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THROUGH A CLEAR WINDOW:  
THE 2021 CENSUS HELPS US SEE CHRISTIANITY  
IN CANADA TODAY

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It is not because of the pandemic. You might think it is, and that is understandable. The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly made it challenging for many congregations. Congregational life was severely disrupted by the abrupt need to cease in-person worship in March 2020. What we imagined might be for a few weeks ended up being for much, much longer. There was no one moment where we could all declare our churches “open.” There was a long, confusing process with changing requirements along the way, different comfort levels for attending (both by ministers, priests and pastors, and members of the congregation), and false starts as new variants forced renewed restrictions to be imposed. After a turbulent period, congregations are back to in-person worship. But things are not the same. Anecdotally, I have heard of many situations where congregational attendance is only gradually coming back to what it was prior to March 2020. Some people seem quite happy to continue to worship remotely rather than in-person. The impact on the number of children present in worship seems particularly striking. Minister colleagues who reported having some children present each Sunday before March 2020 now note that on most Sundays, it is simply adults. Clearly, the pandemic had an impact. One can argue that it has sped up the challenges congregations were already facing. But—and this is important to pause and remember—it did not create those changes. The larger demographic shifts were well underway before the pandemic hit. The number of congregations deciding they are no longer financially viable may have been accelerated by the pandemic; the root causes

have been there for years. We may now be experiencing a tipping point in congregational viability. But, the roots of this go back decades.

The dramatic changes in the place of Christianity within Canada were made clear when the results of the 2021 census were published in October 2022. The Statistics Canada report, “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” focused, as the title suggested, on the ethnic, cultural, racial and religious diversity of Canada. Religion was one of the major subheadings: “Religion: another facet of diversity in Canada.”<sup>1</sup> Christians, the report noted, remained the largest religious group in Canada. This remained true even though these numbers were decreasing, while the numbers of those of other religious traditions were increasing.<sup>2</sup> Those who reported that they had “no religious affiliation” or a “secular perspective (atheist, agnostic, humanist and other secular perspectives)” was the other group that experienced dramatic growth.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, those Canadians with no religious affiliation now represented 34.6 percent of the population, up from 23.9 percent a decade previously in 2011, and 16.5 percent the decade before that 2001.<sup>4</sup> The other data that emerged from the 2021 census confirmed this picture that long-term trends were continuing. Another publication of Statistics Canada released earlier in the year, “The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Religiosity of Canadians,” confirmed that, while the pandemic had a clear impact on religious groups in

1. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 11–16. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

2. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 12. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

3. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 13. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

4. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 13. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

Canada, that impact was limited.<sup>5</sup> Put directly, the pandemic had an impact: but the trends already in place largely continued. There was, as one of the subheadings noted “no visible effect of the pandemic on religious affiliation trends.”<sup>6</sup>

The data published in the report on the 2021 census confirmed what scholars had already been noting about the changing place of Christianity in Canada. As one of the co-authors of *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945*, it was interesting to see how new data reinforced many of the conclusions we had reached. The picture has become even clearer. Those claiming “no religion” are here to stay and a significant feature of the Canadian religious landscape. In contrast, every recognizable major Christian religious tradition in the country, with only one exception, has seen a decline in the number in the number of Canadians affiliated with that tradition. (See Table 1).<sup>7</sup> Overall those who identified as Christians declined from 22.1 million to 19.3 million (or -12 percent). That decline was reflected across the various Christian traditions from the United Church (-40 percent) to the Pentecostals (-17 percent), from the Baptists (-31 percent) to the Lutherans (-31 percent), and included the Latter Day Saints (-50 percent), the Anglicans (-30 percent), and the Presbyterians (-36 percent). The only identifiable tradition which experienced growth was the Orthodox who saw their numbers grow by about 75,000 or 13 percent. Immigration, one can reasonably assume, is a major factor in this growth. Finally, the Canadians who simply

5. Lacasse and Cornelissen, “The impact of the COVID-19.” This report gives excellent information on the particular impacts of the pandemic on practice and other issues.

