

Community needs assessment to inform programming

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Executive Summary

The Church of St. John the Evangelist (“St. John’s”), serving the Kirkendall and Durand neighborhoods, seeks to expand its outreach to LGBTQ2IA+ individuals of faith and newcomers to Canada. As demographics shift and community needs evolve, St. John’s aims to adapt their services to remain relevant and inclusive. The McMaster Research Shop set out to guide St. John’s in developing targeted programming and fostering a more welcoming environment for underserved populations by researching local community needs. However, this study reveals a critical lesson in community needs assessment: the challenges of engaging community members without pre-established relationships.

Our original methodology included scanning for recently published information about the needs of the communities of interest within the focus area. Finding no published information, we attempted to engage key local informants, including representatives of local social services and LGTQB2IA+ and/or immigrant neighborhood groups. Despite extensive outreach efforts, we were unable to connect with these groups. This data collection limitation emerged as a key finding, highlighting the importance of pre-existing community relationships in conducting meaningful local research and the limitations of being an “outsider.” Consequently, we pivoted to reviewing two recent city-wide needs assessments and conducting one interview with a Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council staff member to ascertain the needs of the respective populations city-wide.

Our broader city-level findings revealed that both LGBTQ2IA+ individuals and newcomers face significant challenges in social connectedness, economic stability, and access to services. LGBTQ2IA+ community members often struggle to find affirming faith spaces and face higher rates of mental health concerns, while newcomers frequently experience social isolation, underemployment, and housing affordability issues.

While we couldn't provide the intended neighborhood-specific insights, this study underscores the need for St. John’s to prioritize building deep, sustained relationships with local LGBTQ2IA+ and newcomer communities before attempting to ascertain specific needs. We recommend that the church focus on three areas: actively engaging with local LGBTQ2IA+ and newcomer communities (e.g., attending relevant local events), collaborating with existing organizations serving these groups, and establishing community-led advisory groups. These steps will not only help the church understand hyperlocal needs over time but also position it to effectively create inclusive spaces, facilitate community connections, and bridge gaps in social services in ways that resonate with the communities they seek to better serve.

Introduction

The Church of Saint John the Evangelist (“St. John’s”) is an established local charity serving the Kirkendall and Durand neighbourhoods in Hamilton, ON. The church currently provides a range of services, including programming for senior citizens subsidized housing, tax support, and children/youth groups. Recognizing that demographics have changed within the community in recent years, St. John’s is interested in exploring how to better meet the needs of its community. Central to this initiative is the obligation to better understand the evolving needs of community members to determine the church’s role in meeting those needs. Embracing inclusivity, St. John’s is particularly interested in reaching out to demographics that may not typically engage with their programs, including LGBTQ2IA+ individuals of faith and immigrants and newcomers to Canada.

St. John’s reached out to the McMaster Research Shop for help understanding local community needs, captured by the following research question: In what ways can St. John’s deploy its resources to better meet the social service needs of LGBTQ2IA+ individuals and newcomers to Canada within the Kirkendall and Durand neighbourhoods?

The audience for this research is primarily internal for St. John’s’s planning team and working committees to identify any gaps in their existing programming and service array.

Methods

This project spanned four months, from May to August 2024. Our initial approach was to search for hyperlocal data and reports on the needs of the target population within the specified geographic boundary. We planned to supplement this information with key informant interviews from representatives of local LGBTQ2IA+ and newcomer neighbourhood groups or social services.

Despite a thorough online search, including websites of neighbourhood associations and local community service providers, we were unable to locate any reports with hyperlocal data on community needs. We then attempted to identify key informants by searching for local community organizations within the Kirkendall and Durand neighbourhoods that represented the target demographics. Finding no such local groups, we reached out to ward counsellors and neighbourhood associations via email, but received no responses.

