

Reading the Year Book

What Our Statistics Tell Us about the World We Live In

Preface

There are many ways of trying to understand the world we live in. Within the United Church, our concern for social justice means that we often use economic and political tools: empire and colonialism for example.

But when it comes to understanding the world our congregations are living in, I think it is more helpful to borrow from the world of arts, culture and community-based organizations. The particular changes in society that impact them also impact the church because we share many characteristics.

Like them, we too cannot exist without volunteers and a paying live audience / members.

And so this presentation offers a way of understanding how changes in our society have had – and are having – a dramatic impact on volunteering, belonging to communities, and attending live events.

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Presentation run time is 25 minutes.

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Introduction

Slide 1 Reading the Year Book.

What our statistics tell us about the world we live in.

Slide 2 Hi. My name is David Ewart. I retired as a United Church minister about 3 years ago.

Slide 3 And about 5 years before that, I started making slides of United Church of Canada Year Book data as a way to understand my experience of the United Church since the mid-1960's.

I have two slides of Year Book data I want to show you. But before I do that, I want to set the context.

Slide 4 Many years ago when I worked as a systems analyst with the Government of Manitoba, I became aware that if we didn't ask the right questions, we ended up trying to solve the wrong problems. Which is another way of saying, that if we only focused on the immediate issue without a correct understanding of the whole context, no matter how hard we worked nor how creative our solutions, we never achieved the results we were aiming for. Which is another way of saying, we ended up feeling that we had wasted a lot of time, money and effort.

Expending time, money, and energy on efforts that do not bear fruit often leads to the fatigue and complacency of, "We've done that before."

Slide 5 This presentation will help you understand why past efforts at re-vitalizing your congregation may not have had the hoped-for, long-term results. It will help you to stop trying to solve the wrong problems.

Slide 6 And will help get you working on what may be the more daunting task of responding to the new culture in which we live.

The church does not exist in a vacuum. It exists within a society. And today's world just does not do much of what we in the church take for granted.

Let's take a look at a few of the things that have come to be common in our world today.

A New Thing: Recording Technology

Slide 7 (Hold up LP) Let's begin by thinking about how the world we live in has changed in the past decades.

How did this piece of technology change our world?¹

¹ The following comments rip off and riff off an article by James K. A. Smith, "Alternative Liturgy: Social Media as Ritual," The Christian Century, February 20, 2013.

<http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-02/alternative-liturgy>

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Slide 8 The development of recording technology beginning in the 1800's, meant that for the first time in human history it was no longer necessary to be in the same room at the same time as the musicians.

Music became a non-local experience – we could listen to it anytime, anywhere, at the time and place of our choosing.

The ability to record sound and images has had a profound impact on music, theatre – and the church.

Aside: When was the first million selling record? 1907, by Enrico Caruso, "Vesti la giubba" (Victrola 88061). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdzbZBbN5tY>

Slide 9 But a record is not the same thing as the musicians. This record is not the Doors. So, instead of listening to an actual performance – having a direct experience – the music is mediated through the technology of the record.

Another New Thing or Two: The Internet – In Our Hand

Slide 10 (Hold up a smart phone) A few years ago, this technology (the touch screen phone) added a whole new dimension to Our World.

Whereas the record still required us to at least be in the same room as the record to hear the music, the internet-connected cell phone removed this limitation. A cell phone allows us to hear music from around the globe wherever we are.

We carry the globe in our hand, pocket, or purse.

Slide 11 Smart phones and tablets are also two-way devices – they allow us to be globally interactive.

When I sign on to Facebook, I am instantly able to connect to the billion other people who are also on Facebook. And they can connect with me.

A Fourth New Thing: The Touch Screen

Slide 12 Smart phones and tablets also introduced a whole new way of interacting with the technology – the touch screen – which primarily trains us to use sight and touch to interact with our world.

Touch has created a whole new form of physical interaction with the interface. Eye-hand coordination become the paramount senses.

This form of interacting with the technology creates a whole new level of "intimacy," of personal, physical involvement.

So much so that people report feeling lost, or naked, without their touch screen phone or tablet.

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In fact, let's start calling this new space the Touch Screen Space.

