

# New Congregations in the Canadian Kaleidoscope

An autoethnographic analysis of thirty new  
congregations in the Waterloo region



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# Study Overview

Visitation of 30 congregational worship services was conducted from January to December, 2024. Vignettes from the new congregations provide insight into the variety of ecclesial responses to a culturally diverse region in southern Ontario. This study offers missiological perspective on the ways in which new congregations inspire hope for the future of the Canadian cultural kaleidoscope.

## Key Objectives

1

Review the diversity of recent congregational development within the Waterloo region.

2

Learn from new congregations via comparative analysis of worship services.

3

Reflect on the missiological significance of new congregations in Canadian communities.

I will be guiding you through the varied experiences of visiting 30 new congregations: from showing up to the locations through key moments of the worship services. A simplified liturgical pattern, featuring welcome-worship-teaching-fellowship, will provide the framework for comparing short episodes from the worship services. While each of the worship services was different, one of the common themes was the interaction of Christian faith and culture in a diverse region. There are unique cultural expressions in the region due to its immigration history, but cultural diversity and change are features of many Canadian communities. The window this report provides into the variety of new congregations highlights the limitations of Canada's image as a cultural mosaic and suggests it could be better updated to the concept of a kaleidoscope.[i] Shifting from a static picture of different cultures separated from each other to the more dynamic understanding of changing, interacting cultural identities encourages new perspectives on our communities. Concluding reflections offer insight into the implications of how new congregations offer a response to the Canadian kaleidoscope.

As someone born and raised in rural southern Ontario and as a grandchild of an Irish immigrant, I have both been keenly interested and learned a great deal from the cultural diversity of new churches across Canada. My experience as an interdenominational mission worker, denominational staff person, researcher,

and Bible college/seminary instructor has provided me with opportunities to hear other people's experiences of faith and culture.[ii] As a 2024 Research Fellow with the Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research I focused on new churches in Canada as an extension of my lifelong learning. I began visiting the worship services of recently started congregations in my region.[iii]

## Where in Canada?

I limited my visitation of new congregations to Waterloo Region in southern Ontario, for both pragmatic and strategic reasons. My family has been part of two new churches in Kitchener which have met in the same city run community centre, several years apart, and both have been highly involved in the local neighbourhood. One of these church plants designed the worship service to be accessible to new immigrants from a variety of backgrounds with whom they had developed relationships. The other young church invested heavily in volunteerism in support of the city's food distribution programs and similar service initiatives. Knowing Waterloo Region and having experienced new churches in the area provided local perspective in addition to my previous national, academic research, and consulting/coaching practice.[iv]



**“Shifting from a static picture of different cultures separated from each other to the more dynamic understanding of changing, interacting cultural identities encourages new perspectives on our communities.”**



Admission Category	2018	to	2022	Five Year Per Cent Change
<b>Waterloo Region</b>				
Economic	1,575		3,840	144%
Family	1,200		1,790	49%
Refugee	1,170		2,030	74%
Other	20		125	525%
<b>Total Permanent Residents</b>	<b>3,965</b>		<b>7,785</b>	<b>96%</b>
<b>Cambridge</b>				
Economic	145		595	310%
Family	210		300	43%
Refugee	50		50	0%
Other	-		20	-
<b>Total Permanent Residents</b>	<b>405</b>		<b>965</b>	<b>138%</b>
<b>Kitchener</b>				
Economic	715		1,960	174%
Family	635		1,040	64%
Refugee	945		1,750	85%
Other	20		50	150%
<b>Total Permanent Residents</b>	<b>2,315</b>		<b>4,800</b>	<b>107%</b>
<b>Waterloo</b>				
Economic	710		1,240	75%
Family	310		380	23%
Refugee	150		215	43%
Other	-		35	-
<b>Total Permanent Residents</b>	<b>1,170</b>		<b>1,870</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>Townships</b>				
Economic	-		25	-
Family	30		45	50%
Refugee	10		15	50%
Other	-		-	-
<b>Total Permanent Residents</b>	<b>40</b>		<b>85</b>	<b>113%</b>

Source: Immigration, Refugees, Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Permanent Resident Arrivals, 2018-2022

Figure 1: Number and Percent Change of Permanent Residents Landing in Waterloo Region. [v]

# Waterloo Region

Waterloo Region is a useful Canadian region to do a street level review of new congregations because it is one of the fastest growing Census Metropolitan Areas.[vi] It is a composite region with three mid-sized cities and various small towns in the townships within the commuting radius of the Greater Toronto Area (the GO Train's westernmost commuter stop) as Canada's largest population centre. It is fully integrated with rural areas; among the northern Waterloo "big box" store complexes a horse shelter can be found for the Old Order Mennonite groups who choose to live more simply on the agriculturally rich land. At the same time, the number of permanent residents resulting from immigration continues to climb (see Figure 1), which provides a workforce for the local technology industry as well as the other career opportunities making up the diverse economy.[vii]

In January of 2024, I was not certain how many churches 10 years old or younger I would be able to find within Waterloo Region. As a local resident, I generally had kept my eyes and ears open for new churches and could only think of about a third of the 30 I wanted to visit.[viii] As I began to search online, and then reviewed the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) registration of charities, I was very pleasantly surprised to find more than 30 which might meet my criteria.[ix] That rate of new congregational development appeared to be generally aligned with the national CRA data which has record of between 200 and 450 churches registered nationally as charitable organizations per year from 1991-2021 and that remained open up to 2021.[x] While the CRA registrations provided a type of baseline, some of the new congregations I visited stated that they had not yet registered for charitable status. The new congregations varied in worship attendance from less than 10 people to more than 150.[xi]

The age of the congregation was occasionally stated on their website or raised in conversation but was also estimated from the start date of their social media accounts. A few indicated during their service that they had only recently started “public” worship a few months ago, so they were not yet a year old. New congregations were not included in the research unless at least English translation was available.

