

THE GREAT TRAGEDY AND POTENTIAL OF THE UNITED CHURCH IN CANADA

Christian Commitment Research Institute, Ottawa Canada

Religious Commitment Note 31

September 2011

A personal note. In the spring of 1948 Hugh and Alice Jones and their children moved into the old farm of Barbara Heck, founder of Methodism in North America, northwest of Prescott. They began attending *Victoria United Church*, Maynard, less than half a mile to the east, and found a lively “Mission Band” there for the three children. To a youngster it seemed a very committed church and most farm children in the area attended regularly. Around 1955 the family began to attend the Anglican Church, but a love of the United Church remained with me (Frank). So it was with sadness that I read the excellent thesis of Dr Kevin Flatt which addresses the rapid decline. Dr Zhang found it valuable too, and we were not surprised to hear that a book is in the works based on his thesis.

The great tragedy: major decline. Dramatic decline in numbers began in the 1960s and continues to this day. Sunday school membership, for example, dropped from 610,000 in 1965 to 87,000 in 2006, and is projected to be fewer than 40,000 in 2020. Membership fell from 1,064,000 in 1965 to 558,000 in 2006. The graph below shows the startling decline in the total and Sunday school membership. We have fitted mathematical curves to these numbers, obtaining striking degrees of fit. Membership is declining at an increasing rate. Sunday school membership is declining at a decreasing rate, though the reason for the smoother declining rate may simply be that the decline was so sharp in the earlier years.

The cause of the decline. It is tempting console ourselves by concluding that the decline is merely a sign of the times, but this does not explain the fact that such a decline is not nearly so evident in the conservative churches, many of which are experiencing growth. And this is where Dr Flatt’s ground-breaking thesis comes in. His analysis has revealed some key factors in the decline, mainly the shift away from evangelicalism. These factors are what economists call *endogenous*, originating within the system, implying that such factors are reversible:

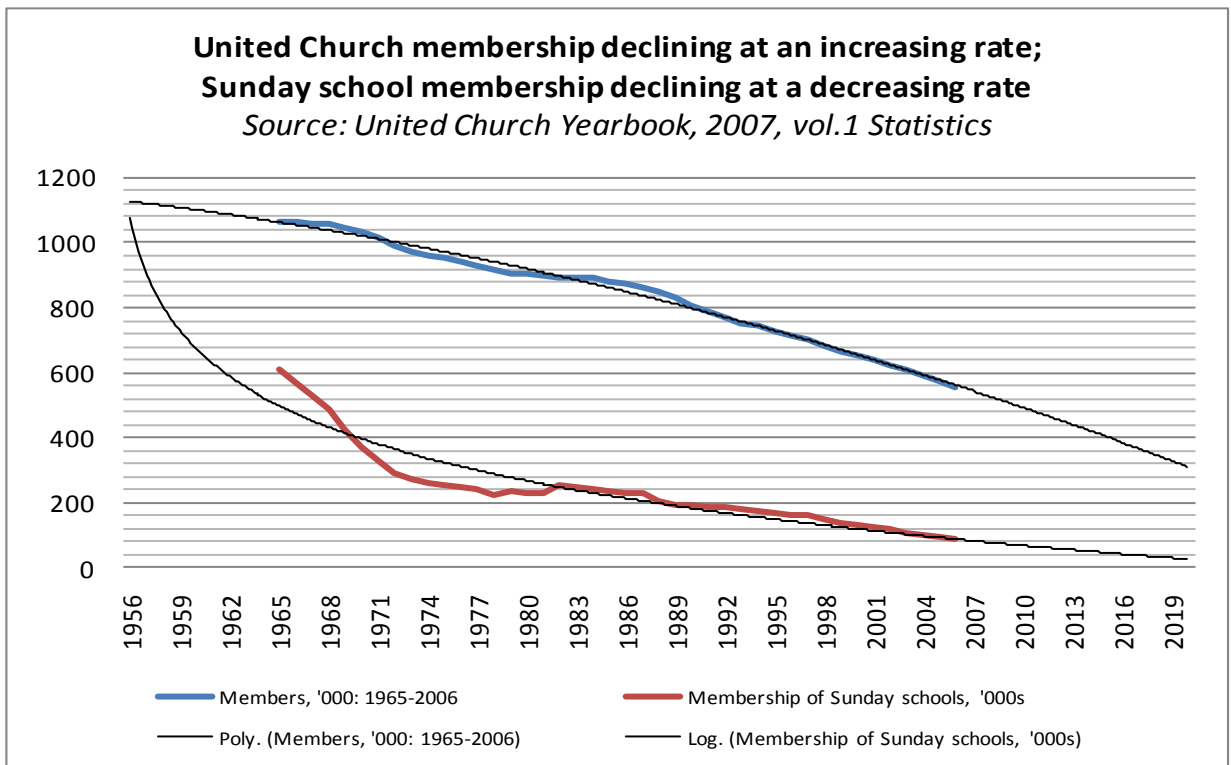
Dr Flatt identifies a couple of main changes within the United Church, rooted mostly in the 1960s, that would explain a good part of the great decline:

