

4-1-2024

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### Recommended Citation

Moulden, G. (2024). Church-Supported ESL Ministry in Canada: A Look at the Church's Mission in Action. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 16(1), 63-85. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol16/iss1/5>

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# Church-Supported ESL Ministry in Canada: A Look at the Church's Mission in Action

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## **Abstract**

*English is a dominant business, academic, and communicative language throughout the world. Immigrants and refugees coming to the West have a great need to learn the language but often do not have the funds or time to pursue studies full-time. Churches often offer English classes to minister to not only their language needs but also to their relational and spiritual needs. This mixed-methods survey and interview research investigates the state of church-supported English as a Second Language (ESL) programs across Canada following the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 50 teachers and program coordinators completed the survey, which revealed needs relating to training and materials for volunteers and demonstrated the importance of the recruitment of additional teachers, the restart of dormant programs, and improved networking among churches. The role of church-supported ESL programs as a means of presenting the gospel to newcomers is also discussed and is recognized by teachers and coordinators as a foundational aim of this ministry.*

Keywords: English as a Second Language, mixed methods, COVID, evangelism, church

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## **Introduction: English as a Global Language**

English is the most commonly used language worldwide, estimated to be spoken by over 1.4 billion people as a first or additional language (Statista, 2023). According to the CIA World Factbook (2023), this accounts for 18.8 percent of the world's population. Ironically, only 5.1 percent of people globally speak it as their native language; the vast majority of speakers of English worldwide use it as an additional language. This global popularity is a testimony to its linguistic power. Historically, it owes this to the growth of the British Empire, which governed as many as 87 colonies worldwide (Moorhouse, 2023); many of these, such as Canada, Australia, and the thirteen colonies that formed the United States, have English as an official or main language. The linguistic power of English lies also in its dominance of the internet, and its utility as a language of communication and collaboration for international companies whose employees and contacts speak a variety of different mother tongues but use English as a lingua franca (Fisher, 2015).

Increased immigration to Western nations has further heightened the communicative value of English, as the number of those needing to learn the language for their livelihood has increased. For example, the number of immigrants has risen sharply in both Canada and the United States: in Canada, the number rose from 923,950 arriving between 1981 and 1990 to 2,454,080 between 2011 and 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2022), while the United States had an increase in the total number of immigrants from 24,557,000 in 1996 to 44,799,000 in 2021 (United States Census Bureau, 2022). According to a UN world migration report, the United States has been by far the most popular destination for migrants over the past fifty years, with an increase in the number of foreign-born residents from 12 million in 1970 to nearly 51 million in 2019, representing 15.3 percent of the total population. The UK, another predominantly English-speaking country, included about 13.8 million foreign-born residents in 2019, making it the fifth most popular destination of migrants, while Canada ranked eighth, with a foreign-born population of about 8 million (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

## **English Language Teaching**

The global popularity of English, and the desirability of countries such as the USA, the UK, and Canada as destinations for migrants from around the world, have combined to make the field of English-language teaching (ELT) a global phenomenon. In Canada and the United States, for example, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs exist to prepare

international students for admission into their desired English-medium university. Commercially, many organizations worldwide, such as Berlitz and the British Council, view English-language teaching as a marketable service and so offer courses on subjects such as exam preparation and business, communicative, and children's English, to name a few. Cambridge English Assessment focuses on language testing; this organization designs and administers a range of English tests, as a business, to young children, K-12 students, business people, and college-age learners of English seeking to achieve a particular scholastic or other goal by obtaining a sufficiently high score on their test of choice (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2023). Publishers likewise seek to make a profit through test preparation materials for exams such as the SAT, GRE, and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language).

Other organizations work to help English-language learners further their proficiency in the language as a free service. The LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) Program, for adult permanent residents and recognized refugees, aims to help “newcomers integrate into Canada and their communities” (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2013). In both Canada (Hunter & Trethewey, 2009) and the United States (CELEA Community-based ESL Group, n.d.), community ESL classes serve a purpose similar to LINC, and their value has grown with the increase in the number of immigrants.

## **The Church and English Language Teaching**

### ***A Brief History***

As a service to people in a particular local community seeking English-language instruction, churches in many countries have been involved in teaching English. Indeed, it is not a recently-developed ministry but one which in some cases has been in existence for well over a century. Kristjansson (2018, p, 173), for example, states that church-supported English-language teaching programs in Canada have existed for over 150 years. Wang adds that Protestant missionaries were teaching English to Chinese immigrants as early as 1859 in British Columbia; their outreach was based on the goals of both helping them integrate into Canadian society and making disciples where possible; some of these immigrants indeed converted to Christianity (2002). Han (2009) reports that the response to evangelism among Chinese immigrants in Canada was very different after 1967, by which time immigration of people from non-white ethnic groups was permitted. Instead of white protestant missionaries leading the effort to evangelize immigrants as was done previously, however, it was the growing number of ethnically Chinese churches reaching out in

many cases, given the large number of skilled Chinese immigrants entering the country since the mid-1990s, needing not only English classes but also a stepping-stone for integrating into local communities.