The choice of the term “congregation” is intentionally broad – when Christians gather to start a new worship gathering it can take many forms, not all of which conform to traditional understandings of “church.” This study included: English congregations hosted within an established church that used another language for worship, satellite congregations connected to churches in a different municipality, and congregations which have merged with another congregation to form a new church.[xii] A decade was selected arbitrarily as a limit to consider a congregation “new.” From my experience within new churches and almost two decades as a coach of church planters, I was aware that some may be well developed before the end of a decade and others might still be working towards sustainability, but it provided a range of developmental experience.[xiii] It should also be kept in mind that the decade in question included a global pandemic.

Word of mouth was one of the ways I found the new congregations as I spoke with people about my research project, but in cities of hundreds of thousands of people that only goes so far. It was possible to do a web browser search and find many new churches. The start date for their social media accounts sometimes provided a clue as to how long they had been in operation. Some shared either photos or videos of their congregational life, but almost all websites provided a location, and a few provided specific directions.[xiv]

Worship Service Attendance	Number of New Congregations	Estimated Age Range of New Congregations
0-20	7	0-10 years
21-50	9	4-6 years
51-100	8	2-6 years
101-150	3	4-10 years
151-250	3	6-10 years

Figure 2: New Congregation Attendance and Estimated Age



## Location, Location, Location

While in start-up mode, where do new churches find space to meet publicly? Meeting in homes can initially be sufficient for small groups, but once the number of people approaches two dozen, most houses and apartments feel crowded. So, unless the strategy is to continue as a network of small groups, the worship gathering space becomes important. With building expenses across the region, finding a place to meet can be a challenge. In the urban centres, access to public transit and parking increases the difficulty level for selecting appropriate meeting spaces. The church plants I encountered provided an interesting cross-section of locations. There was a concentration of new congregations in the Kitchener downtown area, which provides a starting point for exploring the diversity of expressions of communities of faith.

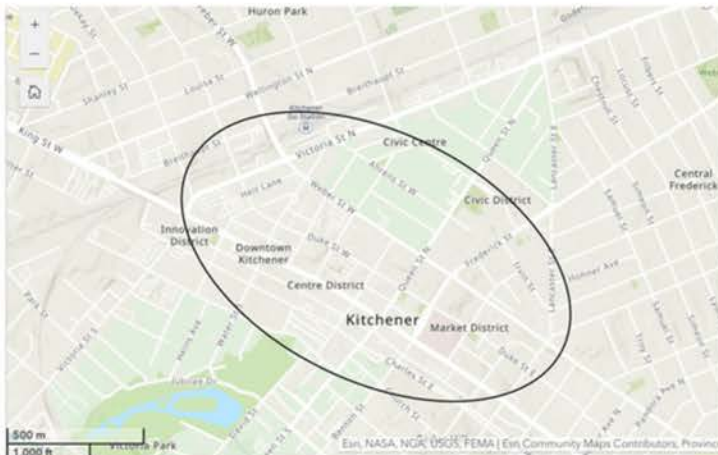


Figure 3: Downtown Area Containing Eight New Congregations' Worship Locations [xv]

### **Downtown**

I found eight new churches meeting in five locations, each within about 15-minutes walking distance of Kitchener's City Hall in the downtown core. Six of the church plants were co-located in three buildings. As an initial example, two unique congregations met in a former factory that had been refurbished to create post-industrial office spaces. A six-year-old church plant of young, urban, Canadian-born families with an ancient-contemporary vibe -- more about that later --

was down the hall and around the corner from a vibrant African-Canadian plant started by a missionary couple from Nigeria. This building was representative of the decades long shift of the downtown from an industrial centre to a technology hub – while the exterior looked very much like a factory, most of the interior had been renovated to provide an industrial-chic look to the halls and rooms.

Across downtown two new churches were meeting in the same hotel in small conference rooms with chairs set up in rows – one on the first floor and the other on the second floor. The first-floor congregation had a hip hop feel to the worship and a no-holds-barred sermon addressing a range of spiritual and social issues. On the second floor a gathering of over two dozen people met for worship and after the service a half-dozen of the first-time visitors were invited to stay and learn what support the pastors could make available for finding jobs and establishing career paths in Canada.

One long established church on the edge of the downtown core was hosting two new churches in addition to its own worship services. A side prayer room provided space for the seven people (including myself and my wife as visitors) and the chapel provided space in the afternoon for a decade-old charismatic church. I was presenting at a denominational gathering on a previous research project and had opportunity to speak to the pastor of the long-established downtown church. He was a former student of mine and was obviously quite happy that their church was able to provide start-up space for new churches – a much-needed accommodation in urban centres.