As outsiders to the community without pre-existing ties, we recognize that our positioning may have been inappropriate for the kind of data collection necessary for this project. A truly comprehensive local needs assessment would likely require the active engagement of these communities in the design and implementation of the research. Such an approach would demand more time and resources to ensure it is conducted

ethically and effectively. We are aware that even if we had successfully located relevant local groups, it would be unreasonable to expect them to trust us or be willing to discuss their needs openly. Furthermore, it's possible that secondary (i.e., pre-existing) information on community needs for specific demographics is typically aggregated at the city-wide level, rather than being available for such narrowly defined geographic areas. These factors collectively presented significant challenges to our research efforts and underscore the importance of community-led approaches in similar future endeavors.

Given these constraints, we broadened our focus to explore the needs of LGBTQ2IA+ individuals and newcomers across the city (rather than the Kirkendall and Durand neighbourhoods, specifically). We compiled several recently published needs assessments of the target demographics and reached out to both the Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC) and Spectrum, an organization serving the LGBTQ2IA+ population in Hamilton. Only HIPC responded in time for an interview.

Due to time limitations, we were unable to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the compiled community needs assessment reports and interview data. Instead, we summarized relevant insights to inform St. John's about likely issues. This information can help them strategically engage with the communities they're interested in serving, establish their needs, and tailor their programs and services accordingly.

Results

LGBTQ2IA+ Community Needs

Data for this section comes from one comprehensive needs assessment report, Mapping the Void, which is a bottom-up needs assessment conducted in 2018 and that improves upon two needs assessments conducted in 2006-7 and 2016. It provides the most up-to-date information on LGBTQ2IA+ community needs and attempts to capture the full range of those experiences. The findings, which come from a comprehensive survey with a total of 906 responses, highlight significant needs around:

1. Community connection:
 - a. Only 17.3% felt extremely or very connected to the LGBTQ2IA+ community. Many respondents expressed a strong desire for more LGBTQ2IA+ specific spaces, services, and community-building opportunities in Hamilton. This may be more pronounced among older LGBTQ2IA+ adults, many whom suffer from loneliness and there are a dearth of services specifically for them.
 - b. While most LGBTQ2IA+ practicing religion or spirituality have been able to find supportive faith communities, there appears to be a "spirituality gap" for many LGBTQ2IA+ individuals in Hamilton, who struggle to find affirming faith communities that align with their identities.

- i. Of the approximately 1/3 of respondents who were practicing a religion or spirituality, 9.1% felt their community was not at all or not very supportive, and 65.9% had experienced some degree of spiritual loss related to their identity.
- 2. Physical and mental health support:
 - a. 75% of participants stated they wanted mental health support in the last 12 months. However, cost was a major barrier to accessing care.
 - b. 46.2% of respondents had considered self-harm due to issues related to their sexuality or gender expression.
 - c. In healthcare settings, only 33% of participants were satisfied with providers' knowledge of LGBTQ2IA+ issues. Many delayed seeking care due to fear of discrimination.
 - d. Transgender respondents overall reported poorer health compared to their cisgender counterparts.
- 3. Economic challenges:
 - a. 46.4% of respondents reported trouble making ends meet at month's end.
 - b. 14.1% experienced food insecurity.

It is important to recognize that increasing legal recognition and social acceptance has meant that some segments of the LGBTQ2IA+ community—notably those who are white, affluent, cisgender, and monogamously-coupled—may have fewer needs for queer-specific services. Certain groups, including those who are non-white, Two-Spirit, transgender, disabled, etc. appear to be more likely to experience the challenges listed above and to feel, more generally, unsafe and unwelcome across places and spaces in the city.

Immigrant & Newcomer Community Needs

One report detailing the needs of Hamilton's immigrant and newcomer community was identified. This 2023 report was produced by the Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC) with the goal to understand the experiences of immigrants living in Hamilton, ON. The report captured data collected from a survey of 689 participants, the majority of whom have lived in Canada for less than five years. Three major challenges were identified by participants in this report:

- 1. Housing and income
 - a. 40% of respondents reported housing as unaffordable
 - b. 70% reported income inadequacy
 - c. Newcomers, racialized immigrants, refugees, and international students were more likely to face housing and income challenges and identified a need to increase affordable housing options.
- 2. Employment:
 - a. Among employed respondents, 50% reported working in jobs that did not match their skills or education.
 - b. Participants proposed a need to enhance employment programs for participants, as well as expand language learning opportunities.

