

The Role of Ethnic Congregations in Volunteering

A Research Report

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

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The Role of Ethnic Congregations in Volunteering

1. Introduction

Immigration can be very stressful. While acclimatizing to a new culture, immigrants cannot rely on their old, social networks to help meet their needs. Immigrants also face barriers such as language and culture that limit their opportunities to make social or professional connections.

In Canada, religious beliefs and institutions have played, and continue to play, a crucial role in new immigrant communities. Immigrants can easily join religious congregations,¹ particularly those of their own ethnic group or ethnicity.² In North America, ethnic congregations usually serve more than the religious and worship needs of their members (Handy and Cnaan, 1999). For many immigrants, these congregations provide a safe haven where they can make friends, speak their language, and

retain their cultural practices. The congregations may also help immigrants find information to meet their non-spiritual needs.

The religious and non-religious activities offered by congregations are often designed and facilitated by volunteers. Many of these volunteers are themselves immigrants (Handy and Cnaan, 1999). The important role of ethnic congregations has not been investigated very closely. The lack of research is surprising, given that immigrants have higher religious participation rates than the average in Canada (Hall, McKeown, and Roberts, 2001).

In Canada, the number of ethnic congregations representing non-European cultures began to increase in the late 1960s, when immigration rules changed (Bibby, 2001). At that time, people from Africa, Asia, and other regions outside Europe were no longer automatically excluded from Canada. The change in immigration policy has had a profound impact on the religious landscape of many Canadian cities. Those cities that welcomed new immigrants have seen a rise in the diversity of religious congregations and their places of worship and now include mosques, Sikh gurdwaras, and Buddhist and Hindu temples. Among Catholic and Protestant denominations, there has been a rapid rise in ethnic congregations serving immigrants from countries or language and cultural groups outside of Europe. Many new immigrant

¹ Warner (1994) defined a congregation as a voluntary local assembly gathered for religious purposes. Hopewell (1987:12) defined a congregation as a local organization in which people regularly gather for what they feel to be a religious purpose [and as] a group that possesses a special name and recognized members who assemble regularly to celebrate a more universally practiced worship but who communicate with each other sufficiently to develop intrinsic patterns of conduct, outlook, and story. A congregation presents a shared identity along with a religious function.

² We refer to Bulmer's (1996:35) definition of an ethnic group as "a collectivity within a larger population having a real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and a cultural focus upon one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance. Members of an ethnic group are conscious of belonging to the group."

Christians have different customs and traditions than Christians of European ancestry, and practice their religion in languages other than English and French.

This report explores how religious congregations help immigrants integrate into Canadian society. It focuses on those who volunteer in their congregations, especially recent immigrants, and examines whether such volunteer activity allows immigrants to build and maintain social connections that help them adjust to living and working in Canada. We suggest that recent immigrants participate in ethnic congregations because such engagement helps them to integrate into Canadian society. We define *immigrants* as people born outside of Canada, and *recent immigrants* as those who have come to Canada in the past two years. Our research focused on religious congregations where at least 75% of members are immigrants from one ethnic group, and more than one third were born outside of Canada. Throughout this report, we refer to these congregations as *ethnic congregations*.

To begin, we present a brief literature review in the following section which outlines what is currently known about immigrants to Canada, their religiosity and their participation in congregational life.³ Section 3 describes the research methodology, and Section 4 outlines the findings from each of our three sources of data. In Section 5, we discuss of our findings and present our conclusions.

2. Literature Review

Places of worship in North America are based on a 'congregationalist model.' That is, they provide members with a place of worship and also many other social and humanitarian services (Cnaan, Boddie, Handy, Yancey, and Schneider, 2002; Schneider and Foley, 2003; Wuthnow, 1988). Mosques, temples, and other places of worship often fulfill these two purposes for recent immigrants (Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000; Williams, 1998). In Canada, few studies have looked at the nature of recent immigrants' participation in ethnic congregations. However, the most recent population census seems to show that the number of immigrants in Canada and the total number of people practicing their faith (whatever the denomination) is converging.⁴ This development may reflect a tendency of recent immigrants to seek out ethnic congregations not only to fulfill their spiritual needs, but also to facilitate their integration to Canadian society.

2.1 Religious trends in Canada

Bibby (2002) has been charting the religiosity of Canadians for several decades. His recent work shows that there are signs of significant religious rejuvenation in Canada, both inside and outside of the mainstream religions. He also shows that immigrants fuel much of this growth, especially in the larger cities.

³ Mattis and Jagers (2001:522) define religion as "a shared system of beliefs, mythology, and rituals associated with god or gods" and religiosity as "an individual's degree of adherence to the beliefs, doctrines, and practices of a religion".

⁴ Statistics Canada, 2001. Main website: www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/home/index.cfm (Last retrieved June 1, 2005)

A recent survey by Statistics Canada also shows that adults who were born elsewhere are more likely to attend religious services than Canadian-born adults.⁵ The survey further showed that all or most new Canadian friends of immigrants' were from the same cultural and ethnic background.⁶ This suggests that immigrants are likely to make new social connections in places where people of similar backgrounds come together.

Congregations are a place to meet people, and build new social networks that replace those lost in the process of migration (Bibby, 2002). Scholars have noted that congregations provide a means for newcomers to socialize with others who share similar immigrant histories. The congregations also enable immigrants to retain their cultural values and customs; learn civic skills; and get help trying to meet the material needs that arise when they enter a new country and culture (Cnaan et al, 2002; Ebaugh, 2000; Fenton 1988; Hurh and Kim 1990; Kashima 1977; Min 1992; Warner and Wittner 1998; Kurien (1998; Williams, 1998).

2.2 Immigration trends in Canada⁷

The most recent longitudinal survey of immigrants showed that most immigrants who arrived in Canada in 2000 and 2001 moved to the largest cities in the country. Almost half (46%) moved to Toronto, while 15% moved to Vancouver, and 13% to Montreal.

⁵ Statistics Canada Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada 2000-2001. 89-611-XIE.

⁶ 85% of immigrants to Canada had made new friends with people from the same cultural background and 63% reported that all or most of their new friends were from the same ethnic background. (Statistics Canada, 2000)

⁷ The findings reported in this section come from the Statistics Canada's Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada 2000-2001. 89-611-XIE.

Immigrants chose these destinations either to join their families and friends or for employment. Immigrants chose other destinations for a variety of reasons which varied from city to city, but the presence of family and friends remained a principal motivator.

Most immigrants (84%) already had some social support when they came to Canada. Most immigrants (78%) chose destinations where they could count on friends and families to help with the integration process, while the remaining 22% chose destinations based on employment prospects or the existence of their own ethnic community.

Immigrants come to Canada from all over the world. In 2000 and 2001, the majority of immigrants (68%) came to Canada from Asia. Most of these people emigrated from the People's Republic of China (20%), India (15%), the Philippines (7%), and Pakistan (5%).

2.3 Congregations and immigrants

Congregations have been recognized as groups where like-minded people come together to worship, to share fellowship, to make friends, and seek help with material needs. They are an important part of religious life. In their study of immigrant communities in the United States, Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000) reported that religion is at the centre of a sense of identity for many groups, and that religious congregations serve as focal points for ethnic gatherings and celebrations, for learning, and for assisting new immigrants. Additional studies support this. They also point out that congregations in the immigrants' countries of origin usually only focus on meeting the religious needs of congregational members (Fenton

1988; Hurh and Kim 1990; Kashima 1977; Min 1992; Warner and Wittner 1998).

