

Understanding perceptions and attitudes towards the Church among spiritual Quebecers

United Church of Canada | Report | May 2024

CALOSUM

Table of contents

Context

- 04. Introduction
- 05. Research Strategy
- 06. Notes to the Reader

Results

- 08. Perceptions of Religion and the Church
- 18. The United Church of Canada
- 20. Testing Communication Ideas
- 28. Media Consumption

Conclusions

- 30. Conclusions

Introduction

Context

Founded in 1925, The United Church of Canada (the "UCC") is Canada's largest Protestant denomination, serving over two million people through three thousand congregations. Progressive and forward-looking, the United Church of Canada emphasizes inclusion, spirituality, justice and discipleship, and seeks to resonate with all Canadians.

Currently, the UCC wants to better understand the perceptions and attitudes of francophone Quebecers who don't regularly attend church. This is an audience that represents a key source of growth, and one that will inevitably require unique and optimized communications. To achieve this, the UCC felt that a qualitative marketing study would be beneficial, as it would provide deeper understanding and perspective.

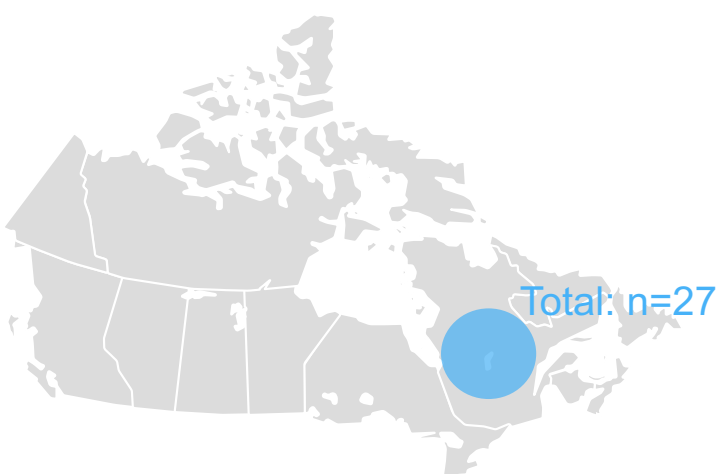
Given the above, Callosum's services were retained and a qualitative study was carried out.

Research Questions

The main research questions that this study aimed to answer are:

- How do spiritual but non-practicing francophone Quebecers feel about the Church and attending church in person?
- What are the obstacles preventing these Quebecers from attending church, and what ideas or initiatives might encourage them to do so?
- What type of message do these Quebecers respond to most, and how should the UCC message be adapted to this francophone audience?

Research Strategy

Methodology	Sampling Design	
4 discussion groups		
Province of Quebec		
120 minutes per group		
May 7 & 8 2024		
<p>Target</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Francophones from 18 to 45 years old • Not associated with or practicing Islam, Judaism or any other religion. Only Catholicism is accepted. • Do not attend church regularly. • Are open-minded or spiritually curious. Are not atheists. • Multigenerational Quebecers (people born in Quebec whose parents were born in Quebec), first-generation Quebecers (people born in Quebec but who have at least one parent born outside Quebec) and new immigrants (people born outside Quebec). 		
	Multigenerational Quebecers aged 18-34	n=7
	Multigenerational Quebecers aged 35-45	n=7
	Multigenerational Quebecers aged 18-45	n=5
	First-generation Quebecers or immigrants aged 18-45	n=8
	Montréal Census Metropolitan Area (CMA)	n=19
	Outside Montreal	n=8

Note on the interpretation of results

Qualitative approach: This study was conducted through a series of focus groups and was qualitative in nature. As such, it aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions and not to obtain statistically representative results.

Results and scales : If numerical results or scales are presented at various points in this report, it is solely to communicate the hierarchy of participants' preferences. It is important to bear in mind that these results or scales are based on **a small sample size (n=27)** and should therefore be interpreted with caution. For these reasons, no margin of error has been calculated and no tests of significance between sub-groups have been performed.



