

THE ACTIVE AND THE INACTIVE CHURCH MEMBER: A
SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CERTAIN ASPECTS OF
ST. GEORGE'S ANGLICAN CHURCH, WINNIPEG

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
The University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
James Edward Winston Jackson
April 1964



I wish to acknowledge the sacrifices of a few of those without whom the present study would not have been possible.

The Rev. Dr. W.S.F. Pickering, my advisor, willingly gave hours of his valuable time in much needed and appreciated criticism and suggestion.

The Council for Social Service, The Anglican Church of Canada, provided some welcome financial support.

The assistance of the Rev. G.A. Stegen, rector of St. George's Church, and of his secretary, Mrs. Reed, is gratefully acknowledged. I also wish to thank the members of St. George's for their patient and hospitable assistance in the study.

Finally, I would like to thank Mrs. Nusstein for her care in the typing of the thesis.

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The study of St. George's Anglican Church, Winnipeg, was an exploratory and descriptive one. An attempt was made to discover what variables were associated with the degree of involvement in church affiliation. A two-fold typology was employed for this purpose. Those who were more involved in the church were referred to as Active members; those who were less involved were termed Inactive. For both types, definition was based upon the respondents' reported frequency of church attendance.

The thesis was based on an analysis of three hundred and three questionnaires filled in during two services on Sunday, April 28, 1963. In order to examine the subject in greater detail, personal interviews were conducted during the summer of 1963 with sixty-seven of the middle-aged males on the church's parish list.

Age, sex, marital status, educational level, and socioeconomic position were found to be associated with the parishioners' degree of involvement in the church. Among those interviewed, it was found that the Active members displayed greater generational mobility, tended towards the middle of the socioeconomic range represented by the church's membership, and tended to maintain more rigid stands on social and religious issues. Furthermore, they exhibited more rigid behaviour patterns associated with religious practices and, for example, with political

voting patterns.

In addition to the focus on the Active-Inactive typology, some attempt was made to comment upon the general social characteristics of the parishioners of St. George's.

In the light of the findings concerning the Active and the Inactive members it was suggested, in the final chapter of the thesis, that further research, similar to that undertaken at St. George's, might well prove fruitful in increasing the sociologist's understanding of religious institutions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Two themes have dominated the sociological analysis of religious institutions. The first, and the one which has received the greater attention, is analysis from the point of view of variables which affect church affiliation, the degree of involvement in church activities, the frequency of church attendance, the doctrinal tendencies of the individual, and the impact of religion on the individual, and, by extension, on society. The second main area of endeavour has been directed towards the understanding of the functions of religion and of the church. While in the first case, the various studies have yielded a substantial body of information, our knowledge of the church's functions and of religion's functions generally, has not, as yet, been convincingly demonstrated by empirical studies.¹

The major interest in the examination of the membership of St. George's Anglican Church is in relating the degree of participation in the church to other measurable variables. American studies² have indicated that there are

1

Statements concerning the functions of religion appear to have been arrived at through a process of intuition rather than based on empirical evidence. For example see:

significant differences between those people who are closely associated with a church as compared to those who are less involved in one.² However, there are few, if any, studies which relate this variable to particular churches.

Since there is virtually no literature in the specific field, the present study is, by necessity, exploratory and descriptive. It can only hope to discover what some of the variables associated with the degree of church participation might be: it is to be hoped that the conclusions arrived at as a result of the research might be used as starting points for other parish studies. Undoubtedly there will be some

David O. Moberg, The Church as a Social Institution (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 127-239; E.K. Nottingham, Religion and Society (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. 12-18. Sociologists' failure to come to grips with the problem of the functions of the church are, however, understandable since "... (1) specification of expected functions of religious institutions--either on purely logical grounds or on the basis of generalization from empirical evidence--is less precise and likely to be less readily accomplished than for almost any other area of social organization (economic, political, family, communicational, institutions), and that (2) any attempt to apply most of the available functional theories of religion to complex societies rather than primitive ones is more likely to lead to frustration than to fruitful understanding or insight." Allan W. Eister, "Religious Institutions in Complex Societies: Difficulties in the Theoretic Specification of Function," American Sociological Review, 22:387-88, 1957.

² Three examples which might be cited are: G.E. Lenski, The Religious Factor (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1961); J.H. Fichter, Social Relations in the Urban Parish (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954); and Arthur Elliott, "A Sociological Study of One Hundred Active Church Members and One Hundred Irregularly Attending Church Members in Five Protestant Churches in Louisville, Kentucky, 1953" (unpublished Master's thesis, The University of Louisville, Louisville, 1953).

findings which will be peculiar to the church under investigation; hopefully, some of the findings, if verified by future studies, will contribute to our knowledge about the structure of parish life.

Essentially, the question posed in the research has been: Are the more active participants in the church significantly different from the less active participants? If there are differences, what are they? Who are the more likely to be active: the young or the old, males or females, the single or the married, the wealthy or the poor? Are views on political and religious questions in any way related to an individual's degree of participation in a church? Of course--and this point must be vigorously emphasized--the reasons why people participate in a church in varying degrees undoubtedly depend on a whole complex of known and unknown variables interacting with one another and influencing the individual.