Handy and Cnaan (1999) reported that congregations in Ontario offered, on average, just over four social service programs for the welfare of the local community. Nine out of ten congregations said that their programs used volunteers. The volunteers in each congregation contributed over 2000 hours per year. If ethnic congregations are involved in similar activities, and we do not have any reason to believe otherwise, this means that recent immigrant members have ample opportunities to be involved in volunteer work.⁸

Cnaan et al. (2002) also suggest that when members of ethnic congregations volunteer within their places of worship, they meet non-members and members outside of their ethnic groups who come to a place of worship for other activities. Such connections outside the religious congregation and ethnic group may assist in better integrating these immigrants into Canadian society. Putnam (2000) suggests that congregations are sites where individuals 'bond' within the organization and 'bridge' with the community. We argue that bonding and bridging opportunities are especially essential to immigrants trying to establish themselves in their new country.

3. Methodology

3.1 How we chose cities

As this is the first study of its kind in Canada, we sampled a variety of congregations in geographically diverse locations. We chose Vancouver, Regina and Saskatoon, Toronto, and Halifax. These cities reflect different total population sizes and proportions of immigrants within them. They were also chosen because they fit within our research budget.

We chose Toronto and Vancouver because they are Canada's largest cities, and attract the most immigrants. We chose Regina and Halifax to represent immigrant populations in smaller urban centres in very different regions of Canada. We were unable to find the required number of congregations in Regina, so we included two congregations from Saskatoon, a city in the same province. For the sake of simplicity, we refer to all the seven congregations in Saskatchewan as being from Regina / Saskatoon.

3.2 How we chose the ethnic congregations

We used the local Yellow (Business) and White (Residential) telephone pages and lists provided by local Councils of Churches to find congregations that met our criteria. We specifically sought congregations in which at least 75% of members were from one ethnic group and more than 33% were first-generation immigrants. This ensured that the sample included congregations with immigrants who had been in Canada for at least less than five years, and congregations that were likely to attract immigrants.

Once we had a preliminary list of possible sites we contacted congregations to find out what faith they

⁸ Immigrants often pattern themselves on traditional American congregations by forming local volunteer groups and establishing community centres, recreational halls, meals, and educational classes (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000).

belonged to; the history of the congregation; the cultural and regional heritage of the members; and the percentage of immigrants and first-generation immigrants. We told them we were looking for congregations with at least 75% members from one ethnic group and more than 33% first-generation immigrants. If a congregation met our criteria, we sent a synopsis of the research and a letter asking the congregation to participate.

In some cases our sample included congregations that had immigrants from different parts of the world. For instance, one of the congregations was a temple in which 95% were people who identified themselves as Indian. The members included people who had come from India (60%), but also people from Guyana, and parts of Africa. The latter two groups consider their ethnic origin to be Indian, as they retain the traditions, language, culture, and heritage passed on by their ancestors who had emigrated from India.

Through this process we recruited 34 congregations representing eight religions and 16 different ethnic groups (See Table 1).

3.3 Distribution of religions in our sample

Christianity has followers all over the world, so it is not surprising that Christians are over-represented. The Christian denominations included in our sample were Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. Their memberships include a variety of ethnicities.

We note that the congregations do not uniformly represent all of the other religions across the country. This is not because there are few ethnic congregations, but because of it was difficult to get congregations to agree to participate. Many were not eager to participate as they had been targeted for undue investigation or surveillance since the attacks on New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Table 1: Religious make-up of congregations in each city

Religious Affiliation:	Buddhist	Catholic	Hindu	Muslim	Jewish	Orthodox (Christian)	Protestant	Sikh	Total
Toronto Area	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	1	12
Vancouver	1	-	3	-	-	1	1	2	8
Regina / Saskatoon	1	0	3	-	-	-	2	1	7
Halifax	-	1	1	1	-	2	1	1	7
Totals	3	3	8	3	1	4	7	5	34

3.4 How we conducted the research

We collected data in 2004. Our research combined quantitative and qualitative methods.

Interviews with administrators and clergy

We interviewed clergy and administrator using structured questionnaires. We designed the interviews to give us a clear picture of the history and organizational structure of the congregation, the socioeconomic demographics of the members, and details about what activities the congregation offered. In Christian congregations, the clergy manages both the organizational and spiritual needs of the congregation. In non-Christian congregations, a core committee or board is responsible for the organizational and fiduciary roles, and hires clergy and administrators or trained spiritual directors to conduct the religious services. In these cases, we interviewed the chair of the board or a key committee member. However, we refer to all of these interviews as clergy and administrator interviews.

Before we began, we tested the questionnaire, and incorporated the feedback in the final version. Then we conducted 34 face-to-face interviews. In the interviews we asked about the mission, the membership, the structure, and the services of the congregations. We then asked about types of volunteer activities within the congregation; rates of volunteer participation; the reasons why people volunteered; what they said the benefits of volunteering were; and what the congregation needed. The responses were coded for analysis.

After we interviewed the clergy and administrators and asked them to tell their members about our

research and invite them to fill out the surveys and participate in our focus groups.

Focus groups

After interviewing the administrators and clergy of each congregation, we requested them to inform their congregation about our research so that we could conduct focus groups with immigrant members and distribute surveys to the congregation at large. When we had difficulty getting people to volunteer for our focus groups, clergy and administrators would give us a list of people we could approach about participation in the focus groups.

We conducted 33 focus groups in total. The groups averaged 6 people and were a mix of recent and long-term immigrants of different gender, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds. The participants were asked:

- when they arrived in Canada;
- how long they had been members of their congregation;
- what were their different congregational/volunteer activities;
- if they volunteered outside the congregation;
- their overall experiences while participating/volunteering in congregational activities; and,
- the value of their volunteer experiences in assisting their integration into Canadian society.

Questionnaire

We distributed 40 questionnaires to each of the 34 congregations. We asked congregants to fill out questionnaires as they came to worship. In some cases we

went to the congregation several times to distribute and collect the questionnaires.

We used a focus group to pilot the questionnaire then made changes to the final question. The questionnaire asked about congregants' socioeconomic profile and their congregational volunteering activities. It also asked them to evaluate these activities.

Out of the 1,360 questionnaires that we distributed, we received 834 responses. This is a participation rate of 61%. We analyzed the questionnaires and examined the data to see if there were any significant links between the variables we were missing.

4. Findings

In this section, we outline the findings from our qualitative and quantitative research. The findings are from clergy and administrators interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups.

From the outset, we referred to *volunteering* in the North American sense, where people donate their time to an organization or a cause they believe in. We found that among some immigrants this concept of 'volunteering' is foreign. They did not necessarily equate donating their time with volunteering, but with helping people. In some cases, they perceived volunteering as a natural extension of practicing their faith; in other cases, they were raised with values that ask them to help everyone in need. Both clergy and administrators and focus group participants told us how they perceived the term. We did not explicitly define *volunteer* in our questionnaires, and often simply handed the questionnaires out to members. Thus, we are unsure if all our respondents perceive volunteering the same way. Consequently, the findings may underestimate the amount of volunteering which occurs in ethnic congregations.

4.1 What we learned from clergy and administrators

The 34 clergy and administrators we interviewed gave us profiles of their congregations and told us what services were offered to congregants. They also shared their insights about how and why immigrants, particularly recent immigrants, access services and volunteer for the congregations, and how these experiences help them adjust to Canadian society.

Profiles of the congregations

- The oldest congregation had been founded 107 years ago and the youngest congregation was established 7 years ago. The median age of congregations was 26.5 years. That is, half have existed for less than 26.5 years and half for more than 26.5 years.
- The number of members in each congregation, including children, ranged from 125 to 37,000 members. The median membership was 600.
- The number of active members in these congregations was much smaller. The median number who attended at least once a month was 265 members. The median number of members who attended services once a week was 245.
- All congregations offer regular worship services. On average, they offer 3 services each weekend. Almost all (75%) offer at least one service a day, seven days a week.
- The number of immigrants coming to the congregations in the past three years had increased in 56% of the congregations, stabilised in 26%, and declined in 18% of the congregations.
- Most of the congregations consider themselves to be financially stable. One third had budget surpluses, and more than half had balanced budgets.
- The key funding sources for congregations were membership dues (49%) and donations (37%). The remaining sources of money came from fundraising initiatives such as events, festivals, small business sponsorships, and on rare occasions, larger corporate sponsorships.
- Most congregations (94%) own the property in which they are housed. Most have paid off their mortgages.

