

# "Greatness" in Canadian Congregations

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# Study Overview

"Greatness" in Canadian Congregations is a qualitative research study exploring church growth through the lens of Jim Collins' "Good to Great" principles as outlined in his bestselling book.[i] A total of 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted with pastoral leaders across Canada, across community sizes, and across Christian faith traditions to learn what it means to be a "great" church in Canada.

*Keywords: Canadian churches, qualitative research, Jim Collins, greatness, church growth*

## Key Objectives

Examine the current strength and vitality of churches in Canada based primarily on Collins' framework, and more specifically the five distinguishing features he discusses regarding the social sectors

Determine if Collins' framework could be helpful in regard to understanding church growth

Compare the vitality and strength of two groups of churches (grouped according to their charitable giving growth patterns) from the perspectives of pastors and lay leaders

Help address the current gap in the academic church literature by identifying empirically validated principles that lead to church growth

Be aware of possible merging trends that organically arise



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# Executive Summary

## Research Overview and Objective:

This study examines church “greatness” through the lens of Jim Collins’ “good to great” principles as outlined in his book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don’t*. A total of 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted with pastoral leaders across Canada, representing various community sizes and Christian faith traditions. The primary objective of the study is to determine if and how Collins’ framework can identify principles of “greatness” that may lead to church growth.

## Research Participants:

Across the ten provinces from 18 different Christian faith traditions, there were 22 single leaders (lead, associate, or unpaid lead pastoral leaders) and nine pairs of leaders (pastor and lay leader together), of whom 31 were male and nine were female.

## Seven Major Findings:

1

**A “great” church...knows its purpose in its community and has specific mission priorities.**

Understanding the mission of the church is considered important by most pastoral leaders; being able to articulate mission priorities or a set of values born out of the mission statement seem to provide further direction and more clearly guide decision making. An over-emphasis on past mission statement making has resulted in some discomfort and cynicism. Pastoral leaders seem to be especially interested in understanding what it means to love God and neighbour in their local setting at this particular time.

2

**A “great” church leader...is loving, present, humble, and collaborative**

Overall, pastoral leaders place a high importance on relationships and exhibit a deep love for their congregations. Many pastoral leaders believe that God called them specifically to love and serve their congregations. At their best, collaboration and humility mark their decision making specifically and leadership in general. They are leaders who are physically and relationally present. They are considered to be highly knowledgeable yet communicate in an accessible manner and are approachable but direct and willing to engage in what might be uncomfortable or potentially contentious conversation.

3

**A “great” church...is marked by collaborative and trusting working relationships.**

The leader-staff/volunteer relationship is most often marked by collaboration and trust - they are working together towards a common goal with mutual appreciation and respect. Pastoral leaders tend not to resort to their position as pastor as the basis of their power; instead, they rely upon “relational authority.”

4

**A “great” church...is known for its preaching and hospitality.**

Pastoral leaders intentionally and intuitively pursue and connect their mission to their preaching (often exegetical preaching) and the modelling of hospitality. They can articulate their guiding values and point to ministries and structures within their churches that embody those values (which directly relate to their mission) and demonstrate a culture of discipline.



They know what to say “yes” and “no” to. They know what is outside their mandate and often appreciate other churches who do these other things.

Pursuing a mission seems to be much more difficult than stating one’s mission and exploring a church’s pursuit of mission reveals if and how deeply the culture of discipline has been embraced.

5

### **A “great” church...knows how to theologically and practically equip people.**

A challenge for pastoral leaders is a congregational lack of theological understanding and practical faith skills (for example, evangelism). At the same time, pastoral leaders tend to believe that spiritual growth is best accomplished through Sunday morning gatherings and depends specifically upon preaching.

There is also emphasis on small groups as discipleship. Hospitality is a desired practice/posture that pastoral leaders would like to encourage. There are challenges, such as extending hospitality beyond the “core group”, fostering hospitality to the community, and incorporating those on the margins. Pastoral leaders are grateful for the good habits of patience and intentionality that they have established.

6

### **Surprise theme! A “great” leader...is ecumenical and collaborative**

The theme of ecumenism and collaboration arose repeatedly and organically throughout the interviews, indicating this as an important priority and practice for Canadian pastoral leaders. Although pastoral leaders hold strong theological convictions towards their own faith tradition, it does not prevent them from appreciating and collaborating with other Christian faith traditions as long as there is a strong Christocentric approach.

7

### **Observation: A “great” leader inhabits self-awareness (personally, as a church, of the community).**

Self-awareness seems to be a persistent facet of Level 5 leadership, for pastoral leaders to know themselves personally, as well as knowing one’s congregation and community. Self-knowledge appears to be part of the practice of presence and hospitality. Understanding a church’s story and place in the community seems to help with understanding and contextualizing mission for a particular place and time.

### **Conclusion**

Three summary conclusions from the research study include: First, Canadian pastoral leaders place a high value on the gospel and often growing churches seem to embody a deeper, more generous understanding of the gospel that guides their decision making and propels them beyond the walls of the church. Second, a vigorous approach to hospitality was a consistent theme, which was exemplified through concrete examples, a spiritual intensity, and a passionate desire for broader and deeper relationship building. Third, unpacking and implementing a mission statement seems to be the more difficult task for pastoral leaders. There appears to be a correlation between churches who do this well and numerical growth. The research study found that alignment with Collins’ themes (mission, leadership, team building, unique role, intentional habits and structure) is generally indicative of “greatness” or growth. Both growing and stable churches appear to exhibit a good understanding of mission and exhibit Level 5 leadership. Growing churches often seem to know how to contextualize and implement their understanding of mission more specifically and more robustly. Adopting a culture of discipline and intention regarding Collins’ themes, ecumenism and collaboration across Christian faith traditions, and a self-awareness on behalf of the pastoral leader, for the church, and of the community may be some of the keys to numerical church growth.

# Research Study Context and Aims

## Literature Review

In the 1970's and 80's, church strength and vitality was often measured and discussed in the literature in terms of the number or numerical growth of members/attendees, financial donations, volunteers mobilized, community outreach initiatives/impacts, evangelism or discipleship processes, and conversions (Reimer & Wilkinson, 2015; Thiessen, 2016; Thiessen et al., 2019; Thumma, 2021). Church health was assumed to manifest itself in the numerical growth of a congregation. As a result of this emphasis, church "greatness" was associated with numerical growth.

Then in the 1990's, the missional church movement moved the flourishing conversation more towards care and concern for the community (Frost 2006; Hirsch 2006). Just before the turn of the century, the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* was published and oriented the church towards a theology of mission (Guder 1998). Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch were popular missiologists who advocated for the church to view her community as a mission field.

In the missional mindset, church "greatness" is understood more as having an impact on the community than on congregational numerical growth.

The early 2000's saw another shift in understanding church "greatness" as more concerned with the emotional health and culture of church (Scazzero 2010; McKnight et al., 2020; McKnight et al., 2023; Peterson et al., 2021). Prompted by the exposure of unhealthy church structure and behavior of pastoral leaders which were highlighted in the media, a renewed interest in church health took place.

For example, due to their experience at Willow Creek Church and the scandal surrounding Bill Hybels, Scott McKnight and Laura Barringer responded by helping church leaders identify dysfunction and toxicity and provided healthy models and principles that promoted goodness and health. The sort of growth they desire to see is "a culture of goodness in our churches that will resist abuses of power, promote healing, and eradicate the toxic fallout that infects so many Christian organizations" (McKnight et al., 2020, p. 8).

## About the Divine Pulse Project

This study is part of a larger study: *The Divine Pulse Project: Exploring Life, Death, and the Pursuit of "Greatness" in Contemporary Canadian Churches*. These studies explore various facets of church life in Canada, with a focus on empirical analysis and the application of modern research methodologies. The studies encompass several key aspects of church growth and decline, factors contributing to congregational survival, and the dynamics of establishing new congregations. The research also delves into the utilization of big-data and AI for identifying major trends and typologies within Canadian churches. A common thread running through these studies is the exploration of the multifaceted nature of congregations, their evolution over time, and the impact of empirical research on understanding these dynamics. This project collectively contributes to a more robust understanding of the Canadian church landscape, providing valuable insights for both academic discourse and practical applications.

In the article “What is a Flourishing Congregation?,” Canadian pastoral leaders reveal some of the complexities associated with church flourishing as some pastoral leaders equate church flourishing with numerical growth and others do not (Thiessen et al., 2019). This is understandable considering the recent historical trajectory of church growth (and decline), along with other factors which Thiessen et al. explore. [ii]

However, it begs the question – how is numerical growth related to church flourishing? Is numerical growth the “fruit” (results) of a thriving church rather than its “root” (cause) (Thiessen et al., 2019, p. 18)? But what then would be the root of church growth? Are there empirically validated healthy principles which could guide churches towards numerical growth as Collins proposes?

Particularly as it relates to church, some may push back to the idea that numerical growth is “greatness”. Jae Hoon Lee, author of *Great to Good: How Following Jesus Reshapes Our Ambitions* and pastor of a South Korean megachurch, plays on Collins’ catchy phrase and intentionally reverses “Good to Great” to “Great to Good” in an effort to emphasize that churches “should strive to be good rather than great” (Lee, 2024, p.1). He cautions against striving for “fame or ‘greatness’” and warns the church against “trying to elevate itself unnecessarily” (Lee, 2024, p.1).

Are numerical growth and church health at odds with one another? Author and pastor of Saddleback Church, Rick Warren argues that “church growth is the natural result of church health” (Warren, 1995, p. 49). Churches grow because they are healthy. Warren disregards the dualistic approach that pits church growth against church health. Instead, he says that we want both and that “quality produces quantity” (Warren, 1995, p. 51).

In Acts 2:42-27, we see the first church of Jerusalem grow – in fellowship, worship, service to one another, and evangelism. This passage of Scripture tells us that the church grew numerically every day and throughout the gospels we see that sometimes Jesus drew large crowds, which often continued to grow. Warren agrees with Collins in that organizations ought to focus on what they can do to ensure “greatness” or health, and that the numbers will look after themselves. Although Warren would attribute the numerical growth to the power of God, both Warren and Collins would propose focusing on healthy organizational structures and principles (not numerical growth).

This project seeks to examine Collins’ principles as outlined in his addendum for the social sector, specifically as it applies to churches. Collins’ description of a “great” organization as defined by his five themes does not exclude goodness. Rather, Collins promotes goodness, as seen in healthy leadership styles and care and concern for lay leaders and volunteers, for example. The question for this research project explores how churches’ numerical growth (a sign of “greatness”) aligns with “good” or healthy leadership characteristics. The question that is posed to Canadian churches explores the relationship between numerical growth and Collins’ five principles of “greatness”.

**Does Collins’ offer empirically validated principles that can explain numerical growth and can perhaps guide the Canadian church towards greater growth?**



## Collins' Choice of "Good to Great" Business Companies

Since the term "greatness" is ambiguous and therefore easily misinterpreted, it will be explored in detail here. We all have our own understandings of "greatness" especially as it relates to church, Collins also uses the term "great" in a specific way, and then the research study has used the term in an intentional way. First, Collins' definition of "greatness" will be outlined, followed by the research study's use of the term "great."

In his study of "good to great" companies, Jim Collins intentionally seeks out companies that experience stock return growth of at least three times over a 15-year period (Collins, 2001, p. 6). He selects 15 years to "transcend one-hit wonders and lucky breaks" and to "exceed the average tenure of most chief executive officers" (Collins, 2001, p. 6). He also chooses "three times the market because it exceeds the performance of most widely acknowledged great companies" (Collins, 2001, p. 6). Collins and his team decide not to consider other signs of vitality, concluding that they would be hard to measure (Collins, 2001, p. 6).[iii] Included in the study is another set of companies that have the same opportunities and similar resources but do not experience the same sort of growth. They then ask the question – what is different about these "great" companies compared to the other companies?

For his study, 28 companies are involved – 11 "great" companies", 11 "direct comparisons" (similar companies in the same industry with the same opportunities and resources but not similar growth), and 6 "unsustained comparisons" (companies that experience significant growth but fail to maintain the growth). Collins emphasizes that, "it is important

to understand that we developed all of the concepts in this book by making empirical deductions directly from the data. We did not begin this project with a theory to test or prove. We sought to build a theory from the ground up, derived directly from the evidence (Collins, 2001, p. 10)."

## Exploring "Greatness"

Considering the multiple definitions of "greatness," especially in regard to church, it is essential to understand that for this research study the term "greatness" is applied in two ways. First, "greatness" is used to describe exceptional and unusual growth as indicated by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) data.[iv] The churches which exhibit this pattern of significant and consistent growth lasting at least 5 to 7 years are considered "great." "Greatness" is rooted in a purely financial understanding as sourced from CRA data. While other measures of so-called success or health are difficult to measure, the tax-receipted giving information can serve as an objective indicator. More giving often means more attendance and volunteerism. It implies and likely means intentional pursuit of an understood mission.

While it is interesting to identify Canadian churches which are exhibiting exceptional and unusual growth, the research study then probes further, asking the question, "What is the rest of the story?" The aim is to discover how, if at all, Collins' principles of "greatness" align with the "greatness" or growth. Therefore, once exceptionally growing or "great" churches are identified, the term "greatness" is then used to define alignment with Collins' principles. Essentially, we want to know – do "great" churches exhibit the sort of "great" leadership and organizational principles that Collins proposes? How do churches who are not

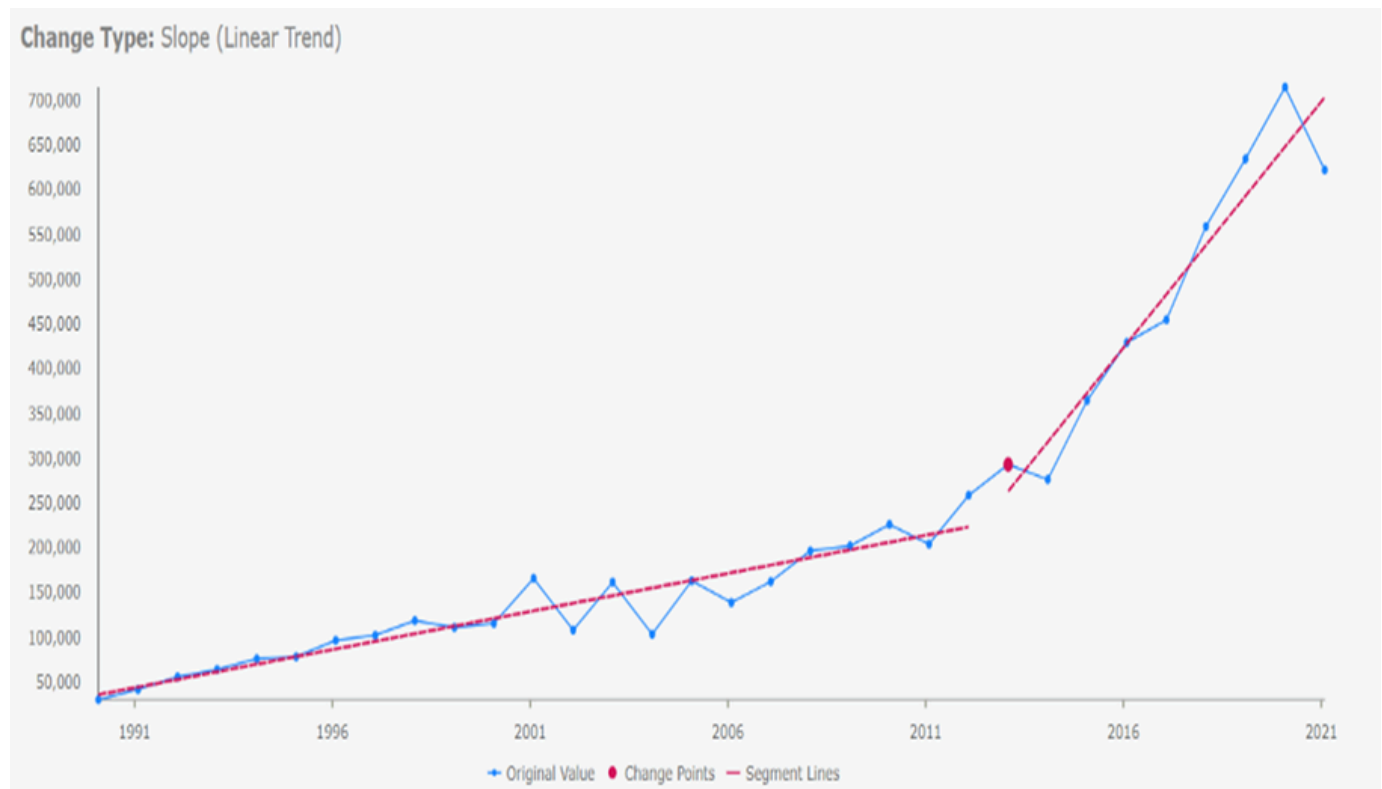
experiencing exceptional growth exhibit or do not exhibit the sort of “great” leadership and organizational principles that Collins propose? It is the direct comparison of these two groups of churches that will show the validity of Collins’ principles.

## Change Points

Two groups of churches were interviewed. The research study included 20 churches who had experienced extraordinary and sustained growth and thus identified as “great” and then 11 churches who experienced general fiscal stability but did not experience a change point and thus identified as “good.” For the 20 churches who experienced extraordinary and sustained growth, the beginning of these times of growth are referred to as “change points”.[5] The change point simply refers to a moment in time when one state transforms to another state from a mathematical point of view. A change point could be described as an inflection point or a

demarcation between two states - stability to exceptional growth. This change in states does not happen in a single instant but is visible through CRA data. For this project, the change point algorithm detected a 3X change in slope over a 5-to-7-year period for receipted giving as identified through the public CRA data.[6] Then 11 churches were interviewed who generally experienced fiscal stability, but they did not have a change point as defined.

Below is an example of a church’s tax receipted giving history according to CRA. As the graph indicates, in 2012, something starts to shift, and the church begins to experience exceptional growth that continues for at least 15 years. Thus, 2012 marks a change point. For this project, we know the financial part of the church’s story, but we are curious as to what is the rest of the story - what else is happening with church leadership and church life?



For the 20 churches who experienced significant sustained growth (as demonstrated by their receipted giving which is shown by the CRA data), there are then 20 change points. During the interviews, the research participants were asked something like, "From the CRA data, it looks like giving really increased in 2012. Can you tell me what happened?" The responses are recorded in Figure 1.

10 change points are associated with pastoral leaders. Sometimes it is new lead or associate pastoral leaders. The leader is often described as being well loved, charismatic, a great storyteller, and someone who championed mission or evangelism. In other cases, the current pastoral leader became more active or started to emphasize something new, like spiritual gifts, mission, or evangelism.

10 (possibly 11) change points are associated with some sort of social structure shift, such as building funds, launching new sites, church mergers, or adding more services.

There is something about the framework shift that creates an opening for something new to happen. It is almost as if conditions are ripe and ready for something new, and a new structure is needed to accommodate the change that is bursting to take place. Note that some change points refer to both pastoral leadership and social structure shift.

Two change points are difficult to classify. The first one relates to a local population increase and people's spiritual hunger which are seen as an outside force, unrelated to the church. For some reason, this church grew significantly while other churches in the area did not. This church does not have a paid pastoral leader and is governed by a board. The other change point related to the sale of land is ambiguous as the pastoral leader was not present at the time and could not recall exactly what happened. These two change points specifically need further investigation before anything conclusive can be determined.

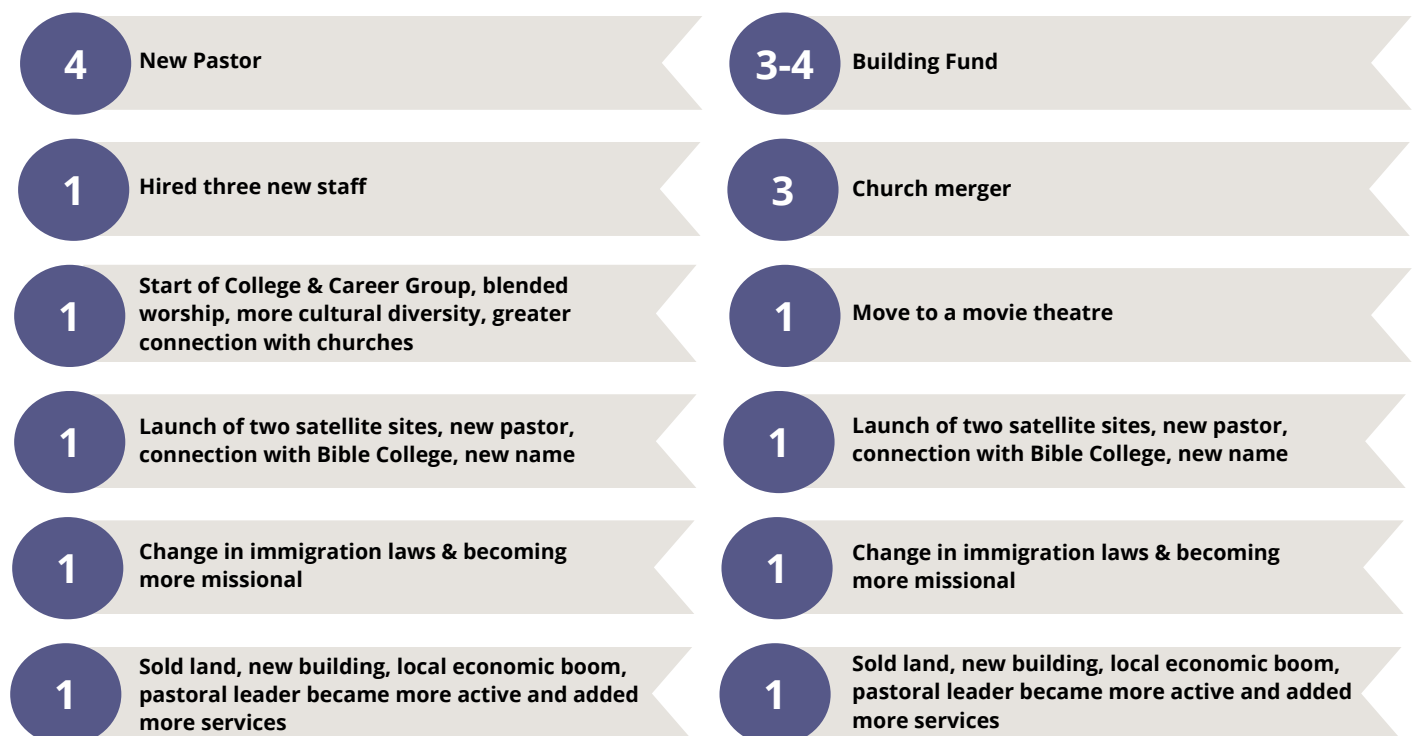


Figure 1



Based on this data, it is possible to say that new or more active/more missional pastoral leaders and social structure shifts seem to share some sort of association with significant growth for churches.

**It is important to emphasize that change points do not reflect a single decision or choice but are associated with some sort of change (which involve intentional decisions).**

The personality of a pastoral leader and a particular emphasis (mission, evangelism, spiritual gifts) are noted to be associated with congregational growth. Along with the pastoral leader, the data indicates that some form of social structure change (new building, merger, new sites, more services) accompanies and even helps initiate the change point. Note that the social structure shifts do not occur much later but seems to be a part of the initial growth pattern.

