

# Survey of Ontario Churches of Christ Summer & Fall 2024

Dr. Nathan Pickard (Newmarket Church of Christ)  
Dr. Noel Walker (Tintern Church of Christ)  
Immanuel Velasco (President: Great Lakes Bible College)

Starting in 1981, the Gospel Herald Publication undertook the important task of surveying Churches of Christ in Canada. Under the leadership of Dr. Geoff Ellis this survey was last conducted in 2011. Much has happened within our movement since 2011, not to mention the COVID pandemic. One of the questions that I (Nathan) am frequently asked is, *“How are Churches of Christ doing in Ontario/Canada?”*

This 2024 survey, building upon the work Geoff Ellis and many others undertook, will focus on the Churches of Christ in Ontario. We hope to extend this survey in 2025 to the rest of Canada with the help of some other folks in other regions in Canada. This will hopefully bring some clarity to how we are currently doing as a movement. Are there reasons to be hopeful? Are there reasons for concern? Though we can never be sure of what the future may hold, we can discover some trends that will have an impact on our congregations. What is happening and what do Churches of Christ look like? What’s the big picture?

In April 2025, at the Training for Service event that will be held at Great Lakes Christian High School, we’ll provide some opportunity for discussion and dialogue about our findings.

This report will be divided up into three parts: Trends, Data, and New Realities. Under each of the three categories, we’ll raise some observations and provide some questions that we think need to be wrestled with. As individuals and congregations wrestle with this report, we believe additional questions will rise to the surface. Our hope is that together we’ll find a way to wrestle with these questions together.

### **Information About the Survey**

We couldn’t find previous surveys. Thankfully, however, the November 2011 Gospel Herald provided some key findings. Many of the questions we asked were based upon the reporting of what we read in the November 2011 issue of the Gospel Herald.

In 2024 the survey was sent to all churches listed in the Gospel Herald website for Ontario. It was also sent to Christian communities of faith with historical roots within Churches of Christ and still identify as Churches of Christ, even if their name does not say “Church of Christ.” In total, the survey was sent to 56 Churches of Christ. Of the 56 churches, we have discovered (or are led to strongly believe):

- 4 of the 56 churches no longer are in existence
- 1 church provided a partial response
- 41 churches answered in near entirety the survey questions to the best of their ability

# Trends

A trend is a general direction in which something is moving towards. What are the trends we are seeing as a result of this survey? The following chart and graph help give us a picture of some unfolding trends.

Comparison to Historical Data <sup>1</sup>						
Year	1966	1981	1991	2001	2011	2024
Average Membership		49.5	46.7	44.7	42.8	47.3
Number of Congregations	52	63	69	77	73	52
Number of Members (Projected)		3069	3536	3367	3127	2100