- Over half of the congregations (56%) had undertaken a capital campaign in the past five years to add to their property, or to build schools or retirement homes for their members.
- Most congregations (88%) reported that more than half their membership lived within 25 kilometres of the place of worship. Only a few (12%) said that more than half of their members lived within five kilometres. Clergy and administrators indicated that many members make a deliberate effort to travel considerable distances to their place of worship.

Why do immigrants join ethno-specific congregations?

From the clergy and administrators' perspective, immigrants join congregations to connect with other members of the community and for religious, spiritual administrators or cultural reasons.

We asked clergy and administrators to tell us what kinds of assistance they think recent immigrants need. The three most cited needs were:

- making social connections in the community;
- practicing religious beliefs; and,
- providing religious training for children.

Recent immigrants connect with others in the community as a way to get assistance. They need help making new friends, finding general information, improving their English language skills, and getting information about work. The clergy and administrators also pointed out that members participate regularly in religious services as a way to get to know other members of the congregation.

Over a third of the clergy and administrators said that they worked one-on-one with immigrants who needed help finding work. They linked immigrants with others, and helped them find information and resources within the congregation.

Religious training for children and youth is a priority for immigrants. They want the next generation to know their roots, and feel the congregation is a good place for them to learn. In this study, 75% of congregations had formal programs to teach children or youth about the religion.

[What kinds of activities do congregations offer for recent immigrants?](#)

Thirty-five (35%) percent of the congregations offer formal, non-religious services for immigrants. These services include providing housing and food when people first arrive in Canada; advice on finding accommodation and managing finances (i.e., familiarization with Canadian banking, currency, budgeting etc); assistance accessing public programs and services; and seminars on Canadian culture. As well, over half of the congregations had a system in place to provide translation services. Congregations that did not have formal programs, assisted recent immigrants whenever they asked for help.

For example, the Sikh clergy informed us that every gurdwara in Canada provides accommodation and food for recent immigrants⁹. Two Protestant

clergy told us that they regularly collaborate with outside agencies to offer training and seminars for immigrants seeking work. All of these programs were organized by long-term immigrants (i.e., have been in Canada more than 5 years). The programs were popular and well-attended.

[What kinds of activities do congregations offer for their members?](#)

The numerous, non-religious services offered by congregations depend on volunteers. Clergy and administrators estimated that just over a third (35%) of their active members volunteered every week. Recent immigrants account for a little over 8% of the total number of members who volunteer each week. As well, just over half of all active members volunteer as they are needed. Types of volunteering activities include:

- *Communal Meals*: In half of the congregations, people prepare food together and eat at the congregation site after religious services. Clergy and administrators pointed out that communal meals are an integral part of reinforcing their members' cultures.
- *Art and Culture*: Just over half of the congregations offer regular training in traditional music and dance, taught entirely by volunteers. The congregations also organize or support community performances. Most congregations (76%) had organized lecture series about the history, culture, and religion of their ethnic group.
- *Youth Programs*: Almost all congregations (91%) had some formal youth programs about religion, culture, and ethnic language. The three congre-

⁹ A gurdwara is a Sikh place of worship

gations which did not have these programs were small or had very few youth members.

Over half of the congregations also offered recreation programs such as art and sport programs, and summer camps.

- **ESL Training:** Many clergy (54%) said that many members expect to get English as Second Language (ESL) classes at their congregation.
- **Activities for Seniors:** Most congregations (75%) offered services for seniors, such as visiting and transportation. All of these programs involved volunteers. These congregations also offer general counselling and bereavement counselling. The counselling is carried out by clergy and a few volunteers.
- **Charity:** Many congregations provide services to the needy in their community. For example, 65% collect and redistribute clothing for the poor; 70% offer food pantries (collecting and redistributing non-perishable food); and just over 50% offer soup kitchens. Clergy and administrators were not able to tell us how many recent immigrants used these services. Most congregations (70%) are also actively involved in fundraising for disaster relief in the members' countries of origin.

[What types of volunteer work do recent immigrants do?](#)

Recent immigrants often help set-up or assist with religious services. For example, volunteers in churches and temples organize the music and help to distribute blessed bread or food offerings. They help by making post-service announcements, distributing food, and collecting donations. Recent immi-

grants are also involved with religious services, such as teaching scripture to children; organizing scripture lessons or discussion forums for adults; and conducting religious vigils.

In congregations that served communal meals, clergy and administrators told us that recent immigrants often prepared and distributed the meal. This put them in direct contact with the rest of the congregation. Recent immigrants also enjoyed sharing their talents at cultural festivals organized by the congregation and teaching their talents to children.

[What did clergy and administrators say about volunteering by recent immigrants?](#)

Clergy and administrators told us that 75% of recent immigrants were very interested in volunteering. However, only 10% of recent immigrants volunteer. Most clergy (80%) pointed out that recent immigrants generally have little time to volunteer because of financial stresses, and because they do not own cars. One clergy said, "*Free time is a problem but often the busiest (recent immigrants) are the most eager to help.*"

Some immigrants do not understand the North American concept of volunteering. To many people, donating their time was not volunteering, but helping others. Some perceive volunteering as a natural extension of their faith; others have simply been raised with values that ask them to help everyone in need.

In five of the congregations, immigrants came from countries with repressive regimes such as former or current communist countries and countries under

military rule or dictatorship. Clergy and administrators in these congregations said that they had to gain the trust of the members before they could help them and bring them into the congregational community. These immigrants had to be introduced to the Canadian culture and ethos of volunteering, because their experience was that volunteering meant doing work for the state or regime. The clergy and administrators in these cases helped immigrants get to know people and participate in the congregation's activities. As they became more confident that the congregation was a 'safe' place, these immigrants asked to be involved with other volunteering opportunities. According to the clergy and administrators, the process of building trust took at least one or two years.

[How do congregations encourage recent immigrants to volunteer?](#)

Clergy and administrators used a number of strategies to motivate recent immigrants to volunteer. The most popular strategies were making people feel welcome, and informing them about the congregational activities and resources. Clergy and administrators also asked people, either personally or from the pulpit, if they would help in programs. They also told recent immigrants about volunteering opportunities in congregational flyers and other publications.

The congregations facilitated volunteering in different ways. A few (five congregations, or 15% of our sample) organized their volunteers formally in committees and groups. They also offered volunteer recognition certificates. The certificates were highly valued, especially by youth and recent immigrants who were looking for employment. Most other congregations relied on the volunteers who had served for

longer periods of time to facilitate and guide the work of newcomers.

[What do recent immigrants gain from volunteering?](#)

Clergy and administrators felt that volunteering offered recent immigrants numerous opportunities to meet people, learn social and other skills, develop their leadership abilities, and embrace change. Some skills recent immigrants gain by involvement in volunteering activities include administration, logistics, maintenance, and repair. Clergy and administrators also said that volunteering exposed recent immigrants to the culture of volunteering. Also, interacting closely with long-term immigrants, newcomers widened their social networks.

[4.2 What we learned from the survey questionnaires](#)

In this section we report on the findings from the 834 completed surveys by members of the 34 congregations. As mentioned earlier, the response rate for surveys was 61%.