While change points offer valuable information in terms of patterns of church growth, more research is required before definite conclusions can be drawn. For deeper understanding of change points, more conversation and investigation are needed with the pastoral leaders and leadership teams most closely associated with the change points. Change points present interesting questions as they relate to the pastoral leader, the ministry context, and the decisions being made at the time of the change point. Knowing more about a church's history is vital to fully understand change points.

## **“Great” Churches and “Good” Churches**

Although as the researcher I knew from the CRA data which churches had experienced a change point or not, I interviewed all the churches in the same way. Although the change point was one particular question for the interview, all the other questions revolved around Collins' themes of “greatness.”

It became apparent that it was not as simplistic to suggest that all the “great” churches exhibited the characteristics that Collins associates with “greatness” and that all the “good” churches lacked those characteristics. It was not always obvious from the interviews themselves (apart from the change point question) which churches would be considered “great” according to the CRA data. It is important to note that generally all the participating churches exhibited some theme of “greatness” as defined by Collins (such as Level 5 leadership characteristics or a clear understanding of mission), regardless of its growth pattern. It is also worthy to note that some of the churches who were identified as “great” churches through the CRA data did not fully align with Collins' themes, which begs the question if they will continue to experience significant growth in the future or not.

Note that a few pastoral leaders expressed a cost involved with the change point. For instance, one church who experienced a sustained period of growth did not look back fondly on the pastoral leader who initiated that growth. In fact, it seemed as though it took the congregation some time to heal from the leader's intentional but perhaps obsessive focus on mission. The leader's approach, although effective in terms of numerical growth, also damaged some key relationships.

## Research Question

Our initial questions, like Collins, are rooted in a purely financial reality. Namely we have churches across Christian faith traditions who share the same growth curve that Collins calls “great” and churches who have a more steady growth pattern, as evidenced by CRA data.[vii]

The question we ask is this – what are the unique properties of churches who share this curve (steadily increasing over time) and do they fit with Collins’ assumptions as articulated by his five themes? Are they “great” from a wider understanding of this term of “greatness”? Essentially, this project investigates two expressions of “greatness” - one being numerical growth and the other being Collins’ description of “great” leadership.

Therefore, these are the research questions:

- What are the roots of church growth?
- Does Collins’ framework give us empirically validated principles that can guide the Canadian church towards greater growth or “greatness”?

If “greatness” is a matter of conscious choice and intention, as Collins argues, then we can identify empirically validated principles that will help set churches on a path towards numerical growth and vitality. If Collins’ leadership framework is applicable to Canadian churches, then his principles of leadership could provide practical tools for churches interested in growing their congregations.

## Demographics of Research Participants

This was a qualitative research study that included 31 semi-structured interviews which were conducted with churches across Canada, across community sizes, and across Christian denominations from July 2024 to December 2024. Two groups of churches (grouped according to their charitable giving growth patterns) were compared from the perspectives of pastoral and lay leaders. One group of churches exhibited fiscal stability while the other group of churches exhibited an exceptional growth pattern. [viii]

### Demographics of Research Participants

Alberta	5
Atlantic Provinces	3
British Columbia	5
Manitoba	2
Ontario	9
Quebec	2
Saskatchewan	5
Denominations Reporesented	11
Single Leaders (Lead, co, associate, or unpaid pastoral leaders)	22
Pairs of Leaders (Pastor and lay leader together)	9
Male Pastoral Leaders	31
Femal Pastoral Leaders	9

# Interview Methodology and Design

## Semi-Structured Interviews

This study relied upon semi-structured interviews with the research participants. A list of prepared questions developed from Collins' five themes were used to guide the interview, while allowing for the liberty to ask further questions or delve deeper as appropriate. This allowed the research participants to engage conversationally, rather than simply providing straight answers to direct questions. The questions were intentionally open-ended and participants could answer as simply or fully as desired. The semi-structured interviews also allowed for the potential of other themes to organically appear.

As the researcher, I practised affirmative listening skills and used prompts such as "Tell me more" or "It sounds like...". I listened for passion and intensity while participants spoke, while noting repetition of themes or the depth of detail regarding themes they spoke about. I also observed body language and non-verbal clues which indicated varying levels of interest and engagement.

## Data Collection

Participants were chosen from the public CRA data based on their financial growth pattern. There was deliberation to have representation across the provinces and across community sizes. We intentionally chose churches from small towns to mid-size cities to large cities to ensure that representation from all sizes of communities. We also chose churches from across Christian faith traditions. Research interviews took place from July 2024 to December 2024.

I emailed potential pastoral leaders with a description of the project and an invitation for an hour-long interview via Microsoft Teams. Pastoral leaders who were interested and willing responded with written consent and a video call was set up. Teams was typically used but occasionally other options such as Facetime or Zoom was used if Microsoft Teams was not possible. The interview was recorded, transcribed, and safely stored in the University of Toronto's encrypted One Drive storage system. I replaced the names of participants with pseudonyms and removed all identifying data. A copy of the interview transcription was then emailed to the participant and the participant was given 10 days to either offer any edits or confirm the accuracy of the interview transcript. If there was no response within 10 days, it was assumed that no edits were needed.

Occasionally changes were made to the transcription, such as occasions of the sound quality of the call interfering with the speaker's clarity of speech. The participant was also invited to participate in the national wide survey related to the project and asked if they would like a copy of the final findings. All participants were interested to receive the final findings.

## Data Analysis

The interview transcripts serve as the raw data for this project and were analyzed with NVivo, a software data analysis program. NVivo is primarily used for qualitative data as it can classify, sort, and arrange very rich text-based information. Nodes (collections of information based on similar themes) were created based on Collins' themes while other nodes were created during the analysis process as new themes emerged (data generated thematic analysis). I compiled a Code Book for each participant, noting the pseudonyms and replacement words for the personal information.

**Can we identify empirically validated principles that will help set churches on a path towards numerical growth and vitality?**



This included names of staff members, family members, other churches, schools, community organizations and geographical locations, and other identifying information. I also made field notes for each participant, noting specific information that caught my interest and might be pertinent.

The interview transcripts were also read multiple times by the researcher to ensure a deep understanding of the data. This was done immediately after the interview, during the analysis process, and during the writing phase. I also made occasional notes on NVivo, marking important quotes, ideas, or stories. Each interview was about 1 hour long and produced about 20 to 25 pages of single-spaced data.

Qualitative analysis requires a certain degree of artfulness given its greater degree of subjectivity and I employed multiple strategies to draw conclusions from the interviews. It was helpful to collect similar themes and to record the frequency of themes. Although frequency was important and offered some information, it was the quality and type of response that proved more helpful.

For example, a response around hospitality that was elaborated upon, spoken with passion, and included concrete examples provided a better understanding of the participant's view of hospitality than a simple mention of hospitality. Therefore, my conclusions are based on the quality of response, rather than only the frequency of response.

A robust response often included personal engagement, a sense of enthusiasm, multiple details, concrete examples, and specific stories. Participants wanted to elaborate on certain responses and responded readily and richly with thoughtful responses to specific questions.

Although somewhat difficult to measure, responses can be compared and differences can be noted. It is also possible that interview fatigue, personal circumstances, and other factors could affect a participant's response.

## **Ethical Considerations**

For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms were assigned to all research participants and anyone they mentioned throughout the interview. Any other identifying information was withheld to ensure anonymity, such as names of schools, community organizations, or specific geographical locations.

Ethics approval for this research study was granted from University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board, Certificate #00046369.

## **Limitations of Research Design**

For this study there is a heavy reliance on the perspectives of the pastoral leader, as we asked for their thoughts, opinions, feelings, reflections, and intuitive responses. This gave us clear picture as to how pastoral leaders see things from their vantage point. However, it does not present the whole picture. The input from the lay leaders helps to accommodate this potential weakness to a certain extent.

While some effort was made to include ethnically diverse churches, it was not always easy to identify the ethnicity of churches by the CRA data. The prerequisites of selected churches also limited choice of participants. This is a potential limitation of the study that we can consider for possible further study.

# Framework for Project

The framework for this project comes from the bestseller *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't* by Jim Collins (2001). He offers insights on why some companies thrive while others do not. Later in a second book called *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, Collins (2005) notes that while the principles of “greatness” are different for businesses compared to those in the social sector, many social sectors leaders who have embraced the good-to-great principles have found them to highly resonate in non-business establishments such as education, healthcare, social services, arts, police, and churches, albeit with slight adaptations to each of the principles.

Collins highlights five themes that can be considered when applying the framework to the social sectors. These five principles were used to develop corresponding interview questions.



## Defining “Great”

Calibrating success without business metrics



## Level 5 Leadership

Getting things done within a diffuse power structure



## First Who

Getting the right people on the bus within social sector constraints



## The Hedgehog Concept

Rethinking the economic engine without a profit motive



## Turning the Flywheel

Building momentum by building the brand

## Defining “Great”

While money (profit) is the definition of “greatness” for business, within the social sector “greatness” is defined relative to mission and impact (Collins, 2005, p. 5).

For churches, money is an input, not an output. According to Collins, “in business, money is both an input (a resource for achieving “greatness”) and an output (a measure of “greatness” - often measured in profit, stock increases, sales, and so on) (Collins, 2005, p. 5).

In the social sector, however, money is only an input - often in the form of donations or grants. Therefore, “greatness” in the social sector cannot be measured financially but must be measured relative to mission. Performance within the social sector can be measured by “results and efficiency in delivery on the social mission” (Collins, 2005, p. 8). Making an impact over a period of time defines “greatness” for organizations like churches. As Collins says, “the critical question is not ‘how much money do we make per dollar of invested capital?’ but ‘how effectively do we deliver on our mission and make a distinctive impact, relative to our resources?’” (Collins, 2005, p. 5). For that reason, the aim of the research is to discover how well churches understand and pursue their mission.

The study relies on the suggestion that “great” churches, who show significant patterns of growth through their receipted tax giving, are also invested in mission. The CRA data serves as a sort of proxy for gauging a church’s interest and pursuit of mission. Increased financial giving is often a strong indicator of increased involvement on behalf of participants who believe that mission is being addressed and may signal a greater capacity to address their mission.

Interview questions developed for the semi-structured interviews included:

- What would you say is the mission of your church?
- Why does your church exist?
- Tell me how your church has pursued its vision or mission over the years?
- What sort of reputation does your church have in the community?

Note that these interview questions approach the issue of mission both from an emic (intrinsic) and etic (extrinsic) approach in order to understand both the congregation and community's evaluation of the church according to the pastoral leader.

These questions attempt to understand how the pastoral leader perceives how those within the congregation experience and understand church but also how those outside the church in the local community might view the church.

### **Level 5 Leadership**

The second theme is Level 5 leadership, similar to *Good to Great* in the business arena. The difference is that in the social sector, leaders rely on legislative skills, rather than executive skills (Collins, 2005, p. 10). Because a leader is dealing with volunteers or often under-paid employees, money is not a motivator, and a leader must rely more on leadership skills than power.

A Level 5 leader must be able to make the right decisions happen with legitimate influence. It is the combination of "personal humility and professional will" (Collins, 2005, p. 11).

Interview questions developed for the semi-structured interviews included:

- What do you love about your job? Your church?
- What are you most proud of?
- How do you think people in your congregation and community would describe you as a leader?
- In terms of living out the vision of the church, how are those decisions made?

### **First Who**

Getting the right people on the bus is the third theme. Since money is not a motivator within the social sector, organizations like churches must address people's need for meaning and purpose in their lives. Being selective about volunteers (thus, making it attractive) and having enough of the right people is key.

Interview questions developed for the semi-structured interviews included:

- In terms of living out the vision of the church, how are those decisions made?
- What are some of the hard realities you've had to face as a church?
- How would you describe your congregation? Your staff members?
- How do you get the right people in the right places?

### **The Hedgehog Concept**

Fourth, the Hedgehog Concept is based on an ancient Greek parable that states, "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." In the parable, the fox uses many strategies to try to catch the hedgehog. It sneaks, pounces, races, and plays dead. The hedgehog only knows one thing – to curl up in a ball and play dead – and he always wins. The Hedgehog Concept within the social sector means that the engine is not simply economic or asks the question "how much money do we make?" Instead, the resource engine includes time, money, and brand (Collins, 2005, p. 18). The Hedgehog Concept for churches means understanding what the church stands for (core values) and why it exists, how it uniquely contributes to the community, and what best drives the church.



Brand is defined as the ability to “cultivate a deep well of emotional goodwill and mindshare of potential supporters” (Collins, 2005, p. 18). Since churches rely mostly on individual charitable donations, much more clarity regarding passion and purpose is necessary.

Interview questions developed for the semi-structured interviews included:

- How has your church leaned into or said “yes” to pursuing the mission of the church?
- What do you think your church is particularly good at?
- Are there things that your church has had to say “no” to?

**The Hedgehog Concept for churches means understanding what the church stands for (core values) and why it exists, how it uniquely contributes to the community, and what best drives the church.**

### Turning the Flywheel

The final theme is turning the Flywheel, which aligns with Collins’ *Good to Great* principles. This is the idea of slowly and steadily moving in the right direction until there is a breakthrough and things take off seemingly on their own. It promotes the approach of step by step or little by little. Supporters not only believe “in your mission but in your capacity to deliver on that mission” (Collins, 2005, p. 25).

Consistency is key. Knowing and staying committed to core values and primary purpose (even though practices and situations may change) is key. Collins’ illustration of the Cleveland Orchestra on September 11, 2001 poignantly demonstrates the power of doing what only you can do well (Collins, 2005, p. 27.) [ix] They chose to do what they do best - which was to play Mahler in response to the attack rather than cancelling.

Interview questions developed for the semi-structured interviews included:

- What are some of the practices or attitudes that have been intentionally cultivated over the years?
- What sort of growth would you like to see?
- Is there anything you did years ago that you are especially thankful for now – something that has borne good results?
- How have you managed to keep going in the face of difficulty or adversity?

Collins concludes by saying that some organizations do well and some do not, even though the environmental challenges are the same for both. Echoing what he states in *Good to Great*, he argues that “greatness is not a function of circumstance”; but rather “greatness is largely a matter of conscious choice and discipline” (Collins, 2005, p. 31).

### Does that hold true for Canadian churches?

- What would you say is the mission of your church?
- Why does your church exist?
- Tell me how your church has pursued its vision or mission over the years?
- What sort of reputation does your church have in the community?

## Jim Collins’ Definition of “Greatness”

According to Jim Collins, a “great” organization “delivers superior performance and makes a distinctive impact over a long period of time” (Collins, 2005, p. 5). For businesses, the success of a company can be based on financial returns. However, for churches, and others in the social sector, success or “greatness” is more difficult to measure: For these organizations, success is defined by making an impact as determined by the mission of the organization.

Collins admits that it is tricky to quantify such results but emphasizes that “what matters is that you rigorously assemble evidence – whether quantitative or qualitative – to track your progress” (Collins, 2005, p. 7). There’s a discipline involved regarding people, thought, and action that results in long term results, despite setbacks.

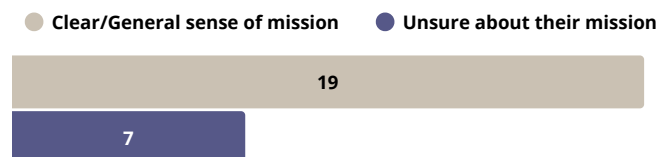
According to Collins, “greatness” for organizations in the social sector mean that they make a unique contribution to their communities, that they exhibit an excellence that their communities recognize, and that they would be missed if they disappeared. The interview questions for pastoral leaders regarding this first theme centre around the mission of the church, its reason for existing, why people go to this church, its reputation within the community, and what pastoral leaders are most proud of.



## Mission of Church

Pastoral leaders believe that a sense of purpose is important for providing direction and laying a foundational understanding for the church. Mission statements tend to converge around the somewhat vague mission of loving God and loving others.

For the study, mission statements and vision statements were not differentiated, but were left to the research participants to distinguish. A total of 26 pastoral leaders addressed this question accordingly:



Most of the pastoral leaders (19) expressed a clear or general sense of mission, such as these:

**Most of the pastoral leaders (19) expressed a clear or general sense of mission, such as these:**

- To Experience growing relationship with Christ
- To be a hub of belonging
- To reach Hispanic people and share the love and hope of Christ
- To equip people and lead them in a personal walk with Jesus Christ
- To have fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ and to be a missional church of [x number]
- To point people to Jesus
- To declare and demonstrate the transforming power of gospel
- To be a community of Christ followers committed to loving God and people
- Faith, hope, love
- To have passion for God and compassion for people
- To love God and others and magnify the name of Jesus Christ
- To share Christ until everyone reflects him
- To build contagious followers of Christ by growing in faith, living in community, engaging in mission
- To cultivate kinship with God, others, and creation
- To offer hope
- To love God and share that love
- To know Jesus Christ, be empowered by the Holy Spirit and make him known
- To live in love with all our relationships
- To operate school and teach Christian values
- To find belonging

Seven of the pastoral leaders were unsure or could not succinctly articulate the mission/vision statement for their churches. They often said that the congregation understood the mission of the church even if most of them could not readily recite it. Other leaders said that their church “for sure” has a mission/vision statement but “I’m not sure what it is.”

Having a clear mission statement helps pastoral leaders understand their purpose as a church and often within the community. Mission statements serve as a concrete way of setting direction and clarifying values that tend to lead to straightforward action and decision making. Having a clear understanding of mission may seem to state the obvious but stating what might be presumed provides a clarity that is otherwise absent. However, it is worthy to note that the interview responses regarding sense of mission ranged from mild enthusiasm to indifference. There is some weariness expressed regarding mission statements and/or vision statements. When referring to the pastor who was at the church during the time of significant numerical growth and who put a heavy emphasis on evangelism, Tom and lay leader Lucas both admitted a sense of “awkwardness” and “hard feelings” as people felt “uncomfortable” with the heavy emphasis and the way evangelism was carried out.[x] Tom said that the congregation had “enough of this” (referring to vision casting and mission statement making) and did not want to “use those words for 10 years.”

Sugar Maple Church had a similar story. Although they thought the making of mission statement was a good exercise to go through as a church, some weariness was expressed as all. They hired a consultant to help them with a vision statement and it was an arduous process which “dragged on, perhaps a little bit more than it should have.”

Although the leaders of Sugar Maple Church said, “worthwhile stuff” came out of it, the vision statement experience was slightly disappointing for people, as lay leader Mack says that some people “wanted it to be fancier than it was.” The vision statement “confirmed” what the church aspired to be and was currently doing; but it was “a little bit more simple, more down to earth” than some people may have liked. As a result, in their words, “the word ‘vision’ became a taboo word around here.”

Although too much emphasis on a clear mission statement in past years seems to have resulted in a somewhat negative connotation when it comes to vision casting or creating a mission statement, most churches deem it important to know their mission as it seems to provide a needed sense of direction and purpose for the churches.

Interestingly, churches seemed to find core values or priorities more helpful as they intentionally live out that general sense of mission in their own particular community. For example, Big Sky Church has three core values that guide their decision making and Divine Mercy Church has three priorities they are pursuing. Elderberry Church also adds that more important than mission or anything else is a high emphasis on the movement of the Spirit. Not that church is to be unstructured, or pastoral leaders are not to make plans, but an awareness of and openness to the Spirit is vital in terms of knowing how to pursue the mission.

### **Reason for Church Existing**

When I asked pastoral leaders why their church exists, this was another way to gauge their sense of mission or purpose.

It was an attempt to understand how they thought about their purpose as a church and place in the community.

The most common response centered around community engagement. This activity within and for the community was driven by Jesus’ command to love our neighbour and to serve others as Christ would.

“

We have a mission, and this is our place, and this is who we are. And we're going to live for this town and serve this town as Christ might ask us to.

-Garth (Big Sky Church)

”

“

“We don't exist for our own comfort. We exist for the people beyond these walls who have yet to come in our doors, and we exist to love our neighbors as our self.”

-Ben (Caragana Street Church)

”

“

We have a lot of newcomers coming into the city from Latin America and some of them have been in churches before, others have never stepped into a church. This is a whole new world for them. It's a different language, a different culture. You know, they ask us – why do you guys do this? We just say - because we love you through Christ and that does plant a seed in their hearts.

-Luis (City Light Church)

”



“

We're trying to reach a particular non-Christian, non-church people. That's how we're trying to grow. We're not trying to grow by having people from other churches come.  
-Jim (Riverside Church)

”

“

[There is] a desire to have some sort of community outreach. They don't want me necessarily just connecting with the youth of our church, but the youth in the community, the people of the community and I'm all for that. That's kind of goes along with my heart for the community.  
-Seth (Maple Street Church)

”

“

That we would be the church that is near the community.  
-Pierre (Hope Church)

”

Cameron from Bayberry Church believes that the reason for a church's existence must be to reach the community. He says, “churches that are not healthy have lost their outward focus in looking into the community. They're almost in protection mode. Stealth preservation mode. Whatever the terminology you would like to use, but to be healthy seems that you have to look outward and how can we reach the community that we live in.”

## Why People Go to Their Church

In another attempt to see how pastoral leaders understood the sense of mission for their church, this question (“Why do you think people go to your church, and not some other church?”) focuses on why people go to their church, versus other churches in the nearby area. Pastoral leaders respond in two main categories:

### Orthodoxy

19 Responses

This is the most common reason given as to why pastoral leaders believe that people go to their church. Pastoral leaders believe that people come to their church because they believe and proclaim the truth and that they are following the Spirit. Pastoral leaders often describe their preaching as expository in nature, “substantive preaching” and “not just motivational.” They say that they “teach what the Bible says,” that they “haven't veered away from the truth or accepted new teaching,” and that they preach the “truth of God's Word.” Churches from across faith traditions answer this way – for example, Anglican, Seventh Day Adventist, Baptist, and Pentecostal. A LGBTQ+ affirming church said that people come to their church because Jesus is central to the preaching and life of the church, along with a culture of welcome and spaciousness. “Being Spirit-driven” was described as being guided by the Spirit in terms of preaching and ministry. One leader simply attributed people coming to the church as the leading of God and placed a high value on the Spirit guiding their decisions as leaders and encouraging the church body. One leader attributed attendance at the church to “prayer” as the number one reason why people come. Lane describes being Spirit-led as this:

“It's the presence of God – it's tangible or manifest in our gatherings and people recognize it. We have many people that have come over to us from United Church, or other mainline churches. And one of the common things they say is - When I come here, it's like God is here.

