

Developing a Data-Based Communications Strategy for North Burnaby

By Gordon Arthur

Participants in the two-year Diocesan School for Parish Development do two projects after their first year as part of their coursework. Each individual or Church group selects relevant projects, reporting back to the school on completion. This is the report on my second project.

Project 2: Identify Programs to Meet the Needs of the Target Demographic

From: No systematic approach to attracting local residents.

To: One or more ideas for possible programmes targeted to attracting and retaining particular constituencies (e.g., seekers, the unchurched) nearby for discussion by the congregation.

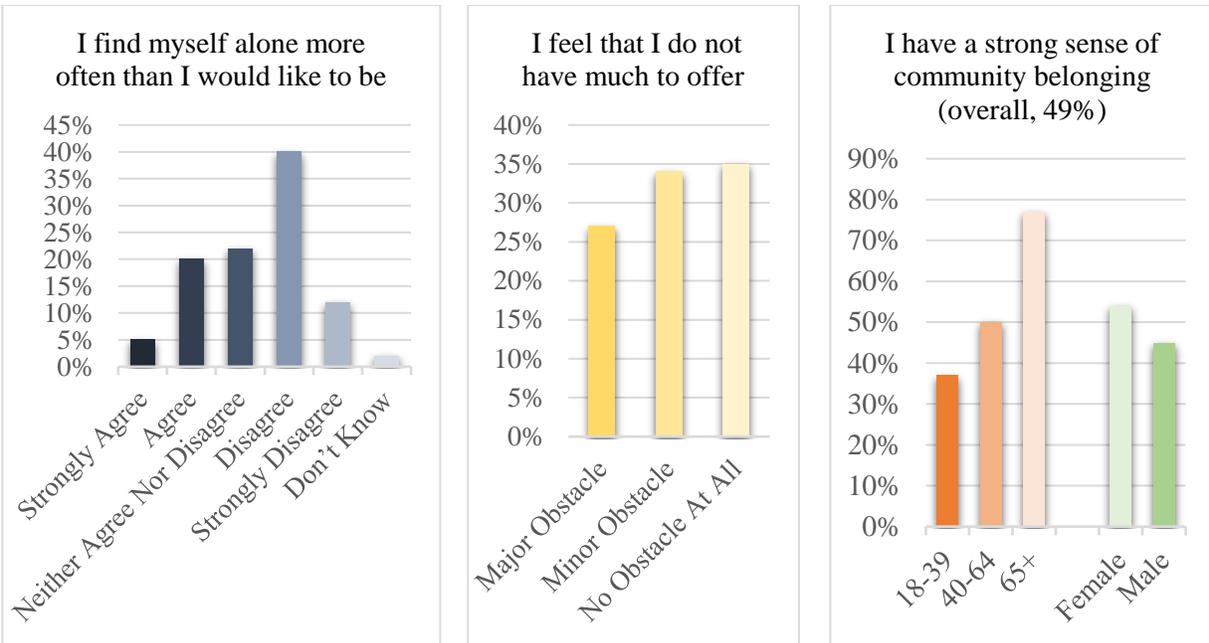
This project builds on and develops Project 1, in which I collected publicly available data on the neighbourhood and used it to develop a demographic profile of the parish. My original intention was to explore the data and to use it to develop a strategy to communicate with people in some of the demographics missing from the congregation. However, when I gathered a focus group to discuss this, it became apparent that we did not have enough information to do so. It took me quite a while to realise that simply gathering the demographic information for Project 1 had not identified the needs of our neighbours, and that we would also need this information to develop the strategy. With the help of three other people, I found relevant documents that filled in the gap.¹

The key findings from these reports were that the greatest social problem is isolation, there is a low sense of community belonging, and the main reason people give for not engaging more is that they feel they have little to offer. While there were substantial variations between different segments of the population on perceptions of some issues, the figures for these issues seem broadly comparable across the community.