**“visitors were invited to stay and learn what support the pastors could make available for finding jobs and establishing career paths in Canada.”**



The largest congregation I visited was six years old and attended by more than 200 people of all ages, but especially, many young families and university students. They were gathered in the downtown community centre, which had formerly been a Catholic high school gym – the scoreboard was still mounted in the corner. My wife and I discovered that one of our young adult children’s best friends was leading worship and we talked to the young couple about what it was like to be part of a new church in the downtown area. The church had previously met in a Christian high school on the edge of a neighbouring town and they said the current location, being on the light rail transit route, opened up new possibilities for people to become involved. The minister was actively involved in one of the local universities and it was easy for the students to cross town to be part of the church.

When I visited the downtown community centre church plant, they told me that there was an African Canadian church just up the street. They saw well-dressed people exiting from their worship service about the same time they were departing in their more casual attire. I discovered that it was an old yellow brick church where I had first worked after leaving seminary. The vibrant worship service of over 100 people was deeply, personally encouraging to me. I remembered walking through that very room over two decades ago praying that God’s glory might again be magnified in the heart of the city.

The concentration of recently started congregations surprised me as someone who had formerly worked in that neighbourhood. The creative use of spaces which are not normally considered “sacred” offered options in a transit-rich part of Waterloo region. Multiple congregations meeting in one church building was not surprising, as I have encountered many established churches which have offered

“incubator” space for new congregations; sometimes as a ministry partnership and other times as a rental arrangement. The diversity of expressions of Christian spiritualities this provides offers multiple opportunities for exploring faith.

**“ The creative use of spaces which are not normally considered “sacred” offered options in a transit-rich part of Waterloo region.”**

### ***Beyond Downtown***

Beyond the downtown, a couple of the worship services were outdoors in local Waterloo parks. One young church was doing summer services under a picnic shelter - transporting the large screen TV for the well-developed multimedia presentation supporting the sermon. Earlier in the spring, in a different park, an eight-year-old, one-a-month “wild church,” designed to meet outdoors year-round, offered a creation-aware liturgy – the only screens involved were the Bible readings on our smart phones. It was March when my wife and I joined with them for worship, it was only lightly snowing. The small clearing was beautiful with the evergreen trees providing some shelter and the small creek trickling through the edge of the parklands. While the 17 participants appeared to be multi-generational Canadians predominantly of European descent, worship was intentionally being culturally contextualized. The liturgical innovations incorporating the outdoor environment to address current ecological concerns of becoming disconnected from creation, demonstrated many cultural adaptations taking place to express Christian faith.



Just beyond downtown Kitchener is a small mall that has seen better days but provides space for an eclectic collection of shops, services, and a martial arts studio. One of the store fronts, tucked down a side hallway, just before the washrooms, was a healing and deliverance ministry. The front was set up similarly to a medical office with a reception desk and waiting room except that scripture verses and Christian art adorned the walls. Down the hall, past the prayer rooms, was a small back room which had a couple dozen chairs set up in rows and nine of the multicultural group worshipped to online streaming music. When the pastor stepped forward to preach, a man who was attending with his children in their martial arts outfits offered to translate for one of the women in the congregation who was not comfortable with English.

One of the church plants that met in a residential area outside of the downtown had information online in both Spanish and English. When I approached the established mainline, Protestant church building on a Saturday afternoon, I noticed another worship gathering leaving the building. The large parking lot attached to the church building accommodated the simultaneous turnover of the two congregations. The two groups obviously knew each other. As I walked up to the building, I observed many greetings, lots of laughter, and hugs. As the service began, the worship leader let one hundred or so of us know that it would not be a “normal” Sunday worship service. They were celebrating their pastor’s birthday and so it was a retrospective reflection on his ministry. He had been the youth pastor in the Spanish speaking congregation which had just left the building and had planted the English worship service with the blessing of the older congregation. A drama featuring his pre-adolescent son portrayed the pastor’s life. The remarkable stories of faith of



of his refugee family complemented the vibrant and celebratory worship, including dancing at the front of the sanctuary, in a blend of contemporary Spanish and English songs. The collection of stories painted the picture of a largely first-generation immigrant congregation which had transitioned to the second-generation by fully supporting the launch of the English worship service as a separate group but maintaining relationships.



These are not only accounts of a dozen congregations finding meeting space in a city, they are also stories of the Christian faith being expressed in many different ways within overlapping urban spaces. Canadian communities have become very culturally diverse and new expressions of church are engaging those identities. There are examples here of churches ministering primarily to the needs of recent immigrants and the transition from the first generation to the second generation. For multigenerational Canadians there were several variations on Christian spirituality: evangelical (one was historically mainline protestant), charismatic (one with early Christian spiritual practices), and ecologically aware. Worship and an experience of the faith community was shaped for current engagement with Canadian society. As we journey through different phases in the worship service with the new congregations, specific applications of faith and culture will be highlighted.