Profiles of the respondents

- Our sample included almost an equal number of men (52%) and women (48%).
- Half of the respondents had household incomes under \$39,999 (See Figure B.1 in Appendix B).
- Just over half of the respondents had post-secondary education (See Figure B.2 in Appendix B).
- More than half (64%) were employed (See Figure B.3 in Appendix B).
- Of the 36% who are not in the labour force, almost half (46%) were retired, close to one third (30%) were looking for work, and a quarter (24%) chose not to work.
- Most respondents (82%) were immigrants.
- Almost a third were recent immigrants; 21% arrived in the past five years, and 8% arrived in the last two years.
- A small number (19%) were under the age of 25 and had been in Canada an average of 10 years (See Figure B.4 in Appendix B).
- A small number (14%) were aged 65 and over and had been in Canada an average of 31 years (median = 33 years) (See Figure B.4 in Appendix B).
- Almost half (49%) had joined the congregation within six months of arriving in Canada.

How many volunteer at their congregation?

Of the respondents to our questionnaire, 84% volunteered at their congregation. They contributed an average of 364 hours per year. Almost a third of people who volunteered at their congregations (34%) also volunteered at other organizations. A few people (3%) did not volunteer at the congregation but volunteered elsewhere. Thus, for those who volunteer, the congregation is the focus of their volunteering efforts.

Congregation members volunteered an average of 7 hours a week. The distribution of volunteer hours is shown in Table 2, which indicates that the overwhelming majority of active volunteers give less than 6 hours of their time.

Table 2: Number of hours members spent volunteering each week at their congregation

Number of hours spent volunteering	Percentage
Less than 6 hours	75
6 to 10 hours	12
11 to 15	3
16 to 20	3
21 to 25	2
26 or more hours	5
Total	100

Are there any differences between men and women?

We found no difference in the number of female and male members volunteering for congregations. However, there was a significant difference between the average number of hours donated each week by men and women. On average, men volunteered 8 hours a week, while women volunteered 6 hours. We were unable to determine why men donated more hours than women.

What are the differences between those who volunteer and those who do not?

Members who volunteer had been with their congregations for an average of 14 years, while those who did not volunteer had been members for an average of 9 years. These significant differences suggest that the longer people are members of the congregation, the more likely they are to volunteer.

We explored the possibility that income might influence people's ability to volunteer. We assumed that the more financially established people were, the more likely they would be to volunteer. On the contrary, we found that members with lower incomes tend to be more active as volunteers.

How do volunteer rates compare to rates for other Canadians?

The respondents tend to volunteer and donate more to their congregations than other Canadians who attend weekly religious services. Among our respondents, 84% volunteered 364 hours a year. Among all Canadians who are active members of a congrega-

tion, 41% volunteered an average of 202 hours a year (McKeown, McIver, Moreton and Rotondo, 2004).¹⁰

Do income or age affect how much time people volunteer?

Members of ethnic congregations with lower than average incomes tend to volunteer more hours.¹¹ People with higher incomes were more likely to volunteer less hours. This is opposite to the trend within the overall Canadian population.

As well, the older people were, the more likely they were to volunteer.¹² This is similar to the Canadian population as a whole where number of hours volunteered rise with age and is highest in seniors (65+ years).¹³

Does employment status affect how much time people volunteer?

The number of hours respondents volunteered depended a great deal on whether or not they were working (either full-time or part-time). There were no differences in the average number of hours volunteered by people who were employed, whether recent immigrants or not. However people who were unemployed, retired, or not working, volunteered longer hours than those who were employed (See Figure 1).

¹⁰ Donation rates are very similar between the two groups. In our sample, 91% make donations to their congregation compared to 90% of all active congregants in Canada.

¹¹ The Pearson's Correlation is $r(568) = -.167, p < .001$

¹² The Pearson's Correlation is $r(600) = .162, p < .001$

¹³ Hall, M., McKeown, L., and Roberts, K. (2000) *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Ministry of Industry. (2001:34).

Among respondents who were unemployed, recent immigrants volunteered more time each week than other respondents. This indicates that the newcomers, with less developed social networks, rely on volunteering to help them find employment. Participants in the focus groups told us this was true. They had volunteered as recent immigrants, especially when they were unemployed, and had benefited from volunteering.

Does age affect rates of volunteering?

From clergy and administrators we learned that almost a quarter (22%) of congregation members are seniors. As well, 75% of the congregations in our study have programs for seniors. Seniors devote substantial volunteer hours to their congregations, and often help in programs for seniors. Disposable time may be the reason why seniors volunteer more than younger members, who must juggle both work and household responsibilities.

We found that older immigrants, especially seniors with lower incomes, contribute more hours than younger, more affluent, volunteers. Nearly 91% of the 129 respondents over 65 volunteered. They volunteered an average of 12 hours per week. This is similar to Canada as whole where Canadians aged 65 and older accounted for 34% of all charitable giving in terms of both money and volunteer time.¹⁴

What things affect whether people volunteer?

We asked respondents to tell us why they could not volunteer or could not volunteer longer hours. More than one third (35%) told us they had increased responsibilities at work and no time, while 18% said child care responsibilities were the reason. Fewer than 6% had other reasons such as looking for work, failing health, language difficulty, and not knowing where to go.

We were interested to see that there was no significant difference between the percentages of men and women who said that the reason they could not volunteer, was because they were looking after children and elderly parents. This finding was a useful insight, as child care and serving the elderly are traditionally seen as women's roles.

What motivates people to volunteer?

To find out why people volunteer, we asked respondents to mark a yes or no to a number of possible motives. Table 3 presents their answers. Many people said that free time was a key motive, while being asked personally to volunteer and volunteering with friends were also important. Two thirds of respondents said they were motivated for religious reasons and to develop their skills.

¹⁴ National Survey of Giving Volunteering and Participating, NSGVP (2000). The Giving and Volunteering of Seniors www.givingandvolunteering.ca/pdf/factsheets/2000_CA_Giving_and_volunteering_in_seniors.pdf (Retrieved June 1st 2005)

Figure 1: Number of hours volunteered per week by employment categories of immigrant members of congregations

