

Church & Faith Trends

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Counting Canadian Evangelicals

by Rick Hiemstra, Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism

Say What?

A survey by *Maclean's* magazine in 2004 found "almost one-third of Canadians defined themselves as born-again or evangelicals."¹ In 2006 *Maclean's* reported that 31% of Canadians "feel uneasy around born-again Christians."² Then in 2007 *Maclean's* reported that Evangelicals form the Canadian religious group most satisfied with their sex lives.³ Are one-third of Canadians uneasy around another third of Canadians who are satisfied with their sex lives?

Where do these numbers come from? Who are the "Evangelicals" that *Maclean's* is finding? How are they finding them and why are they interested? What are we to make of these numbers? For that matter, why should churches or governments care about how many Canadian Evangelicals there are?

Evangelicals and the Public Square

Interest in Canadian Evangelicals has been growing in the last few decades with their return to prominence in the public square. Preston Manning founded the Reform Party in the early 1990s and then led it to become the official Opposition in the Canadian House of Commons. The Reform Party boasted a significant number of evangelical Members of Parliament, and Evangelicals were active in the party's rank and file.⁴ Manning was succeeded as leader of the Canadian Alliance Party, a new incarnation of the Reform Party, by Stockwell Day, who is also an Evangelical. Then in the early part of this decade, during debate over the legalization of same-sex marriages in Canada, evangelical Christians played a vocal and prominent role. Now the country was paying attention.

Other Reasons to Take a Look

Statistics Canada tracks religious affiliation in its decennial censuses. A 1971 document described the government interest in religious affiliation this way:

The data are used by governments as a basis for determining denominational school grants. It is used extensively by religious and educational organizations, such as the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal, to assess the need to construct churches and schools for various religious groups in areas where there are concentrations of people of a particular denomination. Studies of family size and fertility rates among different religious groups are also carried out by social researchers because these data are available. The data are also used by Members of Parliament in assessing the importance of different religious groups in their constituencies.⁵

The reasons for taking a look at Evangelicals have changed over the years. Today the government uses religious affiliation data to better understand immigration, race, charitable giving and volunteering, and marriage and family data. Government interest is still focused on gauging influence and aiding in the administration of government programs. Evangelicals themselves are interested to know how many of us there are for some of the same reasons, but we also want to understand who we are and where we are. We want to know where there is the greatest need for church planting, and we want to understand how we can best cooperate for relief projects and partner together in common mission. In order to do this, we have to understand who we are and how many of us there are. We have to count.

Church & Faith Trends

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

How Many Evangelicals Are There?

George Rawlyk would have estimated “between five and ten per cent of Canadians were evangelicals in the early 1990s.”⁶ Reginald Bibby reports in *Fragmented Gods* (1987) that “Conservative Protestants,” which he uses fairly interchangeably with “evangelical Christians,” represent about 7% of the Canadian population.⁷

In 2004 Bibby’s report on the 2001 census data states that Conservative Protestant groups still represent only about 8% of the Canadian population.⁸ Rawlyk by contrast asserted in 1996 that, using the Christian Evangelical Scale (CES) developed by Andrew Grenville, he found 11% of Canadians were Protestant Evangelicals.⁹ Ipsos-Reid used a modified form of the CES in 2003 and found 12% of Canadians to be Protestant Evangelicals.¹⁰ What is to account for the significant discrepancies?

The spread between Bibby and Rawlyk/Grenville is just three to four percentage points. But throw in the *Maclean’s* statistic that finds a third of Canadians are Evangelicals and the discrepancy grows to a quarter of the Canadian population. So where do these numbers come from? What are the strengths and weaknesses of their counting methods? How should we use these numbers?

Operationalizing Canadian Evangelicals

Good counts begin with good definitions. The better we define Evangelicals, the more likely we are to find them when we go looking. The way that we count is more difficult than it may at first appear. Counting is an expensive business. When it comes to tracking religious affiliation, even Statistics Canada economizes by polling just 20% of the population.¹¹ Researchers therefore look for tools that maximize both accuracy and economy when they set out to find Evangelicals. Sociologists call these tools for finding a population accurately and economically operationalizations.

