

# Pockets of belief: Religious attendance patterns in Canada

by Warren Clark



## Pockets of high religious attendance found in almost every province

In 1946, about 67% of the adult population attended religious services on a weekly basis.<sup>1</sup> According to the General Social Survey, by 2001 the weekly attendance rate had slipped to 20%; the monthly religious attendance rate<sup>2</sup> also fell: from 43% in 1986 to 31% in 2001.<sup>3</sup> Attendance rates vary widely across Canada. Previous research has shown that historically Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick have had the highest monthly attendance rates while Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia have

1. Veevers, J.E. and E.M. Gee. 1988. *Religiously Unaffiliated Canadians: Demographic and Social Correlates of Secularization – Final Report*. p. 18.
2. Attendance at religious services at least once a month (includes weekly attendees).
3. Monthly religious attendance rates have also fallen in the United States to 45% in 2000 from 54% in 1986 while weekly rates dropped to 25% in 2000 from 32% in 1986. Source: U.S. General Social Survey, Survey Documentation and Analysis, University of California, Berkeley. <http://sda.berkeley.edu> (accessed September 23, 2002).

had the lowest.<sup>4</sup> Yet pockets of high attendance rates often exist in provinces that have low attendance and vice versa. The attached map of Canada shows pockets of high attendance in Cape Breton, the Gaspé and parts of southwestern Ontario near Lake Huron, parts of southern Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. High attendance is also widespread in Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. British Columbia is the only province that does not seem to have a high attendance region. Although New Brunswick is a high attendance province, there are several census divisions where monthly attendance is at the middle level.

### Quebec sees big drop in religious attendance

Quebec's monthly attendance dropped the most during the 1990s, with the census metropolitan areas (CMAs) other than Montréal seeing the largest decline. As a result, by the turn of the century (1999 to 2001) Montréal and Québec City had the lowest monthly attendance rates among CMAs. Unlike the rest of the country, British Columbia and Toronto and Vancouver saw small increases in monthly religious attendance rates between the early 1990s and the end of the decade.

### Age and immigration status influence religious attendance rates

Many factors influence the level of religious attendance, including demographics, immigration patterns and the cultural history of a region. Religious attendance is strongly related to age: seniors have the highest attendance rates, while those aged 25 to 34 have the lowest. Therefore, one might expect that high attendance rates would occur in areas with higher percentages of

4. Clark, W. Winter 2000. "Patterns of religious attendance." *Canadian Social Trends*. p. 23-27.



## Among provinces, Quebec had the largest drop in monthly attendance rates...

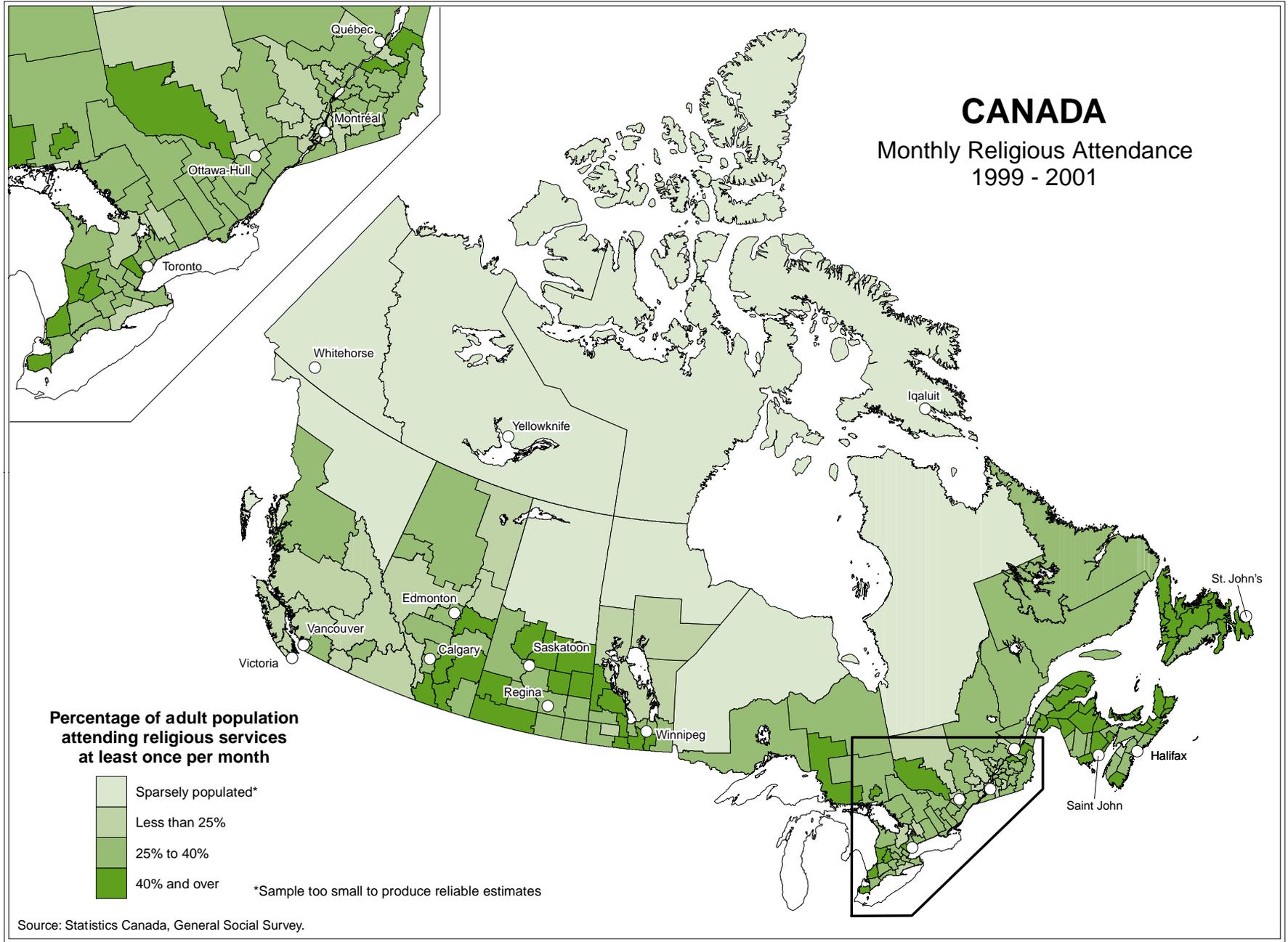
	Religious attendance (at least once per month)		
	Average	Average	Difference
	1989-1993	1999-2001	
	% of population aged 15 and over		
Canada	36	32	-5*
Newfoundland	47	43	-4*
Prince Edward Island	56	53	-3
Nova Scotia	39	36	-3*
New Brunswick	55	43	-11*
Quebec	37	25	-13*
Ontario	38	36	-2*
Manitoba	37	36	0
Saskatchewan	43	39	-5*
Alberta	32	31	-1
British Columbia	23	25	2*

