

THE 2021 CENSUS PANEL:  
REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

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The world is big, and we are small. This is the impression one might be left with when reading the report on religious habits in the 2021 Canadian census and the articles that make up this edition of *Post-Christendom Studies*. If you are a pastor, seminary or Christian college professor, church leader or an interested layperson, it is hard to avoid the idea that the trends reported in the census and reflected on in the articles can leave you feeling like you are tasked with the job of trying to sweep the ocean away with a broom. The trends are large, and they just keep coming with no sense of abatement. They challenge us with questions like: What do we need to know? How do we respond? Thankfully the writers and thinkers who have contributed to this volume have provided both useful analysis of the data and some important thinking on the questions of practice. This article summarizes some of the key ideas that emerge from the various contributions made by the scholars who have contributed to this edition of the journal.

First, there is an overall tenor of hope and optimism that permeates the articles. Despite the reality of demographic trends that speak of a steep decline in the attendance, interest, and overall resources in the traditional church in Canada and every other Western nation, there is a profound sense of hope that the authors offer to us collectively in this issue. For example, Lynne Taylor invites us to see the contextual realities of the Western church as a condition rather than a problem. Problems are something to be solved, but a condition can be a changed circumstance that brings a new reality. It is something that must be worked with rather than solved. Likewise, Stuart Macdonald calls for an honest but hopeful engagement with things as they are as a way forward. There is

no hope in trying to reclaim now-long past cultural realities in terms of people's relationship with Christianity. Instead, we must find constructive ways to work with what is in front of us. Mark Noll's article fuels this hopeful disposition when he points out that Christians arguing for a general tolerance of all religions is much more fruitful as a strategy for preserving the place of Christianity than a defense of Christianity as having a special place of privilege. He also points to the development of Indigenous and Hispanic (in the United States) forms of Christianity that are particular to each group and somewhat separate from Western hegemonic forms as a sign of promise.

Each of these is an example of the idea that those who maintain Christian faith today have reason to remain hopeful about the future of the church in society. The job of church leaders is to find ways to cultivate hope in the life of local congregations and faith communities by faithfully communicating a message that reflects a positive future for the church and developing new initiatives that embody the gospel of Christ in ways that are contextually relevant. Even in times of trouble and turmoil, the work of leadership is to provide hope for the future. One cannot read these articles without getting a sense that there is an unmistakable thread of hope that runs through each one of them.

A second and related idea that comes through in the articles is that the church needs to embrace the cultural changes in religious affiliation and work with them and not against them. Anna Robbins is clear on this point when she reminds us that our identity cannot be formed simply by identifying our enemy or by not recognizing that a whole generation of people has been raised in a culture that the 2021 Canadian census reflects. Further, James Robertson avers that perhaps the non-religious today are not abandoning God but rather finding their spiritual desires fulfilled in a way that no longer requires old structures. Jay Mowchenko, drawing on the work of Randy Woodley, goes even further by offering the idea that perhaps the church is in need of a conversion of its own. One that helps it see that it has much to learn from those who identify themselves as "nones" or "dones" and that by opening ourselves up to their experiences and insights, we may find our own faith enriched and our ability to share our faith enhanced.

Mowchenko reflects the wisdom offered in other articles when he writes, “what if the decline of the Christian institutional church in Canada is serving to bring the people of God closer to the posture and mind of Jesus?”<sup>1</sup> This is a provocative but substantial point. It reiterates the need for the church in Post-Christendom to not give in to fear or rail against the “secularizing” powers that prevail on the one hand but then also not fall into a defeatist complacency on the other. Engagement with the world is still the church’s calling, but we must work with what we have and where we are rather than wish for something else. These are the times in which we live, and it is a good thing to be here.

Third, and once again building on the previous point, the articles, as a whole, suggest that perhaps this shift may be part of a divine plan in order for the church to rediscover its true identity. Again, Mowchenko is most direct on this point as he wonders about the possibility of whether or not this decline is even meant to be reversed. Could it be that our overarching desire to reverse the downward slide is a sign that we have bought wholeheartedly into the narrative that numbers, abundant resources, and societal influence are the marks of true success? Mark Cartledge says it clearly in his article: “The church has grown and declined over the centuries, and her experience has been mixed and inevitably so. Personally, I am more concerned with authenticity and identity. The church, in all of her diversity, must be herself first and foremost.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, as in other historical epochs, a time of immense cultural and religious change that seems to be a threat to the Christian faith (or the faith of ancient Israel) can become a time of renewal as the church is forced to reflect on its true identity and beliefs. This kind of reflection can provide a way forward to an even better future if it is done thoughtfully and courageously.

A fourth area of emphasis that a number of the authors explore is the need for the church in Canada, as in other Western countries, to figure out how to better include, respect and work with new immigrants. It is these newcomers whose churches are currently the one overall source of growth for the Christian faith in most, if not

1. Found on p. 49 of this edition of *Post-Christendom Studies*.
2. Found on p. 89 of this edition of *Post-Christendom Studies*.

all, Western countries. Sam Reimer's article places some emphasis on this hopeful stream, and Tarus and Barron also provide a robust argument for the need for the Western church to make room for Christians from Africa, Asia, South America, and other places where the church is flourishing. Many of the new immigrants to Canada identify as Christian. It is one thing to celebrate the fact that they start their own churches that reflect their culture and brand of Christian faith; it is quite another for the churches in their new homeland to welcome them and find ways to learn from them and incorporate their gifts and talents into the life and leadership of the local, regional, and national life of the existing church. Of course, there is a live question as to *how* the distinctives of Southern world Christianity are contextually amenable to the global North. But this is an issue to be explored rather than to be feared, and it may also lead to some fresh discoveries about the church's identity and how it can function as its best self.

The general tone of hope, the challenge to embrace the changes, the sense that this may be an opportunity for the church to recover its true calling, and the emphasis on the need to include and work alongside newcomers to Canada are only a few of the themes visible in these essays in *Post-Christendom Studies*. Readers could point to any number of others, such as how churches will respond to the LGBTQ+ issue and how this may contribute to how they are perceived in society as a whole. These are part of a much larger conversation that will require more reflection moving forward.

Simply put, the downward trend in religious affiliation is likely to continue. When Statistics Canada releases its 2031 census results, it seems improbable that the data will show anything other than more of the same. The church needs to evaluate and reflect on how it would like to respond. If the responses here are any indication, however, we should remain confident that there is a path forward—even if the world is big, and we are small.