

Does your church know its neighbors?



A Community Opportunity Scan will help a church *experience* God at work in the community and *discover* how it might join Him.



Transforming Communities in Christ
Diaconal Ministries Canada

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* Related materials available at www.diaconalministries.com
see Community Ministry/ Community Opportunity Scan

Introduction

“... [W]hile he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him, he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”
Luke 15:20 (NIV)

At the centre of the story of the prodigal son, is the rejected father who never stops watching and waiting – longing – for his son’s return. He is constantly distracted, always hoping and never lacking in compassion. When he sees his son in the distant he doesn’t hold his ground in a dignified, self-righteous stance; instead, we can imagine him running with arms waving, eyes fixed ahead and never stopping until he has his son securely in his embrace!

Today, that same Father is still waiting and watching. His command to us to *love your neighbor as yourself* means that we too are partners with him in searching for and enfolding those in need of mercy, compassion and a new relationship with God.

Loving our neighbors will look different in different churches and at different times in the unfolding story of each church. How is your church involved in loving its neighbors? Perhaps there is a restlessness or dissatisfaction with the way things are now. People within the church are asking “How can we become more involved in the lives of people in our neighborhood?” “How do we respond to the needs that we know exist in our community?”

A church that is ready to see its relationship with its neighbors in a new way will find that a Community Opportunity Scan (COS) opens doors to exciting possibilities. A Community Opportunity Scan is a process of discovery. It will not only identify needs, it will also affirm the unique gifts and assets in the community and in the church.

This document describes key elements of the COS process. It is like a list of key ingredients you would use in a recipe. How you mix them together and how much of each you use will depend on the unique features of your church and your community. More than twenty Christian Reformed Churches across Canada have undertaken a Community Opportunity Scan. The resources available from Diaconal Ministries Canada have been used by established churches, church plants; rural congregations and urban churches. They are eager to share their stories of the COS process with others.

In addition to the descriptions in this document, Diaconal Ministries Canada (DMC) staff are available to support, and provide resources to, churches conducting a COS. You will find useful tools, templates, sample reports and contact information on DMC’s website www.diaconalministries.com, under Community Ministry/ Community Opportunity Scan.

May the joy and blessing of the Father accompany you and your church along the journey!

1. How will a COS help your church know and love your neighbors?

The church will SEE and HEAR what God is already doing in the community: Listening is hard work! Praying for discernment coupled with disciplined listening to people's stories is one way God can reveal to you what He is already doing in a community.

It will help a church UNDERSTAND its community: Demographics can help you understand your community better, but talking to people who have lived in a community longer than you, especially community leaders who are working with the people groups or neighborhoods that you are hoping to reach can help make demographics come 'alive.'

It will REVEAL ministry opportunities: Demographics can help reveal needs that can be addressed; however, looking for opportunities means:

- a. Learning from and working with others who are already seeking to serve the community; and,
- b. Looking at people not as objects to 'reach' but as local partners.

It will CHALLENGE a church to become involved with its neighbors: Churches that listen and show by their actions that they truly want to help make our cities more loving, more grace-filled and more just places gain the healthy respect of the city and bring honor to Jesus' name.

It will DEEPEN a church's love for people who do not yet know Jesus: Conducting a Community Opportunity Scan provides numerous opportunities for those involved to understand and experience what is happening in the community and in the process 'see the harvest' that God has in mind for the church.

2. The Difference Between Needs and Opportunities

by Pastor Adrian VanGiessen

It's natural when seeking to connect with a community of people to focus on their needs. While somewhat useful, this approach is limited. When we focus on a person's needs we focus on finding out where they are struggling and then finding ways to support them in their struggle. From this perspective, getting to know a community means finding out what the most significant needs are in that community and then trying to respond to them. At some level that can be okay; however, it misses two very important elements that if they are not acted on will potentially sour the relationship and stifle other opportunities to learn and grow.

Other's Gifts: People have been created by God, each with their own talents. A genuine relationship with a person involves getting to know their strengths and talents. A person is known by the talents they have, not the needs they may express. If they are ever going to make changes in their lives it will come in part because someone has affirmed and built on those talents.