PERCEPTIONS OF RELIGION AND THE CHURCH

Religious Experience

So?

The majority of respondents had experienced organised religion in their youth, for the most part Catholicism. However, the practice of religion at a younger age, encouraged mainly by grandparents, does not continue into adulthood. While for multigenerational Quebecers this break in attendance is due more to beliefs that are less present and often altered by events in the Church's past in Quebec, for first-generation Quebecers and immigrants, church non-attendance is more circumstantial: they either haven't found a suitable church or their daily routine takes precedence.

Not really religious but feel more spiritual (they go to church for events) - multigenerational

"It's a bit the same as the others. The Catholic faith, if you can call it that, comes more from our grandparents. Our parents started to abandon it a bit more. Basically, when we were young, we went through all the usual religious rites: baptism, communion, confirmation. But now we're no longer very religious." **Man - Multigenerational 18-34 years old.**

"Yes, Catholic. So when I was young, I went to church every Sunday with my grandparents. That stopped when I was a teenager." **Woman - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.**

"I was in the Catholic religion too. I was even an altar boy for a while, in the choir. That stopped when I was 18, when I was able to stop going with my father." **Man - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.**

Believers, religious, non-practicing (they go to church for events) - first-generation or immigrants

"I grew up Catholic, I'm a believer but I don't go to church anymore. Life catches up and you realize it's not so interesting to go to church every Sunday anymore. And I don't think it's necessary for me to be there to be in communication with God." **Woman - Immigrant 18-45 years old.**

"I don't go to church as much, but we'd started going again to bring the kids. Now, I don't go very often because going to church here in Quebec City is 'boring'! It's not as dynamic as in Brazil, where things have evolved a lot. Even the songs are like from the 12th century." **Man - Immigrant 18-45 years old.**



View of Church

Tradition

"Church makes me think a lot about tradition. It brings back memories, traditional Christmas rites, time with family." **Man - Multigenerational 18-34 years old.**

"It's part of our values in Quebec. It's our tradition." **Man - Multigenerational 18-34 years old.**

"There's a kind of tradition that takes hold around the church, beyond belief." **Woman - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.**

Identity Marker

"The church is like a landmark, it shows us where we come from! It's our history, it's part of who we are." **Man - Multigenerational 18-34 years old.**

Values / Messaging

"I think it brings us back to the underlying message. I think I believe in certain values that the Catholic religion actually conveys. I don't necessarily believe in the God that religion presents to us." **Woman - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.**

Historic Buildings / Heritage

"These are buildings with a lot of history, that tell a story." **Woman - Multigenerational 18-34 years old.**

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Experienced organized religion growing up

"For me, my family weren't necessarily churchgoers. They even decided not to have me baptized. So I didn't do my catechism and all that. I go to church occasionally for weddings and baptisms, but that's about it." **Woman - Multigenerational 18-34 years old.**

How Beliefs Are Defined

So? There is a notable difference between multigenerational Quebecers and first-generation/immigrant Quebecers. While the former are able to say they are more spiritual than religious, and therefore tend to believe in a higher being, the latter say they believe in God, but are less regular in their practice.

Beliefs: Various Definitions

Neutral / I believe in nothing

I believe in a superior / supreme being

I believe in God

*"I don't believe there's a higher being, but it's still plausible." **Man - Multigenerational 18-45 years old.***

*"I'm pretty rational, so I tend not to believe even though some days I really want to believe." **Man - Multigenerational 18-45 years old.***

*"I don't necessarily believe in a supreme being. However, I am interested in different religions and am open to learning more." **Woman - Multigenerational 18-45 years old.***

*"I believe in a higher being, but from there to calling him God, I don't know." **Woman - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.***

*"I believe more in energies, in karma. I think there may be a higher being, but I'm not sure." **Man - Multigenerational 18-34 years old.***

*"I'd say I'm pretty neutral about it! I think there must be something." **Woman - Multigenerational 18-45 years old.***

