



FAIRLAWN

Turning Transition into Transformation: Our Living Faith Story

Fairlawn Avenue United Church – Toronto, Ontario

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FAIRLAWN



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Refreshing Our Call and Vision for Ministry

We are Fairlawn Avenue United Church – a caring and inclusive community of believers, seekers, and doubters, concerned more with thoughtful questions than simple answers. While we honour our historic Christian traditions and texts, we do so with a twenty-first century perspective. We take the Bible seriously, but not literally, looking for the lessons that it offers for today's challenges and opportunities. We also draw wisdom and inspiration from philosophers, scientists, ethicists, social commentators, writers, and poets, as we explore life's sacredness, mystery, and wonder. We welcome all who wish to join us, wherever they are on their life journey.

We challenge and inspire and learn from one another. We create space for people to come together and have conversations that matter – about our relationships with God and with each other, about life and death, about diversity and inclusion, and about what it means to lead a “good” life in a complex world. We work for change, social justice, and peace, in partnership with others.

Our Call

We are not alone. We are connected to God and each other by love. We seek to connect with what matters in life by providing a safe place for everyone to:

- **Explore Spirituality** by asking life's big questions of God and ourselves
- **Experience Belonging** by building community and connection with others
- **Embrace Action** by helping to create a society where all can live in dignity

Our call as a faith community reflects our core purpose for ministry – to support transformation in each other and those around us in practical and spiritual ways. We aim to do so with curiosity, creativity, and courage in uncertain times.

Pathway to Our Vision

We are on a pathway to a new vision, seeking to discern where God is calling us next by identifying community needs that we have the resources, energy, and passion to serve.

We trust the Spirit to guide us through the challenging space between where we have been and where we are going as we strive to bring God's vision for our world to life – a vision of abundance, equity, and reconciliation.

Our Guiding Principles

The ways in which we engage with one another, our staff, and the wider community are an important expression of who we seek to be as a community of faith. We commit to:

- care for each other with kindness
- encourage dialogue by listening to learn and speaking to foster relationships
- value and support the richness that comes with our differences
- work together collaboratively to find creative solutions
- support each other in times of change and transition

About Us

Fairlawn Avenue United Church is a 107-year-old congregation in north Toronto with a small core of committed lay leaders and a compassionate, educated congregation. We have conducted two successful amalgamations, demonstrating our willingness and ability to build a unified new community while honouring each partner's history.

Fairlawn is comprised of 223 households (160 member households and 63 attendee households). 110 of these households include active members or attendees. Approximately 40% live within walking distance of the church. We are well served by public transit and easy highway access.

Fairlawn is part of [North Toronto Cluster of Churches](#), a group of United Church congregations sharing in events and initiatives that bring us together.

Affirming Statement

Fairlawn became an [Affirming Church](#) in 2015, committing to be fully inclusive in all aspects of our life and work of all people of all ages, abilities, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and gender identities. We recognize that striving to be fully inclusive is an ongoing journey and a work in progress for the Fairlawn faith community as a whole.

Our Staff

Fairlawn is currently supported by an Interim Transition Minister (until June 2023), contract Associate Minister (until June 2023), Director of Music, Church Administrator, Custodian, and Executive Director (on leave). We also have two active Voluntary Associate Ministers.

Our staffing model is under review and will continue to change over time as we discern our post-pandemic needs and emerge from our interim ministry.

We are open to the possibility of augmenting our staff capacity, including part-time ministry personnel and someone to support online services, contingent upon our future needs and resources.

Our Governance and Committee Structure

Governing Council

Fairlawn is led by our Governing Council, a volunteer executive committee mandated with overseeing ongoing operations and shaping the future direction of Fairlawn. Our Governing Council's goals are to:

- foster relationships and connections within our community
- attend to the spiritual and pastoral needs of the congregation during/post COVID-19
- manage church resources to address community needs
- continue as a sustainable congregation with shared purpose and resources for a broader ministry

Fairlawn's Governing Council is composed of the Chairs of our councils and committees (see below), and 1-2 members at large. The Minister serves as an ex-officio member of Governing Council.