The same principle applies to our neighborhoods and the communities in which we live. If we focus only on the “needs” of a community we naturally focus on its deficits and miss out on the assets that are already there. To use the symbol of a glass of water, if we only focus on the needs then we will see the part of the glass that is empty rather than the part that is full. It is very important that we see both. One important way to see how ‘full’ the glass is, while not ignoring the ‘empty’ part of the glass, is to conduct a thorough scan of both. It is important for a church to become aware of the vast range of services and activities that are going on in the community. We would do well to appreciate how the community and other agencies have responded as best they could. At the same time, God can use this process to show us gaps and opportunities that he might be calling you as a church to address.

Your Gifts: The other reality is that we have “needs” too. We don’t need to “bury” those when we are developing healthy relationships with our community. The reality is that we are forgiven sinners, whom Christ is working to renew each day, sometimes in spite of our best efforts to resist him. Beginning a new work in the community with this kind of humble transparency is not only healthy, but will go a long way to building authentic bridges that have the potential to build relationships that are two way in direction.

We also have gifts and talents as people and churches. No church has unlimited gifts. It is important for us to know who we are and what our spiritual assets are. We can then steward those gifts with the community God has placed us in. Knowing those gifts are an important step in identifying the kind of focused ministry God might be calling you to.

3. Is your church ready to undertake a COS?

(Related materials available at www.diaconalministries.com see Community Ministry/ Community Opportunity Scan)

One of the key determinants of readiness is a healthy dissatisfaction with the status quo. Others might describe it as restlessness. Together there is an eagerness and passion that drives the church to look for different ways of being connected to the local community. That passion needs to be shared by a significant group of people in the church including the pastor, the deacons, a core of church leaders and a significant percentage of the congregation.

There may be a significant change occurring in the local neighborhood. Many churches that were originally built on large open tracts of land are suddenly finding themselves surrounded by new building developments. The demographics of the local neighborhood may be changing dramatically. Churches that are building and/or moving to new facilities may wish to consult the community about possible uses of the building. A COS will reveal some of those possibilities.

A church re-examining its vision and mission is encouraged to listen to voices inside the congregation, as well as those outside of the church. It is important to listen to the needs and opportunities in the community at a time when a church is discerning its own identity and vocation. Christian Reformed Home Missions often plays an important role in facilitating the visioning process, and encourages churches to include a COS in the design of that process.

Undertaking a COS also requires a commitment to act on the findings. If within the church there is very strong resistance to change, an unwillingness to examine the current health of the church, or a reluctance to be involved in the lives of people outside of the church, then these issues need to be addressed before the process begins. A church cannot respond to every opportunity, but it must be willing to respond with the gifts that God has made available.

Diaconal Ministries Canada staff are available to meet with churches wrestling with the issues identified above and the question of “Are we ready?” Various tools (questionnaires, surveys and discussion questions) are available on DMC’s website, and DMC staff can help churches identify appropriate tools and resources.

4. Determining an Appropriate Timeline

The length of time required to complete a COS depends on many different factors, such as: how many people are undertaking the work; the size of the community; the amount of detailed information to be collected; and the method of discerning ministry priorities. The timeline can also be influenced by other processes underway within the church. For example, if the COS is part of a strategic planning or visioning process, then the timeline may be determined by this larger process. The number of people available to assist with information gathering, as well as their availability to conduct interviews with agencies and organizations during the day, significantly affects the length of time required. Once a COS team is in place, familiar with their role and the purpose of the COS, the process can take 4-6 months. In other circumstances the process was concluded in 8-10 months.

5. The Key Components of a COS

The following is a summary of the key components of the COS process. A description of each element is outlined below.

- a) Building a Team
- b) The Importance of Prayer
- c) Defining the Community
- d) Gathering Information
 - Demographic data
 - Community interviews
- e) Involving the Congregation
 - Sharing information
 - Identifying gifts and passions
- f) Discerning Ministry Opportunities
- g) Implementation and Monitoring

a). Building a Team

A Community Opportunity Scan requires some concentrated effort by a group of 5-8 people. It is important to form a team of people to provide leadership and do much of the work involved with this process.

It may be a diaconate that decides a scan should be done. It can also be an outreach committee, a vision committee or even a Council that decides. They are the *sponsoring group*. They are not necessarily the COS team that carries out the work of gathering information. Most existing groups such as the ones mentioned are preoccupied with a much larger agenda. They hope to make use of the results of the scan as part of a larger effort.