*"I don't go to church as often because of family life and routine. But for me, faith is something that can be lived inwardly. You don't have to attend mass to live it." **Woman - First generation 18-45 years old.***

*"I'm still very religious, I pray at home but I don't necessarily go to church anymore." **Man - Immigrant 18-45 years old.***

Religion vs. spirituality

So? The difference between religion and spirituality is very marked among the Quebecers surveyed. According to them, religion is the practice of beliefs in a higher being, often “imposed” and “regulated” by a religious institution. Spirituality, on the other hand, takes a more personal approach to the exercise of one's beliefs, with greater freedom and defined as a personal choice.



*“For me, religion sounds like control.” **Woman - Multigenerational 18-34 years old.***

*“Religion is not welcoming. The Church is about values that don't connect with me. Homosexuality is not accepted or even abortion; these are things repressed by the Church.” **Woman - Multigenerational 18-34 years old.***

*“Religion is about customs and the practices we have to do (like taking communion); it's imposed, it's tradition, we don't really know why we do it.” **Woman - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.***

*“Religion has often been a matter of imposed things. I've come to realize over time that it's not the belief that I reject, but rather all the strange practices that surround the practice of religion.” **Woman - Immigrant 18-45 years old.***

*“Religion is more an organized way of practicing spirituality. It's more rooted in tradition.” **Male - Immigrant 18-45 years old.***

*“Spirituality, believing in the universe or in life, is up to each individual. You tailor your practice to you! It's freer, more welcoming.” **Woman - Multigenerational 18-34 years old.***

*“For me, being spiritual isn't about adhering to a religion and following its principles, but it's more about finding my purpose within myself. It's more to do with my inner self, looking for answers deep down inside. Spirituality can be linked to religion for someone else. Spirituality encompasses all that: a practice with or without a God.” **Woman - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.***

*“To be spiritual is to believe in a superior being, but not necessarily in the principles imposed by a religion. It leaves room for more openness.” **Man - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.***

*“Spirituality is your beliefs, your values, without conforming to a mold, without adhering to dogma or religious practices, without obligation.” **Woman - First generation 18-45 years old.***

Definition of church: first words (that come to mind)

So?

Quebecers are strongly influenced by their past experiences with the Catholic Church, and therefore often equate the church with the Catholic religion, but also with magnificent buildings full of culture and history. The church as an institution and as a place of gathering comes well after the first two aspects. This allows us to see the importance of this past relationship with the Catholic Church, which tends to overshadow the other aspects involved in the practice of religion.

