EVANGELISM AND "NONES AND DONES" IN CANADA

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Introduction

The fastest growing "religious" group in Canada include those who say they have no religion, or what sociologists of religion call "religious nones." Approximately one-quarter of Canadian adults and one-third of Canadian teens do not identify with a religion.[1] Many of these individuals were raised in Christian homes; however, increasingly religious nones are raised by religious nones. Unlike previous generations of religious nones who generally embraced a range of religious and spiritual attitudes and behaviours, religious nones today are more secular on many fronts.

Some sectors of Canadian Christianity with a longstanding emphasis on evangelism, notably conservative Protestants, have started to pay attention to the growth of religious nones. In general, this interest has been an evangelistic one. Denominations and congregations have grappled with the following questions: How might we reach the "nones and dones," those who have no Christian background or those who have left their Christianity, or at least "the Church" behind?[2] How should congregations meaningfully engage this growing demographic, and how might denominations and congregations sufficiently prepare clergy and congregants to minister effectively in this social environment?

The central question in this article is: With the growth of religious nones, how might churches think about and approach evangelism in Canada? This article offers a cursory overview of empirical data on religious nones and evangelism in Canada and raises a series of possibilities and questions for evangelism in the future. Empirical data are included from several sources, including research gathered by other scholars, previous research that I have published, along with more recent survey data that I (and colleagues) have gathered on Canadian congregations. My hope is that this sociological research can assist religious leaders to lead local congregations to engage "nones and dones" in competent and meaningful ways.

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[1] Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

[2] "Nones and dones" are distinct as well as overlapping categories. Some religious nones are also religious dones (i.e., had a Christian background and then set their Christian affiliation aside). However not all religious nones are religious dones (i.e., some religious nones have no Christian background). Moreover, not all religious dones are religious nones. Some religious dones continue to identify as Christian, even though they have distanced themselves from "the Church" and church attendance more specifically. Regrettably, given the complex overlap between these categories, there is a lack of a comprehensive or accurate set of data on exactly how many "dones" there are in Canada, both within the "nones" category as well as those who continue to identify as Christian.

Religious Nones in Canada

Explaining the Growth

Half a century ago, about 1 percent of Canadians identified as religious nones. In a relatively short period of time, this figure has ballooned to 24 percent. Religious nones are growing in all regions of the country. With the exception of Quebec, where the proportion of religious nones are lowest in Canada (12 percent) due to high Catholic affiliation figures, the proportion of religious nones decreases from British Columbia (44 percent) eastward to Atlantic Canada (16 percent). Religious nones are found in all demographic groups, though the "typical" religious none is born in Canada, young, male, single, and has no children.[3]

There are several reasons for the growth of religious nones in Canada. One is the growing social acceptance to say that one does not identify with a religion. As Canada has become more multicultural and secular, the social and cultural pressure to be religious has diminished. This shift has opened the door to religious nones who previously identified with a religion, yet were nominally religious, to fully embrace a religious none status.[4] Unlike in the United States where a strong social stigma remains for religious nones to "come out" to their family, friends, neighbours, and coworkers,[5] this social pressure is less present in Canada.

Another factor for the growth of religious nones is the strong reaction against the tie between evangelicals and the Republican Party in the United States.[6] Some religious nones in Canada, as in the United States, are infuriated with the perceived elitist and fundamentalist religious and political attitudes and behaviours that exclude and divide along the lines of gender, sexuality, race, and social class. This religious-political linkage is possibly the greatest difference in religious and cultural life between Canada and the United States. Aside from there not being as many evangelicals in Canada (around 10 percent) versus the United States (around 25 percent), evangelicals are not as strongly tied to the Religious Right in Canada. Still, Canadians see the media coverage of Christianity and politics in the United States

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[3] Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

[4] Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

[5] Ryan Cragun, Barry Kosmin, Ariela Keysar, Joseph Hammer, and Michael Nielsen, "On the Receiving End: Discrimination toward the Non-Religious in the United States," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, no. 1 (2012): 105–127.

