



## FAIRLAWN

### Moving Fairlawn Forward

### Session 2: Refreshing our Call and Vision for Ministry (April 2, 2022)

### Summary Report

The second congregational conversation on moving Fairlawn Forward occurred on April 2, 2022, via Zoom. Once again there was a good level of attendance and participation – 14 facilitators and 59 participants, plus 20 responses to the online feedback form. A [background document](#) was shared in advance that summarized past planning and visioning work, as well as a draft call and vision statement that was a focal point of this session.

We heard – and respect – that some of us find all this process frustrating and want to ‘get on with things’. An action orientation has long been a Fairlawn strength. However, the majority appreciate how the work is being broken down and the way technology is being used when it is still not possible to safely gather in person.

#### Part 1 – Refreshing our Call and Vision for Ministry

The first half of the consultation focused on the draft call and vision statement. We have called this a “Pathway to Our Vision” because we believe that we need to work together to best identify our future direction. Breakout groups considered three questions:

**Question 1: Which section, words, or phrases inspire you the most? How or why?**

**Question 2: Which section, words, or phrases challenge you the most? How or why?**

**Question 3: Is anything missing that is critical to who we are as a faith community? What?**

There was strong agreement that the language of the document is inspiring, especially the first two paragraphs. Consistent comments across the groups indicate that the document captures the essential elements of the Fairlawn we know and value.

*Participant quotes: “This document captures Fairlawn succinctly; it expresses accurately who we are as an organization and what we are doing here.” “I can really get behind this... if we had these paragraphs in big letters on the front of our building, I’d be very proud.”*

We also heard strong support for Fairlawn being a place for believers, seekers and doubters, and a community of exploration and thoughtful questions. Many people resonated with the statement that Fairlawn “takes the Bible seriously, but not literally”. People also responded positively to the idea of the congregation as a welcoming community “welcoming all who wish to join us, wherever they are on their life journey”. Others commented on Fairlawn as a serving and caring community, connection to God and God’s call, new ways of being church, social justice, partnerships, and relevance to young people.

The second question asking what people found challenging about the document produced an interesting range of responses. Some spoke to phrases in the document, others naming challenges the broader church is facing in our time and cultural context. Many spoke to the challenge of living up to statements in the document:

*Participant quotes: "Are we as welcoming as claim to be?" "Are we really open to the gifts of others and working with them, or do we prefer to do things for people?" "Do we have the courage to push boundaries?"*

There were comments on the lack of diversity in the congregation and its rootedness in affluence and white privilege.

Some described the challenge of living in uncertain times beyond the life of the church. Others focused on the impact of change in the church and possible losses that might mean.

*Participant quotes: "We are in uncertain times, not knowing where we are heading, whether in our community, our society, our world." "We need to trust the Spirit is guiding us, but we are not certain."*

Others mentioned the question of which online platforms to use and the in-person and online worship discussion, how to tell the church story more widely but sensitively, the need to remember to give space to God and the Spirit, the importance of partnerships, how to respond to the many needs of the world, and diverse generational needs.

In response to the third question around what is missing, some named issues with which many progressive congregations wrestle. Should there be explicit reference to being 'Christian' in the call and vision statement, or does that conjure up a form of dogmatic certainty that is not part of Fairlawn's 'character'? Some wondered why music and worship were not explicitly named, or were they just assumed to be a key part of the faith community's life? Some mused whether the document was too abstract and whether a way could be found to root its aspirations more concretely in the times and the context in which we find ourselves. Echoes of this theme were found in comments about the need for the document to be open about the underlying resource challenges (people and finance) that have become so visibly acute for mainline churches in recent years.

What's next for the document? All the comments will be helpful in refining our call and clarifying our vision. That work will continue in the coming weeks and a revised version will be brought forward in June as part of the of Living Faith Story required by the United Church of Canada's ministerial search process. There is still work to do, but many found the draft a 'real jumping off point' and a 'solid foundation' for the journey ahead.