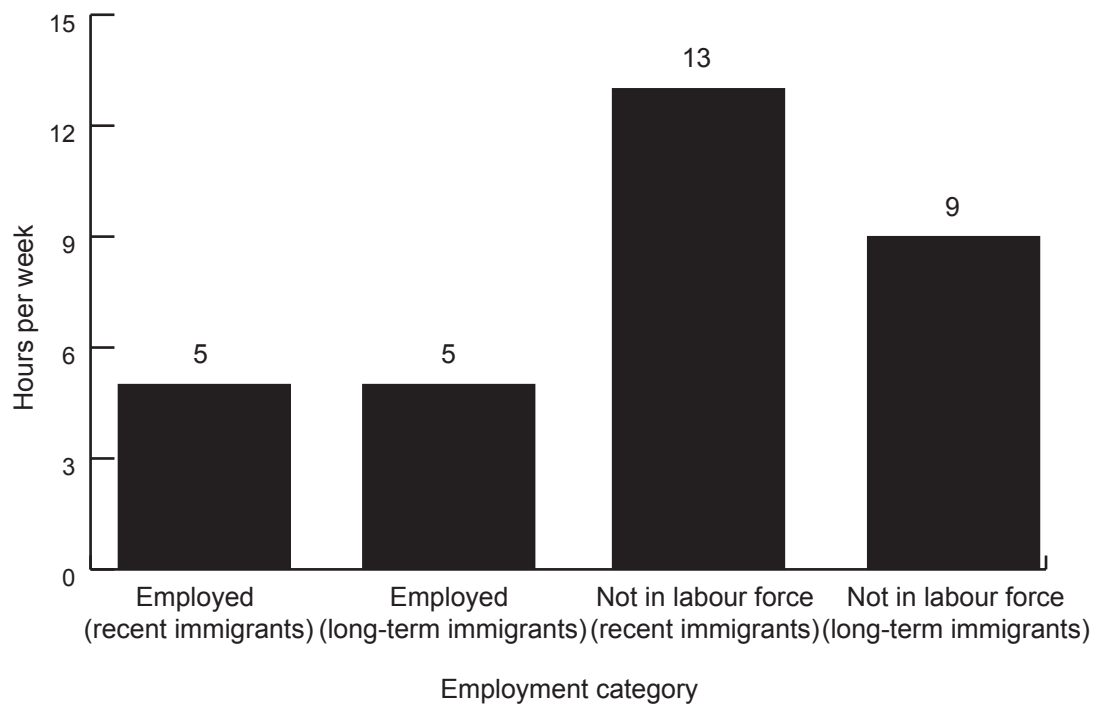


Table 3: Motivations to volunteer at the congregation

Motivations listed in our questionnaire	Percent answering YES
To satisfy my religious beliefs	63
To make social connections in congregation	50
To make social connections in the community	45
I was personally asked to volunteer	37
I had some free time and so I volunteered	36
Volunteer in a program where my friends volunteer	30
I am encouraged by clergy to volunteer	28
To obtain job training skills/professional reasons	26
To volunteer in an organization close to home	24

What are the benefits of volunteering?

To find out which benefits people felt they gained by volunteering, we listed several and asked respondents to rank them. We asked them to use a score of 1 to 5, with 1 representing not at all beneficial and 5 meaning extremely beneficial. Table 5 displays the results. We note that social connections and making new friends were the greatest benefits, while improving language skills and work-related factors were less important.

Table 4: Respondents ranking of the benefits of volunteering

Benefits listed in our questionnaire	Means of responses for all respondents (Number = 792)
Meeting new friends	4.2
Making social connections	4.1
Learning new skills	4.0
Improving language skills	3.4
Learning more about Canada	3.0
Getting Canadian work experience	2.8
References for employment	2.6
Help me get a paid job	2.3

Nearly all respondents (98%) said that volunteering enriches their life. We analyzed the questionnaire results to see if people who volunteered, and those who did not, perceived benefits differently. We found that people who indicated meeting new friends and making social connections as important benefits, were

more likely to be volunteers. Those who gave greater weight to benefits such as learning new skills and knowledge of Canada, and expanding social connections and networks were also more likely to volunteer more hours, although these findings were not significant.

What did young people say about volunteering?

Most youth in our sample (93%) were in school fulltime, and just over half were employed. Of those who worked, 85% held part-time jobs. Despite their school and work commitments, 89% of the young people said that they volunteered at their congregation. They volunteered an average of 5 hours per week. As well, 79% donated money to the congregation. Nearly 45% had also volunteered at other places in the past 12 months and 50% had donated money to other organizations. As with adults, young men volunteered more than young women. The average number of hours male youth volunteered was 6 hours per week, compared with 3 hours a week for female youth. The most frequent reason that youth gave for not volunteering more hours was lack of time.

Compared to the rest of the sample, young people had different motivations for volunteering, and saw different benefits from volunteering. Most said that the main benefit of volunteering was to learn new skills. They perceived this benefit as being a valuable way to get work. They were motivated to volunteer as a way to gain skills. As nearly all of them were in high schools, colleges or universities, it is not surprising that they were most interested in benefits that would help with their future careers.

4.3 What we learned from the focus groups

Profile of focus group participants

Focus groups lasted about 45 minutes to an hour, depending on participants. All the people who volunteered to be part of the focus group were immigrants, and also volunteers at their congregations. Some volunteered on a regular basis and others on occasion.

After a brief introduction about the research by the facilitator, the participants were asked to have an open discussion about their experiences as immigrant volunteers at their congregations, and the role of this volunteering in influencing the process of their integration into Canadian Society. We did not ask their age although some did volunteer the information. Most of the participants appeared to be between their late 20s to their early 50s. Of the participants, 30% were relatively recent immigrants (under 5 years in Canada) and 48% of all participants were women.

Ethnic congregations as a 'place of belonging' or a 'family'

All of the focus group participants described their ethnic congregation either as a place to belong, something to replace their family, or a safe space where they were understood and welcomed. Volunteering enhanced the feeling that the congregation was like a family.

Focus group participants also emphasized that their religious beliefs had taught them to help one another;

this belief encouraged them to volunteer. One participant said,

"The church keeps me connected to my people and my culture even after being here in Canada. This is why I serve the church also because service here is service to God."

More than half the participants felt that their congregations helped to perpetuate family values. They also said that belonging to the congregations helped them feel secure and safe.

Building social connections through volunteering

The participants in all focus groups described how clergy and administrators had personally welcomed them, encouraged them to participate in the congregation's activities and to volunteer their time and talents. Everyone described how, when they arrived in Canada, they sought out the ethnic congregation so they could participate in religious activities and meet new people.

A third of the people in the focus groups said they regularly helped to put together religious services but did not consider this as volunteering. When they began to observe how other immigrants referred to their helping as volunteering, they realized that these activities are valued differently in Canada. Most importantly, they came to see how volunteering might help them access resources such as new friends and information about jobs.

Another third of the participants said that they were motivated to volunteer after observing the volunteer activities of other immigrants, especially their friends.

The final third volunteered on an occasional basis because they liked the activities in their congregations, and wanted to be involved.

People who were recent immigrants described how they made new friends and long-term immigrants described lasting friendships they had made while volunteering or participating in congregational activities. Everyone mentioned that the congregation allowed them to reinforce their religious and cultural practices, while developing networking and other skills that could transfer to work outside the congregation. Some gave vivid accounts of how fellow members had helped them set up their homes and had assisted them when they were dealing with tragedy and grief.

[Volunteering as a way to help immigrants find work](#)

Our focus group participants often said their main task when they moved to Canada was to find a job. Recent immigrants and some immigrants who had been in the country longer said that they thought volunteering was a strategy to help them get a job, but not all of them followed the strategy. Culture, education, and past work experiences all influenced the extent to which people relied on their ethnic congregation for assistance in finding work. Members with professional qualifications or trade skills in high demand usually did not rely on their congregations to help them find work. Others faced difficulties getting work because they had language barriers or lacked Canadian experience.

In a number of focus groups (7 of the 33), people said that they had contacted government agencies for help finding a job. When this strategy did not work, they sought help in their congregations. They either talked

to people they had met as volunteers, accessed one of the services offered by the congregation, or talked to clergy and administrators.

Recent immigrants said they relied on long-term immigrants for advice on how to look for a job, and how to conduct themselves in Canada and at job interviews. Although congregation members gave them lots of tips about finding jobs or doing a job search, this did not always result in a job. Nonetheless, they valued the information and concern they received.

An average of two participants in every focus group began to volunteer at their congregation as soon as they joined. They did so because they hoped they would get to know others and that their volunteer experience would give them an edge in the job market. Here are descriptions of the experiences of two recent immigrants:

“When I came here I volunteered right away to teach Arabic at the church. I was able to put this on my resume and it really helped me to get a job because I had Canadian experience.”

“Her experience with the children’s ministry enabled her to find employment in a daycare. As well, it was a person from her church who introduced her to her employer and gave her a reference.”

One volunteer described how his congregation gave volunteers a certificate of recognition and said that one recent immigrant had taken the certificate along to a job interview. The interviewer had been impressed with how the person’s leadership skills had

developed while he was volunteering and gave him the job.

Volunteering as a way to build skills

Focus group participants who volunteered often said that they developed many skills while volunteering. Here is what one participant said:

“Just like anywhere or in a job, when you volunteer you pick up new skills. You learn so that you can do things right and expand your horizon.”

