

Collecting and Interpreting Demographic Data

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Demographic data is a wonderful resource for any church as they begin to reflect on their place in a community and potential missional engagement. Most of our churches have, over time, become less and less a reflection of the community in which their building is located. This is often due simply to deep levels of connection between the church members. So when members move to live in other areas, they continue to come back to the church for worship and programs. The sense of these being my people draws worshippers back from increasingly great distances. A small congregation of 75 or 80 people may comprise people from all over the city with almost no one from the actual neighbourhood where they gather weekly to worship. This means there is an increasing disconnect with the surrounding neighbourhood. But, within the congregation everyone either remembers what the neighbourhood was like and assumes it is still that way, or they left because it was changing and they no longer felt at home. So, what had once been a local community becomes over time more and more geographically diffused and disconnected. This disconnect means that often the church has very little idea of who actually lives in the area. Demographic data is available to help them unpack this. A good place to start is with the census data.

Every church should have on file the census data for the area it defines as its parish. This should be at least the two census tracts immediately around the building. It is to this area that the church has a corporate responsibility for mission, regardless of how many other neighbourhoods are represented by the congregation. What should this data file look like and include?

This file should include data from the last three censuses. As well, the findings of the most recent census should be added as it is released. Why three censuses? These cover a window of a minimum of ten years. So, it would include, for example, the census in 1991, 1996 and 2001, with the 2006 material being added over time. For the core data there will be research on the ten year window from 1991 to 2001. This provides the church with some understanding of trends and also an ability to interpret. One census does not really help in understanding what is happening in an area. It is a frozen moment.

But, multiple censuses reveal changes and trends. Who is moving in? Who is leaving? Often the data will reveal that various ethnic communities are in motion. They may congregate in one area as a gateway, but then, just as we become aware of their presence and begin to try to enter into their lives, they are moving into a new area. The same holds true for a wide variety of factors. Housing prices may be changing causing a rapid shift in the demographic. Gentrification can turn a community from one of rooming houses to an upscale high income enclave in the matter of a few years.

It is trends that we are trying to discern in this work. We want to be able to meet people as they come in, being proactive, not just reactive. So, every church should have a file with this material readily accessible and this becomes a resource for any turn outward into the community. This data can be found on the Stats Canada web site.

There is also a wealth of other material readily available which goes deeper into the implications of this research. At the City of Toronto site, for example, there are *Ward Profiles*. The findings for each ward are broken down into categories such as population, ethnocultural makeup, immigration and migration, family types, households/dwellings, education, employment, income, religion. These are set out over against city averages.

The various School Boards provide research on each school and its catchment area. So a church can go to the site, look up each school in the Ward and find out what the school offers, who is attending, how students are scoring in the various provincial tests and areas they are working to improve. Also on the site are lists of community partners. This type of information provides any church with a good awareness of who is doing what in the area, how they are connected, and a basic understanding of some areas of concern and need.

Then there is the Toronto Community Health site which offers a whole other range of breakdowns providing very significant information. There is also a site for the Toronto Community and Neighbourhood Services. This is a very practical and invaluable window into the community. Any church can begin to enter into partnership with agencies. These resources help us identify groups working in what we see as a potential area of engagement.

There is a wide range of material available for churches. If a pastor or congregational member blocks out a few hours to simply go into the sites, find the appropriate

community and collect the data, their church will have a body of material which will begin to help it formulate questions. Many of the City sites have this data already analyzed by professional researchers. Their analysis comes with recommendations. Often these recommendations focus on issues that they see which are not yet visible on the ground and will not be for another few years. By the time they are identified, often the problem has become deep rooted. By beginning to engage this process and wrestle and pray over the material a church can be on the ground meeting needs that are deep and relevant but not seen by anyone else.

In addition to online information there are the resources at the local library. There is considerable material there, reports on almost any topic related to the community. Ask the librarian. Cities and municipalities spend considerable time and resources to develop a sophisticated understanding of the area and its needs. Their goal is to build a better community; something Jeremiah 29 reminds is also our goal. This material is available to anyone who would like to use it. Do!

Census data and research are, however, no panacea. There is not shortcut to the hard work of being in the community. What it does is help us to be able to see things we would otherwise miss. But, we still need to walk through the community and spend time in it. We need to be in it walking and praying. We need to spend time drinking tea/coffee, eating, celebrating and simply beginning to live in it. From time to time it is good to have elders' and/or deacons' meetings outside of the church building and in restaurants. We need to encourage our people to eat meals, attend movies, concerts, plays, etc. in the area. All of these types of activities help us to open our eyes and ears to the people in the area. It is this collective information which is invaluable as we begin to turn out to engage the world with the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Helpful sites:

I have selected a series of sites which relate to the City of Toronto. There are equivalent sites for all of the cities and regions in southern Ontario.

- Stats Canada site. There are a wide range of resources available off this page <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/standard/Index.cfm>

- Ureachtoronto: This site is a helpful resource on multicultural ministry and has links to Stats Canada

<http://www.ureachtoronto.com/>

- Brock University Map Library. *Population Density Map*.

<http://www.brocku.ca/maplibrary/>

- City of Toronto *Ward Profiles*. Basic community analysis from Stats Canada

<http://app.toronto.ca/wards/jsp/wards.jsp>

- City of Toronto has community profiles.

<http://www.toronto.ca/demographics/>

- Toronto Health Profiles. This provides a wide range of socio-economic research

<http://www.torontohealthprofiles.ca/>

- Toronto District School Board

<http://www.tdsb.on.ca> then follow the links to the desired schools