Chart 1

## Increasing Or Decreasing In Membership?

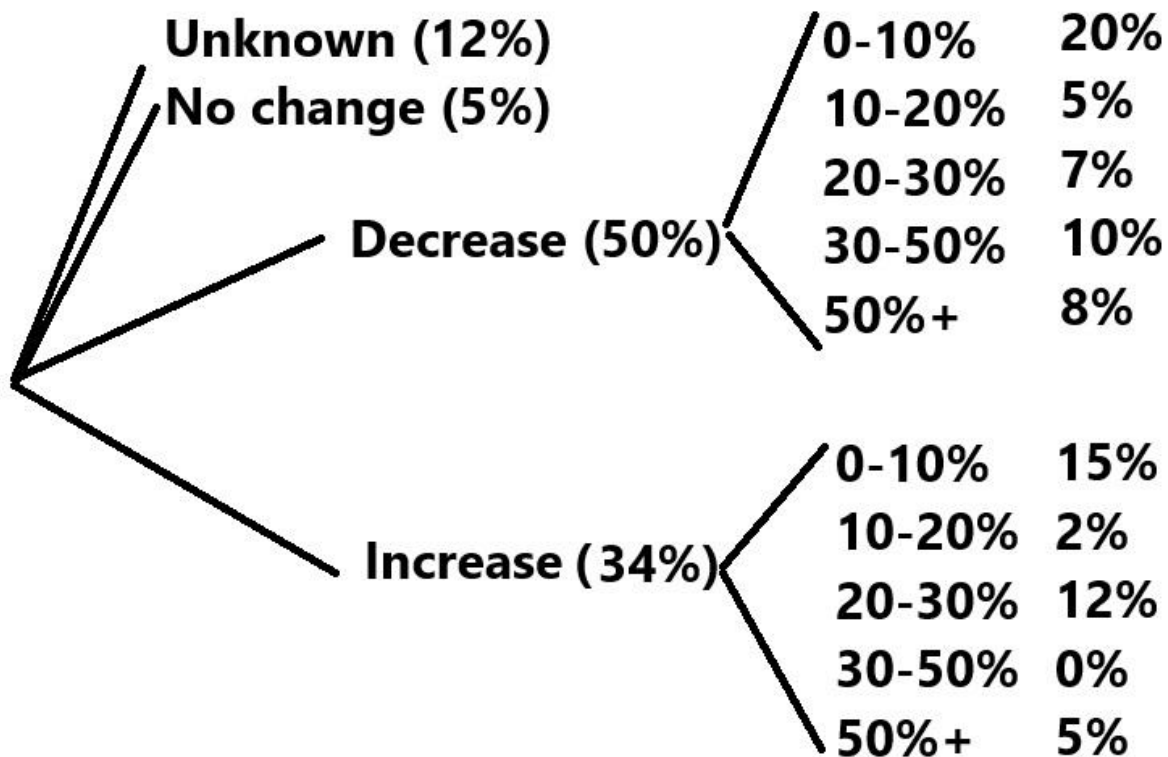


Chart 2

<sup>1</sup> Historical data was taken from *Gospel Herald Volume 76.11 (November), page 11.*

When the comparison of historical data is compared to the number of members, we see a downward trend. This trend, however, is not a slow descent, but instead has become a significant drop-off. Something has happened whereby the number of congregations has dropped by 34% and the number of projected members has also dropped by 33%. Within a span of thirteen years, a third of membership and congregations has disappeared.

Notice, however, that the average membership has increased slightly. As congregations close their doors, particularly in Southern Ontario, the remaining members become a part of neighbouring congregations thus increasing membership within specific congregations.

This combination of fewer congregations as well as a reduced total membership produces a paradox: the average congregation size in 2024 is 47.3 people, up 11% from 42.8 people in 2011 (Chart 1). We have chosen to continue to use the average membership in our graphs (in keeping with the four previous surveys) so that comparisons can be made, but an average can be a misleading measure of central tendency with data that is so widely distributed. A more helpful statistical measure of central tendency would be the median (the value in the middle of the distribution where half the churches are larger, and half the churches are smaller). In 2024 the median value is 36 members.

What does this ultimately mean? This statistical anomaly illustrates something significant about the distribution of believers within our fellowship which we will explore in the next section.

### **Questions We Want to Investigate**

Before we move into the data, first some questions that we want to raise.

1. What has happened in the last thirteen years whereby a third of congregations and membership is no longer able to be reflected in this survey?
2. Will the significant drop-off continue or will there be a leveling out?
3. Does the downward trend create anxiety for our movement or will the downward trend create opportunities for healthy dialogue and vision?
4. What are the factors for the downward trend? Is it aging congregations? Are there societal factors that are contributing to this downward trend?

The downward trend leads us to explore the data.

# Data

The following charts and graphs reveal much about the membership and congregations of Churches of Christ in Ontario. The first set of data concerns the age categories of the general membership. Out of the 41 churches that responded, the total membership equaled 1,998 reported members.

## Age Categories

The following information is derived from the reporting congregation that completed the questions of age categories.

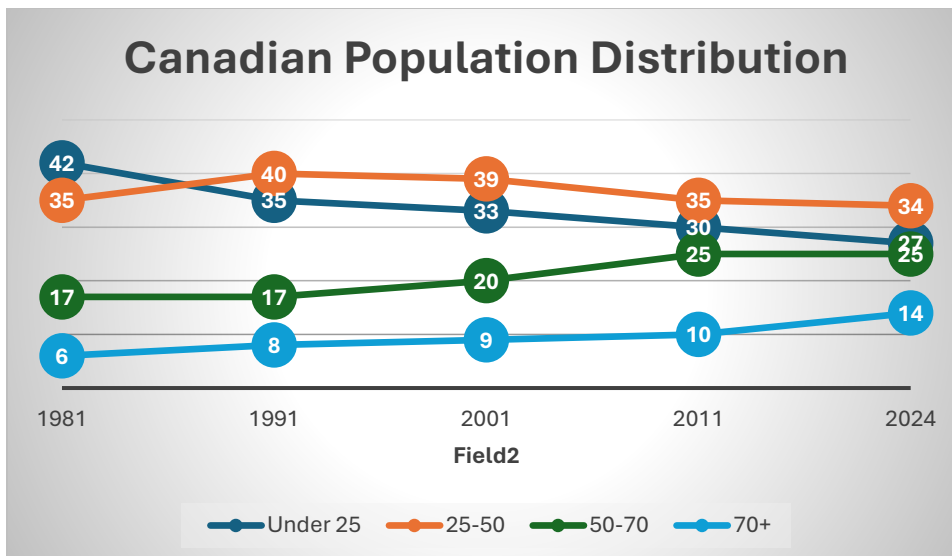
Males					Females				
Under 25	25-50	50-70	70-80	Above 80	Under 25	25-50	50-70	70-80	Above 80
157	258	266	112	75	149	291	316	143	122
8%	13%	14%	6%	4%	8%	15%	16%	7%	6%

**Chart 3**

General observations about this chart:

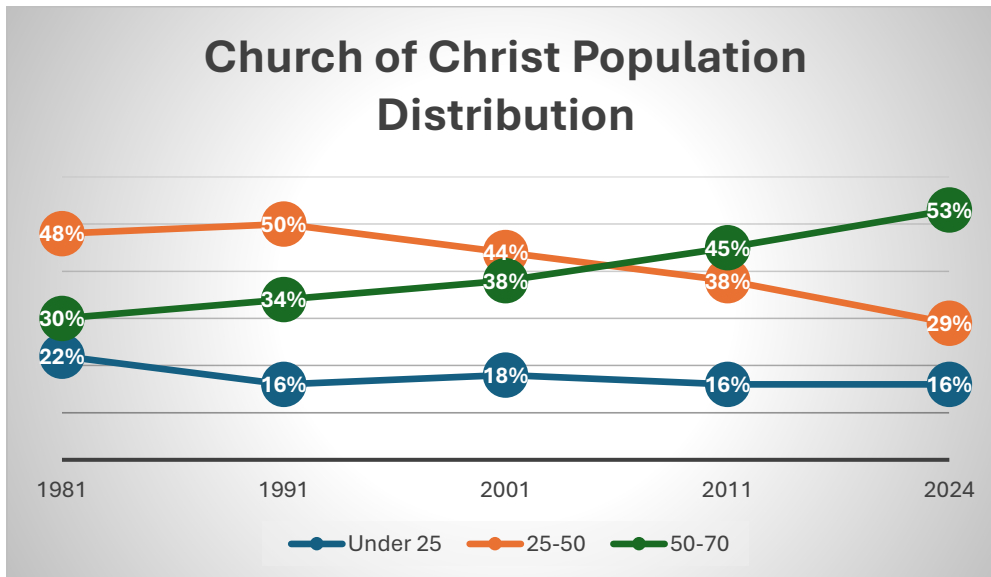
- Women make up 52% of our membership
- Men make up 48% of our membership
- 16% of our membership is under the age of 25
- 10% of our membership is above the age of 80
- 23% of our membership is above the age of 70

The aging of the Baby Boom Generation has had a significant impact on politics, culture and society and one can see the same impact being projected on the demographics of our congregations. When considered together, Charts 5 and 6 illustrate similar population trends over the past 40 years.



**Chart 4: Canadian Population Distribution**

Using data from Stats Canada<sup>2</sup> you can see a shifting bulge in relative percentages as the Baby Boom generation<sup>3</sup> passes from the Under 25 group in 1981, to the 25-50 group in 1991, and finally into the 50-70 group in 2011. The age ranges chosen by previous studies make it difficult to say anything more concrete<sup>4</sup> but the population trends in our fellowship follow a very similar pattern with one unique exception.



**Chart 5: Church of Christ Population Distribution Within Ontario**

The Baby Boom generation has passed through these three age ranges in a manner similar to the general Canadian population and now makes up more than half of our congregations in 2024. What is distinctly different is the relative size of the “Under 25” group. The good news in the bad news here is that the demographic that appears to be missing in many of our congregations today has not disappeared recently. It has been missing for a very long time. Children, Teens and Young adults have been under-represented for more than 40 years in Ontario Churches of Christ. In each year of Chart 5 they appear to be about 20% lower than the general population. This means there is not so much an exodus of young families plaguing our churches today. They have been under-represented for a long time.

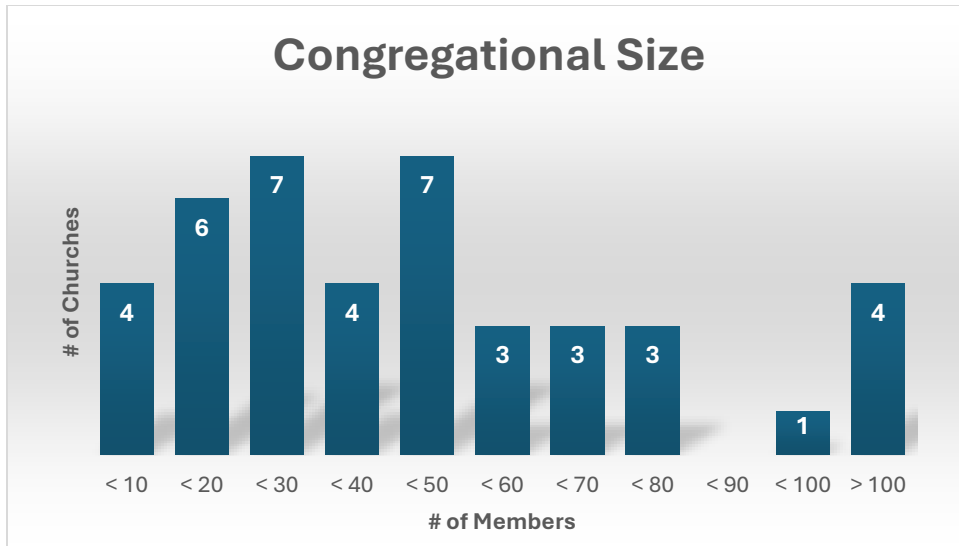
When looking at the data for each individual congregation and the breakdown of age categories within each reporting congregation, we have noticed the following two data points:

- 3 churches have more than 75% of their membership above the age of 70.
- 29 churches (70% of reporting congregations) have more than 50% of their membership above the age of 50

<sup>2</sup> StatsCanada data collected from <https://www.populationpyramid.net/canada/> on Sept 30, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of our analysis, we defined the “Baby Boom” generation those born between 1946 – 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Studies from 1981, 1991, 2001, and 2011 divided the population into three categories: “Under 25,” “25-50,” and “50+” This was a perfectly suitable way to divide the group in the 1980s but as the demographics in our fellowship shifted it would have been helpful to distinguish a group of “70+.” In 2024 we found 30% are between 50-70 while 23% are 70+.



**Chart 7**

When we graph our 2024 survey results, we see a “U shaped” bimodal distribution when we consider congregational size. What that means is, there remain a relatively large number of very small congregations, and a small number of relatively large congregations with fewer and fewer churches in the middle (Chart 7).

Fourteen (34%) of the congregations who responded to our survey report having fewer than 25 members each following the pandemic, while on the other extreme, the five largest congregations in Ontario report having 700 members total, which represents 35% of all the members in Ontario.

As the population of Canada has seen a significant increase in immigration over the past several years, are our congregations reflecting trends that mirror immigration. The question we asked in the survey was, *How many people within the congregation have immigrated to Canada since 2011?* The data reveals that 225 members (11%) have immigrated to Canada since 2011.

One of the interesting things that can be seen in our preliminary results is the place that recently arrived Canadians play in our congregations. Among the 41 congregations that responded to our survey, 14 congregations (34%) of various sizes reported receiving 4 or more immigrants to Canada since 2011. In each of these congregations, newly arrived Canadians represent more than 10% of the membership and in 10 of these congregations, newly arrived Canadians are responsible for the majority of that congregation’s growth in the last 13 years.

We are not, however, simply presenting immigrant communities as objects to be leveraged for congregational growth. Instead, we are suggesting that God may be at work in your community through the lives of recently arrived Canadians. Immigrants and Refugees (even more so) have unique needs. Many are struggling to learn English and are lonely, in need of a friend or an advocate. Some require help navigating the school system or the community resources that are available to them. Matthew 25 reminds us that Jesus is somehow actually present in your communities and in your neighbourhood among the marginalized. Our calling as disciples of Jesus is to find some ways in which we can serve, to the glory of God.

One practice we would suggest for your congregation however big or small it may be, is to meet sometime outside of worship and reflect on the question: Where are there needs in our community and how can we serve them? It often doesn't require money to be of help to a neighbour but instead it requires an act of hospitality or kindness. Each community is of course different but there are lots of opportunities, particularly in Southern Ontario to be of service to recently arrived Canadians in the name of Jesus.

Immigration can change the bleak outlook for some congregations. In some cases, the missionary work undertaken by our fellowship throughout North America is reviving the health and life of a few congregations. The fruit of their labour is now strengthening and maturing congregations here in Ontario.

### **Questions We Want to Investigate**

As we look at the data concerning the age categories of the congregation, what are some questions we want to ask?

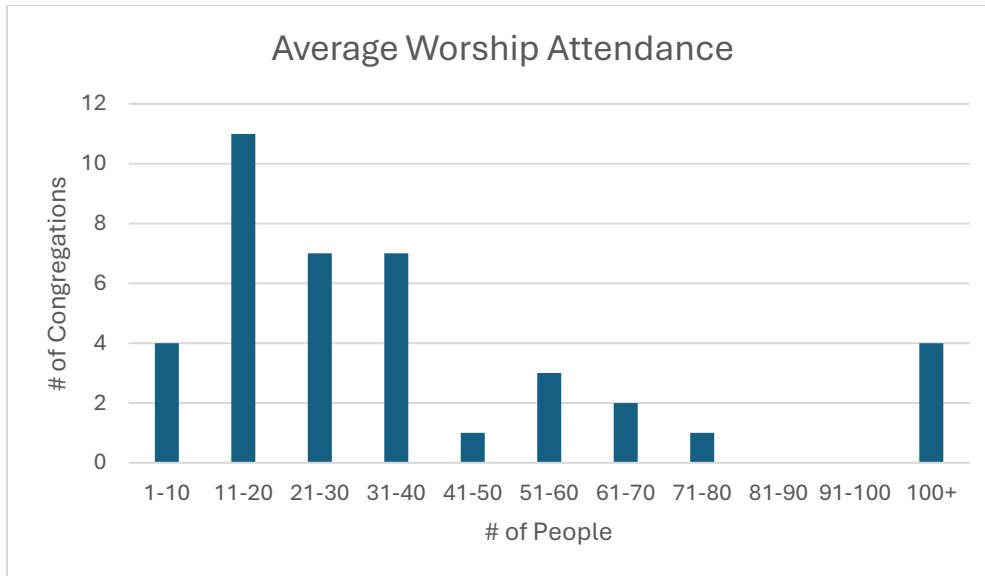
1. As immigration plays a role in the health of some congregations, what practices and conversations should congregations have that will facilitate the welcoming of new families from various ethnic backgrounds?
2. 44% of the report age categories are under the age of 50. What practices must the church embody to strengthen this younger generation so that this younger generation can continue to walk the way of Jesus?
3. Robert Dale in his book, *To Dream Again* helps us understand the lifecycle of churches. If the majority of congregations have matured and are on a path to death, how can we help each other dream again? How can we help each other discover God who has the power to breath life into our churches?
4. Does this data give us anxiety? What is hopeful about this data?