[6] Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations," *American Sociological Review* 67 (2002): 165–190; Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

and it shapes their perceptions (plus Canadian media do not generally portray evangelicals in a favourable light).[7]

Religious nones are also on the rise as people set aside their religious upbringing, typically during their teen or young adult years. The reasons are many for this decision, including parents giving their children the choice to attend religious services, intellectual disagreements with Christian doctrine, social influences that discourage continued religious belief, behaviour, or belonging, and life transitions that disrupt engagement with one's religion.[8] As these religious nones age and possibly marry or have children, the likelihood of raising religious nones themselves is significantly strengthened. This shift matters because sociological research is clear that the family is the single greatest influence over a person's religious affiliation, belief, and activities; if someone is not raised in a religious household, the chances of them being religious in their adult years is significantly reduced.[9] In step with "stages of decline" theory, which asserts that individuals and societies become less religious from one generation to the next, we might anticipate religious nones in the future to have even less of a religious or Christian base than religious nones in recent decades due to their irreligious upbringing.

How Religious Nones View Religion and Spirituality

In order to understand and interact with religious nones, it is critical to comprehend how religious nones broadly view religion, spirituality, and the world. Five brief empirical observations can be made, with the caveat that regardless of one's agreement or disagreement with these perceptions and experiences, these are the realities from which many religious nones operate.[10] First, religious nones are attracted to how open minded, freeing, tolerant, and inclusive the nonreligious framework is, in contrast to religious groups who are perceived to be closed minded, restricted, intolerant, and exclusive. Second, religious nones are a diverse group. Some believe in god or a supernatural being, pray, or consider themselves spiritual, others are atheist or agnostic, with some participating in secular or humanist organizations, and others are fairly ambivalent about religion. My research with

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[7] David M. Haskell, *Through a Lens Darkly: How the News Media Perceive and Portray Evangelicals* (Toronto: Clements Academic, 2009); Peter J. Schuurman, *The Subversive Evangelical: The Ironic Charisma of An Irreligious Megachurch* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

[8] Joel Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015); Phil Zuckerman, *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[9] Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[10] Joel Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015).

Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme[11] found that the largest subgroup of religious nones (over 50 percent) are "inactive nonbelievers," meaning they do not believe in god, do not consider themselves spiritual, and are not involved in any type of secular or humanist organization. The next largest group are the "spiritual but not religious" (26 percent), those who say they are very or moderately spiritual. Third, religious nones overwhelmingly believe that they have meaning and purpose in life, apart from religion. They find happiness, meaning, and purpose in their families, relationships, jobs, hobbies, and volunteer activities. In short, religion is *a* source of meaning and purpose, but not necessarily *the* source of meaning and purpose. Fourth, religious nones maintain that while religion can help some to live good and moral lives, religion is not necessary to be moral. For example, data reveal that some religious nones actively give money and time to charitable organizations, alongside demonstrating ongoing kindness, generosity, and care toward others. Finally, religious nones are strongly opposed to those individuals and groups who push their religious beliefs and practices on to others. This posture is reflective of a broader Canadian social imaginary rooted in individualism, diversity, and inclusivity. This final observation is a fitting transition to address evangelism in Canada, a practice that some "nones and dones" might perceive to reflect the very thing that religious nones are purportedly averse to.

Evangelism

A Sociological Framing of Evangelism

Shifting allegiances from one religion to another, or from no religion to a religion, is relatively rare. Sociological studies reveal that the (non)religion in which a person is raised plays a significant role in shaping what religion, if any, a person identifies with in their adult years.[12] Being raised within a particular (non)religious tradition does not guarantee that someone will identify with that (non)religion later in life, but (non)religious upbringing is the strongest predictor.

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[11] Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

[12] Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010); Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Darren E. Sherkat, *Changing Faith: The Dynamics and Consequences of Americans' Shifting Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, "Like Parent, Like Millennial: Inherited and Switched (Non)Religion among Young Adults in the U.S. and Canada," *Journal of Religion and Demography* 7 (2020): 123-149.