Positive associations

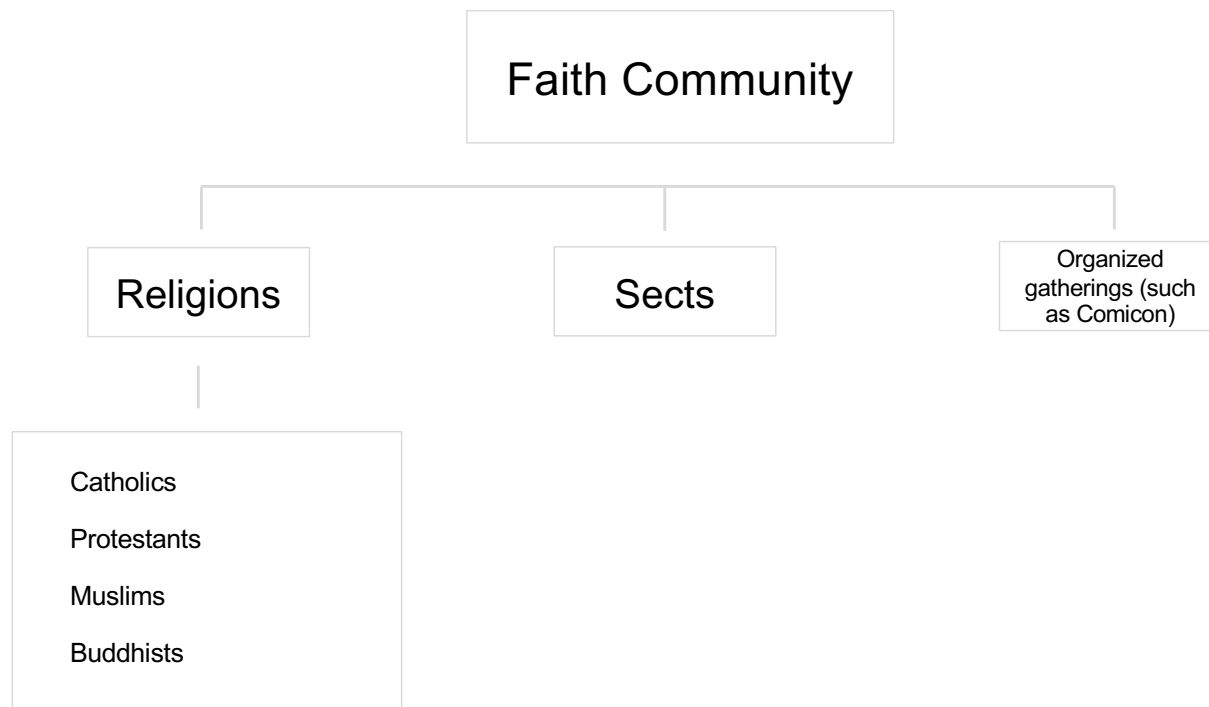
Sometimes positive,
sometimes negative
associations

Negative associations



Faith Community

So? In the broadest sense, and at first glance, the community of faith is largely seen as the element encompassing all religions. But when they dig deeper into their perceptions, some go so far as to define the faith community as those who are practicing in their religion.



Benefits of having churches in communities

So? The benefits of the presence of churches in communities revolve around having an impact on the lives of people in the community. From volunteering to help the most disadvantaged to neighbourhood festivals that bring people in the community together, serving as a social safety net is still the most visible benefit of the presence of churches in neighbourhoods.

Main Benefits

Gathering place (community, sense of belonging)

Social safety net (helping people in difficulty, mutual assistance)

Support (emotional, psychological)

Secondary Benefits

Historical / cultural (better understand history, preserve traces of the past)

Life events (baptisms, weddings, funerals)

Educational (find out about faith, learn about local culture)

Social gatherings (shows, block parties)

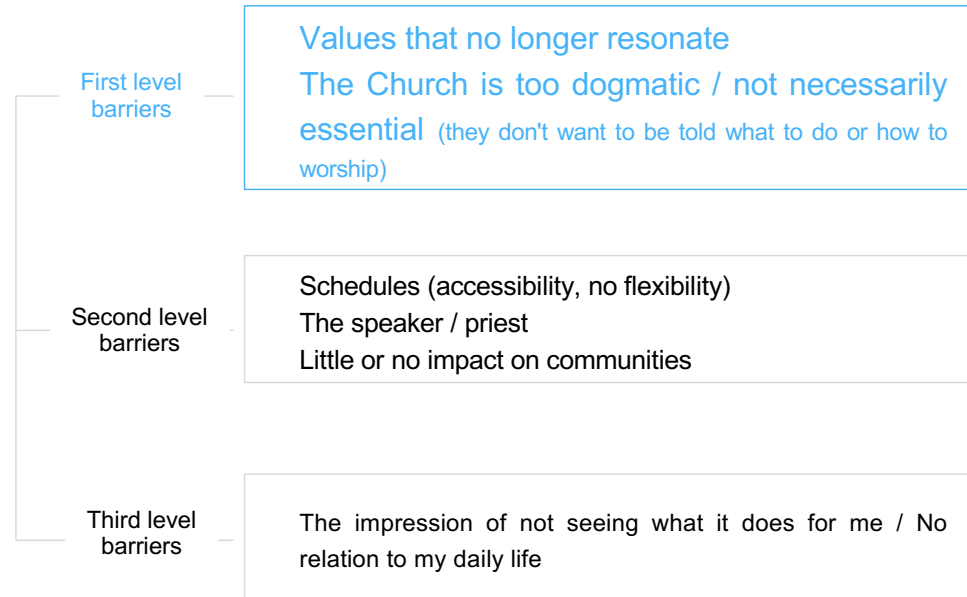
Barriers to church attendance

So?

