



Oh Canada! Less people do spiritual stuff, like praying or turning to AA for help.

The 2021 Canada census data shows a transitioning diversity in our neighborhood (culturally/racially diverse Canada) and an ever-larger population. This is in sharp contrast to our AA demographics and dwindling membership. USA/Canada 2022 Membership survey results will be posted this spring. Are we doing something wrong? What can be done to change our fortunes?



Much of my (day job) professional training has to do with people—like any career—but it's financial planning, markets, risk management, rate of return, sensitivity analysis and I spend more time *between the spread sheets* than most of you might picture. Personally, I find the economy, markets and people's nuanced needs and feelings about money as creative as songwriting. Taxes, interest and succession planning,

from dreams to reality-checks, adapting, planning for the worst and imagining the best—in as much as I have a 9-to-5 life, welcome to Joe-town.

And (not but), I get that it's not super fascinating talk at a coffee shop or during most hikes, or a concert, or the game or in blogs like this. So, I talk about other things, most of the time.

But Rebellion Dogs regulars know that sometimes, in addiction and recovery, we visit new data and number crunch. Is there sobering truth to data? Can you drive a car into the future by staring into the rearview mirror? No. But most vehicles have more than one rear view mirror because it is helpful to grasp what's behind us even though our future is ahead of us. Sometimes it can be lifesaving ... looking where we have been, taking inventory and all that.

“You are the sky. Everything else - it's just the weather.” ~ Pema Chödrön

I was recently a guest on the [I have 12 questions podcast](#)—with super-fun Amanda P. I just saw this great quote above by the wise Buddhist nun and author; I had to fit it in here somewhere. It says so much but the one place I am going with this is maybe AA is the sky and my existential angst acting out about the numbers is just weather, which will pass and the sky remains.

I don't write about this to point fingers and fault find, I just think checking the patients vitals is critical healthcare. I care about AA.

Lasting forever is magical thinking, but exiting early from self-inflicted wounds is avoidable.

As lifestyle medicine can help even with those of us predisposed to diabetes, heart attack or cancer, diet and exercise, a willingness to change can extend life. So it is with AA—which is you and I. It falls on us to take inventory, take responsibility and change what needs fixing—pretty AAish stuff.

Rebellion Dogs reviews Pew Research and other census-style data, mostly about worldview trends in the USA, where over ½ of AA members live. We recently reported on Great Britain's AA Membership Survey 2020 revealing who believe in a higher power; 65% held a secular view of power greater than ourselves; 35% had a religious view (a supernatural, personal higher power). We know skepticism/atheism is on the rise in the USA, but America is still more religious than most developed nations. I was thinking about AA in Canada—what do we believe, eh? Are we somewhat informed by our Euro roots and somewhat influenced by our ten-times-the-population superpower south of our border?

We don't have AA specific Canadian data about worldview, but we do know if we are growing/declining in membership. So let's look at some data:

For a time, AA members were growing in Canada. But that was a quarter century ago.

January 1, 2022: 86,036 members and 5,074 groups.

January 1, 1997: 102,499 members and 5,257 groups.

Our modestly populated yet expansive country had 39,292,000 people in 2022 according to StatsCan, up from 29,910,000, a 31% increase over 1997. More Canadians, more people with alcohol use disorder ... but less AA members.

January 1, 2022, 86,036 Canadians were AA members. Canadian AAs max-members peaked at 102,500 in 1997. All these numbers based on Box 4-5-9: GSO News & Notesⁱ.

The Latest Canadian demographics

"The 2021 Census provides more detail on the ethnocultural and religious facets of society than ever before. In fact, more than 450 ethnic and cultural origins, 200 places of birth, 100 religions and 450 languages have been included in this census."

"19.3 million people reported a Christian (Catholics or Protestants religion), or just over half of the Canadian population (53.3%). However, this percentage is down from 67.3% in 2011 and 77.1% in 2001."