Who is on the team?

A COS team usually includes 1-2 people from the sponsoring group, and it should include several other people with a variety of gifts, such as:

- a leader who is good at delegating and motivating;
- one or two people with strong conversational skills for interviews. It is important that they are available for daytime visits;
- some people who have natural connections to the community (for example, a social worker, a retired principal, a real estate agent, a former public health nurse);
- a person with creative vision who can help the team generate ideas in response to the opportunities discovered during the process
- at least one person with significant computer and clerical skills.

What are they committing to do?

People who are part of the team will be asked to:

- attend team meetings;
- undertake pre-reading and preparing for meetings;
- work with a small group to gather information;
- summarizing and sharing their findings.

b. The Importance of Prayer

(Related materials available at www.diaconalministries.com see Community Ministry/ Community Opportunity Scan)

There are many ways to include prayer as a part of this process. The entire process should be bathed in prayer from beginning to end. You can pray alone or as prayer partners. Ask your congregation and the prayer ministry to pray for this process on a regular basis. You can organize a prayer walk. To prayer walk means to actually walk the streets of the area you want to make in-roads into. There are many good resources to help you to do this; however, it is a

very simple task. Walk and pray, but mostly listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to you about the people of your community.

Prayer prepares the hearts of the people in the community. The Holy Spirit will come where invited and you can invite Him to come and begin preparing people that you want to reach. God will open doors for conversations to take place. Prayer is also important as you decide which agencies, churches, and leaders to interview and as you listen for God's leading through the interviewing process.

Prayer changes *your* heart. As you begin to pray for the people in your neighborhood or community, the Holy Spirit will soften your hearts for them too. This is perhaps the most important reason to pray before, during and after the Community Scan. God desires our hearts to be broken for people who do not have a relationship with him. We need to see people with His eyes, not our own.

c. Defining the Community

To begin a Community Opportunity Scan it is important to define your community. The word community often refers to a geographic area. That might be the neighborhood where the church is located, or the larger geographic area that includes all the church's members. The authors of "Becoming a Church that Makes a Difference" suggest that there is more than one way to define a church's *community of ministry*.

Becoming a Church that Makes a Difference: A Guide to the Holistic Ministry Journey
by Heidi Unruh, Ron Sider, Phil Olson

This book includes some useful definitions that can help a church explore different ways of building relationships with people and neighborhoods.

- **Settlers** concentrate on the geographic neighborhood or physical tract where they are located and 'work for the transformation of these neighborhoods from the inside out.'
- **Gardeners** develop ministry ties with other neighborhoods with which they hope to establish ties. For example, a predominately suburban church might 'adopt' a particular inner-city neighborhood.
- **Shepherds** primarily serve one targeted population rather than a specific geographical neighborhood. A church with a commitment to persons with HIV/AIDS, low-income senior citizens, disabled persons, for example, might have a 'community of ministry' spanning an entire region.

Defining your community early on will help you decide which community leaders, agencies, and individuals you will want to interview during the process. As the process unfolds you may discover reasons to redefine or adjust the "boundaries" of our community of ministry.

d. Gathering Information

There are numerous sources of information available about your community – from demographic data to conversations with agency personnel; households, community members, and other church leaders. The amount of time and attention given to each of these sources may vary between churches. For example, a church that wants to make personal connections with the people in their neighborhood may emphasize the individual interviews. Another church may focus more on the agency and community leader interviews in order to identify local gaps in service and possible ministry partners.

Select agencies, churches, and community leaders that fit within your community of ministry and that you think have connections to the groups or people you are interested in discovering information about.

Be sure to share with those you are meeting with the purpose of gathering this information. Be careful not to set unrealistic expectations regarding how the church will or can respond to identified needs. When you have completed the COS process, take the time to share your results with people who have taken the time to meet with you.

Demographic Data

An important part in preparing to conduct a COS is locating and studying accurate demographic materials that can help you understand your community better. Consider comparative data (years, target area) to determine trends. Listed here are a number of sources for helping you locate these demographic materials. While it may be tempting to limit your study to the ‘free’ sources of material, for a relatively small fee you can benefit from purchasing demographic materials tailored to your particular needs and situation. Some of these purchased materials include colorful graphics and some interpretation of the results.

