

Listening and Learning: Healing and Hope

Fairlawn Avenue United Church Conversations 2019

“Remembering rightly is important work. The way in which we shape our memories and tell them from one generation to the next has powerful implications for identity, values clarification, and soul tending. This is true for individuals and institutions alike. How we remember shapes how we interpret our present circumstances, how we live into our values, how we make decisions, and how we claim our purpose. Memory work is soul-tending work.”

- Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*

Introduction

Following a period of uncertainty, conflict, and upheaval that began in 2016 and left an impact on many (though not all) members of the congregation, Fairlawn Avenue United Church embarked on a time of transition whose mandate and goals were developed by Governing Council in consultation with Presbytery.

One of those goals involved a process to heal wounds and address lingering, unresolved issues from 2016-2017..

As the Transition Team began work in 2018, it became apparent that some members of the congregation, and the current and former leadership, felt the need for a continuing period of gradual healing and re-building of trust. Others preferred to concentrate their energy on moving forward with meaningful and hopeful programs and projects at Fairlawn. Yet others found the entire situation confusing because they were largely unaware of the tensions that developed. However, everyone wished to restore a sense of purpose, community, and trust across the members, leadership, volunteers, and staff within the Fairlawn congregation,.

Responding to such diverse responses is challenging. We cannot act as though nothing happened, yet there is little appetite for dwelling on the past. A need for healing was evident in many of the Transition Team's initiatives, such as the Listening Project work. Specific needs for healing, as expressed by members of the congregation, were met – often in one-on-one conversations with the Transition Minister. In some cases, healing came with the passage of time, sometimes involving a decision to “take a sabbatical” from prior leadership roles. There is a continuing need for sensitivity and awareness as the work of healing continues for some members of Fairlawn.

Intentional Listening Process

In May 2019, the Transition Team tasked us (Jill Klaehn and the Rev. Douglas duCharme) to meet with all those involved, directly or indirectly, in the upheaval that developed in the course of 2016-2017, which led to the Presbytery Visitation Team coming to Fairlawn and releasing its subsequent report.

We (Jill and Douglas) assembled a list of people to approach and, after discussion about the focus for the conversations, wrote to each of them with the following request:

“We are writing to you as part of the Transition Team's efforts to resolve issues resulting from the events of 2016-2017 and to ensure that the work on healing, truth, and reconciliation is properly addressed.

Given your role on Governing Council (or Ministry & Personnel, or as staff) during that time, we would like to meet with you to discuss two questions:

1. How do you perceive that things are going now at Fairlawn, a year later? Do you see ways that the work that has been done to this point is reflecting some learning from what happened?
2. What do you believe we still need to learn from that experience and implement to ensure that we don't go there again?”

In response, we conducted interviews with, or received detailed written responses from, 24 individuals. Only one person whom we approached did not respond.

The interviews were conducted between June and September 2019, meeting either in Douglas' office or in Jill's home. Detailed notes were kept and, where provided, additional written materials were gathered from participants in the process.

The conversations, and the written submissions that we received, were uniformly thoughtful, sincere, and constructive. They frequently included some consideration about what had happened, and how such a complicated and damaging situation could have developed. However, it was apparent to most of those with whom we met that there was no one explanation for what happened, and that working to identify the things that could help Fairlawn to avoid allowing that kind of situation to develop in the future was an effective way to move forward.

With that in mind, we have worked to synthesize a broad range of observations and suggestions based on what we heard in the course of nearly four months of conversations, and to organize them in a way that can, hopefully, inform our path forward. Not surprisingly, the insights that we gained do not all fit into tidy categories, so some overlap is to be expected. Also, these are only very loosely organized by priority.

1. General Observations

Every person we spoke with said, unequivocally, that Fairlawn is in a much better place now than it was in 2016-2017. One person said the difference “is like night and day!”

Others pointed to improved communication, a noticeable improvement in staff morale and caliber, growing community partnerships, and the work of the Transition Team to rebuild key areas of congregational life and culture.

However, concern was also expressed about over-burdened volunteers, the need for new leadership, and a sense of drift in the congregation in terms of levels of engagement and the ongoing viability of programs, such as Spirit Space, requiring a high investment of resources.