Volunteering as a way to help immigrants improve language skills and retain their mother tongue

More than half of the focus group participants said that difficulties with English kept them from volunteering outside their congregation. They said they would be more likely to improve their language skills if they volunteered elsewhere, but they chose to volunteer in the congregation because they were comfortable carrying out their tasks in their first language, and comfortable speaking in English and making errors among other people from the same ethnic or cultural group. A third of our participants had taken an English as a Second Language (ESL) course offered at the congregation.

Both recent and long-term immigrants said it was important that their children learn their ethnic language. In almost all of the non-Christian congregations, the congregants had adapted the Christian practice of Sunday school to teach the next generation their religion and language.

In our focus groups, immigrants described how their children went to Sunday school where they were taught their ethnic language and the tenets of their religion. They also described how they ate at communal meals, participated in cultural events, and attended seminars or lectures. All of these activities helped them make connections in their local community, and provided their children a sense of pride in their inherited cultural identity.

Learning about Canada and adjusting to Canada

Slightly more than half of the participants in each focus group said they had turned to their congregation for social contact and to learn about Canadian society and culture from their peers. Through volunteering they received this knowledge. Although the volunteer tasks did not specifically teach them how to adjust, they learned about Canadian society by interacting with others.

Recent immigrants often volunteer at the Sunday school programs that their children attend. Volunteering allows them to network with parents of the children they teach. They can also observe how long-term immigrants handle intergenerational ties. Specifically, they can learn how to balance their own cultural traditions with the Canadian way of life and minimize friction with their children, who learn Canadian ways from their friends and schools.

Volunteering to build skills

Participants talked about how volunteering at their congregations had taught them relevant, social skills and what was acceptable behavior in Canadian society. As one person said:

“It is important that we tell people how to adapt to Canadian society by telling them what to do or not. For instance, we teach them the importance of being on time and the sorts of questions not to ask, like a person’s age. We also find them jobs by using our Canadian contacts. I believe it benefits me to help these people and I remember how I was helped and then I want to help others.”

Many also said that volunteering gave them the opportunity to lead and to learn about leadership from those around them.

Gender and volunteering

We found that the various volunteer tasks performed in ethnic congregations were often divided along gender lines. This was not surprising given that many members came from cultures and traditions where women are responsible for all household tasks. A majority of the women in the focus groups said their activities included cooking, cleaning, taking care of the elderly, and offering Sunday school programs. This was true for both recent and long-term immigrants. Men were more likely to do tasks such as fundraising, accounting, maintaining the building or property, and organizing events.

Both men and women volunteer in language training, music and art workshops, assist with immigration or other government policies, and help with daily administration. However, women are the majority of volunteers in these activities. In some cases, because of religious and cultural traditions, the work carried out by men and women was kept deliberately separate. Women did not find that their gender-based roles

were in conflict. Rather, they felt this was an efficient way to work.

Women who are recent immigrants bonded with other women while seeking advice about how to run their homes. They received a wide range of information. Here is how one woman described her experience:

“By working as a volunteer [alongside other women], I could learn the Canadian school systems and better understand how to help my kids to adapt to new educational environments. Later, I also helped new immigrants’ families by showing them how to open bank accounts, do shopping, and apply for cable TV, etc.”

Men who were recent immigrants said that the focus of their networking with other male volunteers was on jobs, the economy, and Canadian politics.

Youth and volunteering

Clergy and administrators and focus group participants both said it was important to ensure that children participate and volunteer in the congregation’s activities. As well, young people in the focus groups emphasized that they liked helping out at the congregation. They said that volunteering reaffirmed their religious beliefs to do good for others, and that it taught them valuable skills.

What we learned from the focus groups

Immigrants were often inspired by encounters with volunteers who had helped them adjust. These interactions often had a permanent impact on their lives. Their own personal experiences allowed them

to empathize with the recent immigrants. They noted that volunteering was one way of giving back to the community. As one recent immigrant said, *“It has felt good to be of use to the temple and they always go out of their way to help me.”* The woman who made this statement described how the temple members had given her and her husband a furnished place to stay rent-free, helped them find jobs, and provided tremendous emotional support. She reciprocated by volunteering to maintain greenhouses for the temple.

Although reciprocity is important, our focus groups revealed that immigrants volunteer primarily to develop new social connections and to find employment. People who volunteer all said that volunteering helped them develop social connections; learn about Canadian life and culture; retain their culture; and access information about jobs, finances, and housing. They all developed transferable skills. Some people used these skills to help them get a new job, while others use their skills more generally. For instance, one participant said she did not know how to do general administration work. She acquired these skills while volunteering at the congregation’s office, and now applies the skills in her own life when she has to write business letters or send faxes.

Long-term immigrants also said that their primary reason for volunteering in the congregation was to meet their social and cultural needs. They did not ask fellow congregation members for help finding employment. Most of them (75%) felt that volunteering at their congregations had greatly helped them to integrate into Canada. Others see their integration process as separate from their experiences as volunteers.

All of the focus group participants felt that volunteering greatly enriched their lives, increased their self confidence, made them feel that they are valuable members of the congregation, and gave them a sense of community.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the role ethnic congregations play in helping integrate immigrants, particularly recent immigrants, into Canadian society. In particular, we tried to examine whether volunteering in their congregation allowed recent immigrants to adjust quickly to their new country. Our results indicate that volunteering does seem to have helped. Volunteering allowed recent immigrants to build and access social connections within their new communities.

Ethnic congregations are safe, cultural and religious havens which allow people time to adjust to their new environment. They meet recent immigrants’ religious needs, and they assist recent immigrants with practical needs. The congregations almost fulfill the role of a surrogate extended family.

Ethnic congregations are highly dependent on volunteers to design and implement most of their programs. By encouraging recent immigrants to volunteer for such programs, the congregations help them to meet people, learn transferable skills, and access resources. Volunteering helps them adjust to their new country. Volunteering appears to be an effective way for immigrants to build and maintain social capital, which in turn replaces social connections lost in leaving their home country.

The clergy and administrators we interviewed told us that immigrants expect their congregations to help them make social connections, practice their religious beliefs, and provide religious training to their children. Our focus groups confirmed that all of the congregations in our study met these expectations.

Volunteering at ethnic congregations was a viable strategy for making social connections to integrate into Canadian society. However, our findings revealed that recent immigrants volunteer less than other members on a regular basis.

Our questionnaire results revealed that people who volunteered did so because of social factors. They were personally asked to volunteer, or chose to volunteer in programs in which their friends volunteered. Furthermore, our survey told us that people thought the greatest benefits of volunteering in their congregation were *meeting new friends, making social connections and learning new skills*.

The testimonies we heard from immigrants about how their volunteering activities have helped them form a strong social base, which they depended on to meet their needs. While some newcomers were able to secure employment in their field with ease, many had to spend considerable time and resources finding jobs for which they were trained. After they arrived, connections within their congregations helped them get jobs, find housing, and learn about the school system for their children. Others needed help with translation, accreditation of their qualifications, and help with government-related documents ranging from taxes to medical insurance. Finally, all immigrants spoke about how congregations welcomed them, and made them feel at home in a new country.

All immigrants, whether recent or long-term, have the same need to form social networks and find access to be able to practice their religious beliefs. Not all immigrants, however, have the same utilitarian needs. This plays a role in how much they rely on their congregations to help them get adjusted, and why they volunteer. For instance, seniors have more time and have acquired valuable skills, and often share them with others. In the case of recent immigrants who need jobs, but lack Canadian experience or qualifications, or those who face language barriers, volunteering can help them network to secure employment. Their exposure in the congregations also gives them a sense of how Canadian institutions work. Others with pressing needs like housing and transportation are likely to simply ask for help, and clergy and administrators and other members are often instrumental in helping them. More established immigrants volunteer in their congregations as a way to help newcomers; to give their children a place to understand their cultural and religious heritage; and to make and retain social connections.