A quarter of the population of Burnaby agreed or strongly agreed that they spend too much time on their own, 52% disagreed or strongly disagreed, 22% were undecided, and 2% did not answer. An astonishing 61% found that their perception that they had little to offer was a major or minor obstacle to greater engagement with the community, while only 35% did not see this as an obstacle. Finally, just under half the population had a strong sense of belonging to the community, with the sense of belonging being much stronger among older respondents than young respondents, and slightly stronger in female respondents than male respondents. These perceptions are illustrated in the charts on the next page.²

¹ *Connections and Engagement: A Survey of Metro Vancouver*. Vancouver: Vancouver Foundation, 2012. www.vancouverfoundation.ca/sites/default/files/documents/VanFdn-SurveyResults-Report.pdf (accessed September 12, 2016); *Burnaby Community Health Profile*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia, Fraser Health, and Vancouver Health, 2016. www.myhealthmycommunity.org/Portals/0/Documents/Community%20Profiles/Burnaby_final.pdf (accessed September 28, 2016); *BC Community Health Profile: Burnaby*. Vancouver: Provincial Health Services Authority, 2016. communityhealth.phsa.ca/HealthProfiles/HealthReport/Burnaby (accessed September 28, 2016). I am grateful to Lynne McNaughton, Becky Barnes, and Kate Turcotte respectively for referring me to these documents.

² The first two graphs are adapted from *Connections and Engagement*, 14 and 32. The third is adapted from *Burnaby Community Health Profile*, 5.



It therefore seems that if we are to attract our neighbours in, we would be well advised to emphasise that we offer a community to which newcomers can belong, which will help them to engage more with the neighbourhood, and in which they can develop skills that will help them to offer more to those around them. Thus, we need to develop a programme that emphasises social engagement. However, we must not neglect the Gospel, which should be the foundation for all we do.

As a general rule, communications strategies should include six elements:

1. To whom are we reaching out?
2. What do we want to say?
3. When do we want this project to run?
4. Why are we reaching out?
5. How will we communicate our message?
6. Who will be involved in communicating our message?

Question 1: To Whom Are We Reaching Out?

Based on Project 1, my idea was that we should look at a particular ethnic group, the self-identified Anglicans and Lutherans in the parish who do not attend, and the neighbourhood in general.

By far the largest missing demographic is Chinese. If we are to reach out to this group, we need to be aware of some cultural differences, in particular that Chinese culture (like many cultures in South East Asia) is far more corporate and less individualistic than Western culture. Consequently, Chinese Christians tend to congregate in Chinese Churches rather than to disperse into local congregations. There is already a Chinese Anglican Church in the Diocese of New Westminster (St. Chad, Point Grey), plus another run by the Anglican Network in Canada (Good Shepherd, Vancouver, which claims to be the largest Chinese Anglican Church in Canada). In addition, the estimated Filipino population (another prominent minority) in the parish is of a comparable size to the estimated Korean population here, and it already has the options of St. Michael, Vancouver and St. Mary the Virgin, South Hill (both in the Kingsway deanery). It is quite possible that people

from these populations could be looking to worship in languages other than English, and this could mean setting up a second congregation. Since we already have a (Presbyterian) Korean Church meeting at St. Timothy's on Sunday afternoons, the logistics of managing this could be challenging.

During the focus group process, one of the contributors pointed out that we are more likely to find people sympathetic to the Anglican ethos in Commonwealth countries than elsewhere. This sent me back to the detailed numbers, and I found that the estimated population from Hong Kong outnumbered the estimated population from all other Commonwealth countries except Britain and Canada combined. Accordingly, I would suggest that reaching out to a particular demographic group in the near future would need considerably more research and planning than we are able to do at the moment, and therefore that it should not be an immediate priority.

The second possible group is the self-identified Anglicans and Lutherans in the parish who do not attend St. Timothy's. This is potentially a much more fruitful population. Since the members of this group have already declared themselves Anglicans or Lutherans, presumably we will not need to explain either the Christian or the Anglican/Lutheran ethos in nearly as much depth. There was some discussion at the focus group on the theological orientation of this missing group, with some suggestion that they would mainly be liberals. I find this unlikely, as liberals have a wide choice of Churches; conservatives, on the other hand, have far fewer options (St. Alban's, Burnaby is the only conservative Anglican Church I know in the area) and, in my judgement, they are far more likely to feel excluded as a result. The bishop implicitly acknowledged this around the time of her inauguration, when she stated that she wanted to attract conservatives looking for beauty. To what extent this has happened is not clear, as the diocese rarely publishes such statistics. However, I would suggest that reaching out to those who already see themselves as Anglicans and Lutherans should be a major aim.

The third group is the people in the immediate neighbourhood. At the focus group, the indication was that the neighbourhood is very diverse, and that no single group predominates. Since the Church has always been called to witness to its immediate surroundings, I would suggest that reaching out to the neighbourhood should also be a major objective.

Question 2: What Do We Want to Say?

My initial approach was to suggest that we want to say several things, not necessarily in the following order:

1. This is a community in which you can belong. All who seek God are welcome here.
2. No one here is perfect; we all have flaws, but in God we can find healing and peace.
3. God has done great things for us: John 3:16.
4. Our response to this: love God, love your neighbour.

After some discussion of these issues, and considerable thought about how to address isolation as a particular need, the following message emerged:

5. St. Timothy's is a place where we can connect to God and connect to each other.

This formulation neatly matches the two greatest commandments (love God; love your neighbour), and combines Messages 1 and 4. Put in more technological terms, we could express this as "St.

Timothy's is a place to plug in." A flier we could use to reach out to students at SFU and BCIT, also featuring a technological message that may appeal to students, also emerged from this discussion, and it is appended at the end (page 6). Hopefully, encouraging newcomers to connect will also lead to them seeing that they do have things to offer, although we may need to do more work on overcoming the perception that those who do not engage have little to offer. I will offer a condensed version of this strategy to Vestry for discussion and hopefully adoption in February.

Question 3: When Do We Want This Project to Run?

As soon as possible. I would like to run the SFU and BCIT campaigns to test the strategy. In terms of SFU, getting a copy into the Inter-Faith Centre should be easy, but I would also like it distributed much more widely on public noticeboards. I would like to use a similar strategy concurrently at BCIT. We can then use this to develop for other projects.

Question 4: Why Are We Reaching Out?

I see three main reasons:

1. The Gospel tells us to preach the good news as we go about our daily lives (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:8). Given my Franciscan background, I would want to add St. Francis's dictum, preach at all times. Use words when necessary.
2. There is a perception that the demographics of the congregation do not match those of the neighbourhood, and we want to address this.
3. We need to grow the congregation to make it possible to achieve financial sustainability.

Question 5: How Will We Communicate Our Message?

The following ideas emerged from the focus group:

- We need to reach out to those who might see us as their Church but do not come.
- We could send out or hand deliver fliers periodically and do blitzes for special events. We would need to divide the district into streets.
- The community forum on the Kinder Morgan pipeline was particularly successful. Could we organize other similar events?
- Perhaps we could have a talk on personal safety by a police officer.
- Have an ethnic cooking swap.
- Encourage people to use the labyrinth.
- Have particular spaces for kids (to an extent, we already do).
- Develop the Church as a community gathering centre.
- Showcase what we have to offer.
- Could we reach out to Treasure Island more? It has lots of different nationalities.
- Could we reach out to new immigrants?
- Could we have more gender-neutral language?
- Deeper prayer and spirituality.
- ESL classes.
- Cultural exchanges.
- Church Army Country/Folk camps.
- Could we do more with the Korean Church?
- Vacation Bible School.

These are all good ideas, but they need to be distilled into a coherent strategy. If our aim is to emphasise connection, social events that can be given a Christian focus (shared meals, an ethnic cooking swap, cultural exchanges, work on prayer and spirituality, for example) and community events (such as more community forums or perhaps talks on community safety, etc.) would seem to be obvious priorities. This then raises the question of how we publicise such events. In recent years, we have used a combination of social media, our website, and, for events to which we particularly want to invite those beyond our community (the St. Michael Evensong and the Pet Blessing in particular), press releases; however, the only recent event in which we had direct press involvement was the community forum on the Kinder Morgan pipeline. It might be helpful to try leafletting in the local area as well if we can find volunteers willing to do it.

Question 6: Who Will Be Involved in Communicating Our Message?

Hopefully, as many of the congregation as possible. As Communications Officer, I will clearly have a leading role, as will the other members of the Leadership Team and Parish Council, but we will not be able to do all the necessary work.

Not connecting?

Come find the passWord*

www.sainttimothy.ca



St. Timothy's is a welcoming, supportive, Anglican Church in North Burnaby, close to SFU and accessible via Translink (135 to Willingdon Ave./130 to Kitcheener St., ~45 minutes).

We offer a safe and supportive environment for all, in which we seek to nurture each other in the Christian faith. Our teaching is Scripturally grounded, and we welcome questions and discussion on the faith.

We celebrate both Anglican and Lutheran traditions and bring the best of both to our worship and community life. The congregation currently ranges from toddlers to seniors and includes a large, high-school-aged youth contingent.

Our Communion service is at 10 am on Sundays, followed by coffee hour, with refreshments and conversation. The Church is open for silent prayer on Sunday evenings from 8:30 pm to 9 pm, followed by Night Prayer until 9:15 pm. We welcome all who seek God and fellowship to all services.

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*we also have Wi-Fi