Some religious nones do join religious groups. Sociological explanations of conversion center on social networks.[13] Those who join a religious group tend to have strong, affective, and intense social ties and interactions with those inside the group (e.g., friends or family), and relatively weak social ties and ideological commitments outside the group. Further, converts tend to be "seekers" of answers to their life's problems, finding satisfactory rewards and solutions in the religious group that they join. Based on General Social Survey data, political scientist Ryan Burge shows that in the United States in 2019, approximately two-thirds of those raised as religious nones remain religious nones as adults.[14] Compared with those raised in religious traditions, this is the lowest religious transmission rate from one generation to the next, though "successful" retention rates among religious nones are on the rise. With respect to those who were raised as religious nones in the United States, roughly one-quarter identify as Christian in their adult years, with nearly two thirds of these nones identifying with evangelical denominations. Wilkins-Laflamme draws upon a 2019 nationally representative sample with over 1,500 millennials (18-35 years-old) in Canada to show that only 6 percent of those raised by one or two religious none parents now identify with a religion (of whom nearly 40 percent are now Catholic, followed by 20 percent in non-Christian religious traditions, and 12.5 percent in evangelical Protestant denominations).[15] It is difficult to say for certain why conversion rates are much lower in Canada versus the United States, though this might be due to a lower proportion of Christians, and evangelicals especially, in Canada (i.e., less social pressure to convert others or to join a Christian group). It could also be due to the Canadian sample dealing solely with millennials (i.e., younger adult group) versus all adults across the life course in the American study. Unfortunately, insufficient empirical data, qualitative data especially, with those who were raised as religious nones and converted to Christianity, is extant to understand better the meanings, motivations, and processes that contributed to their conversion. For instance, what, if any, evangelistic practices among individuals or congregations contributed to religious nones identifying as Christian?

Data on Evangelism from Canadian Congregations

Little data exists on evangelism in Canada. A team of scholars at the Flourishing Congregations Institute at Ambrose University in Calgary, Alberta, has examined several traits of "flourishing congregations," including evangelism, to

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[13] Lorne Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[14] Ryan Burge, "Religion, Retention, and Why We Stay or Go," *Christianity Today*, December 9, 2019, https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2019/december/religion-retention-and-why-we-stay-or-go.html.

[15] Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, "Like Parent, Like Millennial: Inherited and Switched (Non)Religion among Young Adults in the U.S. and Canada," *Journal of Religion and Demography* 7 (2020): 123-149.

understand better evangelistic belief, behaviour, and effectiveness among over 250 congregations and 9100 congregants from across Canada.[16] How important do congregants believe evangelism is? Do congregants evangelize, and if so, how? How effective are evangelistic efforts, measured by those who are in the pews? The following data arise from this 2018-2019 national survey that compared Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant congregations, including staff and congregants, across every Canadian province/territory, in small towns and urban centers, small and large churches, and newer church plants to more established congregations.[17]

Beginning with how important evangelism is, group beliefs about the significance or centrality of evangelism to the individual or religious group matters. If a group's beliefs do not stress conversion or sharing one's faith, it is unlikely that members of that group will believe or behave in evangelistic ways. Historically, conservative Protestants are better known for their emphasis on evangelism compared with mainline Protestants (notably more liberal-leaning traditions), with Catholics falling somewhere in the middle. This expectation bears out in the national congregational survey data. Congregants in denominational families located within conservative Protestant traditions (e.g., Pentecostal, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Baptist) are far more likely to say that their congregation gives a high or essential priority to evangelism versus more liberal-leaning denominations located within mainline Protestantism (e.g., United Church of Canada). Conversely, those who say that evangelism receives low or no priority at all in their congregation are found in liberal-leaning denominations (e.g., United Church of Canada), in contrast to conservative Protestant denominations where this response is least likely. Some of the leading ways that churches in the study gave priority to evangelism included children, family, and youth ministries, Alpha, special occasions such as rites of passage or religious holidays, small groups, and women's ministries.