## Welcome

All of these worship services were held in spaces accessible to the general public such as a: church building, community centre, hotel conference room, music venue, park, or office building. They were advertised online and/or had a sign outside letting people know where they were meeting. In some cases, the sign was a permanent fixture at a church building, sometimes it was a banner or sandwich board set out only at the time of worship. A couple of the congregations had people posted outside of the buildings to offer directions, but it was uncommon. Within the buildings, some had official “greeters” while some congregations seemed to assume that either the pastor or someone in the congregation would recognize that visitors had arrived and respond appropriately.

Location	Number of New Congregations	Municipalities
Apartment building	1	Waterloo
Christian school	3	Cambridge, Township
Community centre	3	Cambridge, Kitchener
Established church's building	7	Cambridge, Kitchener, Township
Former church building	1	Township
Former (renovated) factory	3	Cambridge, Kitchener
Hotel	2	Kitchener
Office (Christian, not-for-profit) building	1	Kitchener
Municipal park	2	Waterloo
Music venue	1	Waterloo
New congregation's (old) building[xvi]	5	Kitchener
Store front	1	Kitchener

Figure 4: Locations of New Congregations (10 Years Old or Less)



### ***A Tale of Two Congregations***

There was variation in how visitors were welcomed. One Sunday afternoon my wife and I visited two worship services. The first was a decade old church meeting in a longer established church's building. We slipped into one of the back pews of the worship service and experienced the lively, excellent musicianship in worship (a guitarist and a singer) and passionate preaching; but no one except the co-pastor, strategically positioned at the snack table, acknowledged our presence. Nevertheless, we had a lovely chat in the lobby after the service.

The second church plant had not yet launched a weekly worship service, they had just started monthly worship services earlier in the year in a former church building that was in process of being developed as community space. My wife and I chatted with folks in their tiny kitchen and sat down to a meal with a dozen other people. This allowed us to learn some of their life stories leading up to their involvement in this new congregation.

These two church plants were at very different stages of development. The first was about a decade old and had set patterns and "regulars." The second was just in the initial process of incorporating people into their congregational life and were eager to make connections and get to know deeply the people who were visiting. While one visit is not sufficient to make extensive judgements, there are sometimes patterns in the ebb and flow of congregational life which are affected by its stage of development. New congregations in the process of forming their nascent community are generally eager to welcome people into what they are doing.

### **Worship**

Worship is facilitated by more than the words of its songs, prayers, and devotional reflections. As evident from the different locations and ambience already described, there were influences beyond the order of service. Despite being new, a few of the new congregations obviously had pre-existing history and broader organizational connections which affected their worship. A series of vignettes from specific visits may help illustrate.

### ***A Tale of Two Merged Congregations***

A worship service tucked into the backroom of an uptown apartment building with the entrance off the back parking lot presented a lively worship service. There were about 40 folding chairs and several armchairs in a space that was decorated similarly to a family living room. After a contemporary English worship set for the multicultural congregation, the speaker that morning was introduced as a leader from the Mississauga site. I later learned that this new church had merged once with another young church and then requested satellite status with a hub church in the Greater Toronto Area. There was enthusiasm for the vision provided by the hub congregation and a sense of shared energy from being part of a larger movement.

In a different instance, upon entering one of the established church buildings, it became very apparent that a merger had shaped the congregation. A very multicultural church plant of young families began renting from an "older" congregation, that was both longer established and attended by a majority of seniors, during the pandemic. As they shared space, they entered

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into conversation about their future. Together they decided to form one new church. This was explained by one of the seniors sitting in front of me who was genuinely pleased with both the younger generations joining them and the global influences on worship. I noticed the very skilled guitarist leading worship was wearing clothing from south Asia and a young family sitting across the aisle from me were wearing African styled tunics. While it can be challenging for churches to merge, the fusion of different ages and different cultures contributed to celebratory worship.

### ***A Tale of Two Missionary Congregations***

I walked up a staircase nestled between two store fronts in a strip mall. Online it had appeared that there was a new church in Kitchener, but I learned that I had misunderstood the designation. Apparently, it was the Cambridge branch that had started earlier in the year. However, as it was the 33rd anniversary of their church planting movement in eastern Canada, I learned a great deal about new churches their network had sponsored. They were celebrating the 37 new congregations from Ontario to Newfoundland that been started during those 33 years. I later learned from the website they had had initiated 77 churches across Canada. This international movement started in the Philippines and mobilized newcomers to Canada as missionaries with the capacity to launch churches. During the anniversary service, which was presented on screen from a location in the Toronto area, I experienced more varied expressions of the creative arts in one worship service than I had in fifty years of attending worship. A young adult offered a spoken word presentation that was reflected in the creative movement of the dancers/actors on stage. There were teams of dancers during the singing, some with flags, and interpretive movement depicting the story from the song. Painters were offering their gifts as acts of worship depicting the different regions where local churches were located. At key points,

local dancers and singers in the upper room where I was sitting joined in the worship taking place on screen. A couple of weeks later, I attended the church plant in Cambridge started earlier in the year – not nearly as much media presentation as the anniversary service but they were obviously intentionally developing their media and music. Their worship was a blend of Tagalog and English with simultaneous translation offered by the guest preacher. Off to the side of the community centre gym one of their banners stated the vision: “...evangelizing and discipling Filipinos and all peoples of the world.”