Recent immigrants volunteer less regularly than long-term immigrants. They are also hard pressed for time, and face pressures to adjust to their new environment. However, we found in our focus groups that most recent immigrants do volunteer on an occasional basis. One of the most important perceived benefits of volunteering is the opportunity to increase one's social and to a lesser extent human capital. Our survey findings showed that respondents, who perceived they would gain these benefits, were more likely to volunteer. They also volunteered for more hours than people who did not see that volunteering would improve their social and human capital. In terms of overall benefits of volunteering, 98%

of respondents claimed that volunteering enriched their lives.

This study affirms that an ethnic congregation is an indisputable asset to its immigrant members. Most ethnic congregations rely on informal methods of helping their immigrant members. Perhaps as their congregations grow, clergy and administrators and boards of congregations should offer more formal programs to meet those needs. A few of our congregations did emphasize the efforts of their immigrant volunteers. They formally acknowledged their contributions with certificates of recognition. This strategy is very practical for immigrants who use volunteering as a way to find work.

The quality of programs and services at congregations depends on having well-organized volunteers. Such members of a congregation are a valuable social asset to their local communities. Government and nonprofit organizations that work to meet immigrant needs can partner with ethnic congregations to better understand the needs of immigrants in terms of building local social support networks. By doing so, they can encourage members of ethnic congregations to volunteer in local community organizations. This is one way to increase members' social connections to outside groups and mainstream society. This would increase 'bridging,' which recent immigrants need in order to successfully integrate into Canadian society.

This study has highlighted the role of volunteer programs run by ethnic congregations in aiding new immigrants to integrate into Canadian society.

In summary, immigrants do arrive in Canada with human capital: that is the skills, knowledge and ex-

perience they have acquired in their country of origin. But immigrants often lack the essential social connections to allow them to put their skills and experience to work. Immigrants also need to develop their language skills and knowledge about Canada in order to ease their integration into Canadian society. It is therefore not surprising that they seek easy and accessible ways of achieving these goals by joining religious congregations that mostly comprise people of the same ethnicity and culture.

In our study of new immigrants and their association with volunteerism in ethnic congregations, we found that the congregational volunteer programs assist new immigrants directly as clients in terms of improving their language acquisition and access to information about Canadian society. Such programs also attract new immigrants as volunteers. In this role, they can put their old skills to use and develop new ones that will facilitate their integration into Canadian society and increase their likelihood of employment. Many congregational volunteer programs also extend their services beyond the congregation. Volunteering for such activities provides immigrants with a chance to make connections with people and social groups in the community outside the congregation. So ethnic congregations fulfil a dual purpose for many new immigrants: they provide a familiar cultural and spiritual environment in a new and strange setting and they provide a means for immigrants to build their knowledge and understanding of their new country through engagement in volunteer programs.

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APPENDIX A

Profile of the congregations included in our sample

The following information about the congregations in our study is based on in-depth interviews with the clergy and administrators and on written materials obtained from the congregations.

Age: The ethnic congregations in our sample range in age of existence from 7 to 107 years. The median age of congregations was 26.5 years (that is, half of congregations were older and half younger than this number).

Stability: Our findings suggest that the majority of the congregations in our study are well established and have considerable assets. The average length of time congregations have been in their current location is 17.5 years. All but two congregations, or 94%, own the property in which they are housed, and 22% are still paying a mortgage. More than a third, or 38%, share space with other congregations. These were smaller congregations who could not afford their own space.

Size: The number of members in each congregation in this study ranged from 125 to 37,000, including children. The median was 600 members (that is, half of congregations had less than 600 members, half had more than 600). Our sample includes five large congregations of over 10,000 members and two extraordinary congregations that reported membership of over 30,000.

In the past three years, 61% of the congregations had grown, 32% had stabilized in size, and 6% had decreased in size. The number of immigrants

coming to the congregation in the past three years had increased in 56%, stabilised in 26% and decreased in 18% of the congregations.

Active membership: It is more realistic and accurate to measure the size of the congregation by its active membership, which means the number of members who attend the congregation at least once a month. Using this criterion, the median number of active members is 265. That is, half of the congregations in our study had more than 265 active members, and half had less.

Ethnicity: The multicultural fabric of Canada is evident in our sample. The congregations described their ethnicities as follows: Chinese, Ethiopian, Egyptian, East African (those of South Asian descent), Filipino, Greek, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Lebanese, Lithuanian, Russian, Macedonian, Pakistani, Polish, and Vietnamese.

Diversity: Most of the congregations in our sample are fairly homogenous, in that 80% or more belong to one ethnic and language group. Two congregations included two or three distinct ethnic groups who came from different parts of the world. They had worshipped at congregations with the same religious affiliation in their home countries, and felt culturally and linguistically related to the other groups who were part of the congregation in Canada.