Narrowing the focus to individual behaviour, this national congregational survey research suggests that congregants are more likely to evangelize in "passive" versus "assertive" ways. For example, people are far more likely to say that they show their faith through their actions (e.g., by demonstrating love, care, and compassion to others) versus telling others about their faith or, to a much lesser extent, inviting people to their congregation. Those who "never" invite people to their church are most commonly found in Catholic parishes (over two-thirds), followed by over half of those in mainline Protestant traditions such as the United Church of Canada, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions. Conservative Protestants are the least likely to

[16] Bill McAlpine, Joel Thiessen, Keith Walker, and Arch Wong, *Signs of Life: Catholic, Mainline, and Conservative Protestant Congregations in Canada* (Toronto: Tyndale Academic Press, 2021).
[17] For more methodological details, see Bill McAlpine, Joel Thiessen, Keith Walker, and Arch Wong, *Signs of Life: Catholic, Mainline, and Conservative Protestant Congregations in Canada* (Toronto: Tyndale Academic Press, 2021), 7-11.

say they "never" invite people to their church though, even here, 21-37 percent never do so. The reason for passive approaches to evangelism overall could be driven by the earlier observation that religious nones and arguably Canadians in general are averse to those who seem to push worldviews on to others, particularly more conservative perspectives (e.g., regarding salvation and the afterlife) that are perceived as intolerant or exclusive. These views can come across as un-Canadian, intolerant, and exclusive in a Canadian society that is generally perceived as diverse, tolerant, and inclusive.

One of the most interesting questions, sociologically and practically, concerns the challenges that people confront with evangelism. The national survey research with Canadian congregations reveals five central barriers to evangelism, with 23-42 percent of respondents signaling these items in their "top three challenges." In descending order, they are: lack of confidence, perceived resistance to Christian values and the Christian Church, fear of rejection, few nonbelievers as friends, and lack of training. From a sociological perspective, the growth of religious nones in Canada may help, in part, to explain the second and third concerns. Whether or not religious nones are opposed to Christian values and the Christian Church does not matter as much as the perception itself, for social perceptions shape social realities and thus behaviours in response. (Incidentally, research on religious nones clearly reveals that evangelicals and atheists hold particularly negative views toward one another.)[18] Fear of rejection is another anticipated response in a society that is in many ways less Christian than half a century ago. Some Christians likely wonder what their coworkers, neighbours, teammates, classmates, friends, or family will think or say if they know that they are a Christian, or if they tell them about their faith, or invite them to their church. Social environment plays a critical role in how people interact with others, with many risks (perceived and real) factoring into what they say and do. Lack of confidence, training, or nonbelievers as friends could be related to how well (or not) people are socialized into and equipped for evangelism within their congregation or neighbourhood. For example, some Christian traditions are more prone to actively encourage members to seek personal relationships with those outside the Christian faith, sometimes with the expressed purpose for evangelism. Other denominations actively *discourage* such social ties, often out of fear that social ties beyond the religious group will pull them away from their religious beliefs and practices.

One final set of empirical findings is valuable for consideration. How many congregants in the pews are converts to the Christian faith? A stricter measurement would examine those with no Christian background, who now identify as Christian and regularly attend religious services (i.e., "nones"). A more generous measure

[18] Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

would include lapsed Christians who have returned to the faith ("returnees") and/or to gathering with a faith community (i.e., "dones"). The national survey research with congregations reveals that on the stricter measurement, fewer than 10 percent in congregations come from entirely non-Christian backgrounds (figures range from 1-8 percent, depending on the denominational family). If we expand to include returnees across different Christian traditions, these combined figures range from 7-21 percent. In addition, there are virtually no differences between congregations believed to be growing or declining in size. In fact, the lead source of attenders across congregations (70-80 percent) are from those who have transferred from other congregations, either within the same region or after relocating from one town/city to another. Contrary to some public perceptions that church growth is largely driven by effective evangelism initiatives, it seems that this is not actually the case.

