

Volunteering, Giving, and Participating in the Canadian Church

Initial Findings from the Regional Engagement Atlas
of Churches (REACH) Project



The Regional Engagement Atlas of Churches (REACH) project is a congregational survey measuring volunteering, giving, and participating in Canadian churches; it also explores their impact on the local community.

Preamble

A recent round of the Statistics Canada Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (SGVP) found that Canadian volunteers are on the decline, and fewer Canadians today are donating to charitable causes than in previous decades. However, Christians who attended a place of worship once a week were found to volunteer more and gave more than any other religion [1].

Alongside those who contribute financially to their church's programs through recurrent donations and other monetary gifts, church volunteers are depicted across the literature as high-value assets to a congregation [2]. Whether volunteering for church programming and events or for outside community organizations or projects, volunteers are known in much of the scholarly and practical church literature to be crucial in forming a healthy and thriving church that meets its organizational and outreach goals [3]. Volunteers themselves are also found to benefit from church-based volunteer programs in several ways, including but not limited to the deepening (or strengthening) of one's faith, feelings of satisfaction and purpose, and skill development [4].

While several studies have previously explored the demographic characteristics of volunteers in churches and their motivations, they have yet to quantify and analyze the social and economic capital produced by and benefitting Christian volunteers across Canadian geographies. By analyzing volunteer impact by social and economic capital, churches can begin to target underserved groups, organizations, and causes in their communities. This not only increases their overall community impact and reach, but can be used to enhance their own volunteer programs. The findings from this study will also help church leaders better understand the motives and behaviours driving volunteering, giving, and participating in their congregations.

This preliminary report was developed by researchers at the Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research (CIECR) out of Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto. The Regional Engagement Atlas of Churches (REACH) project is a new initiative exploring volunteerism, giving, and participating in the Canadian Church and local communities (ciecr.wycliffecollege.ca/reach).



Wycliffe College

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research

August 2026

Current State of Knowledge

Who volunteers at church, and for what?

Demographically speaking, volunteers in churches tend to be married, older, and more highly educated. Females are also more likely to volunteer than males. Those who are currently employed or retired also volunteer more often than those who are unemployed or students. Groups of volunteers also scored higher on all measures of religiosity than non-volunteers. Church members who are more active in their congregations are more likely to also participate in volunteering, as well as those who have been a part of their congregation for longer. Religious socialization during childhood may also influence an individual to volunteer for certain causes, but this can be conversely understood as an individual being conditioned into having restricted freedoms due to the authoritarian nature of some religions [5].

Denominational differences

Among Mainline Protestant denominations in Canada, volunteers are far more likely to engage with social activism and community development organizations (shelters for refugees, pregnant teenagers, etc.) when compared to Evangelical Protestants, who are generally more concerned with proselytization and other in-group activities. This could be due to religious inclusiveness, to which liberal mainline Protestantism is connected, which has been linked to the promotion of both religious and secular volunteering—and conversely, the exclusivity of (typically more conservative) Evangelicalism [6].

Volunteer motives

Whether volunteering for the 'in-group' or an 'out-group,' several factors influence whether someone chooses to volunteer. These may include positive associations, obedience/servitude to God, benevolence, a desire to gain skills, networks, and connections, and having previously benefitted from the cause. Several mental health and physical health outcomes are also linked to volunteering, as well as a host of human flourishing measures. Other personal factors, such as ethnicity, immigration status, divorce, loss of employment, and financial strain can also affect a volunteer's ability to make a long-term commitment to the cause, religious or secular [7].

Volunteer motives can also be broken down into two categories: *obligation* (wanting to obey God) and *purpose* (feeling called to serve). These motives may shift over time, and are also connected to churchgoers' relationships with family members and friends who engage or previously engaged in specific activities. Self-determination theory (SDT) also may influence volunteerism trends, as well as a volunteer program's "intentionality" in promoting long-term engagement, commitment to projects, and internalization of the Christian mission. Volunteers also often feel empowered throughout the life cycle of a volunteer position, which eventually leads to further positive associations with the activity, and results in ever-increasing involvement or entrenchment [8].

Methodology

The project is carried out using the Volunteer Impact Survey.
This survey can be broken down into the following key sections:

Church and Work
Information

Geographic
Mobility

Financial
Giving

Volunteering
Outside of Church

Community
Impacts

Human
Flourishing

Demographic
Information

Religious
Habits

Community
Perspectives

Volunteering at
Church

Volunteer Culture and
Excellence at Church

This initial report of findings
engages with some of these
topics.

Methodology

The Volunteer Impact Survey

This initial report is based on results from the Volunteer Impact Survey under the Regional Engagement Atlas of Churches (REACH) project.

The Volunteer Impact Survey collects data on Canadian churches and documents how church members impact their community socially, physically, and spiritually through congregational volunteering, giving, and more. As part of this project, churches receive reports on their congregation's social and financial impact on the church and local community.

Sample sizes

Churches participating in the REACH project and the Volunteer Impact Survey aim to reach a 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error when completing their surveys based on the size of their congregation.

