



ACTON CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

12 Concord Rd. Acton, MA 01720



Acton Congregational Church Strategic Planning Task Force Report May 2024

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes work performed between March 2023 and June 2024 by the Strategic Planning Task Force (SPTF). The SPTF was commissioned by ACC's Church Council in February 2023 to take a proactive response to multi-year trends in ACC church membership and giving which, like many UCC affiliate churches, have been generally downward. One component of the study was to solicit input from ACC's membership to provide guidance to church leadership for adapting ACC to this changing future. By identifying areas of focus that are important to the congregation, our goal is to report back on those priorities and develop recommendations that will ensure that ACC remains vital and relevant to its members, to potential members, and to the wider community.

ACC is a strong church with a remarkable history that dates to the very founding of the town. The church has seen much change and we remain a congregation healthy in our faith, programs, and finances. We experienced strong growth in the final decades of the last century coinciding with a demographic bubble that brought dramatic shifts to Acton as a community. Beyond our local trends, our culture, too, has undergone remarkable disruptions. In the face of all of that, ACC has embarked on a strategic planning exercise; our goal is to surf the waves of change and emerge stronger in faith, in community, and in service.

ES.1 Approach

The SPTF performed this study by looking at available data on our community (see the appendices for examples) and then solicited outside assistance to help shape our understanding of the broader trajectory for churches and to develop a process for moving forward. We live in a community that is aging and that is becoming more culturally diverse. The fraction of Acton residents over 65 has doubled in just 10 years and one-third of Acton households speak a language other than English at home. These are profound shifts in our town that both explain some of the changes in our membership and call for us to respond and react to those changes. We need to serve the community we live in today and meet the needs of worshippers and seekers who look different than they did in the 1980s and 1990s.

These trends are reflected in a changing church membership. The number of pledge units to support the church has fallen by half over the last 10 years and our congregation is aging. Nearly half of "active" members as we track them are 50 or older, and if we pare back the number of SHYF and college graduates in their 20s who are no longer in the area the fraction is closer to two-thirds.

For perspective beyond our congregation, we held a retreat with UCC consultant Rev. Betsy Waters in September 2023, which was eye-opening for all of the members of the Task Force. Using outside data and experience and our own observations, we uniformly came away with a strong recognition for the need to make meaningful changes to our programs and our focus in

order to ensure a future for ACC. The prospect of staying the course and waiting for things to turn around post-COVID was a grim one.

In October 2023, we presented the case for change and a process for revealing the passions and priorities of our membership and our visions for the future of the church.¹ A key element of our charge from the Church Council and of recommendations from Rev. Waters was “intensive listening” to the congregation, so we structured a listening program to gather input, facilitated by Task Force members, that ran from January through March 2024. We hosted nine group sessions with standardized formats and prompts to guide discussion. Members of the Task Force took detailed notes which we compiled and have used to guide this report and our recommendations. In addition to the group meetings, a number of Task Force members had one-on-one discussions with members and we received written responses from a number of members. All in all, this report reflects input from 66 members plus the Task Force.

ES.2 Findings and Recommendations

Through the process described above, the SPTF has attempted to discern the passions, values, and experiences that are shared and prized by those calling ACC their church home. When the Task Force members reflected on what we had heard in talking to the congregation, there was universal recognition that the feelings of loss for “we used to” were very strong and while there was longing on the part of many to restore or return to the past, there was also recognition of profound changes in who was worshipping and participating in the church and in the culture around us.

The passion and depth of feeling for programs and activities of the past were not for the programs – they were for the experiences represented by those programs. The sense of belonging, of sharing common values of a belief in Christ, of supporting each other, of supporting the community, and of worshipping an abundant God that had so generously blessed us.

What we must do is identify and hold out those values and experiences – those are why we are here, why we are part of ACC, why we belong to a faith community – but we must wrap those experiences in the changed reality of who is in our community today, what is happening around us, and what has changed to make the world of 1990 no longer the model for 2024 and beyond. We categorized those values into five themes around which to structure our findings and recommendations:

1. Community/Welcoming
2. Faith
3. Mission
4. Youth/Children
5. Building

¹ This presentation and other resources and background can be found at <https://www.actonc.org/sptf>

ES.2.1 Theme 1 - Community/Welcoming

Community is foundational to members of ACC. Cultural and societal changes over the last 20-plus years have shaken communities to their roots leading to widespread social ills, loneliness, depression, and fragmentation. Members value the sense of community and belonging at ACC and invest heavily with their time and energy to support these programs. Many of the deepest feelings about membership and belonging at ACC come from participation in communities – caring ministries from the Thrift Shop to knitting prayer shawls, music, mission, working with children and youth – and the staff and committees that support these groups. They collectively define who we are because they show where our passions lie.

But our communities need maintenance and attention. We must be deliberate and intentional about strengthening the sense of community we have and building out community to encompass more of our members and to address their needs: needs that may not have existed even a few years ago. Strengthening our own internal community ties and broadening the circle of community will make us stronger as a church and better able to address all of the other priorities we have identified. Our recommendations:

- Deliberately focus staff and volunteer resources on community formation and maintenance, engaging members and newcomers in community(ies) within the church
- Inventory what we're doing today; identify needs and gaps
- **Do better at welcoming: encountering, engaging, maintaining (Top Priority)**
- Foster special interest small group formation and participation to expand opportunities for belonging
- Create marketing opportunities for outreach to expand community/welcoming

ES.2.2 Theme 2 – Faith/Worship

Faith formation and development produced strong and passionate responses from many in the congregation and came up in many contexts, most commonly around youth and children, but also for adults. As we consider the focus on community, however, it is important to recognize that community builds the church, and the church is critical to our faith and our ability to live it. We also heard a general level of satisfaction with our worship experience.

- Maintain our focus that, before all else, we are a Christ-centered community of faith. Beware of “religion lite”
- Expand music and arts ministries to enrich worship and communities while attracting participants and listeners through creative programming and collaboration
- Revisit our vision statement (serving, welcoming, engaging, deepening); this could serve as a polestar/gut check on our initiatives – do these outward expressions of what we are about properly reflect who we are as a community of faith today?

ES.2.3 Theme 3 – Mission

Mission to our wider community is highly motivating for many at ACC. The depth of our commitment in dedicating 10% of contributions to missions is significant, especially in an era of declining financial support for the church. Yet members expressed a feeling of distance between them and the mission work the church does and supports – gaps in awareness and engagement. The Missions and Outreach Committee has already addressed this concern to some degree with the meal packing events mentioned multiple times as wonderful experiences.

