



## FAIRLAWN

### Preparing for Session 3: Assessing Our Future Options and Directions (May 14, 2022)

Our goal for this session is to explore what future path(s) we could pursue in the next phase of our church's life. This discussion will set the scene for a more focused exploration of our options in the fall and inform the Community of Faith profile needed to initiate the search for a new minister.

Why must we choose? Why can't we just return to the congregational life we led pre-COVID? Because the world beyond our doors has fundamentally changed – and we have changed. We want to discern who we are called to serve, and how best to do that.

#### Discerning the Initial Options

From the outset, we have faced a set of challenging facts: our declining membership, a lack of volunteer leaders, projected decreases in our finances, a smaller staff team, the challenge in achieving strong net returns from rentals and a need to reinvest in our building to make it more fit-for-purpose. While keeping our church active during a pandemic has demanded our focus, we must now urgently develop a renewed future vision that we can rally around and in which we might be willing to invest our energy, money and commitment. We also see our need to prepare the way for a new minister as critical. We must articulate a compelling future clearly enough to attract candidates with the right mindset and set of skills to help us.

We looked at a wide spectrum of possible futures or strategic options:

- A. Define and rally behind a desired future for Fairlawn in which we **renew our focus as an independent congregation**. We would recruit a new minister to help us fulfill that roadmap.
- B. Define and rally behind a desired future for Fairlawn in which we **form a strong partnership with a community organization** that shares our vision and values and has complementary unmet needs and organizational assets. We would recruit a new minister to help us fulfill that roadmap.
- C. **Amalgamate with another nearby congregation**. As a strategic option, amalgamation would be an end in itself – a solution to our declining numbers. We would not recruit a permanent new minister under this plan, although a short-term arrangement might be needed for a time.
- D. **Accept the current path of graceful decline** consciously and continue to devote our diminishing resources to supporting our congregation's wellbeing and making a positive impact through service to our neighbours. We would recruit a new minister to help us make the best of that path.
- E. Define a date by which we would **close as a congregation** and devise and undertake a comprehensive wind-up plan to achieve that. We would not recruit a new minister under this plan unless the date was sufficiently far into the future.

## Narrowing the Options

While we wanted to be thorough in assessing a wide range of options, the Fairlawn Forward Transition Team is recommending that we focus on Options A and B for these reasons:

**Options A (Renewing our focus as an independent congregation) and B (Forming a strong partnership with a community organization)** provide room for growth, imagination, and vision. We will need to define detailed scenarios that are both inspiring and practical, and provide a future vision that we could rally behind. We may well end up with a hybrid of Options A and B, combining both a renewal of Fairlawn's ministry endeavours and the seeking of a partnership or alliance to expand our capabilities in meeting wider community needs.

We have identified three strategic option proposals – each a combination of both A and B – to examine in depth on May 14. We need your input to help assess their relative strengths and weaknesses and explore how to further develop them. And we have no doubt that there are other options that you might deem worthy of exploring. We look forward to you sharing your ideas with all of us on or after May 14.

It's important to note that these proposals do not address worship or music – instead they are examples of ways that we can remain viable so that we can continue to offer these core elements of our identity.

See page 3 for a description of these initial proposals, and page 4 for a draft set of evaluation criteria that is still in development.

**Option C: Amalgamating** with another congregation seems to offer little genuine hope as a stand-alone resolution to our challenges. A suitable amalgamation partner would combine a location accessible to our current members, an aligned culture, a healthy membership, and an exciting common purpose. Neighbouring churches struggle with the same systemic, environmental conditions that we face. In their current state, they would be unlikely to offer more than a temporary solution.

An 'amalgamation approach' might be considered in which Fairlawn defines and rallies behind a vision of our own, and then discovers a congregational partner to win over to serve this common cause. For instance, St. James Bond identified a social justice purpose and enlisted Fairlawn to embrace it.

Given that we have not yet landed on a future vision, we recommend that we set amalgamation to one side as a potential tactic that could be explored in the future if a more compelling strategic option could be strengthened by it. Thus, we propose that Option C be eliminated from consideration at this time.

**Option D: Accepting a graceful decline** – which is really maintaining the status quo – satisfies a thirst for nostalgia but would likely mean that many congregants would drift away to find another faith community that meets their needs, accelerating our loss of volunteer and financial resources. Our valued staff might also choose to leave if we were not engaged in some form of renewal. Additionally, the building would be less and less viable to sustain once our current membership declines further. Everything we've heard so far suggests that Fairlawn congregants remain deeply committed to making a major contribution in God's world. Thus, we propose that Option D be eliminated from consideration at this time.

**Option E: Setting a closing date** – this option raises the same concerns as Option D. Our congregation shows no signs of interest in anything other than moving forward as a going concern. There is great commitment to Fairlawn's legacy, but also to Fairlawn's future. Our members seem keen to go on having as significant impact on the communities we wish to serve as our resources allow. There appears to be a widely-shared interest in seeking a new minister. Thus, we propose that Option E be eliminated from consideration at this time.

