

Religion, Participation, and Charitable Giving:
an executive summary

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Introduction

The *Religion, Volunteering, and Charitable Giving* report examines the role of religious or faith communities in regards to two critically important activities: volunteering and charitable giving.¹ The analysis was built upon two very different sources of information. The first is the 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (NSGVP). It was carried out by Statistics Canada, which polled over 18,000 Canadians over the age of 15. The NSGVP is a joint project of Volunteer Canada, the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, Canadian Heritage, Statistics Canada, Health Canada, Human Resources Development Canada, and the Kahanoff Foundation's Nonprofit Sector Research Initiative. Subsequently, Volunteer Canada conducted a series of face-to-face interviews and focus groups across the country to supplement this wealth of statistical data. Their objective was to hear directly from representatives of Canada's faith groups on the types of charitable and outreach programs they are involved in, as well as, how they include volunteers in their endeavors.

¹ This Executive Summary is a synopsis of a more detailed, larger report. Although it captures the essence of the larger report, readers are encouraged to refer to the full report for a more complete analysis of findings.

Why take a closer look at the religious sector? Two reasons stand out:

Though representing only 14 per cent of the Canadian population over the age of 15, religiously active volunteers² make up 43 per cent of volunteers in Canada and account for a startling 50 per cent of all hours volunteered.

The 32 per cent of Canadians who are religiously active contribute 65 per cent of direct charitable donations. As one might expect, this group is responsible for 86 per cent of donations to religious bodies; yet even in the secular sector, the religiously active provide 42 per cent of the \$2.1 billion raised by direct giving.³

The 20 per cent of respondents who attend weekly services, together with the 12 per cent who attend at least monthly services number an impressive 7,334,377 Canadians over the age of 15. These religiously active individuals are already organized into a huge network of local, regional, and national organizations that are able to mobilize their constituencies quickly and effectively. To illustrate how large this network actually is, the Roman Catholic, United, and Baptist denominations have 5,706, 3,909, and 2,435 congregations respectively, while the Pentecostals have 1,441 congregations and Jews have 220.⁴ Faith communities are a potentially huge source of volunteers and charitable giving that we would be unwise to ignore.

The profile of the religiously active in Canada is not very different from other Canadians, given the size of the communities and their educational and income backgrounds. Just over half of this group (52 per cent) are Catholics. The Catholics make up 87 per cent of the religiously active in Quebec and a solid 43 per cent in the rest of Canada. Until recently, Canadian Protestantism was dominated by the Anglican and United churches, with lesser contributions from the Presbyterians and Lutherans. However, these Liberal or Mainline Protestants, to use the current terminology, now amount to only 20 per cent of religiously active Canadians. Almost as numerous are the 18 per cent of religious actives who are known as Conservative Protestants, who attend Baptist, Pentecostal and a host of other evangelical churches. The Conservatives are evangelical in nature and emphasize their efforts on individual change, while Mainline Protestants are open to other paths to salvation and stress the need for social reform. Non-Christians remain a 7 per cent minority among the religiously active; who are in turn a rich mix of Jewish, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and a few New Agers communities.

² Measured by monthly or more frequent attendance at religious services.

³ The religiously active group comprises Canadians who attend church weekly and those who attend at least once a month. The religiously inactive include those Canadians professing to no religion and those who claim a religious connection but never attend services.

⁴ 1997 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches. Nashville: Abingdon Press, pp. 248-250.

What did we discover about the religious sector and volunteering?

The NSGVP makes it abundantly clear that regular attendance at a religious service enhances the likelihood that Canadians will also be involved in volunteering.

Almost half (47 per cent) of all weekly attenders have volunteered in the past year; this falls to 36 per cent for monthly attenders, 28 per cent for those who attend rarely, and 26 per cent for non-attenders.

Not only do the religiously actives volunteer more frequently, we also see marked differences in the amount of time they dedicate.

Weekly church attenders devote an average of 197 hours a year to volunteering, which is far greater than the 135 hours contributed by those who never attend.

There is a predictable variation by age, income and education, but the religiously active in every sub-category are more likely to volunteer.

If all Canadians volunteered as much as the religiously active, the number of volunteers in Canada would rise 35 per cent from 7.4 million to 9.9 million and the total number of hours volunteered would rise 59 per cent from 1.1 billion to 1.7 billion. If all emulated the religiously inactive, Canadian volunteers would be reduced to 6 million and the total hours volunteered would fall to 0.8 billion.

