



**UNIVERSITY
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Making Space for Religious Voices & Ways of Life

**A Needs Assessment of Albertan Religious Communities and an
Example for Religious Studies Centers (RSC)**

AUGUST 2023



Contents

Territorial Acknowledgement	3
Introduction	4
Background	5
Assessment Methodology	11
Samples	14
Findings	17
Survey Findings	17
Interview Findings by Question	25
Conclusion	30
Final Recommendations	31
References	33
Acknowledgements	34



TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The University of Alberta respects the sovereignty, lands, histories, languages, knowledge systems and cultures of First Nations, Métis and Inuit nations.

Augustana is located in asiniskaw sipisis - Stoney Creek, formally known as Treaty 6 territory; a travelling route and home to the Maskwacîs Nêhiyawak, Niitsitapi, Nakoda, and Tsuut'ina Nations, the Métis and other Indigenous peoples. Their spiritual and practical relationships to the land create a rich heritage for our learning and our life as a community.

Introduction

“The Chester Ronning Center (in cooperation with the Institute for Religious and Socio-Political Studies) undertook a community needs assessment”



Public engagement is a well-traversed practice for many governments, non-profits, publicly-funded organizations and other institutions for good reason: it offers opportunities not only for making organizational praxis transparent for a public which increasingly demands it¹, public engagement also offers the opportunity to inform strategic vision and programming in a manner that elevates both relevance and timeliness of service. When it comes to religious studies centers (RSC), even those affiliated with public universities who may have their own public engagement strategies, the degree to which public engagement is standard practice for them independently and how it might inform their planning and services remains unclear.

This report proceeds from a need to contribute to the limited literature on this subject for RSC, as well as offer insights from a comprehensive needs assessment of religious community organizations in Alberta following best public engagement practices to develop particular outcomes. These outcomes include: developing a deeper understanding as to the extent of religious organizational service to urban, suburban, and rural communities and their participants; developing a clearer picture, pending available data, of the frequency of both organizational patronage and retention, along with a measure as to the extent of involvement and/or patron identification with the organization; the development of a shared, multivocal definition of how religious community organizations understand the term “public” and “public spaces;” understanding the extent to which religious organizations see themselves as serving the wider public versus their own in-groups; understanding the extent to which religious community organizations engage with public institutions; development of an assessment for organizational willingness to partner on research, in Ronning Center programming and events, as well as with other religious organizations, traditions, and even intra-traditional denominations; a schematic of the types of events and programming religious community organizations would like to engage in; and developing a clearer picture of the level of engagement that religious community organizations have with promoting religious literacy and/or are engaged in social justice efforts, with one being an extension of the other.

To formulate these outcomes, this report will first offer background information on the topic of RSC public engagement from a literature review and secondary analysis of RSC profiles produced for this assessment. Then the design of the assessment (methodological approaches, clarity on the final sample and other key information) will be explicated before a detailed analysis of the relevant findings. This report will conclude with a brief discussion and final recommendations for the Chester Ronning Center while also offering broader recommendations for other religious studies centers.

¹ See, e.g. Don Lenihan, Rescuing Policy: the Case for Public Engagement, Public Policy Forum, 2012, pp. 22-41.

Background

In preparing the foundational work for this needs assessment, both a literature review and a secondary analysis of available data on RSC with a similar organizational structure or culture as the Ronning Center were undertaken². In the literature review, two main approaches were analyzed: public participation and stakeholder engagement, of which aspects of both contributed to the development of this needs assessment. For the sake of brevity, the findings of the literature review will be summarized in this section.

Public participation in this context largely follows the definition of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), which defines public participation as “any process that involves the public in problem-solving or decision-making and that uses public input to make better decisions.”³ Considered by some to be the “democratization of decision making,” public participation holds as a central principle that “public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.”⁴ Other proponents of public participation argue that increasing public acceptance of organizational decisions can and should be a primary thrust of these kinds of engagements, developing legitimacy and broadening perspectives and reducing conflict earlier along in organizational decision-making processes⁵. Conceptualizations of public participation vary in terms of methodology, including the degree to which engaged stakeholders are involved in final decision making after providing input. These considerations were weighed in light of the development of the Ronning Center needs assessment and will be explicated below.

² Both of these documents as well as the other foundational preparations for the needs assessment were prepared by I-RSS researcher, Levi Bjork.

³ International Association for Public Participation, “IAP2 Code of Ethics for Public Participation Practitioners - International Association for Public Participation.” <https://www.iap2.org/page/ethics>

⁴ International Association for Public Participation, “IAP2 Core Values” <https://www.iap2canada.ca/Resources/Documents/0702-Foundations-Core-Values-MW-rev1.pdf> See also: Carlo Rega & Giorgio Baldizzone. Public participation in strategic environmental assessment: A practitioners’ perspective. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 50, 2015, 105-115.

⁵ Nancy Roberts, “Public Deliberation in an Age of Direct Citizen Participation” *American Review of Public Administration*, 2004, 34(4): 315-353 at 343. <https://hdl.handle.net/10945/53406>; Rega and Baldizzone, 106; International Association for Public Participation, “IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation” (2018) https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/Spectrum_8.5x11_Print.pdf

The other approach analyzed in the literature review was that of stakeholder engagement which is rooted in corporate governance as a way to be responsive to those impacted by the work of any given organization.⁶ Those impacted by this work can be individuals, groups, other organizations or other social configurations generally termed as ‘stakeholders,’ and loosely defined as “anyone who cares, or should care, about the organization—anyone who has a stake in the success of its mission.”⁷ Sometimes stakeholders are internal to an organization and other times they are primarily external to it. While the motivations for stakeholder engagement might vary and occupy different ethical stances (from a utilitarian to more authentic engagements), it is generally understood that such engagement is beneficial to organizational performance overall and should be formalized as an ongoing priority for an organization such as the Ronning Center. Strategies for stakeholder engagement should also avoid superficiality and must be predicated on long-term engagement, rather than singular connections without a broader vision and relationship-building.

The approach adopted for this needs assessment is a blend of both public participation practices and stakeholder engagement which we have termed “public engagement”. The key areas for attention, based on the existing research in these topics, included the following: following prescribed phases of implementation, including follow up after completion and implementing tools for the building of community trust; factoring in variables related to the use of online platforms for engagement; overcoming barriers to engagement; developing (in relationship with the Ronning Center) preferred outcomes (as opposed to mere outputs) to engagement beyond data collection and strategic planning information (ie. educational, empowerment, action-oriented, ideological etc outcomes). As a result, the design of this needs assessment approximately followed the IAP2 Spectrum for Public Participation with a few amendments. While the IAP2 model is a five stage spectrum which includes the following stages: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower, the primary foci for this assessment was the first four stages. The reasons for this are specific to Ronning Center governance which does not allow for final decision making processes to be placed in the hands of the public.

⁶ Marie-Louise Sinclair, “Developing a model for effective stakeholder engagement management.” *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*. 12 (1) at 1.

⁷ Michael Allison and Jude Kaye, *Strategic Planning for Nonprofit Organizations: A Practical Guide and Workbook*, John Wiley & Sons, 2011, pp. 39-40.

Inform:

As much as this needs assessment has proceeded from a desire to inform the Ronning Center about the religio-scape of particular regions of Alberta and to better understand the needs and interests within those spaces, there has also been a desire to use the assessment itself for informing the engaged organizations and communities about the history and services of the Ronning Center as well. While it is anticipated that the strategic planning of the Ronning Center will be shaped and shifted by this assessment, the outreach phase of the plan was also useful for informing the communities we connect with about the Center's presence and overall mandate. Similarly, while the engagement of similar RSC (which be elaborated on below) is helpful for understanding their overall approach to strategic planning, along with their funding structures and other pertinent information, the outreach conducted in this phase was used to connect with those organizations and inform them of both the existence of the Center and its overall mandate.

Consult:

This phase of the spectrum is the center of gravity for the assessment. It is the consultation phase where the Center obtained public feedback on their priorities, as well as the Ronning Center's approach to community engagement and service delivery within its mandate. This assessment also captured the overall interests of these groups as it relates to that mandate in order to determine overlap, shared interests, or new avenues of engagement for the Center to undertake in future.

Involve:

The phase signified the involvement of religious individuals and groups through this assessment at different levels and aimed to maximize participation through accessibility. This occurred in a nesting approach where the later phases were informed by data acquired in earlier ones. In this way, engagement was continuous, rather than singular points of contact to ensure that the respondents' concerns and aspirations are fully heard, understood and considered. There is also the promise of future scaffolding on this engagement with the organizations involved.