Aside: And if think this doesn't impact our expectations of how to interact with the rest of the world, check out this video of a toddler switching from an iPad to a magazine:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXV-yaFmQNk>

New Things Create New Ways of Being Human

Slide 13 Somewhat paradoxically, even though I am now interactively connected to the globe, because my experience and connections are mediated and non-local, I operate in this space as an isolated individual.

And so my sense of where authority lies is that it is within myself. I have unfettered authority to act in this space as I chose.

Slide 14 My imagination and expectations are shaped by this space.

Within this space, my hopes for the future typically use sight – vision – as the chief metaphor.

This “vision” of course is always personal, and individual. It is **MY** vision. Achieving any sense of **OUR** vision is often fleeting and fragile.

Unlike any other time in history, this new media allows spontaneous flash mobs to form.

But can it create long-term commitment to collective action? Not so much.

How Does Being A Congregation Compare with These New Things?

Slide 15 OK. So how do our congregations function? Are they not ... Local?

Being part of a congregation still means being in the same room at the same time as everyone else. Just like we had to do 125 years ago if we wanted to hear music.

Slide 16 Being local, means that the experience we have is direct, unmediated.

For better or worse, the preacher is in the room talking to us – and looking at us.

Slide 17 The congregation's connections are primarily to the neighbourhood. Larger congregations may extend to the immediate region.

Slide 18 When you come to worship, the experience is pre-structured. Someone else has pretty much picked all the words you will sing, speak, pray, and listen to.

Slide 19 And the primary senses for communication are speaking and hearing.

Slide 20 The way of being in this church space teaches me that authority is located outside of myself: in the Bible, God, Jesus, or the church.

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Slide 21 My imagination and expectations are shaped by this space. And my hopes for the future are formed by looking outside of myself. Or rather, not so much “looking” as listening for a call.

Slide 22 The world of the Touch Screen, forms us to be autonomous individuals.

Slide 23 The world of congregations forms us to be a covenant community. (Or at least that is what we tell ourselves.)

Three Populations, Three Conversations

Slide 24 Now in the world of the church, there are roughly three populations. Or three conversations about this new age of the Touch Screen Space.

Slide 25 Tourists. If you are over 60 you probably belong to this group.

Those of us who are tourists dabble in this Touch Screen Space.

We visit the popular destinations, and use them to enrich our experience. We Google, we email, we may Facebook, Skype and blog. We research our next trip and book flights and hotels.

But we really live off-line. We locate ourselves in the here and now.

Slide 26 And in our experience there is no problem going back and forth between these two spaces.

If you are part of this group, you are probably thinking this whole presentation has been boring. “What is the point of all this?” “What is the problem?”

Slide 27 Immigrants. I’m guessing that most of us between 40 and 60 might be immigrants to this Touch Screen Space.

We have become more or less fluent. We know the side roads and local thoroughfares. We live here.

We not only consume content, we create it.

And we know the true costs of creating content: the financial investment needed in technology, skill and expertise; the time needed to create content for the Touch Screen Space.

But every once in a while we get lost. And we can still remember another time and place we once called home. But we know there is no going back.

Slide 28 And we know there are significant issues in providing portals from the Touch Screen Space to Our Church.

If you are part of this group, everything I have said so far is making perfect sense to you. You may be thinking, “I wish everyone on my Church Board could hear this.”

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Slide 29 Natives. I'm guessing most natives to this space are under 40.

Those of us who are natives live in the Touch Screen Space; we move freely from app to app. We don't think of ourselves as either "consuming" or as "providing" content. We are connecting and sharing.

We live in the Touch Screen Space and are a tourist in the Church space. We take in the highlights: Christmas Eve and Easter. We go along with a parent, spouse, or friend to other special events: a wedding or a concert. But we don't live here. Don't really speak the language or live the lifestyle.

Slide 30 You know you are a native if everything I have said so far is boring. If you are thinking, "Yeah. So?"

In my experience there are very few Touch Screen natives in Our Church space who over the age of 20.

Impacts of Not Having a Shared Understanding of This New Technology

Slide 31 Now the fact that there are three populations about the Touch Screen Space, means the conversation within Our Church is very disconnected.

Slide 32 Two of the populations don't see that there is any problem.

So it is difficult to establish any form of serious engagement with this reality and engender sustained traction responding to this new space.