3. Social integration:
 - a. While 77% of participants reported a strong sense of belonging in Hamilton, 29% of immigrant and newcomer respondents indicated struggling to make friends and build social connections in Hamilton, and 35% reported they often felt isolated or alone.
 - i. Newcomers and racialized immigrants were more likely to experience feelings of isolation than longer-term and white immigrants.
 - b. 28% of respondents indicated they volunteer with community organizations, groups or faith communities. However, to improve social connectedness, many respondents suggested a need for actions to improve social connections (27%) and more immigrant programming in local community spaces (19%).

Interview findings largely aligned with the report findings in highlighting the major challenges and needs faced by the newcomer and immigrant communities in Hamilton, highlighting how healthcare and access to information are also enduring challenges. Additionally, they also noted barriers immigrants and newcomers face when attempting to access services in the community. These include language, financial, transportation, location and timing barriers. The interviewee noted the importance of using accessible language and messaging that is not too text heavy, as well as the usefulness of informal networks in reaching a broader audience.

The interview participant had suggestions on how St. John's can better meet the needs of its community. Suggestions includes offering volunteer opportunities or advisory groups to include community members in different activities. They also mentioned collaborating with existing organizations and connecting with cultural hubs to better engage with the community.

The interview participant also stressed the importance that churches can play in community service delivery given that churches often have less stringent directives on how to use resources (in contrast to many government-funded services organizations). This offers churches the opportunity to bridge service gaps left by other community organizations.

Key takeaways and next steps

While we aimed to compile insights on LGTBQ2IA+ and newcomer/immigrant community needs within the Kirkendall and Durand neighbourhoods, the lack of publicly available hyperlocal data and our inability to connect with key informants (likely due to our position as "outsiders" to these groups) limited our ability to achieve this objective. This finding itself is significant, highlighting the challenge of accessing such specific local information without pre-existing community relationships.

Our limited findings, drawn from city-wide needs assessment reports and an interview with a local immigrant support organization, identified several key areas of need for LGBTQ2IA+ and immigrants/newcomers *not specific to* Kirkendall and Durand. The research identified LGBTQ2IA+ community needs around community connection, mental and physical health support, and economic challenges. There is also a notable "spirituality gap" for LGBTQ2IA+ individuals seeking affirming faith communities. For immigrants and newcomers, major challenges include housing affordability, income inadequacy, underemployment, and social integration. Many experience isolation and struggle to build social connections. Both communities face barriers in accessing services, such as due to language barriers or discrimination.

St. John's, can take insight from these findings by orienting its services towards the LGBTQ2IA+ and newcomer communities. For instance, they can:

- Make themselves known visually and in its messaging to be welcoming to LGBTQ2IA+ individuals of faith and newcomers to Canada
- Offer volunteer opportunities and host gatherings that foster social connectedness in safe spaces (e.g., an immigrant advisory committee; LGBTQ2IA+ youth groups)
- Provide social services in high-priority areas, such as housing
 - For instance, [Open Homes Hamilton](#) is a multi-faith network supporting refugee claimants by offering home-based hospitality. St. John's could consider joining this network, bolstering short-term housing solutions for newly landed immigrants

Moving forward, St. John's should prioritize deep, sustained engagement with LGBTQ2IA+ individuals and newcomers in the Kirkendall and Durand neighbourhoods (and beyond). This could involve attending local community events, cultural celebrations, and LGBTQ2IA+ gatherings to build relationships and visibility. For instance, St. John's could have presence at city-wide community events and other initiatives to show solidarity, highlight offered services for these populations and grow relationships with community members in ways that organically highlight needs and programming solutions. Some examples of these initiatives/events catered to the communities of interest include:

- [Pride Hamilton](#)

- [No Hate in the Hammer](#)
- [Hamilton Newcomer Day](#)

Connecting with existing organizations like [HIPC](#) and [Spectrum](#) and offering supports/resources can also be a way to deepen relations with these groups.