"Nones and Dones" and Evangelism in Canada Moving Forward

With the growth of religious nones, how might church leaders think about and approach evangelism in Canada moving forward? Mindful that evangelism is valued, interpreted, and practiced quite differently across Christian sectors and congregational milieus, the cumulative research findings presented thus far leads to seven reflections. First, for evangelism to carry any meaningful weight in a Christian community, it must hold religious significance for that community, at both the belief and behaviour level. Unless religious groups hold a core belief about the unique legitimacy of their religious beliefs and practices, with a conviction that others should be invited into a way of believing and living akin to that religious group, it is unlikely that evangelism will take hold of a religious group and its members. According to James Emery White, one of the evolving challenges for Christians and congregations is they have become too comfortable, consumeristic, and self-focused in their approach to Christianity.[19] White calls for a reorientation of belief that entails greater sacrifice and urgency toward religious nones. Darrell Guder frames a congregation's renewal as "a question of their conversion, their own evangelization," and that "the essence of the church's credible witness is its own ongoing evangelization."[20] The premise is that only congregations that deeply value evangelism as a core tenet from within can seriously discuss evangelism with "nones and dones" (or others outside of Christianity).

Second, talk needs to accompany belief. Religious groups who believe that evangelism is important also need to talk about it regularly in their religious services,

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[19] James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Affiliated* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014).

[20] Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 149 and 144.

ministry activities, core values, weekly communications, and social media conversations. As with religious rituals, such as weekly church attendance, group members require constant reminders of the core evangelistic beliefs and practices that are central to the group, as a way to draw members into deeper levels of commitment to those things that bind the group together.

What groups talk about is just as significant. How is evangelism spoken of and framed, especially as Canadian society changes? Much of the recent literature highlights how some Christian communities, notably in church planting settings, wish to stay clear of "evangelism" language due to the potential baggage associated with the term. More favoured terms and discourse revolve around "missional vocation," "sent community," or "relationships and partnerships with," in contrast to "us/them" or "convert project" language.[21] Recalling that personal social ties are the lead pathway for someone to join a religious group, building and establishing trust with one's family, friends, neighbours, and coworkers, rooted in humble dialogue and conversation, are pivotal to forming meaningful and lasting relationships with religious nones.

Presuming that people avail themselves of the opportunity to develop relationships with "nones and dones," a third observation is that some Christians struggle with even knowing how to form relationships with others in their neighbourhood or workplace or school settings (recall that one of the five noted barriers for evangelism was having few nonbelievers as friends). Again, unless one comes from a religious group that stresses the need and benefit for developing relationships with "nones and dones," it is unlikely that Christians will specifically seek out these social relationships with evangelistic purposes in mind. Churches can help to model pathways forward on this front, plus help to resource congregants with a range of practical and creative ideas. "Missional" oriented congregations have much to offer here, notably on how individuals and faith communities can be "present" and partner with others in their neighbourhoods and communities in life-giving and renewing ways.[22] Books such as *The Art of Neighboring* by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, or *The Bees of Rainbow Falls* by Preston Pouteaux, are excellent resources with practical ideas, experiences, and insights to positively influence the

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[21] Don Everts and Doug Schaupp, *I Once Was Lost: What Postmodern Skeptics Taught Us About Their Path to Jesus* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2008); Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012); James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Affiliated* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014); Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People are DONE with Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland: Group Publishing, 2015); Preston Pouteaux, *The Bees of Rainbow Falls: Finding Faith, Imagination, and Delight in your Neighbourhood* (Skyforest: Urban Loft Publishers, 2017); Christopher B. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[22] Christopher B. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

lives of individuals and organizations in one's community (e.g., block parties, front porch gatherings, community celebrations).[23] As Pouteaux puts it in his subtitle, there are many opportunities to find beauty, hope, "faith, imagination, and delight in your neighbourhood," if only people are attentive to actively receiving and extending hospitality to those around them. Regrettably, one limitation for many is the pace of life that precludes the space to foster and nurture such relationships. Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon helpfully ask, "Do I live at a pace that allows me to be available to those around me? And if not, are all of the things I'm doing more important than taking the Great Commandment literally?"[24]

