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Tensions in Ontario rural churches among long-term members, newcomers, and local residents

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ABSTRACT

Religious decline in small-town rural Ontario churches has created a vulnerability in their systems of belonging, including reduced levels of volunteerism that have traditionally provided significant sources of social capital within churches themselves and for the larger community. Attempts to counter this decline have also created the potential for conflict and tensions amongst church members. Newcomer retirees (predominately from large urban cities) who resettle in rural areas present opportunities for rural churches to encourage and support them as new members, to engage in lay leadership for administration, and to help sustain the array of pastoral services and activities that serve broader community interest and participation. Newcomers, however, also bring different attitudes and values regarding church buildings, spaces, and objects, and within the liberal churches, they expect to have their views and interests addressed. Subsequently, liberal churches face more overt challenges to existing traditions and symbolic meanings of identity and belonging, likely experiencing a greater number of frames of conflict. Utilizing Becker's (1999) approach to congregational conflicts and Davie's (1994) model of believing and belonging, this article explores how larger issues of power, authority, and control between retiree newcomers, long-term members, and local residents reflect the symbolic materiality of church space and furnishings, highlighting tensions in sustaining church identity and place within a wider community context.

1. Introduction

In North America, churchgoers represent some of the highest levels of volunteering and charitable giving that significantly spill over into other forms of civic engagement (see Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 2003; Cnann et al., 2003; Smidt, 2003; Thiessen, 2015). Religiously-generated social capital in rural areas is a predominant expression of group bonding within the church and in the bridging networks and attachments with the wider community through available leadership, building usage, engagement in various service programs and social support activities, as well as provision of an extensive array of pastoral care and counselling (see Liu et al., 1998; Goreman, 2004; Ammerman, 2005; Lee, 2006; Lee and Bartkowski, 2004; Chaves, 2007). Strong empirical evidence by Wuthnow (1997), Bowen (2004), Bibby (2004, 2011) and Thiessen (2015), however, also indicates that the steady decline of religion and church involvement, particularly in more liberal traditions, has significant consequences through declining levels of volunteering, charitable giving, and sustaining correlated assistance programs that are particularly difficult to replace in rural areas.

Despite the serious membership decline in regular participation and attrition through aging and death, liberal rural churches remain highly committed to sustaining existing levels of community involvements and activities, but to do so must increasingly rely on the presence of new members, particularly retiree newcomers. Consequentially, many of the retiree newcomers who gravitate to the more liberal Anglican and United[1] churches seek a more flexible framework of belief and adherence expectations, but also require

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[1] Formed in 1925 through uniting Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational churches, the United Church of Canada is the largest Protestant denomination in Canada. They view the Bible as inspired by God, but written by human authors, recognizing that the documents contained within are products of their historical and geographical backgrounds. Additionally, they hold inclusion very highly, seeking to include all who believe in Christ in their services if they so wish, as well as allowing interfaith marriages, and same-sex couples (allowed under the General Council, but the local council may decide on their own regarding this matter). Finally, the United Church of Canada is highly involved in social justice issues, attempting to help those in need both locally and internationally through their interpretation of Christ's teachings.

more expression for their ideas of innovative changes in worship styles and uses of church space that can be seen as contentious by long-term members and others in the wider community. These conflicts reflect what Becker (1999:18) identifies as "between-frame" conflicts, i.e., a clash of two fundamentally different sets of expectations that are difficult to resolve because their divergent expectations include "different ideas about appropriate decision-making processes," especially regarding church usage, sacred space, and the symbolic materiality of buildings and belongings. Conflicts about identity and how things should be done often entail opposing models, with the current dominant model being challenged or revised by those who are willing and able to voice dissent, i.e., the retiree newcomers (ibid: 21). In this article, two such conflicts are presented: one over visible symbols of inclusiveness, and the other over contested spaces in the churches and what materials should embody these spaces. These conflicts highlight distinctions in attitudes and identities between long-term members and retiree newcomers that become more apparent with declining church attendance, revealing differences between the historical ideal of the congregation's identity as a "family model" church, functioning to preserve what long-term local residents see as tradition-based continuity, and a more inclusive "community model" held by some newcomer retirees that reflect their own values of connection (Becker, 1999:4).

