on a Sunday morning in Cranbrook. That is only 10% of the population!

This phenomenon is true in other countries as well. In the USA, the number of people with no religious affiliation grew from 16% in 2007 to 29% in 2021. In Australia, the increase was larger, from 16.7% in 2001 to 38.9% in 2021. Western European countries are seeing the same trends.

What does it mean?

Firstly, the importance of organized religion in people's lives is markedly decreasing. It began long before the pandemic, but COVID-19 has sped the process up.

But that doesn't mean people have stopped longing for community or other forms of spirituality. Although it may be harder to see in rural communities like Cranbrook, secular assemblies are springing up. The Toronto Oasis, for example, describes itself as “fundamentally different from a church; we could be described as a freethought oasis, where we welcome all

people who want to be part of a community exploring life through reason.” They emphasize people over beliefs, reason over tradition, acceptance as a strong virtue, and making meaning in life by making a difference in the world. The emphasis is on community and welcome, which is part of the failure of the contemporary church.

Another example is a movement called The Sunday Assembly, which began in Great Britain in 2013. Members gather on Sundays, sing together, listen to speakers, and talk together over coffee and donuts. Meetings are meant to be just like church services, but without God.

People still yearn for connection and community. I define spirituality that way, as a hunger for connection. People no longer find it in religious communities. For many, churches are unwelcoming, judgmental, and stifling. That’s especially so if you don’t share their beliefs and practices. They refuse to participate in those churches which spurn or shun those who are different, whether it be members of the LGBTQ community, people of colour, or those who take a different stance about societal issues. It used to be said, for example, that 11 am on a Sunday morning was the most segregated hour of the week.

Even if they no longer attend church, people are still coming together around things that matter to them, like homelessness, or food banks, or climate change, or conservation. People are forming community around all kinds of activities, including book clubs, knitting groups, sports teams, and games nights. There is a hunger for connection which the church no longer meets.

Secondly, those churches who used to believe that “if you build it, they will come” must completely rethink their assumptions. Too many church buildings are empty and poorly used during the week. Even Sunday mornings find church buildings mostly empty. Indeed, buildings have become idols.

We should remember that the early church began as a tiny minority group. Perhaps today’s church is being to find its way back. Perhaps it’s time for churches to rethink their identity, vision, and mission. Perhaps today’s church needs to recover the roots from which it sprang, rather than the business model which the church has adopted in the last few decades. It’s time to rethink why Christians belong to a church.

Thirdly, I can only wonder if these declining numbers are such a bad thing. Perhaps this is a fresh gospel call to follow in the steps of the wandering rabbi who drew people to him by the force of his personality and his message of love and radical acceptance.