## **Worship**

What does the data say about the worshipping life of our congregations? We want to be careful with this. The health of our congregations is not determined by how many people participate in the weekly worship service. Other factors help determine the health of our congregations.

Of the forty congregations that reported average Sunday morning worship, the following data points emerge:





**Chart 8**

Who is attending and participating in the worshipping life of the congregation? Our suspicion has long been that Churches of Christ have been in numeric trouble. But our suspicion is that some congregations, though they seem small, have as part of their life “affiliate” members—individuals who are participating in the life of the congregation but not yet considered members? Might our worship include individuals who are not yet disciples of Jesus? For example, the Newmarket Church of Christ is an average congregation size, but when you look at its affiliate members, there are numerous individuals who are walking with the church into the mission of God, but not yet considered “members” and may not be reflected in the average Sunday morning attendance. Thus, we created the following question, *“Number of affiliate members (those who may not be considered members but are regular participants within the congregation’s life).”* Surprisingly, we found a total of 297 affiliate members.

For seven of our congregations in our survey, affiliate members make up 10% or more of the congregation and are actively involved in the ministries of the congregation. They participate in some parts of worship, and they volunteer in ministry to the community. In spite of not being baptized yet, they are actively involved in service, learning the way of Christ as they learn about Christ.

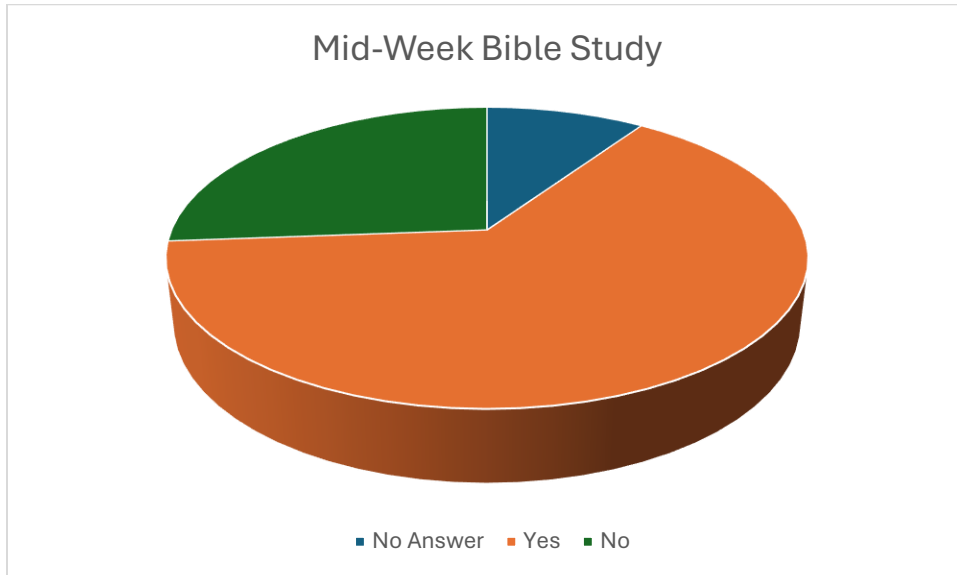
### **What Questions Do We Want to Investigate?**

1. How do congregations engage “affiliate” members? For the congregations that are reporting large “affiliate” numbers, what are they doing? In what ways are they living into relationships with their neighbours and the “outsiders” whereby they can say they have “affiliate” members?
2. How do small congregations worship? What practices can small congregations embody that will help them worship faithfully? What practices can small congregations embody that will help them live deeper into the mission of God?

## **Making Disciples**

In what ways are our congregations equipping and making disciples? Historically we have employed midweek, Sunday evening and Sunday School as ways of equipping and making disciples. Is this happening?

- Only 3 congregations have Sunday evening services
- The majority of congregations continue to have a Sunday school program.<sup>5</sup>
- 11 congregations (27%) reported not having a midweek study
- 27 congregations (66%) reported having a midweek study



**Chart 9**

Though the historical avenues of “making disciples” may be struggling, congregations are finding ways to plant the seeds of the gospel and to watch these seeds take root within the waters of baptism. We asked two questions about baptism.

1. How many baptisms have been reported in the past 12 months?
2. How many baptisms have been reported since 2011?

We are discovering that congregations are walking with people through the waters of baptism. Respectively,

- 83 baptisms reported in the past 12 months
- 381 baptisms reported in since 2011

#### **What Questions Do We Want to Investigate?**

1. Who is being baptized? Is it children who have grown up in the church or are we seeing “new converts?”
2. Are those who are being baptized continuing to worship with our congregations one and two years after their baptisms?
3. What are the stories of those who are being baptized? How can we tell these baptismal stories?
4. In what ways are we “growing” as disciples of Jesus? Are people participating in various discipleship programs outside of the institutional church that we are not able to measure?