Slide 33 Consequently, our efforts become hit and miss, and it is difficult to maintain momentum.

Slide 34 Which leads – once more – to inevitable fatigue and burn out.

Been there, done that. Got the T-shirt, the books, and the scars.

How Has the New Technology Impacted the Church?

Slide 35 But the Touch Screen Space is here to stay. It is the present and future space in which we must be the church.

Let's pause a second and take a good look at this slide again, and ask the question, "What happens when someone from this Touch Screen Space walks into Our Church?"

Slide 36 That's right.

The answer is, "Fewer and fewer people from the Touch Screen Space are walking into Our Church."

Slide 37 As you see from this chart, weekly worship attendance has declined by 50% in 25 years; from slightly over 400,000 in 1985,

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- Slide 38 to 175,000 in 2010.
- Slide 39 And if nothings happens to change the trend of the past 10 years, worship attendance will plunge by 80% in the next 15 years to be 25,000 in 2025.
- Slide 40 25,000 is the number of people who went to church each week in Maritime Conference in 2010.
- Slide 41 In 15 years, it could be the number for all of Canada.
- Slide 42 This drastic decline in Weekly Worship Attendance is happening because there is just too big a disconnect between Touch Screen Space and Our Church.
- Slide 43 And this is not because we are doing something wrong.
- Slide 44 This is not our fault.
- Slide 45 This is not a problem that can be fixed by jazzing up what we do.
- Slide 46 The culture in which we are being the church has developed a different ethos – a different way of imagining and connecting that is not in harmony with the way we imagine and connect.
- Slide 47 When fewer people go to church, there are significant consequences.

Congregations become smaller. And fewer.
- Slide 48 As can be seen in this chart, the number of congregations with weekly worship attendance of more than 250 declined by 80% in the past 12 years, from 155 in 1999 to 27 in 2011.
- Slide 49 These larger congregations became medium ones, but the total number of medium congregations also declined by 20%, from 764 to 632.
- Slide 50 But congregations are also tenacious. They become smaller, but they do not close. And so we are becoming a denomination of small congregations.
- Slide 51 Taking a closer look at Small 1 Point Pastoral Charges, we can the dramatic increases that have taken place in the Very Small and Medium Small congregations from 1999 to 2011.
- Slide 52 Congregations of 50 or fewer now make up 40% of all 1 Point Pastoral Charges.
- Slide 53 These charts help us to understand the critical importance of the changes we have all been experiencing over the past 5 decades.
- [Worship Attendance Decline Is Not Sustainable](#)
- Slide 54 And as we ponder our future, we must consider a hard truth that environmental science teachers us:

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- Slide 55 When the environment changes, organisms must change
- Slide 56 Or die.
- Slide 57 The rate of decline of Weekly Worship Attendance
- Slide 58 Is simply not sustainable.
- Slide 59 This will have significant impacts on Our Church Budgets ...
- Slide 60 Buildings, and ...
- Slide 61 Payroll
- Slide 62 Congregations need to start planning now for a future of fewer people.
- Slide 63 Fewer buildings.
- Slide 64 And fewer staff

Responding to Changes in the Culture

- Slide 65 Because these changes are primarily driven by the culture we live in, we cannot fix the problems the changed culture has created for us.

Develop different **responses** to these changes? Yes.

But **fix** these changes? No. There is no going back to the “good old days” when church attendance was normal in our society.

In addition to all the good work that is being done to help us make internal changes to improve the health of congregations – problems that we can indeed fix if we choose to – we desperately need much more creative, collective, shared thinking about developing new ways of responding to the changed culture in which we live.

- Slide 66 With the exception of the few remaining larger congregations, the impacts of the changes to the culture in which we live are too big for each and every congregation to successfully respond to.

The culture in which we live will not provide the “inputs” that congregations need to thrive: sufficient people and money to pay the bills and keep the building maintained.

Our infrastructure of buildings and payroll was built for another age.

Smaller congregations especially need to experiment with new ways to be church without buildings – and with reduced or no payroll.

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Slide 67 Because the changes in the culture in which we live are too big for each congregation to deal with on their own, we are going to have to develop a spirit of regional cooperation that transcends our past of congregational independence.

Slide 68 There is no single future, plan, or model that will work for all congregations.

Our largest congregations have to respond to this new context in ways that are completely different than our smallest congregations.