Currently, churches representing a range of denominations, as well as independent congregations, pursue ESL ministry across Canada, as will be shown in the study described in this article. Although it is difficult to gauge the number of church-supported ESL programs currently active across the country, the survey reported in this paper was sent out to approximately 1000 contacts representing churches offering ESL classes in Canada at some time prior to the COVID pandemic of 2020-2022. The actual number in operation may have been—and may currently still be—considerably higher, depending on the number of programs operated by churches not in contact with the organization that commissioned the survey. In the United States, meanwhile, there were reportedly over 300,000 Protestant churches in 2016 (Steir, 2016), and over 25 percent of the American population has been identified as “Evangelical Protestant” (Pew Research Center, 2023). Given the greater number of immigrants in the US in comparison to Canada, and the far larger population overall—over 330 million in 2020 as opposed to 38 million estimated in 2023 (CIA World Factbook, 2023), the number of American churches engaging in outreach ministries such as ESL classes for the purpose of disciple-making is potentially much higher than the number in Canada. Indeed, organizations such as TESOL Ministry (2023) and Mission to North America (n.d.) both oversee networks of churches in the US offering ESL classes, while ESL Cooperative Ministries Society (2023) serves the same role in Canada. Globally, international missionary organizations such as OMF (2023), SEND (n.d.), and SIM (2023), among others, also use English language teaching as an opportunity for outreach in churches in different regions of the world.

### ***A Divine Purpose***

As a Christian ministry, the goals of English-language teaching differ from those of community-based, government-sponsored, and company-based ESL programs in important ways, which stem from God’s call for the church. It is important to view the role of church-supported ESL ministries through the lens of the mission and vision of the church as the institution mandated by Christ to fulfill His purpose. The mission is recorded in Matthew 28:19-20 to “make disciples of all the nations”, “baptizing them”, and “teaching them to follow” all of Christ’s commands. Christ provided a vision for accomplishing this in Acts 1:8 with a command to His disciples to be His witnesses locally, nationally, and globally. The global nature of

this command became evident at Pentecost, with the Holy Spirit empowering the disciples to speak in the languages of the people gathered for the event and Peter delivering a message exhorting repentance on the part of all listening. Later, the Lord led Peter and Phillip to preach to a Roman household and an Ethiopian eunuch respectively, and commanded the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas to take the gospel abroad.

However, the mission Christ commanded in Matthew 28 goes beyond preaching the gospel, to also teaching new disciples to obey all of Christ's teachings. This includes Christ's command to love our neighbor as ourselves through acts of mercy, such as those displayed in the Parables of the Good Samaritan and of the Sheep and the Goats. In the first Jerusalem church, the need for such acts became evident when Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the serving of food (See Acts 6). Paul, in his letters, called on congregations to minister financially to members of other congregations experiencing hardship. We are to care for those in need, and those needs are many, as evident in Christ's three-year ministry on earth.

The teaching of English as an additional language from a Biblical perspective is thus best understood holistically as an important means of meeting one of the many needs of people in our surrounding communities (Chang, 2020). Canada is a country where being able to understand and communicate in the official language (English) used in most of our provinces is critical to survival; immigrants and refugees who recognize that their English skills are weak will naturally seek language classes to build up their skills. Churches offering ESL classes can thus contribute to filling an important need of the immigrants and refugees in their midst. Yet even more, the church is also a community of people who support one another not only spiritually, but also socially and emotionally through fellowship, and financially through giving to the poor amongst them. The local church is to be characterized by such qualities as love, service, care, hospitality, empathy, humility, and harmony (Romans 12:9-16). It is to be a community without divisions, where there is "neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man . . ." (Galatians 3:28). Immigrants and refugees who join a church community in the process of taking an ESL class thus stand potentially to benefit in multiple ways—practically, relationally, and spiritually.

