



November 3, 2020

Dear Islington United Church,

In June, Credence provided you with an update on the planning and visioning process called *Growing Forward*. In that letter, Credence shared the results of the congregational survey conducted in the spring of 2020 in a document called: *What we Think we Know*. We asked you to think about the document over the summer in preparation to our autumn conversations.

On October 22nd, the *Growing Forward* Reference Group met to develop a plan of action. Our next steps are as follows:

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| November 4 th | • You will receive a survey link to a short questionnaire, to take the pulse of the congregation based on your experiences since the start of the pandemic. The survey will also ask for volunteers to participate in one of several focus groups. The survey closes November 18 th . |
| November 15 th | • Credence will send links to a series of short videos that you can view at your own pace. The videos are intended as 'thought starters' as we enter into a period of discernment about the future of Islington United Church. |
| November 20 th | • Credence will start facilitating four or five focus groups. These small discussion groups will take place on-line (Zoom) and will be scheduled for up to two hours. They should be completed by December 20 th |
| November 29 th | • Credence will start releasing a weekly Advent prayer invitation to the congregation, concluding on January 3, 2021 (Epiphany). |
| January 12 th | • The <i>Growing Forward</i> Reference Group will meet to hear about the results of the survey and the focus group discussions. |
| January 27 th | • Please circle your calendar for a Congregational Meeting, at which time we will be talking about the future of Islington United Church. You won't want to miss this discussion! |



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February 2nd

- The results of the Congregational Meeting will be reviewed by the Reference Group and a draft plan created.
- Presentation of the draft plan to the Church Council

Date TBD

We are honoured to be walking with you on this very important journey. We acknowledge the uncertain times in which we are living and ask for your continued grace and commitment to the process.

Here is [the link to the online questionnaire](#) that will be open from November 4th to 18th.

With best wishes and great care,

Betty Pries & Peter Spratt

p.s. Here is the full web address in case the hyperlink is not cooperating:

<https://forms.gle/35donwx32buxDAna6>

Appendix 'A': What we Think we Know Report, June 4, 2020 (see next page)



June 4, 2020

Dear Islington United Church,

Please accept kind greetings from Credence during this very unusual time in which we are living. As you know, your Council hired Credence to support you with a planning and visioning process called *Growing Forward*. In March and April, 2020, Credence provided you with a survey and conducted several interviews in connection with that survey. Please see the results of this survey attached.

We have entitled the survey results document: *What we Think we Know*. We intentionally use this title because the document is not meant to be seen as set in stone. Instead, it is a reflection of your voices at the time you filled out the survey. It also helps to ground our conversation for the *Growing Forward* process.

We want to offer a few words of encouragement to keep in mind as you read this survey:

1. The response rate to the survey was phenomenal. To us, this level of response suggests that the congregation is interested, engaged and motivated to be a part of the upcoming *Growing Forward* conversations.
2. You have identified a number of strengths in the congregation worth celebrating: Community, a strong pastoral team, many volunteers, etc. While we expect to hear these strengths in most congregations, the vigour with which you spoke about your engagement as volunteers is remarkable.
3. You will see a number of challenges identified – please take comfort in this section – the challenges you identify are not “all over the place” but instead fall into three distinct categories. The level of common thinking regarding challenges at IUC sets IUC up well for engaging in a visioning conversation. The challenges you have identified fall into the following categories: Challenges brought on by the time in which we are living; governance; and comfort with differences and change. While the latter two are related to issues internal to IUC, the first challenge is connected to the larger reality of the church in the 21st Century. This challenge is being seen across the church in Canada at this time. While this doesn’t make tackling this challenge easier, there is hope in the context of the social changes we are facing: The needs of our society at this time can be understood as a longing for meaning, purpose, belonging and rest. Each of these longings lie at the center of the church’s gifting. IUC is being challenged to lean



into its core gifts in order to serve the needs of the world at this time. This is an opportunity for IUC.