For this report, we summed the responses of four church congregations who have completed the survey. Our sample size for the analysis presented here is **342**. This sample represents data collected from November 2025 to August 2026.

A note on estimates

Estimates throughout this report were calculated using the ratio of survey responses received against the estimated size of the congregation(s). Estimates may not reflect true counts or distributions, but provide an idea of what the congregation's experience(s) may be.

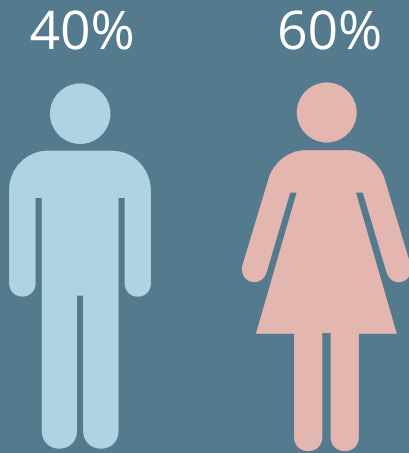
Human research ethics

The Regional Engagement Atlas of Churches (REACH) project has passed ethics clearance for research with human participants.

The ethics committee at the Human Research Ethics Unit (ethics.review@utoronto.ca, 416-946-3273) can be contacted with any questions. Protocol #: 00049371. All data in this report have been reported by participants who provided their consent to participate in this survey.

Demographic Findings

Age and gender



Gender	Median age	Average age
F	46	48.1
M	48	49.8

Marital status

Single 29.6%	Married 58.4%	Common Law 0.88%
Widowed 2.7%	Divorced 7.1%	Separated 1.33%

Employment status

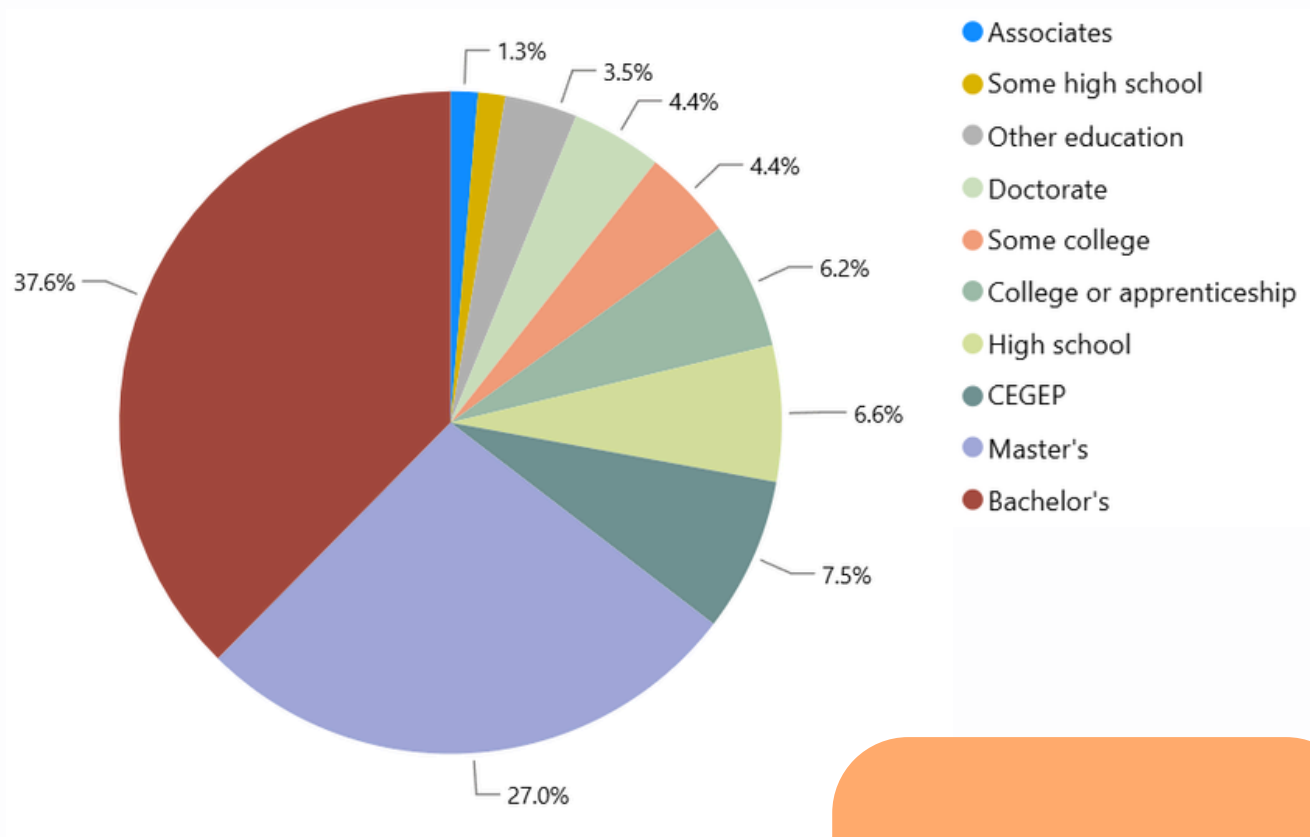
Full-time 56%	Self-employed 0%
Part-time 7%	Student 8%
Unemployed 2%	Retired 21%
Stay-at-home parent 1.5%	
Unable to work or on disability 1.5%	
Other 3%	

Unsurprisingly, married women are the most likely to volunteer and fill out the survey, but the average age among men and women remains similar. The average age being in the mid to late 40s also tracks with previous findings on volunteerism in churches.