Collaborate:

Collaboration, in the case of this assessment, involved building upon the relationships made through the assessment to inform the decisions, planning, and strategy of the Ronning Center going forward, in both the production of this report and its accompanying policy and service recommendations. It does not necessarily mean that respondents will become "empowered" in the sense of the last phase of the IAP2 model such that they are involved in Ronning Center decision making processes directly or "democratically," but rather have been consulted and will continue to be consulted when it is conducive to do so and will precipitate into relevant partnerships when it makes sense to do so.

A third area of literature also clearly influenced the development of this needs assessment, termed as Community Engaged Scholarship (or CES), which refers to a framework for public engagement within higher education institutions like universities and affiliated centers. Weerts and Sandmann define CES as that which “involves the researcher in a mutually beneficial partnership with the community and results in scholarship deriving from teaching, discovery, integration, application or engagement.”⁸ In this manner, universities and affiliated centers are no longer involved in unidirectional knowledge transfer, but embrace mutual exchange. Further, data collection in CES is not just field work where respondents are passive participants, but rather, the process of engagement itself yields unique insights and involves both community participation and collaboration, as well as mutual benefit from the scholarship produced. The use of CES within a university culture can be challenging at times, including with stigma attached to the recognition of community research, funding hurdles, and considerations with research design. This needs assessment aims to challenge these issues.

Finally, in terms of background information, as part of the preparation for this needs assessment, a secondary analysis of available information from similarly structured RSC and institutes was undertaken. The purpose of this analysis was to examine such centers’ approaches to public engagement and CES, if any. Based on the criteria of looking for RSC (mostly affiliated with academic institutions) with similar mandates and programming as the Ronning Center, thirty (30) relevant RSC were identified and profiles were created for each of them. Their profiles include information pertaining to contact information, institutional affiliations, scope and areas of research/service, academic and public activities, vision statements, available funding information and any additional information that could provide insights into strategic planning and/or public engagement endeavours such as annual reports. In analyzing these profiles, one discernible point quickly arises: if said organizations are engaging with coherent and intentional strategies of public engagement, these are not necessarily being made readily publicly available. This ambiguity raises questions about the impact of public engagement should it not contribute to the overall transparency, transformation, and trajectory of these groups.

Nonetheless, there are some relevant findings pertaining to areas of service in such centers that are visualized in Figure 1 below. While the ways in which public engagement informs these areas of service remain unclear, it is helpful to note for entities like the Ronning Center in terms of providing an environmental scan in the shared sector of RSC, and potential gaps could inform future areas of service and innovation.

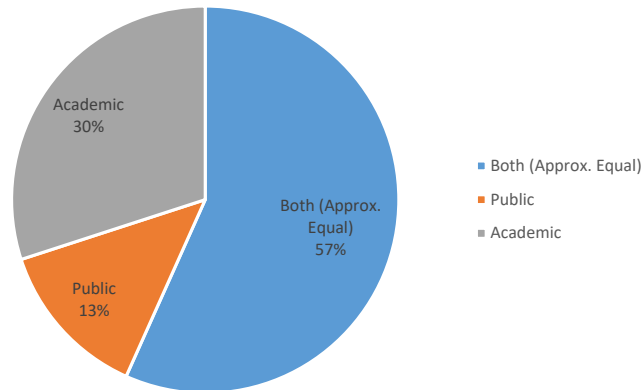
⁸ Michael Allison and Jude Kaye, *Strategic Planning for Nonprofit Organizations: A Practical Guide and Workbook*, John Wiley & Sons, 2011, pp. 39-40.

Figure 1.0 Religious Studies Center Areas of Service & Engagement

AREA OF SERVICE	Number of Centres (out of 30)
Research	
Research (Organic, including hosting research networks and their projects)	11
Research Fellowships (Academic - undergraduate, graduate, post-graduate)	12
Research Fellowships (Community - Clergy, public researchers etc)	2
Public Events	
Lectures	19
Conferences	12
Workshops	2
Other (Film screenings, special events, etc.)	3
Publication	
Articles	8
Journals	6
Books	6
Podcast	3
Film/Video Production	2
Radio Program	1
Funding	
Grants/Awards for Academics	7
Education	
University Courses	3
Public education including continuing education (often targeted to specific demographics such as clergy, educators, professionals, media, government etc)	15

While the RSC analyzed for this assessment vary in terms of their scope, funding, and university affiliation, they all engage with questions of religion and public life in their mandates and services. The degree to which these services or programming are academic in nature versus primarily public-facing can be ascertained based on their collected data. Figure 2 below represents the primary audiences for organizational service. Please note that public accessibility of academic lectures alone did not count as being publicly engaged.

Figure 2.0: Primary Audience for Religious Studies Center Services



It is important also to note that having the public as a primary audience for institutional services does not necessarily translate into intentional public engagement of the kind we have described above. In fact, the majority of centers engaging with the public at all were coming from an educational standpoint, or used terms such as “inform”, “influence” and the “dissemination” or “communication” of academic information and/or research, implying unidirectional engagement. The vast majority of such centers portrayed their public work as an offering, rather than an exchange. Only seven organizations in the list mentioned public engagement in their mandates or areas of service; however, explication of their strategies for engagement was only mentioned in one example. These included mention of:

“the vast majority of such centers portrayed their public work as an offering, rather than an exchange. Only seven organizations in the list mentioned public engagement in their mandates or areas of service”

- Engaging “policymakers and practitioners in analysis and dialogue on critical issues in order to increase public understanding of religion” (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs)
- Engaging “scholars, professionals, students and interested publics to build knowledge about the ways that religion and media are interacting and evolving in contemporary global cultures.” (The Center for Media, Religion and Culture)
- Conducting research... “in partnership with religious communities and interfaith organizations (The Pluralism Project)
- Bringing “exceptional scholarship into dialogue with engaged citizenship and the creative arts through the voices of central figures who are in or who study closely the most important issues in religion and public life in the United States today.” (The Boisi Center) Note: this mandate, while claiming a dialogic nature, admitted to proceed from an impetus to “shape minds and souls” in the Jesuit and Catholic commitment.

- “Enabling and empowering faith communities to reflect critically upon their beliefs and practices and expound and interpret them to a wider public.” (The Edward Cadbury Center for the Public Understanding of Religion)
- Working “closely with non-academic partners to identify the ways in which religion is relevant to their work and to produce research that is capable of meeting their need to better understand the nature of religion and religious organizations locally, nationally and internationally. (Centre for Religion and Public Life) Note: the strategy of identification was not discernible.
- Conducting “Consultation with local congregations and also includes the Hartford Institute’s church assessment inventories (Parish Profile, Pastoral Search & Church Planning Inventories). Hundreds of churches have used these inventories since the 1980’s.” (Hartford Seminary)

In addition to preparing these profiles, online correspondence was also initiated with centers and institutions in the hopes of deriving more information from them as to their public engagement strategies; however, despite attempts to connect, no centers or institutions responded to our requests. As a result, this possibility for engagement with them remains a future potential research area, particularly if this report itself becomes an important conversation starter amongst such centers and institutions based on the precedent now set for public engagement by the Ronning Center.

Assessment Methodology

Following the literature review and secondary analysis of religious studies institute profiles, the remainder of this study followed a multi-methods approach that included an online or phone survey, as well as in-depth conversations with select respondents. To prepare for the surveys, an initial population had to be collected before the assessment could begin.

The population for this assessment centered on religious organizations in Camrose, and Edmonton and immediate surrounding areas. Their information was collected from governmental registry information, as well as publicly available databases. Further data was collected through searches of organizational online footprints and through consultation with religious leaders in their broader religious communities. Efforts were made to avoid duplication of contacts in the population, and collect relevant demographic information on the organizations including their religion, religious denomination/sect, date of establishment, multiple contact methods (including phone, email, and determining direct individual contacts within a broader organization), as well as data pertaining to their online and social media presences.

Religious organizations representing the following religions were included in the initial population for this assessment: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, B'ahai, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Every effort was made to both include and document a broad range of denominations or sects within each religion. Some secular organizations centered on community building and spirituality were included in the population as well; however, these were not systematic inclusions and could be a priority for future research. Similarly, organizations for Indigenous spirituality were limited in this assessment and require further engagement with appropriate protocols for engagement with elders and FNMI leadership. In total, 346 religious organizations were included in the total population for this assessment.

Once the population was identified and the survey was developed in consultation with the Ronning Center, data collection began. This initially occurred through direct email correspondence, introducing the Ronning Center, the assessment, and the primary research investigator. Correspondence included an outreach pamphlet with information about the Ronning Center and its research partner, the Institute for Religious and Socio-Political Studies (I-RSS), as well as a link to the online survey. Following these email correspondences, there was limited direct engagement with contacts, some data collected through the survey online, and other "bounce backs" which initiated a search for other methods of contacting the organization. As survey responses began to be collected, it quickly became apparent that the survey sample was of an older demographic population - something we assumed could be the case for other organizations who had not yet responded. In order to maximize flexibility for organizational responses and accessibility, we began contacting organizations by phone to conduct the surveys with an I-RSS research assistant verbally. The different processes of data collection aided the sense of "mutual exchange" of CES outlined above, and also helped with the relationship development this assessment aspired to foster from the beginning. It also yielded unique insights and findings that will be elaborated further below.