That sounds super uber spiritual, but I think it's from the Spirit. Our people are intentional to welcome people. From the moment they step through the doors. Our worship is Spirit-filled. It's not just - let's sing songs for the sake of singing songs. No - we're here to bring glory and honor to Jesus and to encounter his presence. And then the preaching and ministry. It's just Spirit driven; it's Spirit filled... We want people to encounter Jesus. I would say there's a spiritual hunger that people are feeling, and they are finding that being met. 100%. Yeah. And not just Christians. Muslims, we have Hindus, we have a lot of New Age. There's a spiritual hunger in Canada right now... People are showing up. And they're like, I'm curious. I'm hungry for something transcendent beyond me. Now, that begins the work of discipleship because not everything that's spiritual is the right spiritual but there is an awakening happening in our country right now. And so when I hear stuff about decline, I have a lot of thoughts on that. But I think we have to have eyes to see and ears to hear. God is at work. More than I've ever experienced." – Lane (Elderberry Church)

"I think a lot of pastors are exhorters. But an expositor - all of a sudden, you're hearing Scripture explained, which people want to know what God really says. When you're having an exposition, it's a lot different than an exhortation."  
-Mike (Main Street Church)

"They love the way he [the pastor] carries out his sermons and they like that he sticks to the Bible."  
-Daniel (City Light Church)

"[People say] you centre on the gospel continually and you teach through the Bible. I don't need 5 steps to be a better husband to my wife if I see who God is and how he has loved me."  
-Jim (Riverside Church)

"We have found that people are looking for substance. And not just motivational messages. Not like trying to key into the world and then basically presenting as if the religious product is just a little better than what the secular thing is. I think what we have found is that the church is different than the world and ultimately what the church stands for is based upon what we believe to be the revelation of God through Christ in the Bible. I think that's it."  
-Matthew (Ocean View Church)

"They come. They are searching for a Christ like church, like apostolic Church. And we take pride in this as [denomination], because we have apostolic tradition of succession, so that's what attracts most people. Plus, we stuck to the traditions of the Bible, the teachings of the Bible. We have not veered off or accepted any new teachings."  
-Isaiah (House of God Church)

"I think some of the main draws for the churches are teaching. We have very strong teaching that people really like. Jason, who's our primary teacher, [favours] the expository style of teaching. Really getting into the depths of the text a lot. And Jason is very straightforward. There's not a lot of fluff around it. Some people really like straight teaching."  
-Ethan (Gathering Church)



“

They recognize the errors in the other churches. The things that are not in accord with God's Word. They really do take God's Word to heart and that's why they're here.  
-Samuel (Lakeview Church)

”

**Welcoming****11 Responses**

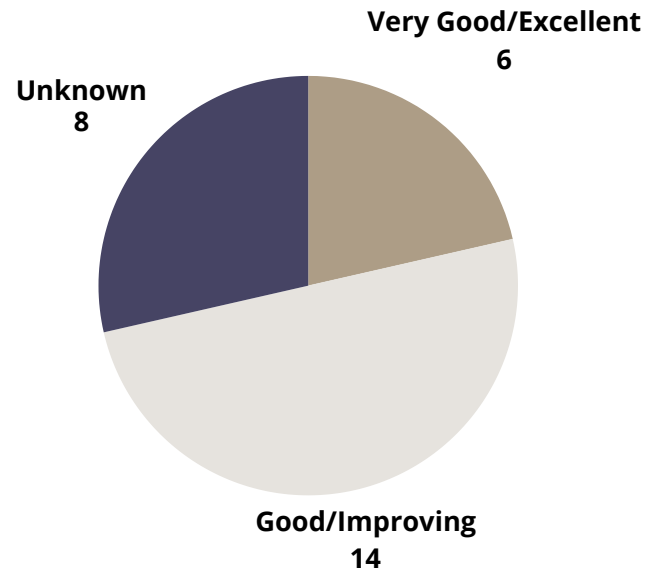
The second reason given as to why people go to their church and not another church, most often pertains to the church culture, describing it as friendly and welcoming. One pastoral leader described the church as having a “sense of family.”

One pastor said that people come to the church because they say that it “feels real.” When I questioned further, he explained that when people come, they feel like they can be themselves, that they won’t be judged, that they don’t have to pretend to be something they aren’t, and that they can be honest about their struggles. The personality of the pastoral leader was also mentioned as a key factor in people choosing their church.

It is notable that the friendliness and warm welcome of a church is not the primary reason as to why people choose to attend this church. This important value is often dominant, and yet pastoral leaders in this study give it secondary importance. Other reasons given as to why people attend their church included: Kids programming, volunteer opportunities and community engagement.

**Reputation of Church**

In this study, 28 pastoral leaders responded regarding how they thought their communities viewed their churches.



**6 Pastoral leaders think their reputation as a church is very good / great**

Extremely good reputation due to not being judgemental and trying to reach the community. A long-term investment.

Very good reputation with government services and church is known for their service to community.

Pastor is very supportive and has worked really hard at creating partnerships to serve the vulnerable in the community. At the same time, many people are unaware of the church.

“A pretty positive presence in our town.”

Great reputation. The mayor is “very familiar with our church and is very thankful for who we are.” We try to seek the welfare of our city well. We have a history of supporting other ministries or social initiatives in our community - financially and by volunteering.

“People call it ‘their’ church even if they don’t go there.”

### 14 Pastoral leaders think their reputation as a church is good/improving

Reputation has been historically judgmental/harsh, and church would be described as “we’ve got it all right” and being better than other people in the community. However, reputation is improving due to community involvement and being a faithful presence in the community.

A place where you can get help

Regular activity at church and hosting large events lets people know that this is a friendly welcoming place

Apathetic and maybe even a negative perception because of some of the views on popular social issues. However, community groups are appreciative of the church sharing space and a lot of non-church families bring their kids for youth group which “I think is a positive thing.”

Beneficial to the community and hosts groups like AA and NA

Fairly positive

“I think that’s the thing that churches need most - churches want to do good things, but they don’t always know what the community needs. We need to be doing more listening rather than telling - oh, we know what people would want. Do you? Who told you that’s what they want?”

“That we would be the church that is near the community. That we help people. This is the way that I am working to train the church to be because if we don’t do this task, we are here for nothing.”

Community would know us for serving food

Seen as a hospital

Improving but historically judgmental due to the ways the church has interacted with the community (“turn or burn”, purity movement, rapture theology, Indigenous schools, Covid-19). Location on outskirts of town poses a challenge.

Maybe a little old school but mostly very friendly and welcoming

Offers their auditorium for community events but one of the criticisms is that the “church can get a bit insular”

Past offence when starting new school and pulled kids out of public school but improving due to the way they work together and volunteer their time and energy.

### 8 Pastoral leaders think their church reputation is unknown / unsure / negative

“I don’t think they’d miss us, but this is where the missional focus we need to work is how we can be known in our community. Yes, I would say we aren’t good. I think we can do better.”

Location of church in industrial area makes it hard to attract people walking by, but people appreciate the architecture

Location makes church not very visible

Location in a movie theatre might make people curious

People who don’t go to church “don’t have a clear idea of what church is about.”

Unsure about how many “stars” they’d receive. Maybe viewed as “Bible thumpers” but also that people think “we’re kind”

Not extreme opinions either way but church has never been a source of controversy

“We have a little bit of an uphill battle” due to a history of division and conflict which has caused a lack of trust within the community. It is hopefully improving with more community involvement in recent years.

In summary, 20 out of the 28 churches who respond to this question believe that the reputation of their church is good/improving/very good. The pastoral leaders also give evidence as to why they think this and what they think the community appreciates and respects about their church:

- Lack of judgementalism or harshness
- Service to the community (directly and indirectly by supporting other ministries/ social initiative in their city/town)
- The way they get along and help each other
- Their friendliness and welcoming

There is also an awareness that the church’s position on some social issues may result in negative views of the church (although it is not mentioned if and what specific criticisms have been brought up).



Another pastor acknowledges that one criticism is that “the church can get a bit insular” while considered “being old school” is another suspected criticism.

It is interesting to observe that three churches report that they are or have in the past dealt with the negative reputation of their church. This negative reputation of being viewed as judgemental and harsh is attributed to a holier-than-thou mentality towards the community, along with aggressive forms of evangelism, such as “turn or burn” and “rapture theology”. Other issues mentioned were the response to COVID-19, the purity movement, and Indigenous residential schools. The physical location of the church (either being on the outskirts of town or in an industrial area) also makes it difficult to know how the community might perceive the church.



It is also worthy to note that establishing a positive reputation takes time. Cameron says it's a “long term investment” while Ted says they are enjoying a sense of flourishing and growth now, likening it to “compound interest”. Referring to all the years of faithful service, the prayers, the service offered to the community, Ted views these things as adding up until there is an overflow. Even though he was not a part of all those years of faithful investment, he recognizes the decades of work done before his arrival as being part of the positive reputation his church now enjoys.

### What Pastoral Leaders are Most Proud of\*



*\*How many times each theme was mentioned by the participants. Participants sometimes choose several themes*

#### Congregational Hospitality

12 Responses

Pastoral leaders are clearly most proud of the way in which their churches extend and practice hospitality with one another, along with willingly and devotedly serving the church. Making people feel welcome, the confidence that new people would be spoken to, and knowing that congregants care for one another in tangible ways are things that pastoral leaders are most pleased about. Pastoral leaders speak of this as “good connection” or “fellowship” or the “togetherness” of their church community.

Knowing that their congregants “care for and check in on each other, like family” is tremendously encouraging for pastors.

The following story illustrates a tremendous expression of love that Mike witnessed within his congregation:

“Well, one of our elders and her husband took this lady in who was very sick and was about to die. One of our elders and her husband came along and assisted her. Eventually, at the end of her life she was so bad they brought her into their own house. The elder and her husband gave up their own bedroom and when the lady was about to die, she said, “You know, I’ve never had that kind of love expressed to me. When I’m ready to pass away, I have family, but I want you to adopt my daughter.” And they did. This is the kind of people that we have.”

#### Community Outreach

6 Responses

The second thing that pastoral leaders are most proud of is the way in which their churches reach out to their communities. Although missional engagement is a common value for most churches, pastoral leaders rank this as a high priority. This is described as their church being a “city on a hill” or “looking for ways to bridge the gap between church and community.” Another pastor simply says, “If we’re not doing that [community outreach], then what are we doing following Jesus?”. Community outreach and engagement is described as “the heart of the gospel.” A restorative justice program for young offenders is named as a specific form of community outreach. One pastoral leader is pleased that his congregation is not in “navel gazing mode” but outward focused.

#### Congregational Stability

5 Responses

Pastoral leaders are proud of their congregational health and stability, which is often described as unity and leaders having a high degree of integrity. The integrity of the church and its leaders over the years is valued by one pastoral leader, saying that this church has not been a place of “shadow truths or lies.”

This sense of congregational stability is referred to as a “realm of grace”, “a stable” congregation, and a commitment to peace and unity. Several pastors mention the lack of division or “splits” within their church while one leader laments that their history of division and conflict makes it difficult for them to move on and become outward-focused. One congregation is over 100 years old and has never split over an issue – this church values peace and unity as a top value. Another leader mentions that their church is a place of rest and peace for some who have come from difficult church experiences – the stability and unity of his congregation is something he was very grateful for.

#### Love and Commitment to God

5 Responses

Love and commitment to God is described as congregants having “a heart to do what God wants them to do” and as people who “truly do seek the Lord first.” Baptisms and the Holy Spirit working through the Word are also what pastoral leaders are most proud of. Having “committed Christ followers who want to make a difference” is how one pastoral leader puts it.

The following demonstrates the commitment to sharing the gospel with those who are unfamiliar with the Christian faith. Note the centrality of the gospel and the enthusiasm expressed about the opportunity to engage in conversation about faith and to introduce people to Jesus. Even new congregants have a keen interest in knowing and loving God. This pastoral leader refers to a conversation that one of the pastors had with a young man in the foyer who was attending his first church service:

“We had a story this past Sunday. There was a young Asian man in the foyer and one of our pastors went up to talk to him and he was visiting relatives in a house across the street from [city in Asia].

He's never been in a church before, and he got up on his own. He's about 17 and came to church, and so the pastor said, "Oh, is your family here?" He goes, "No, I just came by myself." And they had about a 20-minute conversation on various cults, religions and what Christianity is all about. And one thing that's very remarkable that I've never seen in a church before is we have those kinds of stories weekly. Now people with no religious background are walking through our doors. One change that I've brought with the speaking team is what I call gospel centered preaching. We believe that every part of the Bible points to Jesus and ultimately points to the gospel. And we try to incorporate that because we don't know who's sitting in our pews. We don't know their background stuff, so we don't want anyone to leave here without hearing the gospel clearly articulated."

#### Congregational Diversity

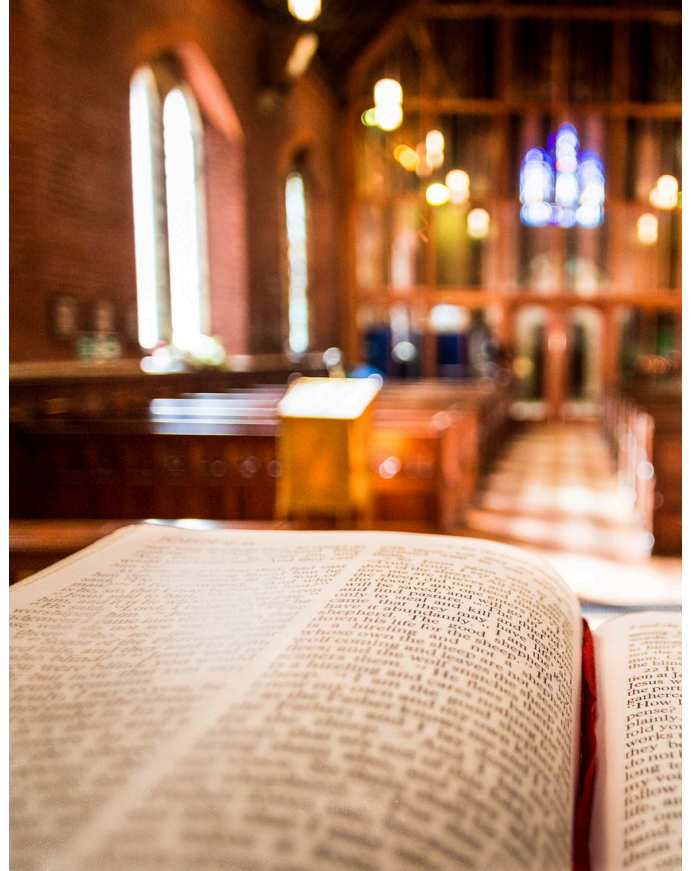
3 Responses

Two churches are proud of the cultural diversity within their church, while another is pleased with the fact that various age demographics are represented each Sunday morning at their church. One church has close association with a Middle Eastern church and an Asian church and shares space with a growing African community within their church.

#### Congregational Openness

2 Responses

For two pastors, they are most proud of the way in which their congregations are open to new things. They describe their churches as being "progressive," "open" to new things, and "apt to step out in new things." There is a sense of being willing to try new things and not being afraid of new ways of doing things.



#### Decision to Become Affirming

2 Responses

For two pastors, they are most proud of their decision as a church to become affirming of LGBTQ+. They describe the church's commitment to being "an open and welcoming community" and "holding space for one another." In one case particularly, it is described as "a really painful long journey" but "one we made together." They are proud of the way they honoured each other and "held on to each other" during the decision process.

Other answers given as to what pastoral leaders are most proud of include various things, such as: starting and operating a private Christian school, their intentionality and strategic planning, their online presence, and their Sunday morning worship service.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, knowing one's mission is considered important by most pastoral leaders – particularly knowing and acting upon the specific mission within their community. Fancy phrases or clever slogans are met with some discomfort as previous experience with such exercises seems to have caused some cynicism. However, pastoral leaders are very interested in understanding what it means to love God and neighbour in their particular setting at this particular time. This means understanding their context – recognizing who is buying houses in their area, what the current needs of the community are, what are the issues that people around them are dealing with.

**Listening and responding appropriately is the posture that they value, rather than simply delivering what they think people need. Having mission priorities or a set of values that guide decision making and provide direction are deemed most helpful by pastoral leaders.**

Community outreach and engagement is deemed the top reason for churches' existence while the thing that pastoral leaders are most proud of is the hospitality and care that their congregants practice towards each other. They believe that people attend their church due to the preaching (most often referred to as expository preaching). Most church leaders think their church has a good or great reputation within their community, due to their care for the community.

There are no clear distinctions between growing churches and stable churches regarding their understanding of mission. Both types of

churches are represented as having a general/clear understanding of mission and an uncertain understanding of mission. In terms of church reputation, it was almost exclusively growing churches who claimed to have a very good/great reputation within their community. Community engagement was also high for growing churches. Both growing and stable churches valued and experienced congregational hospitality.

In terms of what makes for a healthy church in Canada these days, Cameron does not consider the matrixes of attendance and so on to be the key. Instead, he says it is "the hunger to follow Jesus and reach the community." That determines the health of a church, according to him. There is also speculation from Lane that the key to church health and church growth right now is a high emphasis on the Holy Spirit. He says structure and organization is important, but there needs to be a submission to the unpredictability that the Spirit may bring. He notes in his own denomination that churches are "growing all over Canada right now" in a way that we used to term "revival".

According to Lane, "I think the essential thing is being committed to allowing the Spirit to move. And that can be Pentecostal. But I'm seeing at this in some Anglican circles, seeing some Missionary Alliance circles, some non-denominational circles. But the common denominator is people that are like, come Holy Spirit. And God comes where he's welcome. "



# Level Five Leadership

- What do you love about your job? Your church?
- What are you most proud of?
- How do you think people in your congregation and community would describe you as a leader?
- In terms of living out the vision of the church, how are those decisions made?

## Jim Collins' Definition of a Level 5 Leader

In *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, Jim Collins describes the second marker of “greatness,” which he refers to as Level 5 Leadership. Collins realizes that leadership is different in the social sector, as a leader cannot simply demand or threaten compliance to the mission of the organization. Instead, he argues that Level 5 leaders must master legislative leadership skills, rather than executive skills. Legislative leadership “relies more upon persuasion, political currency and shared interests” (Collins, 2005, p. 11).

While consensus building and listening are key skills, it is more than merely being well liked or easy to get along with. Of course, both types of leadership skills – executive and legislative – are needed and Level 5 leadership exhibits a blend of these skills. A Level 5 leader is “ambitious first and foremost for the cause, the movement, the mission, the work – not themselves” and they have the will to make sure what needs to happen happens (Collins, 2005, p. 11).

Collins notes that while we often look to the business world for models of leadership skills, he suspects that we are more likely to “find more true leadership in the social sectors than the business sectors” (Collins, 2005, p. 12).

Church leadership is not so much about the exercise of power as people have the freedom not to follow. This means that Canadian pastoral leaders have leadership expertise that could

benefit other leaders in various settings, including the business sector. As Collins says, “perhaps tomorrow’s great business leaders will come from the social sectors, not the other way around” (Collins, 2005, p. 13).

## Self-Description of Leaders

Pastoral and lay leaders were asked how they thought people might describe them as leaders or how they have heard others’ describe what they appreciate about them as leaders. The following themes emerged from the interviews: The practice of presence, educated but understandable, and approachable but direct.

## The Practice of Presence

The practice of being present to people is an attribute that pastoral leaders believed was appreciated by their congregation. Presence seems to be marked by a quiet faithfulness, rather than a large personality or charisma. Stanley described it as “a steady presence” and likened it to “being more of a shepherd than this rah-rah leader.” Living life with and among the congregation was something that congregants communicated as important to their pastoral leaders. Mark indicated that as he began work at Stonehouse Church, it was made clear to him that people wanted their pastor to live in the same town. He desired the same thing, saying “I just didn’t understand how I could be a pastor without really brushing shoulders with people in daily life. That was what they wanted and that was very much what I wanted as well.” Physical presence is valued, along with an emotional presence that indicates to congregants that the pastoral leaders are authentically available.

This way of presence was described as being relational, interested in people, and offering care. For instance, Sophia said that “I have heard people describe me as spacious. As somebody who is present to people and makes space for them to be seen.”

Garth also remarked that people appreciated him because they know that that “he isn’t just doing his job but loves us and cares about us.” Loving and caring people require a sort of proximity that is inherent to the practice of presence. Even in a church that has a weekly attendance of over 1,000 congregants, Lane commits himself to being “very presence driven.” He said, “I try to be very present with people, relational...even in a church our size, I’m in the lobby every Sunday interacting with people, meeting people, praying for people.” Similarly, Mike said that the “green room” is a “nonsense concept,” explaining that pastors cannot “just go on stage and do their thing and then disappear.” He said this:

“I still go before the service. I greet all the people that I see. I talk to them at the door. I’m praying for people. I’m keeping track of what’s going on in their life. I’m talking to them. No matter how big this church becomes, they have personal access to me. They can make appointments and come and see me personally, and I’m happy to do that. Yes, the accessibility.”

Lay leader Maria described this posture of presence as “this openness to truth and holding on to each other,” indicating that even in times of disagreement or “in the midst of super hard conversations”, they were learning how to be present with one another in the presence of Christ.

### **Educated But Understandable**

A second major theme that emerged from the data is an appreciation for both academic learning and accessible communication.

Even in those traditions where further education is not integral to pastoral leadership, there was an appreciation for biblical knowledge and “knowing the Word.” It was not only being educated that was valued, but it was also having the necessary skills to speak in such a way that people in the pew can understand. In a Mennonite Brethren church, the pastor said that people in his congregation would recognize his education credentials but would also say that he “speaks in language that I can understand,” that “he doesn’t use technical language,” and that he “makes things very, very relatable and understandable when we look at Scripture and with contemporary issues,” with the goal of learning to live the faith they share.

Meanwhile in a Baptist church, a lay leader described the pastor by saying that he is “a man of incredible academic intelligence and has the creds to go with it but manages to communicate it in such a way that people get it.” There was an appreciation for “deep” sermons that are also understandable and relatable. A story was told that illustrated this well, as well as revealing what the pastor deemed important in ministry:

“I don’t say this publicly very often, but there’s a young man in our church who I’ve known since he was a like a teenager. He has fetal alcohol syndrome, and his parents were telling me that he comes whenever I preach. And he can follow and track it. He can say back the main points to the parents after. I told them I’ve had a few accolades in my life, but that’s way up there - it’s connecting with this precious young guy. You know, who works at Burger King and lives in assisted living.”

**Regardless of the size of church or denomination, being present in a generous and genuine manner was a prominent theme for pastoral leaders that they identified as being important to their congregants.**

The pastor confessed that this is one of the most important affirmations that he has received – that a young man with learning difficulties can understand and relate to his sermons.

Also, in the Lutheran and Anglican traditions, there is an appreciation for academic learning. A lay leader promptly answered the question of what she thinks the congregation appreciates about the pastor. She says, “I know what they like about him. Number one - the academic aspect of his knowledge. They really respect his education, time, thought, and application of that to his sermons. Really stimulating sermons. Really thought provoking and engaging.” This is the same pastor who places a high value on living side by side with his congregants and being involved in the community. At an Anglican church in Ontario, a lay leader also acknowledged that he was “almost always learning something” from the sermons, which he deemed as one of the most valuable things about church.

A Mennonite Brethren pastor was most appreciative of this compliment from a congregant: “When you preach, your voice doesn't change.” To the pastor, it felt like a compliment and was very meaningful. When I asked him what it meant to him, he replied: “What that meant to me was again - I am teaching and speaking into lives in a way that, I think is just fully human. I'm not critiquing other preachers and there is a place for the high style rhetorical flourish of some, but that's just not me. I've been aiming at that for 13 years. Nice to hear back because they need to be able to hear me as a fellow human speaking to them as fellow humans, not something from on high.”

It is the combination of both academic learning and accessible communication that is important, according to pastoral leaders and lay leaders. It is “and” not “or.”

The ability to translate deep truths and intricate biblical knowledge and wisdom into easy-to-understand language for regular congregants in the pews on Sunday morning requires both deep knowledge of Scripture and God and keen communication skills.

### **Approachable But Direct**

Another theme regarding the self-description of a pastoral leader that was noted throughout the interviews was that leaders are approachable but also direct or straight-forward. These two attributes are held in tension, meaning that leaders must present as both. For example, Andrew from Trinity Church said that he wants “to be approachable so that people can talk with me” and that they would know that he is willing to talk with them.

Ron, a lay leader at Olive Lane Church, explained that congregants like their pastoral leader because “she's so genuine” and “there's none of that sort of fake minister sort of thing.” Sylvia, the same pastoral leader, said that she is “not a titles person;” instead, she would like people to know that “I genuinely care about them.”

