

Toronto, Then and Now Doug Hayhoe, Oct. 2024

I live in a large multicultural city with many aspects to it, including that of science and faith.

[Prologue: Excuse me for writing about the city where I've lived most of my life. Perhaps this will stimulate you to think and write about your special city or town. But this essay gives some reasons why Toronto is special to me, and why I think about it and pray for it.]

Some of my best memories are walking through the bullrushes beside the Humber River in the summer, and playing hockey on the frozen marshes in the winter. The Humber and Don Rivers drain Toronto, as well as some lesser rivers and creeks. Their origin is in the Oak Ridges Moraine north of the city. When the last glacier receded 12,000 years ago, it gouged out Lake Ontario, placing the soil on this line.



Figure 1 The Oak Ridges Moraine (green) running above Toronto and its suburbs (brown)

Toronto's first inhabitants

In 1908, workmen building a tunnel under the Toronto Bay discovered [ancient footprints in a layer of blue clay](#). Archeologists concluded that these are 11,000 year-old moccasin footsteps of a Paleo-Indian family walking out to the Toronto Islands, at a time when the lake level had fallen so that the islands were joined to the mainland.

Some of the things the early Torontonians hunted may surprise you, such as giant mastodons that once inhabited North America. Many bones of these ancient elephant-like animals have been found in Southern Ontario, dating back to between 9,000 and 12,000 years.

More recently, Iroquois and Hurons lived in Toronto, and then Algonquins, whom the Europeans referred to as Mississaugas. In 1690, they built settlements on the Humber River. When I walked along the river, as a teenager, I little realized I was walking by ancient indigenous villages.

Colonial transformation, industrial development, and explosive growth in population

In 1793, "Toronto was founded as the [Town of York](#) ... after the [Mississaugas](#) sold the land to the British." In 1834 it became a city, and reverted to its original indigenous name, Toronto. It soon became an industrial centre, with the development of railways and manufacturing. It also became a banking centre. The Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX), opened in 1861. It is the 10th largest in the world today. Table 1 has other [significant events](#).

Table 1 Significant Events in the 1800s that impacted Toronto

1813	The capture of Toronto by 2700 American soldiers
1827	The founding of the University of Toronto
1837	The Mackenzie rebellion
1839	The establishment of the first Catholic school
1844	The founding of the Globe newspaper
1875	The opening of the famous Hospital for Sick Children

The most important event of the 1900s was the explosion of Toronto's population. Many people arrived from Europe in the first half of the century, due to the world wars. They were soon followed by people from almost every country in the globe. As a result, the population of the city went from [238,000 in the 1901 census to 2,481,000 in the 2001 census](#), a ten-fold increase.



Figure 2 Six boroughs of Toronto ([Wikipedia commons](#))

Other significant events in the 1900s included the first Grey Cup game in 1910, the renaming of The Toronto St. Patricks as the Toronto Maple Leafs in 1927, the involvement of many in the two world wars, the opening of the first subway in Canada in 1954, and the building of expressways. In 1998, the municipalities of East York, Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough, York and old Toronto were amalgamated into the new Toronto (Figure 2). I went through this transition at the level of the school board.

Half of the 2.8 million people in Toronto were born in other countries. Our neighbours include people from Albania, Colombia, Greece, India, Iran, Italy, Morocco, Nepal, Philippines, Portugal, and Ukraine. In fact, [“both the United Nations and BBC have recently declared it the most diverse city in the world.”](#)

The city was once known as [“Toronto the Good,”](#) because of its “good government, community, and compassion.” And it’s still [one of the safest large cities in North America](#), although other Canadian cities such as Calgary, Montreal, Ottawa, and Vancouver score as well on some safety statistics. Having lived here all my life, I can’t honestly continue to call it “Toronto the Good,” in contrast to other cities. Yet, it still has some good aspects. Many government and charitable organizations help recent immigrants and refugees. Our youngest daughter and her husband work in diaspora ministry in Toronto. One of their programs is called [“Caring for wounded hearts.”](#)

Toronto as a scientific community

I got turned on to science in high school. My teacher, Mr. Scott, was born in Scotland. When I became a high school teacher, myself, there was Mr. Scott, heading up our science department with great skill. When I later worked for the School Board, I realized that Toronto had many teachers with Mr. Scott’s ability.

Toronto has always been at the forefront of science. In 1923, two University of Toronto scientists won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for the discovery of insulin. In the mid 1960s, I was privileged to have the 1987 Nobel Laureate [John C Polanyi](#) as my chemistry prof. at the same university (Figure 3). The care he took to make his lectures crystal clear – at the same time always available to help individual students – was outstanding! As of 2024, [13 Nobel Laureates](#) have been associated with the university. The most recent is the University Professor Emeritus, [Geoffrey Hinton](#), who won the 2024 Physics Nobel prize for discoveries that enabled AI.