Most people expressed an awareness, in themselves, of having had time to move on and to create some distance from what were, at times, intense experiences. Pride was also expressed in the fact that Fairlawn recognizes some “responsibility for what happened, and is taking that seriously.” A few of those we spoke to also noted that the impression that few, if any, people left explicitly as a result of the upheaval that occurred is a testimony to Fairlawn’s resilience and deep sense of connection and belonging.

The experience of having a Transition Minister is viewed as having been very positive, “providing calm, competent, and personal leadership”. One person expressed it this way: “Douglas is with us, not spoon-feeding us, but challenging and supporting us, getting us to a good place from which we can rebuild and renew.”

Others welcomed the sense of being able to detect signs of hope bubbling up – “we are once again creating hope!”

It is apparent that for some of the people we spoke to there is a lingering sense of loss, tied to some remaining confusion over the circumstances of the previous minister’s absences and, in the end, his departure. The opportunity for this kind of conversation was welcomed, even by people who expressed no need of healing. Again and again, as we sat down with people, they began by saying, “I don’t know what I can possibly add” or “you’ve probably already heard whatever I can say about this from others, I’m sure I have nothing new to say”, only to go on to contribute important pieces to our understanding in the course of an hour or more of discussion with few prompts required from either of us!

While our listening process was not intended to arrive at an agreed version of events or a clear diagnosis of “what happened”, almost all of those we spoke with rooted their response to the two questions in an understanding of the situation as they experienced it. Few of these accounts were in any significant way at odds with one another, and yet we were not left with a clear consensus picture of what went so badly wrong.

The closest we might have come to this was an assessment that individuals and challenges “were undone” by other shortcomings in Fairlawn generally, which brought stress levels to the breaking point.

One point of overarching agreement was on the importance of learning from this experience and a commitment to implement what we have learned. As one person said, “We need a new approach that is rooted in our learning – we are now on that path, but we clearly are not there yet.”

2. Communication

Effective communication was a recurring theme through nearly every conversation we had, whether that concerned communication with the congregation, or with staff, or communication among different aspects of congregational volunteers and leadership. Appreciation was expressed frequently for the recent efforts of Governing Council to keep the congregation better informed in a timely fashion about how things are going

and what specific meetings had as a focus. The importance of building and maintaining a consistent and compelling narrative across all communications channels was underlined.

There is also appreciation for the work of the Transition Team and Governing Council related to listening and nurturing respectful conversation across the congregation. There is awareness of the need to develop the capacity to communicate in different ways with diverse groups in the congregation, reflecting varying levels of comfort with technology, and their relative experience of Fairlawn depending on age, length of time as a part of the congregation, and so on

An important area for continuing attention and work is in building trust through communication. This includes the ability to demonstrate that we can convey difficult messages, or address challenging topics, effectively and openly.

Trust will also be built as communication becomes reliably interactive so that a dependable feedback loop is in place to ensure that clear and respectful communication is happening as opposed to the current tendency for communication to be ad hoc and anecdotal. We need to be able to “check that what we thought we said is what was heard”. We could also work to make more effective use of respected allies within the congregation in crafting key messaging. As one person stated, “We need to mobilize those who hold knowledge at Fairlawn Avenue, people who can help to socialize and normalize the change message.”

As our coherent path forward becomes clearer, one person urged that Fairlawn “needs to find a spacious narrative that recognizes and celebrates the diversity, all our voices and perspectives, with an openness to different and changing priorities at any given time – not rooted in fear, or a sense of loss of what was, but a common vision of what can be into the future.”

3. Relationships, Conflict, Trust

If one word stood out by its repetition and emphasis in our conversations, that word was trust. Again and again, we heard variations on the simple phrase that, in understanding what came apart, and what needs to be rebuilt, “trust is huge.”

Governing Council members felt undermined by a lack of trust in their leadership when correspondence from some members of the congregation implied that Governing Council was withholding information from the congregation. Members of the congregation experienced a crisis of trust as they watched promising directions in ministry dissolve in a bewildering conflict somehow involving the minister. Staff members experienced a breakdown in trust as they grappled with a management style that felt top-down and that held them accountable for things that were outside their control and/or their comfort zone to achieve.

For some, the “nagging issue” of a breakdown in trust was tied to a deterioration in respectful behaviour rooted in “how we treat each other, our culture, which needs to be about the issue – whatever it is – *not* the person”.

For others, the issue of trust was connected to more clearly identifying shared values that are consistently mirrored in behaviours that relationships can then be built upon, “behaviours that live into our values and vice versa”.

