

What do Canadians think of churchgoers?

In Canada, other people's religiosity is seen as none of your business — or so our survey results suggest. Respondents were largely noncommittal when it came to guessing the reasons why some of their fellow Canadians would become involved with organized religion; most chose middle options (“somewhat significant” or “not very significant”) rather than expressing stronger opinions. The root of this indifference may well be the idea that faith should be regarded as a private pursuit. Says British Columbia-based philosophy instructor G. Elijah Dann in the *Huffington Post*, “Religion . . . for some people, is a necessary and — I dare say — legitimate ingredient in their lives. That is, as long as they keep it to themselves.”

When survey-takers did have strong opinions, they thought that people get involved with church mainly for personal reasons — for example, to feel in touch with God, to follow Jesus and to seek personal comfort (48 percent, 43 percent and 41 percent respectively identified these as “very significant” reasons). Smaller though still sizable numbers thought that other factors might also be “very significant” for churchgoers: ensuring they will go to heaven when they die (36 percent); being part of a community of caring people (35 percent); and seeking answers to the meaning of life (33 percent). “In your struggle to find your purpose or place, it's normal to seek answers from established authorities,” says Randy Renaud, an anglophone Montrealer in his late 40s who is himself looking for answers in science, art and Jungian psychology. “If one finds comfort or guidance in a religion, then I suppose there's value in that.”

Survey respondents tend to feel that the faithful go to church to address personal needs. They are much less likely to think that people get involved in church to serve the needs of others outside the congregation or to work for justice in the world. Just two in 10 saw each of these as a “very significant” reason for people to become involved in church. “The juxtaposition of these findings,” says survey author Jane Armstrong, “tells us that, whether or not it is a fair assessment, church involvement is seen to be more about an interest in personal rather than societal salvation.” And indeed, she says, in a world in which we are all consumers to some degree, it may be hard for many to imagine religion as anything but another opportunity to fulfil individual as opposed to community needs.

Sociologist of religion Reginald Bibby encourages churches to answer the “What's in it for me?” question. He recognizes that most congregations are interested in more than just trying to meet consumer demands. “But [these] interests and needs represent portals — entry points — for connecting with Canadians,” he writes in *A New Day*, his latest book applying statistical research to advice for churches seeking to grow. “In time, people can become aware of ‘the fullness of faith,’ including ministry to others. First, though, they have to find that faith and involvement help to elevate and complete life — and as such are ‘worthwhile.’”

Bibby's research indicates that outsiders' ideas of what would make church worthwhile for them include resources for everyday living, help with spiritual development and a sense of caring community — in short, the very things that Canadians believe motivate current churchgoers, according to our survey.

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What do Canadians think are the “very significant” reasons why people get involved in a church congregation?

The top five:

- 1 To feel in touch with God**
48% Very significant
 40% Somewhat significant
 9% Not very significant
 3% Not at all significant
- 2 To follow Jesus**
43% Very significant
 40% Somewhat significant
 12% Not very significant
 5% Not at all significant
- 3 To seek personal comfort**
41% Very significant
 48% Somewhat significant
 7% Not very significant
 3% Not at all significant
- 4 To ensure that if there is a heaven, they will go there when they die**
36% Very significant
 44% Somewhat significant
 14% Not very significant
 6% Not at all significant
- 5 To be part of a community of caring people**
35% Very significant
 49% Somewhat significant
 12% Not very significant
 4% Not at all significant

The bottom five:

- 1 To maintain or improve their social status**
16% Very significant
 36% Somewhat significant
 33% Not very significant
 15% Not at all significant
- 2 To meet expectations that others have of them**
17% Very significant
 43% Somewhat significant
 29% Not very significant
 10% Not at all significant
- 3 To work for justice in the world**
18% Very significant
 39% Somewhat significant
 32% Not very significant
 11% Not at all significant
- 4 To serve others outside the congregation**
18% Very significant
 45% Somewhat significant
 28% Not very significant
 9% Not at all significant
- 5 To seek quiet time during worship services**
19% Very significant
 43% Somewhat significant
 28% Not very significant
 9% Not at all significant