

Executive Summary

“The shift in our collective minds from ‘Fairlawn is awesome and people should come here’ to ‘Fairlawn provides experiences that remind people that they’re awesome’ - is a key thought that will help us to create a narrative whereby we are genuinely providing value in a way that lifts people.”

(Internal key informant)

Introduction

Fairlawn Avenue United Church (FAUC) is a long-standing institution in North Toronto, known for being progressive and responsive to the needs of its members. FAUC is currently guided by a strategic plan entitled [The Fairlawn Call](#) (TFC). TFC states that FAUC helps people “connect with what matters in life.”

In 2019, FAUC sought to answer two questions about members of the congregation who are less engaged and also the broader community: Who are they? What matters to them? FAUC contracted with Nayar Consulting to conduct research to answer these questions.

More specifically, the goal of the research was to assess three areas:

- 1. The top 2-3 unmet needs of people in the community, including congregation members who are less engaged at FAUC and those in the broader community**
- 2. The value proposition¹ of FAUC to address these needs**
- 3. How FAUC can better engage and motivate people to participate in its programming and the FAUC community**

A multi-method approach was used to gather data for the consultation including a document review, a community survey, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, a literature review and environmental scanning. In total, 369 people participated in the consultations. The information from this research report will be used to anchor strategic planning for FAUC in going forward.

Key Findings in the Research

Highlights from the key findings in the research are presented against the goal as stated above.

Exploring Unmet Needs

Unmet needs depend on the population group:

Parents with younger children will always choose quality, choice and convenience in terms of activities for their kids; they will be loyal to the group that provides those things, whether it is a church or not

Parents with teenagers want the chance for their children to engage in civic or social justice activities (both together and/or alone), especially in a values framework such as the one that a church could provide

Youth are seeking a chance to meaningfully connect beyond social media, opportunities to network for jobs and a chance to explore more non-traditional visions of religion;

Mature adults are looking for a place to meet others and connect for multiple reasons (e.g., recently divorced or widowed, children who have recently left home, recent retirement from work). Many mature adults may have also “left” the church as young adults but sustain a desire to question how they feel about religion today. There is also a desire for adult learning on cultural, historical and political topics of interest. Lastly, mature adults are looking for ways to “make a difference” in this phase of life

For **seniors**, isolation, grief and loss are critical issues. Other needs include getting help to navigate online resources and intergenerational programming to help younger people and seniors better understand each other.

A need for connection to spirituality *and* community:

People are **longing for a connection to spirituality without it necessarily being associated with religion**. This often takes the form of being interested in social justice (i.e., making the world a better place); in fact, perhaps social justice is the new way people express their deeper beliefs, their “faith”, in a sense;

Churches are seen as a place of community, because they are welcoming and they offer space to gather. Interestingly, while people don’t want to be pressured to donate time or money, qualitative data shows that people don’t feel that would happen at FAUC and feel that a church can be a place of community for broader community members who are not Christian:

“I view [a church] as a community gathering place to share thoughts, even if not necessarily religious but may share similar values (i.e., community, charitable giving).”

(Broader community member)

The Value Proposition of FAUC to Address Needs

The data shows that FAUC has important assets to leverage, including:

- The **people** and the family/ friendly feeling
- The **music program**
- The **minister/ religious services**
- **Social justice work**
- The **annual book sale**

For internal key informants, FAUC is set apart from other churches/places because of the **support that is offered during challenging times** and because it encourages questions about spirituality in the name of making the world a better place:

“Why do social justice work at FAUC as opposed to other places? I have had a huge amount of support from people at FAUC – my husband died, when I was ill, they prayed, there was food on my front porch. You can do social justice work AND GET the support system! You might not get that in another organization...”

(Internal key informant)

Consultation participants state that FAUC's unique value proposition is to offer activities within *a values-based framework*. The qualitative data also shows that for broader community members, engaging in activities offered by a church feels like *an opportunity to give back*.

How FAUC Can Better Engage with the Broader Community

- Data from service providers/other churches indicate that it is important to focus on a few key priorities and ensure that leadership is on board with those priorities;
- There is a critical need to embrace virtual engagement for all populations and age groups;
- Key informants also indicate that FAUC needs to be out in the community, building relationships and being visible;
- Internal key informants strongly feel there is a need for better communications with the community. Multi-pronged approaches are recommended (e.g., online communication, the Fairlawn sign, flyers and direct mail newsletters). The website is a key opportunity for FAUC to do better at engaging the broader community.

What Is The Story?