The barriers to church attendance are listed below. For the multigenerational, it's more a question of a break with the Church and what it represents, so the barriers are more fundamental and revolve around non-adherence to the values conveyed, the abuses often associated with the Church and a desire to detach oneself from it. In the case of first-generation Quebecers/immigrants, the reasons are more circumstantial, since faith is there, present and unquestioned, and there's no desire to break away from it.



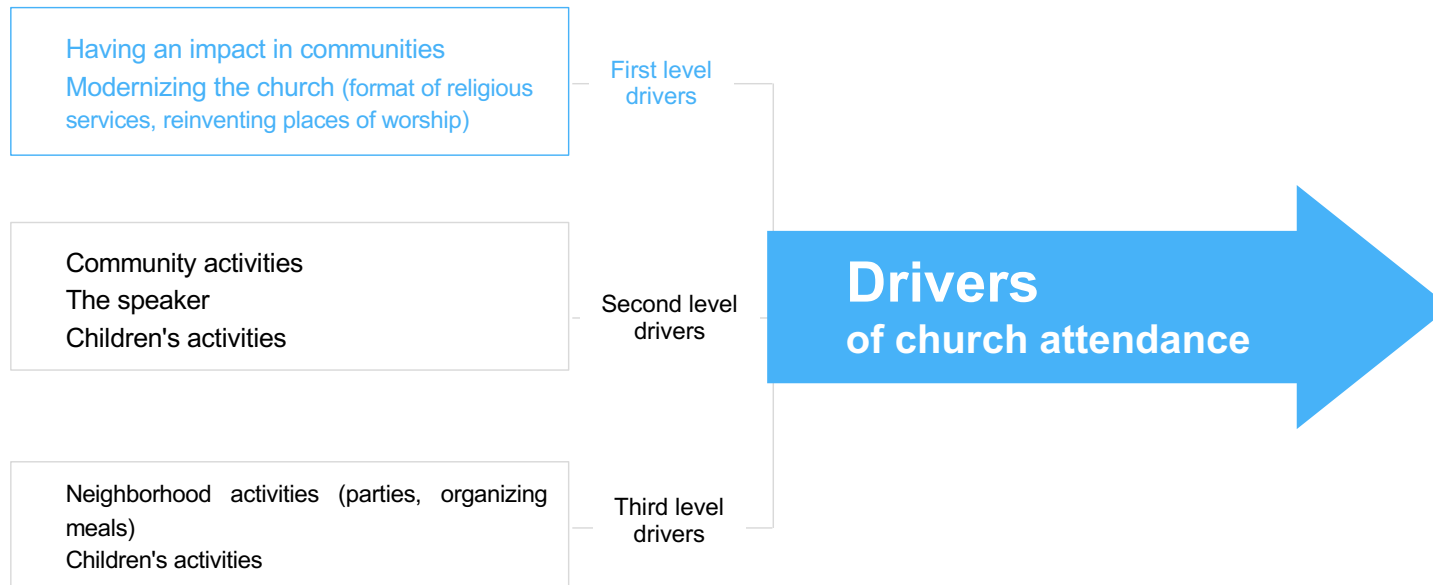
Barriers
to church attendance



Reasons to go to church

So?

The Quebecers we interviewed often spoke of a desire for more community-based events, so as to have a greater impact on the lives of others, and where, for the multigenerational, the place of belief would fade into the background, leaving only mutual aid, gatherings, sharing and exchanges. The church that multigenerational Quebecers would like to have would be more the equivalent of a community center open to all, almost all the time, with a schedule alternating programmed activities and free time where the sacred would be more in the background. For first-generation Quebecers/immigrants, this community aspect would have its place, but with a greater emphasis on putting into action the sacredness and faith they hold dear, while ensuring that the formats of religious services are modernized and adapted.