---

<sup>5</sup> We need to be careful about the language. We call this “Sunday school” but this may in fact only be “adult classes” for some congregations as some congregations do not have any children as part of their faith community.

# Leadership

In what ways are Churches of Christ being served by various forms of leadership? The following charts help us understand the leadership categories of our congregations.

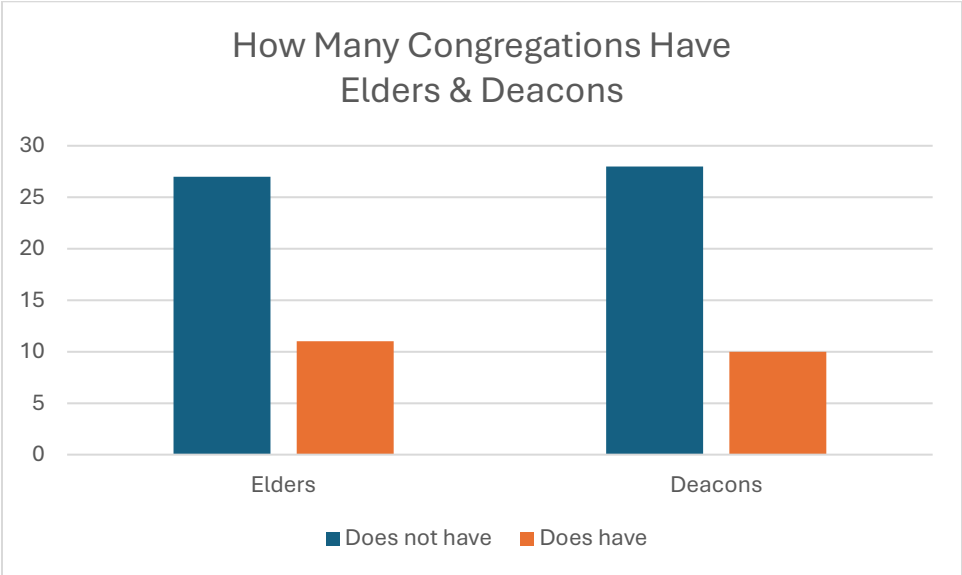


Chart 10

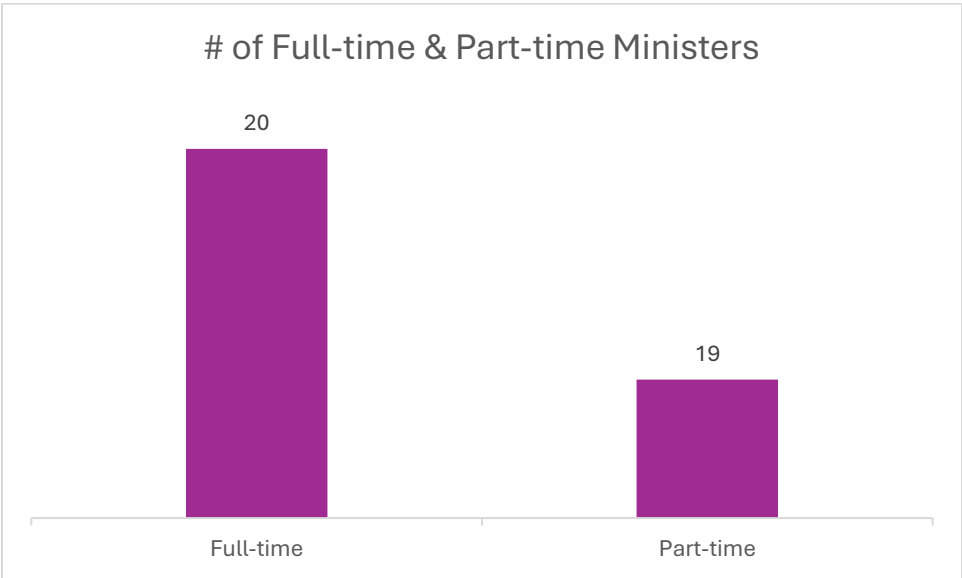
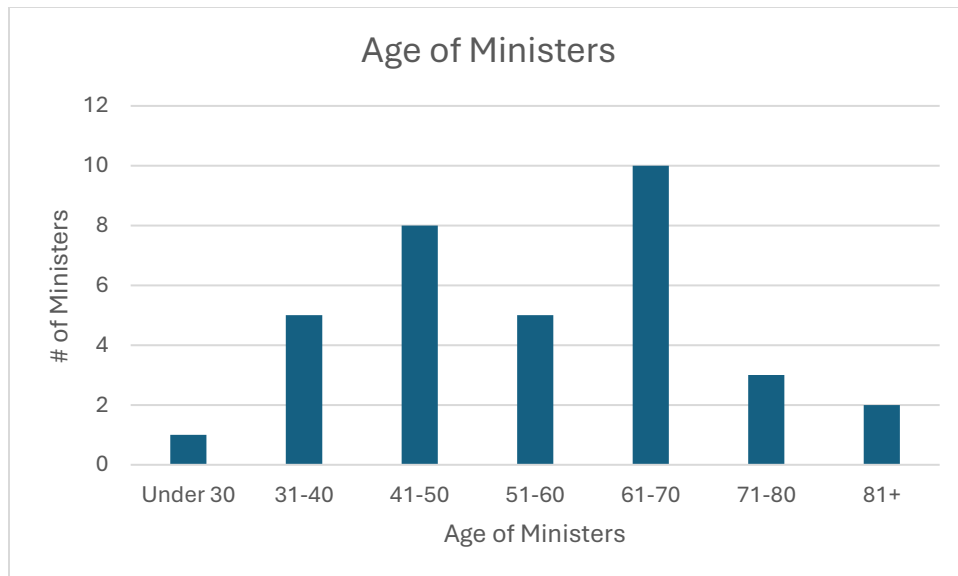