A fourth observation is that if or when they do form relationships with "nones and dones," many people do not know how to evangelize – congregants say they lack confidence, fear rejection, and need training. What does it look like to share one's faith with friends, family, neighbours, and coworkers in culturally relevant ways for the third decade of the twenty-first century? How might churches help congregants to learn more about their own faith? Can congregants succinctly articulate the basics of their faith, why they believe and behave as they do, and what difference their faith makes to their life and to the world at large? Do congregants grasp the nuances to their Christian beliefs and practices, and can they convey those nuances in appropriate ways with "nones and dones?" Pastors and church leaders are particularly critical here as "resident theologians" to nurture and shape the congregant's understanding of religious beliefs and practices in their Christian tradition. Churches would be wise to develop intentional structures, processes, and mechanisms to help congregants with their ongoing Christian understanding and formation.

Fifth, congregations can help by providing opportunities for evangelism in and through their ministry activities. For example, programmatic initiatives (such as Alpha, block parties, or neighbourhood service activities) can serve to provide a useful structure for congregants to get to know others. Mindful that personal relationships are the number one catalyst for people to join a religious group, groups may focus far more on initiatives that leverage personal ties versus large and impersonal events that have much lower potential for new converts, or at least converts with sustained spiritual impact. Larger events are most effective when current members invite personal family and friends with whom they are already in relationship. If carefully structured and executed, congregation-led opportunities

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[23] Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012); Preston Pouteaux, *The Bees of Rainbow Falls: Finding Faith, Imagination, and Delight in your Neighbourhood* (Skyforest: Urban Loft Publishers, 2017).
[24] Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 57.

both engage "nones and dones," and formatively disciple members themselves (e.g., help them learn more about their own religious beliefs and practices).

Sixth, it is important to celebrate the addition of new people to the Christian faith. Doing so not only affirms those who have newly joined, but these celebrations and testimonies also remind the rest of the religious group of the importance of evangelism to the group. As congregants see the "successes" of newly transformed lives, they are reminded that evangelism is an important value for the group, which includes their own involvement to actively model and share their faith in their social networks.

Finally, evangelism entails patience. Sociological data repeatedly reveals that conversion is a gradual process. People and relationships need time to be nurtured and to flourish. The process should not be rushed. When to plant, sow, and reap requires discernment.

Conclusion

The sociological data shows that conversion remains the exception, not the norm. Most religious nones will remain religious nones, notably those who are raised as religious nones. Yet, some "nones and dones" do (re)turn to Christianity, and at the very least, groups who uphold evangelism as an important priority, and equip and support members to evangelize, are more likely to fare better with evangelism versus those groups who do not prioritize evangelism. To use a sports metaphor, the batting average is still likely to be quite low, but this does not mean that Christians who believe that evangelism is important should throw their hands up and negate evangelistic activity. The caution is simply for Christians to be realistic in their expectations.

Several unsettling questions remain. What is the goal of evangelism and how do churches know if they have been "successful?" How should churches measure or mark effective evangelism? Is the goal for someone to say that they identify as a Christian? Is the aim to accept Jesus into their heart? Is the intention for someone to attend church? While a church may not have many "nones and dones" (re)turn to their congregation, if only one person does so (akin to the parable of leaving the ninety-nine sheep to find the one lost sheep), is this an evangelistic success? Is the goal to make the neighbourhood better, and if so, how will a church know that this goal has been accomplished, even if the church never sees significant growth in attendance)? Seriously grappling with these questions at the level of core Christian beliefs and practices about God and the world is imperative if Christians wish to meaningfully engage the topic of "nones and dones" and evangelism moving forward in Canada.

Joel Thiessen is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Flourishing Congregations Institute at Ambrose University, where he has been on faculty for thirteen years. He has authored and co-authored several articles and books, including: *Signs of Life: Catholic, Mainline, and Conservative Protestant Congregations in Canada* (2021), *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada* (2020), *The Millennial Mosaic: How Pluralism and Choice are Shaping Canadian Youth and the Future of Canada* (2019), and *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age*. More about his work can be found at www.joelthiessen.ca.