Councils and Committees

- 3 Purpose Councils:
 - Explore Spirituality (responsible for worship)

- Experience Belonging (responsible for pastoral care)
- Embrace Action (responsible for social justice and outreach)
- Property Council
- Human Resources & Relationships Council (formerly Ministry & Personnel Committee)
- Finance and Stewardship Council
- Board of Trustees

Explore Spirituality Ministry

Worship

Fairlawn has had a traditional sanctuary and service framework for its main worship offering. At the same time, there is a long history of creative and dynamic approaches to in-person and, more recently, virtual worship. Worship is an integral part of our Explore Spirituality pathway, and our services often incorporate multiple art forms, such as poetry and liturgical dance. While traditional worship is valued, there is a strong desire to continue the development of new approaches as part of Fairlawn's continued spiritual growth and our desire to fulfill contemporary needs.

Music

Fairlawn is well known for its exceptional music. Our long-time music director, Eleanor Daley, is an internationally renowned composer and choral leader. Prior to the pandemic, Eleanor led three choirs (senior, intermediate, and junior), providing incomparable musical training for all ages as well as playing an essential role in worship at Fairlawn. Our section leads are paid, several choir members sing professionally, and our periodic Special Music services are highly anticipated and well attended.

Children and Youth

We all fondly remember the days of a bustling Sunday School at Fairlawn but sadly, those days are no longer a reality. While today's families lead busy lives that often don't include formalized religion, our research and experience has shown they are still interested in instilling values and a sense of social justice in their children. Over the past ten years, Fairlawn has invested time, talent, and money in innovative programming both on Sunday mornings and throughout the week with limited success. The time is right for us to consider new ways to best serve the families in our community.

[Explore Spirituality Programs](#)

- In-person and online [worship](#)
- Mid-Week Prayer
- Special Music Sundays
- Special Focus Sundays (e.g., Pride, Social Justice, Truth & Reconciliation)
- Spirituality Groups and Discussions
- Adult Education series
- Christian Meditation group
- Special Prayer Vigils

Experience Belonging Ministry

The care provided by our Experience Belonging support ministries reminds members of the Fairlawn community they are valued and connected by love. The work of these groups makes a profound

difference in the lives of many. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for fun, belonging, and caring will continue to be essential.

Experience Belonging Programs

- Pastoral Visitation team
- Telephone Ministry team
- Breast Cancer Friends
- Widowers' Group
- Postsecondary Care Packages
- Prayer Shawl Knitters
- Quilters
- Book Sale
- Zoom social and small group ministries:
 - Sunday Coffee Chat
 - Basketball, Broadview Discussion, Craft and Chat, Men's Discussion and Tuesday Lunch Crowd, Trivia Night, Mental Health, Grief and Gratitude, Celtic Spirituality

Embrace Action Ministry

At Fairlawn, we have a long history of embracing action, and a passionate commitment to social justice, equity and inclusion. We work to make a difference in the world by staying curious about the barriers faced by those who are marginalized and actively building relationships (e.g., within marginalized communities, support organizations, and government) to become effective and supportive allies.

Embrace Action Programs

Equality:

- Affirm Ministry
- Amnesty International Canada Advocacy
- Change From Within Anti-Racism Series
- Camp Scugog Support
- [Gibimishkaadimin](#) Reconciliation Canoe Trip

Equity:

- Guaranteed Livable Income Advocacy
- Housing Security Advocacy
- Red Door Shelter Holiday Gift Drive
- Roehampton Basket Drive
- St. Luke's Out of the Cold Program Support

Inclusion:

- Boarding Homes Ministry
- Refugee Sponsorship
- Truth and Reconciliation Initiatives
- Walk-in Support

Our Building

Fairlawn is blessed to have a large, well-situated church building with an accessible sanctuary that can accommodate 525 people. At the same time, our building is old and was built in sections over many years. We have invested heavily in the building over the last several years to bring it into compliance with current fire code regulations. Other significant improvements include replacing most of the roof and upgrading our internet and audio/visual system to prepare the sanctuary for hybrid (online/in-person) events in 2022/23.

A recent building condition assessment reviewed by the [Toronto United Church Council \(TUCC\)](#) concluded that Fairlawn's building is in excellent shape for its age and exceedingly well maintained. Additionally, the results of a space usage analysis are being used to develop a building use strategy that will balance the need to bring rental rates in line with market values while still fulfilling community and congregational needs.