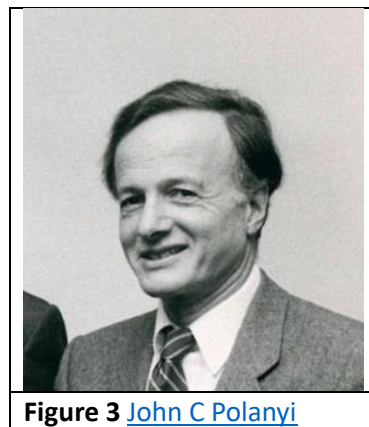


Figure 3 [John C Polanyi](#)

Toronto is also home to two other public universities, York and Toronto Metropolitan, as well as many colleges that host tens of thousands of students. Tyndale, where I worked for ten years in science education, is Toronto's Christian university. A psychology professor there once made a comment I never forgot: "At public universities, you have to be careful about giving a religious perspective on topics. But at Christian universities you can look at topics from all perspectives!"

Toronto as a faith community

The first Europeans to settle in Toronto were mostly Anglican. But the city soon filled up with Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists. In the 1800s, many Catholics arrived from Ireland, after the Potato Famine. In the early 1900s, more arrived, mainly from Europe, as well as Reformed and Orthodox Christians. More recently, the number of denominations has multiplied immensely, as have the number of different countries that they arrived from. In the past 40 years, however, the percentage of Christians in Toronto has declined from 83% to 46%, giving place to Muslims (10%), Hindus (8%), Sikhs (4%), Buddhists (2%), and the "irreligious" (27%) ([Wikipedia](#)).

While immigration is the largest cause of the religious make up of Toronto, important events have also had an impact. Pope John Paul II's visit in 1984 contributed to the strengthening of the Catholic Church, as did his return for World Youth Day in 2002. The Dalai Lama's 2010 visit was significant for many. But for me, the most important events were Billy Graham's crusades.

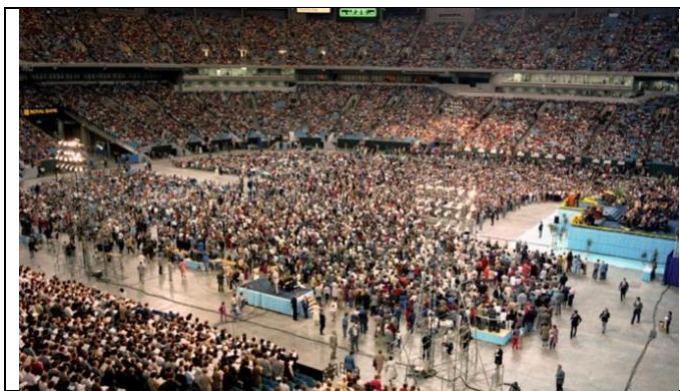


Figure 4 [The 1995 Billy Graham Crusade](#)

When I was a child, my father took me to the first crusade at Maple Leaf Gardens in 1955. More than [350,000 people](#) were at at least one of the meetings. In 1978, Graham returned to Toronto. [Here](#) is one of his messages then. The last crusade in 1995 was at the SkyDome, now called the Rogers Centre (Figure 4). This time, I took my father, who was in a wheelchair. It was special to see hundreds of different ethnic groups all learning about what the Bible says about salvation through faith.

Toronto's current challenges

In addition to its spiritual needs, Toronto has many challenges today, such as the great lack of affordable housing, the homelessness of many, the crime waves hitting the city, and the traffic congestion and construction chaos that affects everyone. I commend our new mayor, Olivia Chow, for working diligently, together with the city council and sometimes in partnership with the premier of Ontario, to address these challenges.

On my morning walks (see my essay, [The Benefits of Walking](#)), I pray for the mayor that she will have the wisdom to make the right decisions about these challenges. I also pray for the many friends and neighbour, for the Bible says, "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you ... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" ([Jeremiah 29:7](#) ESV). If you want to go deeper on the topic of caring for your city, there's nothing better than [this 11 minute YouTube video](#) by the well-known Christian apologist, Tim Keller.

Epilogue

Many of you who read or listen to this essay don't live in Toronto. But I challenge you to reflect on the legacy you have inherited in the city or town where you live. What is its history? What has been significant in the years you've lived there? What are the key challenges facing your city today? If you're a person of prayer, who do you pray for where you live?