The majority of individuals are employed full-time, or are retired, which again aligns with findings.

Demographic Findings

Highest education level achieved



Ethnic and cultural origins

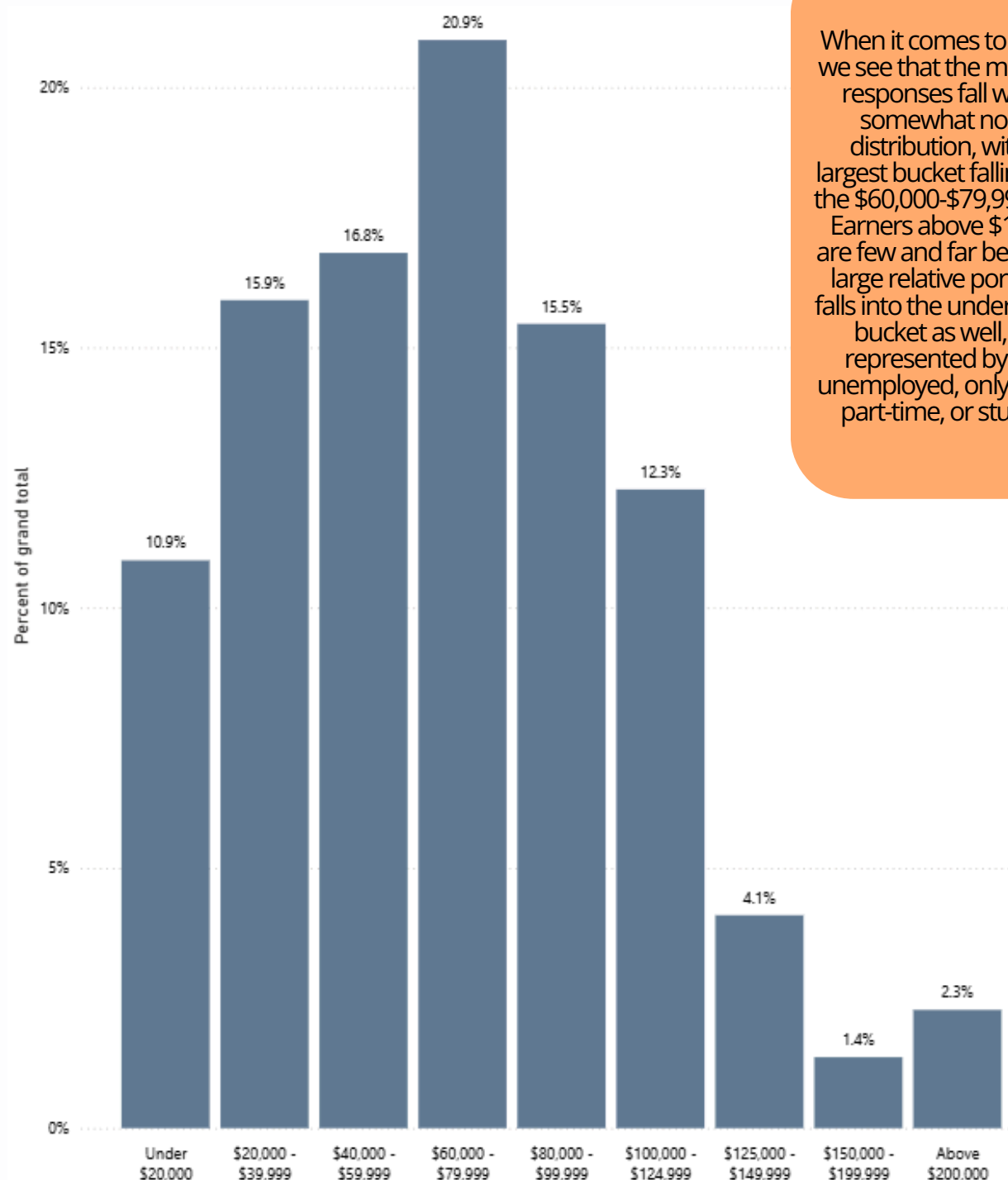
White or European	42.13%
Black or African American	33.19%
Hispanic or Latino	6.38%
Middle Eastern or North African	1.28%
Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit)	0.85%
South Asian	3.4%
East Asian	8.94%
Other ethnicities	3.83%

The majority of individuals in this study held Bachelor's or Master's degrees. This tracks with findings on higher educated individuals being able to give more of their time towards volunteering.

The majority of individuals who filled out this survey identified with White or European ancestry, followed by Black or African American ancestry.

Demographic Findings

Gross annual income bracket



When it comes to income, we see that the majority of responses fall within a somewhat normal distribution, with the largest bucket falling within the \$60,000-\$79,999 range. Earners above \$125,000 are few and far between. A large relative portion still falls into the under \$20,000 bucket as well, likely represented by those unemployed, only working part-time, or students.