346**Religious
Organization
in Population****54****Survey
Respondents****11****In-depth
Interviews**

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would like to be contacted for a deeper conversation, either individually or in a focus group. As arrangements began to be made for focus groups, it quickly became apparent that respondents were having difficulty committing to times when they could meet together with others, either in-person or over Zoom. To accommodate their busy schedules, this phase was further adapted to be conducted over the phone or Zoom and took the form of individual semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (developed out of the survey responses and in consultation with the Ronning Center) to allow for an organic conversation between the researcher and the community respondent. Respondents who confirmed their willingness to participate in these conversations were contacted to arrange a time and conversations ranged from 25 minutes to over an hour. Verbal consent for the taking of handwritten notes during the conversation and using anonymized quotations from those notes was obtained through a form process at the beginning of the interaction. Participants were assured that they would remain anonymous and able to skip questions or end the conversation throughout and, further, that any use of their contributions to this final report would be stripped of any identifying markets when directly quoted. The notes from these conversations will be destroyed after a period of 6 months following the publication of this assessment report.

Data from the survey was both numerical and open-ended which required a mixed methods approach for analysis and including cross tabs and thematic analysis. In crosstabs analysis, data tables of displayed numerical survey results offer the opportunity to examine relationships between variables, to compare data responses, and to pull out patterns that might otherwise not be apparent. In thematic analysis of open-ended questions, repeated key terms are highlighted, coded, and categorized through a data set to derive themed patterns and developing understandings of the population through these processes. Thematic analysis involves proceeding from an awareness that qualitative research is a highly reflexive process and accounts for the researcher's positionality, worldview, perspectives, and biases in the research process. As the primary researcher for this study was a visible member (and convert) of a religious minority group, these considerations were important to take into account during data collection, especially during the interviews, and during analysis.

“Data from the survey was both numerical and open-ended which required a mixed methods approach for analysis.”

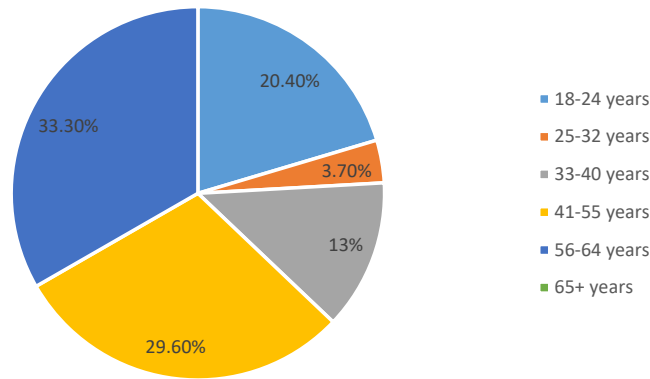
RESPONDENT Samples

In total, there were 54 survey respondents representing 15.6% of the total assessment population. The demographic distributions of the survey sample will be explained below. Of the 54 survey respondents, 10 were from Camrose (18.5%), 43 were from Edmonton, and 1 was from Edmonton but living in Calgary. The Camrose number is slightly over representative of the proportion of the overall population that is from Camrose (14.7%); however, this was expected given the Ronning Center's location in Camrose and some community familiarity with it.

While the reasons for some of these demographic distributions remain ambiguous, others might still be their own implicit findings that require further testing should such lines of questioning be pursued. For example, only 28% of respondents were female and the remainder were male (72%), pointing to either a dominance of male involvement in organizational or religious leadership, as well as the possibility of gendered time constraints within certain religious communities, or gendered tendencies for self-selection in research participation with a variety of motivations. Speculation on the demographic data does not form the basis of this report and so will be avoided.

There was a broad range of ages represented in the survey sample as represented in figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Ages of Survey Respondents



It should be noted, as mentioned above, that initial direct survey responses were dominated by older age demographics and younger ranges were added through phone surveying.

In terms of religious distribution, respondents were overwhelmingly Christian (83.3%), followed by Muslim respondents (7.4%), Jewish respondents (5.6%), 1 B’ahai person, and 1 agnostic person. It should be noted that engagement with other religious communities occurred during the phone sampling process; however, no representatives of those religious communities responded to the survey. The number of Christians in the survey are significantly over-representative of the overall Christian population in Alberta which only accounts for 48.1% of the total Alberta population.⁹

It is worth noting that 40.1% of the Alberta population identifies as having no religion or secular perspectives; thus, as mentioned above, future assessments pertaining to these populations would be prudent. The percentages of Muslim (4.8%) and Jewish respondents were also over-representative of overall proportional populations in the province of Alberta more broadly, but to a lesser extent. The absence of Sikh, Buddhist, and Hindu respondents is of particular concern for future research as well, given their communities’ relatively high total provincial population.

In terms of denomination or sect, representation from Muslim communities was exclusively Sunni, and from Jewish communities, representation covered reform, conservative and orthodox community members. Christian denominations were fairly diverse and included representation from the following groups: Baptists, Evangelicals, Lutherans, Missionary Alliance, Pentecostal (Born Again), Presbyterian, United, Anglican, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Reformed, Mennonite, Moravian, and self-declared non-denominational. The largest number of respondents came from the Lutheran denomination (12 participants or 22.2% of the total survey sample). This was also expected given the high population of Lutherans in Camrose (half of the Lutherans in the survey sample were from Camrose) and given the long-standing Lutheran roots of Augustana campus there.

In terms of diversity, the vast majority of respondents reported white, Caucasian, European, or “Canadian” ethnic origins and/or racial identity with some Arabs, Africans, East or south-East Asians, South Asians, and one Indigenous respondent.

⁹ Statistics Canada, Census 2021 of Population, Profile Table for Alberta, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?DGUIDlist=2021A000248&GENDERlist=1&HEADERlist=0&Lang=E&STATISTIClist=1&SearchText=Alberta>

The organizational demographic data was equally helpful for understanding the sample better. The vast majority of religious organizations engaged for this assessment were part of a national religious network or umbrella organization (75.9%) and had been established for 20 or more years (83.3%). The governance structures of the organizations varied little, with most having a board of directors elected through their congregation or membership base, an executive committee focused on strategic decision making, and funding from within the communities they serve by donation or through membership fees. Other organizations followed a more corporate structure with a hired CEO and directing paid employees while the board served in a limited capacity. Additionally, several organizations were also informed by clergy working within the organization and established elder councils. All organizations represented in the survey sample hold either non-profit or charitable status.

Areas of service was also a key indicator of organizational reach and their own community engagement with the vast majority of organizations offering the following forms of service:

- Religious (prayer, rituals, etc) (100%)
- Life stage services (marriages, divorces, birth ceremonies, burials etc) (94.4%)
- Education (learning, classes etc) (85.2%)
- Children Services (Childcare and children’s classes) (81.5%)
- Events (Holidays, Public talks, community galas etc) (70.4%)
- Charitable Services (Food bank, aid distribution, etc) (70.4%)
- Psychological Services (Family and Individual Counselling, Group Therapy) (44.4%)

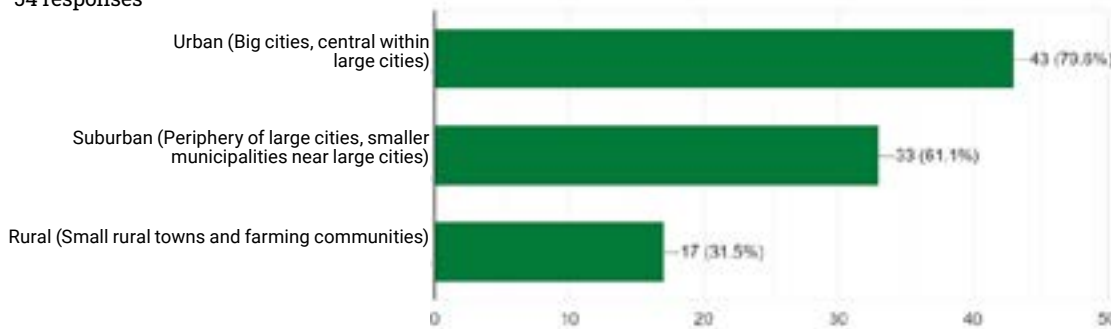
A number of organizations also specified offering AA and NA recovery services, 12 step programs, local neighbourhood initiatives (like community barbecues and school drives), and others.

