

## **State of the Large Church**

PCC Large Church Conference  
Oakridge Presbyterian Church, London ON  
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### Introduction

If your congregation was invited to this conference, then your congregation is in the top 6-7% of all congregations in Canada when it comes to size. We are a nation of small congregations, which makes our churches unique not only within our denomination but also within our country

For the past 40 years the realities of Canada's large churches has been changing but in two fundamentally different ways. Very simply put:

- Those that were strong mid-twentieth century have tended to decline
- But a second group of (generally) newer large congregations emerging today

Canada is beginning to see the **rebirth** of the large church

In this presentation I'd like us to consider:

- Some of the struggles we've experienced in PCC large church experience
- The nature of the emerging large church in Canada
- Learnings we can take from both

### **The PCC Setting – Our Recent Reality**

In 2000 the Life and Mission Agency published the study of membership change in the PCC, 1978 – 1998. This was the first study to distinguish different categories of congregational size when looking at membership change:

	<b>1978 Membership</b>	<b>Change by 1998</b>	<b>% Change in Category</b>	<b>% of PCC Decline</b>
PCC	167,000	-30,962	-18.55%	100%
588 Cong'ns (56%) with < 125 Members	32,150	-1,889	-5.8%	6.1%
92 Cong'ns (8.7%) with > 378 members	62,140	-16,919	-27.2%	54.5%

One other thing to note:

- In that period, 83% of the total membership loss of the denomination came from churches with memberships of 250 or more

Why have we seen such a decline in our largest congregations?

- They tended to be “Inherited model churches”
  - We tend to be Producer Agenda Congregations (ie. These congregations have a sense that “the way we’ve always done church is the way church should always be done, and we expect people to come to us and conform to our ways) vs. culturally contexted congregations (ie. Congregations that think: “where are people at today, what are their needs, what will they find meaningful, and how can our congregation adapt to that?”)
  - Worship emphasis rooted in cognitive understanding vs. felt experience, spoken word and written text vs. “music as liturgy” and visual media.
  - Quality: we were content with current quality, not savvy to the need for quality that impresses others
- Our large churches were late to appreciate that the Canadian culture had changed
  - Lyle Schaller says that there is a 20 – 40 year lag time between “the introduction of a culture changing concept and congregations beginning to adapt”
  - Not aware early enough that we have a “spiritual marketplace” in Canada, with a population that is increasingly consumer oriented
  - We were slow to appreciate a new social trend that came after the Second War: generation-affected culture. Before the war people assumed that each successive generation of people were essentially like their predecessors. After the war we experienced a sharp increase in differences of one generation to the next. Like many congregations didn’t they appreciate generational change soon enough (“in an epoch of change, each person is dominated by their birthdate” sociologist Norman Ryder).
  - diversity became a growing issue (today there is significant diversity in the pews, and dramatic diversity in the community outside our congregations).
  - People are abandoning their sense of religious heritage (between 1991 and 2001, ½ of census Presbyterians dropped it from their self identity)

- There was a growing shift towards religion as a personal experience (in a denomination that has been more cognitive in its worship style)
  - Shift of people from community orientation & being joiners to people having an individual orientation & being consumers
- Some other reasons
    - Our larger congregations did not evolve into being programmatic early on
    - Earned complacency (“we are large and successful, so obviously who we are and what we do is fine”)
    - We ran our largest congregations as if they were simply bigger versions of small congregations. While that worked up to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, since 1950’s that became less realistic. This has to do with “Congregational Size and Style” as well explained by the Alban Institute.
    - We are a small-congregation denomination (75% of congregations have less than 100 in worship). Our denominational culture is rooted more in the small congregation experience, as we should expect. How many of the clergy here right now grew up in a large PCC congregation?