The thesis also attempts to describe the characteristics of the church's membership generally and, where possible, to relate these to the population characteristics of the geographical area in which the church operates.

Sociologists concerned with the analysis of religious adherents have attempted to classify church members into types. One typology is J.H. Fichter's, where, for Roman Catholics, he distinguishes the "nuclear", the "modal",

the "marginal", and the "dormant" parishioner.³ Gerhard Lenski has similarly divided the "actively involved" from the "marginal" church member.⁴ Since the present study was not planned to deal with large numbers, a simple two-fold typology was adopted.

While the terms Active and Inactive are not altogether happy choices, they represent an attempt to label those people who are the more active participants in the church--the Active-- as distinct from those who are less active, the Inactive. As an index of participation we have taken, as Lenski did, the respondents' reported frequency of church attendance. An Active church member is here defined as one who claims to attend church services, on average, four or more times per month. The Inactive member, conversely, is one who claims to attend church services, on average, three or fewer times per month.

Admittedly the above typology is open to many criticisms. It may be argued that any differences between the two groups may be accounted for by factors of little moment. Nevertheless, it may prove interesting--and indeed provide a few suggestions for further research--to discover what sorts of people tend to be regular church attenders as compared to those whose attendance is less regular.

³J.H. Fichter, Social Relations in the Urban Parish (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954), pp. 9-79.

⁴G.E. Lenski, The Religious Factor (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1961), pp. 21-22.

St. George's Anglican Church was selected for several reasons. First--and most important--the thesis adviser was able to obtain permission for the research to be done there. In addition, the writer lived conveniently close to the church, and also had some knowledge of the religious life exhibited in it. Although St. George's is looked upon as one of the wealthier Anglican parishes in Winnipeg,⁵ nevertheless in the matter of churchmanship and the attitudes of its parishioners generally, St. George's can perhaps be regarded as a typical urban Anglican parish.

Having noted why St. George's was selected for study, let us briefly review its history. It divides itself into two parts. The first is the history of a down-town parish of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The second phase is the history of a parish in the south of Winnipeg, beginning during the first World War and continuing up to the present day.

The first services in St. George's "were held in a small school building on the N.E. corner of the Central School grounds",⁶ in the fall of 1883. There were twenty families supporting the parish. In the following year, 1884, the first St. George's Church was opened on the corner of Lydia Street and William Avenue in down-town Winnipeg;

⁵The writer has often heard St. George's referred to as "St. George's-and-all-Cadillacs".

⁶A.D. McElheran, "Parish of St. George's, Winnipeg, Within the Diocese of Rupert's Land" (unpublished paper on file at St. George's Anglican Church, Winnipeg, no date), p. 2. I am indebted to Mr. McElheran's paper for the brief history of St. George's presented here.

a financial statement of 1886 places the value of this church at \$1,745.75.

Probably due to increasing parishioners, a new church, seating 350, and costing \$12,000.00, was built on the corner of Isabel Street and Bannatyne Avenue in 1894. By 1900, 150 families were on the parish list.

According to Mr. A.D. McElheran, the second phase of St. George's history--that of a south Winnipeg parish--began because

as time went by the population of the centre of Winnipeg began to change and the area of the parish changed also from that of a residential section to a commercial and industrial area.⁷

Hence, in the spring of 1916 a decision was made to relocate the parish in the south of Winnipeg--about three miles from its original sites.

The transfer of the whole parish, it might be pointed out, is unusual for the Anglican Church, which is organized on a parish basis.⁸ Although parish boundaries are

⁷A.D. McElheran, "Parish of St. George's, Winnipeg, Within the Diocese of Rupert's Land" (unpublished paper on file at St. George's Anglican Church, Winnipeg), p. 9.

⁸An Anglican church is built to serve people living within a geographical area, not, as for example with the United Church, to serve a particular congregation. Generally in the Anglican Church, when new residential areas build up, they are included in an old parish or else a totally new parish is created to contain them.

frequently altered to accommodate shifting populations, it is contrary to the tradition of the Anglican Church for parishes to be transferred entirely from one area to another.⁹ One of the consequences of St. George's leaving its down-town site is that that area now has a scarcity of Anglican churches.

The location selected for the new St. George's Church was on the corner of Wilton Street and Grosvenor Avenue, in the Crescentwood area of Winnipeg. Services began in this church on September 17, 1916. In 1924 a parish hall was built, and in 1927, the church was enlarged to seat 520. In the 1954 annual report, this church was valued at \$36,500. In the years 1947 to 1951, three campaigns were carried out to raise funds for a new parish hall and chapel. The Wells organization (a fund-raising organization) was called in in 1952 and raised about \$108,000; the previous three campaigns together had raised about \$84,000. The first part of the extension was completed in 1952, the remainder in 1954. The total cost of these improvements was about \$220,000. In 1954, it was decided to rebuild the church and a campaign to raise \$320,000 was completed, again with the assistance of the Wells Organization. On March 31, 1958, the new church, seating 650,

⁹For example, see Guy Mayfield, The Church of England: Its Members and Its Business (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 16-29.