- **De-emphasize check writing and promote volunteer-focused activities to raise awareness and increase engagement (Top Priority)**
- Participate/have a presence in community activities - farmers markets, activists walks (Social Justice), PRIDE
- Focus more M&O resources locally including immigrants and non-English speakers, LGBTQ+ community, the 3% of Acton residents living below the poverty level, our “shadow congregation” such as Thrift Shop customers

ES.2.4 Theme 4 – Youth/Children

Calling out ministry to youth and children emphasizes the importance of this aspect of church life as a special category of community and of faith mentioned earlier in broader contexts. The critical third space community offered by SHYF, retreats, and other youth-centered activities resonates deeply with youth in the programs; those who have been part of the programs; and their parents, grandparents, and friends. “SHYF was a lifesaver for me” is not only an exact quote, but emblematic of the importance of this unique community.

Similarly, experiences of learning about and observing faith in action as children have made impressions on our no-longer children and is something parents of young children today wish for their own kids. Across both youth and children’s ministry we heard of the value of unique, intergenerational relationships formed through these programs – valued both from the perspective of the volunteers and the participants in the programs.

Our church’s changing demographics and society’s changes create challenges in simply doing what we’ve always done to maintain and enhance this critical feature of church life. This relates not only to the shift to an older congregation, but also the types of issues families face – especially mental health issues with children and youth.

- **Promote intergenerational opportunities through programs. (Top Priority)** This is a highly valued aspect of a diverse-age community, expressed by both young and old.
- To restate some of the community recommendations in this context, look for opportunities to provide third spaces for youth in a low pressure environment – study space, gaming, discussion groups
- Be mindful of shifting demographics and needs with staff and program priorities, recognizing that the parents of our children and youth also need our support

ES.2.5 Theme 5 – Building

Our physical presence in the Town center and our 21,000 square feet of space are the final theme for discussion. The visibility and centrality of our location belie the fact that most people in Acton have little knowledge of what happens at the church or even see it as an important part of the community. “We’re the church with the Thrift Shop and the big parking lot” seemed to be the consensus view for how most in Acton and surrounding towns perceive ACC. The assets of location, parking, and usable space create enormous opportunities, yet they are also burdens – financially and administratively.

Aggressive and visionary work done by and set in motion by the Trustees have put us on a path with the goal of self-funding the building – so that income from the Thrift Shop, solar array, space rental, and other initiatives might ultimately fund the space. Shedding the unproductive assets of the two houses has also greatly reduced financial risk for the church and the administrative burden of overseeing them.

- **Encourage strategic decisions and investments to enhance the value of the building to the broader community. (Top Priority)** Enhancing rental attractiveness and utility, support existing uses better (Thrift Shop), moving to self-sustainability
- **Focus on “soft entry” events to draw the community in, to become familiar with and comfortable with the church. (Top Priority)** Build on the examples of the Thrift Shop and Trunk or Treat

ES.3 What is Next and Priorities

The members of the Task Force have had a unique opportunity to learn how churches are being challenged and how they are responding, or not, to those challenges. We view the climate of change as inevitable and existential. If we do not respond and adapt, the church will struggle; if we capture and react to the passions and needs of our congregation and community, we will thrive.

Through voting, the Task Force members identified the five recommendations we felt were the highest priority in terms of needing attention sooner rather than later and opening the door to making other recommendations more achievable. The top priorities are:

- Do better at welcoming: encountering, engaging, maintaining (Community/Welcoming)
- Encourage strategic decisions and investments to enhance the value of the building to the broader community (Building)
- Promote intergenerational opportunities through programs (Youth/Children)
- Focus on “soft entry” events to draw the community in, to become familiar with and comfortable with the church (Building)
- De-emphasize check writing and promote volunteer-focused activities to raise awareness and increase engagement (Mission)

The next step will be for ACC's leadership to consider the information provided here and to develop an implementation strategy that will strengthen ACC across these five thematic areas. In doing so, ACC will need to consider adapting and changing the programs, organization, and staff of our church to meet the needs of the future community. It is vital that the programs and communities and worship opportunities we offer reflect the congregation, region, and culture of 2024 and beyond.

ES.4 The Report

The full report contains a more detailed discussion of the SPTF approach, our assessment of the five themes or areas of focus, some recapitulation of highlights of the listening sessions, and recommendations. We have also included appendices with additional information; previous presentations and materials can be found on the Task Force's [website](#).

We are grateful to the members of ACC who gave their time and energy to participate in listening sessions, to Moderator Janette Blackburn for her contributions as an *ad hoc* member of the Task Force, and to Pastor Paulo França for recognizing the need for our work and his guidance and participation.

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**Acton Congregational Church
Strategic Planning Task Force Report
May 2024**



1. Strategic Planning Task Force Membership

The Task Force members at the UCC's Edwards House in Framingham.



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2. Strategic Planning Task Force: Our Charge, The Context, Our Approach

2.1 Overview

Our Church, like our world, is in a different place than it was ten, or even five years ago. With change, we have both a tremendous opportunity and a responsibility to take a thorough look at what we value most and where we want our focus to be in 2024 and beyond as we continue to fulfill our covenant with God and each other. The charge from Church Council to the SPTF was to:

- Collect information needed to set the future course of ACC
- Identify core areas of focus for our church
- Use these areas of focus to set directions for programs and for staff and volunteer priorities in line with membership and giving scenarios
- Fuel our work with intensive listening to the priorities of our congregation

2.2 Scope of Work

Areas of focus discussed:

- Discerning ministry and program priorities – what are our passions and what is our identity/what defines us as a congregation
- Managing the physical plant, expenses, and maintenance
- Analyzing income and membership trends
- Creating a staff, committee, and volunteer structure that aligns with the above
- Outreach and visibility – the external view of the church
- Time parameters: where we really are now (not where we think we are) and looking out five years

Tools:

- Prayer and reflection by the diverse membership of the SPTF
- Data collection and analysis (demographics of membership, expenses, giving patterns, other revenue/rental revenue, capital items)
- Priorities and passions: Prior vision work and Thrive session
- Facilitated Task Force Retreat (Fall 2023)
- Congregational input (through various channels including listening sessions)

2.3 Context

The Church Council flagged a changed environment for ACC as the impetus for the Task Force to take a hard look at what we are doing and what we should perhaps do differently. We are different, our community is different, and the society around us has changed. These dynamics

extend beyond our four walls, beyond COVID-19, and they have affected churches of all types reaching back decades.

We live in a community that is aging and that is becoming more culturally diverse. The fraction of Acton residents over 65 has doubled in just 10 years and one-third of Acton households speak a language other than English at home. These are profound shifts in our town that both explain some of the changes in our membership and call for us to respond and react to those changes. We need to serve the community we live in today and meet the needs of worshippers and seekers who look different than they did in the 1980s and 1990s.

These trends are reflected in a changing church membership. The number of pledge units supporting the church has fallen by half over the last 10 years and our congregation is aging. Nearly half of “active” members as we track them are 50 or older and if we pare back the number of SHYF and college graduates in their 20s who are no longer in the area the fraction climbs closer to two-thirds (Appendix 2).

ACC is by no means unique in experiencing dramatic demographic and membership shifts. Our Task Force got an important lesson in the depth of change and the imperative for change when we went on a retreat in September 2023 with Betsy Waters – a consultant in church change management who is affiliated with our Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ.² We offered highlights from that weekend in our presentation to the congregation on October 22, 2023. The presentation can be found at this [link](#). We have included some information from that presentation in this report.

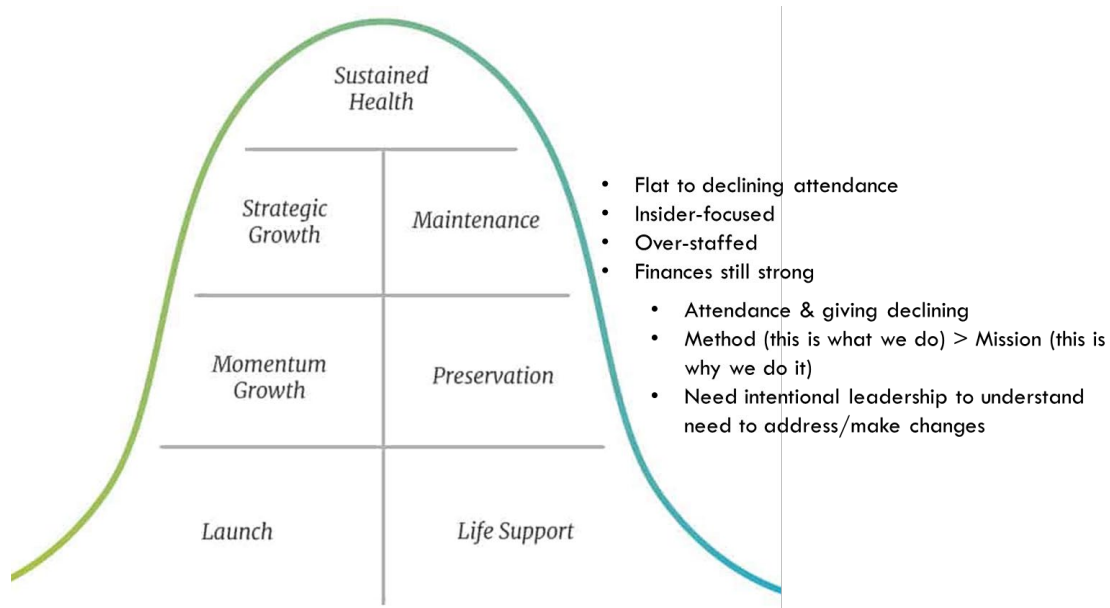
The members of the Task Force emerged from that weekend retreat with a unified sense of purpose behind our work: namely, that if ACC did not mindfully respond to the obvious and profound changes around us, the future of the church was truly in question. The trends are not favorable.

- Children and youth in church programs (not just ACC) fell 90% from highs in the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s; after COVID, those numbers fell another 90%.
- In 2003, ACC confirmed a class of roughly 25 youth; this year we have eight 8th graders considering confirmation and the following class has four.
- When we were designing the addition to the building in the late ‘90s, Sunday School enrollment was over 100 children; today it is seven.
- In 2000, experts projected that 25% of churches would close by the year 2020; that level was reached six years early in 2014.
- Interest in spirituality has soared, while institutions like churches and Christianity have experienced significant mistrust and abandonment.
- Financially, ACC remains on sound footing, but pledging and especially pledging units (households) have declined markedly. These are trends we cannot ignore.

² *The cost of the retreat and the consulting fee for Betsy Waters was funded by contributions from Task Force members.*

From the perspective of our consultant, ACC finds itself on the backslope of a bell curve tracing a church’s lifecycle: we are between a state of maintenance, where we are holding onto our existing programs and structures, and a state of preservation. Without intentional intervention to recognize the need to make changes, we will continue to decline.

Benchmarking Church Lifecycles³



A significant barrier to change, beyond the usual resistance to it, is the comfort found in “how we’ve always done it.” Looking back as the solution for what lies ahead is not, however, likely to send us down the right path because the underlying rules of the game have changed. Life has changed, families have changed, Acton has changed, society has changed.

The most commonly uttered phrase in our listening sessions had to be “we used to.” We on the Task Force have said it. Change brings feelings of loss and we all need to understand that and make room for that. As the Church Council said, ACC and the world are different places than they used to be and they are now headed in a still different direction.

The guidance the Task Force has received and can offer is that the path forward for ACC lies in:

- Acknowledging that loss
- Recognizing that “what we did” is unlikely to be a good guide for what we should do next
- Discerning our passions today for what drives and motivates us to be part of a church and a faith community
- Allowing those passions to guide our path forward

³ From: M. Elizabeth Waters melizabethwaters@gmail.com

One of the best illustrations of adjusting our thinking about ACC in 2024 grew out of an oft-cited feeling from some members that can be summarized as “we just need more young families and then everything will be fine.” In response to that sentiment, we received a passionate and deeply felt comment that seems to capture both the extent of the change and the need to change our thinking in response:

*“Families are seriously burned out. Modern family life, the increasing need for both parents to work to afford to live in this area, sky-high parenting expectations, and increasing mental health issues are taxing people to their breaking points.... ACC needs to **minister** to young families instead of viewing them as the next generation who’s going to come in and take care of an aging church....[I]t will not serve us well if all we do is keep saying, ‘We need families with kids.’”*

2.4 Methodology

The SPTF analyzed demographics from ACC, UCC, and government sources; gained important insight on its retreat; and met regularly between April 2023 and May 2024 to gain the understanding and information to formulate recommendations. We intend our suggestions to aid the Church Council and church leadership in guiding the congregation to a future filled with hope. A major step in moving forward was engaging with the congregation to discover what is important to a broad range of us, where the common themes lie, and what kind of a future we envision.