**“While it can be challenging for churches to merge, the fusion of different ages and different cultures contributed to celebratory worship.”**

At a long-established church building in Cambridge, I visited a new but historically familiar congregation. In 2005, our Church Planting Canada team invited a Ghanaian missionary to Canada to speak at our mosaic themed Toronto congress. He described connecting with recent immigrants who were looking for relationships and who were responsive to the gospel message. Fast forward to 2024 and this Cambridge church plant from their movement was conducting their annual celebration of the many nations present in their midst. There was a short Bible reflection and then each of the countries of origin were celebrated with a walk to the front of the sanctuary, their flag was displayed, music was played representing a style of their nation, and they had an opportunity to describe something important about their home country. The joy was palpable. Jamaica and Nigeria were the most represented countries that morning and they



danced down the centre aisle. The Ghanaian-Canadian pastor joked that “Nigerians can survive and thrive anywhere [there was a cheer]. If you ever find yourself in a place where there are no Nigerians - leave” [there was laughter]. Italy was represented by a nice suit (“Fashion is part of my culture”) and the “good ole’ US of A” was dressed in T-shirt and blue jeans. They explained that there were 19 countries represented in their congregation of about 70 people that morning. I was noticed as a visitor by the pastor, and he asked, “Where are you from?” That is not an easy question for me to answer but I stumbled through explaining that my grandad was from Ireland, and everyone cheered “Ireland!” When my wife was asked where she was from, she said she had ancestors from England, Wales, and France and there was a short pause ... “England!” After the worship service a potluck meal celebrated the different cuisines.

These are two examples of missionary movements which are contributing to Christian faith in Canada. One follows diaspora patterns of migration and mobilizing people from a shared Christian and national, cultural tradition. The other movement incorporates people from many different cultures into a new shared expression of Christian faith. Both recognize the current moment for Canada as a global crossroads. While their vision is to start local congregations, because they are part of a global movement, they are actively trying to learn how to disciple people who can start new congregations anywhere.

**“Both recognize the current moment for Canada as a global crossroads.”**





## Teaching, Sermon, or Message

Many of the congregations used a screen for simple visuals such as: Scripture references, key words, and some photos. As will be no surprise given the widespread adoption of technology during the pandemic, most of the new churches had cameras, and their worship service or sermon could be found online. While the pandemic was challenging for all churches, especially church plants, many of us learned new tech skills. One of the downtown churches had multiple cameras running during worship and a large screen with videocall accounts open. I assumed that it allowed other, possibly international, congregants to participate. Beyond the adoption of technology as a form of cultural adaptation in digital society, the styles of the speaking and the emphases on congregational life together demonstrated different approaches to the task of preaching.

### ***Talk the Walk: Different Styles of Sermons Reflecting Different Spiritualities and Cultures***

In one of the earlier mentioned downtown church plants, the pastor started the sermon with, "Church, I have a confession to make..." I emotionally prepared myself for a disclosure of impropriety, but what was said next surprised me. The pastor explained that when he planted the church six years prior, he had been very traditionally "Pentecostal" but had been exploring ancient Christian spirituality – leaders and writers in the first 500 years following Jesus' death and resurrection. A sermon series on the early church creeds had been an invitation for congregants to explore those resources for shaping faith.

The sermon that morning explored the historical roots of some ancient Christian spiritual practices. The pastor was opening his spiritual journey to conversation with the congregation and anticipated a journey together.

A church plant with historical roots in the reformation meeting the next week focused on exegetical biblical interpretation. As the preacher acknowledged that the initial fifteen minutes of the sermon had only covered the first PowerPoint slide, he made a joke. He claimed to know that many people had a roast in the oven, and they needed the preacher to "land the plane" soon, BUT if they had been charismatics and not Presbyterians, they could have expected a one-hour sermon. I had to stifle my laugh because the sermon on ancient spirituality at the charismatic church had been close to an hour.

A Hispanic church that had developed a multicultural worship service, including bilingual greetings, Scripture readings, and worship songs, carried their integrated approach forward into the sermon. They used a translation service so the congregants who wanted to hear the sermon in Spanish could listen via their smart phones. In the packed room of almost 200 people there was obviously a mix of different backgrounds. The pastor engaged the congregation in the sermon through questions requesting responses and much humour. He asked "what is the word for..." in English and they would provide the word he was looking for – it was part of the ongoing banter between preacher and congregation.

Not all the congregations expected verbal responses during the sermon. Some expected that congregants would take notes. A few of the worship services offered paper handouts: some were song lists, some were announcements, and some were fill-in-the-blank worksheets. A few of the new churches even provided a takeaway bag that not only included snack, pop or water, information brochures, but also a notebook.



## Fellowship

Many of the worship services had some gathering time after the worship service. Sometimes it was simply people chatting with each other in a hallway, but a few made food an essential part of their worship experience. A few were marking important celebrations and so arranged for a full meal “pot luck” style with different contributions from different families. A number arranged snacks, which encouraged people to stay and chat with each other. This element of the worship service, eating together, deserves further attention. There were certainly more opportunities to get to know people personally when we were eating together.

