

The World Changed in 1957 ... or Maybe It Was 1958

United Church of Canada Membership Following World War II

In hindsight, it often looks as though the world changed for the United Church of Canada in 1965. That was the year membership reached what turned out to be its peak of 1,064,000.¹

But signs of the cultural tsunami that would change Canada's religious landscape actually began to be evident in 1957 and 1958. These are the years when the first-born of the Baby Boom Generation graduated from Grade 6. And these are the years when lasting trends in membership first began to appear – again.

The United Church tracks 2 ways of adding to its membership and 2 ways of removing from its membership:

Adding by:

1. Profession of Faith – Persons who have never been a member of any other church. Typically these are teens who have been raised within the United Church.
2. Received by Certificate or Otherwise – Typically these are adults who are transferring their membership from another church.

Removing by:

1. Death
2. Removing by Certificate or Otherwise – Typically these are adults who are moving to another church, or persons that the Session has lost contact with or has otherwise decided that they have ceased to be a member.

Apart from death, the other 3 are all reflective of demographic and cultural changes that take place in Canada. And all of these seemed to have significant changes in 1945, and then began to correct themselves in 1957 or 1958.

Being received – or removed – by certificate reflects life choices and circumstances of adults. And from 1945² both of these increased to peaks 54,700 received, and 63,000 removed in 1957.³

However, the net loss of members in this way was more than made up by new members being added by Profession of Faith. New members joining the church grew from 25,500 in 1945 to what turned out to be the peak of 41,700 in 1958.

It is important to remember that this data is not about the Baby Boomers – it is about their mothers and fathers. After a decade of poverty of the Dirty Thirties and six years of World War, Canadians entered two decades of marrying, moving, and having babies⁴ – and a significant part of their new life was bringing their young families to church. Sunday School enrollment rose from 474,000 in 1945 to 731,000 in 1958.⁵

But in 1957 and 1958, just as the first-born of the Baby Boom Generation began to graduate from Grade 6, their parents began to “graduate” from church.

Whereas these parents had driven the rise in church membership in the decade following World War II, instead of continuing to go to church and being joined by their children as they completed the first years of Sunday School, the phenomenon that we still see today happened then:

Parents attend church in support of their children's religious education. But once the basic years are completed and the children graduate from Grade 6, often the children and their parents stop attending church.

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The response to the hardships of the Thirties and the war resulted in a boom that many of us in the church mistook as a trend.

If in fact there was a 15 year window of opportunity to truly entrench the value of life-long attending and belonging to a church in the lives of young adults and their children – that opportunity was lost.

And instead, at the first opportunity, the longer-standing utilitarian value of attending and belonging to church when needed and useful re-asserted itself.

I actually do not disparage in any way this utilitarian approach. This is after all what it means to be of service to others.

However, the boom from 1945 to 1957 or 1958 blinded those of us in the church to properly understand and respond to the wider culture.

Because we had been so busy all those years with the hordes of new people thronging through the front door without even being asked, we hadn't noticed the steady stream of people leaving through the back door.

When the boom ended and people continued to leave as they had always done – we mistakenly thought the problem was us.

And we've spent – no wasted – 50 years trying every new program or gimmick to renew and revitalize our churches. But it wasn't us; it was just people doing what they had always done – being who they had always been – coming to church when and if it was needed.

The problems this has created for those of us who do cherish life-long attending and belonging to a church are:

1. We haven't a clear idea or plan for encouraging others to also cherish life-long attending and belonging to a church. We just take it for granted and assume others will too.
2. Cherishing life-long attending and belonging to a church is not the reason for attending and belonging to a church. We too often and too easily forget this. We get busy with the many pleasant and necessary activities that keep our churches good places to attend and belong to – and forget that the single purpose of the church is to love the world.
3. We have inherited and continue to maintain buildings and budgets that were created for the boom. They will kill us if we don't soon figure out points 1 and 2 above.

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¹ All data is from The United Church of Canada Year Books. Numbers have been rounded.

² The first year for which this data is studied.

³ The net change of a loss of 8,300 members is typical of preceding years, but in the following years this gap would gradually grow to a loss of over 20,000 members each year during the 1969 to 1973 period. From 1945 to the present, the net change of members in this way has always been a loss.

⁴ Canadian births peaked in 1959 at 479,000 – an increase from 344,000 in 1946, the first year of the Baby Boom. In 1946, marriages jumped to 137,000 from 111,000 in 1945, then averaged just under 130,000 until the mid 60's.

⁵ And peaked a few years later at 757,000 in 1961.