



## ENVIRONICS

### **Truly Not Alone: There Is an Audience for the United Church's Message**

The United Church of Canada and Emerging Spirit worked with the prominent Canadian firm Environics Research Group to do a survey assessing selected attributes of the United Church and their implications for communicating the message of the church to people between the ages of 30 and 45 who don't already attend church or belong to another religion.

Environics' survey looked at the attitudes among this "chosen population" towards selected church attributes<sup>1</sup> which Environics asked them about. These attributes are characteristics which may be found in United Church congregations or are representative of the denomination itself. Did the thoughts of the chosen population differ from the way the United Church thinks about these attributes? Which attributes have the greatest appeal and represent the greatest "marketing opportunity" for the church?

Environics also assessed which segments of the chosen population would be most receptive to communication from the church and what are the best means of communicating with them.

### **Values and Beliefs of the Chosen Population**

The survey found that by far the most important things to those between the ages of 30 and 45 who don't go to church are their children (74%) and family (71%), followed by their friends (34%), their job (27%), and financial situation (27%). Among those in the chosen population, 24% said that faith and spiritual beliefs were very important to them.

Sixty-four percent of those in this age group (who, remember, don't go to church) claimed some religious affiliation. (See Reginald W. Bibby, *Restless Churches: How Canada's Churches Can Contribute to the Emerging Religious Renaissance*, Novalis/Wood Lake Press, 2004 for a discussion that complements the Environics findings.)

Environics found that—perhaps contrary to what is commonly thought—people in this demographic do not identify worship styles or time constraints as the prime barriers to joining a faith community. More than anything, it is the **perceived content that they think they will find at church that puts them off.**

Seventy-three percent of those in the chosen population think that "organized religion tells you what you have to believe" and say that they would rather work out these beliefs by themselves or with those close to them.

Sixty-two percent of this demographic believe that "organized religion makes things too black and white," and a majority (59%) say they believe in God, "but not in the traditional way." In

fact, 59% would also say that “if Jesus were alive today, he would not be associated with an organized religion.” About half of those surveyed (51%) believe that the music, images, and practices they associate with church “are totally alien to my life and style.”

On the other hand, less than half of the chosen population believe that they have nothing to gain by participating in church life (45%), that church leaders lack credibility (44%), and that they are too busy to get themselves and their families to church (36%).

Even fewer of those between the ages of 30 and 45 say they don’t go to church because they have had a bad experience with religion when they were young (23%), or because they think their children would not be welcome (21%).

Only 11% say that they don’t go to church because “no one I trust has ever invited me.”

When scouting out a church, 44% of the chosen population would prefer to get their information about a faith community from their family or friends, or directly from the church itself (30%).

### **Major Themes and Communication Opportunities**

When Environics surveyed the chosen population about which of the selected attributes have the greatest appeal and represent the greatest marketing opportunity, they found responses to the attributes fell into three major themes, which they call: “achieving personal faith,” “connecting and reaching out,” and “questing and embracing.”

#### **Achieving Personal Faith**

- builds deep personal relationships
- offers the possibility of personal transformation
- engages both emotion and the intellect
- offers new ways of looking at faith

#### **Connecting and Reaching Out**

- values all ages
- reaches out to the needy
- translates personal faith into action
- is welcoming to everyone
- works with the poor to improve their situation
- emphasizes helping people
- respects all people
- works for justice in the world
- respects the earth and the environment

#### **Questing and Embracing**

- encourages questioning
- respects personal freedom and choice
- builds relationships with other traditions
- is open to change
- celebrates all, including gays and lesbians

To determine the strongest marketing opportunities for the United Church, Environics measured each attribute for its level of interest among people in the chosen population, whether or not they

believed that such a characteristic could be found in a church, and how likely it was that the attribute would be unique to a specific church.



Environics found that, while people expect churches to have the attributes found within the themes of achieving personal faith and connecting and reaching out, the theme of questioning and embracing represents the best opportunity for the United Church to distinguish itself from other faith communities. The attributes included in the theme of questioning and embracing connect with those the chosen population is most interested in, yet doesn't believe can be found in a church, making the attributes of this theme the most feasible points of distinction for The United Church of Canada.

### Segments of the Chosen Population

Based on the responses of those surveyed, Environics found that four different segments among the chosen population (30- to 45-year-olds who don't go to church) could be identified:

#### Want It All

- are interested in faith, good works, and meaning.
- 45% of the chosen population
- 65% say they have some religious affiliation
- have strong interest in personal faith (89%), connecting and reaching out (90%), and questioning and embracing (91%)

### Interested

- are seeking community and openness
- 32% of the chosen population
- 68% say they have some religious affiliation
- More than half have an interest in personal faith (55%). Connecting and reaching out (87%) and questing and embracing (88%) are what this segment is most interested in.