Chart 11



**Chart 12**

### Observations

Churches of Christ have historically employed the local leadership model of elders and deacons (based upon the pastoral letters). From the data, there are 27 congregations without an eldership and 28 congregations without deacons. Only 11 congregations have an eldership and 10 congregations have deacons.

The data also reveals that we have almost an equal amount of full-time and part-time ministers. However, the data reveals an aging population of those who are called “ministers.” The average age of ministers is 58. An aging cohort of ministers would be acceptable if there were a younger generation of ministers. Unfortunately, for Churches of Christ in Ontario, we only have a handful of ministers under the age of 40.

### Questions We Want to Investigate

1. Do we have a leadership crisis that is quickly emerging? If so, what conversations do we need to have?
2. What leadership resources are available for small congregations who may not have elders and deacons and/or ministers?
3. If the younger generations are not entering into ministry, how do we prepare our congregations to be without a minister? What conversations and practices must we start now in order to prepare for a time in which there may not be a fulltime or parttime minister?
4. What kind of leaders are needed at this time?
5. What can we do together that will help raise up leaders for the future?

### Assets

Through the research we have discovered that the majority of congregations have significant real estate assets. Of the forty-one reporting congregations,

- 33 congregations own real estate
- 32 out of the 33 congregations are mortgage free

- 8 congregations rent or meet in homes

### Questions We Want to Investigate

1. In what ways can the buildings be used to help us live deeper into the mission of God?
2. Are congregations “renting” out their buildings in order to be financially viable?
3. What other assets do congregations have? How can we use these assets in order to help us live deeper into God’s mission?
4. If congregations close, how are the financial assets dispersed? Might we think creatively so that new opportunities and new ministries become possible?
5. What stories can we tell and listen to of congregations closing their doors that can bring hope?
6. Is closing a congregation a failure? Or, can congregations that close their doors be hopeful and find ways to celebrate the life of the congregation?

## COVID

I (Nathan) remember the first Sunday COVID became a real concern. We gathered in worship. Our singing was muted because we weren’t sure of how COVID was spreading. Cam, who welcomed us to the Table of the Lord wore gloves and handed each person a piece of bread and a cup of grape juice. As we left our worship we all wondered what the week would bring and how COVID would affect society. No one dared to think that early in the week society shuttered its doors and for the next twelve weeks we did not meet to worship. It was a surreal experience.

Surprisingly, four of the five largest congregations in Ontario (80%) reported that their attendance has grown since COVID while only ten of the other thirty-six congregations (28%) said the same.

Recent research published in the US is consistent with our findings. Larger churches with paid staff were able to adapt more successfully to the challenges posed by the pandemic and were more likely to benefit from transfer growth from other smaller congregations. Larger congregations also adapted to things like on-line worship more easily than very small churches.<sup>6</sup> The Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture reported that churches “with membership numbers above 100, responded more positively about the influence of technology as part of their services and programs.”<sup>7</sup>

In our survey we found, on the whole, 23 congregations (56%) began using on-line services<sup>8</sup> during the pandemic but larger congregations were far more likely to add this service than the smaller ones. If you were to divide all the congregations in Ontario into two groups (the larger half and the smaller half) 85% of the larger congregations added online services while only 30% of the smaller congregations did. Fifty-two percent of the larger congregations reported the same or increased levels of participation from their