Current Realities

Like many mainline congregations, Fairlawn faces the challenges associated with the increasing secularization of our society, the changing spiritual focus of youth and young adults, and a growing lack of connection in our communities. Fairlawn's aging congregation, a period of internal conflict, the closing of the co-located anchor tenant *Fairlawn Neighbourhood Centre* in 2015, and declining volunteer resources have all impacted Fairlawn's activity and attendance levels, which have dropped significantly over the last five to seven years.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation became even more complex. It also became rich with opportunity, catapulting Fairlawn into the future. The closing of society left many anxious, lonely, and confused. This time of isolation and upheaval, and our subsequent re-entry into a new way of living, has accentuated the need for the type of congregational and community support that Fairlawn has always provided. At the same time, the closing of the church to in-person activities and the subsequent transformation to delivering services remotely led to the development of new skills, such as online worship, and to the discovery of unexpected sources of personal and organizational resilience and creativity, such as the growth of adult learning and small group ministries on Zoom.

As we emerge from COVID-19 and begin to restore in-person worship while maintaining a virtual presence, we acknowledge that it is becoming increasingly difficult to fill executive roles and other volunteer positions. We appreciate that we have to both serve the spiritual and operational needs of our existing congregation and direct our efforts towards new avenues of ministry. All of these paths will require energy and resources to succeed. At the same time, we look forward to what is possible.

Financial Outlook

Fairlawn is a financially stable community of faith in that we had unrestricted trustee funds valued at \$1.8 million at the end of 2021. Financial results during 2021 were positive, due to favourable market conditions, federal wage subsidies and some non-recurring large gifts. However, we were averaging operating deficits of more than \$130,000 for five years before the pandemic began, and we expect this trend to continue and accelerate.

91% of donations to operations in 2021 came from those over age 60, and 73% from those over age 70. Barring an influx of new, younger members, we anticipate declining donations as well as further reductions in volunteer capacity as our membership ages.

Based on the status quo, we forecast that operating deficits will continue to grow each year from \$193,000 to \$290,000 between 2022 and 2031. There are many scenarios that can be envisioned, using many different assumptions. The key message is that, based on how we operate today, we expect significant continuing deficits that will eventually deplete the funds held by the trustees.

While challenging, these numbers provide us with a genuine opportunity to explore how we can best steward our resources – people, passion, skills, building, financial – to serve our mission.

Now is the time to act, while we have the energy and financial viability to choose our future options.

Moving Fairlawn Forward

Fairlawn has been on a journey of transition since 2018, following the early conclusion of the previous minister's pastoral tie with Fairlawn.

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 move on afresh.

A comprehensive report in February 2020 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.

Concurrently, a [Community Research Project](#) with Nayar Consulting was completed, which 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. Because 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.

We are calling this phase of our transition work **Fairlawn Forward**, as we envision our next steps and future options that will best serve our vision and purpose as a faith community.

Using our [Guiding Principles](#) to shape the conversation, we have tried to trust the process and remain open to where God's spirit may lead us and help us to lead.

Congregational Conversations

Between March and June 2022, four virtual consultations were held with the congregation.

Session 1: Setting the Stage

The first session provided a brief overview of the external and internal forces at play as we look to the future and prepare to call a new minister. This session was an opportunity for all of us to acknowledge and celebrate our faith community. It was a reminder of where we have been, and an opportunity to express hopes and reservations about where we are going next.

Session 2: Refreshing our Call and Vision for Ministry

In Session 2, we reviewed a draft call and vision statement for Fairlawn. A revised version incorporating congregational feedback can be found on page 3 of this Living Faith Story. We have called it a Pathway to a Vision because we believe that we need to work together to best identify our future direction, in

collaboration with our next minister. We also looked at our ongoing activities to consider how they align with our sense of vision and purpose and some of the realities that we are facing.

Session 3: Assessing Our Future Options and Directions

Our goal for this session was to explore what future path(s) we could pursue in the next phase of our church's life. We looked at a wide spectrum of possible futures or strategic options:

- A. Renew our focus as an independent congregation
- B. Form a strong partnership with a community organization
- C. Amalgamate with another nearby congregation
- D. Accept the current path of graceful decline
- E. Close as a congregation

We created a [video](#) to introduce three strategic proposals, each a combination of Options A and B. The proposals were characterized as examples of ways that Fairlawn could remain viable so that core elements such as worship, music, pastoral care, small group ministry and other activities could continue to be offered. A straw poll at the end of the session confirmed that 97% of participants agreed that we should continue to focus on renewing our congregational work and pursue some form of community partnership.