Our congregational outreach was guided by three discussion prompts:

1. *How do you engage with our church, and what do you get out of that?*
2. *Why should ACC still be here in 10 years?*
3. *A time-traveling member of ACC from 2044 visits to share what is exciting about our future church. What do they share? And how could you envision getting involved now to lay the groundwork to get us there?*

The SPTF reached out to the congregation through the E-News, had a dedicated signup on our webpage, made announcements in church, then did direct emails to roughly 60 members with follow-up emails to about a dozen households. Ultimately, we held 9 group discussions (mostly in-person, but several via Zoom), had one-on-one discussions, and received several responses in writing. All told, we heard from 66 members representing a wide range of members:

- 12 have kids in youth/children’s programs today (toddler to SHYF)
- 13 were SHYF kids
- 23 are grandparents

The sample was skewed to older members, and although the Zoom option helped increase representation among younger individuals and families, they are underrepresented in the sample.

We used the information from listening sessions along with the input of the Task Force members to structure our findings and recommendations. These follow in the next section of the report.

3. Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Through the process described above, the SPTF has attempted to discern the passions, values, and experiences that are shared and prized by those calling ACC their church home. They are why we are here, and the Task Force members' job as observers and listeners was to distill those into categories that we could define and explain and explore, with the ultimate goal of making recommendations for how our church might, through decisions about its priorities and programs, better support those passions and live up to those values that are most important to our members.

When the Task Force members reflected on what we had heard in talking to the congregation, there was universal recognition that the feelings of loss for "we used to" were very strong and while there was longing on the part of many to restore or return to the past, there was also recognition of profound changes in who was worshipping and participating in the church and in the times in which we live.

The passion and depth of feeling for programs and activities of the past were not for the programs – they were for the experiences represented by those programs: the sense of belonging, of sharing common values of a belief in Christ, of supporting each other, of supporting the community, and of worshipping an abundant God that had so generously blessed us.

What we must do is identify and hold out those values and experiences – they explain why we are part of ACC, why we belong to a faith community – but we must wrap those experiences in the changed reality of who is in our community today, what is happening around us, and what has changed to make the world of 1990 no longer the model for 2024 and beyond.

Our listening sessions were intended to gather from our members (and to sharpen the Task Force members' own awareness of) what are the essential values and experiences that make us a church – our "why." By clarifying what is most important, we could then frame recommendations to support those values, looking at the people (staff and volunteers) and programs needed to not only feature those values in the life of the church, but to build on them and build our community to include others who share those same values.

What follows is our distillation of those values into themes. We have described what we have heard from members, what we ourselves feel, and then offered recommendations in each theme area. The recommendations are deliberately made at a high level: we are not directing how a recommendation should be implemented (*e.g.*, the Deacons should...). The perspective we have brought to this issue is a starting point for further conversations with church leadership and members.

Finally, we have flagged five recommendations as "Top Priority" based on voting by members of the Task Force. This represents our view of where to begin the next steps, acknowledging there are some close votes on other priorities that were not far behind.

3.1 Theme 1 – Community/Welcoming

Community is foundational to members of ACC. Cultural and societal changes over the last 20-plus years have shaken communities to their roots leading to widespread social ills, loneliness, depression, and fragmentation. Members value the sense of community and belonging at ACC and invest heavily with their time and energy to support these programs. Many of the deepest feelings about membership and belonging at ACC come from participation in communities – caring ministries from the Thrift Shop to knitting prayer shawls, music, mission, working with children and youth – and the staff and committees that support these groups. They collectively define who we are because they show where our passions lie. This is a success story through all the change and transition that has occurred: that these communities remain strong and relevant. These groups and activities are the glue that have kept members engaged and energized while living out their faith.

But our communities need maintenance and attention. We must be deliberate and intentional about strengthening the sense of community we have and building out community to embrace more of our members and to address their needs: needs that may not have existed even a few years ago. Strengthening our own internal community ties and broadening the circle of community will make us stronger as a church and better able to address all of the other priorities we have identified.

3.1.1 What We Heard

Our “elevator speech” about the input we gathered from the congregation is simple: “It’s all about community.” This was the most frequently mentioned word or concept, whether relating to the importance of the church being here in ten years or the highlights of the time-traveler from the more distant future. Community, gathering, support, belonging, caring, and friendships were mentioned almost twice as frequently as the next topic in responses to our discussion prompts (Appendix 1). Community, togetherness, and caring represent perhaps the most powerful reason why people attend and participate in activities at ACC.

Threads of this included friendship and simply providing an opportunity to meet people, support for specific groups (elders, young parents, young adults, youth), and direct references to clinical support and our caring ministries (loneliness, mental health, special needs). A phrase commonly heard that jelled this concept was referring to church as a “third space” – a concept borrowed from sociology talking about places outside the usual work and home where we conduct so much of our lives. It’s perhaps a less spiritually driven rationale for church and a church community, but, in light of shattered and shuttered social spaces, it’s a very real need and obviously top of mind for our members.

The work of our caring ministries was mentioned both for the strong bonds among participants in these programs, but also the care and support felt by those on the receiving end of prayer shawl ministry, visitation, Stephen Ministry, the good shepherd ministry (meals), and prayer after worship. This blend of belonging and being cared for is critical to a vital and close community.

It is very difficult to separate welcoming from community. Though functionally different, welcoming reinforces and builds communities so we have chosen to address them together. Welcoming, openness, and diversity were frequently mentioned as aspirational goals, reflecting a general sense that we don't do welcoming like we should – it's not enough of a priority, not enough follow through, not intentional. Members are proud that we are an open and affirming church, but frustrated that more people don't know that. The desire for a more diverse community also came through, with many acknowledging the demographic variety in Acton that's not reflected in our membership (granted, often as a result of cultural differences) meaning we need to find new ways to connect.