### **A Study Focused on Current Church-Supported ESL Ministry in Canada**

The study described in this paper examined the impact of COVID-related church closures on the teaching and learning of English as a second language in churches across Canada. The study was commissioned in 2022

by the Cooperative ESL Ministries Society, an interdenominational Canadian organization supporting churches nationwide that provide or sponsor ESL classes. The organization is “dedicated to welcoming newcomers to Canada”, and regards the fulfillment of the Great Commission as “an obligation of all believers in our Lord Jesus Christ” (2023).

In light of an extensive period of mandated church closures across Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was undertaken to assess the state of church-supported ESL programs after in-person church services were permitted again in 2022. Thus, it was designed to answer two research questions: first, “What is the current state of church-supported ESL programs after an extended interruption of in-person services and other in-person activities?”; second, “With the advent of online instruction arising from the pandemic, what services would teachers and program coordinators like to see offered?”

Leaders of the organization approached me, a researcher and instructor in research methods in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), to see whether I would be interested in creating a survey to be distributed electronically to churches across Canada. As a volunteer teacher serving in an ESL program at a church in Metro Vancouver, I was as eager as they were to learn the current state of what I regard as a vital ministry in a country with a growing immigrant population. Further, having conducted a mixed-methods survey study the previous year on the impact of pandemic-based campus-access restrictions on the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language worldwide, I was receptive to Cooperative ESL Ministries’ request for a similar study focusing on church-supported ESL ministry.

The survey was developed by myself and the leaders of the Cooperative ESL Ministries Society and piloted over the summer of 2022. It was then revised to clarify the meaning of ambiguous items and distributed electronically in the fall via Survey Monkey to elicit information from ESL teachers and administrators on a variety of topics concerning their programs. It was sent to church contacts across Canada whose contact information was included in directories maintained by Cooperative ESL Ministries of churches that have offered ESL classes at one time or another. The survey contained a total of 24 multiple choice and open-ended items covering topics such as the location and denominational affiliation of each church, the age ranges and the number of teachers and students involved in each program, program characteristics such as the number of online and/or in-person classes, each program’s chief strength and challenge, and the perceived training needs of teachers currently in the program.

## **Findings**

Fifty-one respondents, mostly teachers and program coordinators, completed most or all of the items on the Survey Monkey site. Among those who completed the survey, three offered to participate in individual interviews afterward to provide a more in-depth description of the ESL ministry in specific locations. Two-thirds of all respondents were based in either Metro Vancouver (including Fraser Valley) or the Greater Toronto area, both regions with large populations.

**ESL Program Characteristics.** The respondents represented churches from a range of denominations (e.g. Mennonite Brethren, Pentecostal), as well as independent congregations, as shown in Table 1. Similarly, the range of mother tongues (e.g., Mandarin Chinese, Farsi, Spanish) represented among students enrolled in church-supported ESL programs across the country is extensive, featuring speakers from countries worldwide. In terms of each program's place within its church's organizational structure, about 70% of the programs represented by respondents are offered as a separate ministry within their churches. About half have been in existence for more than five years. Program size varies widely, from a single teacher doing a class on his or her own to as many as 26 teachers. On the other hand, about 20% of respondents represented programs not in operation when the survey was conducted, suggesting a potentially high number of programs across the country were not functioning at that time. (Fall, 2022).

**Table 1:** ESL Program Demographics

The number of denominations represented among respondents (including independent churches)	22
The number of first languages represented among students in programs across Canada	105
The number of programs offered as a separate ministry within their church	35
The number of programs that have been in operation for more than five years	25
The number of programs featuring both online and in-person classes	26
The number of programs offering instruction solely or mostly in English	45
The number of programs featuring required Bible study with each lesson	16
The number of programs currently not in operation	9
The range in the number of teachers serving among active programs	1-26

**Note:**  $n = 51$ .

While most of these programs feature instruction solely or primarily in

English, there is considerable variability concerning the formality of their structure, the proportion of online and in-person classes and times, and the approach to teaching the Bible. This is evident in Table 2. There is no noticeable standard program model but rather variation in each of these areas. Indeed, based on responses to the different items in the survey, it is evident that the actual operation of any program can be affected by several factors: the number, English proficiency level(s), and preferences of learners involved; the availability of teachers and others needed to run a given program; the need for—and availability of—technology and/or physical classroom space; teaching materials and method used; and, the church's policy with regards to Bible study.