The cynical perception that the religiously active predominately volunteer within the religious realm was effectively debunked by the survey. In fact, 79 per cent of religiously actives indicated that they generally volunteer outside of their religious domain. Even among weekly attenders who volunteer (73 per cent), more do so in secular agencies than in religious ones (55 per cent). Religiously inactive volunteers devote on average more hours (132) to secular associations than weekly attenders (113). But the higher volunteering rate of the religiously active ensures that they are responsible for a higher percentage (40 per cent) of all the hours devoted to secular agencies than the larger body of religious inactives (38 per cent).

What did we discover about the religious sector and charitable giving?

The average annual donation of weekly attenders (\$551) is more than four times greater than the \$126 average donation by the 42 per cent of Canadians who never attend religious services. Charitable giving by the religiously active is by no means confined to their religious world. In fact, the \$154 average donation by weekly attenders to secular charities is 47 per cent greater than the \$105 donation by non-attenders to the same agencies.

The net result is that the small 20 per cent of Canadians who attend weekly are the source of 53 per cent of Canada's total charitable givings.

If all Canadians gave as weekly attenders did, the total value of direct donations to the charitable and non-profit sector would double to over \$10 billion. However, total donations would fall to \$2.3 billion if all gave as non-attenders did.

Our Observations

There were several general observations that struck us during our encounters with faith communities across the country that are worth emphasizing. These include:

- All the major faiths in Canada stress the obligation to serve others and give to the needy.
- There is a vast physical plant of sanctuaries, halls, kitchens, and meeting rooms that faith communities build, maintain, and make available to voluntary and service organizations in every community and region in Canada.
- The professionally trained clergy in different faith communities number over 24,000 experienced counsellors, who are often called upon by Canadians in times of need.
- Many volunteers in faith communities cook, clean, fund-raise, mow lawns, maintain aging buildings, sit on committees, provide religious instruction, assist in services of worship, and get together for shared food and fellowship. Though seemingly mundane, the tasks performed by these volunteers sustain the physical plants, the material resources, the people, and the values that serve others. Their efforts contribute significantly to the provision of voluntary and charitable outreach.

Without our faith communities, all Canadians and our network of charities and non-profit organizations would drastically diminish.

We offer the following suggestions to stimulate discussion and action:

- Many specialized ministries of faith groups helping the homeless, elderly, and the like, expressed interest in knowing what other faith groups are doing so that they might share common experiences and better co-ordinate their activities. All these agencies were quick to stress that they did not want another level of bureaucracy imposed upon them, but they would welcome a forum where they could exchange ideas and information. Volunteer centres in larger urban areas might consider initiating this much needed process. Elsewhere, the local Councils of Churches may be effective.
- With few exceptions, we found that local clergy and religious leaders know very little about and have little communication with the local voluntary organization community.
- Faith communities do not want a stream of outside agencies speaking at the principle weekly service, where the focus is religious worship. However, most clergy indicated they would be very happy to insert announcements or calls for volunteers in their bulletins, which are distributed to all in attendance.

Conclusion

The impact of faith communities on our daily lives is phenomenal. Our daughters and sons may be happy participants in local guide or scout troops thanks to meeting spaces provided by a community church. We may have benefited from the counselling provided by our local pastor or been fed or sheltered during a crisis. A variety of agencies, programs and activities that we have come to depend on, perhaps exist in part due to monies, time or space provided by people active in our local churches, synagogues and places of worship. Yet, incredibly this is often taken for granted or has somehow fallen into our collective subconscious. If there is one undeniable impact that this study has, it has been an awakening to an incredibly valuable existing resource.

It is disconcerting to note the findings of Reginald Bibby, the acknowledged expert in the field, who cites surveys indicating that weekly attendance to religious services in Canada fell from 53 per cent in 1957 to 23 per cent in 1990. Attendance rates continued to fall in the 1990s but at a slower rate than before. Because there appears to be a correlation between religious activity and volunteering and charitable giving, there is perhaps an alarming possibility that this may lead to a decrease in volunteering and giving in Canada. We would do well then to pay more attention to the enormous contribution already made by the faith community, to tap into its great potential and to share in the concern about its diminishing role in society.