Understanding domains of service also proved important for recognizing certain organizational decisions such as service delivery or related to volunteer and patron retention. Figure 4 shows the distribution across urban, suburban and rural domains.

Figure 4. Demographics Served by Religious Organization

Which demographics does your organization serve? Check all that apply.

54 responses



A total of 11 survey respondents further participated in interviews, with 9 from Edmonton and 2 from Camrose. All interview respondents were male and between the ages of 41 and 64 with the exception of one respondent who was between 33 and 40 years of age. Respondents included 5 Christians (2 Lutherans, 2 Baptists, 1 unspecified), 3 Muslims (all Sunni), 2 Jews (1 Orthodox, 1 self-declared observant), and 1 B’ahai person. In general, recruitment for interview participant was challenging in terms of managing busy schedules and the low recruitment numbers can largely be attributed to this barrier as all respondents who did respond noted that doing so was seen as highly important and beneficial, and any constraints they experienced were due to scheduling, even with maximum flexibility from the researcher.

Survey Findings

Survey findings are derived from two main sources of data collection: the survey answers themselves and notes taken by the I-RSS Research Assistant during data collection. These notes included observations seen during the process of both outreach and phone surveys themselves and prove to offer helpful insights about the process of public engagement and the unique attitudes of religious organization members, including those who refused to participate in the survey and whose general outlooks would not otherwise be captured.

Two major observations from the phone surveying process included: firstly, that younger respondents tended to be more open to answering questions, and secondly, that certain demographics were very reluctant to participate. The latter could be related to the fact that populations from groups that could be understood as ethnic or religious minorities expressed being overly concerned with how their words would be used following any participation in the assessment, even after being assured that no identifying information would tie their answers to publication of any responses and otherwise being guided through the consent and ethics process to be followed in the assessment. This was especially the case for both Chinese and Russian Churches, and some Catholic organizations who displayed hesitancy in responding, even when they eventually did so. Unfortunately, the majority of those organizations which expressed these concerns did not participate in either the phone survey or the interview to follow. This points to even more sensitivity needed for future engagement with the Ronning Center, particularly around anonymity and privacy. The concerns of such populations may also be better understood in light of responses about challenges faced by Christian and religious minority groups offered in the interview findings below.

The numerical survey findings tend to fall into two main categories: people and priorities. In questions pertaining to people, a clearer picture of employee, volunteer, and patron attraction, retention, and membership developed through the available responses. For example, Figures 5 and 6 show that the vast majority of religious organization respondents have low numbers of paid employees, especially when compared to their volunteer bases.

Figure 5. Number of paid employees involved in the organization

How many paid employees are involved in your organization

54 responses

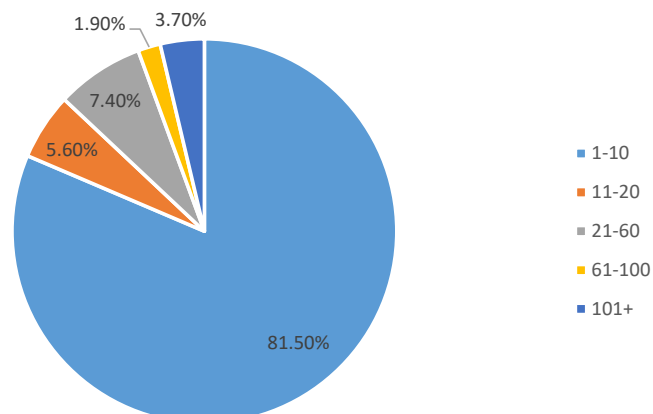
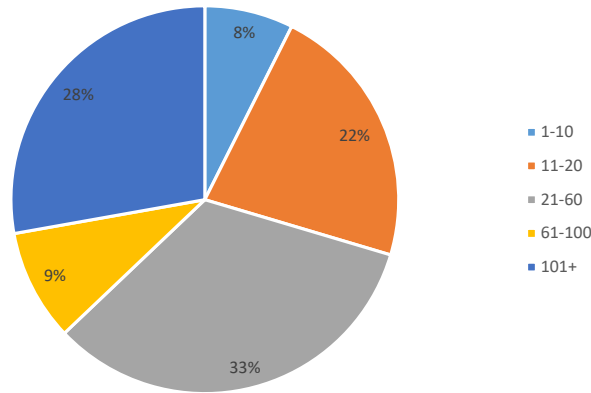


Figure 6. Number of volunteers involved in the organization

How many paid employees are involved in your organization
54 responses



In terms of how both employees and volunteers identify with their organization, this was common the vast majority of the time, and strongly so. Figures 7 and 8 show the different distributions.

Figure 7. Degree to which employees identify with organization

To what degree do employees of your organization identify themselves with your organization specifically?
54 re:

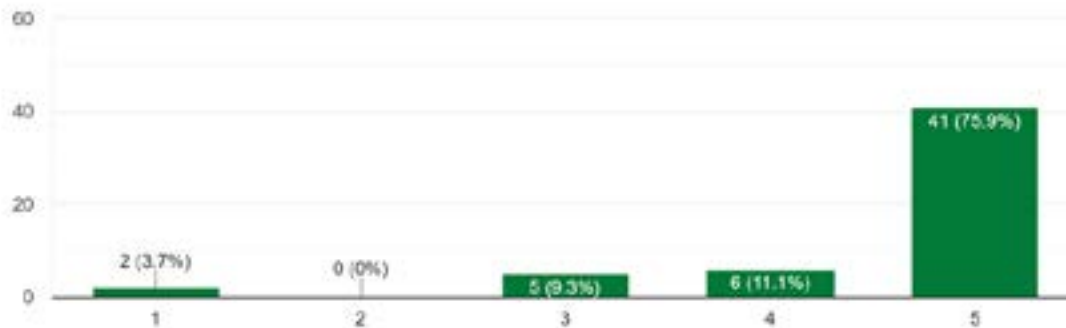
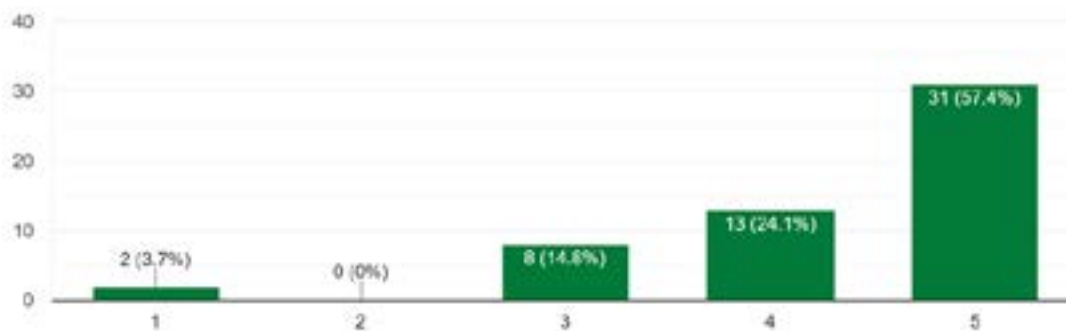


Figure 8. Degree to which volunteers identify with organization

To what degree do volunteers of your organization identify themselves with your organization specifically?
54 responses



Despite having more volunteers overall, the volunteer identity organizational piece (while still strong) was a bit lower than that for employees and might be a contributing factor to lower retention rates of volunteers overall which were also lower than those for employees. Figures 9 and 10 show the different distributions.

Figure 9. Employee retention in organization

How is your employee retention?

54 responses

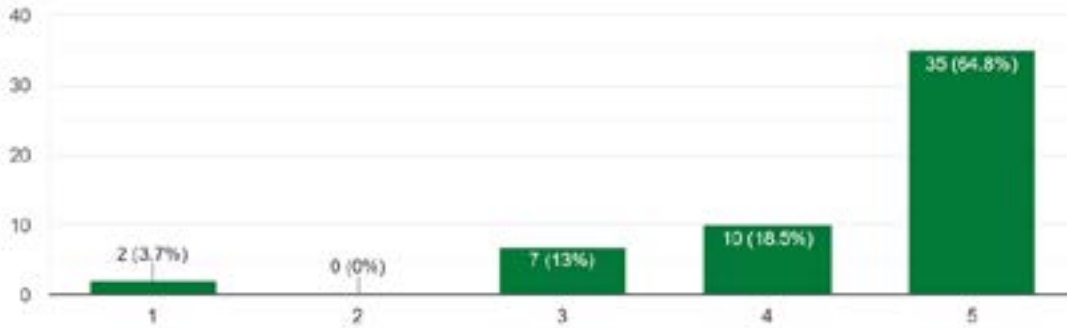
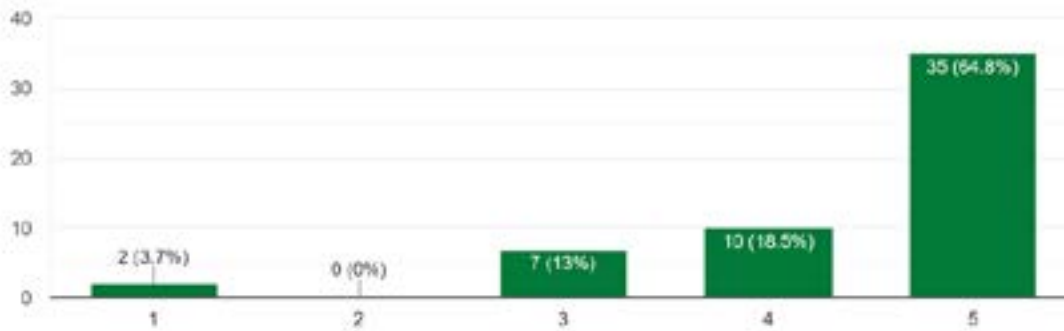


Figure 10. Volunteer retention in organization

How is your volunteer retention?