**Table 2:** Variability in Program Structure, Delivery, and Approach to Bible Study

<b><u>Variability in Program Structure</u></b>	<b><u>Programs</u></b>
Somewhat structured: classes are organized by level, but teachers select their own teaching topics, materials, and teaching methods.	19
Very structured: classes are organized by level and teachers use pre-selected textbooks/materials.	12
<b><u>Variability in the provision of in-person and online instruction</u></b>	<b><u>Programs</u></b>
One or more mornings or afternoons a week, in person.	7
One or more evenings a week, in person.	5
One or more evenings a week, online.	3
Multiple days via a blend of in-person and online classes.	26
<b><u>Variability in approach to Bible study</u></b>	<b><u>Programs</u></b>
There is a Bible study included in every lesson.	14
Including Bible study is up to individual teachers.	3
An English Bible lesson is offered and participation is optional.	15
Bible lessons are offered in their first language.	1
There is no Bible study included in the English classes; it is part of a different ministry.	7

**Note:**  $n = 51$ .

**Respondent characteristics.** Table 3 reveals background information about respondents. Most are native speakers of English and serve in churches in or near metropolitan areas. A large majority (70%) are over

the age of sixty, with an additional 20% aged between 50-59 at the time the survey was conducted. While 70% teach in programs having three or more teachers, 30% serve in smaller programs—a noteworthy statistic given the age range of respondents and the fact that 20% had served in programs not currently in operation the previous fall, perhaps due to the lack of available students or teachers to restart some programs once in-person church services had resumed after the pandemic.

**Table 3:** Key Statistics Concerning Respondents

The proportion of respondents 60 years old and above	70%
The proportion of respondents seeking professional development workshops	60%
The proportion of respondents serving in programs with fewer than three teachers	30%
The proportion of respondents citing the supply of volunteers as the biggest challenge	30%
The proportion of respondents citing relationship building as their program's greatest strength	25%
The proportion of respondents who are not native speakers of English.	20%

**Notes:**  $n = 51$ . Percentages rounded to the nearest 5%.

The three volunteer interviewees are representative of the respondents overall; each is a native speaker of English and lives and serves in a metropolitan area. All three are in their sixties. Conversely, there are some interesting differences among them; one is a pastor, the second a retired high-school ESL teacher, and the third an experienced ESL teacher and program coordinator who has worked both in Canada and overseas serving in church-supported ESL ministry. Their current church environment is likewise quite different; the first serves within a Pentecostal organization, while the second serves in a Mennonite Brethren church in cooperation with the pastor of a Chinese church sharing the premises. The third interviewee, meanwhile, although currently working with a Pentecostal pastor, has served in churches representing different denominations.

**Program Strengths and Challenges.** Discussing program and respondent characteristics lays the groundwork for examining the various program strengths and challenges identified by respondents. Although no single model for developing church-supported ESL programs exists, understanding the most significant strengths and weaknesses of different programs can help us gain an understanding of characteristics that can serve as building blocks for developing programs with a higher probability of successfully meeting program goals and learners' needs.

Table 4 provides a list of the primary program strengths and challenges most commonly mentioned by respondents. Notably, the most commonly identified strength, relationship building, was mentioned twice as often as the second and third—passionate, committed volunteers and program flexibility. Technology, on the other hand, was mentioned far less often, both as a strength and as a challenge. The high priority given to relationship building implies the importance teachers and program coordinators attach to church-supported ESL ministry as a strategy for helping to build a community within the church between members of the congregation and those from the surrounding area. Teachers in church-supported ESL programs appear to see themselves as having a second role in class, being a community builder, fostering relationships among the students and helping newcomers feel welcome and eager to become a member of the “community” they’ve entered. This highlights the importance of the second primary strength listed in Table 4, and the most commonly cited challenge: the need for committed, passionate volunteers, teachers who heartily embrace the nature of their ministry to be not only effective teachers but also good relationship builders.

**Table 4:** Primary Program Strengths and Challenges Identified by Participants

<b><u>Most Often Mentioned Primary Program Strength</u></b>	<b><u>Frequency</u></b>
Relationship building/Community	12
Committed, passionate volunteers	6
Program flexibility	6
Evidence of organization	5
Technology	3
<b><u>Most Often Mentioned Primary Program Challenge</u></b>	<b><u>Frequency</u></b>
Lack of volunteer teachers	14
Inconsistent student attendance	4
Teaching the Bible	3
Technology	3

**Note:**  $n = 51$ .

The interviewees were in agreement concerning the value of building relationships. As the first commented, “I think it’s the relationships...when we get together, we have a great time, and people seem to enjoy themselves and feel quite comfortable to speak or just to listen.” The second stated: “I think our ministry’s biggest strength is interpersonal relationships,” continuing by saying that one student described her teacher and the teacher’s husband, in relation to the entire class, as “our family.” The third interviewee, setting up a new program with immigrants as the intended

teachers, spoke of their desire to “reach the neighborhood” they’re in, which itself has many newcomers from overseas. Their keen desire to build bridges is reflected in comments such as “Oh, yeah, I’ve got a pick-up truck. I can help people move if they need to move. I can help them pick up stuff if they need to pick up stuff for their apartment.”