APPENDIX B

Profile of Survey Respondents

Figure B.1: Annual household income of respondents

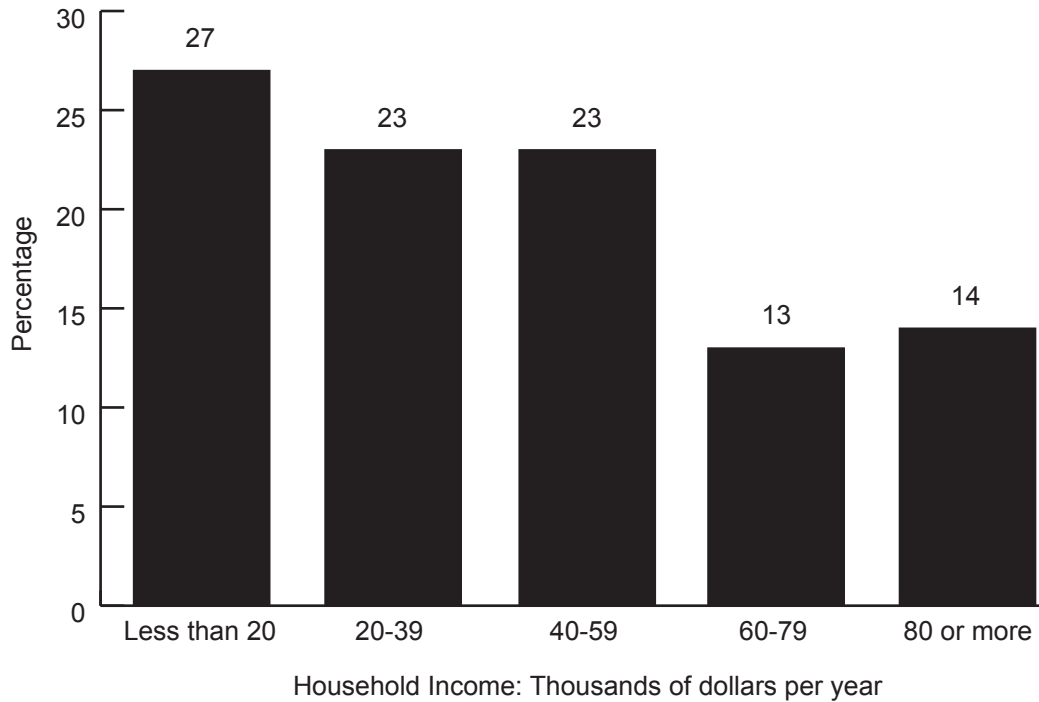


Figure B.2: Educational level of respondents

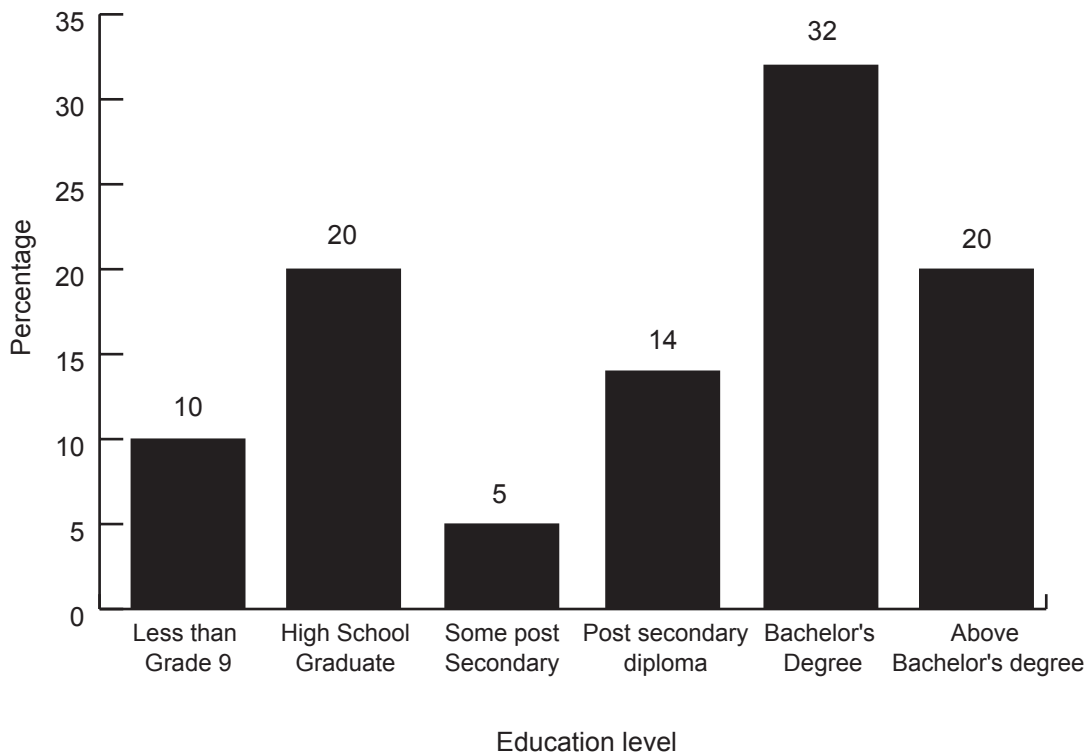


Figure B.3: Employment status of respondents

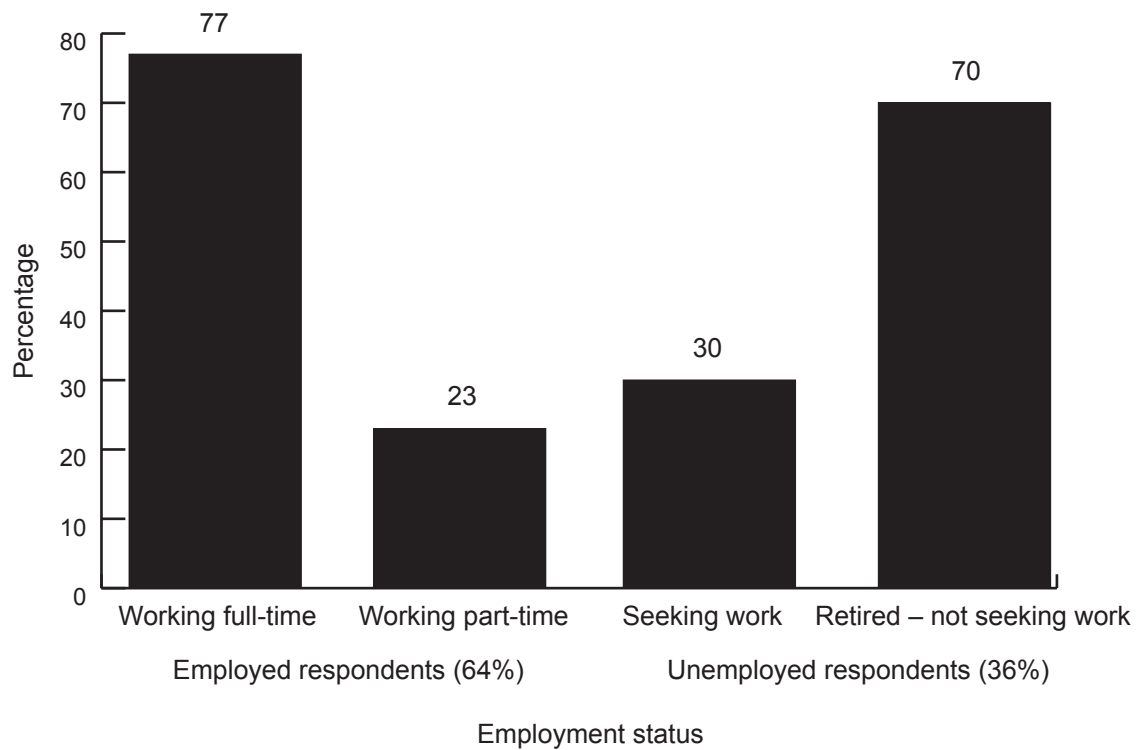
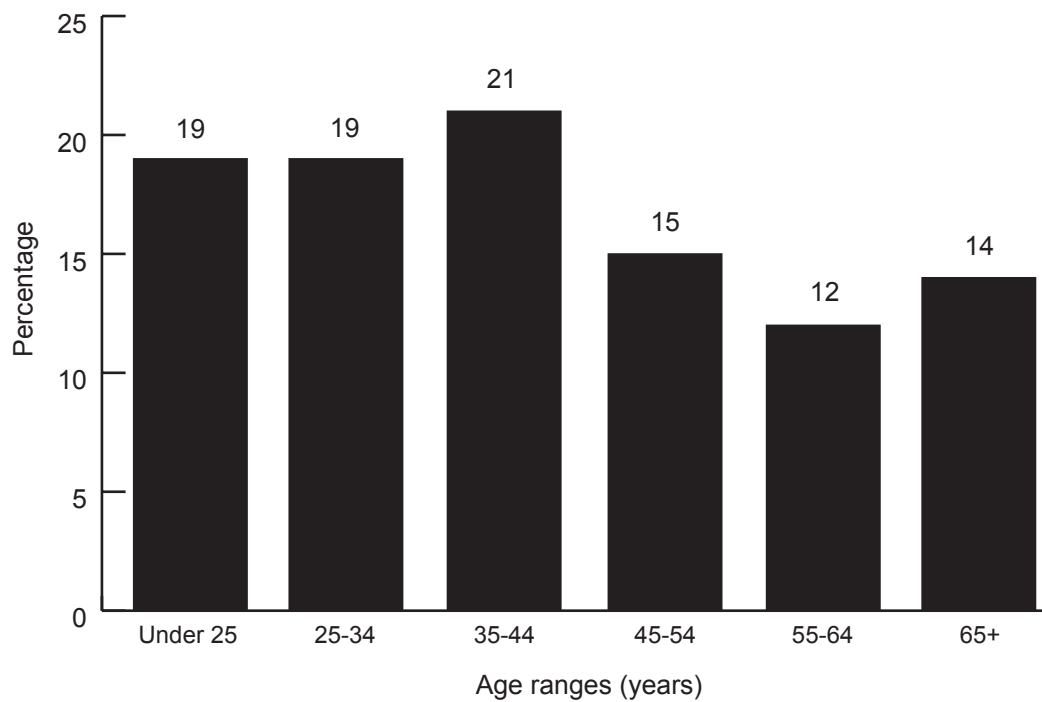


Figure B.4: Age profile of respondents



Notes

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