The Bible contains an operationalization that is helpful for understanding the concept. In Judges 12:1-7 the tribe of Ephraim picked a quarrel with Jephthah over a perceived snub. A battle ensued, and Jephthah and his forces gained the upper hand over the Ephraimites. The following verses record what happened next.

And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, “Let me go over,” the men of Gilead said to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” When he said “No,” they said to him, “Then say Shibboleth,” and he said “Sibboleth,” for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time 42,000 of the Ephraimites fell. (Judges 12:5-6, ESV)

The Shibboleth question operationalized the Ephraimites. This one question did not describe their culture. It did not provide an exhaustive definition of Ephraim. It simply homed in on a question that would separate out an Ephraimite from anyone else, and it did it without an elaborate interview or background check. It was an operationalization. The operationalizations we are looking at do not have the same sinister

Church & Faith Trends

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

intent, but they do carry the same goals of economy and accuracy.

It is important to maintain a distinction between a definition and an operationalization. A good definition is the basis for an operationalization, but an operationalization will find a group that only approximates the definition. In our biblical example this simple question could have been improved upon by asking an additional question such as, "Who is your father?" or even by asking the potential Ephraimite to repeat his answer or pronounce other words with distinct pronunciations. Further questions can help reduce error but only at the expense of economy. Evaluating an operationalization is done by checking the people it finds against the original definition. Error cannot be eliminated. What researchers have to do is decide what level of error they are comfortable with. To put the question another way, researchers have to decide how much they are willing to pay to eliminate more of the error.

Where This Paper Is Going

This paper briefly surveys three non-ecclesial¹² ways that Canadian Evangelicals have been operationalized. The first operationalization we will look at is self-identification, asking the question "Are you an evangelical Christian?" Next we will look at the Christian Evangelical Scale (CES), which has been used by George Rawlyk and The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, among others. Third we will look at the religious affiliation question that Statistics Canada asks as part of the decennial census. I hope that this paper will sensitize us to the meaning of various counts and foster responsible handling of data on Canadian Evangelicals. Finally I intend to suggest how operationalizations may be improved.¹³

Method 1: Self-Identification

A *Maclean's* 2004 year-end poll found, "Almost one-third of Canadians defined themselves as born-again or evangelicals."¹⁴ Respondents were asked if they considered themselves born again or evangelical. It is a question that operationalizes two groups, first "born-again" and second "evangelicals," with no way to break the two groups out of the composite result. This question mirrors the method that The Gallup Organization uses to identify Evangelicals in the United States.¹⁵ Conrad Hackett and Michael Lindsay report that before Gallup started using its composite question in the United States, it carried out two separate polls in 1979. In the first poll, respondents were asked if they had "had a born-again experience," and 39% said yes. The second poll asked respondents if they were part of the "evangelical movement," and only 7% said yes.¹⁶ The Gallup Organization's experience showed that in 1979 there was a significant perceptual difference in the minds of the people of the United States between having a "born-again experience" and being part of the "evangelical movement."

George Rawlyk and Andrew Grenville carried out a series of surveys using the CES in the mid-1990s. They found that further questioning of those they had already identified as Evangelicals revealed,

When asked if they considered themselves to be born-again Christians, 64 per cent of the evangelical sample said yes, 35 per cent no, and 1 percent "I do not know."¹⁷

Church & Faith Trends

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Rawlyk concluded,

One in three Canadian evangelicals obviously did not want to be described as born-again Christians because of the negative association of this phrase with fundamentalism, especially its American variant. Virtually all of these men and women, however, maintained that they have had conversion experiences.¹⁸

Self-identification is probably the least expensive way to operationalize Canadian Evangelicals; however, Rawlyk found serious under-reporting by Evangelicals even when public perception of evangelical Christians was more positive. The other major weakness of self-identification is that the term “evangelical Christian” is poorly defined and understood in the culture.