Although approachable and easy to talk to may be characteristics that may make a person shy away from difficult conversations or addressing conflict, this approachability seems to be combined with a sense of kind but fearless directness. Antonio said that “I've always been very approachable. But people have said that I can be quite straightforward at times also. And they appreciated that.”

Lane echoed a similar sentiment, saying that he is “bold” and not afraid to address issues in the day from a biblical framework and perspective. So, in my preaching, I'm not afraid to address hot topic issues,” going on to mention some of the controversial issues surrounding politics and gender that he has included in his sermons.

Jill said that people want to see that “we’re willing to get our hands dirty. Like we’re not sitting and asking everybody else to do the thing.” Then she went on to say co-pastor Steve particularly is

“quick to say - nope, this person is upset, but we’re not letting them just be upset. I’m going to their house and we’re going to have a conversation. We’re going to have a meeting about this. We’re going to talk about this. We’re going to make sure that the board, our pastor’s council, is aware and on side and just really not letting things fester.”



Steve demonstrated the ability to address difficult issues and to have uncomfortable conversations, while also communicating solidarity and love and for with the congregation. There is a proximity that signifies a sense of teamwork and cooperation, but that same proximity also seems to give permission for pastoral leaders to speak plainly and directly into people’s lives.

Jill told a story that involved holding congregants accountable to their membership responsibilities, which included some sort of regular receipted giving. This meant the pastor(s) met with each of these congregants and explained the responsibilities of membership. These conversations required clear communication and could potentially be awkward or uncomfortable. Jill reported that the conversations went well and that “every single one of them is still in the church and more engaged now having had the difficult conversation.” This story exemplifies the sort of boldness and willingness to engage despite the discomfort that pastoral leaders recognize as important.

### **Relationships & Love for Congregation**

Pastoral leaders name a few things that make their jobs enjoyable – from the stable church history to preaching to developing leaders. Congregational stability and the commitment to preaching God’s Word is the thing that gives Ted job satisfaction. He quickly added that the “biggest blessing” is “to be able to love” the people he works with and serves. He even said that he told them he loves them, admitting that “in some cultures they say - I appreciate you or this is what I like. I can’t always easily say I love you. So, I guess that’s another huge thing for me.” Seth also named “the opportunity to preach” as one of the things that he really enjoys. Ethan appreciated the chance to “lead and develop leaders and really set things up,” acknowledging that part of his gifting is to “innovate and discern things and then empower people.”

However, the most dominant theme centered about relationships. Again and again, pastoral leaders expressed their appreciation for the relationships they experience within the church and the love they feel for their congregations.



When asked what they enjoy about job, the responses primarily centered around these relationships. In fact, a couple of pastoral leaders identified their people as the greatest asset of the church. Sophia said this: "I love our community. I love the people. The greatest resource we have is this collection of people that have found their way to our church. They are people who are wise, deep, committed, spacious, open." When I ask Pierre what he liked about his church, his response was "all the people particularly." This was echoed again and again by pastoral leaders. What gives them job satisfaction was the relationships they are a part of within the congregational setting. Trish identified "the relationships" and loving "the curiosity that people have about their faith" and the chance to "look at Scripture differently to kind of unpack some of the baggage that has come with the Christian tradition over time and see things in a new context," saying "that's my favourite thing to do."

**Again and again, pastoral leaders expressed their appreciation for the relationships they experience within the church and the love they feel for their congregations.**

Grace, the lay leader at Cinnamon Spring Church, added that although building relationship is difficult as you get older, it is "one of those things you can pretty easily get in church." "Good friendships" and "visiting with people" were primary sources of job satisfaction for Lucas and Andrew at their respective churches.

The love for their congregations that both Vera and Matthew exhibited convey an unconditionality that speaks of commitment to the congregation.

When asked if she loves her congregation, Vera responded: "I do. So, the hymn 'Here I am, Lord' - at the end of the chorus, it talks about how I will hold your people in my heart. That is how I feel about the congregation. Or when I'm coming to a new congregation. I don't know if the congregants, or my congregation could necessarily understand what that is. That's how I feel. Some of them are really hard to take sometimes. But I don't kick them out."

Matthew also answered affirmatively to the same question. He said "Yes, I do, yes. Some members are easier to love than others, that's for sure but that's just the way human nature is." Deep appreciation and love, however, were not always easy or uncomplicated. Daniel expressed the love for his congregation enthusiastically, as he says, "Oh my goodness, I love them so much. First off, I love people. I love building relationships." His co-worker, Luis, reinforced the emphasis on relationships, while also acknowledging that it "comes with a lot of challenges."

### **"Confront the Brutal Facts"**

One of Jim Collins' markers of a "great" leader is the willingness to "confront the brutal facts," referring to Admiral Jim Stockdale who was captured during the Vietnam War. Stockdale was imprisoned and tortured for 8 years, while never losing faith that he would eventually be free. However, he noticed that the men who did not make it out were the optimists who died of a broken heart, believing that they would be free by Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter, and then were disappointed.

Stockdale said, "you must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end - which you can never afford to lose - with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be" (Collins, 2001, p. 85). Stockdale would say - "we're not getting out by Christmas; deal with it!" (Collins, 2001, p. 85).

During the interviews, pastoral leaders often acknowledged difficult things surrounding ministry, such as finding lay leaders who are sincere and committed or people who are willing to engage in evangelism. The challenge of connecting with other denominational leaders was expressed; as well, the frustration that first generation immigrants experience as their children adapt to life in Canada while trying to honour their own cultural heritage, saying “they don’t think like their parents at all.”

Some leaders not only articulated their specific challenges but also described how they are addressing those challenges. For example, Ethan honestly acknowledged that a missional focus is lacking at his church: “I think we haven’t created the presence in our community. The question often is that if the church wasn’t there, would people miss you? And I would honestly say, I don’t think they would miss us.”

He went on to say, “I think we can do better” and then listed several initiatives that they have undertaken to address this issue. Sonja noted the “real sense of pessimism and loss after COVID” and the fact that people were just not returning to church as part of the “big resignation.” Her response was to celebrate the “little wins” and to fan the flames of the things that were going well. She said that this turned the tide of hopelessness as the church started to gain traction again. Countering the negative historic reputation of his church is the challenge that Seth is facing and overcoming with regular, faithful involvement at the local school. These leaders not only recognized the difficulty but are responding with appropriate corrective action.

### **Decision Making: Humble & Collaborative**

Level 5 leadership is explicitly displayed through decision making. Asking how decisions are made, who makes the decisions, and paying attention

to the postures held surrounding decision making revealed how pastoral leaders were/were not humble and collaborative.

As lead pastor, Ben did not cling to his power to make decisions; instead, he referred to his wife who sometimes accused him of asking too many people for help, or for directions. He said, “Well, why not? If I don’t know the way, why wouldn’t I ask someone who knows the way?” He saw no shame in asking for help, and listed several people he has gone to for help over the years – other pastors, his superintendent, counsellors, lawyers, etc. Referring to her congregation, Trish said that they “recognise that the minister isn’t the boss” and that working collaboratively is what she prefers.

Jim acknowledged that this sort of leadership is not always easy because as a leader, he wants to be liked, and he wants the congregation to act and think in certain ways. So, it is a struggle but, in his words, the ideal heart posture of a church leader is “Sorry, Lord. It’s not about me. Right. Let me make this about you.”

A couple of pastors noted that it was important to establish this understanding of leadership and authority at the beginning. When Brian first arrived at the church, congregants started to tell him that he needed to stop coming out to everything and encouraged him to spend more time at home with his family. His response was “but I never wanted anybody to think that I was not willing to wash the dishes, you know, or anything like that.” He intentionally wanted to communicate that he does not wield positional authority but wanted to establish relational authority. Antoine also said that whenever he comes to a new church, he does not arrive and want to change everything, indicating that “everything you did the past is wrong.”

Instead, he adapts first and takes a learning posture because, most importantly people need to be cared for. Trust needs to be established first, which comes once people know that their pastor is somebody who will “help them and guide them in the Lord” and that “the Lord will provide.”

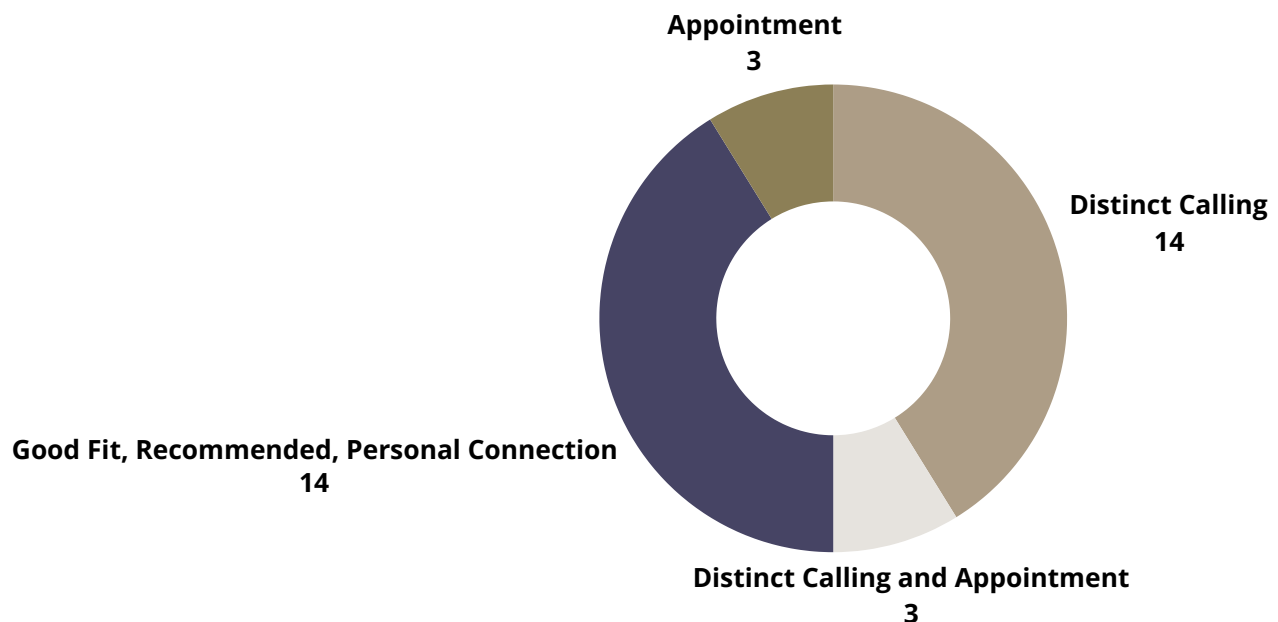
Mack, an elder, commented that this was the thing that convinced them to hire their new pastor, Johnny. He sums up Level 5 leadership nicely:

“One thing that really came across to us was a humility. Going through the interview process, it wasn't always there with all the candidates because I was on the search committee as well. There's a real humility there, which was something that we valued. We weren't necessarily looking for someone who was going to come in and tell us a hundred percent how to do everything. It's my way or the highway. We were first really looking for someone that had a more shepherding mindset as opposed to a leader mindset. A shepherd says - come on with me. A leader says - hey, get in line behind me. That was something that our church was looking for.”

### **Sense of Calling & Motivation for Ministry**

In terms of calling of pastoral and lay leaders, 14 pastoral leaders experienced a distinct calling, while three more were appointed while also experiencing a distinct call. 14 other pastoral leaders were either recommended, deemed themselves a good fit, or felt some sort of personal connection to their church, while three others did not express a sense of calling.

Pastoral and lay leaders who felt a distinct calling to their churches described it as “God’s grip on my heart for this community,” a feeling of finding home, a stirring in their heart, or like “something niggling” and then “everything clicked.” Often it was a persistent feeling or stirring that wouldn’t go away or they could not ignore. One pastor described it like “prophetic confirmation” and a lay leader described the experience of the pastor preaching his first sermon as “This is awesome, this is great, this is God’s answer. You need to be here.” Other leaders described it as “God’s will” and “this is where God wanted us. One leader said, “I felt directed by God”, I felt a real, you know, I don’t even know how to describe it. Probably the greatest burden that I’ve ever experienced in my life.”



Some expressed a distinct call to a specific location. In some cases, they were extraordinary stories. A leader said it was not just a general call to ministry, but it was ministry to a particular town in southern Ontario. One leader had the strange experience of his son asking him one morning over breakfast if they were moving to a particular city – not knowing that his father was considering a position there. This was a little bewildering for the father but also helped confirm that perhaps this was the place where God was calling him. Another leader felt “very very drawn to the core values” and that the church “won my heart.” Another pastor prayed for years about doing ministry in a particular town. Both her and her husband wondered how that would ever work. To their surprise, it all came together, and they are engaged in pastoral ministry in the town that had been on hearts for years.

Besides sense of calling, the motivation for ministry was explored through the interviews. Pastoral leaders are driven by a desire to share the truth and love of Jesus and by the transformation that people experience due to faith in God. Cameron articulated his motivation for ministry by naming his driving force right now as “wanting to reach those lost people.” Antonio emphasized the “present stage of the ministry of Jesus,” meaning that people praise God for things that God has done in the past or praise God for the things that God will do in the future, while failing to realize “what [God] is doing today and how it is that God is still building the church now.” Other pastoral leaders used phrases like “seeing people take next steps” and seeing the “transformation that God is able to bring about.” “Hearing those testimonies of people who are growing in their faith” keeps Seth committed and motivated in ministry while Sonja referred to the “little victories” and being able to “reinforce those wins” as instrumental in helping

herself and the congregation know that “something good is happening amongst everything else.”

Although the motivation to serve as pastoral leaders is strong, financial and career instability are noted as real challenges. Antoine recognized the Lord’s calling to ministry but also acknowledges that better compensation could be found in other employment. He says, “I know that, for example, my wife’s salary is almost double than my salary. I will receive a better salary if I work somewhere else.”

Isaiah also was realistic about the financial challenges that being in ministry involves. He referred to the stability his former career held and the assurance that gave for the future. Now, being in full time ministry, he says “I don’t know what I’m getting into for the next 25 years. So, for a young person like me, with a young family with two kids – that’s a hard thing.” And yet, the call to ministry and the desire for their congregations and future generations to grow in faith persists.

When asked why an unpaid pastoral leader would invest so much time and energy in the church, Matthew referred to the Westminster Confession that “man’s chief entity is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” As a result, Ocean View Church aims to glorify God in prayer and worship and to reach out to “both to the Christians in the church and to those who are not Christians outside that we may reach them for Christ.” According to Samuel, his faithfulness to the Word of God was something his congregants highly value. Likewise, the “mission and call of the church and the good news of Jesus” was what Tom is most enthusiastic about. Referring to the vision statement, Brian was adamant that “Christ [is] front and center” in terms of the church’s vision statement and the



why behind it. When I asked why this was important, he simply said, “Because that’s why we’re doing this.” These comments are coming from a range of different Christian faith traditions (mainline, Reformed, Evangelical), and yet the focus on Christ remains the same.

### Conclusion

Referring to the research question, what do church leaders and lay leaders believe about their pastor/priest leadership role?

**Quite simply, they believe that God often calls them to particular congregations in order to serve and love that group of people and that community.**

At their best, humility and collaboration mark their decision making specifically and leadership in general. They are leaders who are present, understand deep spiritual truths but can communicate them in an accessible manner, and are approachable yet know how to be direct when needed. They are not afraid of the hard facts and can face uncomfortable or unflattering truths and then respond appropriately. Church leaders place a high importance on relationships and exhibit a deep love for their congregations. This description of leadership fits with Collins’ picture of Level 5 leadership in that legislative leadership skills are clearly demonstrated. Pastoral leaders are not relying on their position as leaders as their basis for authority but instead cultivating trusting relationships with their lay leaders and congregations in order to lead well. Also, the goal is not to acquire something for themselves, but it is the gospel that is central for their church. As Collins says, it is a combination of intentionality and persistence, along with humility, respect, and love for their lay leaders and congregants.

Both growing and stable churches were represented well when it came to Level 5 leadership, particularly in terms of prioritizing and prizing relationships.

Virtually all the pastoral leaders expressed care and love for their congregations. The ability to have hard conversations and the emotional intelligence required to navigate more awkward situations was a skill that some leaders demonstrated (representing both growing and stable churches). The theme of presence was perhaps slightly more evident among growing churches, but not exclusively.



# First Who

- In terms of living out the vision of the church, how are those decisions made?
- What are some of the hard realities you've had to face as a church?
- How would you describe your congregation? Your staff members?
- How do you get the right people in the right places?

## Jim Collins and First Who

Getting the right people on the bus within the constraints of the social sector is the third theme for Jim Collins. Realizing that leaders within the social sector cannot draw people in with promises of money or other incentives that are more associated with the business world, leaders must intentionally and carefully choose people to join their organization. Collins believes that "greatness flows first and foremost from having the right people in the key seats, not the other way around" (Collins, 2005, p. 14). It is hard to get the wrong people off the bus (especially in the social sector) and it is not financially possible in many cases to "use money to buy talent" for organizations like churches (Collins, 2005, p. 15). Because those in the social sector often have limited financial resources for staffing and often rely on volunteers, it is especially important "who" you have on the bus. "Great" companies want people who are self-motivated and self-disciplined and who want to do the best they can because they believe in the mission of the organization.

Collins argues that companies must tap into people's "idealistic passions" and make "the process selective" (Collins, 2005, p. 16). Because people desire a sense of purpose and meaning, this is the advantage that the social sector (particularly churches) has. It can provide this sense of purpose and meaning something to people.

To be a "great" organization, leaders must attract and bring on board people who are passionate and committed.

## Description of their Leader / Staff Relationship

As shown by the interviews, the leader-staff/volunteer relationship was most often marked by collaboration - the notion that they are working towards something together. It was not just working together, but how they are working together that was important. A sort of team spirit would aptly describe these relationships, rather than the typical boss-employee relationship with a distinct hierarchy of power.

Although pastoral leaders knew they must make the final decision and are largely responsible for the church, they tended not to resort to the position as pastor as the basis of their power. One leader referred to "relational authority," rather than positional authority.

For a church that used to be more "siloe off", Stanley appreciated that they are more together now. It has been a recent shift in the church culture which he noted as a healthy one. Another church that has a co-lead model has separate and different job descriptions for each, but one of the co-lead pastors said that a lot of the ideas and decisions are done in collaboration with each other, noting that "it's different from maybe some of the other leadership structures".

Even those leaders who classify themselves as Type A leaders also led collaboratively; therefore, collaborative leadership is not so much a personality trait as it is a way of leadership, meaning an easygoing, relaxed personality is not what makes collaborative leadership.

First, collaborative leadership involves things like listening well, affirming other people's ideas, and giving "them freedom to do what they're called to do. Or what God places on their heart." The freedom-plus-support model builds this collaborative work culture. It is not so much about stepping completely away and offering total freedom to staff/volunteers, but it is more about empowerment and not controlling. As one leader says, a "relational leader" is more of a diplomat who can "hear [the staff/volunteers], listen, change and flex."

Secondly, the relationships between leaders and staff/volunteers are marked by trust. When I ask Ted what it is about the staff team that makes it such a great working environment, his response is this:

"I think what I've noticed is that the trust level has grown. So, when I came in, I had positional authority because of my position. I think I have religious authority because people know me and can trust me and stuff. That's one aspect and we just have fun, we enjoy being together and there's kind of chemistry, this thing that you can't cultivate. It's just either there or it's not there, so that that has been a big part of it. They're willing to work hard too. There are no slackers on our staff. They're willing to sacrifice. They're willing to work in areas that are not their primary gifting for a season or whatever is needed. And they're very thoughtful. I mean, I made a mention that my friend runs a pastry company here. And they went out and bought me pastries for my birthday. They took time to do that. Made it very nice."

There was a mutual sense of trust between the leader and the staff/volunteers. Along with the increased trust seems to come a greater sense of enjoyment of one another and a "kind of chemistry." There is a warmth of relationship evident between leader and staff/volunteers.

Although this sort of "chemistry" sounds as if it naturally arises, it is reasonable to suggest that there is some intentionality in regard to church culture and staff relationships. Contrary to what this pastor says, though good chemistry may play a part, good working relationships are cultivated and do not magically happen. It would be interesting to further interrogate what is happening here and how these sorts of relationships were built. The pastor is clearly acknowledging the trust and good relationships but perhaps not fully aware how these have been formed.

## **The relationships between leaders and staff / volunteers are marked by trust.**

Lane is a pastor who does not "tout the lead pastor card" but tries to empower both male and female leaders. In doing so, he is demonstrating trust with his staff member, making it known that he thinks she will do the job well. Respect and intentionally placing oneself under the authority of a staff member as a sign of support is exemplified through this story:

"I had my female associate pastor bring the Word yesterday in our anniversary service. I will intentionally say things like, I'm ready to submit to the preaching of God's Word as you bring it, Pastor. Just for our congregation to hear that. It's like, oh, Lane's okay with this. But I think also for her - she feels empowered. She feels trusted."

There is a clear sense of accountability, along with plenty of support, space, and trust. What is not present is the tendency to micro-manage.

Third, there is a real sense of respect for lay leaders in the church on behalf of the pastoral leader. For Sylvia and her denomination, these lay leaders are “the people responsible for everything that is not worship and spiritual care.” These are significant roles that bear a lot of responsibility and her appreciation for them is evident. Ron, the lay leader, expresses appreciation for his co-lay leader saying “we have strengths in opposite places and so between the two of us, we have probably more than just the two of us. It’s sort of one of those synergy sort of things.”

When I comment to Luke that it sounds like there is mutual respect for each other, he responds:

“Yes, I think so. Often, I tell them [lay leaders], I really want to know what you’re thinking. Like, say it. In the end, I have to make decisions about things, but I don’t want it to be just about me saying this is how it is. I want to know opinions and what they’re thinking.”

When it comes to making decisions and planning, pastoral leaders prefer to work together with staff and lay leaders in a way that invites participation from all involved and in a way that is marked with mutual respect and listening to one another. So, leadership/staff (or volunteer) relationships are marked by collaboration, trust, and respect, which nurture a friendliness and warmth of relationship among the pastoral team.

### **Description of Congregation**

Collins’ second theme focuses on who and how the leader is able to establish relationship with and able to “bring on the bus.”

Investigating how a leader perceives and relates to their congregation offers important information about how they engage in this process. Therefore, one of the interview questions asked pastoral leaders to describe their congregation. Family is the most common analogy that pastoral leaders use to describe the staff-congregation dynamic and the relationships in the congregations. The family analogy speaks of a sense of closeness, loving relationships, a feeling of connection, and welcome. Several pastors refer to the noise level in the foyer on Sunday mornings or the amount of small talk that happens after church as a sign of healthy relationships within the congregation. There are also plenty of examples of people caring for one another in practical ways – such as casseroles and providing support during times of trouble.

There is an emphasis on the genuineness of relationships – “it’s a group of people who actually really love each other and care about each other,” that it’s “not fake welcoming – it’s real welcoming.” This is also extended to new people who are more on the periphery. Craig at Prairie Bluestem Church says – “I think that we have a great heart capacity to welcome.” Congregations are also praised for being genuine in terms of their relationship with God. Pastoral leaders describe their congregants as being sincere about faith and motivated to follow God.

Along with all the positive connotations of the family analogy, pastoral leaders are quick to point out that it is not perfect. This family analogy reveals a warmth and commitment to each other simply because they’re family; however, challenges are also acknowledged, saying that “families aren’t perfect.” Because of the familial type relationships, at times there is a necessary desire to bite their tongue and “put out fires” with wisdom and discernment. Along with being family, there is conflict, hurt feelings, and a tendency to become insular.



