

## **Religion by the Numbers** **by John Longhurst**

In 1965, theologian Harvey Cox wrote the book *The Secular City*. In it, he said, he wanted to “work out a theology for the ‘post-religious’ age that many sociologists had confidently assured us was coming.”

Boy, were they wrong.

If anything, the world seems to be more religious today than ever before. In this post-9/11 age, it seems there’s hardly a subject or issue that can be understood without some knowledge—however grudging—of religion.

In 1995, Cox acknowledged that things weren’t turning out the way he predicted. Religion, he wrote, “seems to have gained a new lease on life. Today, it is secularity, not spirituality, that may be headed for extinction . . . a religious renaissance is under way all over the globe.”

Here in Winnipeg, religion is still important for many people, whether it’s the thousands gathering each Sunday for worship at Springs Church, a few hundred Sikhs meeting at a local gurdwara or a few members of the Bahá’í faith meeting in a home.

Getting an accurate count of how many people go worship services on a weekly basis depends on which figures you use. Statistics Canada pegs it at 20 percent, while University of Lethbridge sociologist Reginald Bibby puts it at 26 percent. This means that between 137,000 to 178,000 Winnipeggers could be going to church, temple, mosque, synagogue, gurdwara or some other religious meeting place in the city every weekend.

That’s certainly less than it was in the 1940s, when two out of three Canadians went to church every Sunday, and less than in 1986, when 28 percent said they worshipped on a weekly basis.

But it’s still a sizeable number; what other activity in Winnipeg can you name that finds that many people doing the same thing every weekend—and with almost no advertising? The Bombers, Moose and symphony can only look on with envy.

“There is no other group activity in Canada that begins to compare with such a level of involvement,” says Bibby, who has been tracking religion in Canada since the mid-1970s. He adds that “total church service attendance on an average weekend surpasses a typical Grey Cup or Super Bowl television audience in Canada. It’s more than the total number of fans our six NHL teams combined draw in an entire season—with a fraction of the marketing, publicity and corporate support.”

And it’s not just seniors filling the pews; in his most recent book, *Restless Churches: How Canada’s Churches Can Contribute to the Emerging Religious Renaissance*. He

reports that young people are returning to worship services. In 1984, 23 percent of youth ages 15 to 19 reported attending weekly worship services; that figure dipped to 18 percent in 1992. Bibby expected it to fall again during his 2000 survey, but discovered that number of teens going to church had actually climbed to 22 percent.

Of course, that wouldn't surprise people who have found themselves fighting traffic outside Springs Church on Lagimodiere Boulevard on a Friday evening, when as many as 800 young people are leaving their youth service.

Bibby also found that increased attendance isn't limited to evangelical or conservative Protestant churches—the mainline denominations (Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United and Roman Catholic) are growing, too, with 56 percent of Catholics outside Quebec who attend infrequently saying they are open to greater involvement in their church. Among infrequent attenders to mainline Protestant services, 63 percent say the same thing.

As for the non-western religions, they're growing too, mostly through immigration. Between 1991-2001, 1.8 million immigrants came to Canada; 15 percent were Muslim, seven percent were Hindu and five percent were Sikhs.

What about here in Manitoba? According to the last census, there are 475,200 Protestants 292,970 Catholics, 6,900 Greek Orthodox, 4,600 Ukrainian Orthodox, 13,000 Jews, 5,000 Muslims, 5,745 Buddhists, 5,485 Sikhs and 3,840 Hindus.

An additional 201,800 people reported having no religion at all. Most of them—136,000—live in Winnipeg. But that doesn't mean they aren't spiritually inclined; a report released recently by Statistics Canada found that 53 percent of Canadians who don't go to worship services still engage in religious practices on a monthly basis, such as praying, meditating or taking a walk in the woods.

Observed Peter Wyatt of the United Church's Emmanuel College: "Lots of people are saying these days 'I'm not religious, but I'm a spiritual person.'" It's their way of saying, he says, "'I don't participate in so-called organized religion.'"

### **Biggest and Oldest**

Where do all those worshippers go? There are over 500 meeting places in the city—not including house churches, of which there are a number. But determining which of these is biggest isn't easy. Groups count members differently—some count anyone who identifies with the group, lives in the area or attends services on a regular basis. Others only count only those who formally take out membership, or who are baptized into the faith. This explains why some groups have thousands on the membership rolls, but only a few hundred in attendance at a worship service, while others have only a few hundred members but attendance of over 1,000.

Using attendance as a guideline, the largest gathering of worshippers in Winnipeg—and maybe in all of Canada—occurs each Sunday at Springs Church, where between 7,500 to 8,000 people meet each Sunday at one of the church's five locations.

Most Springs' attenders go to services at its church on Lagimodiere Boulevard. Others attend Springs services in Selkirk or Steinbach, or next door at the church's large youth facility, where they get a simulcast of the sermon on a big screen. Still more gather for Springs' services at nine community centres or other facilities in the downtown and north end areas.

The church is so big that the youth have their own building, next door to the main sanctuary. Called Springs 725, it features high-tech audio and visual systems for use during high-energy youth services.