The interviewees also stressed the value of committed volunteers. As the one working with immigrant teachers noted, they saw their immigrant status as an opportunity to help other newcomers: “We’ve been here a few years now five or ten years, and now the people who are just arriving here need the benefit of what we have gone through for the last five or ten years, including things of racism and unacceptance, and all of those kinds of feelings.” Another of the interviewees cited the fatigue of working alone as the reason for desiring additional help: “I think the biggest challenge will be to get people to help me shoulder the load. I do get tired, and it would be nice to have a team of people that I could work with in this.” The third did not mention fatigue but did point out the need for more workers: “The challenge is, if we want to grow, then we have to have another teacher, and you know, a couple of more helpers.”

Aside from the lack of volunteers, other program weaknesses are reflected in the pedagogical challenges and training needs identified by respondents. Table 5 highlights teaching grammar and pronunciation respectively as the two most significant difficulties experienced by teachers. Respondents’ identified training needs for teachers offer little surprise given the challenges mentioned in Table 5: four of the five most cited needs reflect their language-teaching difficulties, as illustrated in Table 6. The lone exception is the most commonly-mentioned need: teaching the Bible in English. A couple of respondents did mention using Bible-based materials for their English classes; such materials are available, for example, through the “Love New Canadians” ministry (2023) based in Calgary, Alberta. From the study, it is impossible to know how many ESL programs are making use of such materials; nevertheless, there is evidently considerable interest in using English as a means of sharing Biblical truths with learners in church-supported ESL programs, judging by the data in Table 6.

**Table 5:** Pedagogical Challenges Identified by Respondents

“Our teachers/I currently find \_\_\_\_\_ most difficult to teach.”

<b>Answer Choices</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Number</b>
Grammar	33	14
Pronunciation	26	11
Specialized classes (e.g., academic English, business English, English for children)	14	6
Basic literacy skills	12	5
The Bible	7	3
Listening	5	2
Communication skills (politeness, greetings, introducing oneself, etc.)	2	1
Vocabulary	2	1
<b>Total Number of Responses</b>		<b>43</b>

**Table 6:** Teacher-Training Needs Identified by Respondents

“Our teachers/I would love to have a workshop on \_\_\_\_\_.”

<b>Answer Choices</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Number</b>
Teaching the Bible in English	35	13
Teaching pronunciation	32	12
Teaching grammar	27	10
Teaching communication skills	24	9
Using Zoom more effectively	19	7
Not applicable. We do our own training.	19	7
Teaching older adults.	14	5
Teaching specialized courses (e.g., academic English, business English)	11	4
Teaching vocabulary	8	3
Teaching children	0	0
<b>Total Number of Respondents</b>		<b>43</b>

A final piece of evidence for the challenges experienced by church-supported ESL teachers is seen in the types of services most commonly desired among respondents, shown in Table 7. Reflecting the training needs expressed through Table 6, workshops emerged as the most sought-after service; one-day conferences were also a popular request, potentially for the same reason as the workshops. The second most commonly desired service was for opportunities to exchange ideas for materials, a request likely included in the third most requested service: a national website to include, among other things, “program ideas”. It is only natural for

volunteer teachers to have little or no idea what materials are available for teaching ESL in a setting such as a church, particularly for online classes. This leaves them with the challenge of using materials found online or developing their own, the latter option being likely a significant task for a teacher having little or no formal training or teaching experience. Program ideas would also include such items as selecting appropriate class goals and objectives, planning lessons, using apps such as Zoom effectively, and conducting effective assessments, all unfamiliar to inexperienced volunteers, who would benefit a great deal from ideas and guidance from seasoned teachers.

**Table 7:** The Most Highly Desired Services Indicated by Respondents

<b>Answer Choices</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Number</b>
Putting on workshops for teachers.	65	30
Offering opportunities for exchanging ideas for materials.	61	28
Having a national website where all programs can contribute news, program ideas, etc.	54	25
Offering one-day conferences for teachers and other ESL ministry members.	52	24
Offering opportunities for social connecting with other churches in our area.	35	16
Doing Bible study, etc.	24	11
Providing opportunities for students from different church programs to meet each other.	20	9
Organizing ESL or ministry workers camps.	11	5
<b>Total Number of Respondents</b>		<b>46</b>