### ***A Tale of Two “Working” Congregations***

Two of the church plants I visited asked for “first time” visitors to stay after the service. In one instance, I had been in the hall area outside of the meeting room after worship, grabbing a coffee, and was invited back in to hear from the pastor. She explained to all of us that she and her husband knew what it was like to immigrate to Canada and offered to support people in their settlement journey. She mentioned that she had a side-gig as a business owner, that her family had also gone the same path to become established in Canada. She suggested they had connections in the tech industry or could at least explain options for ramping into careers (such as project management) that could help people become established.

In the other instance, my wife and I were invited to a side room where coffee, tea, and baked goods were available while the rest of the congregation went downstairs for the “pot luck” lunch. We were introduced to two people on the team that assisted people with becoming part of their church and a young man who was apprenticing to go with the future church planter to a neighbouring city. They shared the vision of their church planting movement and invited us to take on a role (greeting, media team, and

other options). My wife and I left the room impressed with their boldness and the clarity of their invitation. We realized that there are faithful Christians who might be put off by an invitation to volunteer on their first Sunday visiting a church, but this church planting movement is actively looking for people who are ready for such an adventure.

**“She and her husband knew what it was like to immigrate to Canada and offered to support people in their settlement journey.”**

### ***When the Music Fades***

I was present when two different congregations announced that they were ending their worship services. The first experience was in the side room of a large established church where seven of us were gathered for worship. The sermon had been delivered by Zoom videoconference while the pastor was travelling overseas. He shared with the group that in the future they would join the host church for worship but would continue with their 5:00 am weekday prayer meetings.

The second experience, as soon as my wife and I entered the sanctuary the pastor identified us as visitors, greeted us warmly, and said that it would NOT be a normal service. After leading us in worship with his guitar and offering a sermon on “seasons” (Ecclesiastes 3), the pastor asked if the congregants had read “the email.” He went on to explain that week the host church, which uses a language other than English, made a budget decision to close the English service. The English pastor’s salary was the largest expense so with the financial concerns driving the decision, the leadership of the three-year-old



congregation was dismissed. The pastor of the host congregation was present and prayed a prayer of thanks for the three years of ministry. It was a subdued moment, but the atmosphere was not completely tragic. Both pastors offered hope for the future and there was obvious care for each other.

In both cases I felt for the leaders and their fledgling congregations. After years of coaching church planters, I learned to talk about the experience of starting a new congregation being like a roller coaster ride. Painfully long, slow times of climbing uphill. Nerve-wracking moments where it may feel like we are out-of-control and are rushing into an uncertain future. The twists and turns that can affect any congregation are felt dramatically when the new congregation is in the early stages of trying new things and learning how together they can develop sustainable ministry.

### ***Change and New Congregations***

It may be possible that the lack of stability (or, framed more positively, adaptability) of new congregations allows them to contribute faith constructively to social contexts of diversity and change. The ability to respond rapidly to opportunities or needs enables a congregation to demonstrate love to people experiencing transitions in life. There are inherent risks; it is possible that dreams which were the focus of heartfelt prayers will not be realized in the ways they were imagined. Still, there is the possibility of learning new lessons and striking out in new directions that respond to changes in the community.

“I learned to talk about the experience of starting a new congregation being like a roller coaster ride.”





One of the additional research projects I conducted as a CIECR Research Fellow was interviews with leaders in 25 denominational organizations which had intentional plans for starting new congregations in Canada. One of the themes that emerged was that starting new churches enabled adaptation to community realities quickly whereas established churches may take longer to make necessary changes.

**“So, I think that was a big motivator and a big reason was to provide a space for the, the leaders that are in the margins that don't feel like they quite fit in the traditional place, and it gave them a, yeah, give them an opportunity to try something different, a different expression (Interview with Jae).”[xvii]**

**“I think there's a recognition, honestly, that if you're not starting new things that are culturally relevant - new congregations... it's so difficult to shift that church of 40 (that family church). Almost impossible (Interview with Kevin).”**

## **Mosaic to Kaleidoscope**

For decades, Canada has been described as a cultural mosaic.[xviii] The basic idea was that each person (or group) contributing to the image of Canada had an opportunity to offer their unique cultural identity to the beautiful pattern. In some ways this vision has been fulfilled as cultural diversity has increased with federal policies focused on multiculturalism and sustained immigration from a wide variety of global regions. Cultural festivals can be found in both urban and rural communities celebrating different traditions and food. Canadian institutions have attempted to update their images to correspond to the mosaic of their respective constituencies.

This image of the mosaic does have its weak points. One of the concerns is that it invokes a static image; colourful ceramics cemented into a pattern with grout permanently separating each of the pieces. Waves of immigration, the generational transition of cultural change within immigrant groups, Indigenous efforts at relationship building and culture sharing (truth and reconciliation process as one example), and various expressions of societal change have created a highly dynamic social environment for many communities. Change is unquestioned, it is the rate of change that is worthy of notice.