"Approximately 12.6 million people, or **more than one-third of Canada's population**, reported **having no religious affiliation or having a secular perspective** (atheist, agnostic, humanist and other secular identities). **The proportion of this population has more than doubled in 20 years, rising from 16.5% in 2001 to 23.9% in 2011 and to 34.6% in 2021.**"

"Understanding the changes in Canada's religious landscape allows for a better understanding of the country's cultural and social history, and the diversity of its current population. From a sociological standpoint, the study of the evolution of religion allows for a better understanding of some of the changes modern societies are facing (StatsCan)ⁱⁱ."

Oh Canada: 29% have a secular perspective and no religion. Of the people who associate with a religious identity, there is a lot of small "r" religious in Canada. Half (52%) say that beliefs are very or somewhat important; 19% of self-declared religious people don't think beliefs are important.ⁱⁱⁱ About a quarter of Canadians overall attend church. And of the religiously affiliated the religious segment that has doubling in size are Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs who would not speak of or pray to "God *as we understood Him*." Our representation would not be their "spiritual—not religious" understanding of *Big Book* AA.

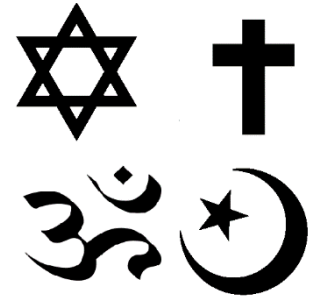
Meanwhile, south of Canada, The Guardian reports on American shifting landscape in, "Losing Their Religion: Why US Churches are in Decline." ^{iv}

"In 1972, 92% of Americans said they were Christian, Pew reported, but by 2070 that number will drop to below 50% - and the number of "religiously unaffiliated" Americans - or 'nones' will probably outnumber those adhering to Christianity ... While grandparents might have been regular churchgoers, their children would say they believe in God, but not go to church regularly. By the time millennials came round, they had little experience or relationship with churchgoing or religion."^v

The goods the godlessness and what I am going to do about it as an AA member.

If our second most popular pamphlet is what we collectively believe, "There is room in A.A. for people of all shades of belief and non-belief (*A Newcomer Asks*, P-24)," then where is the tapestry of today's North America described in the AA story?

In our updated literature, will people who believe in a higher power tell us about praying to Shiva, Allah, Mother Nature, Krishna, Vishnu, my own inner resource (*of our understanding*)?



Will all "He," "Him," "Father" references be removed from our dated literature to include Sikh and Islamic faiths that have no gender for Ik Onkar or Allah? "Admitted to Ik Onkar and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs."

And will half of the stories in the next edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* be atheists who candidly refer to humanist power—with no supernatural agency?

Is there a way to write the 12-Steps in one way that represents all members equally, or would a variety of wordings be best? "Here are a variety of the Steps our diverse members have taken which are suggested as a program of recovery..."



This future-gazing characterization of AA would be consistent with "room in AA for people of all shades of belief and non-belief."

According to the 2070 predictions a less theistic AA is already underway. If we proportionally represent AA worldviews maybe, in Canada, AA will stop shrinking towards oblivion and find a balance of maintaining the integrity of our message, while widening our gateway to

reflect our inclusive, never exclusive creed. Where are we now as far as diversity in AA approaches?

A.A. tools available:

- [*The "God" Word: Agnostics and Atheist in AA*](#)^{vi} (P-86 ©2018)
- [*One Big Tent: Atheist and agnostic AA members share their experience, strength and hope*](#) (©A.A. Grapevine)^{vii}
- A secular, neither religious nor irreligious AA example of recovery, [*Living Sober*](#)^{viii} (© A.A. World Services 1975)
- [*Do You Think You're Different?*](#) (P-13 including two agnostic/atheist stories © 1976)^{ix}
- Substantial growth of [secular AA meetings](#) in-person and on Zoom including ICSSA conferences and representation at the AA World Convention (see you in Vancouver, 2025)

Is this a substantial body of work, woefully inadequate, or how would you describe it? More words on more pages haven't stemmed the bleeding of Canadian AA membership.

Beyond conference-approved literature, "carrying the message" comes in podcasts—including [AA Grapevine's own](#), social media hubs for 12-Step talk and a wealth of AA-authored books about secular/practical/humanist approaches to the 12-Steps from traditional publishers and self-publishing. These are all more secular (irreligious) than AA's primary literature.