Through the 1970’s and 1980’s our style of doing large church was losing ground

### **In the Context of Religious Change in Canada:**

During this same period religious participation in Canada declining. Statistics Canada’s 2003 “Report on Religions in Canada” shows some notable changes in Canada:

In 1971 fewer than 3% of Canadians claimed “no religion”

In 2001, grew to

- 16% of nation
- 16% of Ontario
- 25% of Alberta
- 33% of British Columbia
- 40% of the Yukon

In the 1990’s, the total number of Protestant Christians in Canada declined by 775,000, in a country with a growing population

- of the major Protestant denominations, only the Baptists saw an increase
- Presbyterians were the biggest losers
- Pentecostals declined as well

THE POINT:

- OUR LARGE CONGREGATIONS HAVE BEEN LOSING PEOPLE IN A COUNTRY THAT HAS A DECLINING NUMBER OF PROTESTANT CHRISTIANS

The Changing Large Church Scene in Canada

But there is something else happening in Canada at the same time:

- We have NEW large congregations emerging on the Canadian landscape.

From the 1970's on, a new KIND of large church was emerging in the United States, and IS emerging in Canada in the last 10 to 15 years

- it is certainly emerging in Alberta and B.C.,
- it is also in Central Canada, perhaps not with the same kind of growing dominance

Let's look at what is happening in Calgary as an example:

- Canada's fourth largest city, with 1 million people
- remember: 25% of Albertans self-identify as having "no religion"
- Calgary worship attendance per capita is lower than Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver. Calgary has among the lowest per capita attendance rate at Christian churches of any place in Canada.

**Calgary Large Protestant Churches and Their Weekly Attendance (in 2005)**

Centre Street (Evangelical Missionary)	4,675
First Alliance	2,700
Westside King's (Pentecostal)	1,500
Foothills Alliance	1,400
Bow Valley – Country Hills Alliance	1,350
Sunwest (Mennonite Brethren)	900
First (Church of the Nazarene)	800
Bethany Chapel	750
<b>Central United</b>	700
First Assembly (Pentecostal)	700
	16,375

10% of all Christian worshippers in Calgary attend 10 congregations.

- A remarkable change in 20 years
- It is a change that is still gathering speed
- Note that Central United (grown from about 200 at worship 10 years ago to 700 today) is on the top-ten list.

## THE POINT:

In a Canadian religious marketplace right now large churches are on the ascendency. The older large church has something to learn from them.

### Current and Emerging Large Church Trends

Before we move on in this section:

- You may not like some of the things the new large church is doing
- But their growing “success” on the Canadian landscape tells us ***something about the changing nature of Canada’s worshipping Christians***
  - And there is the learning
  - It prompts us to ask questions concerning our own life as large Canadian churches
  - **“What are a growing number of Canada’s worshipping Christians looking for?”**

I have visited these congregations and interviewed their staff. Here are some of the things these large churches realize and respond to that have led to their growth.

#### 1] They Recognize that There is a Spiritual Marketplace Out There

These congregations made the shift from a Producer’s Agenda to a Consumer’s Agenda. The emerging large church tends to make ministry to the unchurched a high priority. And... they are willing to accept the cost of making that happen.

Eg. Westside King’s Church in Calgary. A Pentecostal congregation, started in 1994, that was willing to give up speaking in tongues in public worship for the sake of creating a comfortable worship environment for unchurched people. How willing are we to retool what we do for the sake of those who are not part of our congregations?

#### 2] They Recognize that People are very Diverse

In the past 50 years there has been a shift in our culture from Homogeneity to Diversity. We have great diversity in our pews today. This has prompted these large congregations to add diversity to programme and different styles of worship.