## ... while among CMAs, Vancouver had the largest increase

St. John's	44	36	-8*
Halifax	37	31	-6*
Saint John	48	43	-5*
Saguenay	46	29	-17*
Québec	37	21	-15*
Sherbrooke	39	26	-13*
Trois-Rivières	40	29	-12*
Montréal	29	21	-8*
Ottawa-Hull	35	28	-7*
Kingston	40	33	-7
Oshawa	37	30	-7*
Toronto	37	38	2*
Hamilton	36	36	0
St. Catharines-Niagara	43	38	-5
Kitchener	39	37	-2
London	38	35	-3
Windsor	46	38	-8*
Sudbury	43	40	-3
Thunder Bay	30	31	1
Winnipeg	34	34	0
Saskatoon	41	37	-4
Regina	35	33	-2
Calgary	28	29	1
Edmonton	31	30	-1
Abbotsford	38	41	3
Vancouver	24	28	4*
Victoria	20	20	1

\* Difference is statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey.



## CST What you should know about this study

Almost every year since 1985, Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) has interviewed adults aged 15 and over living in private households in the 10 provinces. The GSS has collected information about the frequency of attendance at religious services (excluding special occasions such as weddings, funerals and baptisms). The accompanying map and tables show the percentage of the adult population aged 15 and over who attend religious services at least once per month (including weekly attendance). The monthly attendance rates on the map have a coefficient of variation of 16.6% or less. To maintain this level of reliability, some geographically contiguous census divisions in all provinces except Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island were combined. The maps are divided into four religious attendance categories: 1) sparsely populated areas consisting of the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut which were not surveyed by the GSS. In addition, insufficient numbers of respondents were surveyed in the northern parts of several provinces to produce reliable estimates for these areas. This group represents less than 1% of the adult population aged 15 and over; 2) low levels of monthly religious attendance where less than 25% of the adult population attended at least once a month. This group represents about a quarter of the adult population; 3) mid-level of monthly religious attendance of between 25% and just less than 40%. This group represents about 60% of the adult population; and 4) high level of monthly religious attendance where 40% or more of the adult population attended religious services at least once a month. This group represents about 14% of the adult population.

seniors. This, in fact, is true for Saskatchewan, parts of Manitoba, Cape Breton, the Lake Huron shore in Ontario and the Gaspé in Quebec, which have somewhat higher percentages of seniors. There are, however, other areas with high percentages of seniors but not high religious attendance rates.

Immigrants are concentrated in Canada's three largest CMAs (Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver). Because immigrants attend religious services more frequently than Canadian-born adults, their presence in these cities may influence attendance rates. Toronto and Vancouver saw an increase in monthly attendance rates, while Montréal's rate declined less than those of other CMAs in Quebec. Nationally, monthly religious attendance rates of Canadian-born adults dropped from 35% in the 1989 to 1993 period to 28% between 1999 and 2001, while the rate for those born outside Canada increased slightly from 42% to 45%. In Toronto and Vancouver, the monthly religious attendance rates of adults born outside Canada increased while the Canadian-born rate decreased or showed no significant change. In Montréal, attendance rates declined among both adults born outside Canada and the Canadian-born, but the drop was smaller for immigrants.

## CST Immigration influences religious attendance in the three largest CMAs

### Religious attendance (at least once per month)

	Average 1989-1993	Average 1999-2001	Difference
	% of population aged 15 and over		
Montréal			
Canadian-born	26	17	-9*
Born outside Canada	44	40	-4
Toronto			
Canadian-born	31	28	-3*
Born outside Canada	44	50	6*
Vancouver			
Canadian-born	19	21	2
Born outside Canada	35	39	4*

\* Difference is statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey.



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On May 13, 2003, Statistics Canada will release 2001 Census data on the size, composition, and geographical distribution of religions in Canada. Data will be available on the Statistics Canada Web site [www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca) on that day.