One of the possible improvements of the metaphor of the mosaic is the image of a kaleidoscope. I remember visiting my cousins' house as a child and playing with a decorated cardboard tube with one transparent end and one translucent end containing colourful pieces of plastic and mirrors. By pointing the tube towards a light source and turning it, vibrant patterns of colour emerged. The beauty of this simple toy was the ever-changing patterns as colours overlapped, merged, and diverged as it was turned. The kaleidoscope image of shifting and merging fragments is a more realistic depiction of cultural change and hybridity.[xix]



These shifts in cultural identity were evident among the new congregations I visited. Immigrant churches have always been part of the fabric of Canadian national life. The way cultural preferences and language use are resocialized in their new nation state affects the local church. As indicated in Figure 5, in the cities of Waterloo Region about half the population are either first- or second-generation immigrants. Kaleidoscopic change is in effect across those generations. Canadian diaspora missiologists have noted the importance of the hybrid experience of individuals who have cultural identities of more than one cultural or linguistic group.[xx] The ability to understand more than one culture is advantageous in a multicultural society, even though there may be tensions to navigate.

### Appreciating Churches and Cultures

One of the reoccurring themes among the new congregations was the interplay between faith and culture. All the churches were unique in some way, even though they all shared the same gospel and offered teaching from the same Bible. As one last tale of two congregations to illustrate differences in cultural engagement, there were two church plants which focused on the college located on the border of Kitchener and Cambridge: one started pre-pandemic and one post.

The “older” congregation had a very multicultural selection of students joining them for worship while the younger congregation, a plant from one of the Kitchener downtown church plants, very intentionally created a sense of community for African international students. Meeting the needs of a very specific group (monocultural) or offering an opportunity for worship among a segment of the community that is culturally diverse (multicultural) are directions a new church can pursue. As was the case for the church plant designed for African international students, sometimes this direction can be identified in advance of starting a worship service. At other times this emerges as the new church interacts with the surrounding community, which was the story told by the more diverse church plant. There are obviously future ministry implications for both situations; integration with the broader community will likely become a greater consideration as the college students graduate.

Our assumptions about the terms “multicultural” and “cultural diversity” themselves need attention. At one level a church may appear to be homogenous but with further opportunities to hear from the lived experience of the congregants, their cultural diversities become more evident.

	2016			2021		
	Number	%	Median Age	Number	%	Median Age
Total Population in Private Households	516,085	100	38	568,065	100	37.6
First Generation (Born Abroad)	130,375	25.3	47.6	173,740	30.6	43.2
Second Generation (Born in Canada with at Least One Parent Born Abroad)	108,125	21	30	119,150	21	28.6
Third Generation or More (Born in Canada with Both Parents Born in Canada)	277,585	53.8	35.6	275,175	48.4	37.2

Figure 5: Population by Generation Status and Median Age (Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo)[xxi]



As an example, African international students could represent many countries of origin and languages but even if they were all from only one country (such as Nigeria), depending on their home regions they could come from different religious backgrounds, languages, and cultural traditions. It is helpful to think of congregations as being multicultural relative to their neighbours, but to also recognize that some cultural aspects of worship are more accessible to certain people. Whether an individual congregation should be considered multicultural or as one of the cultural institutions within a multicultural municipality needs to be discerned carefully.

## Faithfulness in the Kaleidoscope

When we review two millennia of church history, it is not difficult to find dramatically different expressions of congregational life and Christian spirituality. The microcosm of this study, 30 congregations from the past decade in one region, demonstrates a fraction of the creativity of expressions of congregational life offering the way of Jesus to neighbours amid cultural diversity and change. The same question exists now as it did throughout history – how are we faithful and loving? [xxii] There are ways of discerning constructive change that increases the health of congregations and their contributions to society, but as the Emeritus Director of NAIITS Terry LeBlanc suggests, this requires intentionality.[xxiii] It seems unlikely that the rate of change will slow, so new congregations are one of the ways in which “the church” in Canada can be relevant while remaining faithful.

The examples in this report, of followers of Jesus offering their best interpretation of Christian life in the shifting cultural kaleidoscope, point to some of our collective capacity. Being a visitor to so many different kinds of churches all in the same region, gave me a great deal of hope for the future. The different forms of worship offer opportunities for different kinds of people to enter into discipleship and experience Christian community.

My experience of visiting the new congregations inspired thankfulness and expectation. I was very thankful for the varying expressions of worship and how that was providing faithful community for many different people. If it seemed appropriate while I was visiting, I would share my research project with them and often they shared stories about how their church came into being. It was amazing to hear how God guided them. While social science methodologies often focus on the human part of our experience, this divine thread is worth following. The ability of the Holy Spirit to call, guide, and form new churches across cultural diversities offers hope for the future of the church.

## What Next?

Check back with the Institute for more research and resources on congregations in Canada, as we continue to deepen our understanding of church life and its role in shaping Canadian society.