6. Lacasse and Cornelissen, “The impact of the COVID-19,” 8.

7. Statistics Canada, Table 98-10-0343-01 “Religion by immigrant status and period of immigration and place of birth: Canada, provinces and territories,” Released 2022-10-26, was used in this analysis. Table 98-10-0342-01, “Religion by visible minority and generation status: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations with parts,” Released 2022-10-26, gives further detail on the smaller traditions which make up some of these larger traditions (for example, the Canadian Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church are two of the traditions within the broader category of Reformed). The current paper focused on the main categories and those groups which could be compared to the 2011 census data.

told the census they were “Christian” (with no further qualification or identified denomination) exploded—again. This group, which was about 1.5 million strong in 2011, is now approximately 2.7 million strong, a growth rate of 87 percent. More research on this group is needed and will undoubtedly take place. In the meantime, caution should be exercised. Our research on the census to 2011 discovered that this was a far more complex and diverse group than is often assumed.<sup>8</sup> It is also worth remembering that, despite this group’s growth, the overall number of those who identified as Christians in Canada nevertheless declined by over 2.7 million affiliates.

The change over the last twenty years is dramatic. The Statistics Canada report on the religious data in the 2021 census provides evidence of some striking changes. At the same time, this twenty-year time frame is simply inadequate if we want to truly understand and appreciate how dramatic a change this really represents. As reported in the census, those Canadians with no religious affiliation now stand at 35 percent of the population, more than double what was reported twenty years ago. Yet, what we really need to understand and appreciate was that this figure was consistently below 1 percent of the Canadian population up to and including the 1961 census. Even when the census changed from being done by personal interviews to being anonymous in 1971, that number had only grown to 4 percent. To understand the dramatic shift in religiosity in Canada, comparisons are needed to the time when Christian affiliation was strong in Canada—in particular, the 1950s and early 1960s. The change over the last sixty years becomes even more apparent when we consider a longer time scale.

8. Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*.

Denomination/Tradition	2011	2021	% Growth/decline
Catholic	12810710	10880360	-15%
Christian Orthodox	550965	623005	<b>13%</b>
United Church	2007615	1214185	-40%
Anglican Church	1631845	1134310	-30%
Presbyterian	473380	301400	-36%
Lutheran	478185	328045	-31%
Baptist	635840	436940	-31%
Pentecostal and other charismatic	478705	399030	-17%
Jehovah's Witness	137775	137255	0%
Latter Day Saints	175880	87725	-50%
Reformed	102825	79870	-22%
Christian (not otherwise specified)	1475575	2760755	<b>87%</b>
Christian	22102480	19373330	-12%
no religion	7850610	12577475	<b>60%</b>

**Table 1: Percentage change of selected Christian traditions, Christians, and no religious affiliation—2011 and 2021. Source: 2021 census data Table 98-10-0343-01, released 2022-10-26; 2011 census.**

Christians in Canada have become a much smaller percentage of the overall population. In some traditions, they have also become much older. What is striking in the data provided in the 2021 census is how much younger those without a religious affiliation are. As Figure 1 shows, the percentage of those with no reli-

gion in the younger cohorts (under 44) exceed the percentage of the total population in these cohorts. Put simply, those with no religion are younger. This is not news but is further confirmation of this trend.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Canadians who have a Christian identity seem to skew older. This is clearly the case in terms of the United Church of Canada (Figure 2). The United Church has few affiliates in the cohorts below 35–44. The percentage of the United Church affiliates in each of these cohorts is strikingly less than what one finds within the total Canadian population. This continues to be true, though not as dramatically, in the 45–54 age cohort. Indeed, it is clear that the majority of United Church affiliates are over 55, dramatically more as a percentage of the institution than is the case for the total population in Canada. The 2021 census dramatically confirms what many have observed about who is in the pews of this denomination's congregations. But it is important to recognize that it has not always been this way. As Brian Clarke and I demonstrated in *Leaving Christianity*, in 1961 the United Church of Canada's census affiliates fit very closely the age profile of the Canadian population. There were the same percentage of young people in the United Church as there were in the population.<sup>10</sup> We also noted that this had changed by 2001, with United Church affiliates being significantly older.<sup>11</sup> What the data from 2021 does is confirm that this trend is continuing, even intensifying. What this also confirms, then, is that what we are witnessing in at least some Christian traditions is generationally driven change. Those who were affiliates of the United Church of Canada in 1961 have not left, they have simply become older. Younger Canadians, including those baptized in the United Church, failed to become life-long affiliates of that denomination. Note again that this began more than twenty years ago. Indeed, data suggests that this rupture happened—for whatever reason or series of reasons—in the mid-1960s.<sup>12</sup> Is the United Church unique in this re-