This analysis on small-town rural churches utilizes other theoretical frameworks such as Davie's (1994) concepts of believing and belonging that express new spiritual and religious responses in the face of declining church attendance in Britain. They are particularly applicable to understand how long-term local residents with no overt interest in religious belief continue to feel deeply attached to the churches and their place within the larger community, or how some newcomers feel they can only belong to a liberal church that allows a wide range of beliefs. MacDonald's (2002) analysis of the relation of symbolic materiality to congregational conflicts during the Scottish Reformation and Finlayson's (2012) focus on emotional experiences and responses to church buildings, both apply to the range of configurations within believing and belonging, and highlight how challenges to or transformations of what is considered "sacred space" can manifest as sites of contention, reflecting what Chidester and Linenthal (1995:6) refer to as their inherent capacity for both poetics and politics. Heley and Jones' (2013) depiction of the serious leisure practices of older people in the rural areas of mid-Wales is useful to appreciate the range and high level of commitment to leisure activities, many of which are church related, and to emphasize the correlation of older people as one of the most significant sources of their community's social capital, a position supported by other scholars such as Putnam (2000) and Le Mesurier (2006). In the high amenity area of rural Ontario, however, serious leisure practices among retiree newcomers are predominantly oriented towards recreational activities (golf, skiing, hiking, garden or bridge clubs) and volunteering for art and music festivals, not to local church involvements and networks that serve the wider community.

The central theme of this article not only presents the retiree newcomers' impact on rural church dynamics and identities in a time of declining church attendance, but also illustrates that their capacity for generating conflict in liberal churches expresses different attitudes towards belonging that can be articulated through the symbolic materiality of the church building. Newcomers resettling in rural areas from large urban cities may not fully appreciate the deeper symbolic sense of what the church represents to a small community's understanding of continuity, identity and social cohesion. Within the broader debates on aging populations in rural areas, particularly the increasing resettlement of urban retirees, this article contributes to the underlying dynamics of retiree integration, especially how their very positive qualities of leadership and administrative expertise can also enhance differences from long-term residents or how their serious leisure interests shift away from more traditional ways of social inclusion and community involvement. The research also contributes to the discourses surrounding the studies of retiree migration, rurality, and religion through its methodological approach of interviewing individuals and taking their opinions, observations, and levels of religious involvement as the predominant source of data.

2. Methodology

The research context is one section of a large rural area known as the Kawartha Lakes District in the Haliburton Highlands of Ontario, a multi-seasonal tourist and recreational destination approximately 2 h (135 km) from the urban expanse of the GTA (Greater Toronto Area), and less than an hour's drive from the mid-sized city of Peterborough (population roughly 78,698; Statistics Canada). Data gathering within this small rural section (comprising two small towns, three villages, and two hamlets, with an overall population of 5556 from the 73,214 in the Kawartha Lakes District) entailed on-site visits to several churches (one Catholic, four mainline Protestant (Baptist, Anglican, United) and four non-denominational community churches).[2] Except for the Catholic church, all would be characterized by what Irvine (2001:6) identifies as small (less than 124 members) or very small (fewer than 70 members) congregations. In addition, 32 in-depth interviews, both formal and informal, were held with 10 clergy, 22 lay leadership members (12 individuals, 5 married couples), and 2 group discussions. Most interviewees were age 50 and older (except 3 male clergy) and 10 were women (2 clergy and 8 lay leaders), with 60% self identifying as retiree newcomers.[3] Churches in this article are only identified through their denominational tradition (i.e., Catholic, United, Anglican, Baptist, community) to provide anonymity for interview participants. Participant observation occurred in two United churches (through weekly attendance at Sunday services, involvement in pastoral programs, attending planning sessions, volunteering at bazaars, community dinners, and so forth), each over a six month period. The location was chosen based on the corresponding author's familiarity with the area over four decades,

[2] Graham (1981:58–59) classified small towns as having a relatively high population density in various neighbourhoods with a distinct business district and traffic lights at several cross roads. Villages tend to have a main road with businesses usually laid out in a linear fashion on either side with surrounding residential areas close by. Hamlets have only one or two businesses (corner store, gas bar and/or restaurant) on a main road with dispersed residences. In this study, both small towns and villages had three or more different churches of mainline traditions (Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist or United) as well as evangelical and non-denominational community churches, with hamlets usually having a non-denominational community church, since most of the extremely small (less than 30 members) mainline ones have been closed and sold.

[3] The clergy interviewed were first contacted by phone, with their selection based on church denomination and location as advertised in the local phone directory. They were asked if they would be interested in being part of this study on small-town churches, and those who agreed to be part of the study underwent initial formal interviews, lasting approximately 2–3 hours in their respective churches. Five of the clergy had a subsequent, less formal second interview consisting of broad ranging topics, also about 2–3 hours on average. The clergy identified lay leaders whom they felt would be interested in also participating in this study and knowledgeable about the recent history of their personal churches, providing contact information for these individuals. These lay leaders were then contacted for potential interviews, and about half of respondents were willing to have a second interview, and in one case, a third. The selection sample is restrictive, as all participants were still involved within their churches at the times of their interviews, so the sample is biased towards those who remained affiliated with their churches rather than those who had left due to conflict or otherwise.