The importance of social justice initiatives

So? Social justice initiatives resonate strongly with spiritual Quebecers and are listed below. It's important to note that food security and ending poverty were the initiatives spontaneously mentioned as benefits of having churches in communities, in neighborhoods.



“There could be volunteers who cook, or times when we can bring food to help others. Something along the lines of soup kitchens.”
Woman - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.

“We could partner with existing groups to get involved in causes that bring together, welcome and help people who are experiencing difficulties. It could be organizing bazaars.”
Woman - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.

“It’s a bit hard to pin down things to do. But getting people together, accepting everyone, talking about it to raise awareness.”
Woman - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.

“We have a lot of refugees right now; we should get involved so they integrate with us instead of the opposite happening.”
Man - Multigenerational 35-45 years old.

“For me, I don’t think climate change necessarily has anything to do with the church, but it’s something that affects me a little more.”
Woman - Multigenerational 18-34 years old.



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA (UCC)

The United Church of Canada's reputation

So?

With Quebec's religiously charged past, it's not surprising that few participants know or have heard of the United Church of Canada. The UCC would benefit from communicating more about who it is and how it positions itself more as a community of faith in action for all through its social justice initiatives.



1/27

Had heard of the
United Church of
Canada



TESTING COMMUNICATION IDEAS

Stimuli

Tested Taglines

In this study, each of these taglines was first presented to participants one at a time, then all three at once, for comparison and to establish a preference.

“There is such a thing as an open, modern, and inclusive Church!”

“A Church without dogma... is possible! Come dig into the Christian faith in your own way with us!”

“A place to feel welcomed, just as we are.”

Sentence 1: Impressions

So? Although the wording seems to appeal, associating certain words with the word Church is problematic. For the participants, the description seems to underline characteristics that should be foundationally associated with the Church, but which are not currently associated with the Church. The phrase seems current, with the use of words that are in vogue today, such as inclusion, but with a more marketing ring.

Church

- “If it has anything to do with prayer, now that could hold me back.”
- “In my mind, if I have to adhere to principles and talk about Jesus, even if it's inclusive, you've lost me.”

Inclusion

- “It seems to me that 'Church' doesn't work with 'modern and inclusive!'”
- “But that's how the Church is already supposed to be: open and inclusive. So if they need to tell us it exists, it's because they realize it doesn't.”
- “It's a word that's 'Trend', that's everywhere right now.”

“There is such a thing as an open, modern, and inclusive Church!”

The sentence

- “It's like saying whatever people want to hear!”
- “This is all supposed to go without saying, so specifying it is like affirming there's something wrong!”

Openness

- “What do we mean by 'open and inclusive'?”
- “A little too good to be true: 'Open, modern, inclusive'?”
- ✓ “The idea of doors always being open is a good one, but we know that's not the case.”

Modernity

- ✓ “The choice of words like modern reminds me of the words used in marketing at the moment to attract people.”
- ✓ “By saying modern we're trying to show that we've evolved, I think that's it!”

Sentence 2: Impressions

So? In this sentence, the word dogma polarizes the entire understanding and perception of the participants. Some feel constrained by the word and what it may mean or imply, while others point out the contradiction, since for them the Church is based on dogma. Finally, some think that the fact of specifying “without dogma” already tends towards judgment, or alternatively, provides a kind of openness to excess.

Digging deeper into the Christian faith

- “Christian faith’, I have to associate myself with that, and for my part, I dissociate myself. So I’m out of here!”

“A Church without dogma... is possible!
Come dig into the Christian faith in your
own way with us!”

The sentence

- “The sentence as it stands wouldn’t appeal to me. I just feel like I’m being told everything I want to hear.”