3.1.2 Recommendations

- Deliberately focus staff and volunteer resources on community formation and maintenance, engaging members and newcomers in community(ies) within the church
 - Developing and maintaining information about members' interests/abilities (find their superpowers)
 - Onboard people into groups where they feel supported/in community (links to welcoming)
 - Reach people where they are; recognize members can be vital, engaged members even when they aren't in worship on Sundays
 - Consider a staff position for this as resources allow/elevate this as a program staff priority

- What we're doing today
 - Inventory programs in which members participate
 - Leverage our existing groups to build and deepen community. Example: senior choir – comes for rehearsal, works hard, goes home; repeat. Create opportunities for engaging – doesn't have to be everyone, dinner before rehearsal, drinks after, brunch after church some Sunday, *etc.*

- What we could be doing: Identify needs and gaps
 - Explore gaps and opportunities to create third spaces by changing the focus of some existing groups and creating new ones. Some priorities:
 - Parents of young kids/parents' support/single parents
 - Parents of school age/stress/schedules
 - Tutoring/mentoring for students
 - Career mentoring/networking for adults
 - Build a man park – conceptually if not physically
 - Specialized support: immigrant issues, ESL, taxes, legal issues (market through thrift shop)
 - Groups could simply meet, host speakers/discussions, offer childcare
 - Don't be afraid to jettison programs that aren't meeting our current needs

- **Do better at welcoming: encountering, engaging, maintaining (Top Priority)**
 - Reconstitute a welcoming committee
 - Develop a next step – what happens after “first contact?” Palm card, QR, website section, personal outreach
 - Bolster coffee hour: food at coffee hour once a month, various styles (youth take a month, pancake breakfast, other)
 - Increase visibility of ONA – very important for newcomers, new staff to be aware ACC is ONA
- Foster special interest small group formation and participation to expand opportunities for belonging
 - Examples: walk & wonder, bike rides, community meals, men’s breakfast
 - Support promotion and awareness
 - Facilitate placement of members/new members into groups
- Create marketing opportunities for outreach to expand community/welcoming
 - Integrate marketing into information flow – regular communication with committee chairs, Council to talk to those outside our four walls

3.2 Theme 2 – Faith/Worship

Faith formation and development produced strong and passionate responses from many in the congregation and came up in many contexts, most commonly around youth and children, but also for adults. As we consider the focus on community, however, it is important to recognize that a healthy and vibrant community builds up the church, and the church is critical to our faith and our ability to live it.

One member of our task force used the metaphor of a sandwich to explain the centrality of faith to our vision and mission as a church: faith is the meat or filling of the sandwich – our communities and our missions/works are the bread, holding the filling inside and it is through those communities and works that we find faith inside.

3.2.1 What We Heard

Conversations in this area had three themes – one related to teaching and learning with an emphasis on children and youth. This stressed the importance of values – teaching and following a Christ-like path - loving one another, caring for the sick, welcoming all. Members talked about stories and scripture that bring these values to life. A second theme was dynamic worship and the importance of gathering as a church, the feelings of loss around smaller attendance compared to pre-COVID, and desire to engage a wide range of members and friends through worship in person and online. That said, we heard a general level of satisfaction with our worship experience. Finally, many members referenced the critical link between worship and music at ACC as meaningful and special. We heard gratitude for the gifts of the staff and participants in music programs and a strong desire for more and innovative music and artistic programming.

3.2.2 Recommendations

- Maintain our focus that, before all else, we are a Christ-centered community of faith. Beware of “religion lite”
- Expand music and arts ministries to enrich worship and communities while attracting participants and listeners through creative programming and collaboration
- Revisit our vision statement (serving, welcoming, engaging, deepening); this could serve as a polestar/gut check on our initiatives – do these outward expressions of what we are about properly reflect who we are as a community of faith today?
- Explore new formats in which to engage adults in study and faith development

3.3 Theme 3 – Mission

Mission to our wider community is highly motivating for many at ACC. The depth of our commitment in dedicating 10% of contributions to missions is significant, especially in an era of declining financial support for the church. Yet members expressed a feeling of distance between them and the mission work the church does and supports – gaps in awareness and engagement. The Missions and Outreach Committee has already addressed this concern to some degree. The meal packing events were mentioned multiple times as exceptionally meaningful experiences because they created opportunities for active involvement across more members of the congregation, as opposed to traditional financial support (*i.e.*, “check writing” in our shorthand below), which is often visible only to those directly involved with M&O.

3.3.1 What We Heard

Mission and the call to help others came up frequently as members talked about lessons from their faith and the importance of passing that faith on to others. Our responsibility to the wider community was a frequently cited response to the “why should the church be here in ten years” prompt as many see this as a critical responsibility and something they feel good about. Members consistently mentioned devoting our time and money close to home, recognizing needs right in Acton and neighboring towns. Many expressed an interest in learning more about what local needs are and how they might best support them.

3.3.2 Recommendations

- **De-emphasize check writing and promote volunteer-focused activities to raise awareness and increase engagement. (Top Priority)**
 - All church mission trip
 - Regularly programmed mission activities Sunday mornings
 - Engage with other churches/faiths
- Participate/have a presence in community activities - farmers markets, activists walks (Social Justice), PRIDE

- Focus more M&O resources locally including immigrants and non-English speakers, LGBTQ+ community, the 3% of Acton residents living below the poverty level, our “shadow congregation” such as Thrift Shop customers

3.4 Theme 4 – Youth/Children

Calling out ministry to youth and children emphasizes the importance of this aspect of church life as a special category of community and of faith mentioned earlier in broader contexts. The critical third space community offered by SHYF, retreats, and other youth-centered activities resonate deeply with youth in the programs; those who have been part of the programs; and their parents, grandparents, and friends. “SHYF was a lifesaver for me” is not only an exact quote, but emblematic of the importance of this unique community.

Similarly, experiences of learning about and observing faith in action as children have made impressions on our no-longer children and is something parents of young children today wish for their own kids. Across both youth and children’s ministry we heard of the value of unique, intergenerational relationships formed through these programs – valued both from the perspective of the volunteers and the participants in the programs.

Our church’s changing demographics and society’s changes create challenges in simply doing what we’ve always done to maintain and enhance this critical feature of church life. This relates not only to the shift to an older congregation, but also the types of issues families face – especially mental health issues with children and youth.

3.4.1 What We Heard

Families in the church deeply value ministry to children and youth and the unique community/space it provides. We heard expressions of gratitude for the programs from current youth and their parents and a desire that those third space opportunities remain available to those that follow them. SHYF was specifically mentioned as a unique mission that can and has drawn in youth from the community who are not members and that can serve as a soft entry point for new families. To emphasize what we already addressed under community, mental health challenges, for youth in particular, were cited as critical concerns and something youth programs can help with.

