

"As I see it a large church is the best way in 2003 to live a powerful Christian life and to change the world."
—Pierre Poulin, *Eglise Nouvelle Vie*

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Does size matter?



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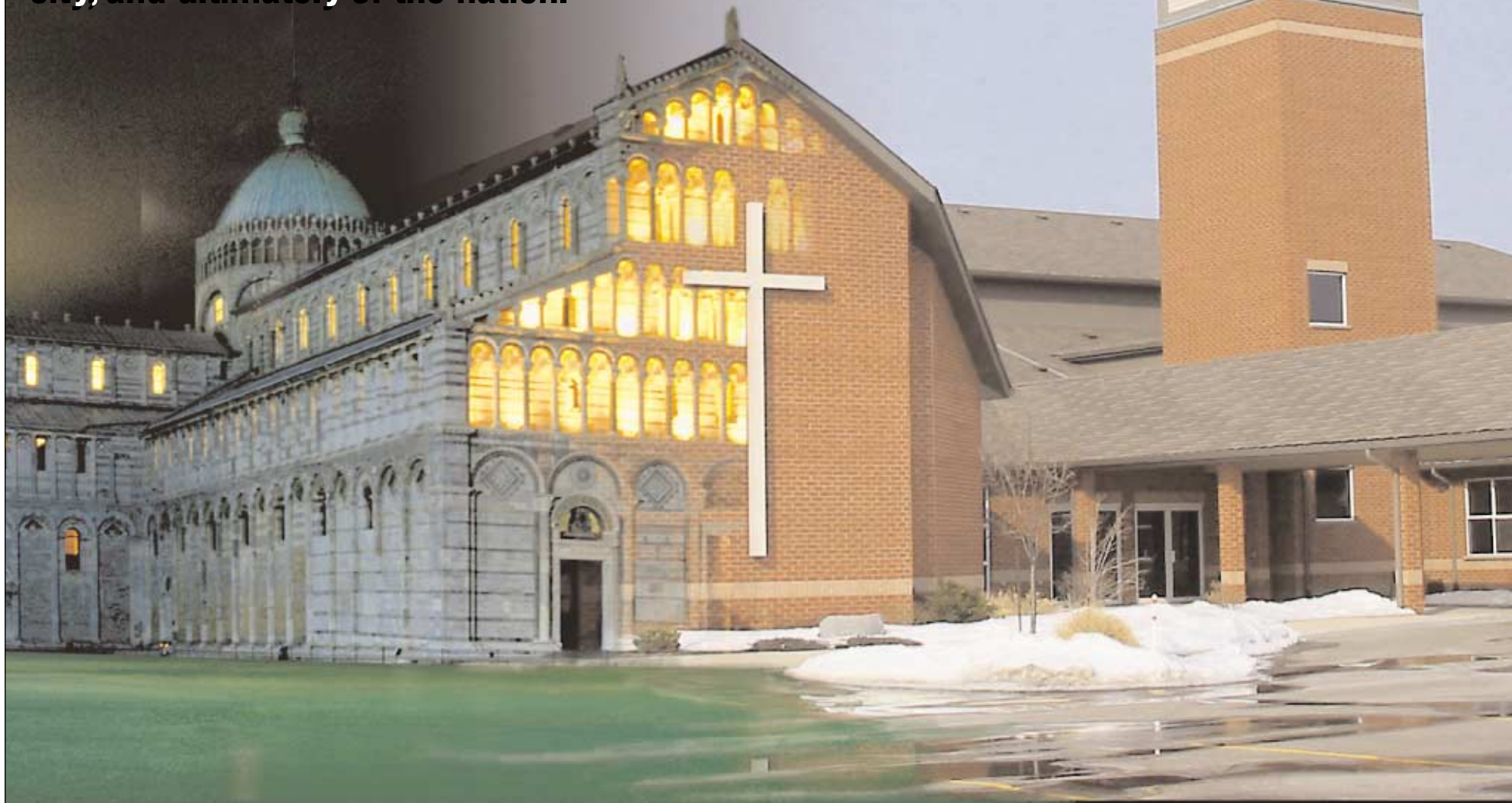
Spring 2003

ChristianWeek

LARGE CHURCHES

Cathedrals of the new Century

"I would propose that a part of Canada's spiritual malaise is the loss of cathedrals. Not large buildings per se, but the loss of large congregations who indeed become the shepherds of their city, and ultimately of the nation."