The temptation for a congregation to become clique-ish and hard to penetrate is noted as a concern. The difficulty of getting along is not pronounced but is noted as a regular part of family life. Along with the challenges of family life, apathy, spiritual illiteracy, and a sense of unpreparedness and challenge to take on roles of responsibility are mentioned.

There is also the literal family nature of some congregations in both small town and city locations. As one pastor said, “there’s a lot of intermarriages so we are literally a family.”

A growing cultural diversity is a prominent theme for congregations, across denominations and across community size. In Atlantic Canada, a pastoral leader says “we’ve also seen a lot of immigrants coming...having no connections to Christianity or the gospel at all... we have Nigerians. There’s Chinese. There’s Syrians. Mexicans. Which is probably reflective of society at large.” In a small town in Ontario, a pastor says that they have switched to the Spanish Alpha program to accommodate for the growing number of Spanish people in their congregation.

A larger church on the prairies speaks of a growing number of Asian, African, and Middle Eastern people within their circle, partly due to immigration, increased contact with diaspora congregations, and proximity to a university. Another significant connection for a church was with nearby Indigenous reservations. One church specifically prayed for ethnic diversity within their congregation and that prayer is being answered. Note that this is a trend that not just the city churches are experiencing but extends also to some small town and rural areas. There is an intentionality around their congregational makeup and a purposefulness about reaching out to those around them who do not already have connections with their church.

During the interviews, a story was told that depicted the relationship between church and community as open and welcoming, even in a time of conflict. Note the response of this congregant as she deals with people who are actively in opposition to the church and the pastor’s admiration of the congregant’s gracious and generous response:

“Several years ago, we had an Easter Sunday service and there were a group of LGBTQ protesters with signs outside. Two or three long standing members of the congregation went right out to the parking lot. One of them said, ‘Come on in.’ They were like ‘What?’ ‘No, please come on in. We’re worshipping- our Saviour has risen. Come on in.’ They were like – ‘Well, that’s OK.’ But I was so impressed with the way that she and others were just very open. But that’s her.”

Despite the family analogy, one pastor admitted that they have had to work hard to facilitate and encourage relationships among congregants. He says “there’s an assumption at times that we know each other. But we don’t really know each other much more other than I know you live down that street in so-and-so’s house and you might have a couple kids or something.” His context is small town on the prairies where one might expect closer relationships. However, I suspect his experience is not unusual and resonates in other settings as well.

### **Appreciation for Volunteers**

Spiritual maturity was named as something that pastoral leaders are looking for in terms of staff and volunteers, which is defined by godly character and integrity: As one leader asked, “Do people see them as Christ-like or not?” Leaders also want staff/volunteers who are willing to be committed to the life of the church and the congregation – whether it is cleaning the church, visitation, financial help. Knowing that

staff/volunteers can be relied upon to do what they said they would do was often repeated by pastoral leaders.

Other attributes that pastoral leaders either specifically look for or especially appreciate include:

- Dedicated to the life of the church
- Reliable
- Has integrity
- Good attitude
- Teachable
- Servant heart
- Humble
- Doesn't complain
- Isn't ego-driven
- Trustworthy
- Demonstrates love for the other
- Notices and remembers people
- Emotionally intelligent (self-aware, socially adaptable, possess social skills)
- Culturally intelligent
- Self-motivated
- Positive
- Passionate
- Wanting to grow (not passive)
- Dynamic

Knowing who might be a good choice for specific roles at the church is not as straight forward as checking boxes. Ben says it's "completely elusive and subjective" because what he is looking for is "the heart of the person." He is most interested in knowing how they seem to be growing in their faith, how they are respectful towards the church, how they respond to authority, and how they are "winsome."

Ted is eager to praise the youth pastor, saying that "he's only 23 but he's very kind of mature beyond." Lay leader Michael is quick to agree, saying "his favourite word is awesome. Yeah, everything's awesome. And the truth is – he's an awesome guy." The youth pastor is commended for having "a tender heart" and having a team of very committed, sacrificial, caring, welcoming leaders. In fact, when asked why so many youths and kids go to their church, Ted and Michael attributed it to how well organized and fun the youth program is, thanks to the great youth pastor and team of "very committed" volunteers.

Two pastors say they don't "really look for anything," knowing that that is "going to sound weird." One pastor said that if someone volunteers to do something, "that's led by the Spirit." Her response is to simply accept that person and support them in that role. Another pastor said people get involved for different reasons, so she accepts how and when people step forward; but she does not carry the weight of recruitment. And if a job is not getting done, then "how important is it or can we just trust that the Spirit will lead someone to that job if it's important?" It is interesting to note that one of these churches is experiencing extraordinary growth while the other is experiencing fiscal stability.

### **Recruiting / Hiring Staff and Volunteers**

Pastoral leaders prefer a relational approach to hiring. Knowing the people in previous contexts or in their own church gives leaders confidence that the new hire will be a successful one. The desire to know people and "know their heart" is important. One leader commented that "there's a lot of trust there," that is built up prior to the actual hire.

**Spiritual maturity was named as something that pastoral leaders are looking for in terms of staff and volunteers, which is defined by godly character and integrity.**

As an example of what pastoral leaders are looking for when it comes to hiring new staff, Ted talked of two people that he would like to hire:

"There's a young man right now that I'm meeting with who's fairly new to our church. He's a civil engineer, really, really sharp. I actually don't know where he's going to end up in terms of our church, but I want to bring him on...he's got a hunger for knowledge like I haven't seen before, and I don't want that just to rest within him. I want him to be able to use that for other people through challenging things. But I see it.

There's another young woman I taught at a local seminary here, and she was one of the sharpest students in my class. She's not from our church, but in three years. I want her on staff. I don't know what she's going to do, but I think she's going to be here. She's smart. She's gifted. She can get along well with people. Those were the number one things that stood out to me."

Note that the pastor is actively looking for future potential staff hires as he sees personal and leadership characteristics that he values. He sees something in them that aligns with their values and mission as a church and can imagine how having them on board would be mutually beneficial.

Hiring someone from within the church ensures familiarity with the person. Mike prefers this way of hiring because it seems to have better results. He told the story of hiring someone, prefacing that he had been looking for someone to fill a specific position and asked someone to step in as a volunteer:

"I explained what he needed to be working at, but then I began to realize - here's a young man who's very respectful, teachable, and actually was implementing things I was saying. Pretty soon the group was growing underneath his

leadership. I thought - I don't need to look any further. He's right here."

In terms of how to recruit people, pastoral leaders mostly rely on announcements and regular appeals, which are met with limited success. Other recruitment methods include incorporating multiplication systems with ministries, the apprenticeship model, keeping eyes open, and observing people. Personal invitation was noted by several leaders to be more effective than general asks or announcements from the pulpit.

Sugar Maple Church has a volunteer participation rate of 80 to 85%. When I asked what their secret was, lay leader Mack replied that so many people volunteered due to relationships: "I think that really is a big part of it because people are doing it with and for people that they have meaningful relationship with." Because there is a strong existing sense of community, it seems like love is the motivating factor for people to be a part of ministries and projects.

Jim wants to know if a leader has "really [been] called to this mission" so the church is slow to hire. Riverside Church uses an apprenticeship model in terms of leaders and that leaders can apprentice "in some cases 7 to 8 years" before being officially appointed. Note that hiring is a slow and thoughtful process which Jim hopes ensures a healthy leadership team.

### **Challenge #1: Leadership Deficit**

Several church leaders lament about the difficulty of finding staff. Hiring people from within seems to be one solution. One church leader says it is hard to find the right people who best suit the church so hiring from within their congregation means that they're already familiar with the culture and vision of the church. There is also continued opportunity to develop people

before and after hiring. When I ask Mike what the key is to get the right people in the right places, his answer is “lots of anxiety and prayer,” noting that he doesn’t always get people in the places and that he has had failures too. Lane echoed that most of the staff have been hired from within while Ted says that he often relies on existing relationships.

### **Challenge #2: People Do Not Feel Equipped**

Another challenge expressed by pastoral leaders is that people do not feel equipped for volunteer roles. This is more directed towards unpaid leadership roles within the church. Congregants seem to feel ill-equipped or non-equipped and are hesitant to step forward. Congregants are described as “shy” or “tentative” when it comes to taking on more active roles. Cameron explained it like this:

“I think they just lack the courage, or courage is not the right word. They just lack the believability that they can do it. You see it in them as a leader. Like I can spot a whole lot of leader a mile away, but they don't see it and [I try] to build their courage up enough to say – no, you can do this and let me help you become that. They're like, oh, I don't know if I can do it. It's just the encouragement, I think.”

Other explanations included fear, lack of knowledge, lack of sense of responsibility, and anxiety over “making mistakes or being good enough.”

Nathan supposed that people often thought: “What could I offer? I don't see I have anything to [offer]...that sort of self-defeating attitude which isn't just in the church, it's in society. I mean - does my vote really matter? So, I think that's another reason that this message of loving God, loving others as you love and value yourself, you

have a voice. You are a difference maker.”

This feeling of not being equipped arises throughout the interviews and pastoral leaders struggle to know how to handle this. Some acknowledge that the church has done an inadequate job in terms of equipping people with basic theology and knowledge of Scripture.

### **Conclusion**

In regard to hiring and recruiting volunteers/staff, clear expectations and organizational structures seem to be important. Knowing exactly what the role involves and how it fits in with the overall vision and structure of the church is mentioned.

One church completed a workplace organizational assessment to become certified as a great place to work. This was done to care for the staff and to create a “better and healthier state.” When I asked what the staff appreciated about the workplace, the answer was “flexibility,” “trust,” and “the intentionality of how we drive towards our vision.”

Another pastoral leader commented on the “great HR protocols here and systems in place” to ensure the health of the staff. This leader was not only concerned with performance but also for the individual staff/volunteer as a person. From staff evaluations, the staff felt “supported and championed in their ministry.”

Unity is an interesting theme that arises throughout the interviews. Sophia said a big marker of their church is “generosity of spirit,” saying that “there’s not a lot of negative drama” and that “people are able to make space for each other and their opinions.” The unity of the church and the fact that there had no splits within the congregation for a hundred years was something that lay leader Jacob was most



grateful for.

One church re-organized their leadership structure to clarify roles and responsibilities and accountability structures – resulting in a greater sense of unity. Because expectations were clear, people were more at peace and “some good trust” and “some really good energy between the groups” has resulted. The pastoral leader noted that “stuff in church life can grind you down” referring to the cost of conflict and disunity. This leadership restructuring had a direct positive impact on the general health of the staff and congregation.

When I asked lay leader Matthew if there was anything intentionally done to promote the sort of unity that their church enjoys, he cautioned against legalistic preaching and losing focus of God’s vision to present every person perfect in Christ. He went on to say, “it is sometimes said the church is a flock, not an enclosure. So, the flock is determined by its shepherd but there is room within the flock to move from the left to the right and vice versa. So, the rallying point is the shepherd. There’s one flock, one shepherd. We definitely know within our church there are people who are more conservative than others, but everybody is from different walks of life. I don’t know how divisive other churches are, but our church tends to help out people on an individual basis. If somebody is having a hard time - let’s say somebody had a death in the family or you know, some disaster happened – we’re pretty quick to help somebody out on a practical level and whatever necessary.”

Matthew points to the centrality of the gospel and actively leaving room for differences of opinions on issues that are not crucial to the gospel.

He also emphasizes that the high priority of love for another unites people as they care for another. As long as Jesus and love for another are the focus, there is an allowance for diversity of thought and unity can flourish.

The challenges of finding the “right” people are expressed by both growing and stable churches. Growing church pastoral leaders tend to have a more intentional approach to recruitment and building relationships with potential leaders. The warmth of relationships between staff and congregation is expressed more directly by growing church pastoral leaders; however, the size of congregation and number of staff/lay leaders could also be a factor. There does tend to be more interest in building trusting relationships with growing church pastoral leaders, while recognizing that a couple of stable church pastoral leaders also exhibited this same interest.



# The Hedgehog Concept

- How has your church leaned into or said “yes” to pursuing the mission of the church?
- What do you think your church is particularly good at?
- Are there things that your church has had to say “no” to?

## Jim Collins and the Hedgehog Concept

This is the pivot point, according to Jim Collins. The Hedgehog Concept refers to an ancient Greek parable about a fox and a hedgehog. The fox has multiple strategies for survival while the hedgehog has one strategy – to curl up in a ball and play dead. Even though the fox may be more cunning, the hedgehog always wins (Collins, 2001, p. 91). Using that analogy, Collins advocates for a focused and intentional approach for organizations to carry out their mission. It is not so important to have an elaborate or complex strategy for the organization; but rather, “the essence of profound insight is simplicity” (Collins, 2001, p. 91). Simplicity and discipline allow an organization to focus on what’s important and to know what to say “yes” to and what to say “no” to. This directly relates to the next theme – the Flywheel approach (Theme 5). Collins says three things are important to know – what you’re passionate about, what you’re good at, and what drives your resource engine (time, money, brand) (Collins, 2005, p. 18-19). Particularly for local churches who rely on charitable donations, “penetrating insight and rigorous clarity” are especially important when it comes to pursuing “greatness” (Collins, 2005, p. 20).

Collins says to begin with passion, assess your local community to know how you might be able to best contribute, and then create a plan that accomplishes your purpose. Therefore, the interview questions for this theme relate to how a church is pursuing its mission.

## Pursuing the Mission

Knowing the mission of a church is one thing but it is another thing to know how to pursue that mission. The research participants pursue the mission primarily in two ways – through preaching and modelling (most often referred to in terms of hospitality). This was done either intentionally or intuitively.

## Preaching and Modelling

The two primary ways of pursuing the mission expressed by the research participants are preaching and modelling hospitality. Preaching is the most common way in which pastoral leaders believe their congregation is formed. When I asked a pastor from British Columbia how they are pursuing the mission of the church, consistent “ministering the Word... week in and week out” was his response. “Preaching of the Word and bringing the people together to hear the Word of God and to be encouraged by the Word of God” is the primary focus. Another pastor acknowledged the “influence of the pulpit over the course of church” as “very, very significant.” He attributed the direction of the church largely to the pulpit, so teaching is a high priority. Another pastor considered the best way to help people spiritually grow is “getting in the Word.”

Teaching was described as a “spiritual encounter” and somehow “transformative.” Preaching with a “Christ centered focus” – or “actually talking about Jesus in the pulpit” was how one pastoral leader puts it. The homiletic structure he then lays out emphasized knowing what God is saying in Scripture and then applying that to life now. It’s about understanding the “former previous actions of God” and then focusing on the “activity of God” in the present. In a more liturgical style church, the liturgy is emphasized; however, the homily is also mentioned as a way to know the biblical

message and to relate that to the present context.

Expository preaching is mentioned several times as a preferred style of preaching. One pastor says, "I'm an expositor so I think people are looking for an explanation from Scripture that will apply to daily life." Preaching "chapter by chapter, verse by verse" is seen as the best approach to preaching. Another pastor says, "I'm known for my expositional preaching." One pastor did not "want to brag" but said that "one verse we can take one hour easy;" the commitment and desire to study the Bible is evident.

Preaching is often followed up with small groups. Some pastors note that this is where discipleship and fellowship happen. Gathering in small groups during the week is important for building relationship and allowing a space for people to talk about the sermon. Prayer is also mentioned as an important component of small groups. Although small groups and prayer appeared in some responses, they were significantly less dominant themes.

The second primary way of pursuing the mission is to model the sort of behavior the church deems important. One pastor describes it as "walking the talk". Most often, this was around the theme of hospitality. The idea is that if you have people modelling this sort of welcoming and friendly presence, then others will catch on (caught rather than taught) and slowly the culture is transformed. One pastor says that he has never trained the greeters but, due to the structure of their service, "as soon as they walk in the doors here, there's usually people here greeting them and saying hi and how are you?". So, there is no alternative but "they have to walk through to get into church."

Referring to building a welcoming church, another pastor said that the "whole hospitality aspect" is important to the church and that they have "people who are examples" and who "make it a very strong priority to stand close to the front door and reach out to people as they see them walking." He goes on to say that "I think other people have taken that up and certainly reached out to people." The modelling way of pursuing the goal of becoming more welcoming seems successful in this example. There are structures in place (a welcome team, greeters at the front and back door) but, at the same time, they are relying on this model of hospitality to be "caught" rather than "taught." The pastor at Redemption Church confirms this saying that he does not preach about hospitality per se but that this welcoming culture is "so ingrained in the church" due to these "role models that are setting these examples".

He says "if you show up to the church for the first time and you're greeted by 7 people, after a year or two, you realize you're the one who's now greeting these people. And it just keeps going like that." Although this sort of hospitality seems organic or spontaneous, the words "ingrained" and "role models" suggest intentionality. Further investigation here may reveal structures or corporate habits that were not articulated by the pastoral leader.

### **Intentionality and Intuition**

Two opposing approaches to pursuing the mission are represented in the data. On one hand, there is intentionality and clear structures in pursuit of the mission. Pastoral leaders demonstrate that they have thought out their core values and know how they want to grow towards those. Often small groups are used to intentionally disciple people. Church structure is utilized as an important way to become what

they want to be become and to do what they want to do.

To intentionally focus on participation with God, Mark at Stonehouse Church changed the structure of church board meetings. Previously, they would have “budget reports, committee reports, a lot of documentation, a lot of voting” and while those things still happen at the tail end of meetings, he says “75% of their time together is missional dwelling in the Word, spending time reflecting on what are we doing, what does God want us to do, and are we partnering with God?”

Jim at Riverside Church says that as a church they prefer bi-vocational pastors. Not only does it keep costs down (as well as not owning their own building) but they want people to see “that we don’t have vocational clergy or staff. We’re just people whose lives have been changed by Jesus.” This intentional decision around staffing reflects their values and their understanding of being a missional church. The “Saying Yes” section focuses more on the core values that churches establish and demonstrate how churches embody those core values in their community contexts.

On the other hand, intuition and placing “zero pressure” is another approach. Sylvia at Olive Lane Church tries not to put any pressure on people – even to attend church. She says, “I preached one Sunday about how we don’t actually have to attend church to be Christian.”

**Instead, her focus is on “genuine love for other people with no strings and no expectations.” Unconditional love, which she traces back to Jesus’ way of interacting with people, is the key.**

She says “I always think, what did Jesus actually teach? At the core of everything that Jesus taught is care about people who need care.” In her words, then “we can change the world.” This approach is more focused on caring for people and encouraging them to care for others. This is seen as the essential work of the gospel and is viewed as happening more organically.



One pastor said that they are “just feeling our way because this is unique and different,” referring to the post-pandemic time and other things happening in their local area. She said, “I think we’re just using our intuition. If a topic seems like we’re not ready to go there yet, we just back off.” Both the pastor and lay leader appreciated an intuitive kind of discernment, understanding that their congregation was responding to various changes in ways that they needed to be aware of.

Knowing how a pastoral leader’s intuition has been developed over the years is another question completely, recognizing that intuition usually refers to some sort of unspoken or unconscious structured approach to knowing. In addition to intuition and discernment, they described a constant sort of evaluation and adjustment process as they pursued their mission. Though appearing almost unconscious, it would be interesting to investigate how this approach to discernment has been nurtured in congregations.



## Saying Yes

Clarity regarding mission and intentionality, especially in terms of pursuing that mission means that a church “says yes” to those things that align with the mission. This is a demonstration of the culture of discipline that Collins refers to with the Hedgehog Concept. This is most noticeably observed in churches who have clear values and concrete ways of embodying those values.

A church on the prairies has three core values and the pastor specifically links their church activities to each of the core values. For example, one of the values is focused on who they are as a community and encouraging a greater sense of relationship and spiritual friendship. As a result, they have incorporated regular storytelling (testimony) in their gatherings, particularly in their women’s events: “Every time they have an event, they interview somebody with questions. They try to understand who they are and what’s happening in their lives so that we just know a little about each other.”

For another church, “yes” meant deliberating collaborating with a church in a different province of a different denomination to pursue their mission of evangelism at the local, national, and global level. It meant “yes” for both churches involved and by pooling money and resources, a summer of sports camps was offered to the community in a freshly renovated “state-of-the-art” gymnasium at the hosting church.

Referring to a conversation with the youth pastor, Sophia says how they look at the values to determine what activities might be most in line with those values while relating how a ministry trip this past summer aligns with one of their core values. In her words, the core values “show what we care about” and then help determine how best to embody those values.

This story demonstrates the usefulness of naming core values as it helps them live out their mission statement and be the community of faith that they believe they are called to be.

Another church focuses on discipleship, rather than evangelism, and holds to presence, transformation, and mission as core values. Again, the core values are a contextualized embodiment of their mission statement. While the mission statement grounds them, the core values guide them as a congregation.

All their programs and activities – which fall under connect groups, community groups, or catechesis groups – explicitly contribute to these values. Their catechesis program is well thought out with revolving teaching modules to purposely form their congregants into people who know God, are well connected with other church members, and are engaged in mission. Prayer is emphasized throughout all the programs. This was an excellent example of the Hedgehog Concept and the Flywheel theme.

Hosting one big public event for another church is important but only that one big public event. While that is important, they are “very high on benevolence” so they want to make sure they have resources ready to help people who are experiencing hardship. They want to be the church when someone hears of someone else in need, they say “Oh go to our church” for assistance. Therefore, the one big event lets people know they exist and introduces the church to the community.

Just as lack of resources means saying “no,” having the right resources at the right time means being flexible enough to say “yes” to an opportunity that presents itself. Tom called it “opportunity meets resources meets chutzpah.”

He referred to a Christmas concert that happened because they had the auditorium that is “designed acoustically as a concert hall.” They had a worship director with a master’s level of piano, and there was the desire to do something special at Christmas. Those three things came together with the church hosting a special Christmas concert for the church and community.

### **Saying No**

“Saying no” goes along with “saying yes”. Just as it is important for a church knows what they are saying “yes” to, it is also for a church to know what to say “no” to. Not knowing what you are saying “no” means that you are either saying “yes” to everything or you are saying “yes” without a clear sense of purpose. On the other hand, saying “no” to everything does not necessarily guarantee you are pursuing mission either. There needs to be a sense of purpose behind the “yes” and “no”. For example, one pastor says this: “We never pass an offering plate” because “we want to communicate that we’re not interested in your money. We don’t need it.”

This same church has also said “no” to owning a building and has chosen to rent a building. No building or property practically means lower overhead in terms of financial cost. There is also something “intimidating” about a church building, Jim says, so the non-church location of the church is an intentional way to welcome people who might be afraid to enter a church building.

A church which has a very clear sense of who they are and how they are contributing to the community is free to say what they are not doing without guilt or shame. For example, Garth says plainly “we’re not the missional church, we’re not the prayer church or the worship church.” There’s a sense of freedom as the identity and

mission is clearly understood. Another church has said “no” to quick expansion. Not adding another Sunday morning service is based on the desire to plant, rather than expand. The pastor says, “we went from two to three services, but we’re not going to go to four services.”

The reality of limited volunteers, money, and resources is also named as something that affects a church’s ability to say “yes” or “no”. One pastor says, “anything new coming up is not going to happen because we have all our volunteers dedicated towards this sort of discipleship program.” There’s a clear understanding that saying “yes” to something new would mean saying “no” to something that is currently being done. Vera says that there are some things they might like to do but “we just don’t have the energy to do this” or “we don’t have the people to do this.” Or as Brian says as they are deciding whether to do a particular project, they have to stop and ask themselves, “Ok is this real? We’d love to do this but is this something realistically that we can take on right now?” He acknowledges that saying “no” is difficult because “all of it is good work.”