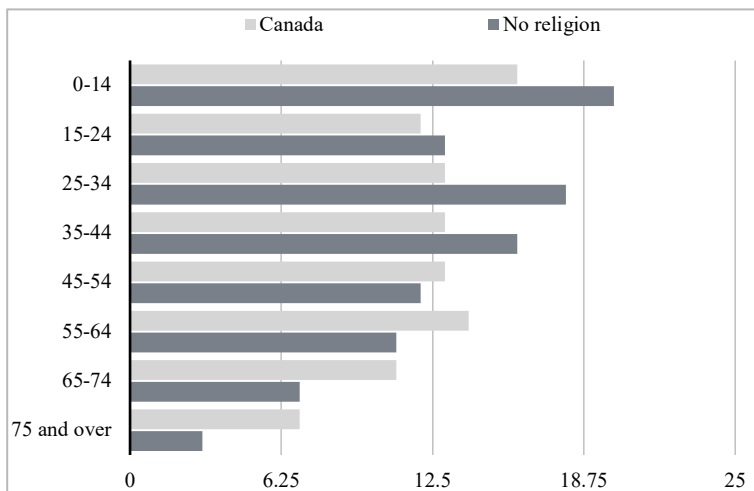
9. Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 169–73.

10. Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 38 (Figure 1.1).

11. Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 39 (Figure 1.2). The discussion is on pp. 37–38.

12. Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 53–55, 197–231. Flatt, *After Evangelicalism*.

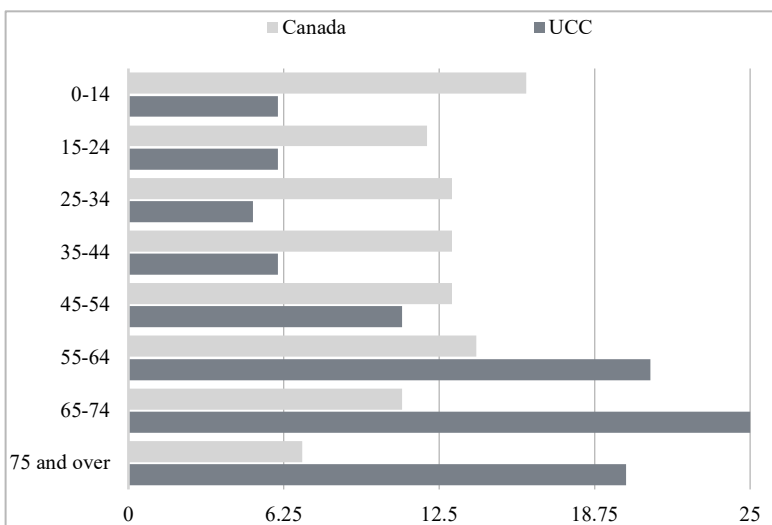
gard? Or is it merely an example of this trend, one that other denominations or traditions might want to consider, not merely anecdotally, but using the data available through the census?



**Figure 1:** Percentage of Canadian population, and those indicating no religion, in age cohorts in 2021 census. Source: 2021 census data Table 98-10-0343-01, released 2022-10-26.

Data from the 2021 census brings into even sharper focus the changed place of the Christian tradition in Canada. The pandemic may have accelerated the situation, but the trends have been developing over decades. Canada is different, not only from what it was twenty years ago but even more so from the early post-WWII era that saw a religious revival and expansion of Christian affiliations, memberships, and institutions. That Canada is long gone. While we may gain insights from further research—for example into the age profiles of specific denominations, or a better understanding of who exactly is in the category of “Christian” in the census—the broad picture is clear. We are a post-Christendom, post-Christian country. Similar trends seem to be emerging in the United States. While it will be interesting to learn more about “The Great De-

churching,” to use the phrase Jim Davis and Michael Graham have applied to the American situation, Canadians should be cautious in assuming that this reflects our experience.<sup>13</sup> The growth of those stating they had “no religion” started earlier in Canada and seems much more entrenched. Canadians need to focus on the excellent work that has been done over the last decade on religious change in this country, including suggestions of how we need to respond to this change. It is time to stop denying and start adapting. I am deeply appreciative of Lee Beach’s *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom*.<sup>14</sup> This book takes our changed situation seriously. This needs to be the starting point for congregations and denominations: taking the situation seriously and moving forward in faith.



**Figure 2: Percentage of Canadian population, and those indicating United Church of Canada (UCC), in age cohorts in 2021 census. Source: 2021 census data Table 98-10-0343-01, released 2022-10-26.**

13. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*.

14. Beach, *The Church in Exile*.



Trying to move back to what is remembered as a golden age (which, indeed, may have existed) is not helpful. Nor is it possible. The 2021 census data on religion confirms that we are in a vastly different Canada. It is time to accept this and move forward.

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