Findings on Giving

Average annual giving per capita (\$CAD)

Receiving Charity Category	Average*	Total share
Local (Home) Church	\$2,519	67.33%
Other Churches/Congregations	\$76	3.74%
Canadian Christian Charities/Missions	\$470	15.78%
International Christian Charities/Missions	\$189	7.17%
Canadian Secular Charities/Organizations	\$123	5.25%
International Secular Charities/Organizations	\$21	0.73%

*The average in this case is a 95% trimmed mean

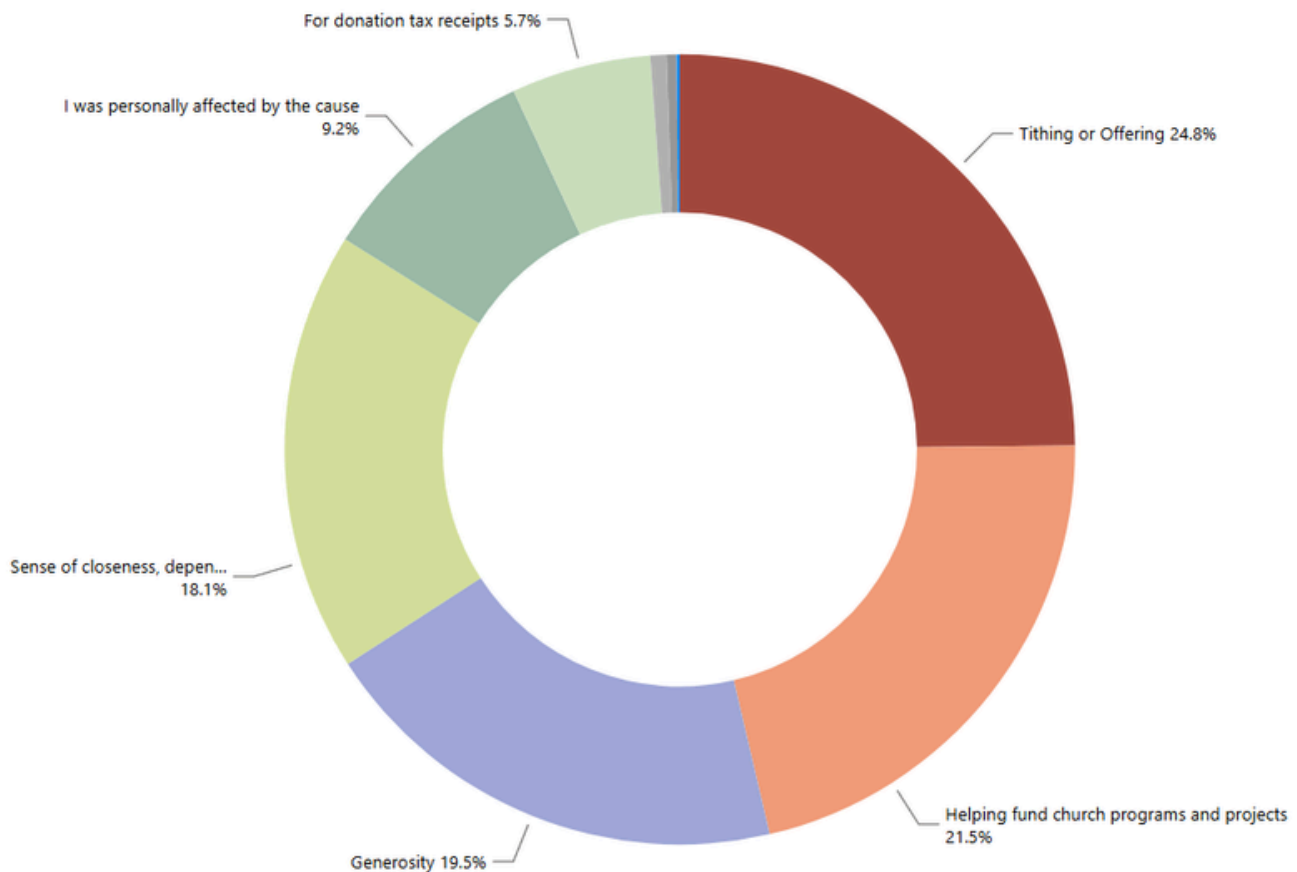
Giving to the local church consistently remains the highest category when we break down giving into groups. At 67.33% of the total share, giving to the local (or home) church makes up the vast majority of people's financial giving. Personal and religious loyalties to one's local body of believers clearly wins in the financial giving category.

Interestingly, both Canadian Christian and secular charities reported higher rates of giving than their international or foreign counterparts, showing a possible bias for Canadian charities, regardless of whether or not they belong to the same religious tradition.

Also surprising was the low level of giving to other churches or congregations in the local neighbourhood. It appears that people are less willing to give to local churches apart from their own. This challenges our understanding of the interconnected church ecosystem that we believe exists, where churches collaborate with one another in many ways. Perhaps giving (from members of the congregation) should not be understood as 'involved' in the church "ecosystem."