Franklin Pyles
Special to CW

While church attendance continues to decline, there are significant signs of renewed spiritual vitality in our land.

In his most recent study of religion in Canada, *Restless Gods*, University of Lethbridge sociologist Reginald Bibby provides data about a "large number of Canadians who believe they are experiencing the activity of God in their lives...a spiritual restlessness that may be spilling over into the churches."

But historian Mark Noll considers these findings "cold

comfort" for evangelical Christians. In a speech last year at Tyndale College, he observed that evangelicals continue to hover at eight per cent of Canada's population.

For evangelicals this means confronting the reality that on every front—public policy, media, lifestyle, education or, most importantly, spiritual life—we are a small minority who exercise little influence, and the influence we do exert is often strongly opposed.

Canadian evangelicals need to develop a strong strategy for evangelizing and discipling our nation. This needs to be a comprehensive strategy, which includes church planting, church growth,

institutions of higher learning, compassion ministries and influencing media and social policies.

And I believe that the raising up of large churches in Canada is one critical part of such a strategy. I maintain that large churches can exert spiritual influence on three levels of society beyond their immediate congregations.

Impact the city

First, large churches can have a big influence on their cities. Ted Haggard writes that certain churches and their pastors become the elders in their cities. I believe that there is a strong sense in which this is true. Cities have a reality as

communities in the political, sociological and spiritual realms. There is considerable evidence in the Bible to show that the spiritual reality of a city is primary and determinative of its political and sociological reality (see, for example, Jacques Ellul's *The Meaning of the City*).

Cities can be either bound in darkness and be agents of oppression through the political and sociological medium; or they can follow God, experience light and be places where the political and sociological medium brings great benefit to all citizens. This is not to say that any city can become the New Jerusalem. But, that there is coming a city which is the New

Jerusalem tells us of the reality and influence of this spiritual stratum.

In Europe the reality of this spiritual dimension of the city was demonstrated by the presence of the cathedral. Usually it stood out from the other buildings, both in size and in grandeur. These cathedrals of course did not stand alone, but nurtured a large system of churches which brought ministry to the neighbourhoods and surrounding rural areas.

Thus, all understood its message of the importance of the church to that city as the source of salvation, wisdom, societal stability and health.

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Large churches encourage growth

Pyles continued from page 1

I would propose that a part of Canada's spiritual malaise is the loss of cathedrals. Not large buildings *per se*, but the loss of large congregations who indeed become the shepherds of their city, and ultimately of the nation.

We need to rebuild these cathedrals by nurturing churches that will become large in proportion to the city they serve. Thus, churches with a Sunday morning attendance of 200 in a rural town of 800 is in fact a large church for that community and can exert a transformative influence in the power of the Holy Spirit.

However, at this point I wish to speak about large churches in Canada's large population centres.

Urban influence

The vast majority of Canadians live in one of four metro centres: Montreal, Greater Toronto, Calgary—Edmonton corridor and Vancouver. These metropolitan areas can sustain, and should, many churches in the 5,000-

10,000 weekend attendance range. The three largest of these four areas could sustain a number of churches in the 25-30,000 range.

How would we expect Canada as a society and the Kingdom of God, our true home, to spiritually benefit from these large assemblies?

They would be engines for evangelism. Fifty-six per cent of respondents to a survey among Canadian churches that have attended a Willow Creek seminar report that as a result they now have a "stronger emphasis on reaching the lost."

In the current spiritual climate, we will never see large churches because of people transferring in. The churches that would grow must do so by means of highly successful evangelistic efforts. Once these churches grow they will be the ones who explore new ways to evangelizing people and they will produce the materials that will allow those methods to be transferable.

church facts

Lakeshore St. Andrews Presbyterian Church

Affiliation: The Presbyterian Church in Canada
Location: Tecumseh, Ontario
Average weekly worship attendance: 798
Membership: 376
Contact: 519-979-8082; www.lakeshorestandrews.net
Pastor: Chuck Congram
Key ministry: small group ministry

"When it comes to effectiveness in churches, leadership is the issue."