After Springs, the next largest Christian worship centres are Church of the Rock, where about 1,500 meet for Saturday evening and Sunday morning services; Grant Memorial Baptist Church, which finds 1,400 people gathering at two regular services and a youth service each Sunday morning; and a similar number meeting each Sunday at Calvary Temple, a Pentecostal congregation that is one of Winnipeg's oldest evangelical churches.

The largest parish for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Winnipeg is St. Ignatius, with over 2,200 families. For the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, the largest churches are St. Paul, with 1,227 baptized members, and Grace, with 1,226.

The largest synagogue in the city—and in western Canada—is Shaarey Zedek, where over 3,000 people are members. Between 500-600 Sikhs gather weekly at the Gurudwara at the Sikh Society on Mollard Road. About 200-300 Hindus meet each Sunday at the Hindu Temple on St. Anne's Road.

As well, Winnipeg's Mennonites meet in 29 different churches; Jehovah's Witnesses gather in 22 different meeting places; members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints meet in five wards, or churches; and the city's 300 or so Bahá'ís meet at the Winnipeg Bahá'í Centre, or in local homes.

In terms of oldest places of worship, the oldest site of Christian worship in Winnipeg is St. John's Cathedral, off Main Street. The present church, built in 1926, marks the birthplace of the Anglican Church in western Canada in 1812; Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Winnipeg's downtown dates back to 1868.

The second oldest place of Christian worship in the city is Saint Boniface Cathedral, where a Roman Catholic chapel was constructed in 1818. The present cathedral, built in 1972, lies in the shadow of the cathedral built in 1905-06, which burned down in 1968.

For the United Church, which is the result of an amalgamation of Methodist and Presbyterian churches in 1925, the oldest continuing meeting place is the Little Britain

United Church, near Lockport, built between 1872 and 1874 as a Presbyterian Church. Augustine United, also known as the Village Church, was built in 1904; it is the oldest continuing United Church building still in use in Winnipeg. The congregation itself was formed in 1887.

Among non-Christian faith groups, Jews were the first to arrive in Winnipeg, with the first permanent Jewish settlers arriving in the city in 1877; the first synagogue was established in 1883 and the oldest synagogue still in use is Ashkenazie, established in 1922.

The first Muslims arrived in Manitoba in the early 1900s, while the first Buddhist temple was built in 1946.

All of this has to be kept in perspective, of course; when it comes to worshipping in Winnipeg, Aboriginal people started gathering at The Forks 6,000 years ago, long before anyone else was thinking about building a place of worship in what would one day become Winnipeg.

## **Good Works**

Going to worship regularly is a good thing, but it isn't the only—or even the best—indicator of religious commitment. All religions teach that faith is to be lived out in ways that help others, and make the world a better place.

The 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating found that 64 percent of Manitobans who volunteer have a religious affiliation, and that 32 percent of those attend worship services weekly. The survey also found that Manitobans who attended religious services more frequently gave more volunteer hours on average than other volunteers.

The survey also found that 41 percent of those who gave money cited religion as a reason for being charitable. And religious people give a lot of money; religious organizations received more than half of the total value of all donations made in Manitoba, but just 14 percent of the total number of donations.

But people of faith also donate freely to non-religious causes. The survey reported that people “who were affiliated with a community of worship, regularly attended weekly services, and who described themselves as ‘very religious’ were more likely to donate to social services than the rest of Canadians.”

It concluded by saying that “religious affiliation, attendance at a place of worship, and intensity of religious feeling were associated with both higher donor rates and larger donations among Canadian donors as a whole.”

Here in Winnipeg, some of the more prominent religious-motivated charities include the various ministries for the poor and homeless operated by the Salvation Army; Siloam

Mission, founded by the Church of the Nazarene; the work of inner city activist Harry Lehotsky, pastor of New Life Ministries; and Marymound, which offers an range of services for youth striving to overcome abuse, depression and family problems.

Other groups include Youth for Christ, which operates programs for at-risk youth; the House of Hesed, which provides housing and services to people with HIV/AIDS; and a plethora of other ministries, services, food banks, thrift stores and outreach programs that seek to make life a little less burdensome for people in Winnipeg.

On the international scene, Winnipeg is home to the head offices of three national relief and development agencies: Mennonite Central Committee, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank—one of the largest suppliers of privately-donated food in the world—and Canadian Lutheran World Relief.

### **The future**

Even with growing numbers of people no longer attending worship services on a regular basis, religion will never disappear in Manitoba—aging boomers, getting their first real glimpse of mortality, and wondering about things like the meaning and life and the afterlife, will see to that. But even without that, curiosity about spirituality and mystery will continue to captivate people, as evidenced by books like the Da Vinci Code.

But don't take my word for it; no less an authority than Manitoba Job Futures, a joint project of the federal and provincial governments, believes that religion has a good future in the province. According to the agency, employment prospects "for ministers of religion" in the province "are expected to be good in the 2006 to 2010 period."

Somebody's got to take care of all those aging boomers. After all, as a bumper sticker puts it: "Spirituality doesn't make hospital calls."