Findings on Giving

Why do people give?

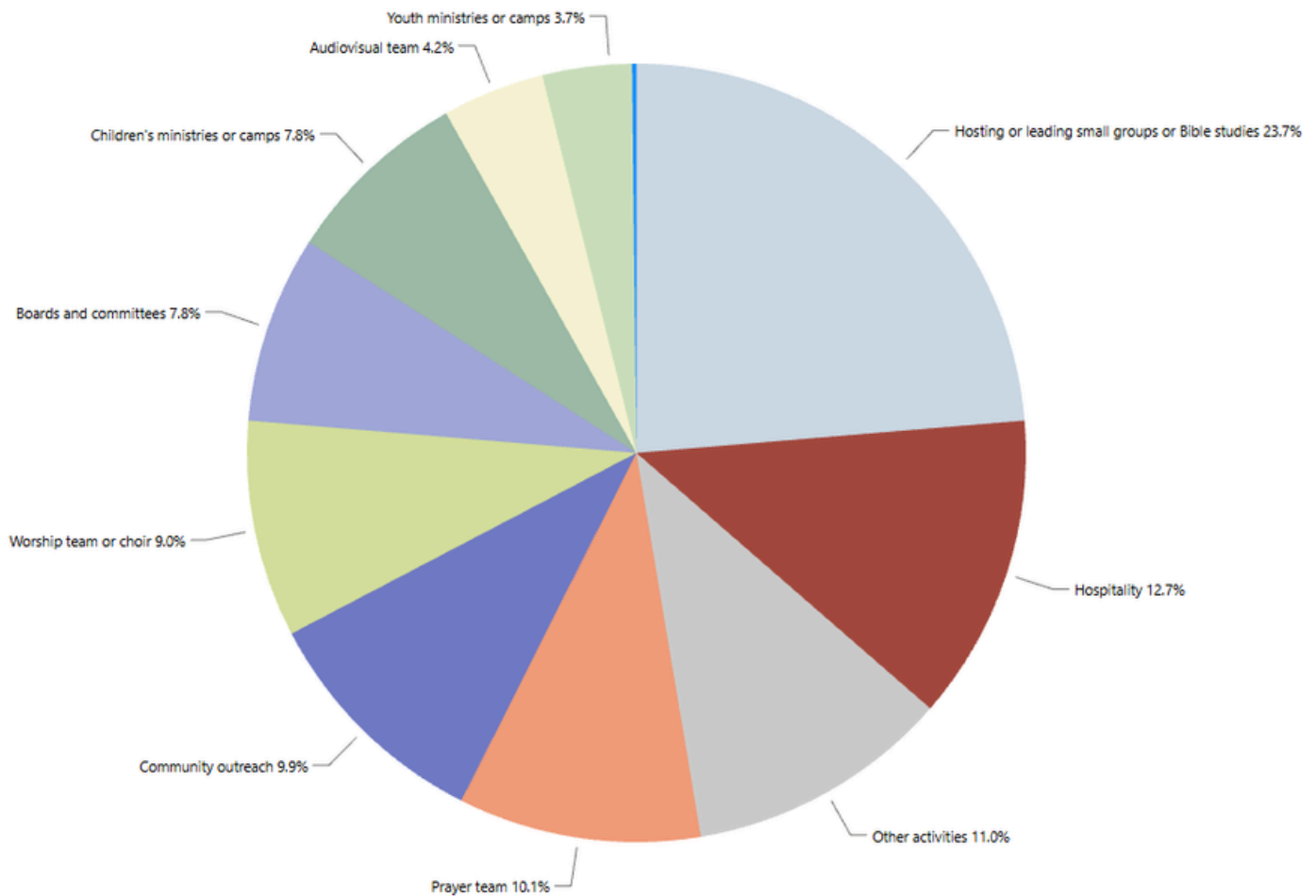


The reasons for giving to the local church are diverse. While the majority here give as a form of tithing or offering money to God, the following categories come close as second and third place reasons: Helping fund church programs and projects, out of a sense of generosity, and a sense of closeness or dependence on God. Fewer claimed that it was for charitable tax receipts, or for having been personally affected by the cause.

It appears through these responses, that spiritual or religious reasons for giving (tithes, offerings, closeness to God, etc.) trump reasons for personal gain or based on personal experiences.

Findings on Volunteering at Church

77% volunteer at church in some capacity. But where do people volunteer?



Other findings

Average annual church volunteer hours per person 141 hours

Percentage of respondents who volunteer at or for their church 77%

Where does volunteering happen?

Volunteer at church building itself 69.26%

Volunteer for their church from home 22.58%

Volunteer for their church elsewhere in the community 8.15%

Findings on Volunteering at Church

Why did people volunteer at church?