54 responses

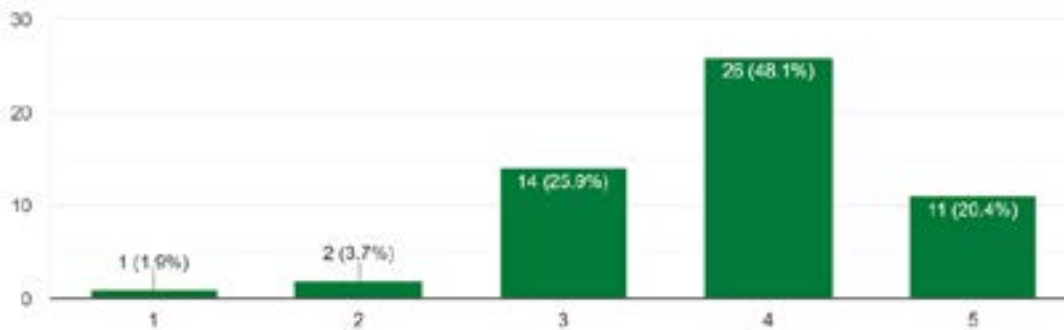


Patrons represent the other broad category of people who are involved with religious organizations. The range in the number of patrons was significant with some organizations only serving 25 and others serving upwards of 10,000. The average number of patrons for all organizations was 484.8, although it appears that patron retention can be an even bigger challenge than retention of volunteers. Figure 11 shows that there is significantly more diversity in this answer, something which could be impacted greatly by religious dynamics themselves: for example, some religious ways of life do not specify membership or patronage with a particular or consistent house of worship but could be patronized in transient ways by populations which are difficult to engage, track and measure.

Figure 11. Patron retention in organization

What is your organizational retention like for patrons/congregants?

54 responses

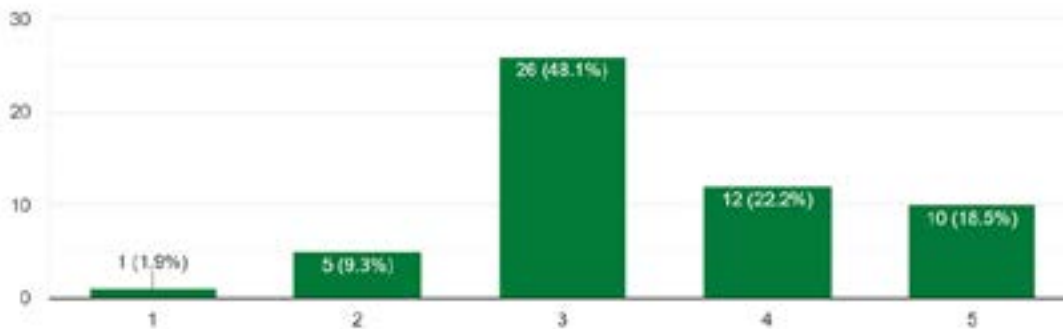


When asked what the organization was doing to combat issues with patron retention, responses were mixed. Some organizations were not pursuing any solutions to this issue. Others would simply follow up with the patron or congregant who stopped attending, implying a known and personal relationship with that person. A number of respondents made sure to mention that they viewed this as an issue of aging patron populations where attendees were either dying, or moving away. Numerous responses found that the Covid-19 Pandemic had an impact on patron retention and that efforts had to be made by their organization to engage patrons again after lockdowns and other precautions ended.

In building a better picture of organizational engagement with patrons, we wanted to understand the degree to which religious organizations are primarily member-based. These results were also diverse with 42.6% being member-based, 13% being non-member based, and the remaining 44.4% being some combination of them both. The procedures for becoming a member varied, however, all of them included needing to first agree to basic faith tenets for that religion (and for some Christian groups, baptismal requirements) as well as sometimes overtly requiring adherence to denominational or sectarian tenets. Members usually need to make a donation and are expected to be actively involved in the organization to retain membership. Very few organizations also require potential members to take a class prior to becoming members. Almost all organizations which include membership had their services open to the public (“open to all” or “everyone is welcome”) with very few members-only services or domains. These included the ability to vote at AGMs, the ability to serve as an Elder in the Church, having one’s children attend Sunday schools, or being able to attend specific events such as the Lord’s Supper. These examples, however, were not the majority and most organizations were non-exclusive - numbers which are reflected in Figure 12. On the numerical scale, 5 represents being strongly invested in serving the wider public while 1 represented being strongly invested in their religious community only.

Figure 12. Extent to which religious organizations are invested in serving the wider public

To what extent is your organization invested in serving the wider public versus your religious community only? (Note: 3 represents equal investment in both communities)
54 responses



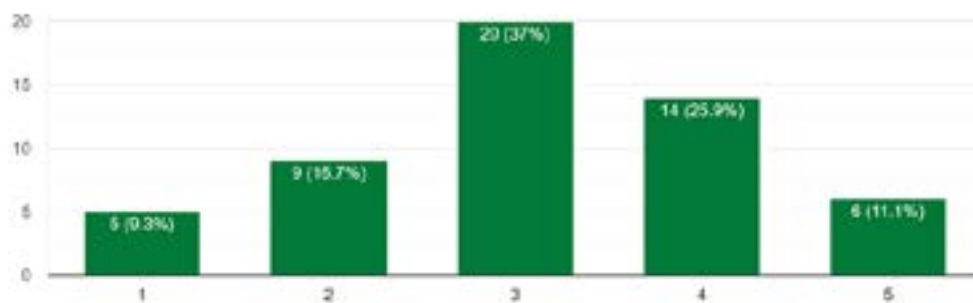
The remaining survey questions pertained to developing an understanding of organizational community connections and determining the degree to which their strategic plans and outlooks have factors in common with the Ronning Center mandate. In terms of domains of community engagement, the majority of organizations were engaged or willing to engage in intrafaith work, meaning with other denominations or sects within their religion (77.8%). Engagement in interfaith work (with other religions) was noticeably less with only 44.4% doing so and the majority of those being religious minorities (Muslim, Jewish and B’ahai respondents). When asked to explain why they do not participate in certain community connections, only 7 respondents clarified the reason. One Christian respondent felt there were almost no opportunities to engage with other religions in Camrose, implying that if they were available, they might pursue them. Another Christian respondent from Edmonton cited volunteer capacity issues which prevented them from doing interfaith programming beyond services they were providing to their own congregations. The other respondents noted that they either “do not see benefit in running events or programs in affiliation with organizations with different religious belief” or that they “believe that we are to follow Christ alone, following His Word (the Bible). As such, [they] cannot work together with any other group or religion that does not hold the same teaching.” Others affirmed that their mission was about following Christ alone and that they don’t see “a strong connection between that mission and joining in services with other religions.” While more work remains to be done on understanding these attitudinal or doctrinal considerations, it may be a denominational consideration with negative responses to interfaith work coming predominantly from Baptist, Evangelical and Witness Christian backgrounds. Similar responses from respondents in those denominational groups were recorded in the themes of, social justice, religious literacy and advocacy, as will be expounded on below.

According to survey results, it should not be taken for granted that religious organizations automatically engage in social justice activities. Figure 13 shows the degree to which social justice is an important part of the organization’s mandate with 5 meaning it is their primary mandate and 1 meaning it is not part of their mandate at all.

Figure 13. Degree to which social justice is part of organizational mandate

To what degree is social justice work an important part of your organization’s mandate?