Now what about other "more religious members" as Alcoholics Anonymous (Appendix II) refers to non-secular AAs? What about, as the 2021 Canadian census reports, "ethnocultural and religious facets of society ... more than 450 ethnic and cultural origins, 200 places of birth, 100 religions and 450 languages," not all of them dream one day of being our country's president, as Bill Wilson described all AA members? Could AA be in as many mosques, temples, and other religious/community environments as we find represented by our meetings in churches? If we met a more ethnically diverse Canada where they live, would that tilt our overtly white bread-looking AA in the direction of the inclusive AA we aim for? And neutral places; my home group is an agnostic/atheist group and we rent space in a university, classroom, a suitable place for members who see the AA transformation as the "educational variety" of sobriety. And Zoom, or other online mediums, this is neutral ground and more suited to proportional representation of members in the meeting.

So there are other ways AA as a whole can understand ourselves better. We are making strides with our latest surveys (Great Britain 2020 and USA/Canada 2022 which we will get the results for this April at our General Service Conference. Here is how some of the questions have been altered from our last *2014 AA Membership Survey* for the 2022 version:

12. Have you attended an A.A. meeting virtually (online or by phone)? Do you prefer virtual meetings , in-person meetings or both equally?

13. What attributes do you prefer or need in meetings you attend?

- accessibility (such as no stairs, or served by public transit)
- held in a particular language (please list language)
- other members similar to me (please describe how)
- additional characteristics (please describe)

14. What is your age? ____ years

15. What best describes you: male, female, prefer to describe

16. Relationship status: Single, never married, married or life partner, divorced, separated, widowed, prefer to describe

17. Racial and ethnic background (Check all that apply)

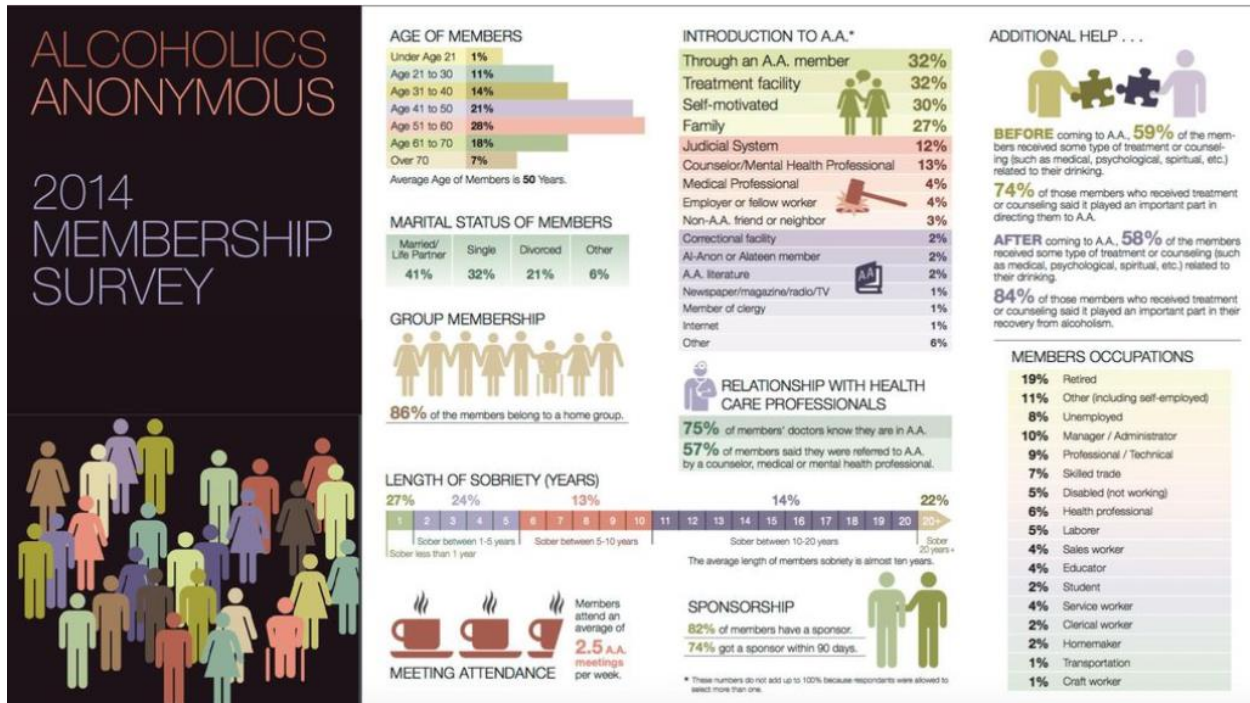
- Asian
- Black, or African American
- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Native American, Alaska Native, First Nations, or Indigenous
- Pacific Islander or Hawaiian Native
- White, Caucasian, or European American
- Prefer to describe_____