The following questions will be helpful when analyzing the data:

- How representative is our church of the surrounding community?
- In which category is our church most (un)like the community?
- What people, agencies or resources might we need to consult with as we move ahead to minister more effectively to our community?
- Is it on the border of a low (or high) income community?
- Is our community experiencing change?
- What surprises us about the statistics?
- What do they confirm?

(Questions developed by Ted Kruse for *Building Church Leaders*, Christianity Today Int’l., and Outreach Canada.)

Potential Sources of “Free” Data

- Canadian Census materials (available on-line and in print at many local libraries)
- Local Planning Department
- Local Chamber of Commerce
- Local Real Estate Board
- Local Social Development Council and Agencies
- Local Universities

Potential Sources of Commercial Resources

- Outreach Canada: <http://www.outreach.ca/> (Resources/ Research/ Resources Available/ Demographics) You can view samples of the Community Profiles produced by Outreach Canada on their website. The website also includes an order form. Demographic data are available at a reasonable cost to churches and can be ordered and tailored to meet your needs.
- AMB Research consultant Myrlene Boken will prepare a comparative statistical report based on your specific geographic area (705-456-4133).
- Regional Social Development Councils and Agencies. Some provide resources outlining local agencies, non profit organizations along with a brief summary of their activities and contact information.
- The Community Social Data Strategy (a partnership between the Canadian Council on Social Development and Statistics Canada) makes statistical resources available to community-based organizations cost effectively. You can begin by looking at “poverty by postal code” at <http://www.ccsd.ca/subsites/socialdata/home.html>

Community Interviews

(Related materials available at www.diaconalministries.com see Community Ministry/ Community Opportunity Scan)

Samples of the various types of interviews described in this section are available on DMC’s website. They can be edited to fit your specific style and purpose.

Also available on the website are sample charts that may be helpful when compiling and summarizing your findings.

i). Interviews with Community Agencies

Contact several agencies in order to identify the services they provide and their perceptions of community needs in the selected area. Look over a list of agencies in the community, and select a maximum of ten to twelve organizations. It is best to go in pairs, a note-taker and a leader.

Call agencies ahead of time to make an appointment. Most interviews can be done in an hour or less. Try to get an appointment to see the director and/or the program supervisor. You may consider mailing a copy of the questions to the person you will be meeting with prior to your visit.

Doing the interviews should be as relaxed as possible. Remember you are getting to know each other. Take some time to let the agency tell its story. A tour of the facility is helpful.

ii). Interviews with Individuals

First CRC, Calgary, developed a survey that they distributed to households in their neighborhood. A copy of their survey is available on the DMC website. The Calgary survey was distributed to nearby households by 30-40 church volunteers one Saturday morning. The surveys were either collected an hour later in people's mailboxes, or mailed-in, or completed on-line. The personal contact made during distribution of the survey significantly impacted the response rate. Several other churches have tried replicating the Calgary survey by mailing it to residents or dropping it off in mailboxes. Consistently where there has been no personal contact during distribution of the survey, the response rate has been close to zero. The COS process is about building relationships so each step of the process must involve meeting the people you are interested in hearing from.

Where it is difficult to reach people in their homes, for example people living in apartment buildings, consider other gathering points (malls, recreation facilities, parks) where you can make contact with individuals.

iii). Interviews with Community Leaders

Community leaders (such as, politicians, city officials, school principals, police officers, service club members) can provide information about services that presently exist in the community, possible gaps in service or unmet needs, plans for new developments and initiatives, and particular challenges that may be faced in your community of ministry.

iv). Interviews with other Churches

This is an opportunity for you to introduce your church to neighboring churches, and collect information about their programs and activities. It will be useful to avoid duplication and identify possible areas of collaboration and/or partnership.

v). Interviews with Businesses

Local businesses – from the corner store to the florist shop - are interested in the health of the neighborhoods where they are located. Well-established businesses may be able to share information about how the neighborhood has changed over time. Some may be willing to consider new opportunities to contribute to the welfare of the community.

e. Involving the Congregation

(Related materials available at www.diaconalministries.com see Community Ministry/ Community Opportunity Scan)

Sharing Information

While the COS is underway, the team should take the time to share what it is learning about the community with church leaders and the congregation. Sharing this information will increase ownership and appreciation of the process. The congregation's interest will also encourage the COS team. Brief "did you know?" announcements in the church newsletter, graphs from the demographic reports displayed on a church bulletin board, and specific prayer requests from time to time will ensure the congregation remains informed and connected to the process.