Dogma

- “Dogma’ is not a word people use much. And I have no idea what it means. You’ve already lost me in the first sentence.”
- “The word ‘dogma’, it’s heavy!”
- “The idea of ‘without dogma’ is good, but the word is a bit stiff.”
- “‘Without dogma’ is kind of contradictory.”
- “It goes against the very essence of what I hear from the Church. What is it otherwise? A community center!”

Do it your way

- ✓ “I like the ‘do it your way,’ however! It’s positive!”

Sentence 3: Impressions

So? Apart from the fact that the wording points to an element that should be foundational to the Church, “welcoming all as they are”, and the word “place” that seems broad and ill-suited, people’s impressions of this wording are more positive.

The sentence

- ✓ “It’s general but, but it’s good! It even includes anti-racism!”
- ✓ “It’s more positive, it touches on the essence of what the church should be.”

“A place to feel welcomed, just as we are.”

Just as we are

- ✓ “I like the ‘as we are’ part. You go dressed as you are, no need to change who you are.”
- ✓ “It reminds me of being without judgment.”

Place

- “I’m struggling with the word ‘place’: I find it vague. Perhaps ‘space’ would be better.”

Feeling welcomed

- ✓ “It’s already better, feeling welcomed connects with the feeling of belonging.”

In general

- “The phrase gives me the sense that they’re repeating what we already know!”

Comparative Assessment

So?

It's important to note that the formulation mentioning dogma is the one that succeeded in achieving unanimous non-adherence. The other two formulations received equivalent support. However, it is clear that the wording that seems to resonate with both groups of Quebecers is the one mentioning welcome. It would therefore be an avenue worth exploring, especially as first-generation/immigrant Quebecers are the ones with whom communication efforts would be least important, and who would find it easier to join and get involved in the events.

	All participants n=27	Multigenerational n=19	First-generation/ immigrant n=8
“There is such a thing as an open, modern, and inclusive Church!”	14	14	-
“A place to feel welcomed, just as we are.”	13	5	8
“A Church without dogma... is possible! Come dig into the Christian faith in your own way with us!”	0	-	-

Stimuli

Tested Statements

As part of this study, additional statements and information were presented to the participants.

1. The United Church of Canada has been ordaining 2SLGBTQ+ pastors since 1988.
2. The United Church of Canada is the largest Protestant denomination in Canada.
3. The United Church of Canada was founded in 1925.
4. The United Church of Canada ministers to over 2 million Canadians in 3,000 congregations.
5. All United Church of Canada pastors are required to undergo racial justice training.
6. The United Church of Canada recently set aside \$3 million for indigenous communities to support their work identifying unmarked graves, gathering knowledge, and commemorating and honouring children who did not return home from residential schools...
7. 65% of the ministerial staff of the United Church of Canada are women.
8. The United Church operates democratically and elects its spiritual leader every three years.
9. United Church pastors are not required to be celibate.
10. United Church congregations meet and worship in many languages and cultures.

Statements about The United Church of Canada

So? The statements made about the United Church of Canada arouse curiosity and help to shed light on the different communication axes used in the proposed taglines. Redressing the errors of the past seems to be a crucial element for the spiritual Quebecers interviewed, who seem to have been more concerned about helping indigenous people and the non-celibacy of officiants. Elements of social/racial justice emerge as important to emphasize, as do elements of diversity and inclusion.

The United Church of Canada recently set aside \$3 million for indigenous communities to support their work identifying unmarked graves, gathering knowledge, and commemorating and honouring children who did not return home from residential schools...	14
United Church pastors are not required to be celibate.	11
65% of the ministerial staff of the United Church of Canada are women.	10
The United Church operates democratically and elects its spiritual leader every three years.	10
United Church congregations meet and worship in many languages and cultures.	10
All United Church of Canada pastors are required to undergo racial justice training.	9
The United Church of Canada has been ordaining 2SLGBTQ+ pastors since 1988.	7
The United Church of Canada was founded in 1925.	6
The United Church of Canada ministers to over 2 million Canadians in 3,000 congregations.	1
The United Church of Canada is the largest Protestant denomination in Canada.	0



MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Recommended media

So? The media used by participants are listed below, and should be given priority in future communications to reach these Quebecers.