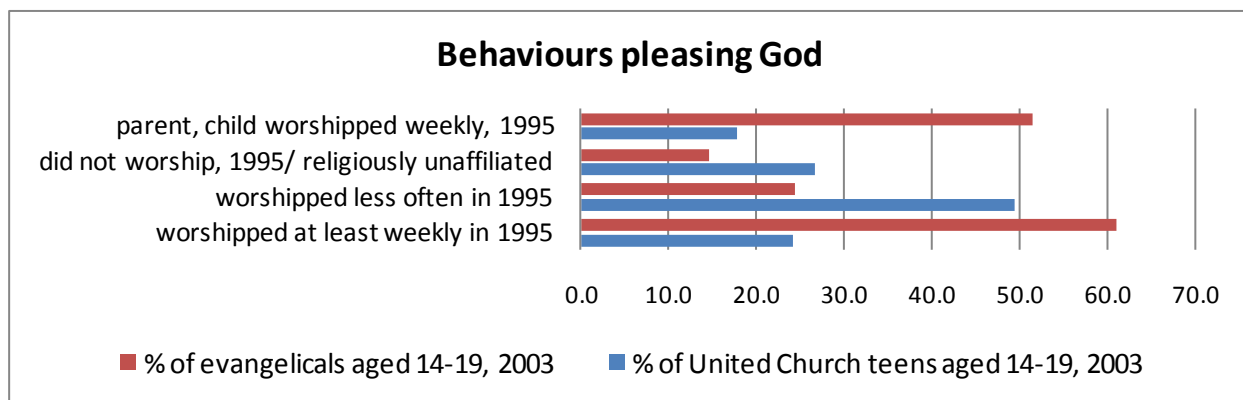
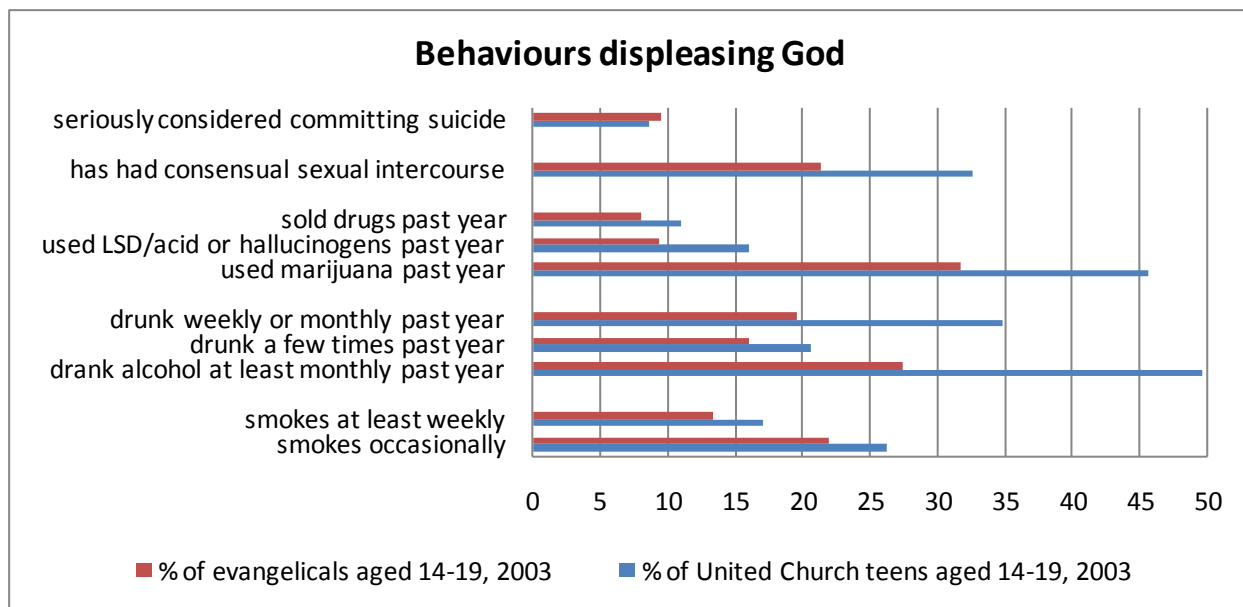
1. More liberal theological ideas and thus teachings were embraced by many United Church leaders inhibiting its ability to establish a morally orienting identity for its members. The traditional emphases on conversion and evangelism were abandoned. The New

Curriculum for Sunday school introduced in 1964 marked a central turning point for the United Church, a redefinition of the denomination making it explicitly non-evangelical. Flatt shows that “the sharp downward turn in the (Sunday school) enrolment trend coincided exactly with the introduction of the New Curriculum”

2. A more positive evaluation of the secular world by the United Churches blurred the boundaries between the church and the world. The shifts to new moralities regarding issues ranging from sex outside of marriage to abortion on demand diminished the church's strictness in labelling actions as simply right or wrong in all circumstances. This strictness, together with the clear group boundaries, based on the arguments made by sociologist Christian Smith, is one of the four key factors necessary for maintaining religious group strength.