54 responses



Religious organizations sometimes view their preaching or dissemination of religious information (“Helping people understand that the Kingdom of God is real”; “By teaching the central role that G-D plays in all our lives we create a society of true social justice”) as their primary activity for social justice - something which deviates from common understandings of the term. It is important to note that that understanding differs significantly from organizational understandings where social justice initiatives are seen as an expression of religious knowledge in action. For those organizations which engage in social justice activities, they were asked to elaborate on what that entailed. Some of their responses below are being included to show the diversity of responses and understanding of the term “Social justice,” with some organizations understanding it to be synonymous with direct charitable endeavours, especially around food security and assistance for disadvantaged groups. Others took a more systemic and advocacy-based approach. Some focused on local community efforts while others supported their national and international groups to address widespread humanitarian issues such as human trafficking.

- Several respondents noted that their organization helped with humanitarian work through the Mustard Seed, Hope Mission and the Bissell Center in Edmonton, among others.
- There were several mentions of refugee sponsorship from different locations around the world including Congo and Ukraine.
- “Exploratory plans for affordable housing. During COVID, we got a grant to hire a social worker and did some stuff for food scarcity. Also help with the Native healing center.”
- “Restorative justice involvement; working with community agencies that work with the disadvantaged; sponsoring refugee families.”
- “The unhoused, the disenfranchised, reconciliation, gender equality, racial justice, environmental stewardship, disability peer groups, among others.”
- “Sexually exploited, low-income assistance, ESL, new Canadians, adults with developmental and cognitive challenges, refugee support”

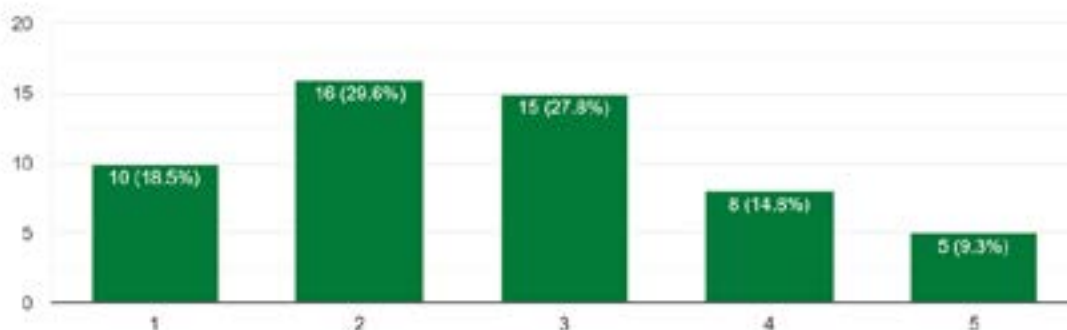
Additionally, a number of organizations were clear to demonstrate their support of Truth and Reconciliation, and for some churches or their national organizations, their willingness to make records available pertaining to aspects of colonialism such as residential schools. Finally, several Christian organizations made mention of supporting LGBTQ2+ rights.

Advocacy efforts were substantially less than social justice endeavours with Figure 14 showing the degree to which advocacy is an important part of the organization’s mandate with 5 meaning it is a primary part of their mandate and 1 meaning it is not part of their mandate at all.

Figure 14. Degree to which advocacy is part of organizational mandate

To what degree is advocacy work an important part of your organization’s mandate?

54 responses



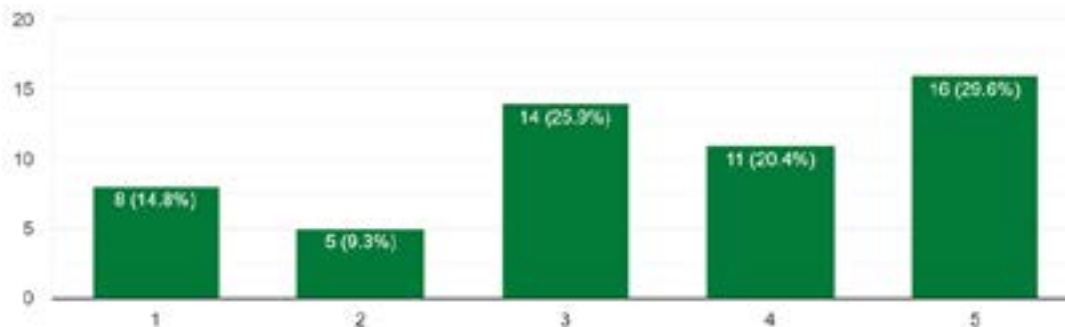
Advocacy efforts overlapped with social justice endeavours for some organizations and were clearly separate for others, including specific efforts such as letter writing on relevant issues including Islamophobia, fighting for equality, marching in pride parades, engaging government and local leaders on issues around housing or support for vulnerable groups, joining national or regional networks that advocate for specific issues like refugee support and settlement, Truth and Reconciliation, on Palestine, and interfaith bridge-building, and others. One organization specified that they commit to “advocacy for culturally oppressed/underrepresented groups (e.g. Indigenous peoples, people of colour, ethnic minorities, the poor) and the elimination of barriers between underprivileged people and the privileged; peace, conflict, and unifying studies; bringing people of diverse backgrounds together at the neighbourhood level for social activities and projects to benefit the community as a whole.” When asked to elaborate on their answer, a number of organizations (22) stated that they do not engage in advocacy because it is not part of their organizational mandate nor a priority of their religious conviction. Only one organization answered that they do not engage in advocacy due to a lack of volunteer power to address issues of importance to the communities they serve.

Lastly, in this vein, religious organizations were asked the importance of engaging in the promotion of religious literacy to the wider public for their organization. (Figure 15) It appears that this matter is of more importance than advocacy, generally speaking, depending on the organization’s understanding of what religious literacy means and how they understand the wider public, answers for which vary significantly. In this question, 5 refers to primary importance and 1 refers to not much importance.

Figure 15. Importance of promoting religious literacy with wider public

To what extent is it important for your organization to engage in promoting religious literacy to the public?

54 responses



For some respondents, religious literacy followed a more widely understood definition of promoting understanding of “neighbours,” meaning adherents of faiths and religious ways of life other than one’s own. Sometimes this was couched as a general “awareness of other religions” or “general knowledge of religions” and familiarity with the beliefs, “views and disciplines” of different religious groups. Others were more specific stating that religious literacy was “Awareness of the values and systems of various religious traditions and how they might impact participation in and understanding of issues in the public forum” as well as how “religion intersects with society.” For others, religious literacy, though ambiguously defined, was nonetheless something that should lead to a “healthy appreciation of other faiths.” For numerous other respondents (19), however, religious literacy meant developing a usable understanding of the Bible, Christian worldviews and behavioural norms, having nothing to do with other faiths. Eleven Christian respondents did not use, understand or accept the use of the term religious literacy to characterize their organization’s work.

As the question pertained to the wider public, it was also important to determine how these organizations understand the terms “public” and “public spaces.” It is worth noting that 12 respondents (22.2%) did not have a definition for these terms or skipped the question. The remaining definitions were as broad as from “anything outside our organization” or “outside the home” to “anything that is not sacred.” In general, many respondents pointed to accessibility/availability and signposting as a prerequisite of a space being understood as public, noting that if it is available to the wider population and/or potentially run by government or mixed communities, and “working towards the common good,” it is considered public. Most organizations did not consider themselves to be technically public spaces; however, they did consider their organization to be accessible to the public more or less. Proceeding from these understandings, the organizations’ approaches to promoting religious literacy, if any, have an inner logic. When asked about their engagement, organizations almost unanimously agreed that their promotion of religious literacy centered on sharing information with the public about their specific religious tradition. These included activities such as the following:

- Bible study, sermons, or otherwise “helping people who want to grow in their faith”
- Promoting the observance of 7 Noahide laws
- Offering public course teaching about their religion open to anyone
- Worship and prayer services
- “Sharing the Good News”
- Religious (Christian) support in recovery programs
- Promotion of “balanced views of Islam” to the wider public

Others specified that their organization has taught world religions courses (most specifically about Islam - stated by Christian organizations) including children’s classes which promote religious literacy and shared human values such as “love, generosity, courage, faithfulness, creativity, speaking one’s mind, ...” They also mention offering open houses and distribution of their holy books (specifically the Qur’an), have partaken in interfaith dialogues consistently, or that they just “want to be part of the community on a human level” without making people feel like they’re just trying to make “mini Christians.” Some organizations prefer to operate within a neighbourhood lens, promoting community by region within their city “to which people from any religion/tradition, or none at all, are invited to attend and share their thoughts/prayers.” Overall, many religious organizations are willing to engage to varying degrees with the promotion of religious literacy and tend to view that participation as a space in which to educate others about their specific beliefs and practices, sometimes but not always from a non-proselytizing perspective.