As you know, we had intended to meet in person in April and May of 2020 in order to engage together in the *Growing Together* conversations. Because of the pandemic, these meetings have been delayed. At this time, we anticipate continuing with these conversations in Fall 2020 – whether in person or online. Our conversation plan is as follows:

- **Planning Meetings:** Meetings with Minister & Reference Group (RG)
- **Congregational Learning:** The congregation will be invited to watch several online Credence videos to prepare for the visioning process.
- **Focus Group Meetings:** Focus Group meetings with IUC congregants will be used as pre-visioning conversations, to drill down on the findings in the report and to invite dreaming about IUC's sense of call and direction.
- **RG Meeting**
- **Congregational Meeting:** A congregational meeting planned for late Fall 2020 (whether in person or online) will draw congregational voices together and plan for IUC's future.
- **RG Meeting:** The RG will develop a plan based on the congregational meeting.
- **RG Meeting with Council:** The RG will share the plan with Council.

We are grateful to be on this journey with you! As we look ahead to IUC's future, please be comforted by the following words from Jeremiah 29:11-13:

For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord...

With best wishes and great care,

Betty Pries & Peter Spratt



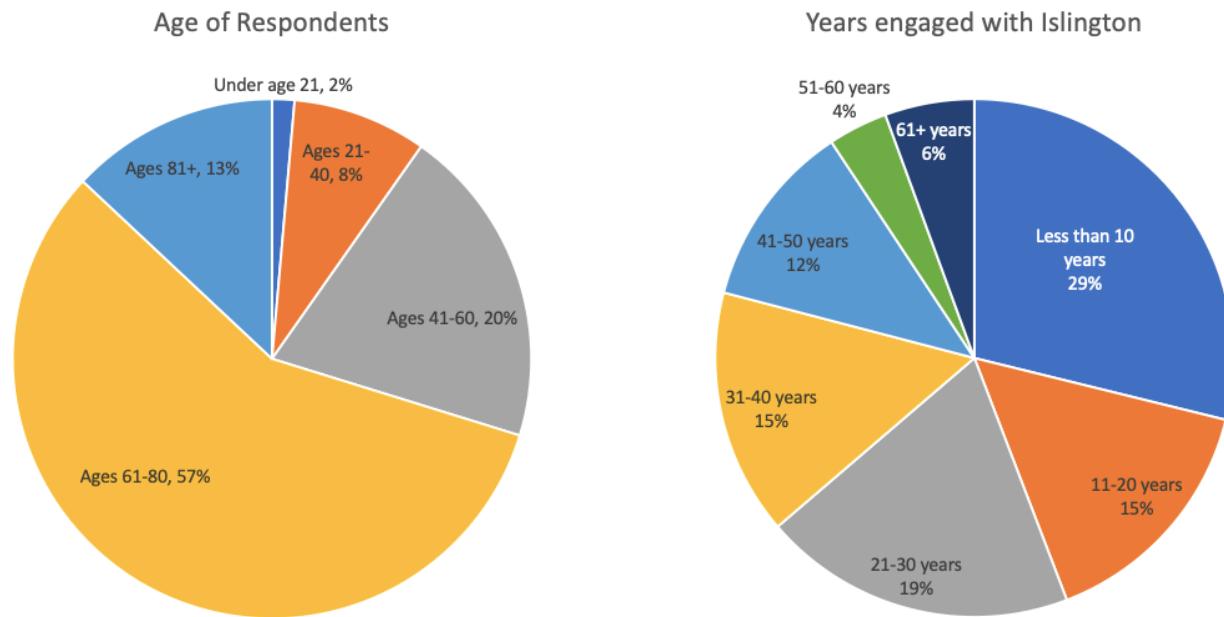
What We Think We Know about Islington United Church

June 4, 2020

This document is based on 215 online survey responses, 3 paper responses, 13 telephone interviews and a focus group conversation with Council – all of which occurred in March and April 2020. It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic hit Toronto in mid-March. Approximately 71% of the survey responses had been submitted by this time. Credence is unable to comment on the extent to which the congregation's feedback changed as a result of the church's response to the pandemic.

The document is a collation of the perspectives of the congregation, provided here in aggregate fashion to ensure confidentiality. In general, comments heard only once are not included in the document. In this document, "a few" refers to 10-30%, "some" refers to 30-50%, "many" refers to 50-75% and "most" refers to 75%+.

Survey Data





General Overview

We see ourselves as a welcoming congregation with approximately 350 participants in attendance over two worship services on Sundays. We are mostly over the age of 40, with the majority of us being between the ages of 61 – 80. At Islington United Church (IUC), we are blessed with many gifts and talents. We enjoy being part of this congregation and are passionate about what we do and how we do it. We are an engaged group and run many programs that serve the congregation and those beyond it. We do not all think with one mind and sometimes struggle with how best to engage our diversity. Though we believe that something needs to change among us, we are uncertain about our next steps. We are ready to engage in a process to determine how we are being called.