The Alpha program is an example. It began in a local church in England, and, as it was used over several years and refined, it spread to other churches, until it became a service organization that now is transferred to thousands of churches.

In a similar manner, some of these churches will become large precisely because the Holy Spirit will inspire them to conceive of an evangelism method that will prove to be the key to communicate Christ either to a specific local, or to a generational grouping, or perhaps to a particular ethnic or religious group.

As they meet with the blessing of many converts, and grow numerically, their very growth will enable them to have the resources to begin the process of transferring this methodology that they have pioneered.

As well, because of their size, these large churches will be able to foster a growing network of contacts that will reach into every corner of Canadian society. We would see the day when there are Christians among the "household of Caesar" so to speak, and not just a few, but many, and this many

will not be afraid to share their faith even further.

For these reasons I do not believe I am speaking in hyperbole when I refer to them as engines of evangelism.

Compassionate ministry can be pioneered and conducted from large churches. The commitment of the government in Canada to be the provider of a solution to every problem, which grew out of the liberal church project, is already a demonstrated failure.

While a number of reasons for this failure many of which may be valid have been proposed, I would suggest the key reason is the impossibility of the political structure to minister to people spiritually. Before evangelicals lies an amazing opportunity to bring vast resources to bear so society can truly be changed from the inside out.

This new social initiative has already started on many fronts. It is not being propped up as a theory which reality must somehow be pressed to conform to. Rather, compassionate ministry is arising from a profound theology of sin and grace and is being tested around the world.

But around the world must also include Canada. For that to happen, churches with a large resource base must (and, I believe, will) become deeply involved in their communities.

I believe these churches will offer a mix of immediate help, such as cars for single mothers, support groups, care for the elderly and very practical help to new Canadians, with an attempt at curing deep spiritual causes that present themselves in personal and social disorder.

Using knowledge already gained by our compassionate ministries around the world, our large Canadian churches will have both the available expertise and the volunteer base to make significant impact in alleviating a variety of ills.

Large churches will nurture a church planting movement. Much of Canada is deprived of lifegiving churches. While various denominations are seeking to become aggressive in church planting, much, much more is needed. The growth of large

churches in other parts of the world show conclusively that aggressive church planting becomes part of their vision.

Because of their resource base, these churches are started as fairly large churches and sometimes grow to become very large churches themselves. The success of our dreams to plant a church for every 1,000 people in Canada depends upon the rise of large churches.

A call for vision. We are a weak people, and a vision like this, a vision of once again speaking the Word of God with authority and spiritual power to the people of Canada, is certainly beyond our natural resources. But it is not beyond the resources of God.

Therefore, let us wait upon the LORD, expecting our strength to be renewed, so that we will mount on with wings as eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not be faint.

Franklin Pyles was pastor of the Alliance Church in Owen Sound, Ontario before he was elected president of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in July 2000.

"A large church provides me abundant opportunities to worship, to grow, to love, to care, to serve, to witness and to evangelize."

—Ian Ma,
 Vancouver Chinese Alliance Church

church facts

Lakeview Free Methodist Church

Affiliation: The Free Methodist Church in Canada
Location: Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
Average weekly worship attendance: 1,033
Membership: 272
Contact: 306-374-6556; www.lakeviewchurch.com
Pastor: Dean Angell
Key ministry: Online prayer and community group

"To become a community of authentic Christ-followers, based on God's Word, fulfilling Jesus' purpose of seeking and saving the lost."

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church facts

Metropolitan Bible Church

Affiliation: Associated Gospel Churches
Location: Ottawa, Ontario
Average weekly worship attendance: 1,150
Membership: 304
Contact: 613-238-8182; www.met-church.org
Pastor: Rick Reed
Key ministry: Young adults ministry

"Our vision...to train ambassadors for Christ...who join together in growing more like Christ and guiding more to Christ in the nation's capital region and the nations of the world."