Interview Findings by Question

Deeper conversations with members of religious organizations who also answered the survey provided important nuances and richer answers to clarify some aspects of the survey questions. These conversations also aided with determining religious organization impressions of both the University of Alberta and the Ronning Center in the hopes of better understanding ways in which engagement can continue and can inform Ronning Center services, programming, and strategic planning. For the sake of clarity, the coded themes pulled during the analysis of these conversations will be offered by each interview question. This will also help with replication of the assessment should the same processes be applied to secular and/or Indigenous communities for comparative study.

What are the primary challenges you feel you face as a religious person in society? What do you see the role of your religious organization being in dealing with those challenges? What are the primary challenges your organization faces?

Numerous respondents, from all religious backgrounds, mentioned that living as a religious person in secular society (particularly a society that is at best, discouraging of religious and spiritual ways of being and knowing, and at worst, openly hostile to them) is the primary challenge they face. As an extension of this, numerous organizations, especially Christian ones (perhaps to the surprise of both the researcher and those reading this report), noted that the media and/or popular misrepresentation of their religion was a significant contributing factor to their unease in secular society. This was not mentioned (as expected) by Muslim organizations despite this issue being a tangible, well-documented reality for Muslims.

The latter issue of Christian misrepresentation seemed to be a sticking point for most Christian respondents. Some described the media as “dark and negative about us” (4) or as portraying Christians and by extension religious people as “non-modern” (22) because they consider some secular societal practices and laws religiously offensive. For some, this was less an issue of media misrepresentation and more a problem of media amplification of “people who claim to be Christian” (27). Others elevated these misconceptions to the status of a “stigma” about what it means to be Christian, stating that “what’s out there has been misconstrued by extreme polarization of both the right and the left.”(24) They and others lamented being portrayed as “anti-vaxxers, anti-abortionists, anti-gay, etc” especially during the pandemic. For some respondents commenting on this issue, it went beyond the media and was a wider social problem where “values and beliefs overlap in the guise of tolerance [while actually being] intolerant of religion...[with claims that] religious ideas are hate speech.” (10) Others parsed this alleged intolerance as anti-Christian discrimination, particularly in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (13), arguing that there is “no place in the public square for Christians to speak” and that “Churches are being attacked [with] 250 Churches being vandalized or burned” and noting that “if that had been a mosque or a synagogue, it would have been big news. [There seems to be] broad acceptance of [the burnings] as pay back... for Residential Schools, even though our tradition wasn’t involved in [them]. It makes an unstable and unsafe environment for us.” (13)

Challenges faced by religious minorities included issues of religious practice within a secular society; however, were generally parsed as problems of accommodation, acceptance, and discrimination. In some cases, this issue showed up most acutely in the public education system which was understood to be “challenging for any religious person as it is not diverse or open to any religious teachings how we want.” (24) This challenge was juxtaposed with perceived societal pressure to also “be involved and contributing” but in a system that doesn’t respect or value you or your religion. Other problems of financial and housing system issues from a religious perspective were noted as placing major constraints on people of religious minorities. All Muslim respondents made mention of the issues of accommodation and discrimination from a gendered perspective - ie. that it is more of a challenge for visible Muslim women than men. It is worth noting that all Muslim respondents were male.

Beyond stated problems of interpersonal or systemic discrimination, respondents also lamented the lack of “soul” or spirituality in society more broadly, especially how it made operations of their organizations difficult due to dwindling numbers and/or problems of relating to religious adherents (especially youth) in a society where “anything goes.” (22) One Jewish respondent summed it up as a matter of personal conviction in the face of “temptations [which] are much more present. Anything you want is available and it’s not always easy to avoid this.” (26) Another respondent said that the materialism of society was challenging to avoid, even for “people who might call themselves spiritual,” generally pointing to the overwhelm of secular cultural norms/practices, like capitalism. (14)

In light of these socio-religious challenges, respondents viewed the role of their religious organizations as being a place of solace, knowledge and education, and community. A Jewish respondent said it was their job “to fill the ideological gap in providing and findings answers to the big challenges we face in the system, developing ways to tailor the old [religious] values to modern challenges.” (26) Muslim respondents saw it as the duty of their organizations to offer educational alternatives than what the public system offered and stuck to practical responses. Several respondents viewed the role of their organization as being a place for cultivating an understanding of religious discipline in an undisciplined society and “to have people understand we’re all answerable to God” - ie. for ethical/moral accountability. (22) One respondent parsed their entire ministry’s purpose as equipping “our people today about how to live in opposition to what’s out there,” (34) whereas others presented their role as simply “bringing people back to God’s Word...[and] what this means to their day to day lives... to navigate or calibrate their lives as God intends.” (10) The notion of community stewardship through a challenging or hostile public context was prevalent in all conversations.

What do you think of the University of Alberta as an institution overall? Before this assessment, had you heard about the Ronning Center? If so, what are your general impressions of the Center and what we do? If this was your first encounter with the Center, what thoughts or impressions do you have about it so far?

To understand the barriers or opportunities for ongoing engagement with religious organizations, it became imperative to understand how they perceive both the University of Alberta and the Ronning Center. Prior to answering these questions, respondents were reassured of their anonymity in their responses and that the researcher did not apply a social or moral value to their honest perspectives and responses. They were reminded that there would be no repercussions for any negative responses.

Overall, given the misgivings with media representation found in answers to the first set of questions, it was anticipated that the same respondents might have a negative perception of the University of Alberta as an institute of higher learning as populist discourses tend to equate such institutions with allegedly liberal social inculcation; however, this was not the case. The majority of respondents viewed the University of Alberta positively, as providing a necessary societal service (“a tremendous gift to society in training the next generation of professionals” (22)) and doing so competitively and with excellence. For the most part, respondents felt that the University was “welcoming for people of faith” but could use some improvements, which will be elaborated further below. Respondents with positive impressions noted that their student congregants “seem happy” whether studying or teaching there, and that the University is a place that people go “to be changed” for the better. (34) Other positive specifics mentioned included University accolades in the STEM fields, providing a great student experience, alumni engagement and support, solid athletics, and exhibiting some progress over the year for students of religious minority backgrounds. It should be noted that the inverse was mentioned for students of Christian backgrounds which will be elaborated on below.

Even though a respondent may have given a positive impression of the University of Alberta, that did not deter them from also offering insights into areas that require improvement or may be negative. These issues included mentions of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic incidents; a general need for more religious freedoms particularly more places to pray, more chaplains, and more student groups centered on religious beliefs and values; a perceived discrepancy between the high purported ideals of the University versus their lack of implemented EDI policies and practices in reality; the degradation of the University to operating like a business (especially in light of governmental cuts which extend most swiftly into the liberal arts); and too much of a secularized atmosphere, especially at Augustana campus, post-merger. All Muslim respondents made specific mention of problems relating to the teaching of Islam and Islamic Studies in the Religious Studies department - an ongoing controversy especially around the Introduction to Islam course and a lack of sensitivity around religious sensitivities to depictions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and other religious disagreements mired in debates about academic freedom. This controversy became known to the public in recent years with the involvement (and protests) of Muslim community organizations and the Muslim Students’ Association.

Impressions of the Ronning Center ranged from neutral to positive, with only one negative response given. The negative response was given by a respondent who had previously been involved as a community member with the Ronning Center but who now viewed the Center as being “watered down” and exclusive of certain voices “unless you fit in the spectrum of where society is going.” (10) This respondent also had negative perceptions of the University of Alberta and saw both institutions together as being highly secularized, compromised in terms of free speech, and refusing to offer equal opportunity/voice to “anything ‘right’ [on the political spectrum] or Christian.” Other respondents, including other Christians, were more positive in their responses or (if they did not have knowledge or experience of the Ronning Center prior to the assessment), were hopeful. In the latter category, respondents felt the Center had the potential to make religious students feel more comfortable overall, and that the Center could offer a great service for improving society by offering space to ask life’s big (philosophical) questions, as well as providing opportunities for interfaith encounter/dialogue, and amplifying different religious perspectives.

Some respondents had intimate knowledge of Ronning Center programming, may have co-organized Ronning Center events in the past or had even been financial contributors to the Center. Excluding the one aforementioned negative response, those with these experiences and prior knowledge gave overwhelmingly positive responses.

**What kind of services do you think the Ronning Center should provide to the community?
What would be helpful or valuable for a university center to offer?**

It was a natural extension of the previous questions that respondents would then want to offer up suggestions about what the Ronning Center should be doing in terms of advocacy with the University's ecosystem; however, we were interested in other proactive suggestions for services and programming. Some respondents took this in relation to addressing some of the challenges they had already vocalized; however, others paused and pondered the question holistically. Every respondent noted that it was an excellent question and one that they appreciated being asked, noting in some cases that they do not feel consulted on such matters otherwise.