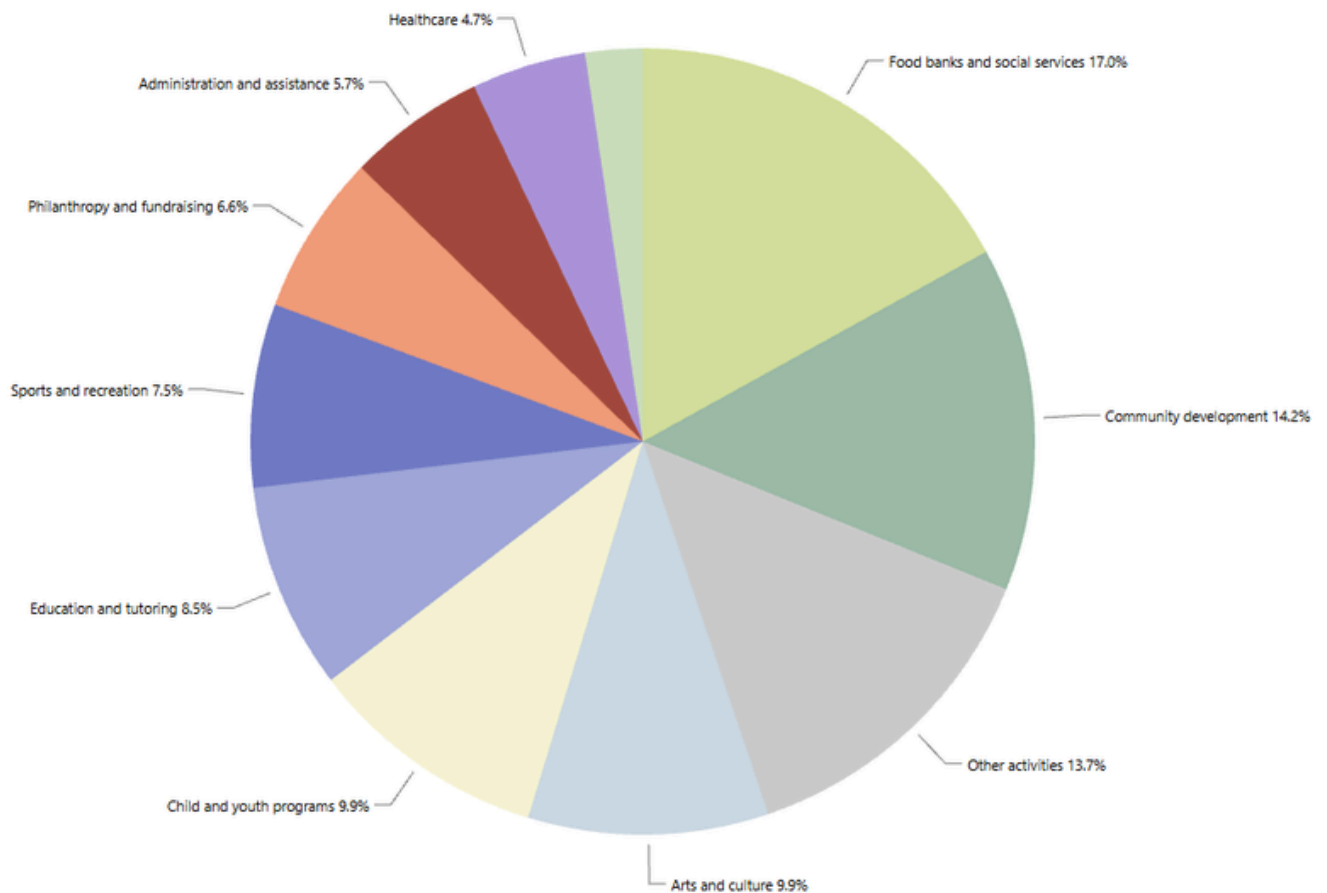
Reasons for volunteering	Share
To help others in the congregation	28.9%
Spiritual growth, closeness to God	25.2%
Personal enjoyment and fulfillment	19.4%
To feel appreciated	7.4%
Gain or improve skills and self-confidence	6.8%
Giving back for a specific cause	6.7%
Other reasons	remaining ~5%

Why didn't people volunteer at church?

Reasons for not volunteering	Share
No time to volunteer	24.4%
Prefer not to answer	17.1%
Unable to commit long-term	12.2%
Do not know how to get involved	9.8%
Health problems or am unable	9.8%
Nobody asked me to volunteer	9.8%
No opportunities to use my skills	4.9%
Dissatisfied with previous experience(s)	2.4%
Not interested in volunteering	2.4%
Other reasons	remaining ~7%

Findings on Volunteer Outside of Church

34% volunteer outside of church in some capacity. But where do people volunteer?



Other findings

Percentage of respondents who volunteer outside of church itself 34%

Average annual other volunteer hours per person 72 hours

Far fewer people (34% of respondents) are invested in volunteer activities apart from the ones taken on at church (77% of respondents). This is 44% less volunteer engagement.

The total amount of hours (72) are also less than those hours related to church (141). This is 51% less volunteer engagement.

Findings on Volunteer Outside of Church

Why did people volunteer outside of church?

Reasons for volunteering	Share
Helping others	20.36%
Getting involved in my community	18.04%
Personal enjoyment and fulfillment	15.98%
Paying it forward	13.14%
Giving back for a specific cause	10.05%
Skill development and career advancement	8.5%
Improved mental or physical health	5.93%
Evangelization	5.41%
Other reasons	remaining ~2.5%

Why didn't people volunteer outside of church?