## Three Strategic Option Proposals for Evaluation (view our video presentation)

Each of these ideas represents an alternative vision that we find potentially exciting and believe may contain the seeds of our desired future. Each might attract new energies from our members and from volunteers drawn from our wider community. None offers a fully self-contained future path to resolve all our current challenges, and each may need a partner with resources, skills, and experience to draw upon.

Each option will also likely require a refurbishing of our property to make it fit-for-purpose, while ensuring our sanctuary remains suitable for many worship-related activities. These ideas can only succeed if many of us can identify ways to volunteer or benefit and are willing to contribute financially to building them.

### **Proposal 1: Enhanced Affirm Ministry**

Fairlawn could expand our Affirm Ministry to serve the North Toronto 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Youth, especially, struggle for safety, acceptance, freedom from bullying, and much more. Parents and grandparents similarly face challenges of acceptance and support for their loved ones. This option could include investing in a range of programs to assist those searching for gender identity, helping families and allies to support Queer youth, continuing our educational efforts as well as providing safe opportunities for young people to socialize and engage in, such as drama and exercise activities. We might look to partner with civic organizations already skilled in supporting this community, offering opportunities to broaden our networks of potential volunteers and share in the costs of building upkeep.

### **Proposal 2: Seniors Ministry**

Fairlawn could partner with an organization to provide a comprehensive set of offerings for seniors in North Toronto – for those needing support to age-in-place, for those in cognitive decline, as well as their caregivers. The services might span a spectrum of art, music, dance, exercise, cooking, community gardens, and much more. Existing resources are limited in our neighbourhood, and this targets a segment that overlaps closely with our own evolving membership, as was highlighted in the Nayar research. We could seek funding from a community partner in need of space, possibly one who has access to government funding in a way that Fairlawn does not, and who could share in the costs of building upkeep. UCC funding, a capital campaign and/or trustee funds might support accessibility upgrades and infrastructure to support communal activities (e.g., cooking classes, community garden).

### **Proposal 3: Centre for Creative Dialogue**

Fairlawn might provide high quality in-person and online forums for education and conversation around major societal issues, aimed at attracting speakers and audiences from within and far beyond our walls. We could form an alliance to deepen this offering, collaborating with an organization skilled in organizing and staffing major conferences. We could seek sponsorships and funding to gradually enhance the multi-purpose nature and technical capabilities of our sanctuary, contributing to the upkeep of our building. Examples of possible themes might be refugees/immigration, global vaccine and health equity, climate change, peace-making and other topics of interest within the Fairlawn community.

## Next Steps

One of our goals for May 14 is to confirm that the congregation agrees we should focus on Options A and B at this time. We will continue to develop and strengthen these ideas further, incorporating your input and perhaps investigating other alternatives proposed by you. Our progress will be reflected in the draft Community of Faith profile and ministerial job description that will be discussed in our June 5 consultation. Following that, we aim to narrow down and validate the feasibility of our alternatives, consult further with the congregation, and be ready to continue towards our goals with our new minister.

## Appendix: Draft Decision Criteria for Any Successful Strategic Option

The Fairlawn Forward Transition Team considered the following initial set of criteria in developing the three proposals to be shared on May 14. We will continue to refine these criteria, with your input, in the fall of 2022.

### **Essential – i.e., a strategic option is unlikely to succeed without satisfying all of these:**

- Inspires and excites our congregation by broadly appealing to hearts, minds, and spirits
- Flexible enough to have continued relevance and impact on the communities we wish to serve
- Makes efficient use of limited staff, volunteer, and financial resources and/or offers a realistic path to expanding those resources
- Continues to be feasible over time as our current congregants diminish in numbers/capabilities
- Plans for the effective use/repurposing of the building, while maintaining space for worship
- Offers opportunities for our congregants to play an active, hands-on role in a variety of ways
- Suggests a future that would attract potential ministerial candidates

### **Highly desirable – i.e., the more of these a strategic option can satisfy, the better:**

- Draws upon skills or experiences we have already built in the congregation
- Widens the community that we serve/contribute to by expanding our reach geographically and/or demographically
- Equips us to deepen our understanding of that wider community, their needs, perspectives, and abilities to contribute
- Applies relevant technologies to extend our reach and communicate effectively with all those we wish to serve, especially with younger generations
- Enhances our collaboration with North Toronto Cluster congregations, especially where they seek to serve communities we cannot prioritize, or vice versa
- Allows us to continue to make use of our sanctuary for worship
- Provides opportunities to engage congregants as volunteers, patrons, and beneficiaries
- Demonstrates a path to sustainability for our faith community and its mission, especially with younger generations