Social Networks

- Facebook
- Instagram
- YouTube
- Pinterest
- WhatsApp
- TikTok



Traditional Media

- Television
- Radio
- Newspapers

Television

- “When it comes to television, it would be Radio Canada, TVA.”

Radio

- “I listen to 98.5 on the radio.”

Newspapers

- “I read La Presse.”

Conclusion

1

Religion in Quebec carries the weight of the province's loaded history with Catholicism

Catholicism has long been omnipresent in Quebec. The split that occurred in the 60s is still very much on people's minds, and is a particularity to consider in Quebec when talking about the practice of faith and/or commitment to a faith/spiritual community.

Conclusion

2

The United Church has communications work to do

The United Church of Canada is not well known in Quebec, which in itself is not such a bad thing, given the particular context and relationship Quebecers have with the Church. Meanwhile, the United Church of Canada has some interesting things to offer that could reach and unite many Quebecers, particularly around the social justice initiatives that were well received by those surveyed. Communicating around these initiatives, but also about who the United Church of Canada is, by highlighting statements that speak to its mission and daily actions, would be beneficial.

Conclusion

3

One province: two distinct targets

It's worth noting that first-generation Quebecers and immigrants are a more natural target, one more easily reached. They are believers and consider it important to have churches that are involved in their communities.

Most multi-generational Quebecers have lived through their parents' complicated history with the Catholic Church, which has left some of them with very personal wounds that make it more difficult for them to open up to religious belief and practice.

Conclusion

4

Community and social justice: yes! But at what price?

Although there may be nuances, the community aspect of the Church, with its sense of belonging, its feeling of having an impact on its environment and its social justice initiatives, are values shared by both target groups. In many ways, these shared values seem an acceptable entry point for multi-generational Quebecers, who recognize a need for community and sharing, even if for them the prayerful, biblical aspect should take a back seat.

The question for the United Church of Canada is how willing it would be to dilute the religious, sacred, biblical aspects to make room for those Quebecers who might ultimately not commit.

Conclusion

5

A clear, transparent message without saying too much!

The sentences tested and their wording showed that what all participants are looking for is clear information to know what they're committing to, and a sober tone that doesn't play on figures of speech, as the message could be misunderstood or misinterpreted.

The sentences that struck a chord with many were those in which all the words were simple, understandable and part of their vocabulary. The United Church of Canada can build on this to develop a message that will resonate with both target audiences, much as the following phrase did: "A place to feel welcomed, just as we are".

Targeting a modern audience

So? The common thread most often heard was that they don't want to go to church to be passive, and listen to someone talk about things that have little or no relevance to them. They are more interested in a service where they can participate, more like a discussion, a sharing of ideas or advice on subjects closer to their reality, but also through activities that enable them to have an impact in their community.

Service

Changing the service format

The current service is often found to be too long, monotonous, inflexible and offering little opportunity for participation and involvement. A more discussion-based format could be envisioned or introduced.

The sermons / The speaker

Sermons are often found to be too far removed from their reality, and don't seem to reach them in their daily lives, their difficulties or even their needs.

More welcoming / More open

Churches are still considered unsuitable for families with young children. There are few welcoming, open spaces for children, with enriching activities to help them discover or deepen their faith.



Activities / Causes

Community activities

Community activities to help neighborhood residents with various aspects of daily life are very popular. Feeling part of something bigger motivates and inspires.

Social justice initiatives

Social justice initiatives that have a direct impact on people's lives resonate strongly and therefore show an interest in having a concrete, quantifiable impact.

Opening churches to be more present

The church should be open (literally too), always ready to welcome, help and advise. The church should clothe itself in the title of attentive counselor, kind and slow to judge, and shed the garb of the rigid, sometimes hard-nosed teacher.

THANK YOU

CALLOSUM

Ideas that Inspire

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