Reasons for not volunteering	Share
No time to volunteer	27.31%
Gave enough time already volunteering	18.08%
Prefer not to answer	11.81%
Unable to commit long-term	11.81%
Do not know how to get involved	8.86%
Health problems or am unable	6.8%
Nobody asked me to volunteer	4.43%
Not interested in volunteering	4.43%
No opportunities to use my skills	2.95%
Dissatisfied with previous experience(s)	1.85%
Other reasons	remaining ~6%

Volunteering (Continued)

Volunteer burnout and appreciation at and outside of church

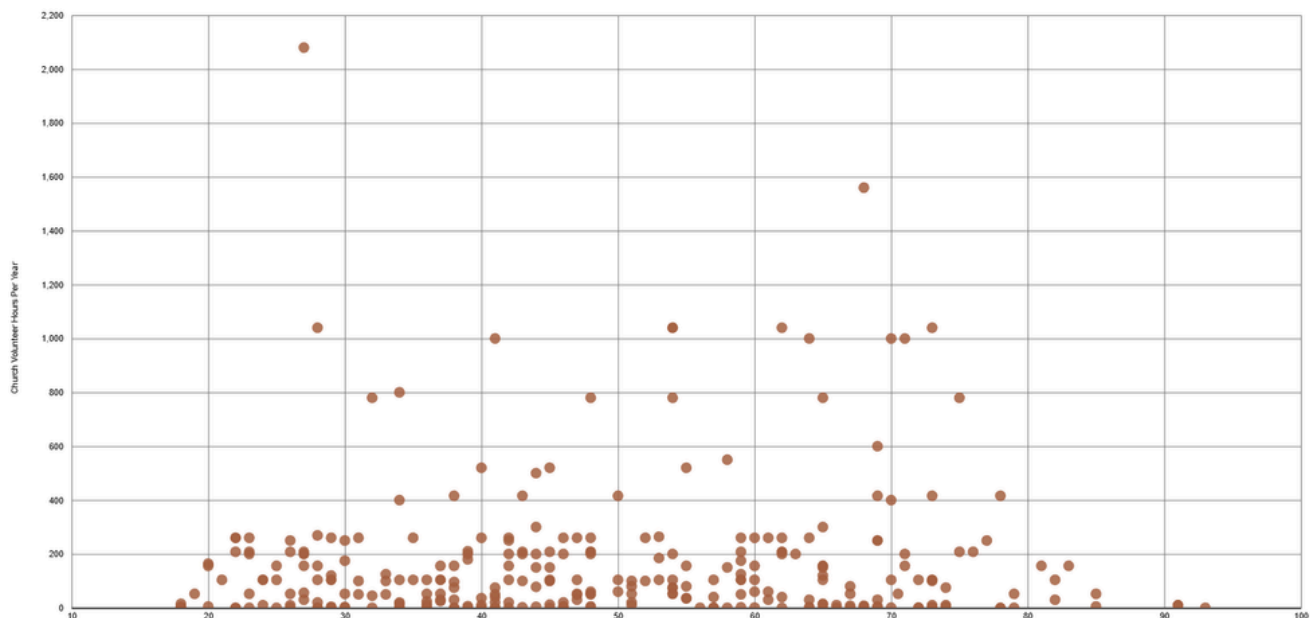
Statement (ranked 0-10)	Church activities	Other activities
Feel appreciated by the people they serve	8.15	7.78
Feel appreciated by leadership	8.41	7.28
Feel burnt out or overextended	2.72	2.72

The findings above are averages of responses where people were asked to rank how they felt on a scale of 0-10, where 0=Never and 10=All the time.

Across the board, people felt that their volunteer activities related to church (at church, for the church, etc.) were activities in which they felt more appreciated than within activities apart from or outside of the church. When it comes to burnout, people felt similarly about being overextended across both volunteer activity types.

The chart below demonstrates findings on age and the amount of volunteer hours contributed by year. The distribution demonstrates that the age of a person in a church congregation does not necessarily dictate a higher amount of hours they contribute to volunteering on a yearly basis. Rather, people across the entire age range (18-93) contribute along similar statistical patterns.

Church volunteer hours per year across the full age range (18-93)



Findings on Congregational Flourishing

Participants were asked to rank the following questions out of 10, where 0 = Strongly disagree and 10 = Strongly agree.

Congregational flourishing measures whether congregation members feel united by a shared mission, are actively being uplifted, supported, and satisfied by its leadership, and whether members trust one another. Interestingly, we found that trust and satisfaction were ranked the lowest, albeit still somewhat high on the scale of 0-10.

Everyone trusts each other [in our church].

7.1

The shared mission [of the church] is clear to everyone.

8.6

Everyone is satisfied with how things are [at our church].

7.2

There are structures and practices that allow us [the church] to accomplish our goals.

8.4

Leaders have the skills and understanding they need to lead the congregation well.

8.4

Findings on Human Flourishing

What is human flourishing?