Some people observed that this basis of respect and shared values is now being reflected in the way the new staff team is functioning, expressing gratitude “for the fortitude and resilience of the staff now – collaborative, trusting, respectful, and forgiving... all qualities we’re seeing from them”.

In general, there was consistent agreement that, “ultimately, Fairlawn is not about the things we do, but the relationships we foster and build.”

To the extent that the M&P committee is tasked with maintaining healthy relationships among the congregation, staff, and leadership, it was widely agreed (including among current and former members of M&P) that a critical component for Fairlawn to be ready to move forward will be a fully functioning, healthy, and effectively supported M&P with clear policies and procedures, the trust of the staff and congregation, and effective channels for communication across all involved in the overall relationship.

We heard that additional work still needs to be done to learn about, and develop, skills for dealing with conflict “in healthy, constructive, and respectful ways” because conflict will happen and, if we are equipped to respond effectively, it can be constructive. It was generally agreed that building self-awareness and an understanding of insights from studies of emotional intelligence would be a valuable source of learning for everyone – in our personal and family relationships as well as in life together at Fairlawn.

4. Covenant of Respect, Listening

While communication was a significant focus for many of our conversations, there was another element of community building and tending that captured our attention on its own. This was reflected in people’s discussion of how our shared values as a congregation come to be rooted in the way we behave with each other and others.

It was expressed in the hope that we have an opportunity to deepen our capacity for listening to one another, leading to a culture of conversation that instills openness and curiosity, compassion, and trust as we come to know one another better and invite others into the conversation.

As one person observed, recognizing the prevalence of e-mail communication among Fairlawners, “talking is better than writing, we need to be accessible to one another”.

A couple of people recalled that, as part of the work to develop The Fairlawn Call, there was a commitment to developing something called “The Fairlawn Way”, which would express how people at Fairlawn would interact with one another and would be rooted in faith and values. For various reasons, that did not happen at that time, but it was welcomed that we are coming back to that work together.

5. Leadership and Learning

We heard several strong appeals for a new approach to leadership in this day that is “not just putting out fires” or making relatively routine management decisions. This need was experienced by some, for example, in the gap that they felt opened between the compelling sense of mission found in The Fairlawn Call and its implementation, which was pursued through a focus on measuring and managing outcomes.

In the words of one person, “We need a new narrative that changes the ‘survival’ track. This is a big piece of not going off the cliff again. It’s not about survival, but about mobilizing the congregation around a new, transformative vision. It’s about discovering afresh what God is doing in the world among us and around us that is life-giving, and getting with the program!”

It was also acknowledged by several of the people we spoke to that the Fairlawn community and congregation “is a tough crowd, a high-achieving, high standards bunch of people who push themselves to fulfill high expectations and are easily dissatisfied if those expectations are not met.”

It was recognized that “learning” can, and does, take place in many ways, and our approach to the learning that needs to happen should be responsive to, and respectful of, that reality. The Governing Council’s work to incorporate adaptive learning approaches to leadership was held up as an example of our ability to make progress on this.

We also heard that cultivating a culture of learning is an important way of equipping faith communities today for navigating uncertainty: “Learning goes hand in hand with risk-taking – creating space for managed risks.”

Another person observed that a culture of learning, investing in leadership that is focused on strengthening discernment, and tending the soul of the congregation, will reduce the temptation when seeking a new minister to “seek a saviour, a magic bullet”. This is because the growing depth, and breadth, of understanding and leadership practice will invite new ministry personnel to contribute to a collaborative approach that is well-equipped, with clear and distinct roles. This was echoed in one person’s remarks that “as we work on learning in ways that equip us to be a church for the 21st century, and cultivate an approach to leadership that supports that, we can look for a minister who is self-aware, emotionally intelligent, secure, and able to work with a dynamic group of staff and volunteers here at Fairlawn.” Someone else put it in straight-forward terms: “Ministers come and go, but others of us remain.”

Sometimes the learning referred to was broad in its scope and, at other times, more focused training, was also seen as a welcome direction: “Plans for leadership training along with a clearer sense of what attributes are needed in lay leaders will make a difference.”

The capacity and potential for learning was encouraging for a lot of the people whom we spoke with: “Transition becomes a collective growth process that needs both time and

critical analysis as it unfolds rather than timelines and tasks to be completed. Change becomes personal, involving collective learning goals that are given ongoing attention and support... The messiness of change, affectionately known as making mistakes, becomes the source of new learning.”