Session 4: Telling our Living Faith Story

In this session, we shared a draft of this document, our Living Faith Story, for input. The story articulates our beliefs, ministry needs, and financial realities and is a key element of the Community of Faith Profile needed to initiate a ministerial search. It tells others – including prospective ministers – who we are, why we exist, and what future options might best serve our vision and purpose as a faith community.

Three Strategic Option Proposals

Proposal 1: Enhanced Affirm Ministry

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. Expanding Fairlawn's Affirm Ministry to serve the North Toronto 2SLGBTQIA+ community 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 engage in activities such as art, drama, community cooking, and exercise. We would look to partner with civic organizations already skilled in supporting youth, offering opportunities to broaden our networks of potential volunteers and share in the costs of building upkeep.

Proposal 2: Seniors Ministry

The number of seniors over 85 is expected to triple in the next 25 years. In Toronto, our neighbourhood currently has the highest percentage of seniors over 85 living at home. As our population continues to age, there is an increasing need to provide a comprehensive set of offerings for seniors in North Toronto seeking support to age-in-place, for those in cognitive decline, as well as their caregivers. Fairlawn could partner with an organization to provide services that might span a spectrum of art, music, dance, exercise, cooking, community gardens, and much more. Existing community-based resources are extremely limited in our neighbourhood. This proposal targets a segment that overlaps closely with our

own evolving membership. We would look for a community partner in need of space who could share in the costs of building upkeep.

Proposal 3: Centre for Creative Dialogue

The world is changing dramatically around us. To effectively tackle societal issues, we need to understand, learn from, and engage with those issues. Through a Centre for Creative Dialogue, Fairlawn might provide high quality in-person and online forums for education and conversation around diverse topics with a coherent message of hope, aimed at attracting speakers and audiences from within and far beyond our walls. Possible themes might include refugees/immigration, global vaccine and health equity, climate change, peace-making and more. We could form an alliance to deepen this offering, collaborating with an organization skilled in organizing and staffing major conference who could contribute to the upkeep of our building.

Next Steps

Our consultations to date have affirmed that the organizing framework of Explore Spirituality, Experience Belonging, and Embrace Action includes the key components of what we believe to be our purpose. The pandemic has reinforced how important those three ministries are to Fairlawn and those we serve, and we are looking within that framework for new opportunities to pursue.

Throughout the next several months, we will continue market research to deepen our understanding of what could be feasible in terms of future options that might best serve our vision and purpose as a faith community.

Early indicators suggest that that Proposals 1 and 2 above both have elements of viability, whereas Proposal 3 might be more appropriate as a complementary offering in the future as resources permit.

We are actively pursuing some intriguing opportunities and will continue consulting with the congregation as this work progresses. Sourcing and negotiating with qualified community partners, implementation of a chosen option and ongoing relationship management, in addition to serving our existing congregation, will require significant volunteer support and executive leadership from Fairlawners and others.

Any successful option will be managed by a community partner with expertise and experience with the community being served. The goal will be to minimize the burden on Fairlawn staff members. Ideally, it would provide opportunities for participation and programmatic support from interested Fairlawners and community volunteers.

Concurrently, we are launching our search for a new minister to join us on our journey to develop a renewed future vision that we can rally around and in which we are called to invest our energy, money, and commitment.

We have been – and must continue to be – courageous and active! We have changed, yet remained ourselves, in the past few years. We can take comfort in the fact that we will continue to evolve, and yet remain the essential Fairlawn, as we step into the future. We are a strong, loving, and connected community of people excited to discover where God is calling us next.

More About Us

- [Fairlawn website](#)
- [Fairlawn Forward](#) consultations
- 2020 Community Research Project with Nayar Consulting ([executive summary](#) and [full report](#))

- [Annual Reports](#)
- Video links:
 - [Three Draft Proposals for Renewing our Focus](#)
 - [Worship services](#)
 - [Gibimishkaadimin 2019](#)
 - [Fairlawn YouTube channel](#)
 - [Fairlawn testimonial video](#)