In a recent study Kevin Flatt and Frank Jones (2010) further analyzed the link between numerical decline and behavioural outcome within a theoretical framework. It showed that United Church boys, compared with other boys, worship less frequently, and are more prone to exhibit high-risk behaviours such as intoxication, smoking marijuana, selling drugs, and non-use of birth control by the sexually active. The charts below were derived from estimates in the Appendix of this study. It will be noted that the evangelical teens are far from what most parents would want; and what God wants of His children. There are many other charts and statistics in this 363 page study, available at no charge at www.ccri.ca .





Returning to the personal note, my family (Frank’s) in the late 1940s and 1950s had elements of Christianity in it, with Dad often quoting Paul, and Billy Graham radio addresses, but with some basics lacking, such as grace at meals and Bible reading at meals. Childhood friend and grade nine locker-mate James Dickey, ordained in the 1960s, had both grace and Bible readings in his Presbyterian home. Bible study, bedtime prayers, and keeping the Lord’s Day holy, were also lacking in our home. Admittedly, other families seemed more devoted, though some others were less so; we may have been like most. I don’t remember the church sowing basic seeds of lasting commitment, though no doubt its Mission Band had some effect. Neither was the need to repent and be born of the Spirit stressed; all churchgoers were assumed saved, as is the case in most liberal Christian churches today.

The great potential: The last, first. If you have worked with recovering addicts you will know that rapid deep decline can paradoxically be a great thing, as it may be the only way it to awaken and turn one around. Or perhaps you have seen or experienced radical conversions like that of the Apostle Paul, John Newton, or John Bunyan, and are convinced that only the Holy Spirit, grace alone through faith alone, can work such wonders. The United Church and its people seem to be the least committed today in many ways, though it has the potential for a radical turnabout,

through the Holy Spirit, which the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* says “can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine,” Ephesians 3:20. The great challenge of the Church is to truly trust in grace alone, because the alternative, man’s ingenuity and great plans, have had no effect throughout history on turning the tide of spiritual decline, and have probably speeded up the that decline by diverting time, treasure and talent away from the one factor that works: total trust in the Holy Spirit.

There is hope however: revival, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and God’s grace, can happen to spiritually dead nations, such as England, Scotland and Wales in the 1700s, and to withering churches. That appears to us to be the great hope of the once great United Church, and it all begins with prayers for revival and conversion, admission of total helplessness, and deep repentance. The blasting power of fact can take a person to the door, but only repentance and sincere belief can open it to solid God-centred renewal.

Returning to the Bible in church and at home. Perhaps only those born of the Spirit will appreciate the extent of the change needed, and have hope (confident expectation) that such change is possible. Though change in the church may seem too difficult at the beginning, it can always begin in the home with a committed husband and wife and godly children. Resources such as the following point to the radical change needed in children.

House, Kirk. *God’s claims on your children*, 2nd edition, GAM publications, 1977, (readings in the last 2000 years of Christian education). This begins with a selection on the training Jesus received, and the result, Luke 2:40.

Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. *Raising children God’s way*, Banner of Truth: 2007, based on Ephesians 6:1-4.

Murray, Andrew. *Raising your children for Christ*, Whitaker House: 1984, containing 50 studies based on Old Testament and New Testament verses, with a “Parent’s prayer” concluding each.

Parshall, Craig and Janet. *Travelling a pilgrim’s path: Preparing your child to navigate the journey of faith*, Tyndale: 2003. This is a road map for parents drawn from John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Frank Jones, Executive Director, Christian Commitment Research Institute; Ph.D. (Economics) McMaster University; B.A. (Geography and History) Carleton University; Research Fellow, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada; and former lay Chaplain, University of Ottawa; Senior Analyst, Statistics Canada; Adjunct Professor of Economics, University of Ottawa. Liping Zhang, Ph.D. (Economics), CFA, Assistant Professor, School of Business, Trinity Western University. Thanks are due to Statistics Canada for access to the micro-data survey files. The opinions expressed are our own, and do not reflect those of Statistics Canada. Remaining errors are also ours.