## **Part 2 – Which Activities Are Critical to Fairlawn's Ministry and Why?**

The second part of the consultation focused on how Fairlawn's call and vision for ministry gets lived out through our practices, activities, and programs. We began with a case study of how one of the Purpose Councils had evaluated their proposed activities through a range of parameters that included resource needs, joy/fun component, impact, community, innovation, and inclusivity.

Participants were then asked to consider one or two activities that they see as critical, or essential, to Fairlawn's sense of mission. We anticipated that this would be a difficult conversation, as it can be hard to articulate the essential 'why' that makes certain programs critical, rather than simply good, desirable or someone's personal preference.

The breakout groups and feedback forms mentioned a wide variety of programs and activities, with some having multiple mentions across the groups. A detailed [summary of all the raw comments](#) is available online, as well as a [shorter themed summary](#) comments. It was clear that worship, music, and spiritual support groups are seen as core, even essential activities, with Sunday worship still seen as the primary locus for the community, even though some voices indicated its limitations. Interestingly, three key programs – Walk-In Support, the Refugee Ministry, and the Boarding Homes Ministry – received even more mentions than worship, with the first two receiving special attention.

Other programs receiving multiple mentions were the book sale, the pastoral care dimensions of various Experience Belonging programs, and several social events. Social justice was described as an essential part of the Fairlawn brand that may require a fresh focus in the future.

A wide range of reasons were given for the importance of the programs people named. Worship and spirituality were seen as essential to resourcing all the other activities. For some, worship and spirituality were features that distinguished the church's ministry and prevented it from being just another social agency. Some outreach activities were simply seen as 'what Christians do', while others commented on the impact that outreach programs can have on those who lead them: *"we grow as people"*, *"we are equipped for service outside the church"*. While there was a general sense of wanting to be involved in things that make a difference in the world, little was explicitly said about measuring the level of impact of programs and activities.

Several activities were seen as directly contributing to building community and relationships within the church, but an activity like the refugee program could also be seen through the same lens 'to connect with people'. In the same vein, activities such as the Tuesday Lunch Crowd (an activity with a primary focus on deepening community) were also valued because they offered the opportunity to invite people to experience church without coming to a formal entry point such as worship.

One or two groups thought about how to prioritize activities in a time of diminishing capacity: *"we can't do everything"*, *"we need to discern what we are able to do"*, *"don't do what others could do"* were among the comments shared. Concern for the real capacity of the congregation was mentioned in the feedback forms as well. A few groups recognized the limited leadership Fairlawn can give in some areas, pointing to the lack of visible Truth and Reconciliation work at this time. Another discussed the need for core groups to exist for the success of some ministry work – and the need to accept that some work can't happen when a core group is not in place.

*"Bringing people into the building"* was mentioned several times as a positive aspect of some outreach activities, and the need to be attractive to those outside the church – both youth and unchurched adults. Some past one-off events, such as all-candidate meetings, were seen as bringing in non-church people as well as offering something that seemed important to the wider community for its own sake.

Some activities, such as the book sale, were named as a relatively easy and time-limited way for some to make a time and financial contribution to the church – a reminder that there needs to be a variety of ways and levels of intensity in which people can contribute.

While the discussion was informative, the wide range of activities named, and multiple reasons given for their significance, did not really reveal which programs and activities the community sees as critical to Fairlawn's sense of mission. This work will be picked up again in coming sessions that will more explicitly name the impact of the changing external context on the mainline church, and internal resource and capacity limits that have been made clearer through financial and demographic analysis as discussed at the 2021 Annual General Meeting.

### Part 3 – A Challenge to Think Differently

The consultation closed with a challenge to imagine fresh approaches to the way in which Fairlawn engages in ministry – ways that might rely less on internal resources and people and instead might provide an outlet for the energy and desire to ‘do the good’ that exists among many non-churchgoers. There are also ways in which some beloved community activities can be simplified and made more manageable in a time of reduced volunteer leaders and staff resources. It may not be matter of letting go of such activities so much as refocusing them for changed circumstances.

[Read the summary of comments by theme](#)

[Read the full summary of raw comments](#)