The key findings offer a compelling picture for FAUC's future:

FAUC and the Community

- The service area in which FAUC is located is one that has been relatively stable over many years. People in the community are relatively well-off, from an income perspective. They are somewhat older, with people over 55 showing some moderate growth. Parents with younger children are decreasing to some degree in the area, while people with teenagers are staying steady. Interestingly, younger adults in the neighbourhood tend to live with their parents;
- In the community, FAUC is well-known and has a good reputation. Congregants closely associate FAUC with its commitment to social justice. Non-congregants state that they see the building as part of the community: "we know the church is there"

Unmet Needs and Target Groups

- Some of the fundamental tenets of the United Church of Canada (UCC) are key assets for the purpose of community engagement for FAUC today: connection, inclusion and a progressive attitude towards faith. These assets align strongly with the key findings. People are looking for more connection. In fact, non-congregants want to "feel accepted and valued." This interest in connection relates to different things: transitioning in life when times are difficult, learning new things, making connection with others and hoping to do good social justice work (stated as being "able to make a difference in the world" and "to be part of something bigger");
- Perhaps most importantly for FAUC, people have a need to gather and to question the bigger picture, especially given the painful state that the world is in today. While this might not result in people turning to religion, it certainly has people probing the deeper meaning of life. This is FAUC's sweet spot. This provides the chance to connect, learn, question, do good work and unite it all to deeper questions of *meaning, existence, purpose and service*. Although FAUC is a Christian church that will not stop the broader community from engaging;

- The key findings show that in terms of connection, activities and programming, non-congregants are willing to engage with FAUC. **This demonstrates that, no matter what, faith underscores a sense of belonging and connection.** Congregants and non-congregants alike are seeking a place to gather anchored on connection, social justice and engagement, and FAUC fits the bill for them. This does not mean, however, that FAUC can simply offer new activities and expect people to come. The minister, laity and congregation of FAUC must also dedicate resources to community outreach and engagement;
- Getting out and about also means engaging new people who have not yet been involved with FAUC. *Looking internally for growth is not going to provide good returns to FAUC.* The people who are lower-engaged members are such for a reason, and are not especially interested in being more engaged. But the broader community, seeking community and connection, can be better engaged;
- The research shows that the groups to focus on first and foremost are mature adults (many of whom are going through life changes related to work status, marriage status and having children leave home) and parents with teenagers. Given census data, these populations are compelling for FAUC to focus on. As well, a longer-term vision can start to be seen:
 - Those mature adults will become seniors and FAUC will have a relationship with them as they age to be in a better position to provide help and support as needed
 - Parents with teens will soon be mature adults and will have built a relationship with FAUC so that they are more likely to get involved as they transition out of active parenting, work, etc.
 - Any newcomers or lower-engaged members that fall into one of these groups would be included as targets for engagement
- Bringing families with younger children into the church so the children grow up and then stay as adults and engaging youth is not borne out by the key findings, census data and literature .

Opportunities to Build FAUC's Value Proposition

- In terms of social justice work, focusing on one or two key social justice areas may be important for FAUC to build longevity into their engagement strategy and partner with other groups;
- FAUC must now see itself both as a community place and a religious anchor. The UCC is in a unique position in this way, as it is seen as a place of openness and engagement.

Considerations for Strategic Planning

This research will be used to anchor strategic planning for FAUC in the coming months. The research points to the following considerations as part of that strategic planning process:

Top unmet needs

1. Maintain focus with current members of FAUC who are higher-engagement (e.g., as they age, offer supports in terms of grief, loss, a place to get support and a place of community).
2. Focus on two key populations going forward: Mature adults (aged 55-69 years, both those in the current congregation and in the broader community) and parents with older children (i.e., the 40 and 50 year old people who have older children in the broader community).

3. Reduce focus on lower-engaged members, unless they happen to be a member of the priority populations, in which case engaging them is through that lens.
4. Anchor what is being offered to a community engagement focus *and* a religious focus; continue focus on questioning spirituality and religion through UCC's unique values framework.

Exploring FAUC's Value Proposition

5. Building off of FAUC's reputation, FAUC should take a strong social justice focus and anchor identified activities and its brand on that social justice work.
6. Focus the social justice work on an issue that can give FAUC strategic traction. Have that focus inform all branding, outreach, partnerships, etc.
7. Anchor marketing, communications and branding to messaging that: (a) FAUC welcomes all viewpoints about religion and spirituality, and (b) FAUC is about learning, dialogue, connection, purpose and changing the world to make it better.

Motivating People to Participate

8. Use the music program as a way to build the profile of FAUC overall, by directly anchoring it to defined social justice work and learning opportunities.
9. Create a community outreach plan that takes FAUC out of the building with its key offerings; employ a multi-pronged outreach and communications strategy.
10. Ensure that FAUC goes online and goes virtual! Consider online classes, activities and alternative services, including virtual services on days other than Sundays.
11. Make sure FAUC gets out into the community and meets people through events and outreach.
12. Focus the tenant relationships on programming that brings certain populations in and build partnerships with organizations in the neighbourhood and beyond to increase FAUC's reach.

Building Capacity to Operationalize the Strategy

13. Start slowly by focusing on one population and/or one initiative; build it and go from there.
14. Consider a Start, Stop, Continue exercise to focus effort on strategic activities.
15. Update the organizational structure to create capacity to implement the new strategy, identifying what skills are needed at staff and volunteer levels (e.g., dedicated community outreach and engagement resources).
16. Proactively develop and implement a change management plan, recognizing that FAUC is coming into another time of transition; ensure that leadership works together to support a positive culture and encourage buy-in from congregation members.