So instead of binary answers to gender, race, etc, people are invited to self-identify as they wish. While that presents new challenges for recording and reporting out the data, anything else would be "the tail wagging the dog."

In the Great Britain survey, we asked members if they believe in a higher power and is that power religious or secular? That's very helpful; it tells healthcare professionals and the public more about AA; it helps inform our best efforts to meeting member needs. Should we ask the same questions in USA/Canada in our 2025 survey? I say, "Absolutely. The truth will set us free, right?" How could individual beliefs be outside of the mandate of the survey that describes member variety?

I'm not naïve, this is a ticklish issue. Some people (minority opinion) feel we shouldn't do a membership survey and/or it doesn't reflect our membership accurately. The Great Britain GSO hired professional data collectors who report that the findings in each question should be accurate of the whole within 2%, 95% of the time.

What say you? Does the information in the membership survey^x look like the AA you are attending? What our survey report out rings true for me. Nevertheless, we should listen to the detractors, we respect the minority opinion, and they may have ideas that could make our efforts better.



There are things I am thinking of that my own home group could do to outreach to our more diverse Canadian neighborhood. We could speak with different community and cultural groups; ask them if they know about Alcoholics Anonymous; ask them what they do for members of their community who have a problem with alcohol (and/or other drugs)? Is there anything we could do to help?

This is all within our (Twelve Tradition) parameters for outreach. Public Information, Cooperation with the Professional Community, there are guidelines for how to do this. I have been involved with these committees and there is nothing to discourage groups from making their own strides in these areas. Is your group open to anyone interested in AA or closed to AA members or others who feel they have a problem with alcohol? Even if it's a closed meeting, could you have an open house, inviting members of the community to your meeting to learn more about AA? This is not promotion and not anti-drinking, it's public information.

I am in discussion with our Area 83 committee about the membership survey, what they've done in Great Britain and Central Europe (English-speaking groups). I hope our area can talk about the 2022 and the next membership survey and why asking about member's worldview could help us help each other and better accommodate the newcomer's needs.

Request to include questions about member beliefs and service in AA shot down before.

Leading up to the 2017 membership survey, asking our members about what we believe and what keeps us sober has come up before. It got kiboshed.

From the 2017 67th General Service Conference Final Report:

2017 Membership Survey—In July [2016] a subcommittee was appointed to review the timing and process of conducting the AA Membership survey and to review the Membership Survey Questionnaire and discussed three requests to add to the survey:

1. A suggestion to add a question(s) regarding the belief or non-belief of the member in a "Higher Power."
2. A suggestion to add a question(s) to determine the member's participation in 'service beyond the A.A. group.'
3. A suggestion for the trustees' 2014 Membership Survey subcommittee to consider asking the primary language of the members filling out the questionnaire.

After extensive discussion, the committee took no action regarding these member requests, noting the subjective nature of the 'Higher Power; and 'service beyond the home group' questions and determining that the requesting 'primary language' information was beyond the historical scope of the Survey. The committee also agreed to table to the committee's subsequent meeting a request from Area 79 British Columbia/Yukon, to consider changing the gender question on the AA Membership Survey to allow for a better reflection of the diversity of our membership.

The committee agreed to forward the final report to the Conference Public Information committee, who took no action on the subcommittee's recommendation that an AA Membership Survey be conducted in 2017.

A brief overview of how the General Conference process takes place:

I've never been a trustee, a delegate or attended a General Service Conference. I have been granted permission to conduct research at GSO Archives and the Greater

Toronto Area Intergroup archives to view and take notes on minutes from committees like the ones mentioned above.