Human flourishing is the measure of wellbeing across many angles. Although not explicitly related to religion, human flourishing has been tied to religiosity in several studies. We use the metric developed by Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program.*

Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days?

8.1

In general, how happy or unhappy do you usually feel?

7.9

In general, how would you rate your physical health?

7.7

In general, how would you rate your mental health?

8.0

Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?

8.5

I understand my purpose in life.

8.3

I always act to promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations.

8.3

I am always able to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later.

7.9

I am content with my friendships and relationships.

8.0

My relationships are as satisfying as I would want them to be.

7.5

How often do you worry about being able to meet normal monthly living expenses?

3.2

How often do you worry about safety, food, or housing?

2.6

*Our Flourishing Measure | The Human Flourishing Program. (n.d.). Retrieved July 30, 2025 from <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/measuring-flourishing>

Qualitative Findings

Question summaries*

The following examples of summaries explore how participants in the REACH project felt about their church's contribution towards advancing spiritual, material, and personal growth among the congregation and wider community.

Q: How has your church made an impact on the community spiritually and materially? (Example answer below)

Respondents indicate that their communities are deeply engaged in providing essential support through **food banks**, **school supply distributions**, and **Christmas gift baskets**, addressing both immediate needs and seasonal challenges. Many highlight the role of local churches in fostering unity and offering diverse programs such as **job fairs**, **youth camps**, and **family activities**, which contribute to social integration and emotional well-being. There is a strong emphasis on helping vulnerable groups, including **newcomers**, families in **poverty**, children of **incarcerated parents**, and the **homeless**, often through partnerships with other organizations. Emotional responses reflect **gratitude** and a sense of **transformation**, with volunteers expressing **fulfillment** in serving others and witnessing **positive community impact**. Programs like "Joyful Helpers" [pseudonym] and initiatives supporting education and employment stand out as key elements in these collective efforts.

Q: How has your church made an impact on your life? (Example answer below)

Respondents indicate that their church community plays a central role in fostering **spiritual growth**, deep **friendships**, and a strong **sense of belonging**. Many highlight the **inclusive**, **supportive**, and **nonjudgmental** nature of the community, which embraces diverse backgrounds and life stages. Programs such as mission work, outreach to children, and overnight camps are noted for their positive impact on faith and personal development. The church's **biblical preaching**, **pastoral care**, and opportunities for service are frequently praised for nurturing faith and encouraging intentional Christian living. **Emotional support** during life challenges, including illness and loss, is deeply valued, with respondents describing the church as a **loving**, home-like environment.

*These qualitative response summaries were created with the use of AI

Suggestions for the church

Question summaries*

The following examples of summaries explore how participants in the REACH project felt that their church could improve its approach towards advancing spiritual, material, and personal growth in the wider community.

Q: How can your church improve their spiritual, material, and personal impact on the greater community? (Example answer below)

Respondents indicate a strong desire for **deeper community engagement** that goes beyond basic aid, emphasizing **empowerment** and meaningful support, particularly for nearby First Nations communities. There is a clear focus on spiritual **growth**, **discipleship**, and **outreach**, with references to biblical motivation and a commitment to **evangelism**. Many appreciate the church's active presence and community orientation, while also suggesting enhancements such as more family activities, youth programs, and improved communication through newsletters. A welcoming, friendly atmosphere that fosters genuine relationships beyond formal church attendance is also highlighted as important. Overall, respondents value ongoing efforts and encourage continued support for both spiritual and practical needs.

Participants were also asked to rank the following statements on a scale of 0-10, where 0=Not at all effective and 10=Extremely effective. These were used to further evaluate and demonstrate areas of improvement.

How well does your church promote and uphold...	Ranking (0-10)
Clear and effective communication among volunteers and teams	7.7
Healthy leadership practices among volunteers	7.7
Volunteer training and mentorship opportunities	7.6
Volunteerism rewards and recognitions	7.4
Sense of belonging for volunteers	8.3
Organizational culture of excellence for volunteers	8.1
Spiritual mentorship opportunities	7.0
Sharing the Gospel, building relationships, and fostering spiritual growth for non-believers	8.1

*These qualitative response summaries were created with the use of AI

Next steps

As this project continues to unfold, we are confident that the data we collect will continue to unveil a fuller picture of the state of church giving and volunteering in churches across Canada. Our findings here generally align with the literature, particularly when it comes to demographic findings, but our investigation of human flourishing and congregational flourishing and our more in-depth lines of questioning show nuance where there previously was little information.

As more churches get involved with the REACH project by having their church participate in the Volunteer Impact Survey, we will continue to analyze these data and provide Church Impact Reports to help churches better understand their Volunteer DNA, community impact, and level of flourishing.



Comprehensive
demographics



Community
impacts



Congregational
flourishing

Get Involved

The team behind the REACH project continues to seek churches interested in participating in the Volunteer Impact Survey and receiving their own custom Church Impact Report. If you or your church could benefit from a deeper understanding of its people and wider impact, we would love to connect.

Please contact wycliffe.ciecr@utoronto.ca and include "REACH" in the subject line to get started.

Contact the Research Team

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