---

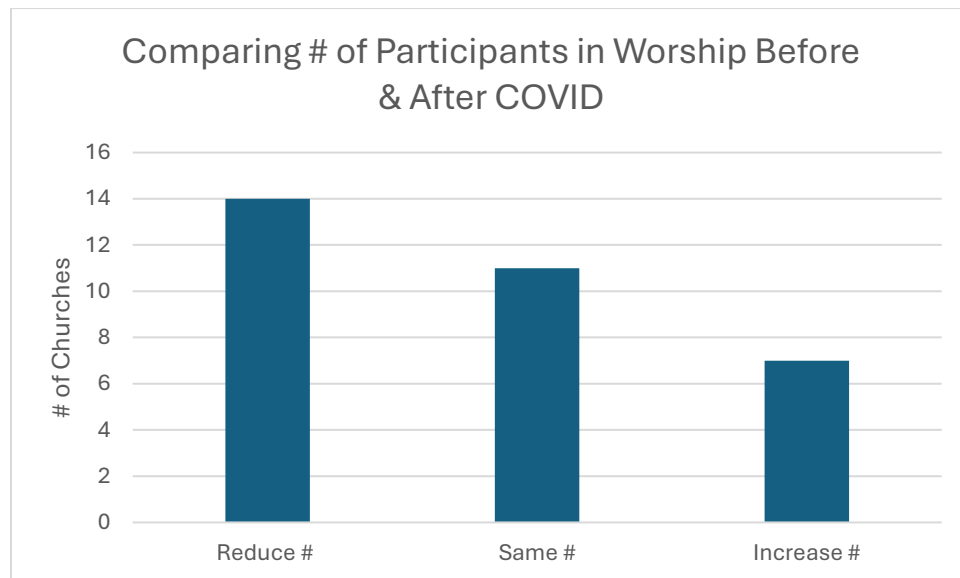
<sup>6</sup> Justin Nortey, “More Houses of Worship Are Returning to Normal Operations, but In-Person Attendance Is Unchanged Since Fall,” Pew Research Center, March 22, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall>.

<sup>7</sup> Shari Finnell, “Larger churches have had an easier, more successful transition to using technology after the pandemic,” Faith & Leadership, Nov 28, 2023, <https://faithandleadership.com/larger-churches-have-had-easier-more-successful-transition-using-technology-after-the-pandemic>. The full report can be downloaded here: <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/bitstream/handle/1969.1/200172/Report3TechinChurches-FINAL-We%20are%20still%20Here-Oct%202023-Final%20FINAL.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>

<sup>8</sup> These services included Facebook Live, ZOOM, and YouTube.

membership in worship, while only 29% of the smaller congregations reported the same or increased levels of participation. While the pandemic cannot be blamed for all the decline we found in our results, it has clearly had a polarizing effect on the congregations in Ontario. Many of the large congregations are getting larger (or staying the same) while most of the smaller congregations are getting smaller.

How did COVID affect our churches? The data presented is only a snapshot. It's the stories that we can tell that will help paint a complete picture of the ways in which COVID affected us.



**Chart 13**

On the survey we asked the question, *“How many weeks did you not meet on account of COVID.”* The answers were varied and we are unable to generate a graph. We can say that some churches continued to meet. Other churches didn't physically meet 2-3 months, 4-6 months and longer. It was also reported that some churches didn't physically meet together for almost two years. Most churches were able to virtually meet (YouTube, Facebook, Zoom). Some churches have continued to offer a hybrid service while other churches have stopped offering a virtual worship experience all together.

Questions We Want to Investigate:

1. Why did some churches increase in participation after COVID? What are the extenuating circumstances that led to an increase in participation?
2. Those who stopped regular participation in worship after COVID, are they worshipping with another Christian faith community or have they stopped participating in the church's life altogether?
3. What were the benefits of beginning an online presence for our worship services?
4. What are / have been the challenges that have arisen as a result of developing an online presence for our worship services?
5. What would we do differently if COVID (or a disease similar to COVID) happened again?
6. What have we learned from COVID about the institutional churches?
7. What are the stories congregations can tell about how COVID pushed the church into new forms of living into the mission of God?

# New Realities

In the 2011 Gospel Herald, Dr. Geoff Ellis described the Churches of Christ within Canada as “*A Movement Challenged*.” Geoff’s insights are not wrong. Churches of Christ within Ontario are a movement challenged. We have fewer churches, a third less of members, an aging age group for current ministers, and are meeting less frequently. Current realities of many of our congregations will make it difficult for congregations to turn around. Not to mention, the shift in societal values and a significant shift towards “a secular age,”<sup>9</sup> the head winds we are facing are strong.

We’re not alone. All denominational churches within North America are facing a declining membership. Churches are closing. Churches are struggling. Our declining realities are being shared across all Christian denominations.

Its therefore easy to become filled with despair and a sense of hopelessness. Remember though . . . remember the gospel story . . . after death comes resurrection. Remember the story of Ezekiel, “*Can these bones live?*” Remember the stories of exile in the Old Testament and the promises made known by the prophets, “*Homecoming*.” We may not see our churches flourish as they once have; we may feel the pains of death . . . but we trust in a God who is present; we trust in a God whose Spirit is still at work in our midst; we trust that the resurrected Jesus will continue his storm-stilling work!

With this, we want to investigate some questions.

1. What congregations understand the current shifts yet have not lost hope but have instead leaned into the mission of God? What practices are shaping them? What forms of gathering are they embodying? What stories are they telling? What can we learn from these congregations?
2. It may be that some local congregations will cease to exist. How can we help them die gracefully? How can we help dying congregations plant seeds for something that will come next?
3. What voices of wisdom should we listen to given our current situation?
4. What text(s) of Scripture should the church listen to given our current situation?
5. What are we learning about God? About God’s mission? About each other?
6. How can we help spur one another (Hebrews 10) with endurance, even though we are facing some difficult headwinds?

---

<sup>9</sup> Borrowing this language from Charles Taylor