We heard a great deal about intergenerational opportunities and the unique environment of church where children and youth can come to know adults in, again, a third way – apart from the duality of home/family and school.

More than in other areas, teaching and education came up in reference to children’s programming: introducing the bible to children, telling stories, and imparting values like the Golden Rule. We also clearly heard that parents of children in the church are burned out as they are the primary resource for children’s ministry, lacking other adult volunteers or staff to carry that load. The small number of families active in children’s programming are not receiving the support they need.

3.4.2 Recommendations

- **Promote intergenerational opportunities through programs. (Top Priority)** This is a highly valued aspect of a diverse-age community, expressed by both young and old. This could include:
 - Enlist more adult (non-parent) volunteers to support children’s ministry
 - Restore/enhance sponsorship opportunities pairing children/youth and elders
 - Joint mission/service opportunities
 - Mentoring, tutoring, college and job advice
- To restate some of the community recommendations in this context, look for opportunities to provide third spaces for youth in a low pressure environment – study space, gaming, discussion groups
- Be mindful of shifting demographics and needs in staff and program priorities, recognizing that the parents of our children and youth also need our support

3.5 Theme 5 – Building

Our physical presence in the Town center and our 21,000 square feet of space are the final theme for discussion. The visibility and centrality of our location belie the fact that most people in Acton have little knowledge of what happens at the church or even see it as an important part of the community. “We’re the church with the Thrift Shop and the big parking lot” seemed to be consensus view for how most in Acton and surrounding towns perceive ACC. The assets of location, parking, and usable space create enormous opportunities, yet they are also burdens – financially and administratively.

Aggressive and visionary work done by and set in motion by the Trustees have put us on a path with the goal of self-funding the building – so that income from the Thrift Shop, solar array, space rental, and other initiatives might ultimately fund the space. Shedding the unproductive assets of the two houses has also greatly reduced financial risk for the church and the administrative burden of overseeing them.

3.5.1 What We Heard

Members view our building and facilities as key assets that we should utilize more effectively to the benefit of the other four themes. As we asked members to think about the distant future, they frequently talked about utilizing the building and property more completely: “a full parking lot every day of the week” came up multiple times. Responses referenced the Thrift Shop, community spaces, classes, and community support.

3.5.2 Recommendations

- **Encourage strategic decisions and investments to enhance the value of the building to the broader community. (Top Priority)** Enhancing rental attractiveness and utility, support existing uses better (Thrift Shop), moving to self-sustainability

- **Focus on “soft entry” events to draw the community in, to become familiar with and comfortable with the church. (Top Priority)** The Thrift Shop is the main example currently along with Trunk or Treat.
 - Study space
 - Community drop-in for support of mission activities above (tutoring, ESL, immigrant support)
 - Music events – collaboration with other music groups or encouraging groups to perform at ACC
 - Other fine arts – gallery shows/exhibits
 - Host forums on social issues
 - Using the parking lot: music festival, food trucks, ethnic festivals

4. What is Next?

By identifying areas of focus that are important to the congregation, our goals were to sort through and report back on those priorities and develop recommendations that will ensure that ACC remains vital and relevant to its members, to potential members, and to the wider community.

ACC is a strong church with a remarkable history that dates to the very founding of the town. The church has seen much change and we remain a congregation healthy in our faith, programs, and even our finances. We experienced strong growth in the final decades of the last century coinciding with a demographic bubble that brought dramatic shifts to Acton as a community. Beyond our local trends, our culture, too, has undergone remarkable disruptions. In the face of all of that, ACC has embarked on this strategic planning exercise; our hope is to surf the waves of change and emerge stronger in faith, in community, and in service.

The SPTF was established to make recommendations to the Church Council and church leadership. We are not an implementing or executing entity, so our work is effectively done with the delivery of this report and our findings to Council and the congregation. It is up to the Council and other church leaders to determine how to evaluate and react to our recommendations.

The members of the Task Force have had a unique opportunity to learn about how churches are being challenged and how they are responding, or not, to those challenges. We view the climate of change as inevitable and existential. If we do not respond and adapt, the church will struggle; if we capture and react to the passions and needs of our congregation and community, we will thrive.

4.1 Top Priorities

Through voting, the Task Force members identified the five recommendations we felt were the highest priority in terms of needing attention sooner rather than later and opening the door to making other recommendations more achievable. The top priorities are:

- Do better at welcoming: encountering, engaging, maintaining (Community/Welcoming)
- Encourage strategic decisions and investments to enhance the value of the building to the broader community (Building)
- Promote intergenerational opportunities through programs (Youth/Children)
- Focus on “soft entry” events to draw the community in, to become familiar with and comfortable with the church (Building)
- De-emphasize check writing and promote volunteer-focused activities to raise awareness and increase engagement (Mission)

The next step will be for ACC's leadership to consider the information provided here and to develop an implementation strategy that will strengthen ACC across these five thematic areas. In doing so, ACC will need to consider adapting and changing the programs, organization, and staff of our church to meet the needs of the future community. It is vital that the programs and communities and worship opportunities we offer reflect the congregation, region, and culture of 2024 and beyond.

Appendix 1. Word Maps Gathered from Listening Sessions

Question 2: Why Should ACC still be here in 10 years?

Community-related: 56

25 community
6 friends
7 support
6 each other
4 mental health
3 elder care
3 connection
2 loneliness

Mission-related: 27

10 others
6 help
3 help people
3 mission
3 action
2 service

Faith-related: 27

7 God
6 values
5 Jesus
4 learning
3 worship
2 gospel

18 youth/children/kids

Other:

3 inter-generational
2 [not] social club
2 other churches
2 safe space

Question 3: Time-traveling question: What is exciting about our future church? How do we lay the groundwork to get us there in 20 years?