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Mission and Vision**

While the purpose of church-supported ESL ministry was not a specific focus of the survey, it is nevertheless important to consider its role in relation to the mission and vision of the church articulated by Christ. In the context of the study, it can be shown that the importance of the Great Commission exists as a founding principle for all church-based ministry on the part of the organization that commissioned the survey and of at least some churches and program directors. For example, as mentioned in the introduction, Cooperative ESL Ministries considers participation in fulfilling the Great Commission to be a responsibility of all Christians; Christian ESL teachers, regardless of their specific teaching context, are thus expected to view themselves as participants in carrying it out through

their work as teachers, whether as professionals or volunteers. Another Canadian organization that offers ESL classes as part of its intercultural ministry, as mentioned earlier is Love New Canadians (2023), which applies a “pathway to Jesus” approach featuring Bible-focused ESL study for immigrants strongly considering becoming Christians.

The interviewees in the study likewise considered the Great Commission to have foundational importance. The first stated that he started his ESL ministry so that “people would have the opportunity to hear the Word of God and experience the love of God as they develop their English skills in a supportive environment.” He shares Bible stories and invites his students “to events and gatherings where the Gospel is often shared.” The second described evangelism as “the primary aim” of her program and uses “direct verbal teaching from the scriptures, interactions over questions arising from the scripture passages, and group prayer” to this end, as well as teaming with the pastor of the Chinese (Mandarin) congregation sharing the church premises, as he shares the students’ mother tongue. The third interviewee worked most recently in a church with a multilingual Chinese pastor who would intentionally “share the Gospel personally and individually in the heart languages of many students, said to be a crucial final step in evangelizing immigrants with low levels of English” (personal communication). Additionally, the church was providing translation of its sermons, as well as “ESL-friendly Bible studies,” excerpts of the Jesus film, and the Alpha Program for evangelistic purposes. While these available examples are few, they represent the seriousness with which some churches involved in ESL ministry work to bring immigrants and refugees to faith in Christ.

### **The Impact of the Pandemic**

The most noticeable impact of the pandemic is reflected in the fact that over half the programs currently in operation feature a blend of online and in-person classes. Less than 30% of programs feature in-person classes alone (See Table 1). At one church in the Metro Vancouver region, for example, the number of classes had expanded from 12 online operating in the Fall of 2021 to a total of 22 classes (13 online and nine in person) by March 2023 (See Table 8); this hybrid approach has allowed the program to take in more students, increasing the number who are not only learning English but also studying the Bible and learning important Biblical truths. A second potential impact of the pandemic on church-supported ESL programs can be seen in the proportion of programs (approximately 20%) not in operation at the time the survey was distributed. This may be due, at least in part, to the lengthy suspension of all in-person church activities

mandated by provincial governments across the country during the pandemic, resulting in a possible loss of students and teachers needed to restart classes. One cannot be sure how many ESL programs were discontinued as a result of such mandates; however, the proportion of respondents to the survey whose programs were discontinued (20%) suggests the number countrywide could be quite large.

### **The Effect of Technology**

The relatively high proportion of blended or hybrid programs in comparison to those that are in-person only reflects the impact of technology in the operation of many church-supported ESL programs (See Table 1). Indeed, online services continue to be offered at many churches despite the return to in-person services in 2022. As Professor Lisa Weaver of Columbia Theological Seminary stated, “The technology and communications platforms that were initially incorporated as part of a rushed recalibration to provide worship services virtually are now a fundamental and standard part of the worship life and ministry of the church.” (2023, p. 64). Pakpahan et al. (2022) and Chow and Kurlberg (2020) have described how this impact has affected local churches in Indonesia, as well as churches in places as diverse as Singapore and Sweden. Many churches worldwide have adapted their worship and other activities to this new reality, although its spiritual repercussions need to be examined through formal research focusing on different churches.

Considering the effect of technology on church-supported ESL, the first interviewee recognized both the challenges and opportunities it has presented. As to the challenges, he stated, “What I found is, many of the 60-plus crowd are uncomfortable with technology, and as a result of that, they either paused or discontinued their ESL ministry when their groups could not meet in person.” Nevertheless, he also recognized the benefit, “In my Zoom class...I literally get people from all over the world participating in that group.” The third interviewee, who is experienced in launching ESL programs in churches and is currently helping to set up a new one, had a team-teaching strategy in mind for dealing with the challenge of technology, “We want to have an older person paired with a younger person for the sake of the younger person, and we can recruit them, saying, ‘Hey, listen! We've got some older teachers, but they're not as comfortable using Zoom online for the Thursday class, so if you can be their partner, you can help them with the online part. They will help you with the English instructional part, and you'll both benefit each other.’”