### 3] Blending is Emerging Everywhere in Worship

It can seem like there are only two ways to worship: traditional or contemporary. But Calgary's largest churches are exploring blended worship (define)

I visit these congregations when I'm on vacation, and I have seen:

- at Sunwest Mennonite Brethren they stood for the Gospel Reading
- One of our biggest Baptist Churches this year introduced a third service on Sunday to supplement their two contemporary services. The new one is Traditional
- First Alliance: last year this congregation committed to conducting all its services in a blended format. While the backbone of the service is contemporary, they also say The Apostle's Creed, litany prayers, responsive Psalm reading. Recently they have been exploring the theology of the Sacrament of the Last Supper to enhance it's meaning
- At another guitar-driven worship I attended, a quartet sang a Bach piece a cappella
- Electric Guitar fronted worship leading hymn singing
- Three reasons for this happening:
  - People are beginning to see that post-traditional worship has discarded things that root us with our historic Christian identity
  - Robert Webber is having an impact
  - And ultimately, people are finding it meaningful

The learning for PCC Large Churches: Blended worship has been promoted for a while,

- Appears now that people all over the theological map from whatever worship style they started with are now discovering blended worship
- As larger congregations we will have a great diversity of people in our pews. They will appreciate diversity in worship.

### 4] Worship for them is a "Peak Experience" for People

Sociologist Wade Clark Roof says that this was one of the most important trends coming out of the 1990's. Worship has made two shifts since WW2:

- Worship started as a "service" to God and an opportunity to provide information about the Christian faith
- The 1970's Shift: worship moved to become more of an "experience" with increased participation of people

(through singing OR liturgy OR Charismatic movement). Worship became a time not just to be educated but to be inspired

- The 1990's Shift: larger churches are turning worship into an "event" (moving from "quality" to having a "wow factor"). The biggest and best known churches are now the destination of (essentially) pilgrimages

For large PCC congregations: we have the resources to do this compared to congregations that are smaller

I'm talking about worship that is five star worship (like hotel or restaurant)

- What are visitors attracted by?
- If we're honest, what do we want in our own worship?
- Ultimately, it is WORSHIP... and what does God deserve?

5] There has been a Shift from the Dividing Line Being Mainline vs. Evangelical to the Dividing Line being Common Purpose – Future Oriented vs. Not

- There has been a great divide in Protestant Christianity on the theological spectrum, between the "mainline" and "evangelical"
- This still exists....
- BUT THERE IS SOMETHING NEW EMERGING AND IT IS VISIBLE IN THE LARGE CHURCH. THERE IS A GROWING AWARENESS AND URGENCY ABOUT HOW DRAMATIC SOCIAL CHANGE IS. THE EMERGING DIVIDING LINE IS ABOUT THIS DICHOTOMY: CHURCHES THAT ARE FUTURE-ORIENTED AND HAVE COMMON PURPOSE vs. THOSE THAT DO NOT
- This is clearly evident in the large churches because they generally see themselves as being a future-oriented new phenomenon.
- But it is not just Large Churches. You can see this sense of commonality of purpose around different programs. For example, congregations of all denominational stripes now find common purpose in mission:
  - Eg. Calgary Dream Centre (A mission work of First Assembly Pentecostal in Calgary. It provides transitional housing and residence-based programs around life change for street people. The biggest supporters of this centre outside First Assembly are the Roman Catholics and the Anglicans)
  - Alpha
  - Stephen Ministry

- In From the Cold
- Habitat
- Natural Church Development

Purpose and Pragmatics is creating new points of commonality

- The new dividing line: churches that “get it” and want to go vs. those who don’t

The question for our large churches: do we see ourselves as having a future – oriented, significant purpose for our congregation?

## 6] They Engage in Size-based Networking vs. Denominational Dependence

- Large, future oriented congregations tend not to feel comfortable in the nest they were born in:
  - At Sunwest, First Nazarene, Centre Street, they feel like foreigners in their denomination. They appreciate that they are different because of their size.
  - Larger churches are talking across denominational to each other because of the commonality of size. This discussion is becoming more meaningful for them than denominational ties (because their denominations, like ours are culturally oriented more for small church)
  - Organizations like Willow Creek Association and the Leadership Network have become answers to this need.