31 more (most mentioned word)
2 coffee shop

Community related - 47

23 community/gathering place
10 events
7 social
3 young adults
2 college age
2 special needs

Welcoming/membership - 22

13 open/welcoming/more welcoming
6 diverse
3 more diverse

23 kids/young/youth/young people

Mission related - 13

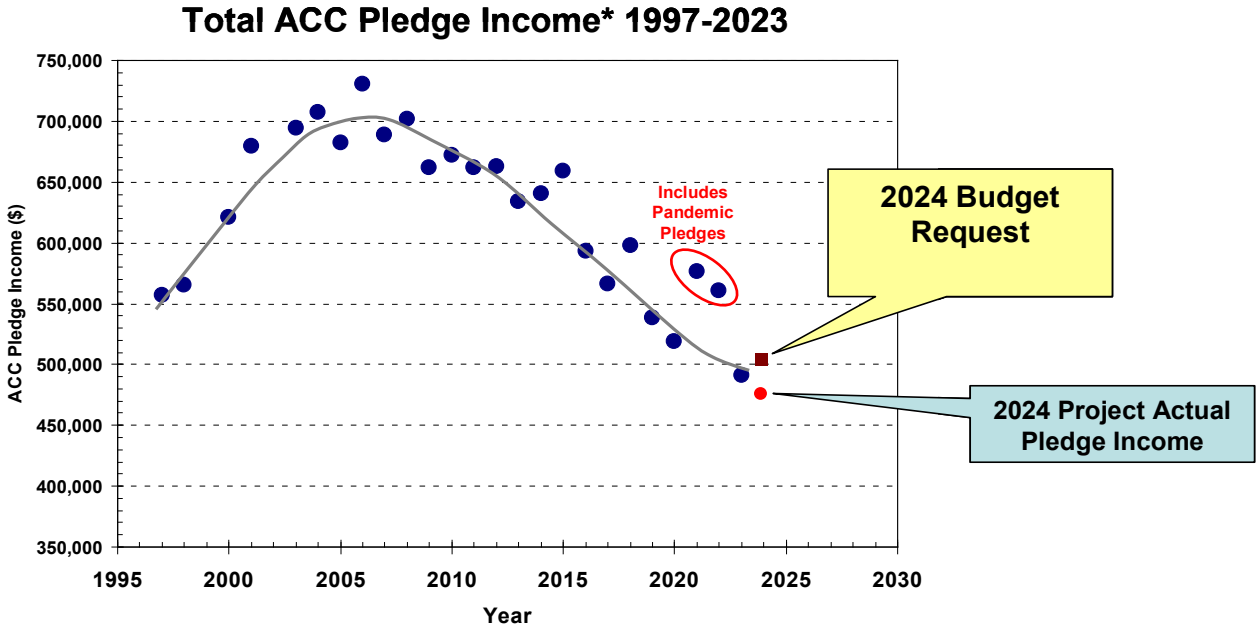
7 mission
6 needs
5 community center

Other:

7 building
3 other churches

Appendix 2. Recent ACC Trends

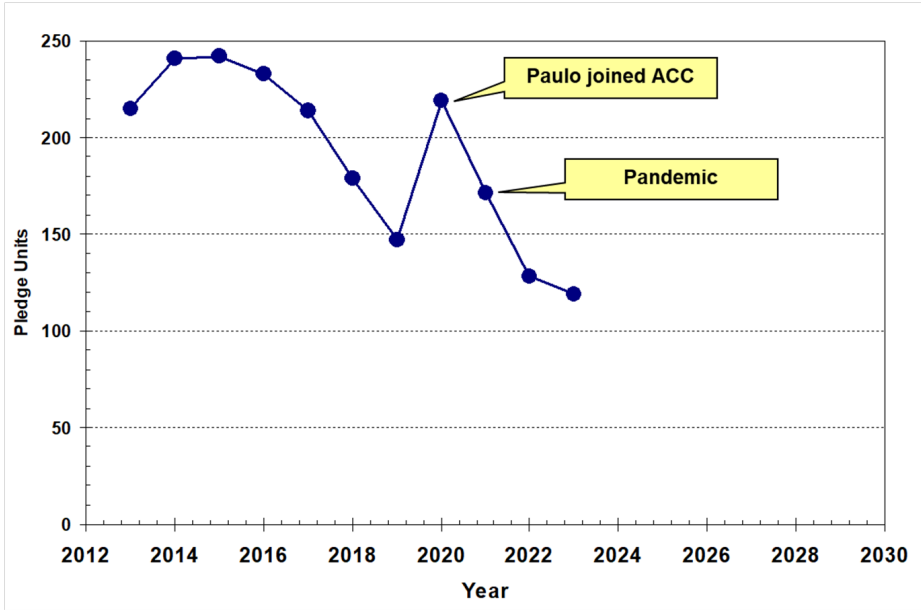
The SPTF has included data compiled and presented by the Trustees at the January 2023 Annual Meeting. These results highlight some of the trends that formed the impetus for the formation and charter of the SPTF.