Saying “no” to things sometimes hurts. One pastor acknowledges that he would really like to have a specific ministry like some other churches have and says, “so yes, I’m jealous.” But, at the same time, he says, “but we just can’t.” Although he would love to do more, he recognizes the limits.

Another pastor would love more resources put into leadership development. However, the church is in the midst of a big project and is fundraising for their own building. He said “delayed gratification” is needed and that they “all understand” but saying “no” does not always come easy. If a new project or ministry does not fall in line with the ministry of the church, there is a need to say “no”.

Saying “no” sometimes bring a sense of relief. Sonja recounts a story from a few years ago when they realized that a certain program was no longer serving the congregation. Although it was a traditional ministry in their denomination, they dropped it because the context had changed, and it was no longer serving the people it was purposed to serve.

Instead of saying “no”, another church has found ways to make things possible. This involves joining with other churches to offer worship training training to their lay leaders. She says that this has “really switched our perspective – rather than saying we can’t do something, it’s more, well, if all of us work together, maybe we can,” Rather settling into a scarcity mindset, she is imagining other possibilities. Most of the churches who were able to articulate clear “no’s” are growing churches. This was a more difficult question for many pastoral leaders. Therefore, it is interesting to see that knowing what a church is purposefully not doing seems to be connected with knowing their unique purpose and role, and thus, associated with church growth.

### **Things Your Church is Particularly Good At**

This interview question is another way to discern how well churches have identified their particular purpose and role as a congregation. Churches most commonly respond with hospitality and being open minded. Church leaders believe that their churches are good at hospitality, in terms of welcoming, caring, and belonging. Andrew and Jacob describe caring for their children (through the building and operation of a private Christian school) and caring for their elderly (through the operation of a seniors home) – as a sort of “cradle to grave” approach. They mention that their church community is a place of “safety”, and it is important to offer a shelter from the world for their congregants and for others who would like

to be a part of their community.

Sylvia and Ron are confident in their church’s ability to care for people. Referring to some recent deaths among their congregation, they say – “we come together as a family.” They support and care for each other – not only in conversation and asking how they are doing, but in practical ways as well. It sounds like a culture of emotional and practical hospitality.



Mark notes that the congregation is good at going along with new things because they want to be an active, visible part of the community. Despite their small size, they desire to live their Christian faith with actions, and not only words. He says, “it’s really easy to try new things because everyone’s always very excited and usually partners in the way that they can be a part of that.” Note that all three examples come from growing churches.

## **Conclusion**

In terms of the Hedgehog Concept, churches in this research study pursue their mission primarily in two ways – preaching (often exegetical preaching) and modelling hospitality. Churches take two approaches – intentionality and intuition. Pursuing a mission means saying “yes” and saying “no”. Saying “yes” is often revealed through a church’s core values and distinct structures or practices that embody those values. Churches who can articulate their guiding values and point to ministries and structures within their churches that embody those values demonstrate a culture of discipline. Saying “no” is also a part of the culture of discipline – knowing what a church does and also knowing is beyond their mandate or mission. There is often appreciation for other churches who do these other things. Pastoral leaders believe that their churches are good at hospitality and being open minded. Pursuing a mission seems to be a more difficult task for pastoral leaders. Having a mission statement or knowing one’s mission is the starting point but pursuing the mission requires a clear understanding of their congregation and their missional role in the community. This is where it becomes evident if and how deeply the culture of discipline is embedded into the life of the church. From the interviews, it is apparent that more growing churches exhibit a clearer pursuit of mission than stable churches.



# Turning the Flywheel

- What are some of the practices or attitudes that have been intentionally cultivated over the years?
- What sort of growth would you like to see?
- Is there anything you did years ago that you are especially thankful for now – something that has borne good results?
- How have you managed to keep going in the face of difficulty or adversity?

## Jim Collins and Turning the Flywheel

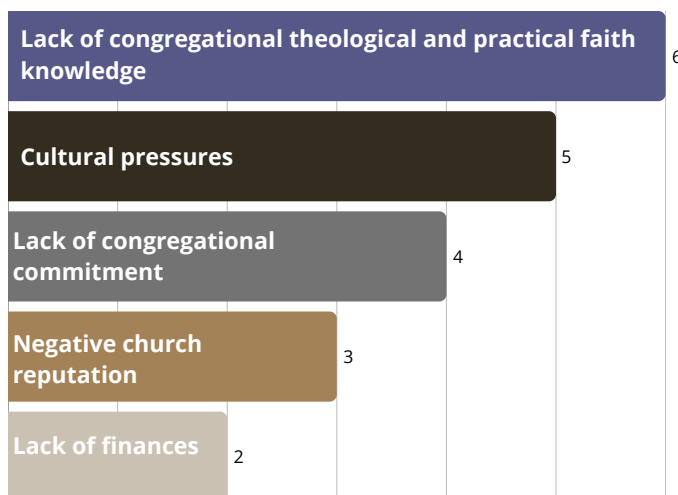
In Jim Collins' research on "great" companies, he found that the slow and steady approach works best. It is companies that are not waiting for that one big lucky break or their one moment that spins them into success. Instead, it is patient and persistent effort. Collins uses the image of a huge flywheel – that takes great effort to move just a little: But you keep pushing and working, moving just a little bit at a time, and then eventually the flywheel builds momentum and then "at some point – breakthrough!" (Collins, 2005, p. 23). There is a compounding effort that makes the investment of all the previous work worthwhile. Once the flywheel gains momentum, people are more committed, you attract greater resources, you see the results you've been aiming for, and this creates more support and commitment. For the social sector, turning the flywheel means building a strong, self-sustaining organization that is more than one leader's passion project or great idea. It is about a great organization, rather than a single great idea or program. According to Collins, instead of financial success (which is the driver for businesses), it is "brand reputation" that is important for those in the social sector. For this study, it means that people believe in the mission of the church and the church's capacity to fulfill that mission.

It is a cycle: Attract believers – build strength – demonstrate results – build brand – attract more believers and so on (Collins, 2005, p. 26). Persistency and consistency is the key. Even though strategies and practices may change, commitment to core values does not. Again, it is all about a culture of discipline.

Related to the Flywheel principle, Collins refers to the Stockdale Paradox, which means you persevere and hope despite setbacks. He says, "you must retain faith that you can prevail to greatness in the end, while retaining the discipline to confront the brutal facts of your current reality" (Collins, 2005, p. 30). The environmental challenges remain the same – for those who do well and those who do not. Collins says "greatness is not a function of circumstance. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice and discipline" (Collins, 2005, p. 31).

## Challenges and Hard Times

The top five challenges including the number of times mentioned by research participants, that are identified by pastoral leaders are:



Other concerns were also mentioned:

- Resistance within denomination to collaborate with others
- Moving beyond saving people to loving people
- Lack of clarity regarding vision
- Pressure to change the tradition of church
- Conflict within church
- Being peaceful amidst cultural conflict
- Proper care for church leaders

Note that there is a general lack of commonality among the responses and that pastoral leaders do not easily claim one challenge as most prominent. Since pastoral leaders name several things as challenges they face, the lack of consistency may suggest a lack of clarity or awareness of the specific challenges that pastoral leaders are facing. Another possible explanation is that perhaps pastoral leaders felt a reluctance to name specific challenges.

Here is a closer look at the top three challenges that pastoral leaders named specifically in the study. First, congregants lack theological knowledge and biblical literacy. This is evident in their lack of practical faith skills – feeling equipped to lead a small group, take on lay leadership roles, evangelism. Church leaders repeatedly used the phrase “not feeling equipped” to describe their congregants.

While there is the aspect of lacking knowledge and skills, there is also a strong sense that lack of confidence is a key part of not feeling equipped. Some pastors described it as “hesitancy” or “shyness” while others noted that congregants need “encouragement” and “confidence” or the assurance that they could “make a difference.” Pastoral leaders believe that congregants need to be equipped with two things – theological /biblical knowledge and encouragement.

Second, cultural forces that oppose Christian faith are named as the second biggest challenge

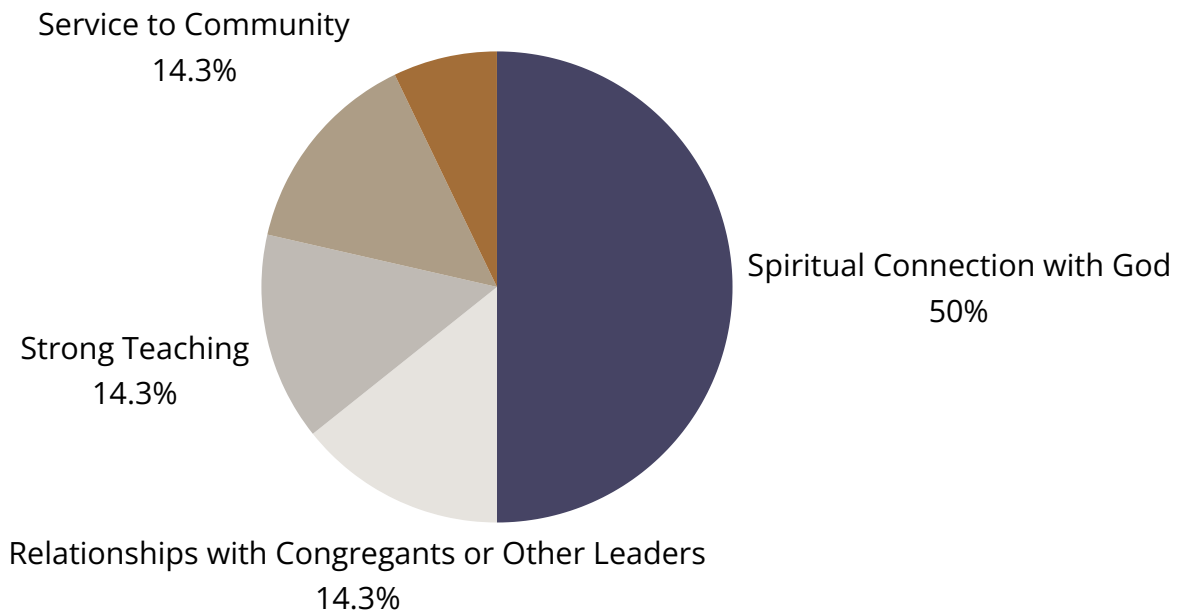
for the Christian church. This includes “harmful ideas” regarding gender and identity, a general sense of confusion, discontentment or “unrealistic expectations for everything,” the prevalence of and necessary wisdom regarding use of technology, and cultural aggression towards organized religion.

The opposition to organized religion relates to the negative reputation of the church (which is the 4<sup>th</sup> challenge of the current church). This negative church reputation is related to the legacy of residential schools and for the church hurt that people have experienced over the years. This negative church reputation is also associated with church splits and with judgementalism and harshness.

Third, church leaders consider congregational apathy and lack of commitment as the next biggest challenge. Although church leaders are quick to admire the spiritual maturity evident amongst their congregants, lack of spiritual fervour and maturity is also named as one of the top three challenges. This is seen as lack of commitment and lack of desire to spiritually grow. How these two themes coexist require further investigation. The struggle to get enough volunteers and to encourage wide participation (rather than a few doing most of the work) is mentioned by several leaders.

In terms of strengthening church leaders, it is the grace of God or the presence of God that church leaders rely on. This is described as an encounter with God or a sense of God. Spiritual direction is mentioned as a way that church leaders make space for that encounter. Pastoral leaders demonstrate a personal commitment to Jesus, an authentic relationship with God, and hold the Scriptures in high regard. It is interesting to note that leaders believe that preaching is the best way for their congregants to meet God while it is a mystical experience that leaders depend on to meet God.

## Things that are helping church leaders get through difficult times:



### Desired Growth

Pastoral leaders desire numerical growth as well as spiritual growth – both are mentioned 14 times throughout the interviews. Growing numerically is important for churches, with one church even aiming to double every ministry within the church in the next 10 years. This is a goal set by the denomination. A pastor in Quebec says he would “like it if the church would double every couple of years.” A lay leader in British Columbia says he would like to see more college and career age people at their church. A pastor in Ontario says she would like to see more children at their church services, also noting that this could be disruptive. Since numerical growth is often one of the lower priorities for most churches, this is a significant finding. Some pastoral leaders are not only desiring but deliberately and strategically pursuing numerical growth.

Church planting is specifically mentioned by four churches. Instead of adding another service or building a bigger building, these churches would like to church plant. A church in Atlantic Canada says this is a decision that they are facing:

“Are we going to build onto the church or do we start another church somewhere else? What most of us find ideal and think would be better is if something else smaller was started, somewhere else in another community. But then you need people that will spearhead that. Some really, really committed people.” The challenge of church planting (finding committed people) relates to one of the top five challenges Canadian Christian churches are facing – lack of commitment.

Along with numerical growth, pastoral leaders desire for their congregations to grow spiritually. This is articulated in various ways – “to walk in the Spirit,” “to love others as the Lord has loved us,” “to understand and keep the faith,” and “to put their trust in Jesus in difficult times.”

“More firm in the faith” is a phrase that is repeated several times. One pastor says that this sort of spiritual growth happens in small groups. Another pastor mentions that they have an “outstanding group of female leaders” but “we don’t have that amongst men.” This pastor would like to see a “mentorship and a multiplication of godly men” in the next few years.

Spiritual growth means “more than showing up on Sundays” and “taking initiative when it comes to spiritual development,” as well as “disciplining other people.” Spiritual growth is related to knowing the Bible, studying the Bible, and then some sort of action – whether it is sharing it with others or living it out in regular life. In fact, spiritual growth is first defined as increased knowledge/experience of God, often followed by evangelism.

Mission engagement is mentioned six times by pastoral leaders. To the research participants, this means involvement in the community, service to others, and evangelism. Pastoral leaders want their congregants to be people who not only know things but practice the Christian faith. Greater participation from a wider audience is part of the desired spiritual growth.

As Antoine says, “when we arrived here six years ago, we had one guy who played the piano and my wife. Today I think we have seven people who play the piano.” This is the sort of spiritual growth he (and others) would like to see continue to grow – more volunteers, more people equipped, more leaders developed.

Despite the emphasis on hospitality which is demonstrated within the church, Seth wonders about the hospitality that is extended to the community:

“If they came to our Sunday morning, I think we would be very definitely, very welcoming and want to connect with them. But why does that have to change if we see them outside the church? Do we just assume that if they're here, they're seeking something? What makes us say they're not seeking something if they aren't here? Why can't we have that same attitude outside of the church and just give people dignity and see them as God's creation? ”

Seth is articulating a desire for missional hospitality that extends beyond the congregation and into the community.

Spiritual growth is defined as being a people that practices Christian faith in a way that suits the congregation and community. It is spiritual growth that includes belief, formation, and action. There is a desire for more global outreach and to build cross cultural relationships with other churches in other parts of the world. As one pastor says, “we definitely have a heartbeat forward to see what God might call us into something there.”

Truth and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada is stated as an area of hoped for spiritual growth. Having more people and new people serve in various capacities is another area of hoped for spiritual growth.

More and greater unity is another aspect of spiritual growth. This includes unity across denominations in the local community context, as well as a greater sense of unity within the congregation. As one pastor says, he'd like to see “less groups and more people breaking out,” referring to the cliques and divisions that often exist within a congregation. Lay leader Lucas states that the sort of spiritual growth he'd like to see is for people to “appreciate and understand each other better” as a result of “digging into Scripture on a daily basis” and developing a “stronger love for who God is and how God blesses us.” Along with greater appreciation and understanding for each other, another leader names “less offended-ness” as an area of potential spiritual growth. This is directed towards those on the edges that keep their distance due to some past offence or hurt. This sort of spiritual growth is not only individual but corporate.



Another pastor wishes for new people to be integrated: "We have some newer people, and I want to work on integrating them better with the long-time members. A small parish can become a little bit of a clique and we just need to get to know the new people." Pastoral leaders desire that their communities of faith be places where "no one is slipping through the cracks" and that their churches are places where people can "experience love and connection and welcome... expressing the very nature of God as revealed in Christ," as Craig puts it. Seeing congregants demonstrate hospitality towards one another is something that makes pastoral leaders happy, such as Stanley: "Like right now when I hear so-and-so saw that person at church, went up to them, invited them out. They're sitting together the next week and they're just friends and they're walking together. So, seeing more of that just organically happening with us kind of giving those tools and boosting and giving them a little push to do that."

Besides integration of people on the edges, unity within the congregation means integrating other cultures within the life of the church. One pastoral leader says what they want is "not just token diversity, but where they actually have a voice." He sees it happening at the church but would like to see more.

Vera puts it nicely. She says, "I'd like to see them shine. To come to a place in their lives of knowing who they are and living their lives from that place of understanding." However, she also faces the hard reality: "But we didn't teach people properly. We just assumed that when they came to church, they knew. And I'm surprised at the questions that I get from some people that I would think would know all these things and they don't. Don't know why we use different colors for hangings through the years. They don't understand necessarily the significance of the Paschal Candle. It's not important for them, but they don't understand about the linens that we

use. And there's just the lack of education in that." This comment is from a mainline church, but the same concern is also specifically voiced by at least two Evangelical Protestant pastors.

### **Congregational Practices and Postures**

This interview question is directed towards finding out what sort of congregational practices and postures the pastoral leaders want to cultivate among their congregations. Related to what kind of growth they'd like to see, this question focuses in on how that growth might be facilitated.

It is important to note that this question was more difficult to answer and often Sunday morning services, particularly the sermon, is seen as the primary practice to facilitate spiritual growth and pursue mission.

The most common response (10X) focused on Sunday morning gatherings with the sermon being primary. Preaching the Word, being faithful in teaching each Sunday, and helping people understand Scripture is the most important spiritual practice for pastoral leaders. The liturgy and music are also mentioned.

The second most mentioned practice or posture that pastoral leaders want to cultivate among their congregation is hospitality. The desire to not only welcome people "into our building but also welcoming people into the life of our church" is a high priority.

Other leaders phrase it like cultivating "love for the other," building "a culture of love," having church be "a place of a lot of deep connections," and just "being in each other's lives." Coffee times before church are seen as a way to cultivate hospitality, as well as other times of sharing food and fellowship. Incorporating a sense of empathy and caring for one another is part of that hospitable culture pastoral leaders desire.

**This is more than merely giving a friendly welcome. It is about incorporating people into the life of the church, giving them a sense of belonging, and building close caring relationships.**

Similar to Sunday morning teaching, but in a different and smaller environment, small groups or Bible studies are a favoured practice (5X) that pastoral leaders want to endorse. These are sometimes called discipleship classes, and some churches have specific names for small groups that fit their cultural church context. One pastor says that small groups allow people to dig into “the meat of the Scripture.” Referring to post-pandemic time when churches were in the midst of starting up again, Sonja says, “We need to look at the things God is doing. We need to keep going forward. So we did that. We did a study on Nehemiah, rebuilding the temple.” She notes that after starting the Bible study, they started to “see that hope again because we’re getting young people.” She links renewed hope and increased attendance among younger people directly to the Bible study. Another leader emphasized that “spiritual knowledge is one thing, but then certainly applying it to one’s life... it’s a whole person mindset to discipleship.” As a pastoral leader, he was interested in more than hearing the sermon on Sunday and gaining knowledge – he desired the holistic transformation that occurs when applied to one’s life.

Also mentioned (5X), service is a key practice that pastoral leaders want to cultivate. This is mostly mentioned in terms of inside the church, and then to a lesser degree, outside the church.

Prayer and prayer meetings are also an important practice for pastoral leaders (3X). Other practices mentioned include seminary classes, annual revival meetings, personal devotion times, not blaming one another, and increased trust in God’s provision. Ethan names the five discipleship dimensions they focus on as a church. Each year these are assessed, and he says, “engagement with mission is always the weakest.” Note the intentionality regarding regular assessment, which then allows for specific action to be taken.

### **Good Habits**

Similar to the previous question, this time I ask research participants to look back and see if there is anything they did years/months ago that they are thankful for now. This question tries to get at good habits that have been established or a particular way of being that was introduced and that is now bearing fruit. The themes of patience and intentionality were evident throughout the responses.

Pastoral leaders are glad they practiced patience and good listening skills. This was a prominent theme that came up repeatedly. Looking back, leaders were grateful that they were patient when they first arrived at their churches and did not demand that things be changed immediately. One leader described it as not being “heavy handed.” Instead, they observed and listened and then slowly changed the focus from maintaining to actively growing.

They talked positively about new ideas and encouraged people to get involved. Antoine said, "I always when I come to a church, I try to do like they do and change some things inside. I don't want to arrive and to change everything and, like everything you did in the past is wrong. I want to adapt first." Brian said that "I always want to be listening and open to other people's suggestions and I will push back if we can't do it for X, Y, or Z reason. But having that openness, rather than saying 'I've got my plan'."

There was also a sense of patience in terms of learning how to have conversation with one another as a congregation. Lay leader Maria spoke of learning together (as a congregation) how to "speak with Christ's love in Christ's light," advocating for a Socratic dialogue method.

She said that their congregation is learning how to speak with one another in a way that honours God and each other. Isaiah was grateful that he had taken the chance to be involved at the local university and with other pastoral leaders in the community.

He said, "I go actually, even though some of them would oppose for me to be there," admitting that it is "awkward" for both them and him, but also good and satisfying. Despite the lack of immediate results, he was believing that his persistent attempts at community building and communication would bear future fruit.

One leader's encouragement was this: "One of the things I want to say to people is - don't give up too soon but get the good processes in place that you need to weather the change. Perseverance is a great value." For life together, learning how to speak and live with one another was something pastoral leaders were grateful for – for themselves and their congregations.

In terms of their own spiritual care (individually and corporately), there was an emphasis of "daily putting in the effort" realizing that some of those tasks are quite ordinary. Pastoral leaders realize that they must first model what they desire for their congregation. There was a necessary patience that involved developing an awareness of God and what God is doing. It meant knowing their church story. It included taking regular sabbaticals and, as Ben says, "an unrelenting commitment to leadership wellness and restoration" that's been "really, really significant."

Sophia said that she knows there are "seasons of church life that are really arduous and sacrificial because you're spending into the future" and then there are "seasons where you're reaping." Realizing which season your church may be in requires a sort of patience to simply be in the season you are in while trusting that the next season is coming. A leader spoke of the experience of coming from a place of floundering to "clarity and cohesion."

Another leader said that they have "a mandate on how we then should act as a church," acknowledging that "it's really worth it, but very labour intensive." One pastor named it as "focusing on the major things" and not letting the minor issues take precedent.

Mike named a simple singular focus as a posture that he's adopted and is grateful for. He said, "I've never been a trender, if you know what I mean by that. There's always a trend in the church world. I've avoided it all. I just said no. I'm going to just stay the course. Just do the fundamentals really well. Praying, preaching the Word, teaching the Word. Developing leaders. We just kept doing those four things all along until finally you've got developed people who actually have grown up."

In summary, it was a posture of patience that they prized, whether it was their relationship with the congregation, the congregational relationships, or their own spiritual lives and the spiritual life of the church.

The following “good habits” relate more to intentional church structure, management or specific programs. Prudent financial management and remaining “fairly right sized” when it comes to building and budget was an important habit. Intentionality was also expressed with hosting specific ministries.