My "Cole's Notes" of the General Service Conference is this: There is a trustees' committee (for Public Information, Literature, Treatment/Hospitals and Institutions, AA Grapevine, Cooperation with the Professional Community, the AA Convention, Archives, etc.) that meets four times a year. Likely, the committee members work and communicate between these meetings. These trustees' conference committees sometimes appoint a subcommittee for a particular conference action/item; the triennial membership survey is an example of one of these subcommittees.

The conference (the voice of AA as a whole) meets once a year in April for a week. The trustees committee offers a report, findings, and suggestions to the Conference Committee (eg: the trustees' Public Information committee). The Conference Committee, having reviewed the trustees' report, either (i) makes a recommendation to the whole conference to proceed on an action, (ii) sends the matter back to trustees' committee for more work/clarification, or (iii) choose to not take any action (whereby the conference is not asked to vote on the matter).



There are more exceptions and nuances, details of which that the typical reader would prefer that I do not get too far into the weeds about. I'm trying to give some chronology on what the issues and process were leading up to the 2017 survey, how suggestions and concerns were heard and how and why these suggestions were set aside and more dramatically, why the succession of triennial surveys was discontinued and by whom. So the trustees' committee dismissed the god/no God

questions, the Conference committee decided against recommending a 2017 membership survey.

Without looking at minutes, who knows what mitigating circumstances there were, other pressing issues, personal biases, etc. I can only report based on what I have seen.

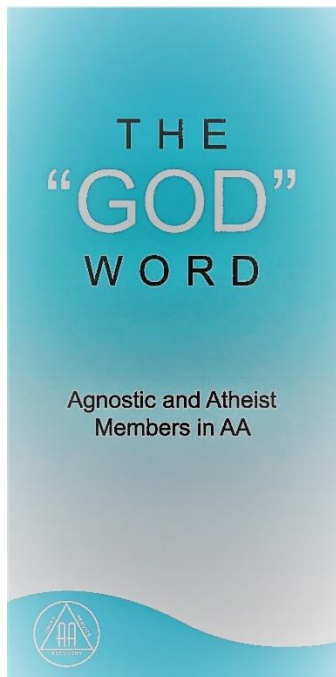
Of note, while the USA/Canada trustees committee felt that worldview and AA service were too touchy to ask about, this is exactly what the 2020 Great Britain General Service decided was relevant and helpful. A different committee, different geographic area, and slightly different timing.

If readers from USA/Canada feels that they would like to know what your fellow members believe and/or what role service plays in member's sobriety, I can tell you the best approach: Ensure that your views are wishes are expressed to the conference. Here's a playbook for how this works best...

How *The "God" Word* became conference approved in English, Spanish, and French.

[PDF, how we got here](#)

[Episode 29 Rebellion Dogs Radio "how to do it" https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/rebellious-radio/blog/4610783/rebellion-dogs-radio-29-the_god_word-and-aa-history](https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/rebellious-radio/blog/4610783/rebellion-dogs-radio-29-the_god_word-and-aa-history)

