



**FAIRLAWN**

## **Moving Fairlawn Forward**

### **Session 1: Setting the Scene (March 13, 2022)**

#### **Summary Report**

The first congregational conversation on moving Fairlawn Forward took place on March 13, 2022, by Zoom during Coffee Hour. There were 14 facilitators and 78 participants online – an impressive turnout! The session was an opportunity for all of us to acknowledge our faith community, which has built both powerful relationships and beautiful opportunities for inspiration, joy, comfort, and generosity. At our best, Fairlawn has been transformational and provided purpose, drawing on the best of each for the good of many. It was a reminder of where we have been, and an opportunity to express hopes and reservations about where we are going next.

Prior to the session, a [background document](#) was shared by email that included a brief overview of the external and internal forces affecting Fairlawn as we look to the future and prepare to call a new minister. Facilitated breakout groups were asked to share their thoughts on two questions:

- What do you value most about Fairlawn Avenue United Church as a faith community?
- What (topics) do you hope we will cover/touch on as we conduct this transition work?

#### **Question 1: What do you value most about FAUC as a community of faith?**

We wanted to begin with an exercise of appreciative inquiry around what we value most about Fairlawn. Participants were encouraged to visualize a photograph in their mind of a time when they experienced Fairlawn Avenue United Church at its best. Several key themes emerged as people shared their memories:

##### **The Importance of Belonging**

We heard so much joy from participants. Many recounted experiences and relationships spanning decades of life at the church with great nostalgic pleasure. We heard about how deeply people valued the importance of belonging and the support of the Fairlawn community, both in joyous, fun occasions and especially through life's tougher transitions.

There was a belief that this community inspires the best from congregants, for the good of many, both inside and outside of our church walls. There was a deep desire to continue to build powerful relationships, provide loving pastoral care, and experience beautiful opportunities of inspiration, music, joy, connection, comfort, support, friendship, and active generosity.

*Photo Visualization: A collage of various events in the Assembly Hall, gathering for potluck suppers, celebrating our refugee families, and getting to meet them and other members of the congregation. She and her partner were new to Fairlawn in 2005 through amalgamation and found that gatherings with food were wonderful ways to get to know people and marvelous outreach opportunities.*

*Photo Visualization: A phone call received at home during COVID that surgery can happen on short notice – involving a long recuperation, during which cards, emails of support received, meals dropped off, driveway and walkways shovelled, practical help and emotional support given.*

### **The Need for Spiritual Rejuvenation**

There was a recognition of the powerful impact held by choral music, quiet reflection, and inspirational messaging. Several participants commented that they were both inspired and challenged by the information and learning that came from attendance at Fairlawn events, the current relevancy of sermons and activities, and the opportunity to exchange diverse views in a safe environment.

*Photo Visualization: A get-together in the Kimmel Room after church with a guest speaker. The types of circles that allow you to pursue a topic more deeply, get to know fellow members on a deeper, more personal level, and experience the diversity of Fairlawn. In discussion groups, we pursue like-minded topics and are challenged to learn and unlearn things about our history (e.g., Truth and Reconciliation).*

*Photo Visualization: Advent by Candlelight tables in the sanctuary, full of people, many of whom were not from the congregation (or even church people). Tables lit with candles; it is quiet, there is fellowship, and meeting new friends. Beautiful music.*

### **The Transformative Power of Purpose through Faith in Action**

Others remembered our many outreach and social justice activities, which provided spiritual and physical nourishment, dignity and welcome, both inside and outside of our building. Memories included the Fairlawn Neighbourhood Centre, supporting a local mosque with a 'ring of peace', Camp Scugog, green initiatives, and so much more.

*Photo Visualization: A group of people working on the Syrian refugee project, partly conflated with a picture of people working on the book sale. Lots of laughter and fellow feeling.*

*Photo Visualization: Listening to a Fairlawner talk about Embrace Action, the wonderful hands-on outreach that Fairlawn does. The Boarding House Ministry, so hands-on and so sincere. I realized, "this is a church that walks the walk" and doesn't just give money for someone else to do good works. There are a multitude of areas of need that this church deals with and becomes part of – it is wonderful.*

*Photo Visualization: Walk-in Support (guests) greeted at the door, asked for their name, given the dignity of being a person and then given a number. Warm place, breakfast, and lunch, and establishing friendships amongst themselves as well as the team that is there.*

## Looking Forward

We heard a deep desire to look forward without forgetting the past, building on what we are at our best.