Method 2: The Christian Evangelical Scale (CES)

The CES is an operationalization that is substantially based on the Bebbington quadrilateral. David Bebbington in his work *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* identified four characteristics of British Evangelicals. These include:

- *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed;
- *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible;
- *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ and the cross; and
- *activism*, the expression of the gospel in service to others.¹⁹

The questions that make up the CES scale are as follows:

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree, moderately or strongly with each of the following statements,

1. The concept of God is an old superstition that is no longer needed to explain things in these modern times. (Reverse scored)
2. I feel that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of my sins.
3. In my view, Jesus Christ was not the divine son of God. (Reverse scored)
4. Man/woman is not a special creature made in the image of God, he/she is simply a recent development in the process of animal evolution. (Reverse scored)
5. I believe Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried but was resurrected to eternal life.
6. I feel the Bible is God’s word, and is to be taken literally, word for word.
7. I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian.
8. I feel it is very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians.
9. Please indicate whether you never, occasionally, weekly, or daily read the Bible or other religious material. Choose the category which comes closest to describing your activity.

Church & Faith Trends

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

10. Which of the following best describes how often you attend religious services: I never, or almost never, attend religious services; I attend religious service on occasion; I attend religious services about once a month or so; I attend religious services once a week or so.²⁰

The agree/disagree statements were scored as follows: agree strongly = 4, agree moderately = 3, disagree moderately = 2, disagree strongly = 1. Frequency of bible reading was scored: daily = 4, weekly = 3, occasionally = 2, never = 1. Frequency of church attendance was scored: weekly = 4; monthly = 3, occasionally = 2, never = 1. Those who score 34 or greater out of a possible score of 40 are determined to be evangelicals.²¹

A 2003 study used a shorter version of the CES with several modifications. The most significant change in 2003 was the modification of “I feel the Bible is God’s word, and is to be taken literally, word for word” to the broader “I believe the Bible to be the word of God and is reliable and trustworthy.” Those commenting on the first version of the Bible question, including Mark Noll, considered it too restrictive and not necessarily representative of evangelical thought.²² John Stackhouse believes that the revision is too permissive in that it does not deal with the Bible’s supreme written authority versus that of tradition.

Method 3: Religious Affiliation

In this section we will look at how Reginald Bibby and Outreach Canada operationalize Canadian Evangelicals using census data. Then we will look at the specific census work done by Statistics Canada.

Reginald Bibby, a respected and careful sociologist of religion, makes extensive use of the religious affiliation data generated by Statistics Canada. When asked in 2007 about his criteria for deciding which denominations were evangelical, Bibby answered,

My primary criteria involve a combination of group self-identification and common sense. ... Primary groups in the Conservative Protestant category are ones that would tend to identify with EFC (The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada)—Baptists, Pentecostals, Alliance, Nazarenes, Mennonites, etc. ... But my main goal is to try to place people and their denomination in the “religious family” with which most feel the greatest affinity.²³

Outreach Canada describes itself as “an evangelical-oriented mission organization, focused on strengthening churches and communities across Canada.” Part of its mission is to provide local demographic information to churches and ministry groups. Outreach Canada’s primary source of data is the Canadian census regarding religious affiliation. Outreach Canada identifies denominations as evangelical if they indicate agreement with two documents: the Vision 2000 Canada Statement of Faith²⁴ and The Lausanne Covenant.²⁵

Church & Faith Trends

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

A religious affiliation operationalization will not count as Evangelicals the many people who belong to mainline denominations though they hold many of the same beliefs and characteristics as those in denominations considered evangelical. These people Stackhouse calls “churchish evangelicals.” In 1993 Rawlyk found that, of his Protestant evangelical sample, 30% came from mainline churches.²⁶

Statistics Canada and Religious Affiliation

Statistics Canada is the primary source of Canadian data on religious affiliation. It has been collecting these data since 1871 through its decennial censuses.²⁷

Enumeration Instructions

Before 1971, enumerators filled out forms for census respondents. Self-enumeration was introduced in 1971. Two formal sets of documents directed the enumerators how to fill out the religious affiliation question: enumerators’ guides and the questions that appeared on the census form itself. Training sessions also provided guidance to enumerators.