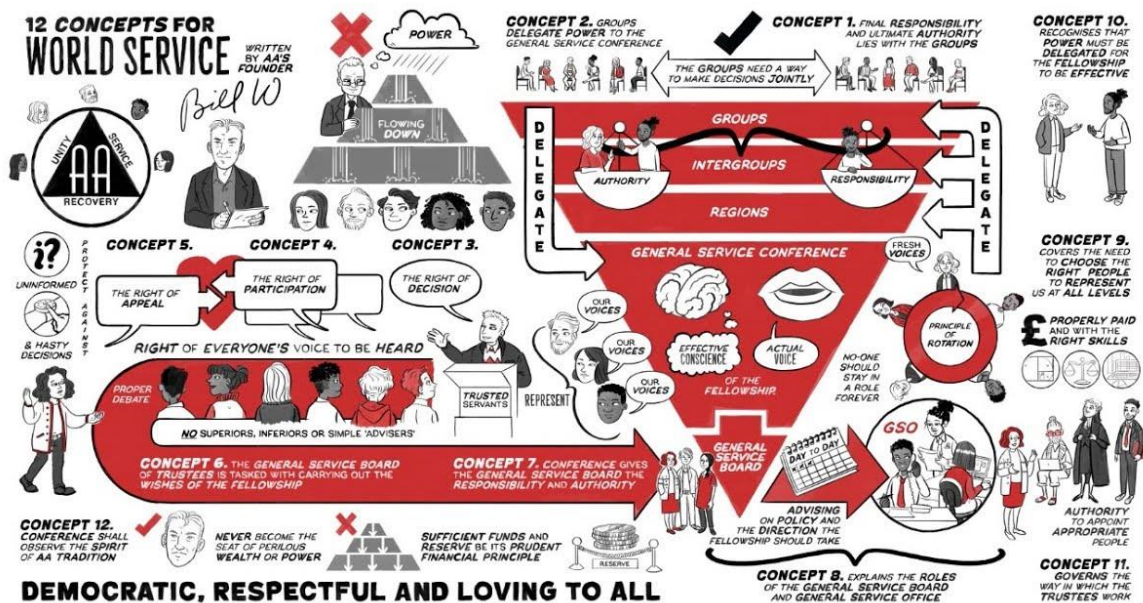


The above audio (Rebellion Dogs Radio #29) and PDF (March 2017 blog) outline the organic, grassroots way the British conference approved agnostic/atheist pamphlet was adopted by USA/Canada General Service Conference and AA World Services. What is noteworthy, since 1975, eleven times the conference was asked to consider a collection of stories of AA atheists and agnostics in pamphlet form and for ten or eleven different reasons (that we have documented in previous blogs) the conference did not provide what was asked for. Why was this 2017 effort different?

It was a different time, that's part of it. But maybe the game changing factor was that agnostics and atheists USA and Canada groups brought our desire to have this British pamphlet adopted and amended for use on this side of the Atlantic. We told our story of feeling unheard and how this pamphlet would be validating. We showed how this follows a precedent when in 1980 *A Newcomer Asks* was brought from England and

transformed into conference approved GSO literature. Districts voted to ask the conference to provide us with this new literature. The districts brought their motion to their Area where it was discussed and voted on. Several Areas were sending delegates to conference with the Area's substantial unanimity to have this wish realized. At the General Service Conference, with limited dissension, well over 2/3 needed voted in favor of adopting *The "God" Word: Agnostics and Atheists in AA*.

Maybe this membership survey is not your thing. But this is how conference works and maybe when something you think would make AA better, you can be part of a team that makes it so. Any member can write to or call the committees of the General Service Office to express a concern or interest. But when it starts with the group and the group agrees, and their group rep brings it up with the district and they vote and agree, then bring it up at the area where 600 - 1200 groups find substantial unanimity, that's more persuasive than one member's letter or phone call.



To review...

So in Canada, AA has been shrinking in members for 25 years, now. Most members today, never knew AA at the peak. Is this an existential threat to AA? Yes; while AA is never on a membership drive, a shrinking fellowship, over 25 years, is not promising. Especially when contrasting our shrinking membership to the country just outside our groups doors or Zoom room, that is more than 30% bigger today than in 1997 when Canada's AA glory days drew to a close. In a growing country our subculture is diminishing and to many, that looks and feels serious.

The steps we are collectively taking, and what we have been doing as individuals, are not stemming the shrinking membership. What will the 80,000+ members in Canada do to better prepare AA for newcomers for this century? Let us do what we can, help each other, work together, and see how it goes.

ⁱ <https://www.aa.org/box-459>

ⁱⁱ <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/rt-td/ethno-religion-eng.cfm>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2021079-eng.htm>

^{iv} https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/22/us-churches-closing-religion-covid-christianity?utm_source=pocket-newtab

^v <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/22/us-churches-closing-religion-covid-christianity>

^{vi} https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/assets/p-86_theGodWord.pdf

^{vii} <https://amzn.to/3l1UgZX>

^{viii} <https://amzn.to/3WWBErw>

^{ix} https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/p-13_en_0222.pdf

^x https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/assets/p-48_membershipsurvey.pdf