Identifying Gifts and Passions

Gathering information from the community will provide an overwhelming number of opportunities for every church. No church is able to respond to every opportunity; therefore, an important step in the COS process is examining the unique gifts and passions of your congregation. What is God calling *your* congregation to do at this time?

The deacons may have recently conducted a "gifts inventory", or church members participated in "discover your gifts" seminars. This information would be helpful in identifying the unique identity of your congregation. The DMC website also contains sample congregational surveys that can be tailored to specific opportunities revealed during the community interview phase.

The COS team and church leadership may consider sharing the findings of the process with the congregation before forming any conclusions or recommendations. Members are encouraged to share how God is leading them to respond. When the COS is part of a larger visioning process, it may be during a congregational retreat that everyone has an opportunity to identify possible responses to the information collected.

f. Discerning Ministry Opportunities

(Related materials available at www.diaconalministries.com see Community Ministry/ Community Opportunity Scan)

As you identify ministry opportunities, keep in mind various ministry approaches that may be developed over a period of time. The information you gather will provide opportunities to:

- **Create awareness** about people and situations in your community that the church may have previously been unaware of. In the short term it may be appropriate for the church to concentrate on better understanding and exploring appropriate ways of responding to your local reality.

- **Highlight service opportunities** for individual members who are searching for ways to become personally involved in the community, as well as organized groups within the church.
- **Identify ministry partners** in order to enhance scarce resources, and avoid a duplication of services.
- **Evaluate existing programs** with new insight into how potential participants may find current programming inaccessible, or an obstacle to sustainable change.
- **Begin new ministries** where needed services and opportunities for building relationships exist.

Identifying ministry opportunities involves reviewing and evaluating the possibilities recorded during the information gathering phase. From these many possibilities it is necessary to discern the short term and longer term priorities for your church. Consider inviting Diaconal Ministries Canada staff to help facilitate this section of the process.

A simple process of identifying priority opportunities may include:

1. Review the possibilities recorded in the summary charts (demographics, community interviews, church visits, etc). Group possibilities into themes where possible. List a maximum of 10-15 possibilities on a flipchart.
2. Ask each person to:
 - a. Write on a piece of paper three opportunities from the list that they think your church could start within a year.
 - b. Put an asterisk in front of two opportunities they think are most important for your church to consider in light of its gifts, resources and strengths.
 - c. Identify the one ministry they believe will have the greatest impact on the church's efforts to become involved with the community in a new way, and explain why they picked this one.
3. Share and discuss your responses.

g. Implementation and Monitoring

The COS process is not completed until its findings and recommendations lead to measurable changes. It is important that the COS team, and the sponsoring group that gives the team its mandate, have the same understanding of when and how the results of the Community Opportunity Scan will be implemented and monitored. COS team members may be involved in developing new initiatives; or, it may be a new team, or existing program leaders, who are tasked with translating ministry possibilities into specific activity goals with timelines, accountable individuals and expected outcomes. The sponsoring group may also consider developing a budget that will be available for new initiatives at the end of process.

The information gathered by the COS team should be updated from time to time, and referred to when considering new ministry initiatives.

A Final Word of Caution

The richness of the COS experience can be quickly extinguished if it is simply becomes an information gathering exercise. It can be further repressed by personal or corporate agendas that limit the scope and potential of opportunities. The team can cut itself off from new discoveries and challenges if it limits its conversations to people and agencies that they already know. Similarly, it is possible to become so buried in information that the team loses sight of its purpose.

Conducting a Community Opportunity Scan is not a difficult task, but it requires focus, commitment and perseverance. God is waiting to bless and delight those who seek to discover ..., who seek to see and hear ..., who seek to be amazed by... the height and depth, width and breadth of his love for all he has created!



Diaconal Ministries Canada
Transforming Communities in Christ

*Community ministry stories, resource materials,
and further information are available at*
www.diaconalministries.com

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