6. Governance, Councils and Committees

We heard quite a lot, consistently, about how our organizational life at Fairlawn lacked a sense of the parts working together as a whole as an expression of a unifying vision and narrative. The tone and primary focus of our organizational life seemed to many of those with whom we spoke to have become “very bureaucratic”.

As one person observed: “the church is well-run. We don’t need Governing Council wrestling with all that. We need people focused on overall direction, strategy not caretakers.”

Some issues related to governance could be addressed – or even “corrected” – by compiling a clear policy and procedures handbook, including existing government-established employment standards, accessibility, human rights, fire safety, and other requirements, as well as United Church of Canada policies – from conflict of interest, to duty of care – and undertakings that Fairlawn has entered into as an affirming congregation. Our approach to policy development was seen to have been as casual, or hit and miss, and this had created a lack of clarity and professionalism.

Better on-boarding of new congregational leaders – whether on Governing Council, M&P, or other Councils and Committees – is something we could, and should, do a much better job of providing for those whom we ask to take on leadership roles.

A great deal of attention was given in the presbytery visitation team’s report to the issue of setting goals and measuring outcomes, among councils and staff in particular. As one person said to us: “Goal-setting needed to be collaborative and realistic and it wasn’t – the consequences as a result have been significant.” There is broad agreement that Fairlawn needs to be able to assess progress in fulfilling priorities, and evaluating programs, to be effective stewards of our financial and volunteer resources. This will need attention before long as enthusiasm builds in response to the community research work for emerging new program ideas. Existing programs will need clear direction, and sometimes we will need a way of agreeing to wind up projects that have fulfilled their original intentions and can therefore be celebrated, and concluded, when appropriate.

Alongside that work, there was a clear expression of the need for Governing Council to clarify and continue focused work on its overall leadership role, providing direction and discernment that is rooted in listening to the congregation, and providing staff and volunteers with a coherent understanding of current priorities and directions.

7. Defining and Enabling our New Mission

The role of a vibrant and open-hearted spirituality and a clear mission for Fairlawn was underlined by many people we spoke with. As one person put it, “Fairlawn should be out

there telling our story. It's a good story!" Another said: "We are a church – are we bringing God into the conversation? Well, we are now, yes!"

There is a clear awareness of the need for a continuing, and increased, investment in exploring diverse kinds of spiritual experience within people's lives, including through engagement in social justice projects that embrace spiritual expression through action.

The Fairlawn Call was endorsed by several people as something that "buttressed our ability to withstand upheaval by providing focus and purpose."

At the same time many people expressed a need for a stronger, evocative "sense of narrative story-line that holds things together". Several people had the impression that, through the period of greatest upheaval and sense of crisis, "it was like a perfect storm, with everybody trying extremely hard, but not in sync at all". The assumption was that "everyone was on board" with the directions in which the congregation was moving and ways of implementing The Fairlawn Call – but, in some critical respects, "everyone" was not on board.

There was also a concern expressed that the inter-connected, but distinct, roles of the congregation, minister, Governing Council, and staff team needed a shared reference point to give coherence to how each contributes something different to deliver on our mission. One emerging aspect of clarity in this regard was a new understanding that the staff is not in place to "service the congregation", but rather to "enable the congregation to fulfill its ministry and mission" when that has been clearly identified by the congregation.

So, as one person said: "Vision, mission, and a sense of purpose are extremely important to have and to stay connected to. Having a longer-term vision and a good idea of how we'll get there will be a really important component in helping us to not go off the rails in the future!"

8. Connection to the Wider Church

We heard from several people that, while the presbytery response to Fairlawn's deteriorating situation was imperfect and, at points, not helpful, the recourse to presbytery was quite valuable. In due course, the presbytery visitation team did generate recommendations that framed a workable path for moving forward effectively.

The emerging concern, however, is that the new structure, with presbytery and conference replaced by Shining Waters Regional Council, means that the wider church will be much more distant from the local context of congregations. The capacity for timely and appropriate support and/or intervention will likely be reduced.

There was uncertainty expressed over whether the North Toronto Cluster of United Churches would be able to "pick up the slack" any time soon in terms of accompaniment through future difficult experiences..