### Traditionalists

- see the church as an institution
- 13% of the chosen population
- 81% say they have some religious affiliation
- are strongly interested in personal faith (75%) and connecting and reaching out (88%), and over half have a strong interest in questing and embracing (56%).

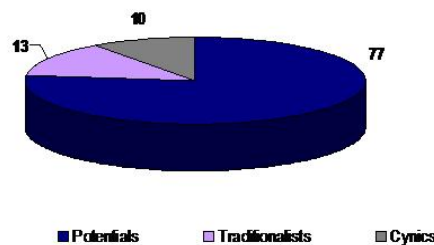
### Cynics

- are disinterested and spiritually disengaged
- 10% of the chosen population
- 20% say they have some religious affiliation
- show virtually no interest in any of the major themes

The Want It Alls and the Interesteds emerge from the data as complementary groups that can be considered together as a new segment, which Environics calls the “Potentials.” **The Potentials make up 77% of the chosen population and hold the greatest possibility of being an audience for The United Church of Canada.**

## Two complementary groups emerge to become a “new segment” named the Potentials

- Want-it-all (45%)
- Interested (32%)



### **Who Are the Potentials?**

The Potentials group is made up of slightly more women than men. Three-quarters of them are married and the majority have children. They are slightly more likely to have graduated from a community college than a university.

The geographic distribution of those in the Potentials segment is generally representative of the Canadian population as a whole, with four in 10 living in Ontario and three in 10 living in Quebec. Most are anglophones.

One in 10 Potentials claims some affiliation with the United Church.

The Potentials responded most strongly to the themes of connecting and reaching out and questing and embracing. In the theme of connecting and reaching out, the attributes Potentials are most interested in include welcoming all, respect for all people, and respect for the earth. From the theme of questing and embracing, the Potentials respond most strongly to building relationships between people of different faiths and respect for personal freedom and choice.

Environics found that the values of the Potentials show that they:

- are postmodern, more open than others to complexity and ambiguity
- are open to new definitions of family
- place a high value on equality of the sexes
- are early adopters of new technologies
- put happiness before duty
- seek personal autonomy
- are creative and spontaneous
- have an interest in the mysterious

But the Potentials also are:

- less likely to see the importance of organized religion
- not active in the community
- concerned about their financial futures

### **Summary**

The segment of Canadians between the ages of 30 and 45 who don't attend church or already belong to another faith community that shows the most promise of having an interest in The United Church of Canada are those Environics calls the Potentials. Potentials represent 77% of the survey's chosen population.

Spiritually, Potentials are most interested in the themes of connecting and reaching out and questing and embracing. The latter theme offers the United Church the best opportunity to distinguish itself from other faith communities.

Potentials would be most interested in the message of a church that:

- reaches out to those in need and works for justice in the world
- is welcoming to everyone
- builds relationships between people of different faiths
- is open to questioning, debate, and change
- respects the earth and the environment

Environics found that, like other Canadians in their age group who don't go to church, Potentials don't see worship style or time as prime barriers to becoming involved in a faith community. Rather, they are most concerned that at church things would be made "too black and white," and that they will be told what to believe. Most believe in God, but "not in the traditional way," and think that if Jesus were alive today he would not be associated with organized religion.

The Potentials prefer the complexity and ambiguity associated with a postmodern worldview and would be interested in a church that is provocative in challenging both their intellect and their emotion and provides a stimulating place they can explore the "big questions" of life and faith together with others.

A challenge—and opportunity—for The United Church of Canada is that most Potentials don't believe a church with these attributes exists. However, Environics found that if Potentials did know about such a church they would be interested in visiting or attending it.

This Environics survey shows that, contrary to what is commonly thought, interest among many adults for a church with the attributes that the United Church possesses remains strong. Reaching the 30- to 45-year-old age group with a message about the church that is strong enough to overcome the apprehensions that many in this demographic have about organized religion will be a challenge, but certainly worth the effort.

Perhaps the more difficult question is whether or not the United Church is up to the challenge of welcoming this postmodern, open-minded, and independent group into its congregations. The signs all show that if the United Church invites them in an effective way, they will come. Is the church ready?

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## <sup>i</sup> **Attributes of The United Church of Canada**

Environics worked with The United Church of Canada to identify attributes or characteristics which may be found in United Church congregations or are representative of the denomination itself. After surveying 30- to 45-year-olds about the appeal and believability of the attributes, Environics found their responses fell into the three major themes listed below.

### Achieving Personal Faith

- builds deep personal relationships
- offers the possibility of personal transformation
- engages both emotion and the intellect
- offers new ways of looking at faith

### Connecting and Reaching Out

- values all ages
- reaches out to the needy
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### Questing and Embracing

- encourages questioning
- respects personal freedom and choice
- builds relationships with other traditions
- is open to change
- celebrates all, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual people