



Highlands United Church Exploratory Research Project 2010 (*Summary*)

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Background

Highlands United Church was given a federal grant to hire two summer students to conduct community research between the months of June and August 2010.

The research conducted investigated three key groups: the church congregation, the community in general, and the Edgemont Village merchants.

Preliminary research was gathered from the Environics Analytics Service Area Report for Highlands United and the North Vancouver District Identity: Our Community Our Plan project.

This document outlines the research conducted between June 24 and August 15, 2010.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the research were to:

- Determine perceptions of the church from the three key groups (congregation, community, and merchants)
- Determine the needs of the three key groups and how the church could help to fulfill those needs
- Inform the church's program and event planning for the future

Methodology

The information outlined in this report was collected in the following ways:

Tablecloth Questions

Blank pieces of paper were laid down on table tops at the Highlands United Sunday School picnic and at the Second Sunday lunch in July. On both occasions participants were provided with markers and several questions, and they were asked to write their responses on the tablecloths as they enjoyed their lunch.

Community Needs Survey

This was an online survey consisting of 16 questions asking respondents about their opinion of Highlands United and the programs that it offers. The survey was primarily accessed via the Highlands United website, but paper copies were also available. The survey was promoted through flyers and announcements during regular Sunday services as well as through multiple emails sent out on the Spirit Singers and congregation list-serves. This survey generated 82 responses, both from the congregation and from members of the wider community.

Focus Groups

We held two small focus groups. The first was with four individuals from the Capilano Community Services Society: the executive director, two youth workers, and one of the youths that the society works with. Our discussion lasted approximately one hour and covered the following topics:

- The gaps in youth and seniors services
- Information about the work that they do
- Potential overlap between the work that they are doing and the work that the church is doing, and how the two could benefit each other

The second focus group was an hour long meeting with three members of the congregation. Our discussion covered the following topics:

- Their opinion of Highlands United and the opinions that they had heard from their friends outside the congregation
- Things that the church does well, things that the church could do better
- Where they would like to see the church in the future

Business Survey

This was an online survey consisting of seven questions asking respondents about their opinion of Highlands United, the challenges that businesses in Edgemont Village face, how the church and Edgemont businesses could work together, and where they would like to see the Village in the future. The survey was promoted by walking into each business, handing out a flyer, and asking for a response. This survey only generated one response.

Interviews

We met with the manager of Runaway Bay Hair Salon. This was approximately a half hour meeting during which the following topics were discussed:

- Her opinion of Highlands United Church
- The challenges that Edgemont businesses face
- How the church and Runaway Bay could help each other
- Where she would like to see Edgemont Village in the future

We also met with a representative from St. Catherine's Anglican Church to discuss the results of similar community research that St. Catherine's conducted last year.

Sunday School

We led Sunday School on August 1. There were approximately ten children and youth in attendance, ranging in age from 3 to 14 years old. We asked the participants to decorate a banner with pictures and phrases that explained why they come to church and what a church's role should be in the community. The children were also asked to draw from a stack of cards with a different question on each and to answer the question on the card they drew. These questions asked them about their opinion of church and about the kind of programs they would like to see the church offering, as well as a few silly questions to keep them engaged.

Friday Nights Concerts in Edgemont Questionnaire

On Friday, August 6, Highlands United Church hosted the Friday Nights in Edgemont community concert. Members of the community were asked to answer two of three questions on slips of paper. Those who filled out the questionnaire were invited to enter their name into a draw for a \$25 gift card to Giftworks. 26 people responded.

Miscellaneous

We recorded the flyers and notices posted on bulletin boards at the Capilano Branch Library, Super Valu, Westview Safeway, St. Catherine's Anglican Church, Highlands United Church, Paws and Claws Petshop, William Griffin Rec. Centre, Delbrook Rec. Centre, and Westview Bean Around the World. We also had conversations with people in the community, members of the congregation, and spent some time sitting and eavesdropping at various locations in Edgemont Village.

Demographics

Our research was targeted at residents of the North Shore. We did not attempt to focus on any specific age, gender, ethnicity or social group.

The community needs survey was our only method of gathering information in which specific demographic information was collected. It was also our primary means of collecting information. The following is the demographic information for the respondents of the community needs survey:

Gender

Male	23.1%
Female	76.9%

Age Range

18-24	2.5%
25-29	1.3%
30-44	7.6%
45-64	50.6%
65-80	32.9%
81+	5.1%

Location

Central / Lower Lonsdale	7.7%
Delbrook / Upper Lonsdale	16.7%
Edgemont / Capilano Highlands	29.5%
Lynn Valley	14.1%
Norgate / Pemberton Heights	5.1%
Seymour / Deep Cove	21.8%
West Vancouver	5.1%

Length of time they have lived in the area

19 years and below	33.8%
20 years and above	66.2%

Primary Language

English	96.2%
French	2.5%
Dutch	1.3%

Highlands Attendance

Attend Highlands	85.9%
Do not Attend Highlands	14.1%

Caveat

The results of this research are limited due to the small sample size of participants and by the fact that those who were willing to respond to our surveys / questionnaires may have already had positive opinions about the church. The results are intended to be directional, not definitive.

Note that '*quotations in italics*' throughout the document indicate respondent verbatims.

Summary of Key Learnings

1. Why do/would people choose Highlands United Church?

i. The perception of Highlands United

When asked 'What are the first three words that come to mind when you hear the word church,' many of the same words appeared repeatedly in people's responses. The word 'community' stood out above all others: it was the first word that came to mind for 28.8% of respondents and was used somewhere in the top three words by 46.3% of respondents.

When asked to select as many words as applied from a list of descriptors, 84.4% of respondents chose the word 'caring' to describe Highlands United. 'Welcoming,' 'inclusive,' and 'Christian' were the second most selected words all at 83.1%. Other words that over 50% of our survey respondents chose to describe the church include:

- Vibrant
- Progressive
- Relevant
- Open
- Questioning
- Involved
- Flexible
- Affirming
- Environmentally conscious

ii. Why Highlands United is unique

Music

When someone is determining whether Highlands United is the church they want to attend, music is one of the most attractive things Highlands can offer. In all areas of our research that involved the congregation (tablecloth questions, the community needs survey, the congregation focus group, Sunday school, and talking to people in general), music was a common theme. 96.3% of survey respondents are aware that Highlands offers a number of choirs – the third highest program that respondents were aware of behind Sunday worship and bible studies. On the tablecloth questions at church events and in our congregation focus group, music was identified as the main reason why members choose Highlands as their church and why members continue to come back to Highlands: *'a lot of new people come to the church and become members because of choir.'* Although many other reasons were given for why Highlands is unique, music was the most universally acknowledged.

Other attractions

Many people also identified one-on-one invitation as the reason they came to Highlands, whether it be someone they know or someone they meet in the community asking them to try the church. The personal connection and welcoming of the one-on-one invitation was the reason for its appeal. When asked the question 'What are the five most pressing needs in your life that aren't being met,' many people identified that they need to fulfill spiritual aspects of their life: *'feeding my spiritual side,' 'to find my quiet place and balance each week,' 'sometimes I can't feel God, his voice has become quiet in my heart.'* Highlands provides a place for those needs to be fulfilled.

Other reasons people have been drawn to Highlands are the appeal of the spiritual leadership style of the minister at the time, a feeling that Highlands is a family church and an involvement in one of the church's programs like healing touch, local outreach or Sunday school: *'a wide range of activities that are meaningful to me keeps me at the church.'*

iii. Why people have said they do not attend church

We received many responses as to why people do not attend church. Their responses were in reference to church in general, not Highlands United Church specifically.

Time

The most frequently cited reason that people say they don't attend church is that they just don't have the time to go: *'people are time-starved.'* For many people, Sunday is their only chance to relax and spend time with their families: *'mostly don't go a timing thing, my only free day.'* For others, Sunday is part of their work-week: *'I don't go to church because I don't have time and work most Sundays.'* Other activities, like organized sports, often run at the same time as church services.

Either way, a lack of time is a reason that many people do not attend because *'most people are so busy that they don't want to add church to their life.'*

In the North Vancouver community, a lack of free time is an issue for a lot of people. In our Community Needs survey, in response to the question 'What are the five most pressing needs in your life that aren't being met,' time was one of the most frequently occurring answers. There were several people who stated that for the most part their needs were already being met, but if *'there was more time in my day that would be nice.'*

What respondents claimed they would like to use this extra time for varied:

- *'Time to give to my community'*
- *'Time with loved ones'*
- *'Time to myself to exercise, sleep and reflect'*
- *'Time in the day to accomplish everything I want to'*
- *'Time to share feelings and just letting off steam'*

- *'Time to be involved in Highlands and community service'*

Childhood experiences

Another reason that came up was that *'adults who went to church as children don't have a positive view of church.'* In discussions with members of the community outside the congregation, we were told that some people were forced to go to church when they were younger, that it was boring or unappealing in some way, and that as soon as they were old enough to stop attending they did. People who had a negative experience with one church as a child assume that all churches are the same and avoid church in general.

For example, some people who were raised Catholic consider themselves to be *'Christian but not practicing.'* Other churches demand more in terms of church attendance, so some people feel that if they can't go all the time they shouldn't go at all.

Others never experienced church as a child because they were *'not brought up in a family that goes.'* They do not attend now *'because we never went as children.'*

Negative or indifferent perceptions of organized religion

Some people have a negative perception of the impact that organized religions have on the world:

- *'Don't want to be attached to religion when it causes so much unrest'*
- *'Some ethnic groups feel that religion has been the downfall of their country'*
- *'Most people don't see church as relevant in their life'*
- *'I hear from people that people who go to church are hypocrites and they don't want to associate with a church'*

Others do not feel negatively about the church, but they do not really feel that church is relevant in their lives:

- *'Church is boring, not lively and unfortunately it's the glitz and glamour that bring people'*
- *'I do not attend church because I am not a believer'*
- *'I am not religious'*
- *'I live in my church, God is all around'*
- *'I do not understand the concept of religion'*

2. Engaging with youth and young families

i. The future of Highlands United

Many research participants identified youth and young people to be the future of Highlands United and the key to the church prospering for ten, fifteen, and twenty years from now. However, participants were also concerned that the church has a decreasing population of young people which directly affects the church's prosperity. This is reflected in the demographic information of the community needs survey: zero survey respondents were under the age of 17 and only nine out of 82 respondents were between the ages of 18 and 44.

The issue of declining young people is not just a problem for Highlands United, but a problem for the community of North Vancouver in general. When asked the question 'What are five things that you believe are the biggest issues facing the community of North Vancouver,' lack of affordable housing, high cost of living, and lack of young families were the three largest response trends and are all issues that make North Vancouver, and Edgemont especially, a difficult place for young people to live. Some respondents also identified specific concerns:

- *'Lack of engagement of young adults in the church'*
- *'Area is too expensive for young families therefore no renewal of energy'*
- *'Need to educate our young people that the church is an important part of community without question'*

Our business survey and interview with the manager of Runaway Bay also identified a diminishing amount of young people to be a problem for Edgemont businesses: *'seniors just don't spend like a young family would, most Edgemont businesses are geared towards young families'*. They recognize that Highlands gives them an opportunity to reach out to a demographic of younger church members that may only occur once a week on Sundays or during big church events:

- *'When Highlands Church holds events (like weddings, funerals, rummage sales, etc.), it brings people through or into the Village who might otherwise never have come'*

ii. The needs of youth and young families

Besides issues concerning the lack of affordable housing, high cost of living, and lack of young families, many survey respondents included youth needs in their responses to the question 'What are five things that you believe are the biggest issues facing the community of North Vancouver':

- *'Children needing afterschool care'*
- *'Place for our youth to go'*
- *'Parents' lack of time for their kids – they need community support/help'*
- *'Engaging young people in community issues'*

The survey responses indicated that parenting groups, after school programs, and children's clothing and toy swaps would be welcome additions to youth programs with interest from the congregation members. Our congregation focus group also emphasized the need to continuously listen to youth and the younger generation to make them feel comfortable in the church and that having a voice was important to them.

However, it is important to note that the people raising the concerns about youth needs in our survey and focus groups were not youth themselves. In our research during Sunday school with youth ranging in ages from 3 to 14, we found that the aspects about Highlands United that were the most important to them were the programs that were geared directly towards them like youth choir, Sunday school, the vacation bible and musical theatre camps, and youth group. When making a banner for the Friday night concert, all these programs came up when we asked them to write the parts of church that they liked the best.

3. The aging demographic

i. The problem of an aging demographic

Although many of the research participants made it clear that an important obstacle in Highlands United's future is the decreasing amount of young families in the community, senior issues were also a topic of concern. When asked to rate statements on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, statements that the church should 'focus on the needs of older members more than youth and young adults' or 'focus on the needs of youth and young adults more than older members,' there was no clear indication of preference either way. 91.8% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the first statement and 81.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the second statement, telling us that one age demographic should not be valued overwhelmingly over another.

The respondents have also identified an issue related to the decreasing amount of young people in the North Vancouver community which is also the biggest issue in terms of seniors. Many respondents noted that the lack of senior housing or downsized housing was an issue in the community which forces seniors to remain in their original homes and as a result, young families cannot move into the community as often. The lack of seniors housing was the largest senior-related issue recognized by the research.

Other senior issues mainly stemmed from emotional problems facing that demographic, such as loneliness, isolation, friendship in their later years, and dealing with old age:

- *'Accepting aging and preparing for end of life with no fear of what lies ahead'*
- *'Meeting new people in age group of sixties other than church people'*
- *'Senior support, especially when they are out on their own and there is no family to help out'*

ii. The needs of an aging demographic

Because 38.0% of survey respondents were actually from what can be considered the "retirement" demographic (65 and above), the survey gathered many suggestions for the need for senior programs in the community. Some respondents identified the greatest needs of the community to be *'community activities for seniors'* and *'seniors programming'* while other respondents gave more specific needs:

- *'Need to provide ample villages where folks can walk / scooter to get life's necessities'*
- *'Ensuring that the elderly are able to stay involved through extended services like transportation, visiting, etc.'*

Senior needs were also identified in our focus group with Capilano Community Services Society. Their bus program for seniors was emphasized as a very demanding program to run and one that needs a lot of assistance. They just purchased a new bus that has Highlands' logo on it due to the church's donation to their organization, but the bus program still struggles with financial support and volunteers to drive and socialize with the seniors.

4. Providing a safe and welcoming place for *all*

i. Encouraging diversity

One of most important characteristics of a church to the people we heard from was that the church be inclusive of everyone, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. The multiculturalism and diversity of the North Shore is seen as a positive and defining quality of the community, and yet some people identified a *'growing prejudice against Farsi community'* and other instances of a lack of *'inclusiveness to ethnic minorities.'*

One of the needs of the community is to build *'more awareness of cultural diversity'* and to foster *'acceptance of others with differences, financial and cultural.'* 97.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the role of the church should be to provide hospitality to all people.

Respondents felt that the church should

- *'Be welcoming and being relevant to potential members from minority groups, multiethnic, and mixed heritage families, who currently don't see themselves reflected in the congregation membership'*
- *'Allow for the integration of all cultures'*
- *'Help people from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds to feel part of the community'*
- *'Provide a way for the changing ethnic population to relate to each other'*

One respondent suggested that we make it *'more visible that we welcome all i.e. a rainbow symbol on our outside sign and on the doors.'*

Survey respondents also felt that age should not affect an individual's inclusion in the church: 100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a church should provide programs and services for all ages. As stated in the section on the aging demographic, respondents did not feel that the needs of any one age group should be focused on over another.

ii. Encouraging everyone to have a voice

Our congregation focus group emphasized the importance of *'feeling like HUC listens to them, they can ask for what they want.'* Respondents felt that they would like to see even more of this comfort level, with more people from the congregation having input on decision making: *'the Ministry needs to be open to hearing the nos and yeses.'*

It came up that one of the strengths of Highlands United was that it *'allows individuals to question the way things are and the practices of the church.'* The feeling that you are being heard – and that while you might not always get exactly what you are asking for, you will not suffer a consequence for your opinion – is what makes a church feel like a safe place.

iii. Encouraging community involvement

Survey respondents saw a lack of community involvement and an unclear *'cultural identity'* as being amongst the most pressing issues facing the North Vancouver community, asking *'do we know our neighbours?'* and *'how do we foster a sense of community and ownership to make our populous cohesive?'*

The lack of a feeling of community can be seen in comments about community needs such as *'declining community involvement / participation'* and *'lack of connection of people to where they live'*. Respondents felt that the church could take more responsibility for *'maintaining an inclusive society where all feel a part of the north shore regardless of income.'*

100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a church should respond to community needs. 98.7% agreed or strongly agreed that the church should be in tune with the needs of the community. 94.8% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed the idea that the church should conduct itself separately from the community.

iv. Being attractive to newcomers

Respondents felt that another key role of the church in the community was to be attractive to newcomers and to *'[assist] newcomers with adjusting to a new community no matter if moving locally or internationally.'*

83.1% of respondents selected the words *'welcoming'* and *'inclusive'* to describe Highlands United. These words were in the top three most selected words to describe Highlands United from members of the congregation.

Despite the importance of being welcoming and inclusive, the issue of cliques in the congregation was a common theme throughout our research. Although all respondents seemed to agree that the church is a welcoming one, a continuous welcome seems to be a problem for some. Some people feel that it is difficult to really break into the inner circles of the church:

- *'There are times when I wonder if there is some way new people can get involved. It is very difficult when so many members have been around for ages and love to do things.'*
- *'Our family did attend regularly for 8 years. It felt a bit 'cliquey' at times. Once our son finished with the youth choir, we did not attend even though we had tried to be involved in many different aspects of church life. We only seemed to be involved with those members we knew already outside of Highlands so there just wasn't enough connection to keep us attending.'*

The issue of cliques also arose in our congregation focus group: *'long time members form cliques and groups – these cliques cannot see that there are cliques.'* We were

told that there is a *'difference between how newcomers see the church versus how the long time members see the church regarding welcoming.'*

Hospitality was identified as an area in which the church needs constant improvement. Respondents advised the church to:

- *'Have a newcomers club so they feel a part of something when they join a new church. Newcomers are not looking for a phony welcome, and then never see the person who welcomed them to the service. They need reassurance that this is the place that they want to be and where they want to give of their talents and time. Don't overlook potentiality of your new people. They come because they want to be a part of worship that is meaningful and not superficial.'*
- *'Perhaps we could have an assistant for the older members so they can be encouraged to participate and perhaps take over a job in time.'*
- *'Find a way to actually integrate new people with the congregation.'*

And while it seemed to be universally agreed on by respondents that encouraging new members to join the congregation was important, we were also advised about the importance of not forgetting about the existing congregational members in attempts to attract new ones:

- *'With increased effort for local and global outreach don't forget the current congregation for they are the ones who pay the bills.'*
- *'More time needs to be put into pastoral care and routine visiting of the congregation. The personal touch is very important.'*
- *'Don't lose some of the history of the church in the need to be all things to all people.'*
- *'A larger congregation doesn't necessarily mean better.'*

5. What could Highlands United be doing better?

i. Communication

When asked to select the programs that they thought were available through Highlands United, survey respondents were not in total agreement about the availability of all programs. 100% of respondents were aware that the church offered Sunday worship services. Sizeable percentages of respondents were also aware of well-known programs like bible studies, different choirs, Sunday school, youth group, and Scouts / Girl Guides. However, the respondents' knowledge of events beyond those seemed to taper off considerably. Although 88.8% were aware of the flea market, 82.5% were aware of summer camps and 77.5% were aware of weekly communion – which are all large percentages – they seemed to be underwhelming percentages for events that are so prominent in the church.

Only 27.5% of respondents were aware of jazz vespers. Although this was not completely surprising because it will not actually be introduced to the congregation until the fall, many of the respondents who filled out the hard copies of the survey wrote question marks in the box next to jazz vespers which may indicate that some of the online respondents would not know what the program entails either.

A specific issue that was also raised was the problems with email communication:

- *'I find the endless barrage of emails on every topic very irritating. I am thinking of unsubscribing. I understand that that is how you communicate with your community, but there must be a better way of sending so many emails out. I don't even read them, just hit delete. maybe you should ask people what topics they would like to receive emails on rather than just mass emailing. I'm sure some of your members love all your emails, but I suspect that many of the younger members who already get way too many emails find the Highlands emails very annoying and a deterrent.'*

Issues about communication and advertising were also raised in both focus groups held with Capilano Community Services Society and the congregation members. CCSS was not aware at all of what kind of programs we offer and was also not aware that the church programs were open to the entire community and not strictly the congregation. In our congregation focus group, concerns were raised about the church dropping funding for advertising because of money constraints.

ii. Partnership

In our focus group with CCSS, the business survey, interview with the manager of Runaway Bay, and meeting with a representative from St. Catherine's, a common theme arose in regards to partnering. Capilano Community Services Society immediately saw the opportunity to be mutually beneficial with Highlands in terms of promoting different programs. As indicated in the section about youth, the few

businesses that did respond to our questions also saw an opportunity to align themselves with the church to cross-promote various events around Edgemont.

When we met with a representative from St. Catherine's to discuss a similar survey that they had done, the issue of partnership between the two churches was raised especially in terms of their close proximity to one another. This sentiment was also echoed in the congregation focus group as well as in the online survey: 98.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the church should *'work together with other churches of different beliefs to better the community.'* Although this partnership theme was brought up across our areas of research, many believe that Highlands is not taking full advantage of these partnerships.

iii. Specific advice from the congregation

Some of the advice that we got from the congregation about how Highlands United could be better was very specific:

- *'I would love to see upbeat modern Christian music on overheads at the start of service to bring us into God's spirit. I realize this is more of an evangelical approach, but it does bring you alive. I love evangelical services, and I love the fact that the united church loves everyone. Amen.'*
- *'Highlands is a great place overall. More music, less bible preaching. The overhead projectors would be nice.'*
- *'Move the more frequent communion services to the regular service'*
- *'Make sure that each service provides a suitable message within a sermon which relates to a bible reading'*
- *'The confirmation classes were invaluable. The evolution of the United Church in terms of theology etc. should somehow be made available to those not in the fold.'*
- *'Set up grand-parenting circles, outreach into the local schools to help those families that don't have grandparents for elder role models.'*
- *'Apply for a liquor license so the lower halls could be rented or provided for social functions such as wedding receptions etc.'*
- *'Put fans in the ceiling of the sanctuary to make the church more comfortable in the warm months and therefore attract more functions such as weddings etc.'*
- *'Encourage groups to use the church as a base from which to conduct meetings and charge a nominal fee.'*