A degree of caution was expressed through these observations, recognizing that we should not assume much in the way of support in the future. We, therefore, need to act to increase our own resources for working on conflict more effectively and building congregational resilience.

9. Hope for the future

Several of the people we talked to referred to an over-arching sense of anxiety about the future for churches in our society. This was partly due to media reports about the decline of church affiliation in our society, reports of churches closing, and the struggle to find relevant and sustainable directions for congregations like Fairlawn. This discouragement was also a reflection of a sense of crisis instilled by the previous minister, expressed in the matter-of-fact assertion that if Fairlawn does not turn things around and begin to grow in some fairly dramatic ways, it, too, will be overwhelmed by a secular tidal wave.

For those expressing this concern, the future of Fairlawn was seen to be hitched to the future of the church in our society – a daunting, almost existential, burden to take on. As one person said to us: “We are part of a grand experiment for church in the 21st century. We are not alone. This isn’t all on Fairlawn.” And, as another person said, “nothing motivated by fear will go well”.

Finally, one person felt that the biggest threat to the future will come not from society around us but from within: “In terms of the risks and challenges to being church in today’s society, the internal undermining is likely greater than the external threat.” The encouraging aspect in that outlook lies in the fact that, while we cannot control society around us, we *can* do a great deal together to address internal matters as they arise, to ensure that they do not succeed in undermining Fairlawn’s community life and ministry.

There is great hope in the resource for discernment that our current community research project “Taking the Call Forward” represents. One person remarked that: “it will land us in an eco-system that is new to us, but **is us**... We will want to develop new competencies and abilities, and new sources of passion – but, that presumes that we understand ourselves well as we are, first.” In the same way, there is a sense that we should take our time to first understand ourselves – our values and our mission – before we call a new minister. This will – and should – take time.”

Concluding Thoughts

It is not our place to make recommendations. The experience of having such honest and searching conversations with a wide cross-section of Fairlawn leaders was an honour that we both found to be enlightening and humbling. We listened hard, and we feel that we listened well, and carefully, to those we spoke to, recognizing that we each brought different perspectives and sensitivities to our listening. We hope that the shades and textures of each of our ways of listening has been respectful and that this report is expressive of the people we are in ways that help the congregational members recognize themselves in the words that we share here.

We realized, early on in this work, that our report should not just be a “document” for the Transition Team or Governing Council to consider. We have opted to make this a conversation that the whole congregation can, and should, sit in on. We have written in that spirit of openness and trust.

As much as we might wish it were so, there is no guarantee that Fairlawn will not find ourselves in difficulty again. That is a reality for congregations – and families!

We have highlighted several things from what we have heard – things that we feel will help Fairlawn Avenue United Church be a resilient, and effective, people who are willing to learn from our experience, even when that experience has been painful.

Work is underway on some of the things that we draw attention to in our report: communication, conflict, leadership, and trust, for example. Additional work will be required. Doing that kind of work says that we are living into our faith and values in ways that are courageous and authentic.

As we discern ways to build strength, understanding, and resilience for the life and ministry of Fairlawn, we hope we find seeds of wisdom and spirit in these notes that will equip us for what lies ahead. God is not done with us yet. So, in our listening, and our learning, we are living further into a vision of hope that roots us in love, always.

Finally, we found the following words, from a resource for churches that recognizes the importance of having difficult conversations, to be both inspiring and encouraging:

“Conversations become much more difficult when we are in dialogue with one who matters deeply to us. Even if we feel angry or alienated from a friend or family member, we care about the direction of the conversation and the impact of our words. We are concerned about how we present ourselves and how we are perceived. We have a lot at stake in these conversations...

“Difficult conversations occupy a separate space in our lives. They require much more energy than everyday conversation because they carry multiple levels of meaning that go well below the words spoken, to the core of our own identities... No wonder, then, that we want to minimize the need for difficult conversations and have developed elaborate strategies to avoid them. The cost is that by avoiding the conversations we know will be difficult we also sacrifice the opportunity for growth, a clearer sense of who we are, and a more honest basis for relationship. A conversation marked by honesty, trust, mutual respect, civility and openness to new ideas will be no less difficult, but more satisfying. In our better moments, we know this to be true.”

- Katie Day, *Difficult Conversations: Taking Risks, Acting with Integrity* (Alban Institute, 2011)

Sincerely, and faithfully,
Jill Klaehn and Douglas duCharme