We heard an affirmation of the continued importance of the work of our three Purpose Councils: Experience Belonging, Explore Spirituality, and Embrace Action.

Living our faith in community, for common cause through embracing action; supporting those on the margin, sharing talents; having fun, welcome, inclusivity, belonging to a community, connecting with people; caring and partnering with those in our community for a greater good for all involved.

We remain strong in our core values and in our ability to create a caring community. We have and are learning new ways to explore our spirituality, wherever we are on our faith journey. Many social outreach programs have been reframed and are carrying on, in a different way. Our refugee program is still supported by many in the congregation and there are continued hopes that it will be resurrected once the world settles. We are finding new meaning in the same words – Experience Belonging, Explore Spirituality, and Embrace Action – and living them in a different way with different aspirations for our church.

This qualitative or anecdotal feedback begins to provide all of us with a sense of the essence of what is at the core of Fairlawn's calling and purpose. Together, we can remind each other of who we are at our best, and what we value about being part of this community.

[Read all the photo visualizations](#)

## Question 2: What topics do you hope we will cover as we conduct this transition work?

We asked participants to tell us what was on their mind relative to Fairlawn's future.

We received a wealth of feedback that can be categorized across several common themes:

- Our Call: explore spirituality, experience belonging, embrace action
- Our Guiding Principles: our culture, how we are with each other, a desire for transparency about issues
- Our Vision: future options, the demographic we serve, our core purpose
- Our Sustainability: available resources (volunteer, staff, financial, technology, the building) to sustain our vision and purpose

Participants also acknowledged the need for pastoral support through transition from our past to our future.

[Read all the topics you hope we will cover as we conduct this transition work](#)

We will be talking further about some of these topics in our next two congregational conversations:

- April 2: Refreshing our Call and Vision for Ministry
- May 14: Assessing our Future Options and Directions

We thank all participants for sharing your memories and thoughts in conversations that matter at this pivotal step of our faith journey. We need your voice to help shape our future, together.

## A topic deserving special attention

One topic that came up in the session on March 13 deserves to be responded to directly. This concerns an impression, following the early conclusion of the previous minister's pastoral tie with Fairlawn, that the congregation was found to be at fault, and that the reputation of Fairlawn has been damaged as a result. **This is not true.**

The reasons for the breakdown in the pastoral relationship were complex, and the situation was handled confidentially, as was appropriate. The Presbytery recognized that a disruption of that kind can create lingering problems in a congregation if not handled constructively. Therefore, Fairlawn was given an opportunity to work with an experienced Intentional Interim Minister (IIM), Reverend Douglas duCharme, to pause, to reflect on recent experience, to learn, and be able to move on afresh.

A comprehensive report in February 2020, from Douglas and the initial Transition Team, confirmed with what is now Shining Waters Regional Council that this work had been fully engaged in by Fairlawn, and that the congregation was in great shape, having taken the opportunity to learn through this difficult experience. This work was only ever intended to be constructive and supportive, not in any way disciplinary. Fairlawn's reputation across the United Church remains very strong.

In the meantime, the [Community Research Project](#) with Nayar Consulting was completed, and it provided an opportunity to renew and refocus Fairlawn's energies going forward. Recognizing that an IIM can also help congregations explore new directions, Douglas' appointment was renewed to assist with that. As a result of time lost to COVID-19, that work will now be completed by June 2023, and a new minister will be called to support Fairlawn's future direction.

Additionally, as part of the applied learning that we have done through this time, Fairlawn's [Guiding Principles](#) were developed as an expression of the ways Fairlawn functions when we are at our best. By naming these qualities, and ways of being together, we have created a set of best practices that bring our words and values to life. This is something that many organizations find important to express and to practice.

There is no question that Fairlawn Avenue United Church will be seen as a vital and attractive opportunity for the right person in ministry when we are ready to proceed with a search later this year.

### Next Steps

Participants provided us with feedback and raised astute issues in Session 1 that deserve further thought, analysis, and background research. Some of this work is underway, and some will be undertaken with the assistance of the Toronto United Church Council (TUCC) over the coming months. As we build our understanding of issues and their importance relative to our future direction, we will share our thinking with the congregation. Importantly, this will inform the Community of Faith Profile and Living Faith Story that we must prepare to ready ourselves to call a new minister.