The 1931 *Instructions to Commissioners and Enumerators* had this to say about the religious affiliation question:

The religion of each person will be entered according as he or she professes, specifying the religious body, denomination, sect or community to which the person adheres or belongs, or which he or she favours.²⁸

Census Forms

Before 1951, census forms appeared in tabular form, and the column heading simply read, “Religious body, denomination to which this person adheres or belongs. (Do not use indefinite terms such as Christian, Believer, or Protestant, etc.)” There was no suggested list of religions on the census form itself until 1951. By 1951, census forms were designed to be scored by automated readers once enumerators had filled in mark-in circles with soft lead pencils. Although there was still an option to write in the answers, there would have been a strong administrative impulse to use the categories provided on the form, categories that could be scored more easily. The new scoring technology resulted in the introduction of the suggested lists of religions on the census form. The lists continued after the scoring technology ceased to be used. Automated readers require answers to be written with a particular kind of soft lead pencil and to stay scrupulously within the lines of the mark-in circles. When self-enumeration was introduced, it was not possible to have the same kind of control over the way forms were filled out as when enumerators completed the census forms. Therefore, electronic scoring was abandoned in 1971. Mark-in boxes were still used beside the individual suggested religions until 1991, when a write-in box was provided for all responses except “no religion.”²⁹

Church & Faith Trends

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Clerical Assignments

After religious affiliation data have been collected, they have to be processed or coded. Clerks often assign one answer to another category based on a set of rules contained in the census's *Population Code Book*. These clerical assignments are often necessary because of illegible responses or the ambiguity in people's responses. Sometimes smaller denominations would be placed in larger family groupings, or more often would be placed in an "other" category. In certain cases, however, clerks reassigned them to completely different religious groups. For example, the 1971 *Population Code Book* assigns the following groups to the "United Church"; many of these groups could plausibly be understood to be evangelical:

All People's Church, All People's Mission, Bible Christian, Church of All Nations, Evangelical Association, Evangelical Church, Evangelical Free, Evangelical United Brethren, German United, Methodist Bible Student, Methodist Chapel, New Connection Methodist, Salem Church (Methodist), Swedish Methodist, United Brethren in Christ, United Church Mission, Zion Evangelical.

It would be an interesting research project to find out what all the clerical assignments were and then to try to quantify their effect on reported religious affiliation.

Conclusions

Lack of interest throughout most of Canada's recent history regarding evangelical Christians generally meant that when they were counted, and they often were not, it was done with little care. The re-entry of evangelical Christians into the public square has fostered a new interest in evangelical Christians and a renewed interest in counting them.

Of the three common types of operationalizations, self-identification is the least helpful. Because of confusion over the meaning of the terms "evangelical" and "born again," combined with negative cultural associations with the terms, the data collected this way will be unreliable.

Religious affiliation data gathered in Canadian censuses has tended to be biased against finding Evangelicals in how the census questions were asked, coded, and reported. The assumption of denominational homogeneity that may have at one time made denominational affiliation a good operationalization has given way before radical individualism. A variety of cultural and ecclesiastical influences have tended to move religious socialization down to the congregational level and at the same time up to the wider evangelical family level. Bundling a religious affiliation question with a question about frequency of attendance at religious services would improve its value as an operationalization of religion generally and of Evangelicalism specifically. It would allow us to identify and draw better conclusions about a core and periphery for each religious group.

Church & Faith Trends

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

During the past century Evangelicalism substantially defined itself over and against theological liberalism. There are important doctrines held by Evangelicals, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, that are not operationalized because they were not the flash points of controversy with theological liberalism. As the influence of theological liberalism has weakened, Evangelicalism finds itself in a period of readjusting its sense of identity in relation to the wider culture. Current operationalizations of Evangelicals concentrate on distinctions between Christians. Future operationalizations will have to take account of the distinctions between Evangelicals and a wider culture that has ceased to be Christian in any meaningful sense. The strong threats to the faith are changing, and so therefore are the boundaries that will be emphasized.

Because both Canadian culture and the culture of Evangelicalism are changing rapidly, definitions and operationalizations will need to be revisited every few years. The core of the faith may not change, but for greatest effectiveness, the way questions are asked may have to change. The best way to learn where these boundaries currently lie would be to conduct a large congregational survey of evangelical churches in Canada, paying attention to what contemporary Evangelicals voice as their boundary markers. We would do well to make a distinction in such a survey between the boundaries indicated by different generations. Generations within churches inhabit different cultures and will likely have different boundary markers.³⁰ New operationalizations will also have to take account of the evangelical Christians who immigrate from the Global South and bring with them new social and theological emphases.³¹

(Endnotes)

¹ Jonathan Gatehouse, "2004 in Review—The Poll: Sex, Snacks and Grapes," *Maclean's*, December 27, 2004, and January 3, 2005, 38. "Would you describe yourself as either an Evangelical or Born again Christian? Yes—31%, No—63%, Don't Know/Not Applicable/Refused to Answer — 6%," 38. The Strategic Counsel telephone survey between November 26 and November 30, 2004, of 1000 Canadians is accurate within ± 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

² Lianne George, "How Canadian Are You?: The 2006 Canada Day Poll," *Maclean's*, July 1, 2006, 43.