## Endnotes

- [i] Thanks to Rick Hiemstra and Scott Mealey for feedback on drafts of this report.
- [ii] Mark Chapman and James W. Watson, "Common Actions: Participatory Action Research as a Practice for Promoting Positive Social Action among and between New Canadian Church Planters and Denominational Leaders," *Ecclesial Practices* 4 (2017): 63–86, <https://doi.org/doi/10.1163/22144471-00401003>; James W. Watson, "Multivocational Ministry in Multicultural Canada," in *Beyond Multiculturalism: Intentional Intercultural Congregations as an Expression of the Kingdom* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2024), 81–88.
- [iii] Thanks to Brian Baxter, Glenn Gibson, Frédéric Dejean, and Walter Bryce "Duke" Vipperman for sharing techniques on "street level" research of congregations.
- [iv] I have been an associate of the national, interdenominational network Church Planting Canada since 2003. For the past two decades I have offered church plant coaching/training, revitalization consultations, and research – for the first 5 years with Outreach Canada and then for 15 years with The Salvation Army Canada and Bermuda.
- [v] Statistics Canada Government of Canada, "The Daily — Canada's Population Estimates: Subprovincial Areas, July 1, 2023," May 22, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240522/dq240522b-eng.htm>.
- [vi] Arianne Folkema, Dan Vandebelt, and Monica Vythilingam, "Waterloo Region Immigration Profile" (Region of Waterloo Public Health and Paramedic Services, 2024).
- [vii] Arianne Folkema, Dan Vandebelt, and Monica Vythilingam, "Waterloo Region Immigration Profile" (Region of Waterloo Public Health and Paramedic Services, 2024).
- [viii] Ashley K. Hagaman and Amber Wutich, "How Many Interviews Are Enough to Identify Metathemes in Multisited and Cross-Cultural Research? Another Perspective on Guest, Bunce, and Johnson's (2006) Landmark Study," *Field Methods* 29, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 23–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X16640447>.
- [ix] For the three largest cities (Kitchener, Cambridge, and Waterloo) there were 23 Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) registrations which could be confirmed as having active online presence and appeared to have started since 2014. Many of the recently started congregations which could be confirmed as having current online activity (and some which received site visits) did not yet have CRA registration (or were sponsored by other churches or denominational offices). Some of those did not appear to offer translation into English (or French), so some immigrant congregations using other languages were noted without making a visit in person.
- [x] Note that in the CRA listing the charities are self-reporting as "churches." While the data has been cleaned to limit the number of other charities inaccurately included as churches, the theological positions of the churches are not assessed which means there are a range of theological positions, including non-trinitarian traditions, among the CRA listing of congregations. Thanks to the Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research team for access to the data: Stephen Hewko, Scott Mealey, Zev Minuskin, and Caitlin Nystrom.
- [xi] The research ethics for public meetings do not require consent or confidentiality as they are public however, out of respect for the individuals (and congregations) involved, immediately identifiable characteristics (such as names or exact locations) have been left out of this report.
- [xii] Note that this study focuses on new congregations which have a collective, in person worship gathering while not all microchurches/house churches meet in that format and some digital churches may not have regular in person meetings.
- [xiii] There is no standardized language for new congregations, "church planting" is a more common term among non-Catholic or non-Orthodox traditions however different traditions have specialized terminology.
- [xiv] One of the congregations provided a phone number on their website to request further information as their regular meeting place was undergoing renovations and they were meeting in a home.
- [xv] Wycliffe College, Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Growth, "Congregations in Canada – Beta," November 27, 2023.
- [xvi] The new congregation had possession of the building either through direct ownership or their denominational organization was the legal owner.
- [xvii] Interviewees were offered anonymous pseudonyms.
- [xviii] John Murray Gibbon, *Canadian Mosaic: The Making of a Northern Nation* (Dodd, Mead, 1939); Ninette Kelley and M. Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (University of Toronto Press, 2010).
- [xix] This image maintains some differentiation from the "melting pot" model of cultural assimilation where everyone takes on the same nationalistic flavour in that parts of the colour fragments of the kaleidoscope can maintain their distinctiveness.
- [xx] Sadiri Joy Tira and Juliet Lee Uytanlet, *A Hybrid World: Diaspora, Hybridity, and Missio Dei* (William Carey Publishing, 2020).
- [xxi] Statistics Canada Government of Canada, "Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census - Kitchener - Cambridge - Waterloo (Census Metropolitan Area)," July 13, 2022, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/page.cfm?lang=E&topic=9&dguid=2021S0503541>.
- [xxii] Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-28.
- [xxiii] Terry LeBlanc, "Culture, Faith and Mission: Creating the Future," *NAITS* 1, no. 1 (2003): 149–66.



# About This Study

"New Congregations in the Canadian Kaleidoscope" examines new congregations in the Waterloo region through an autoethnographic study of thirty distinct churches. This project is part of the broader "Birth Plan" project, which explores the dynamics of church planting across Canada, offering valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, and opportunities faced by new worship communities as they establish themselves in diverse and evolving contexts. This project was funded by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment.

## Methodology

Thirty worship services of congregations which started within one Canadian geographic region in the past decade were visited to offer comparative public event analysis as an ecclesial geographical assay. An autoethnographic approach combined the researcher's personal experience with the field research and was supplemented by additional data (literature review, Canada Revenue Agency charitable data, and key informant interviews with denominational organization leaders) to triangulate the data collection and analysis. This report and project is part of the larger Divine Pulse Project which has been approved by the of the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board #46369.

**About the  
Canadian Institute  
for Empirical  
Church Research**

The Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research, an initiative of Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto, is committed to supporting those who serve in and research the Canadian Church through data-informed research, tools, encounters, and insights.