Once the church has genuine relationships with these communities, they may consider involving community members in the design and implementation of a future needs assessment within the Kirkendall and Durand neighbourhoods¹. This may lead to more specific recommendations around culturally competent programming addressing identified needs such as mental health support, social connection opportunities, or employment assistance. They can leverage their flexibility in resource allocation to address service gaps and offer space or resources for community-led initiatives. Establishing mechanisms for continuous community feedback, such as establishing immigrant and LGBTQ2IA+ advisory groups, will ensure programs remain relevant and effective.

By focusing on building trust and relationships within these communities, St. John's can gain a deeper understanding of local needs and co-create meaningful, impactful services that truly resonate with and support LGBTQ2IA+ individuals and newcomers in their neighbourhood. This approach will allow the church to organically understand community needs, build trust, and develop programming that is both relevant and competent for the populations they seek to serve.

¹ See CMHA, 2011 – "[Assessing Community Needs and Resources](#)" for insights around potential process.

References

Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC) (2023). Immigrant Voices: Hamilton Immigration Survey 2023 Report. Retrieved from:
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Appendix – Interview Guide

Hello, my name is ____, I am a student volunteer with the McMaster Research Shop. The McMaster Research Shop helps local community organizations in Hamilton to do research. We're working with The Church of Saint John the Evangelist (St. John's) to figure out how well their services meet community needs and where they could improve. We really appreciate you taking the time to chat with us today. I'll quickly explain what we're doing, then feel free to ask any questions before we start.

We're looking at the church's current programs – things like youth music groups, tax help programs, seniors programs, housing support, as well as lots of available physical space for programming. We want to see how these resources serve the local community (Kirkendall and Durand areas, and beyond), and how the church can better support groups like 2SLGTBQ+ people and newcomers to Canada. Your input will help shape the church's future plans.

I also want to let you know this is totally voluntary. You can stop anytime or skip any questions you're not comfortable with, and all your responses are anonymous. If at any point you feel fatigued, please let us know, and we can take a short break.

Lastly, if it's okay with you, I'd like to record our talk to make sure we get everything accurately. Only our research team will have access to the recording, and we'll delete it once we're done with the project. Is this okay with you?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do you give your consent to participate in this interview?

Introduction:

1. Would you mind introducing yourself and your role at the [name of organization]?
 - a. How long have you been in this role/working for this organization?

Describing the Organization/Community:

2. What does your organization do?
 - a. Who do you serve?
 - b. Are there specific demographics [the organization] prioritizes?
 - c. What services and/or programs do you provide?
 - i. HIPC: Are there specific services that newcomers are often interested in?
 - d. Have you witnessed any positive outcomes for participants accessing your programs/services?
 - e. What strengths and/or challenges have you observed with your programming?

- i. HIPC: Understanding that newcomers are from various religious sects and language backgrounds, what are some challenges the church might face and how could they overcome it?
- 3. How does your organization communicate with its community?
 - a. HIPC: What communication strategies are most effective with newcomers?
- 4. Is your organization connected to or partnered with other organizations to provide further (e.g., wraparound) services?
 - a. (If yes) Could you describe these partnerships?
- 5. In your opinion, what are the greatest needs faced by [name of organization] and [the community of focus]?
 - a. From your perspective, what do you think can/should be done locally to meet those needs?

St. John's Role

- 6. Prior to this interview, were you aware of St. John's or any of the programming they offer?
- 7. What's your initial reaction to the idea of [name of organization] collaborating with St. John's?
 - a. What do you think this collaboration could look like?
 - b. Do you think [the community of focus] would be receptive to a collaboration?
- 8. Here is a list of current programs/services offered at St. John's Current & Past Programs for Interviewees.docx. [Share list in Zoom chat and read list aloud]. Do any of these stand out as possibly being of interest to [the community of focus]?
- 9. What type of programs/services could St. John's provide that would be beneficial to [the community of focus]?
- 10. Are there any barriers individuals might face when accessing services at St. John's?

Closing:

- 11. Do you have any other comments or concerns you would like to share?
- 12. As we continue with this project, we would like to hear from as many individuals as possible. Do you know of anyone else who would be willing to share their input with us?

This concludes the interview. I want to thank you for taking the time to meet with us and share your input. If at any time you have any questions and wish to connect, please feel free to reach out.