³ Ken MacQueen, "The Happiest Canadian," *Maclean's*, July 9 and July 16, 2007, 54. *Maclean's* reported, "Which religion has the best sex? Evangelicals (ahem, 69% satisfied) are the happiest."

⁴ Evangelical Christians were active in the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party as well; however, they did not have the same influence within their respective parties.

⁵ Statistics Canada, 1971 *Census of Canada—Questions and Answers*, 51.

⁶ George A. Rawlyk and Mark Noll, eds., *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 19.

⁷ Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin Publishers, 1987), 28.

Church & Faith Trends

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

⁸ Reginald W. Bibby, *Restless Churches: How Canada's Churches Can Contribute to the Emerging Religious Renaissance* (Toronto and Kelowna, BC: Novalis and Wood Lake Books, 2004), 39.

⁹ George A. Rawlyk, *Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour?: In Search of Canadian Evangelicalism in the 1990's* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 118. Rawlyk found that 16% of the population were Evangelical Christian, with 11% being Protestant Evangelicals and 5% being "Catholic Evangelicals."

¹⁰ Aileen Van Ginkel, "Evangelical Beliefs and Practices: A Summary of the 2003 Ipsos-Reid Survey Results," *Church and Faith Trends* (December 2003): 1. The survey found that 19% of the population were evangelical Christian, with 12% being Protestant Evangelicals and 7% being "Catholic Evangelicals."

¹¹ During a decennial census just 20% of the population will receive the long form, which includes the question on religious affiliation.

¹² Churches and denominations have been counting their own for as long as there have been churches in Canada. Each denomination has its own definitions and operationalizations. To aggregate the data collected by various denominations into a figure representing the size of the movement called Canadian Evangelicalism is akin to adding apples to oranges to grapefruit. This task would be difficult even if the barrier of simply gathering the data could be overcome.

¹³ A more comprehensive version of this paper is available on the website of the [Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism](#).

¹⁴ Gatehouse, "2004 in Review," 34–41.

¹⁵ Conrad Hackett and D. Michael Lindsay, "Measuring Evangelicalism," (unpublished paper, 2007), 6. Hackett and Lindsay report that The Gallup Organization has used the question, "Would you describe yourself as a born-again, or evangelical Christian?" since 1986 to identify American Evangelicals. Since 1992 the percentage of Americans classified by Gallup as evangelical has ranged between 36% and 47%. This is higher than but still consistent with the findings of the 2004 Strategic Counsel Poll.

¹⁶ Ibid. "Born-again" is a term with stronger cultural relevance in the United States than in Canada. This would account for the relatively high percentage of Americans self-identifying as "born-again." It would be interesting to know whether this represented an aversion to the term "evangelical" or whether people in the United States tend to have denominational affiliations that are stronger than their affiliation with the wider evangelical movement.

¹⁷ Rawlyk, *Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour?*, 119.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London and Boston: Unwin Hyman and Routledge, 1989), 2–19.

²⁰ Rawlyk, *Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour?*, 233.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Andrew Grenville, e-mail to author, September 12, 2007.

Church & Faith Trends

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

²³ Reginald Bibby, e-mail to author, August 28, 2007.

²⁴ *The Vision 2000 Statement of Faith* is similar to the current *The Evangelical Fellowship Statement of Faith*. <http://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?&cpid=265&csrid=184> (accessed August 29, 2007).

²⁵ <http://www.lausanne.org/lausanne-1974/lausanne-covenant.html> (accessed August 28, 2007).

²⁶ Rawlyk, *Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour?*, 129.

²⁷ Statistics Canada replaced the Dominion Bureau of Statistics in 1971.

²⁸ Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada 1933—Instructions to Commissioners and Enumerators*, 33.

²⁹ “No Religion” continued to have its own mark-in box.

³⁰ See J. D. Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press, 1987).

³¹ See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).