For example, Celebrate Recovery was a ministry that not only helped people with addictions, but it changed the culture of the church causing it to be more honest and authentic. Cameron said that this ministry changed their atmosphere, and new people began to say “this church feels real.”

In his words, the individuals who participated in Celebrate Recovery were honest in a way that “made us as a church realize that we can stop pretending.” The church culture is no longer “just shake my hand and see you next week.” Now it is more real and “I’m having a bad day or a good day” or “Can you pray for me?” Another church leader spoke about intentional visitation and personal outreach as the pastoral leader.

Intentionally thinking through leadership structure at a church resulted in greater trust and better working relationships. Garth said, “that silly little thing, you know, kind of seems boring, but man, that has been so good for us. I think we’re a much, much healthier church because it’s just clear now. We have a very clear structure and out of that I think we’ve built some good trust and some really good energy between the groups responsible for various things. ”

Finally, a very intentional discipleship model with three clear lanes, based on three core values was invaluable for one congregation.

**Rather than evangelism,  
the focus is on  
discipleship with the  
belief that evangelism is  
then inevitable.**

Lane is convicted that “if you focus on evangelism or outreach, you’re not always guaranteed discipleship.” He wants people “to encounter the presence of God.” Intentionality was also expressed in terms of developing a strong youth group, a strong missional presence (both local and international), and regular Bible study.





## Conclusion

It is interesting to note that the number one challenge for pastoral leaders is a congregational lack of theological understanding and practical faith skills (for example, evangelism). At the same time, the number one way in which pastoral leaders believe in and rely upon for spiritual growth is Sunday morning gatherings, specifically preaching. The question must be asked - are Sunday morning gatherings (specifically preaching) forming people in the way that pastoral leaders would like? Is preaching an effective way of teaching Scripture and increasing people's theological understanding? It is interesting to note that pastoral leaders name experience with God as the thing that keeps them going in difficult times and nurtures them spiritually. However, it is knowledge of God through preaching that they view as the primary way to facilitate congregational spiritual formation. So, what is the relationship between knowledge of God and experience of God? It prompts the question - why are pastoral leaders focused on knowledge of God for their congregations while they name experience of God as more personally significant?

The emphasis on small groups as discipleship rings true across denominations. Some churches are very intentional about how they structure these groups and their purpose. Small groups, however, received only moderate attention and the role of prayer was even less. This could be because pastoral leaders simply assumed the importance of small groups and prayer or perhaps they were part of the existing church structure but not intentionally pursued. For whatever reason, preaching and the Sunday morning event was most emphasized, over small groups and prayer.

Hospitality is the second most desired practice/posture that pastoral leaders would like to encourage. This is a deep and generous understanding of hospitality that involves caring relationships, nurturing a sense of belonging, and helping people discover and use their gifts as part of the community. The sense of hospitality seems to be derived from theological conviction with a direct orientation towards God. There are challenges, such as extending hospitality beyond the "core group", extending hospitality to the community, and incorporating those on the margins. Cultural integration is also mentioned as a challenge.

Good habits or things that pastoral leaders are glad that they have and are practising revolved around the themes of patience and intentionality. They were deliberate and persevering and willing to not to see the fruits of their labour immediately, trusting that they were slowly building something good in the meantime.

# Ecumenism and Collaboration

Even though ecumenism and collaboration are not the subject of any of the interview questions, this theme naturally emerges from the interviews. For the purpose of this study, ecumenism is defined as the appreciation for and the tendency to connect and cooperate across Christian denominational lines. The themes of ecumenism and collaboration arise again and again from pastoral leaders across the various Christian traditions represented and across community sizes throughout Canada. Not only are collaboration and ecumenism held as important values, but these values are actively practiced by many pastoral leaders.

## **Ecumenical Spirit: Borrowing from Other Traditions**

Pastoral leaders refer to borrowing from other Christian traditions for their ministry. There is not a strict adherence to one faith tradition for Sunday morning gatherings; instead, there is an openness to and appreciation of other faith traditions. For example, a lay leader of an Evangelical Protestant church, says he's "lived in or studied in almost every denomination you can think of" – the Anglicans, Methodists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, charismatics, Jesuits. He adds that he really appreciates Catholic history and is currently exploring the Orthodox tradition. At the church, they value and incorporate many of these traditions, citing liturgical expressions and very reformed or expository preaching and charismatic worship. For him, this ecumenical approach "is a lot more inclusive for me and I feel more at home."

A Pentecostal pastor acknowledges that he knows the Pentecostal world, but that he's learned from his Anglican brothers and sisters and his Presbyterian Church of America brothers and sisters.

He is Pentecostal but preaches expositionally and places heavy emphasis on the sacraments and communion, which he notes "isn't very Pentecostal at all." He likes to work the Common Prayer into his messages on Sunday, adding that most of their people "don't even know what it is." Agreement with other traditions isn't the focus, but rather the chance to learn from each other, which he says is important. So, while pastoral leaders gladly wear their denominational label, there is also this borrowing from other traditions.

## **Conviction Yet Collaboration: Finding Common Ground**

There was a conviction expressed around collaboration that assured allegiance to their own faith tradition, that kept Christ as the centre, and that a spirit of competition did not inform the collaboration.

## **Compromise to Orthodoxy?**

Pastoral leaders from the research study demonstrate a desire and willingness to collaborate with other churches despite having strong theological conviction towards their own particular faith tradition. Their bias towards their particular faith tradition is obvious as shown below:

**"Our denominational edge is  
good theology."  
- Lutheran Church**

**"This is what we're known for -  
robust theology."  
- Christian Reformed Church**

**"I took a Bible study with the  
[denomination] and I think they have  
the truth."  
- Seventh Day Adventist Church**

And yet, for the most part, this conviction does not keep them from connecting and collaborating with others.

Caution was expressed though in terms of possible compromise in terms of who they are as a church and that they believe. One pastoral leader says he is willing to connect and collaborate with other churches as long as they weren't asked to "violate our own sense of who we are and what we believe." He said, "as long as we're not called on to compromise who we are. Absolutely, yes. But the fact that we are a Christ following community, that we're a Christian community, that this is the language that we speak, that's part of our identity."



Another pastoral leader, however, states that his/their theological convictions did prevent them from connecting with other churches due to theological incongruence. As a way of being faithful to God's Word, they intentionally do not join with other churches in worship or community activities. As the pastoral leader says, "We believe that God tells us to beware of false prophets...those who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine...and to avoid them is what God tells us. His Word is the most precious thing to us. It's our only source of absolute truth and so God does not want us to compromise that truth with anything."

### Christocentrism

When I asked "why" or "how" connection and collaboration with other churches is possible and/or desirable, pastoral leaders generally refer to Jesus as the unifying centre. Some phrased it as attempting to "major on the majors" or flying only the "Jesus flag."

The emphasis is not on denominational or particular theological understandings, but agreement on Jesus, with other things being secondary. When I asked one pastor why he wished to have more relationship with other local church leaders, he replied: "I just think that's the Kingdom. That's how the Kingdom of God is. We're all going to be together someday, so why not do it here on earth as it's going to be in heaven?" And when I asked about different theological convictions, his response was: "I think we can work around those things. As long as we love Jesus and he's forgiven us of our sins, the rest we can work around."

An Evangelical church is connecting with local churches of various denominations (ranging from Catholic to United) to host an ecumenical worship night. When I asked if there was any resistance towards connecting with churches who may not share theological convictions, Nathan responded:

"Yes. And I'm not saying this in a judgmental or condemning way, but I would say the only resistance has been within the [denomination]. My answer has been to gently say - step back from the denomination and realize that we're all partnering in Jesus' mission. If we're going to raise a flag, let's put our denominational differences down. Let's just raise the flag of Christ and the Holy Spirit. And if you think this is a [denomination] thing, it's also a Presbyterian thing, like it's a Jesus thing and that's more of the win, right?"

He goes on to say, “the only label we should be seeking is just a win for Jesus. A win for God’s Kingdom breaking more into this world. Those are the banners to be flying.”

Riverside Church is part of a church planting network and functions as non-denominational, but partners with different denominations. They partner with whatever denomination makes sense for that church plant in its geographical setting. Currently, they function within two denominations, saying that in the more rural area, “it made a lot of sense” to partner one denomination. Then in the more urban location, it made sense and they “lined up with a lot of things” to partner with a different denomination. This approach allows them “the freedom to not simply be limited to one tribe” and they enjoy and are grateful for multiple connections. Pastoral leader Jim wants to ensure that it’s a mutually beneficial relationship but expresses resistance to “wave the denominational flag.” He won’t even post it on their website necessarily because “that’s not the flag we’re waving.” Instead, he says, “It’s the Jesus flag and the gospel flag that we want.”

A Christocentric approach is also the key to maintaining a sense of unity among a theologically diverse congregation. Big Sky Church is made of people from very many backgrounds and yet it does not cause a lot of conflict or division. When I asked Garth what “the secret is,” he had a few responses. First, admitting that it is a bit of a “cheeky response,” he said that “it’s just simply that I don’t think enough churches try.” He said that churches “don’t try to be big in their thinking” and don’t “try to keep everybody in;” instead, they “just lay it down” and then people leave.

Effort is needed to keep people centered on what matters, to sometimes put personal preferences aside (more charismatic worship, for example), and allow differences of opinion on issues that are not central to the Christian faith.

Their confession of faith is helpful in that it “doesn’t nail down a lot of stuff,” meaning that there is room to disagree on issues like creation as long as people agree that “God created the earth.” They “hold to a traditional view of marriage and sexuality and gender” and “non-violence” that fits with the history of their faith tradition, yet they “don’t dig into a lot of things that push people hard away.”

It hasn’t been a place “where we all believe the same” and the confessional space they are in emphasizes discipleship in Jesus. Garth says there’s “something really wonderful” about a Christocentric approach because there’s an emphasis on salvation and living in right relationship. On top of that, the church has a “community hermeneutic where we believe the community interprets Scripture. Not the pastor. Not the expert. Not anybody outside. So we do this together.”

Although this question of how to maintain unity was something he had not thought about it, he recognizes it as a “really good question.” He says the church “should be a miracle” and not like other social groups where everybody thinks the same. Instead, he wants his church to be a place where people say – “it’s interesting that all those people go to the same church because they don’t seem all the same, but I think that’s a good thing.”

**A Christocentric approach is also the key to maintaining a sense of unity among a theologically diverse congregation.**



For a church that recently choose to be LGBTQ+ affirming, lay leader Maria notes that some people would think “oh, you’ve become a welcoming and affirming church, you must be really liberal.” She says that some people are liberal at their church, but they also have “super conservative” people in the church. She emphasizes that because the church is Christocentric with Jesus as the centre uniting people together, along with a “spaciousness that is authentic” – they can’t be easily “pigeon-holed”. While others might say they are not orthodox in their Christian beliefs, they believe that they have maintained Jesus as centre while welcoming everyone. Maria refers to it as the “paradox of the gospel” being “lived out in our church.”

### **Not A Competitive Spirit**

Accompanying the Christocentric approach is an attitude of cooperation, rather than competition. This sense of cooperation is expressed in a variety of ways. Stanley says he had made it a regular habit to pray publicly for other churches in his town on Sunday mornings. Inspired by a popular American pastor who suggested this practice, he has now made it a regular habit. He prays that the other churches would “preach the Word and that people would be built up in those churches and they’d reach out to the community.” When I asked him why he does this, he admits that there may “have been a perception that we’re kind of our own thing” and wonders if historically the church was “on the outs.” He explains his desire to support other churches by saying this:

“Well, I think you want to show that we don’t have the corner market, you know. We’re not the only church in [city in BC]. I do think we’re faithful to the gospel, and maybe there’d be some churches I’d wonder about, but I don’t want to be in this position of saying, hey, this is

the only good option in town and we’re in competition with the church down the street. I don’t want to ever encourage that mindset. I want people to know you can go down the street to [neighbouring church] and you’re going to be fed, and that would be a great place to spiritually grow if you so choose to do so. But if you do go there - become a member and plug in and invest and go all in, and if you’re here, do that here.”



A mainline church in Ontario connects with other churches for community engagement projects because they want “all hands-on deck.” They choose a particular church for the location of the project for practical reasons – it’s all on the same level, they have a big parking lot. The pastoral leader is “really pleased that nobody’s been like, well, we need more credit for this. You know, it’s not like we need our name in lights. It’s just we’re going to get the work done.” Not worried about who gets the credit, the goal is simply to serve the community and to see the town or community is the parish (not the old view of the parish being a building or a church). The leader uses very missional language (“we are charged with being an outpost of Christianity” in this small town.)

An Evangelical Protestant church partners with a dozen other local churches to host worship nights. There is not a sense of competition, as they rotate between the churches and take turns hosting the event. The churches are local and represent many denominations from mainline to Catholic to Evangelical.

## Partnering with Other Churches

Pastoral leaders often partnered with other churches in the form of local ministerial groups.

**They worked together to extend compassion towards the community and then they also worked alongside or with the community on joint projects or for a common purpose, such as caring for school children or providing care for people in retirement homes.**

### Local Ministerials

Local ministerial associations repeatedly come up as a sort of collaborative effort to care for the community. A Catholic leader spoke of the ministerial association as coordinating and buying gift cards “for those people that really are in need,” saying that “I think every church in town supports that program.” Another community care effort that is supported by his church alongside other churches is the church services offered in the local care homes. He goes on to say that the six churches in town represent a variety of denominations and these pastoral leaders meet for lunch a few times a year.

A Pentecostal leader is part of “a great ministerial between the other churches, even the mainline churches,” noting that “it’s very ecumenical.” They have a fund to cover emergency housing at a local motel and other needs that people may have. They also do food drives together – a friendly competition between the churches to see who can collect the most food. Every church needs to have a representative on the local food

bank board. As he says, “there’s great unity” in regard to serving our community.

A Lutheran pastor appreciates the good working relationships between the leadership of the various congregations in the area, saying that this was something he personally wanted to be a part of because “it hasn’t been like that in all the places I’ve served in the past.” He goes on to say that he is “quickly tired of denominational barriers.”

He’d like to see churches’ efforts “go into the community” rather than “working so hard” to maintain independent structures. The ministerial is represented by all the clergy and is “encouraged and supported by everyone, including lay people.”

Although not a ministerial, Trish appreciates collaborating with sister churches of the same denomination in the area to provide such things as training for worship leaders. It is too much for one church to take it on, but together, it is possible, and all the churches benefit.

Also, one pastor comments about loneliness he has experienced within the denomination. He says, “pastoral leaders feel primary responsibility for their church, so they have to “guard it” but then pastoring ends up feeling lonely because “we’re all so crazy busy”. He admits that pastoring is “lonely and I think we need that connection.”

This pastor did however experience a sense of kinship with local churches of various denominations due to their collaboration on a joint project. However, he was noting that he desired that same sort of “team spirit” with the churches of his own denomination.

### **For the Sake of the Community**

The purpose of the ministerials is largely to serve the community. For the pastoral leaders who did not mention a local ministerial, they still joined together with other churches for local mission engagement. One mainline pastor said the churches “can’t always agree on theology” but “we can all agree on feeding people.” His church works with other churches to host a community supper that also serves as a marker of a church holy day and raises money for the food bank. Feeding people is something all the churches support.

Another pastor who disassociated from their denomination when they became affirming still supports the denominational campus ministry and Indigenous ministry (while joining a mainline church for Christmas Eve.) For the sake of the community, they are willing and happy to collaborate with others (even a church that they disagree with so much that they would disassociate). He even said, “I mean if a Muslim group or an atheist group, wants to do river clean up and we want to do river cleanup. Well, let’s build relationships and learn from each other and do river cleanup.”

Connecting and collaborating with others is a priority for Pastor Johnny and “it kinda frustrates me that others don’t.” He values the idea of doing life together and serving the community together. When I ask him if that might mean working with people who you may disagree with theologically, his response is “Well, that happens.” I commented that he did not seem concerned with that, to which he replied, “Well, I’m not that concerned about that.”

Another church collaborated on a major music project for the community which involved over a hundred people from 30 to 40 churches. The

event ran for several nights, and all the money raised was donated to a local community social service agency. The pastor expressed enthusiasm for the project while also noting the risk involved with that many volunteers and the sizeable expenses associated with a big event.

### **Working with the Community**

Churches in the study cooperated with one another for the sake of the community but they also cooperated with the community. Many of these initiatives were centered around food. For example, a church in BC established a community garden to be a place where people can connect and grow food. This past year, some of the harvest went to seniors in the community.

Lavender Lane Church in Quebec works together with a local social service agency for weekly food distribution to people with food insecurity in their region. The pastor himself is there every week, working alongside congregational and community members.

A church in Ontario hosts pancake breakfasts throughout the year (usually related to community events) and shares building space for things like the local Remembrance Day Ceremony. They have the sound system and the seats and can accommodate a crowd. Pastoral leader Jill says that they really want Juneberry Church to “become a place where the community comes.” From the stories she shares, that is what is happening. She says when “someone passes away in the community and they’re not already connected somewhere, they get sent to us even if we don’t actually know who they are.” If people are in need and have no connection, people tell them to go see them. The church receives emails from the community saying – “hey we’re doing this and do you want to be involved?”

The community seems to sense that the church loves the community and wants to be of help. She describes it as “a very positive feel.” She tells a story regarding their involvement at the local high school:

“One thing that we found this year when we went back into the high school to set up some of our outreaches and to see what we can do, one teacher in the school attends our church. She’s been our bridge to get started, but she said this year when they had their first staff meeting, they were looking at the calendar and seeing what could go on. It was a teacher who last year was not quite sure about letting a church into the school said in the meeting - well, what about Juneberry Church? They come and they like to do things. Are they going to come back again?”

That was a huge win for us to just say we want the church. We want the community to see the church that way. And this is one of the ways that we’re like, OK. I think we’re getting it. If we have somebody who’s not interested in the gospel, didn’t really trust us last year, but this year is like, when are they coming back?”

Olive Lane Church, due to their physical location, finds it difficult to contribute directly to the community, so a lot of their outreach “happens through other organizations who are working in the city.” They say that outreach happens in two ways – financial contributions and volunteerism. The first is that they have a budget line designated to outreach in their local community – for groups that work with youth, women, those with health concerns. Their financial donations to these groups support the work in the community. The second way involves people from the church volunteering for the sake of the community. Working with local organizations is also the way that Cinnamon Springs Church contributes to their community – working alongside other community groups.

To make “the church available in every aspect of life,” Isaiah from House of God Church goes weekly to the local university campus to offer a church service. Instead of expecting people to come to them, this church goes out into the community. He admits the challenge of adapting to new ways of doing things, citing older congregants as most resistant; but says that “we realized that the community needs to know us.” It’s why he accepted to do the interview with me – as an effort to be more engaged with the community and break down some of those walls that often isolate church communities. Though the university does not necessarily cooperate with him in terms of the worship service, they do offer space for Isaiah, and they have a desire to serve their students spiritually – which Isaiah is happy to cooperate with.

Maple Street Church in Ontario specifically has commissioned their pastoral leader to spend a part of each week in the community. Most of that time is spent at the local high school – for instance, coaching a sports team. The church wants him to be there and to be a part of the school community so he’ll take a day off work to attend a sporting events with the students, saying that the church is “all for that.” When I asked Seth why he thinks the church does that, he said: “They just have a desire to have some sort of community outreach. They don’t want me necessarily just connecting with the youth of our church, but the youth in the community, the people of the community and I’m all for that. That’s kind of goes along with my heart for the community.”

**These stories of community engagement are not only connection for the sake of the community, but they are stories of community engagement with the community.**



They are not establishing their own programs apart from existing programs, but they are contributing to someone else's program. This relates back to the theme of not worrying about who gets the credit and is an example of people who do not have similar theological views working together.

### **Public Witness**

This section deals with the "why" the connection and collaboration. Three main reasons arose – for the sake of younger generations and those who have experienced church hurt, for the community, and for other churches.



### **For Younger Generations / Church Hurt**

Nathan saw the value of connection and collaboration with other churches particularly as a visible sign of "the church working together". He says that people have been hurt by the church and have lost trust in the church. In reference to a regular joint church event with other churches in the area, he says that half or more than half of the attendees have either "been hurt by the church or don't have church experience but are curious." To see the church working together somehow heals some of that hurt and mends some of the negative reputation that the church has.

When I asked Isaiah why it was important to know and engage in conversation with other religious leaders in the community, he said that that engagement and conversation send a message that the community and the younger generations in the church especially need to hear. He says:

"Because if we do not have conversation, that means I'm assuming the message is I don't like you and we can never talk. Christ said to love your neighbor as yourself. So whoever your neighbor is, whatever schisms are or divisions, I will put those aside for the sake of the conversation and the sake of our new generations. They need to see that we are able to reach the community. This is important for them."

Being able to reach the community is key for the younger generation. Community engagement seems to be a high priority for them, and this is linked to relationship with other churches, loving our neighbour, and putting an emphasis on unity.

### **For The Community**

Connection and cooperation with other churches and community groups is also seen as important as a public witness to the community. Nathan says this is part of "earning the trust of the community" and he links it to the church regaining their voice "in the public square." If the church expects people to listen to what the church has to say, then working together is part of earning that trust back.

When I ask Garth why it is important to work with another church in town (joint services, Christmas hamper project) and to make sure church events do not interfere with one another (summer programs for children), unity as a public witness for the community is cited as the reason.

He says “Personally, because I think unity in the body of Christ is the most important witness we can give to the world. To say, yes, we don't agree but you know what? Jesus is good. So, I think that to me the public witness of the church in our town, if we're not getting along, that's no use.” It is understood that conflict and division are then the sort of witness that draws people away from Jesus, and unity is the sort of witness that draws people towards Jesus. Likewise, other leaders throughout the interviews stated that past conflict and division has been part of the negative reputations of their churches.

### For Other Churches

Pastoral leaders were eager to connect with other churches for five reasons:

- Mutual learning
- As a display of unity
- The necessity of a diversity of churches
- For collective efforts
- For mutual support

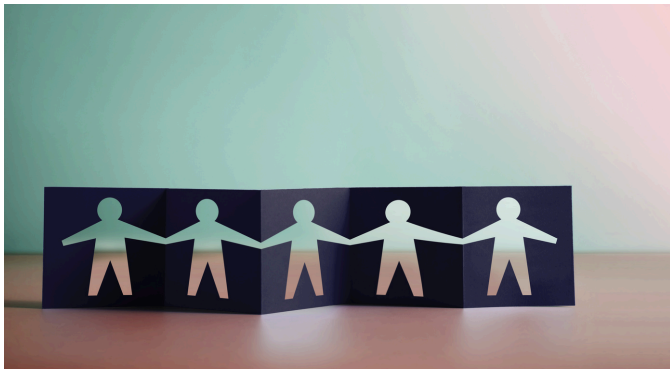
First, connection with other churches allows for mutual learning and is a way to get to know each other's faith traditions and serves as a prompt to engage in the community in a helpful and positive way. Pastoral leader Isaiah says it is important to talk to others who are not the same denomination as themselves as a way “to inform others” and “get us involved” in the community. He acknowledges that this is not always easy and requires courage. He attends gatherings of other church leaders “even though some of them would oppose for me to be there.” Because other Christian leaders may be uncomfortable with him, he could easily stay away. But he says, “as awkward as it is for me or for them to have me, I've gone and have made friends in other communities when I've been invited to their events and when they come to our events as well.”

He goes on to say that those efforts are paying off and in the last three to four years, the church leaders as a whole for his local area have grown in community together.

