



David Haskell, Associate Professor
Religion and Culture; Digital Media and Journalism
519-756-8228 ext. 5808 or dhaskell@wlu.ca

Beth Gurney, Associate Director
Communications & Public Affairs, Laurier Brantford
519-756-8228 ext. 5753 or bgurney@wlu.ca

NOVEMBER 21, 2016 | 245-16

Laurier researcher reveals 'secret ingredient' that makes churches grow

BRANTFORD – While the decline of mainline Protestant denominations is common knowledge, why they are dying has been the subject of much debate. A study led by Wilfrid Laurier University researcher David Haskell reveals the traits that help some congregations thrive while others wither, and the results are not what many may expect. Conservative religious doctrine, according to Haskell and his co-researchers, is a key driver for church growth in mainline Protestant congregations. According to their studies, liberal doctrine in fact leads to decline.

Historically, Christians who lived in North America or the U.K. who were not Catholic attended a mainline Protestant church. They were called “mainline” because they were the spiritual home of the vast majority of Protestants. Today, they are in steep decline. In the U.K., the Anglican Church (Church of England) is the largest mainline denomination; attendees to their Sunday services have dropped below one million for the first time. Canada’s four mainline denominations — Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and United Churches — have lost over half their members since the 1960s, even while the population of the country as a whole has nearly doubled. In the United States, the largest mainline churches – United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Episcopal Church – have declined at a faster rate than any other major Christian group in the country, according to the Pew Research Centre.

Now, in the first empirical study of its kind, researchers from Wilfrid Laurier University and Redeemer University College offer compelling evidence that conservative theological belief among mainline Protestant clergy and church attendees leads to the growth of a congregation. The most essential results of their five-year research project will appear in the December issue of the international, peer-reviewed journal, *Review of Religious Research*.

The article, written by lead researcher David Haskell of Wilfrid Laurier University and co-researchers Kevin Flatt of Redeemer University College and Stephanie Burgoyne of Wilfrid Laurier University, is titled, “Theology Matters: Comparing the traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy.”

“One of the greatest obstacles to this study was finding mainline Protestant churches that were growing,” said Haskell. “However, once we did, we were able to compare the religious beliefs and practices of the growing church attendees and clergy to those of the declining. For all measures, those from the growing mainline churches held more firmly to the traditional beliefs of Christianity and were more diligent in things like prayer and Bible reading.”

Why this study is controversial

According to Haskell, many academics, journalists and mainline Protestant church leaders are convinced that theology has no bearing on church growth.

... more

Page 2/ Theology Matters: Discovering why churches grow

But the “Theology Matters” authors assert that more specific questions lead to more accurate answers.

“Our research contradicts several prominent studies that claim theology and church growth are not linked. It is clear they are,” said Flatt. “But, unlike those other studies which tended to ask just one or two questions of a single key informant — usually the pastor — we surveyed entire congregations and asked many specific questions about religious beliefs and practices.”

Over 2,200 regular mainline Protestant church-goers and clergy from a mix of Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran and United churches in the province of Ontario were surveyed. About half were from declining congregations (an annual two per cent loss in attendance over the preceding 10 years) and half from growing congregations (an annual average growth of two per cent or more over the same period).

“Most people, especially academics, are hesitant to say one type of belief system is better than another,” said Haskell. “But if we are talking solely about what belief system is more likely to lead to numerical growth among Protestant churches, the evidence suggests conservative Protestant theology is the clear winner.”

A problem of supply not demand

Clergy and the congregants of the declining churches believed that pressures and changes in society had caused demand for religion to drop. However, this belief does not explain the growth of some mainline Protestant churches.

“So what was different about our study’s growing churches? Their *supply* was different,” said Flatt. “That is, the conservative religious ‘product’ they supplied was very different from the liberal religious ‘product’ supplied by the declining mainline churches.”

“While I would agree that wider cultural changes can impact demand for religion, what our findings suggest is that the supply side of the equation is more important,” said Haskell. “In these cases, in particular, it’s an issue of supply not demand.”

In “Theology Matters” Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne conclude that conservative Protestant doctrine has been shown to meet internal psychological needs (e.g., greater personal happiness) and external social needs (e.g., stronger group bonds) better than competing theological systems.