What Draws Us to Islington

- We enjoy our sense of community – a church family that is supportive, caring, friendly, and welcoming. We look to our church community for social connection and fellowship. Several of us state that we feel a “sense of belonging” and inclusion among us; some offer appreciation that IUC is an “Affirming” church. Our motto, *Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors*, resonates with us.
- Some of us are drawn to IUC for faith and spiritual development. We feel a longing for a closer connection to and relationship with God – we come to IUC because it is a “vibrant faith community.” Several of us especially appreciate our Bible studies. Some of us are drawn to IUC’s sermons and music and in this regard, we think highly of our Ministry Team.
- Some of us connect with the congregation to find peace amidst the everyday challenges and busyness of (pre-Covid-19) life. We want to experience calm and a sanctuary – an oasis where we can re-energize and in preparation for the week ahead. We value opportunities for re-grounding, for reflecting on our purpose, and engaging in deep personal renewal.
- We contribute to the life of the church in countless practical ways including our involvement with music, choirs, in fundraising, at the rummage sale, in youth programming, as committee members, Elders, ushers, Sunday School teachers, lay leaders, greeters, and many, many programs that connect with individuals in the congregation and beyond. (*We named over 35 different roles in our survey responses!*). We appreciate the time, energy, and passion that people contribute to IUC’s life of as volunteers.



Strengths, Assets, Opportunities

- We love the sense of community that we feel with one another. Just over half of us consider this our strength. We care for each other and for our larger community. We perceive our caring to be equally balanced between our internal faith community and the broader community/neighbourhood.
- We appreciate the level of participation and engagement by our volunteers (we have active participants and active programming) and see this as one of our greatest strengths. We generously give of our many talents. We engage in over twenty different programs, both internally focused (e.g., Bible study groups, choirs, etc.) and those with an external outreach focus (e.g., Mabelle, Giving Garden, etc.).
- We appreciate the worship experience at IUC. Approximately 60% of us referenced the music, services, prayer, and sermons as strengths of the congregation. We value the Ministry Team and its spiritual leadership.
- We also appreciate the leadership offered by the many volunteers on Council and committees.
- Some of us feel IUC is particularly good at being open minded, welcoming, and inclusive of others.
- Other strengths we see include: the practice of flexibility and a willingness to work together to try new things; our beautiful facility that is large enough to support our many programs and meetings; our strong financial position thanks to the generosity of those who financially support the work of the church and our fiscally responsible leadership.

Challenges: Demographics, Volunteerism and Finances in a Changing World

- Our congregation is aging; we regard this as our most significant and worrisome challenge.
- Our aging congregation is not being offset by a growth in young families and/or youth. We are saddened that, in recent years, we have not been able to attract more youth and young families to IUC. We hope that the recent introduction of the Resonance Project will contribute to increased engagement with these important groups. Many of us believe that ministering to younger people is a specific challenge that needs to be addressed for the longer-term health of the congregation.
- Closely tied to our aging congregation is our declining number of volunteers. This is especially difficult because volunteerism has been our strength for so long. We



are saddened that fewer people seem to be stepping up/in to take on volunteer leadership roles; we are concerned about the wellbeing of our remaining volunteers and fear that they will burn-out. We are aware that without volunteers, we may be forced to reduce the programs and activities of IUC for which we are known.