Evangelical Protestant pastoral leader Lane also says that his relationship with other churches in the neighbourhood “is very important.” There is the challenge of having enough time and space to build relationships within his own denomination, as well as building relationships with local churches. In his previous position, he had greater connection with local churches whereas now a lot of his time is consumed with his own denomination. While he acknowledges that that is good and he's honoured to serve, there is a piece of him that “misses that kind of ecumenical cross-pollinating.” He says he “loves sitting down with other pastors and other streams and just hearing how the Lord is at work, receiving from them and encouraging them.” As Stanley (stated previously) prays for other churches during the Sunday morning service, Lane prays for the church of another denomination he walks by on his way to church Sunday mornings.

Lane believes that churches ought to engage in cross-denominational conversation and collaboration because iron sharpens iron. Although he is firmly grounded in his denomination and faith tradition, he is open and appreciative of other Christian faith traditions. Describing the kingdom of God as a mosaic, all the churches are “unique and different but when it's all together, it's beautiful.” He wants to keep learning from pastors who are doing things well and faithful in their own context. Disagreeing about election and predestination is not important but it is essential to be “unified on Christ's life, death, resurrection, virgin birth, coming again.”

He says, “when it comes to the gospel, we don’t really debate unless we’re intentionally trying to debate for fun, which I’ve done.” The most contentious issue is around the role of women in the church. He has a lot of “strong high-capacity female leaders” on staff that he promotes but that is where he gets the “most pushback”. Complementarian churches “inevitably bring it up” and not that he minds the question or debate, he says “to me, that’s not gospel.”



Recently Lane has engaged with some local United Church ministers who recognized Lane’s church as an Evangelical Protestant church that is growing and they wanted to talk. Initially, he was a little worried or reluctant thinking that may get a little awkward since “theologically we’re not in alignment on a lot of stuff.” Yet as he sat down in his office with two United Church ministers, he was reminded of what they do share in common, and he realized that “they love Jesus and they believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus.” He says, “like we were talking about the importance of the resurrection and what that means” and that he “was able to speak very transparently.” He even spoke candidly on why he thought the United Church was dwindling (liberal theology, being more inclusive, no real interest in church, older people are faithful no matter what) and the other ministers were “not repulsed. They were not mad.” They too recognized this as a problem in their denomination and they were trying to learn.

It was a humbling experience for an Evangelical Protestant pastor to sit down for conversation with United Church pastors.

Lane was “humbled in that conversation because I would have kind of almost written them off as like, do I really want to engage with this? Because theologically, I think they’ve gone way left on things, but I walked out there going, no, they love Jesus. They believe in the gospel. I think they’re completely wrong when it comes to sexuality and gender. But I can’t write them out of the kingdom. Well, it’s not for me to do anyways. But you know what I mean? We all do it. We wouldn’t say it, but we kind of do it.”

## **The cross-denominational conversation provoked humility and then repentance.**

Lane had to pray “Lord, forgive me. Your kingdom’s bigger than I think.” He is still strong in his convictions, but he says, “you know what, I can’t say that they’re not a part of the kingdom. I think it’s bigger than that.”

Second, besides mutual education and a community engagement prompt, connecting and collaborating with other local churches also displays the greater unity of the church. Maple Street Church hosts a joint worship service once a year that involves all the churches in town – over half a dozen – ranging from Catholic to non-denominational to United to Anglican. The pastoral leaders actually host each other and there is a real sense of collaboration and connection as not only the leaders lead together, but the congregations also mix. This is a tradition that has lasted over 40 years for this town.

Third, even more than a display of unity, Jim believes that churches working together does the important task of showing the diversity of churches which he believes is a strength for the church. He does not see the different denominations as disunity but views it like the various gates that were a part of the city wall in Nehemiah. He emphasizes that our mission is “to focus on the way we’re doing things the way we believe we’re called to do things for our gate” but not to see other churches who function differently as against us. We are on the “same team” but we have “different gates.” Using his own church as an example, he says people come to that church who may not ever visit another church, but other churches are reaching people who would never come to their church. All the churches together are on the same team, building the same wall, but working on different gates. That is how he views unity with other Christian churches in his city. He wants to “stay in my lane with the gate that we have” and doesn’t want other churches to become like theirs or for his church to feel like they need to become like the other churches. To become all the same would “weaken us”. He believes that the range of churches is helpful in that they reach a range of people.

**It is important to know what the church is doing, why they are doing it, and to believe that this is what God is calling them to for this time and place.**

When I asked him why it is important to cross denominational lines, Lane referred to the kingdom of God as not being about one denomination or one church. Just as Jim said, his church is not going to reach everybody in his city so it’s important to have a variety of churches. It is also easy to “get stuck”.

Fourth, working together allows for a larger and more effective collective effort. An Evangelical Protestant church on the prairies has a tradition of working with other churches, which Ben says that he “sees no other option.” At the end of the interview when I asked if there was anything that I did not ask that he would like to tell me, he said yes and proceeded to talk about connecting with other churches. The church has “a lifelong commitment to partnering and engaging with other like-minded churches in the community,” saying this is something that he inherited from his predecessors. “Like-minded” is defined broadly and extends to those who do not have similar Evangelical Protestant theological convictions (such as “the mainliners and the Catholics.”) He even says this is what has kept his church “respected as well” over the years. The commitment to partnering with other churches is for the sake of the community. He says that one church alone – “no matter how powerful or megachurch you think you are” - cannot bring the kingdom of God to his city. Instead – efforts have to be combined, and it has to be a “collective effort.”

Finally, there is some resistance from congregants that pastoral leaders experience. Discernment is needed to know when and which churches to collaborate with, but Ben says that the congregants have come to realize that he will not compromise – either on his conviction to collaborate or his theological convictions. Ben is committed to the local ministerial even when “a few naysayers” question his involvement as an Evangelical Protestant with the Catholics or the United Church. His response that working together as pastoral leaders is important. He has made a point to develop friendships with the other pastors, even saying that the “whole camaraderie thing of supporting one another” is important. They were “a lifeline” for each other during Covid and he says, “that’s what I think kept some of us sane.”



## Conclusion

Because this theme of ecumenism and collaboration arose organically throughout the interviews, it is important to recognize it as an important value and practice for Canadian pastoral leaders, especially for those leaders of exceptionally growing churches. Most of the churches exhibiting exceptional growth were interested in ecumenical collaboration while most of the churches exhibiting steady growth did not express that same interest. Maintaining strict denominational lines seem to play a secondary role while working together and appreciating one another across denominational lines seems more of a primary concern. We see this as pastoral leaders feel free to borrow from one another's traditions (style of worship, approach to prayer, etc). Although pastoral leaders hold strong theological convictions towards their own particular faith tradition, it does not prevent them from collaborating with other faith traditions as long as it is a Christocentric approach. Instead of a competitive spirit, there is a sense of togetherness and cooperation. Churches partner together as local ministerials – working for the sake of the community and working alongside the community. Ecumenism and collaboration are deemed important for the sake of the younger generations who are dealing with church hurt, for the sake of the community, and for the sake of other churches. Connecting and collaborating with other churches allows for mutual learning, is a display of unity, is a picture of the kingdom of God, encourages a collective effort, and is an avenue for mutual support. Pastoral leaders are not afraid of crossing denominational lines or feel tentative about connecting with a faith tradition that is slightly different. Throughout the interviews, there is a strong Christocentrism and an eagerness for the kingdom of God.





# Conclusions

In conclusion, if “greatness” is a matter of conscious choice and intention, as Collins argues, then we can identify empirically validated principles that will help set churches on a path towards numerical growth and vitality. Therefore, can Collins’ framework guide the Canadian church towards greater growth or “greatness”?

The research study found that alignment with Collins’ themes is generally indicative of “greatness.” The churches who were growing significantly and steadily as identified by the CRA data more consistently matched with Collins’ five themes (mission, leadership, team building, unique role, intentional habits and structures) than churches who were identified by the CRA data as fiscally stable. The pastoral leaders of both growing churches and stable churches generally tended to have a good understanding of mission and exhibited Level 5 leadership characteristics to varying degrees.

The divergence between the two groups of churches became more apparent as Collins’ next three themes were explored (First Who, the Hedgehog Concept, and the Flywheel). Knowing who they aspired to be and who they needed to bring on to help pursue the mission was not always easy or straight forward.

The disparity continued to increase as knowing one’s congregation and its particular role and purpose was explored. Growing churches seemed to have a clearer idea as to who they were and what they offered as compared to stable churches. Their self-awareness as a church tended to be higher.

The strongest contrast between the two groups of churches was evident in Collins’ final theme, the flywheel. Growing churches were more likely to be intentionally and slowly pursuing the mission with clear vision and explicit steps.

They seemed to know where they were going and how they were going to get there. It was a combination of intentionality, patience, and persistence. Stable churches often understood their mission but could not easily articulate how they were pursuing the mission.

Finally, as a whole, growing churches were more ecumenical and collaborative than stable churches. This was a surprise characteristic of growing churches that was not predicted by Collins’ framework but became apparent through the research project. All the churches who participated in the research study showed some signs of “greatness” in one or more areas identified by Collins. However, it seems that all five themes need to be present for significant numerical growth. It is also worthy to speculate that some churches may be on the trajectory of future growth as they continue to develop the other themes. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that there are churches who are not yet experiencing significant and sustained growth but may very well in the near future due to their increasingly alignment to Collins’ themes of “greatness.”

**One of the keys for churches who are interested in numerical growth may be to align themselves with each of Collins’ principles, while adopting an ecumenical and collaborative posture and developing self-awareness of themselves as pastoral leaders, as churches, and awareness of their communities.**

Adopting a culture of discipline and intention regarding Collins’ themes, ecumenism and collaboration, and self-awareness may lead to “greatness,” or numerical growth.

According to Collins, the questions for pastoral leaders to ask themselves can be reduced to these three:

1. **Am I humble and collaborative leader?**
2. **What is the purpose of our church in this community?**
3. **What are the specific steps we're intentionally taking to achieve that purpose?**

It is also imperative to note that there are other influential factors for a church's numerical growth that were not addressed in the study. For instance, the church's own story and history within the community seems like an important factor when it comes to the church's growth. One leader specifically mentioned the history of conflict and others alluded to difficult times, such as division, sexual scandal, and broken relationships. There were a number of pastoral leaders who were relatively new to their positions and perhaps their responses might be different within a year or two. Knowing more about the previous leaders might also shed some light in terms of growth or stability.

With an overall appreciation for the research study, I would make three observations. First, Canadian pastoral leaders place a high value on the gospel. There is a centrality of the gospel that is seen across the faith traditions. Pastoral leaders view the gospel as what grounds them in their profession as individuals and what grounds their churches as organizations. This is seen in their personal sense of calling, their understanding of mission, their community engagement, and their approach to relationship with other churches. Growing churches, particularly, seem to embody a deeper and more generous understanding of the gospel that seems to guide their decision making and propels them beyond the walls of their church.

Second, throughout the study a vigorous approach to hospitality was a consistent theme. This was a sort of hospitality that went beyond niceties and a "friendly hello." Pastoral leaders talked about wanting to create conditions in which people could imagine themselves as an equal part in the church community, which signalled belonging. This hospitality invited others in with the desire to know them and to allow for them to contribute to the overall community. Pastoral leaders referred to authentic relationships, knowing each other beyond the surface level, and building strong communities of faith and love with an outward focus. Pastoral leaders desired and practiced a rich sense of hospitality within their congregational settings.

Third, knowing how to unpack and implement a mission statement seems to be the key to pursuing mission as a church. The pastoral leaders who were able to tie each ministry and program back to their core values as determined by their mission statement had an admirable clarity of direction and purpose. They possessed a strong sense of mission, an understanding of who their congregation was, knew their role in the community, and had thought out how to best move forward to become and do what they thought God desired for them. Small group gatherings, ministries, and community outreach all worked together in a beautiful way toward a common vision. Having a mission statement is important. Knowing your core values as a church is even more helpful. Then, working step by step towards the vision seems to be the key.

In conclusion, most churches have a generally clear idea of the mission of God, but the challenge is twofold: first, contextualizing the mission for a particular place and time and, second, intentionally developing structures

**Knowing how to unpack and implement a mission statement is the key to pursuing mission as a church**

within the organization that propel towards the mission. There is a patience and perseverance involved here while keeping one's attention and working steadily towards the purpose or mission of the church. The pastoral leaders interviewed demonstrated devotion to God and a desire to be obedient in terms of faithful service to their congregations and communities. Overall, there was a genuine interest in the larger body of Christ and an invested concern for the community.

One of the myths of church growth, as described by Warren, is that dedication alone will lead to church growth. One of the popular myths that we have accepted is that "if you'll just stay doctrinally pure, preach the Word, pray more, and be dedicated, then your church will explode with growth" (Warren, 1995, p. 56). Although it sounds simple and true and acknowledges God as part of the process, it is not always true. Like Warren says, it leaves pastors feeling ashamed, guilty, and frustrated because they want the right things, and they are working hard – but they are not experiencing numerical growth. Dedication is good. But it is not enough.

This research project allowed me the opportunity to speak to many Christian pastors across Canada who are devoted to God, love their congregations, and very much desire to have a missional impact on their communities. These are good pastors who work hard and care deeply. Therefore, this study is meant to encourage and to provide some practical, concrete ideas for dedicated pastoral leaders to implement in their own contexts – with the aim that more and more people will come to know and love Jesus Christ.

### Further Wonderings

At the conclusion of a research study like this, awareness of further areas of research become apparent. The following questions and themes deserve more time and energy:

### Change Points

Change points are an interesting event to investigate more closely and these points invoke many further questions. A change point represents an interesting time in a church's history in that it indicates the specific point in which the church begins to experience significant and sustained growth. For this research project, most of the pastoral leaders were not present at the church during the time of the change point. Some leaders could directly recall the change point and could quickly determine the reason behind the change point. Others, however, were either unaware of the change point or unsure as to the reason behind it. Each of these change points could be further investigated to gain more insight into the pastoral leader (and lay leaders) at the time in terms of their personality, leadership style, philosophy of ministry, and guiding ministry principles.

Knowing a church's history, key influences, and turning points helps make sense of growth patterns. Understanding the local and cultural influences that have impacted the church is also helpful. Events like a local disaster or church scandal are not isolated events and often have far-reaching effects. For further reading, please see *The Stories Congregations Tell: Flourishing in the Face of Transition and Change*, edited by Joel Thiessen, Arch Chee Keen Wong, and Mark D. Chapman, which is a recently published book that features the stories of seven Canadian congregations, highlighting the importance of understanding one's congregational story in terms of flourishing.

James F. Hopewell encourages pastoral leaders towards a deep understanding of their congregations through storytelling. In his words, "many churches fail to tell their story," and as a result, they are "paralyzed in prosaic self-description that follows depressingly predictable lines" (Hopewell, 1987, p. 140).

We tend to tell our congregational story through a list of past pastoral leaders, the history of the building and renovations, or by “counting money, membership, and programs” (Hopewell, 1987, p. 140). He argues that telling the story of a congregation helps to develop the identity and mission of the church. Rather than the story of a few individuals (often the pastoral leaders), storytelling proclaims the corporate nature of the congregation. Story also weaves events and people together in a sort of “living fabric” (Hopewell, 1987, p. 149). As Hopewell says, “narrative particularizes the congregation by displaying in mood and incident the unique ethos of the individual parish” (Hopewell, 1987, p. 149). If a church knows their story, the change points become evident and make sense within the overall story of the church which includes an understanding of their missional presence and activity in their local context.

The relationship between “health” and “growth” is also an area to consider. What is the connection, if any, between numerical growth and spiritual and organizational health? Are all healthy churches growing? Are all growing churches healthy? Is there a pace of growth that is optimal? Are there considerations to be made regarding numerical growth due to geographical location or specificity of mission?

While there are many questions around change points, this is indeed an interesting point for further research. There is not enough data to make too many substantive claims, but the data does indicate that pastoral leaders and social structure shifts are two important factors that contribute to change points.

### **Profile of a “Great” Pastor**

Although the data collected around Level 5 Leadership especially gives a somewhat clear picture of healthy leadership, we would benefit from learning more about what it means to be a

“great” pastor. While this study primarily looked at relationships, leadership style, and priorities from the pastoral leader’s point of view, it would be advantageous to explore what a “great” pastor looks like from a staff or lay leader’s perspective. What do congregants notice and appreciate about “great” pastors? If preaching plays a dominant role in congregational spiritual formation, then pastors as effective communicators are crucial. But what are the other things that may spiritually form congregations? Although the information gathered from the leader’s point of view is important and helpful, we are missing other key conversation partners.

If we could develop a profile of a “great” pastor that was not focused on personality or charisma but instead gave us leadership principles that were applicable in almost any setting (city/rural, mega church/micro church, across denominations, and more), that would be helpful for Bible schools and seminaries. This information would also be helpful to churches as they are hiring new pastoral leaders.

### **Practices of a “Great” Church**

The practices of a “great” church would provoke much interest and discussion among church researchers and pastoral leaders. A few questions from the research study explored this topic and prompts much wondering. What do “great” churches do on a daily or weekly or monthly schedule? How often do they meet? How do they meet? And what do they do when they’re together?

I wonder about spiritual practices – how do they nurture these Christian practices that both ground and move us forward? What roles do prayer and Sabbath keeping and Scripture reading play? What about evangelism? What is the best approach when it comes to sharing the gospel for the Canadian context in 2025? One of the significant challenges voiced by pastoral leaders in the study was that congregants are

not theologically or practically equipped. Although preaching and modelling are named as the primary ways to equip people, are they effective methods? Are there better ways to be doing this?

Practices often depend on some sort of structure. Therefore, church organizational structure is important. Remember the story of a pastor in the research study who changed the way they ran council meetings and the effect that this was slowly having on the congregation? Remember the story of a pastor who changed the organization chart, and it resulted in more unity and less conflict? How we do things matter as much as what we do as a church. It would be interesting – and inspiring – to collect “best practices” for Canadian churches and to see how pastoral leaders adapt these practices for their own contexts. It would look different for a church in downtown Montreal compared to a church in small town Saskatchewan, but there would be practical ideas there that could then be adapted to one’s own particular church.

### **Knowing Your Story**

Self-awareness was a consistent theme throughout Level 5 Leadership, for pastoral leaders as well as knowing one’s congregation and community. As a leader, self-knowledge assists in your ability to walk with people and to be present with people. This is a key part of being a pastoral leader. Establishing connection and relationship with your congregation is part of building community and helps with collaborative decision making. But this self-awareness extends beyond the individual to the church as an organization. It seems as though knowing your church’s story and place in the community helps with understanding and contextualizing mission. Though the mission statement may have been drafted years ago and has been useful in the past, it only continues to be useful if leaders are able to reimagine its

manifestations as time goes on. Being familiar with significant events in your church’s history, like change points, seemed to give some pastoral leaders an understanding of where they have been and where they are going. Some of the pastoral leaders were new to their positions so perhaps that explains some of the lack of awareness about the church’s history. Some pastoral leaders seemed to have a keen understanding of their past as a church (both positive and negative) and knew what needed to be repaired and what needed to be maintained. Then, finally, awareness of your place in the community as a church body seemed important for churches who had a clear understanding of their mission for this time. They were aware of what their community needed and the current issues that people were facing. They then were able to respond with concrete appropriate action. Therefore, knowing your story as a pastoral leader and as a church within a particular community seems helpful for pastoral care and community engagement.

### **Relationships between Pastoral Leaders and Lay Leaders**

One of the interesting parts of this research study was having nine pastoral leaders and nine lay leaders together on the interview. Six pairs of leaders came from growing churches and three pairs came from stable churches. These relationships seemed very supportive and good rapport was observed between the pastoral leaders and lay leaders. There was mutual respect and appreciation for one another that was both implicit and explicit. It was very encouraging and made me wonder what has been done by both sides to nurture such seemingly healthy relationships. I also wonder how this impacts the church as a whole. It prompts a variety of questions around sense of ownership, decision making, vision casting, and resolving conflict, for instance. There is more that could be explored here in a further study.



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## Endnotes

- [i] The framework for this project comes from the bestseller *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't* by Jim Collins (2001). He offers insights on why some companies thrive while others do not. Later in a second book, Collins (2005) adjust the principles of “greatness” for the social sector. See Section 3.
- [ii] For example, churches in rural areas where depopulation is occurring, find it difficult to grow numerically. Also, Thiessen et al. found that pastoral leaders tend to attribute church growth to internal factors and church decline to outside factors (Thiessen et al, 2019).
- [iii] Collins explains further that “We debated whether we should use additional selection criteria beyond cumulative stock returns, such as impact on society and employee welfare. We eventually decided to limit our selection to the good-to-great pattern, as we could not conceive of any legitimate and consistent method for selecting on these other variables without introducing our own biases.”
- [iv] The Canada Revenue Agency or CRA is a Canadian government agency that collects data from all registered charities including their annual tax-receipted giving.
- [v] ArcGISPro. “How Change Point Detection Works.” <https://pro.arcgis.com/en/pro-app/latest/tool-reference/space-time-pattern-mining/how-change-point-detection-works.htm#:~:text=Types%20of%20change%20points,-Four%20types%20of&text=Mean%20shift—Detects%20shifts%20in,value%20at%20each%20change%20point>. (A geographical information system that handles and analyzes geographical information by visualizing statistics.) A change point “identifies time steps when some statistical property of the time series changes.”
- [vi] It is  $r^2$  which is a way of measuring consistency, rather than a more chaotic growth pattern. – Scott/Steve can edit this definition.
- [vii] See Section 1.7 for further explanation.
- [viii] This is further discussed in 1.7 Exploring “Greatness and 1.8 Change Points.
- [ix] On September 11, 2001, when New York City’s World Trade Center was the target of terrorist attacks, the Cleveland Orchestra members simply put down their instruments and stopped rehearsal for the day. They wondered if they should cancel the concert scheduled for the next day, as many other public events were being cancelled. However, the chief executive and the music director decided that people “needed the orchestra to do the one thing it does supremely well: play the most powerful orchestral music ever created by the human race.” As a result, they went ahead with “Mahler’s Fifth”, a powerful piece that begins like a funeral march and ends in a celebration of birth and renewal. Collins says what mattered is “that the orchestra remained true to its core values” and “doing for the people of Cleveland only what it could do, better than any other organization in the world.”
- [x] As mentioned in Section 2, all names of individuals and churches are pseudonyms.

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# About This Study

*"Greatness" in Canadian Congregations* is part of a larger research project titled *The Divine Pulse Project: Exploring Life, Death, and the Pursuit of "Greatness" in Contemporary Canadian Churches* which explores various facets of church life in Canada, with a focus on empirical analysis and the application of modern research methodologies. The studies encompass several key aspects of church growth and decline, factors contributing to congregational survival, and the dynamics of establishing new congregations. The research also delves into the utilization of big-data and AI for identifying major trends and typologies within Canadian churches. A common thread running through these studies is the exploration of the multifaceted nature of congregations, their evolution over time, and the impact of empirical research on understanding these dynamics. This project collectively contributes to a more robust understanding of the Canadian church landscape, providing valuable insights for both academic discourse and practical applications.

## Methodology

*"Greatness" in Canadian Congregations* is a qualitative research study exploring church growth through the lens of Jim Collins' *"Good to Great"* principles as outlined in his bestselling book. A total of 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted with pastoral leaders across Canada, across community sizes, and across Christian faith traditions to learn what it means to be a "great" church in Canada.

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**About the  
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The Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research, an initiative of Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto, is committed to supporting those who serve in and research the Canadian Church through data-informed research, tools, encounters, and insights.