The opportunity for global outreach presented by technology is evident in the growth of the program mentioned in the previous section,

as shown in Table 8. The expansion in the number of online classes there has brought in new students joining classes from such countries as Bolivia, Colombia, and Chile, although most had already immigrated to Canada. During the current term (September-November, 2023), the average weekly number of in-person attendees to the program has been 93, and the average number online has been 103; most of the latter group reside locally rather than overseas and like the in-person attendees, live within walking or driving distance of the church. The actual number who attend a weekly church service and are thus potentially integrated into a local Christian community, however, is unknown.

**Table 8:** ESL Program Growth at a Metro Vancouver Church

<b>Term</b>	<b>Number of ESL classes</b>	<b>Total number of students</b>
Fall 2021	12 (online)	64
Fall 2022	15 (online and in-person)	111
Winter 2023	22 (online and in-person)	168

**Note:** Participants originated from 25 countries (Winter 2023): Afghanistan, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Latvia, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Syria, Taiwan, Turkey, Ukraine, and Venezuela.

Conversely, one wonders how many ESL programs across the country were discontinued during the pandemic due to a lack of technology. Although this was not the primary program challenge identified by most respondents, one cannot discount the possibility that in smaller churches, lack of access to the needed technology, and the absence of people qualified to use it resulted in a sizable number of ESL programs being put on an indefinite hold. Such a scenario is not implausible given the proportion of respondents (30%) serving in churches with fewer than 3 ESL teachers.

### **A Broad Range of Interest**

Evidence from both the range of denominations in which ESL programs are operating and the number of first languages represented among the students in those programs demonstrates that interest in church-supported ESL programs within Canadian churches and among Canadian immigrants is strong. This appears to be the case even for the churches whose respondents indicated their ESL program had been discontinued; their effort to complete the survey suggests a certain level of interest in the

ministry. As one respondent commented, “We would welcome support for a restart.” Another stated, “I was involved in a program that has recently shut down due to changes at the church. I’m praying through options at my home church (no program currently).” At the same time, the difficulty of finding additional volunteer teachers to keep the ministry going and offset the fatigue expressed by interviewees is a matter of concern. Among ESL students, on the other hand, the interest may be in a growth phase with the return to in-person services and the number of hybrid programs (those offering both in-person and synchronous online classes) as indicated by data from the church represented in Table 8.

### **The Importance of Community Building**

As noted earlier, the most commonly cited strength of programs was the development of relationships, also referred to by some respondents as “community building.” This is perhaps the signature characteristic of church-supported ESL programs in comparison to those sponsored by the government (e.g., settlement English programs) or private institutions targeting international students or immigrant businesspeople. Tsaneva (2022), reflecting on her experience as a church-supported ESL program director, stresses its importance, “Ultimately, ESL ministry is about far more than teaching English. Our relationships go deep and create a safe place for belonging and community, for students to practice English without fear of judgment, and for the Gospel to be shared in word and deed.” Han (2009), who conducted a case study of a couple’s gradual inclusion as members of the faith community of a Chinese church in Greater Toronto, mentioned that English classes served as one organized means of assisting the couple in the process of becoming full-fledged members of that community. However, due to a lack of research, the extent to which community building also occurs in online class environments is not clear.

### **The Issue of Discontinued Programs**

The proportion of respondents that had been serving in programs that have been discontinued is itself a concern, given the increase in immigration in Canada over the past thirty years and its projected increase in the near future (Feinstein, 2023). The concern is even greater considering the number of teachers serving in small programs. As examples of this, two of the three respondents I interviewed either teach alone or with their spouse (with a Mandarin-speaking pastor helping out). Both expressed concern about the fatigue factor in serving without additional teachers to share the load. The high proportion of older

volunteer teachers in the ministry combined with the proportion of small programs raises two questions: First, how many similar programs are there among those that have been discontinued? Second, how can additional volunteer teachers (and, where needed, tech experts) be recruited to help re-start discontinued programs and to prevent current small programs, such as those in which the two aforementioned interviewees are serving, from being forced to close their doors?

### **Training and Materials Needs**

Similar to other ministry work done in churches, most teachers in church-supported ESL programs are volunteers; few have served as professional teachers, and 20% are non-native speakers of English, based on the results of the survey. It is thus not surprising that, as a group, teachers in such programs experience challenges in areas such as teaching pronunciation and grammar; while some non-natives have better knowledge of grammatical rules and structures than native speakers, this does not mean they will necessarily be able to teach these effectively without some helpful guidelines. As for teaching pronunciation, understanding how individual sounds are produced and the techniques for producing these sounds is knowledge that is not acquired without some form of training. Moreover, my personal experience with ESL teachers whose first language is not English has brought to light the lack of confidence many have when it comes to teaching English for oral communication due to their awareness that they lack a native Canadian, British, or American accent.