And similarly, our smallest congregations can – and must- respond in ways that our largest ones should not even think about.

But I believe no one really knows now what will work – what the sure-fire, “do this and thrive” solution is.

And so we must support each other to experiment with the widest possible variety of responses.

New Questions for Thinking about This New Touch Screen Space

Slide 69 Looking at this slide again, we have to begin asking new questions about how Our Church can be sustained within this growing Touch Screen Space.

Slide 70 And for every question we have to ask, “Can we transition our tradition into this new space?”

Slide 71 Or, “How do we transition natives from this space into our traditions?”

Slide 72 For example.

If God is indeed present in all times and all spaces, just how is the Word manifested in Touch Screen Space?

Clearly, the Word cannot become flesh in this space. So what “texts” do we find in this space to read during a Season of Epiphany?

Or alternatively, what is the portal from Touch Screen Space into Church Space that provides the context, meaning and impact of “becoming flesh” for a Touch Screen native?

Slide 73 Surely a mark of the church as we know it is that we congregate.

Jesus has said that where two or three gather together in his name, he is with us.

Just what does that look like in Touch Screen Space?

Or alternatively, what is the portal from Touch Screen Space into Church Space that provides the context, meaning and impact of full-frontal bonding in real time?

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Slide 74 And just to make the issue more visceral.

How do we celebrate communion in Touch Screen Space?

Or alternatively, what is the portal from Touch Screen Space into Church Space that provides the context, meaning and impact of rooting the present-future by re-membering the past?

Slide 75 How do we ritually enact new life – new identity in Christ – in Touch Screen Space?

Or alternatively, what is the portal from Touch Screen Space into Church Space that provides the context, meaning and impact of being marked with a new family of origin?

Slide 76 I ask these questions to try and emphasize how the physicality of the things we take for granted creates complex and novel issues for being the Church in a Touch Screen Space.

Framework for Planning the Futures of Our Congregations

Slide 77 You will have other questions. And have other responses. But here are a few of mine just to spark the conversation.

Slide 78 There is no single future that we can all embark on together.

For example, there may be enough similarities between our largest congregations that it might make some sense for them to share ideas.

But it makes no sense whatsoever for our smallest congregations to imagine that their future will look anything like the larger ones.

There is also a vast gulf between the realities faced by rural congregations compared to urban ones.

We desperately need to become colleagues in diversity.

Slide 79 The recent spate of resources on revitalizing congregations are all doomed to fail if mission is undertaken as a strategy for survival.

If the church is to be an icon of God's love for the world, then it must love the world as God does.

God does not love the world in order to survive. God loves the world for the world's own sake – totally for the world's own good – without hesitation – without thought of payoff or return. The church must do the same and separate survival anxiety from its love for its neighbours.

Slide 80 Separating Mission from Survival will require the courage to plan live smaller – and more authentically.

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Whatever appeal our congregations will have to the Touch Screen Space, it will primarily be that we provide an authentic alternative of a local, face to face, religious AND spiritual community.

Slide 81 The future will not be static. It will require non-stop adjusting, creativity, and re-inventing ourselves.

Our planning and decision making will need to be nimble and winsome.

Slide 82 I believe one of the things that gives new life is to never cease telling self-correcting stories.

We are not the first to find ourselves in a wildness – to feel like we are in strange land – to wonder how to sing the Lord’s song in a new space.

But we also need to be careful that we don’t tell stories that are mere nostalgia.

I don’t believe that our best days are behind us. But I also know that our future will not be anything like our past or even our present.

Two Pearls of Wisdom

Slide 83 Finally, let me finish with two pieces of wisdom that I find encouraging.

Second Isaiah knew the desolation of being uprooted and being placed in unfamiliar territory.

Unlike Isaiah we haven’t been physically re-located. Instead we have become exiles in our own land, in our own homes.

But like Isaiah, we still have the same God who speaks and calls to us.

Slide 84 Is not the Touch Screen Space a new thing?

Slide 85 And finally, let us remember that embracing the new is our founding heritage.

Let’s Continue the Conversation

Slide 86 I’d love to hear your responses to this presentation.

Or even better meet with you and your congregation to talk about what this might mean for you.

Email: David Ewart at david@davidewart.ca.

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