Suggestions for services included the following and centered on developing opportunities for interaction between people of different religions and spaces for their religious voices and ways of life to be heard,

- Eating meals together (as members of different religions) to get to know each other better and enjoy each others' company; creating events for interacting together without having to be centered on academics all the time;
- Offer opportunities to counter negative assumptions about their religion to others who hold them, especially through interfaith events and facilitated conversations
- Opportunities to simply share their values, worldviews, practices and philosophies to build understanding
- Continuing more research and community assessment on religious communities in general and publicly sharing the results for all to discuss and benefit
- Offer religious studies courses beyond what is available by University departments currently, including online and available to the general public

Finally, suggestions around religious students dominated this segment of the conversation with religious organizations requesting data collection on students' religions (especially international students or students arriving from other parts of Canada), requesting more access to religious students in general, monthly engagements with students from their religion, sharing community organizations and resources with students through the development of a religious guide available from the Ronning Center and distributed across campus, as well as including students in all interfaith events suggested above. One respondent also suggested that the Ronning Center could become a place for students to report incidents they experience of religious discrimination on campus.

Beyond direct suggestions and recommendations, some respondents also made mention of things they hoped the Ronning Center might change about its programming, indicating a familiarity with the organization prior to assessment engagement. One respondent suggested that there be more action-based activities for engagement, including interfaith dialogue on a monthly or consistent basis to develop relationships over time and avoid “just having speakers on issues” as one-off engagements. This respondent also suggested that a longer-term space for building interfaith relationships like this might develop into connections that coalesce around charitable or social justice initiatives “beyond academics.”

Similarly, another respondent suggested the promotion of more “experiential aspects of religion for the purpose of education” beyond formal lectures and panels. While they mentioned interfaith work as others did, they also suggested “solo faith work” which would include facilitating Church or religious house visits and services, and inviting people of other religious or secular ways of life into these spaces to discuss “shared values.” In this vein, one respondent stated the Ronning Center could be a protective space of “intellectual honesty” against “secular fundamentalism” - a place to “push boundaries and ask questions” and show that one’s religion “is everything,” not just part of their life. While not all of these recommendations will necessarily be implemented, gathering these perspectives is imperative for the Ronning Center to understand how its stakeholders perceive it as an organization and its mandate.

On the survey, we had a question about religious literacy. Can you tell me more about your general thoughts on what religious literacy is, and what it does? Can you further tell me whether or not you feel there is social value in learning about other religious groups and religion as a whole?

Responses to the deeper question about religious literacy in these conversations led to slightly different answers than what was found on the survey with most respondents there focusing on literacy within their own tradition. In interviews, respondents felt that equipping wider society to engage with religious questions about our existence, or “bring the soul back into society” was a primary impetus for engaging in religious literacy. Respondents view it as contributing to the development of “well-rounded people” who understand faith in general and are able to have “acceptance of other views, even within their own faith”. Understanding faith diversity was another positive value of promoting religious literacy mentioned by respondents to prevent “self-exclusion from understanding” others and develop “fine human beings [who] care about the social aspects of the society you live in.” One respondent put it succinctly saying, “you can’t understand people from a different faith background if you don’t know anything about their faith.” Overall, all respondents felt religious literacy has a positive social value and was critical for not only understanding the shared society we live in and talk with others respectfully, but also enabled the challenging of prejudices and the promotion of social unity, despite differences.

What made you want to both fill out the survey and also speak with us? Did you experience any potential barriers to engaging with us that we could help you with in the future? For future engagement, what factors have to be considered for your participation? Are you willing to be contacted at a future date to connect with us further?

As the Ronning Center is committed to ongoing engagement with religious organizations in the regions studied in this assessment, it was important to understand what motivated respondents to participate and if there were any obstacles or barriers to their participation that could be mitigated for future engagement. Of course, the latter question is unlikely to bring many answers as the only respondents asked were those who managed to overcome any barriers to actually participating, and because of the assessment adaptations for engagement made throughout the research process which aimed to maximize accessibility. That said, there were some unique insights that were relayed through respondent answers. Notably, the majority of respondents felt it was a religious responsibility to participate and offer their faith perspective, noting that this is especially true because of the shared perception that religious perspectives are so infrequently captured, especially by the University. Additionally, members of religious minorities felt an added responsibility to participate “to give a variety of perspectives.” No barriers to engagement (with the assessment adaptations taken into account) beyond a general busyness were recorded and all respondents consented to both receiving the final public version of this report, as well as future engagement opportunities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this assessment is an important first step into better understanding religious organizations in northern Alberta for the purposes of developing ongoing engagement with a University-affiliated religious studies center and addressing both their concerns and their needs. In general, more work remains to be done educating religious organizations and the general public on basic religious studies concepts such as public space, religious literacy, and even in the areas of advocacy and social justice with a religious studies-informed approach. It appears that the general perception of religious misinformation and demonizations in popular discourses is highly distressing to religious practitioners and the organizations they belong to, and one role a religious studies center like the Ronning Center could fill is in raising the level of discussion around the topic of religion in media and popular conversations more broadly. While religious organizations tend to be focused on staying afloat, are invested inwardly in congregational education and charitable initiatives, or they may be serving more transient populations which are harder to mobilize and organize, the resulting gap presents an opportunity for a place like the Ronning Center to engage with matters of religious discussion, encounter, and literacy (among other key topics explored in this assessment) which organizations deem important but cannot delegate attention or resources for. The Ronning Center has the opportunity to do this in cooperation with religious organizations, prioritizing experiential and practical activities for religious voices and ways of life to be heard, beyond purely academic discussions around the topic of religion and beyond a unidirectional educational approach found in most other RSCs. Finally, given its positioning within the University of Alberta ecosystem, the Ronning Center also presents a unique space to not only amplify discussions about religion but also has the potential to connect students of different religious backgrounds with each other and with religious organizations in the community.

Final Recommendations

Taking all phases of this assessment into consideration, there are a number of recommendations to be made which can inform the strategic planning of RSCs, especially the Ronning Center. These recommendations will be made according to their general themes or areas of services, but are not offered in any particular order.

research

Research: Future research which scaffolds from this preliminary assessment is highly encouraged, particularly in the areas of demographic limitations or to overcome other recruitment barriers. It is recommended to reproduce the survey and interview phases of this assessment within secular and traditional FNMI communities after adapting and following any appropriate protocols for engagement and developing a criteria for identifying stakeholders in those respective communities. Hosting general religious community listening campaigns on a semi regular basis and publishing the findings of those assessments would also be another key area of service in basing strategic planning on research, as well as relaying key findings within the University and to broader society. In short, leading by example to demonstrate the use of religion as a lens to develop understanding about our shared communities is essential. Additionally, using this preliminary assessment as an opportunity to open conversations with other RSCs as to their public engagement strategies (if any) would be another immediate area of research to develop. Work on the topic of student religiosity and adherence could help address the dearth of information (and data) about students and inform both the University and religious organizations on any issues pertaining to religious students particularly. This topic would also aid understanding about the challenges faced within the University ecosystem, how those challenges could be addressed by both the Ronning Center and community religious organizations, and the degree to which the Ronning Center can provide needed spaces for discussion and learning for religious students.

students

In addition to the future research directions pertaining to students, it is also important to include students of various religious backgrounds in as much future programming for the Ronning Center as possible. It may also be a beneficial endeavour for the Ronning Center to be a hub of resources and connections for students (especially international and out of province students) regarding religious community organizations and tools they may not otherwise readily access. The Ronning Center could also develop spaces for religious students to engage with and encounter one another in a University community setting.

programming & services

While the Ronning Center has pursued programming and services in the past which prioritize building bridges between academia and communities, as well as being intellectually accessible while still rigorous, there is the opportunity to improve on the diversity of programs and services offered going forward. Opening spaces for religious voices and ways of life to be heard, seen, experienced individually or in conversation with one another seems to offer great potential in terms of developing meaningful long-term relationships and spaces of engagement and learning. Further, the Ronning Center also has the opportunity to develop conversations and thought-provoking, multi-directional teaching around matters of religious literacy, understanding secularism and matters of “public life” particularly in this context, as well as religious studies and definitions of religion more generally. Without abandoning some of the public lecture series and panels that the Center already facilitates, there are plenty of directions the Ronning Center could go with this including developing online courses about religion and religious literacy, courses designed to foster religious literacy beyond understanding it as a concept, and other key topics identified in this report.

advocacy

It appears that the Ronning Center is seen as a place of potential advocacy for religious adherents within the University ecosystem, including pushing for standard and informal collection of religious data on campuses and among alumni. This topic would be the priority, however it is among other potential points to be determined by further research including (but not limited to) student religious clubs on campuses, religion and freedom of expression on campuses, and facilitating conversation or mediation in matters directly pertaining to the study of religion at the University and related concerns from religious communities.

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