

# United Church of Canada Trends - How We Got Here

Click [here](#) for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this post.

1965 was the peak of Membership in the United Church of Canada.

Between 1945 to 1965, UCCan Membership increased by 42% from 750,000 to 1,064,000.

If we had been able to maintain the 1945-1965 rate (see Foot Note 1) of growth from 1966 to 2005, our Membership would have been 1,789,000 by 2005. Our reported Membership for 2005 was 573,000 a decline of 46%.

Compared to where we thought we'd thought be in the 1960's, we are missing 1,200,000 members. Or, to put it another way, our congregations should have 3 times more members and attendance than we currently have.

However, when considered as a percentage of the total Canadian population, UCCan Membership actually declined from 1949 to 1965, from 6.0% to 5.4%. Thus, even during our post-war "boom," we were actually not keeping pace with the overall population increase and were already declining as a church. (See Foot Note 2)

In 2005, our Membership is 1.77% of the Canadian population. If this trend continues unchanged, we will be at 0.0% of the Canadian population by the year 2022.

## Reflections on These Trends

The church needs both people and money to exist. (See Foot Note 3)

From 1965 we have had a serious "people problem" with no adequate response. We have also had a money problem as donations fell off, but there has been a creative solution to this problem.

We owe a debt of gratitude to those who, from 1965 to the present, have made sacrificial commitments to overcome the adversity of these difficult financial trends, primarily by raising significant money from property income.

In 1965, our Sunday Schools were overflowing. It was natural to assume that as these children grew, they would join the church – adding to our numbers; get married – even more members; get jobs – adding to our receipts; and have children – keeping the need for large Sunday School spaces.

Instead, almost the reverse happened. When the Sunday School kids grew up, they left the church and so did many of their parents. Numbers and finances plummeted.

The boom period following the Second World War contained within it the seed of a "people problem" that no one recognized:

We were not helping people actually experience and enjoy the presence of God in their lives as a life-long journey. We were not helping them learn and follow the personal discipleship practices that the ancient church has long taught as being crucial to having intimacy with God.

We thought of the church as a voluntary membership organization, and not as a voluntary discipleship movement. We provided good programs and services, but when these had met their need, people left.

Once the "people problem" was recognized, we had no effective response since we still approached it as a membership type of problem. Voluntary membership organizations of all types have been in steady decline for as long as we have.

The "people problem" will be enormously difficult to address since the skills, knowledge, experience and practices that might address it have been absent from our actual experience as a church for at least 3 generations. The learning curve to acquire these resources will be steep and will require patient and persistent learning over the long haul. (See below for my list of the skills, knowledge, experience and practices that I believe we need to begin acquiring immediately.)

However, thanks to creative fund raising activities and income from property rentals, we did find a solution to the money shortfalls that arose as donations declined.

The dilemma as I see it is that if we do not reverse the “people” trends, we are headed towards a future of well-maintained, but empty, properties which will be sold and redeveloped.

And, even more vexing, as numbers decline, the burden (in terms of both volunteer time and labour, and expenses) of operating and maintaining properties falls on fewer and fewer shoulders.

This burden falls on those whose life of sacrificial commitment has kept the church alive for decades, but whose continuing commitment to the same way of responding (through fund raising and property income), may in fact preserve a legacy whose requirements of time and money become too great, and lead to the church to collapsing.

Properties are liabilities as well as assets. We often under-estimate the real costs of owning and operating properties: volunteer time and donations; operating costs such as utilities, insurance, etc.; minor and major capital maintenance costs that build up whether the work is done or not.

Often, the financial problems of churches could be dealt with at much lower cost of volunteer time and anxiety if properties were sold or redeveloped, and the proceeds wisely invested to provide income for the long-term.

I believe we are at a tipping point. That is, we currently have the strength and resources to repair and operate our properties, but continuing to do so will create a burden that within a short time (perhaps 10 or 15 years), will be too great for those who are part of the congregation to cope with.

We need to address the “people problem” with creativity and the same sacrificial commitment with which we have tackled the property and finance problems.

Fortunately, there have been several trends emerging that give signs of hope for actually addressing this downward trend. They lift up ancient Christian practices for deepening a healthy intimacy with God: actually experiencing and enjoying God’s presence in our lives; and more recent insights for deepening healthy self-understanding and relationships with family and neighbours.

I would point to the following beacons of hope:

- **Emergent Church** – Diana Butler Bass, “Christianity for the Rest of Us.” Studies how real live mainstream liberal congregations have adapted ancient Christian spiritual disciplines into their way of being church.
- **Process Theology** – John Cobb and others. Provides a way of making sense of beliefs about God in light of modern science’s discoveries.
- **Emotional Intelligence** – Daniel Goleman and others. Provides ground breaking new understandings of “difficult emotions” such as anger, fear and anxiety and how to respond in new ways that promote healthy relationships.
- **Family Systems Theory** – Murray Bowen and others. Provides new insights into how patterns of behaviour become entrenched in social relations, and cause these patterns to be repeated even when new people become part of the relationships.
- **Adaptive Leadership** – Ronald Heifetz and others. Provides helpful, practical advice about what is needed and helpful in situations where the way forward is not clear.
- **Biblical Contextual Studies** – Bruce Malina and others. Provides crucial new awareness of the social context of the Bible – very different than our own. Cracks open and radicalizes “what the Bible is saying to us.”

David Ewart,  
[www.davidewart.ca](http://www.davidewart.ca)

Foot Notes:

1. Statements in this document about possible futures are based on a "least squares" statistical calculation using data for all the years reported, and not just comparing the two years mentioned.

2. Canadian population data did not include Newfoundland prior to 1949, whereas United Church Membership did. So comparisons between the two are made from 1949 and not 1945 as with other data.

3. Obviously the church may "exist" and not really be a "church." That is, it may not be a place or community where the gospel of Jesus Christ is made known. But on the other hand, if the church does not exist as a place and a community, then the gospel cannot be made known. And in Canada, existing as a community and a place requires people and money.