In fact, these congregations have dropped aspects of their denominational heritage that they have decided are unhelpful:

- This is beyond dropping denominational name
- Eg. Westside King’s (Pentecostal) does not speak in tongues during worship
- Sunwest Mennonite had dropped ALL Mennonite / Anabaptist Doctrine
- The Calgary Herald Newspaper ran a large article recently on Central United, in which the Lead Minister confessed that his congregation and his denomination no longer know how to talk to each other. This congregation is part “Crystal Cathedral” part social agency.
- Bow Valley / Country Hills Church (#5 in Calgary) merged two congregations across denominational lines (Baptist and Alliance) because of their shared sense of mission.

What is the learning for us?

- Have we discovered partner congregations to network with who look like us?
- Do we still look to our denomination to resource large churches, when our denomination is substantially one of small congregations?
- Can we learn more about being large church DIRECTLY from our own congregations like Trinity Oro, St. Andrew's Lakeshore in Windsor and Oakridge in London?
- Can we learn more about being large church from other large churches outside our denomination?

## 7] They have an Orientation around Mission

Management of the large, diverse organization that the large church is can also lead to them becoming insular. We can be so busy keeping our busy church life going that we don't think much about mission. Mission can become something our churches do indirectly

- We raise funds for Presbyterians Sharing, PWS&D
- But the lack of personal connect can mean this kind of mission involvement doesn't enliven us

A growing number of congregations are discovering that a central orientation around mission can be enlivening. In fact, this was in part the cause for the remarkable growth of several of these large churches in Calgary. Mission-minded churches of particular note in Calgary are:

- Central United: was a declining downtown mainline church until it chose to have a deliberate, hands-on mission to those in need in the city core. This congregation has attracted many Calgarians who want to be involved in this kind of work.
- Prince of Peace Lutheran: was a struggling, small congregation in the poorest neighbourhood in Calgary. They sold their building, moved outside the city, and build a Christian school. The congregation meets in the school. They have since built a condo complex for retired persons. They are now looking at building a nursing home. They are interested in building a Christian community that meets the needs of all people. This group of 50 that built the school has grown into a congregation of about 250.
- Bow Valley – Country Hills Alliance: banded together because they both shared a common dream of becoming Calgary's first multi-campus congregation.
- Grace Presbyterian, Calgary has become very energized by becoming very involved in "hands-on" mission
- Calgary's largest churches make evangelism their primary mission orientation.

Congregations like this are learning that discovering one's God given mission is not only honouring God but it also benefits the congregation's life.

8] They have a Clear sense of Identity internally and clear community image locally

- Growing diversity in our congregations naturally dismantles common identity
- Mission and purpose drift is common in churches today
- The diverse activity all going at once in a large church is like a centrifugal force, which seems to spin everyone away from the center
- This creates a weakening of congregational identity for self understanding and community image

Calgary's large congregations

- Find it essential to state formally:
  - what they stand for
  - their vision for the future
  - their values for living
- This helps build a point of commonality and creates a consistent image for the wider community served

## **Wrap Up**

This is a collection of 8 learnings which are generalizations. Perhaps they are not the most important learnings for us. You may find some of the things the new large church is doing fascinating or repulsive. But the growing prominence of these congregations is teaching us something about the Canadian public who choose to go to worship. As a minimum, the new large church experience prompts us to ask ourselves some questions about our large church experience:

1. How much are we working from a Producer's Agenda or a Consumer's Agenda? What is your balance between following tradition vs. responding to current needs and preferences?
2. Does your congregation assume homogeneity or diversity? How much does your church recognize and respond to the diversity that exists within your congregation now and in your local neighbourhood?
3. Are you intentional about blending traditional and contemporary elements in worship? Do you provide different worship options?

4. Are you working towards a very high quality worship service with that has a “wow” factor?
5. Does your congregation get the realities of rapid social change, and are you responding in a future-oriented way?
6. Do you connect with other large congregations who are on the same journey as you are, for mutual encouragement and learning?
7. Are you working towards a strong mission focus which is fulfilling of God’s calling and also enlivening for your congregation?
8. Has your congregation articulated your sense of identity, to build both a common core within your congregational life and to be a sharable image to your community?

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