- As our congregation ages, fewer people engage in “church,” whether that means fewer people in attendance at Sunday worship or a reduction in offerings. As a result, a number of us (approximately one third) are concerned about Islington’s finances. We are also aware of the realities of donor fatigue for those who remain. Doubts about our financial sustainability represent the second most significant challenge that keeps us up at night.
- While a few of us specifically noted the strength of our beautiful building and location, a few also acknowledge that the building requires significant upkeep, requiring finances which are already a cause for concern.
- A few of us are concerned with the greater community’s lack of interest in church and wonder about the relevance of church in our current day and age. In a similar vein, we perceive a healthy tension between those who would prefer a greater emphasis on “spirituality” and those who would prefer an approach to worship that reflects more traditional focus on “religion”. *We note that the trend towards greater interest in spirituality is reflective of society in general. While this is not exclusively the domain of church-going adherents, it represents an opportunity for us.*
- We understand the world is changing – as seen in the changes in our local neighbourhood. We see our community as multi-cultural and diverse. Along with this diversity we notice many new Canadians from countries where Christianity is not the primary religion. So, although we experience population growth with new residential condominiums and apartments, we acknowledge that these may not provide the answers to offsetting our aging congregation. Our ongoing involvement in community programs such as the Maybelle Food Program provides us with a valuable window through which we see the effects of food, shelter, and income insecurity in our neighbourhood. Some of us see the church’s future tied to how it serves the community, but we fear that running the programs will become challenging as we anticipate decline in our volunteer base. *Note: Over 67% of Canadians identify as Christian, though of this percentage less than 18% attend church more than once/month.*



- We recognise that our society is changing – church no longer holds the place in our community that it once did, and people's lives are perhaps busier than they once were. There is a sense that people are distracted and attendance at church does not rise to the top of people's priority lists. *This reality is not uncommon and reflects our current 21st C environment. Most congregations today – especially in the mainline context – are wrestling with decline. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen an increase in interest in religious activity. It is too early to say, however, how this will change in the months and years to come.*

Challenges: Governance

- We are concerned about the governance of our church, and in particular, how decisions are made and by whom. Some are concerned about changes to reporting structures and the working relationships between staff and volunteers. There is a strong desire to have a plan that will address a perceived lack of consensus around Islington's future direction.

Challenges: Change

- We seem to be in the midst of significant changes. We sense that different approaches might yield different/better results; however, not all of us are comfortable with change. It seems that lines can be drawn (us vs. them) including judgement about those with whom we disagree. We feel some regret for not having processes in place to enable us to respectfully address difficult conversations together. In some instances, this has led gossip and unhealthy conflict to take hold and/or get moved outside where the debates continue in private. From time to time, we observe that perhaps we are not as open, friendly, or welcoming as we think we are or think we should be.

Callings, Dreams, & Hopes

- We have many dreams. Our strongest shared dream is to continue to find opportunities to live our faith by engaging with and serving our broader community – Christian or not. This is a powerful longing expressed by one-third of our congregation. We see our neighbourhood shifting and wonder how we are being called to connect with our neighbours. As one of our congregants so eloquently states, “*Years ago we had a lighthouse as our motto/symbol. My dream is that our congregation members would be examples of hope and love in our community such that others will be curious about the source of this [light] and we can share our faith in God who is with us in all things.*”



- We hope for increased engagement with young people, and also with other generations – not wanting any group to feel slighted because of a focus on one demographic.
- We aspire to continue to have the church as our home for spiritual growth and renewal, and for supporting our faith journeys/development. We also wish to uphold our church community as a place that helps to reduce our anxiety and assists us with daily living.
- We long to be financially sustainable. We understand that we cannot rely solely on our givings to support our church and its programs. The German International School of Toronto and IUC have recently come to terms on a multi-year agreement for GIST to use the facility. It is believed that this arrangement will have a positive impact on the financial health of IUC. Several of us nonetheless identify the need to place greater emphasis on fundraising.
- While we dream of continuing as a congregation, we have mixed feelings about growth – some of us long for growth, while others appreciate the closer connections which a smaller group allows. *Note: It is common to have differing views about growth and change. The challenge in these moments is to find opportunities to hear and value diverse views/voices while finding the way forward together.*
- Regardless of the direction we take, we long to be and remain welcoming, open-minded, and inclusive.
- Some among us hope for creativity around programming and around our physical space, that we would explore ways to serve within and beyond our faith community. A few examples put forward include the following: redeveloping part of the property for mixed use, including affordable rental housing, community hub/outreach space (kitchen, gym, hall, office, library, wellness/healthy living, programs for seniors and youth, programs for young moms), and office space with underground parking, and other features/uses.
- We wonder if we might promote our congregation (via booths and exhibits) and its strengths (e.g., our wonderful music, inspiring sermons and worship experience, connections with the broader community, safe and inclusive culture, etc.) to become more visible in the community. Are there opportunities to leverage technology in the post-Covid-19 world? *Note: Within three days of Palm Sunday, IUC reportedly had over 1900 views of its online service. Normally that would have been less than 200 views.*