Concerning teaching materials, as discussed earlier, training for teachers and the sharing of materials (and ideas for such) were the most common needs expressed by respondents (See Table 7). Workshops, conferences, and a website for sharing materials (and ideas) were the most commonly mentioned solutions to meeting these needs. To this end, conferences have been offered online over the past two years through the Cooperative ESL Ministries Society, and resources are available online for teachers searching for ideas (SOCEM, 2023). A conference in October 2023 had nearly 70 in-person and online participants, including presenters and panelists, according to one administrative employee (personal communication). A hybrid conference was also held in Metro Vancouver earlier in 2023, with nearly 40 attendees representing 22 programs in Metro Vancouver and beyond (personal communication from the conference organizer). As contact information for churches operating ESL programs is updated, more teachers will potentially gain access to resources and hopefully be able to attend future online or in-person workshops and conferences. Additionally, it is hoped that information for

churches wishing to (re)start ESL programs will be made available and accessed to facilitate success in these efforts.

### **Moving Forward: Maintaining and Strengthening the Ministry**

Based on the earlier discussion regarding the expressed training priorities for teachers and their desire for teaching materials or ideas for such, one gains some sense of helpful strategies for maintaining and strengthening church-supported ESL programs.

First, teachers would benefit from attending conference sessions, webinars, and workshops covering topics such as teaching grammar and pronunciation (both in person and online) as well as teaching the Bible in English. Second, teachers would also be helped by being made aware of, and having access to, online networks offering links to resources for teaching both ESL and the Bible. ESL teachers and coordinators aware of these networks need to share this information with their ESL ministry colleagues so that more of them can benefit from announcements of upcoming conferences, webinars, workshops, and social gatherings. Currently, networks such as the Cooperative ESL Ministries Society in Canada, CELEA (Christian English Language Educators Association), and TESOL Ministry in the US are active in North America. CELEA offers an annual conference in the spring (which was both virtual and in-person in 2023), and the Cooperative ESL Ministries Society holds conferences about twice a year. Developing and maintaining directories of churches offering ESL programs in different regions is thus a vital task of these networks.

Third, and most importantly, there is a need for church-supported ESL ministry leaders to work collaboratively to formulate strategies for promoting and assisting in the expansion of the ministry by helping churches whose ESL programs are dormant to restart them and to begin new programs where there is a local demand. Tsaneva (2022) supports such collaboration, citing this approach being used in other ministries. This will likely require the recruitment of new leaders, at the church, denominational, and network levels, to join in the ministry work. Additionally, it will need the support of elders and others in positions of church leadership to encourage members of their congregations to participate in the ministry. In a world where steady migration to the West is expected to continue for years to come, the need for church-supported ESL programs will continue to expand.

## Closing Thoughts

### Limitations

No research is without limitations, and this study is no exception. The most important is the low response rate to the survey, 5%, considerably lower than what is expected (nearly 30%) for an online survey (Lindemann, 2021), suggesting it may not have yielded a representative sample of such programs. Yet the response rate itself can be meaningful as it is potentially indicative of the extent of the impact of programs discontinued as a result of mandated closures of onsite services and ministry activities.

With regards to the church's directive to share the gospel, the question of how effective church-supported ESL programs have been at helping to advance this effort was beyond the scope of the current study; its purpose has been descriptive rather than evaluative. Nevertheless, the prime importance of the Great Commission is a reminder that an in-depth understanding of the value of church-supported ESL programs as a ministry requires additional research to develop an awareness of their effectiveness in fulfilling the task of making disciples.

### Conclusion: Carrying on with the Mission

Since the Lord declared to Abraham that "in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 22:17), God's plan for humankind has involved all nations. This is clear from Christ's mission and vision for the church. Yet the mission involves more than sharing the gospel: From Christ's command to demonstrate the genuineness of our faith through our love for one another, the church, both globally and locally, has had a perpetual mission to attend to the different personal needs of its members and those in surrounding communities. Immigrants, and in particular refugees, bring a multitude of needs to their new homelands, and in regions where English is the language of the workplace, education, and all daily communication, the need for effective instruction in the language is immeasurably great to help those whose proficiency is lacking. As descendants of Abraham through our faith in Christ, the call to be a blessing to the nations, both practically and spiritually, rests with us.

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