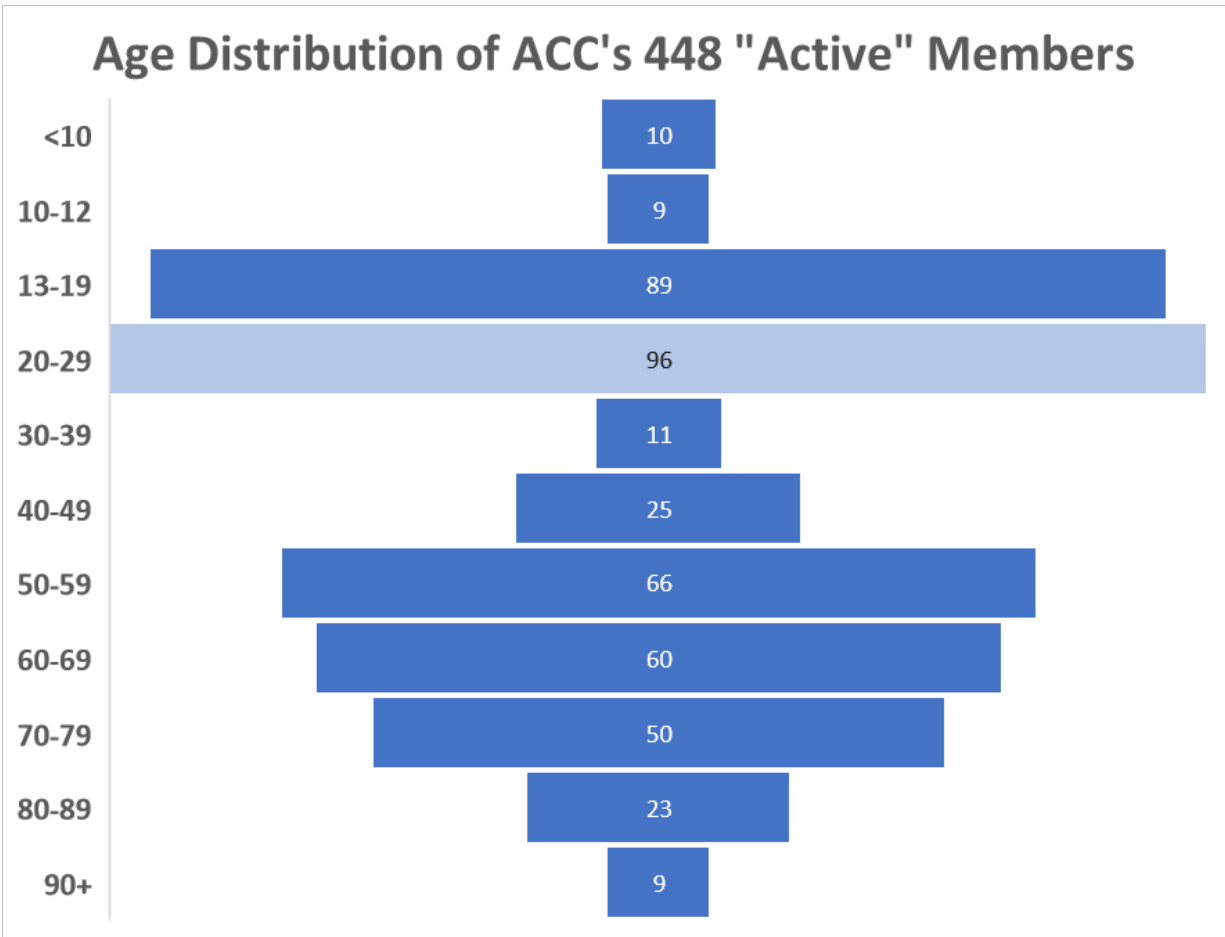


*Includes loose collections and Special Pandemic Pledges

ACC pledge income from 1998 through 2023 showing the trends that resulted in ACC’s transition from a program-based church to a pastoral-based church.

ACC Pledge Units





Note: The report references the aging of the congregation, despite the large number of those in the 13-19 and 20-29 categories above. These numbers reflect the large cohort of youth that have mostly left the area after high school and were part of the population surge that overwhelmed the Acton schools in the latter half of the 1990s and early 2000s. ACC has not conducted its routine rollcall meeting since 2018, when students that move away have typically been shifted to an inactive status, so a large number of these young adults are, in fact, inactive. It is the much smaller cohorts in the <12 and 30-49 categories that portend a continued increase in the median age of the congregation.

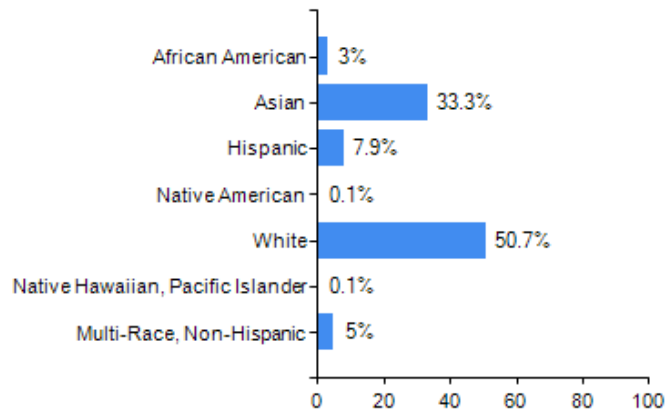
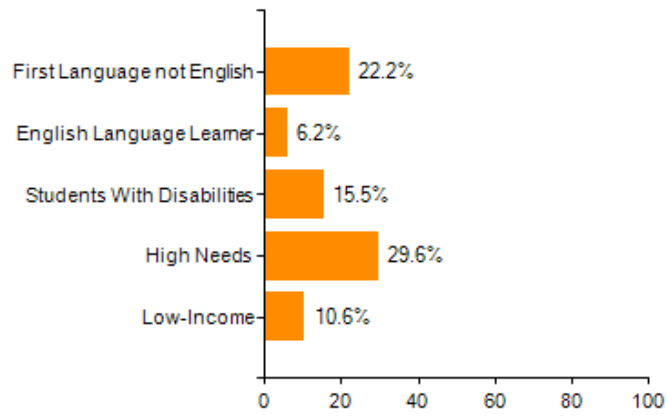
Appendix 3. Town of Acton Demographic Trends

Demographics of Acton: Population: 2010 Census – 21,924; 2020 Census – 24,021 – represents a 9.6% increase

Race / Ethnicity	2000	2010	2020
Non-Hispanic White	88.3%	77.3%	63.4%
Asian	9.1%	18.6%	23.7%
Two or more races	NR	1.7%	5.7%
Black	0.8%	1.1%	4.2%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	1.8%	2.6%	3.5%
Native American	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%

Number of Acton Households in 2020:	8,931 (8,187 in 2010)
Percentage of persons under 18 years in 2020:	30.6% (29.5% in 2010)
Percentage of persons 65 years and over in 2020:	15.9% (8.4% in 2010)
Median age	41 (38 in 2000)
Foreign born persons, percent, 2017-2021:	27.3%
Owner-occupied housing unit rate, 2017-2021:	71.6%
Households, 2017-2021:	8,931
Language other than English spoken at home, percent >5 years+, 2017-2021	32.8%
High school graduate or higher, percent of persons age 25 years+, 2017-2021	96.9%
Bachelor's degree or higher, percent of persons age 25 years+, 2017-2021	76.4%
In civilian labor force, total, percent of population age 16 years+, 2017-2021	70.8%
In civilian labor force, female, percent of population age 16 years+, 2017-2021	65.7%
Median household income (in 2021 dollars), 2017-2021:	\$138,163
Persons in poverty, percent	3.3%

2022-23 Enrollment: 5,133 kids in Nine Schools Grades pre-K Through 12



Demographics at Acton-Boxborough Regional High School (9-12 grades)

Race	% of School	% of District	% of State
African American	3.2	3.0	9.4
Asian	36.8	33.3	7.3
Hispanic	6.8	7.9	24.2
Native American	0.2	0.1	0.2
White	49.6	50.7	54.4
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.2	0.1	0.1
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	3.1	5.0	4.4